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Race and Victimhood in Postwar Representations of Sexual Violence in Occupied Italy

In 1990 Andrea Z., who lived through the liberation of Southern Italy as a young man, described the experience before and after the armistice in the area around Frosinone, where he was living with his family.[1] He writes that before the liberation, when the Germans were occupying his village, life was relatively tranquil and relationships with their occupiers was friendly:

> Prima dell'armistizio i rapporti con questi soldati furono meravigliosi. In un paese dove non succedeva mai nulla, si creò un'atmosfera di festa e noi ragazzi tutti i giorni ci recavamo tra loro portandogli uova, frutta fresca, dolci, e sempre questi contraccambiavano con caramelle, cioccalote [sic], sigarette, che noi davamo agli adulti.[2]

After September 8 1943, that all changed. In addition to the heavy bombing and widespread hunger that plagued Southern Italy, the hoped-for liberation brought other sufferings, including the "mass rapes" of Italian civilians by the French colonial troops. For Andrea Z., recalling the liberation meant remembering the rapes of civilians – men, women, and children, but above all women (some of whom, as he claims, were raped by hundreds of men) – by the Moroccan troops as well as the impotence he and other civilians felt when they failed to protect "le nostre donne": "Alcune madri, fratelli, padri furono uccisi per difendere il loro onore. In poche ore i nostri 'liberatori' sono riusciti a cancellare 6 mesi di barbarie tedeschi."[3] Italy's liberation in his testimony became equivalent to rape; the two were bound up together in his memory. According to his testimony, love did not exist for Italian civilians during wartime. "Atti d'amore" – presumably of a violent nature – existed only for the Moroccans and for the soldiers of the various occupying armies: "ci furono però atti di amore tra i soldati di tutti gli eserciti."[4]

His testimony is significant for a number of reasons. First, it complicates the trope of "il cattivo tedesco" and evinces a certain sympathy for the Italians' German occupiers who, while guilty of their own sort of barbarism against civilians in the South, nevertheless seemed to generally respect Italian women.[5] His testimony also seems to echo a sentiment expressed by many Italian civilians who lived in the South during the war: that the liberation represented a watershed in the history of the war in the sense that it signified the beginning of real suffering for Italian civilians – the hunger, the bombings, the rapes. The language Andrea Z. used to describe the rape of Italian women is also, in its own way, telling and emblematic. The raped women were "our women", and he and the other civilians had failed in their duty to protect their honor. The rape of women in wartime, as many scholars have noted, is not only often a reality of war it is also a frequent trope – a symbol of "national and sexual humiliation" (see e.g. Fehrenbach 2005, 50). As foreign troops entered Germany in 1945, for example, German men sometimes found themselves powerless to protect German women from sexual violence; the presence of foreign troops also meant that they no longer had "*exclusive* claim to bodies of white German women" (ibid., 47). Like their German counterparts, Italian men also realized that during the liberation they lost their status as defenders and protectors of women. But, men were not the only ones who may have faced such affronts. As Gabriella Gribaudi has written, raped women were "segnate"; many who were known to have been raped found themselves unable to marry or, if they were able to, it was often with less than desirable partners (Gribaudi 2005, 527).

After 1943, even relationships that were consensual – or, if not consensual, at least more ambiguous, difficult to define – likely products of wartime exigencies became particularly controversial.[6] For example, Orietta M., who was a young girl when the war broke out in Italy recalls the retaliations that women who left their Italian fiancés for their American occupiers were subjected to:

> Quando gli americani arrivarono a Roma fu una gioia incredibile e difficile da raccontare. C'erano i marocchini che assalivano le ragazze! Ma c'erano anche le ragazze che…lasciarono i fidanzati italiani per mettersi con gli americani. E le teste rapate venivano coperte con dei bei foulards![7]

This example reveals that in addition to those women who had been "compromised" through their relationships with either the Germans or fascists after the fall of fascism in 1943 and those who had been condemned spies, women who simply went with the stranger – in this case, the Americans – were also punished in this way.[8] Giovanna B., writing of her experiences along the Gothic Line during the liberation, describes a more extreme example of the jealousy that these women evoked:

> Capimmo che gli americani erano vicini…C'interrogarono per sapere le posizioni dei tedeschi e tutti risposero quel poco che sapevano; a noi ragazze un comandante raccomandò di non dare confidenza ai militari perché potevano nascere gelosie e tragedie (infatti per questo era stata uccisa una ragazza di soli [sic] quindici anni).[9]

These women were seen by some of the other civilians, their male counterparts in particular, as traitors. For some civilian observers, the Allied occupation had clearly become too intimate and invasive – especially in the case of rape committed by the black or 'colored' troops. Some of the testimonies of Italian civilians who lived during the war, for example, reveal a deep, long-lasting and collective fear of these soldiers – of not only the Moroccan troops, but, in many cases, of black or 'colored' soldiers in general, which was not only influenced by what civilians actually saw and experienced but also by the anti-black propaganda of the Italian fascist regime and the Repubblica Sociale Italiana.[10] For example, one woman described the fear felt by her family when the Americans, with their 'colored' troops, were stationed in their homes in Liguria:

> In quell'occasione, per la prima volta, conoscemmo davvero la paura: quella paura che toglie il fiato e le forze. Cercavamo di sorridere, di mostrarci ospitali e disinvolti, ma non ci riusciva molto bene. Ci terrorizzava soprattutto il colore di quei visi: era giallognolo, olivastro; non ne avevamo mai visti prima di così.[11]

In many testimonies, in fact, Italian civilians frequently wrote of the disillusion that came with liberation and referred to liberation sarcastically – as a curse rather than a blessing.[12] The experience of the liberation for many civilians signified violence and violation. This violence and violation, as Filippo Focardi and Lutz Klinkhammer have noted, – especially that which was attributed to the French Moroccan troops – also took on a broader political meaning in the immediate postwar period. It formed part of a wider narrative that justified Italy's status as a victim of Nazi-Fascism and helped to exculpate Italian war criminals and keep such criminals from being tried by the Allied Forces in the years right after the war (Focardi/Klinkhammer 2004, 330–348).

Although it was not until the 1990s that the history of sexual violence in World War Two Italy began to be considered seriously by scholars, it was represented in literature and film in the early postwar period.[13] Undoubtedly the most well-known work dealing with wartime sexual violence is Alberto Moravia's 1958 novel, *La Ciociara* (*Two Women*). In Moravia's book, much as in Andrea Z.'s testimony, it is with the liberation that the true suffering of Italian civilians begins. *La Ciociara* tells the story of the horrors that plagued Southern Italy during World War Two through the experiences of two women: Cesira, a widowed shopkeeper, and Rosetta, her adolescent daughter. The novel is narrated by Cesira, who chronicles the women's flight from Rome to the region of Ciociara, where they hope to find bread, peace, and family away from the chaos of Rome but, instead, encounter starvation, ignorant peasants (with the exception of the young student and intellectual Michele, who they befriend) and eventually, the arrival of the Allies with the French Moroccan troops. While the threat of sexual violence is present throughout the novel from all sides – from the fascists, to Italian civilians, to the American troops – it is the French Moroccan troops, the strange soldiers "dalla pelle scura e con le facce come di turchi" dressed in white sheets who "se non ci fosse stata la guerra, questi marocchini mai e poi mai sarebbero venuti in Italia" that actually defile Rosetta; Cesira is attacked and passes out as Rosetta is gang-raped in an abandoned church as the women flee the falling bombs of the Allies (Moravia 2006, 261). The representation of the French colonial soldiers contrasts sharply with the depiction of the German soldier, Gunther, who rapes Ida Mancuso, the protagonist of Elsa Morante's 1974 novel *La Storia* during the occupation of Rome in World War Two. Gunther is ordinary and pitiable, with his ill-fitting uniform, childlike face, and longing for his mother and his home (Morante 1974). Before he brutally assaults Ida, he helps her carry her groceries up the stairs and shows her a photograph of his family. Gunther may be a sexual aggressor but he is also, like Ida and unlike the French colonial troops, a victim; he is killed fighting a war for which he has little understanding or conviction.

But Rosetta's rape is central in a way that Ida's is not. Rosetta's rape is highly symbolic: her violation is also Italy's writ large, foreshadowed, as Kozma-Southall writes, in a series of violent instances leading up to the rape, such as in a detailed description of Allied shelling (Kozma-Southall 1984, 209). She writes that the shelling "transforms the novel from the simple story of two victims to the quasi-allegory of two women who are also integral parts of a much larger and more universal meaning, i.e., the violence done to Rosetta is like that done to Italy during the war" (ibid.). Moravia himself, in a letter to his editor, Valentino Bompiani, wrote of the centrality of rape to the book and discusses the possibility of calling the English-language translation simply "Rape": "The title will remain *La Ciociara* even though the more appropriate title would be 'Lo Stupro' (the rape). In fact, absolutely in the classical manner: 'The Rape of Italy'. I think that since *La Ciociara* is a title that's untranslatable in English, I'm going to propose 'Rape,' which sounds good as a title… In the story there is really no love, there is only (as you'll understand) a rape" (Moravia 2001, 348). If there is only 'a rape' in the novel, there is also hope for redemption at the novel's end for the two women, and for Italy.

For Moravia, "la guerra è infatti uno stupro, e cioè la profanazione di qualcosa di intatto, di puro" (Seroni 1957). However, some foreign journalists refused to recognize the deeper meaning(s) that the rape held and the apparent allusion to Italian victimhood that it implied. In a bitter 1958 review of the book in the *New York Times,* the American journalist Charles Poore wrote that Cesira was nothing more than a simple egoist who was seeking "peace and largesse at the hands of the Allied forces" (Poore 1958). She was awaiting, as he writes, liberation which was really "defeat" but which the Italians had somehow turned into a "victory". While Poore does note that the focal point of the book is the "attack" (the word "rape" is never used) of Cesira and Rosetta by the French Moroccan troops and that all that leads up to it is prelude, he does not ponder at length on its meaning. For Poore, this novel teaches us nothing new about the horrors of war. Rather, it should give us a greater appreciation for the suffering of the British: "In truth, if you compare the bombardments from the air that the Londoners endured for five years with the amount of shellfire around Cesira and Rosetta, you come out with a renewed admiration for the superior fortitude of the British people." (ibid.)

In Poore's comparative framework, the British suffered much more than the Italians during the war. Moreover, the evident critical (and, implicitly, unjustified) attitude among Italians in the novel towards the Allies was also noted, "especially when their arrival did not immediately inaugurate a *risorgimento* of good times, good food, good clothing, and improved housing among the ruins for all" (ibid.). Poore clearly had little patience for the book's allusion to Italian victimhood. In a much more glowing review of the novel, Marc Slonim wrote that the rape scene is the "book's least convincing episode, even though it has an important place in the larger symbolic structure" (Slonim 1958). The two women are, according to Slonim, victims of the war: "War kills their innocence and goodness, turning them into tools of evil." (ibid.) Slonim, unlike Poore, seems far less loath to call the two women victims. For Poore, it seems that to name Cesira and Rosetta victims would be to grant Italy a victim status too.

After the publication of *La Ciociara* and the release of the film version – which had simplified the more complex text of the novel – by Vittoro De Sica in 1960 the topic of Allied sexual violence in Italy remained relatively absent from cultural media and political discourse.[14] But, in the last few years, the violence committed by the French colonial troops in particular seems to have taken on new meanings, sometimes functioning as a 'usable past' in political discourse.[15] For instance, in 2005, Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance) released a poster calling for an end to sexual violence against women, demanding that the perpetrators of such violence be punished according to the law [against sexual violence] passed in Italy in 1996. The poster, which read in bold "Never Again!" featured a screenshot from Vittorio De Sica's *La Ciociara*.[16] Three years later, in 2008, a women's organization in Bologna announced an anti-violence against women initiative with posters showing a propaganda image from the fascist period – of a black American soldier sexually assaulting a white woman – which read, "Defend her! She could be your mother, your wife, your sister, your daughter."[17] The publication of the flyers elicited intense reactions. A number of local politicians representing the Partito Democratico (PD) argued that the image – regardless of the organizers' intentions – criminalized foreigners. Critics of both the Alleanza Nazionale and the Bologna Women's Center posters voiced their concern about the use of such images, which, though attempting to raise awareness about violence against women, seemed, to instead, re-evoke the fears of 'the black peril'. Critics also did not fail to notice the particular salience these images took on in the atmosphere of heightened fears surrounding the growing number of 'extra-comunitari' in Italy.

Outside of Italy, the representation of the violence committed by the French colonial troops has also recently served as a backdrop to a novel written by the American author, Joanna Scott, whose earlier novel *The Manikin* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. *Liberation*, published in 2005, is a novel about the occupation of Elba in World

War Two; it is narrated by Adriana Rundel, an elderly woman living in New Jersey, through a series of memories of her experiences as a young girl (Adriana Nardi) living through the liberation. Andrea Nardi, is a privileged, slightly spoiled, and very protected eleven year old. When the French colonial troops arrive on Elba, Adriana is forced into hiding in a closet as word of the violence committed by these troops began to spread. Adriana is vaguely aware of the threat that they pose to her:

> Deep inside her growing body, inside the cabinet, inside the kitchen, inside the walls of La Chiatta, she let herself consider what could happen. She could guess that it had to do with the advantages of strength over the stupidity of innocence. Adriana Nardi wasn't stupid. She'd always considered herself exceptionally knowledgeable and didn't find it difficult to surmise at least a part of the truth from which she was being protected. It had to do with young girls and soldiers and how, if a girl's body was too little for their [soldiers'] pleasure, they had to make it bigger. (Scott 2005)

Her sheltered world changes as the war begins to disrupt life on the island and brings a young Senegalese soldier, Amdu Diop, who has escaped from his regiment into her backyard. Amdu had run away after accidentally viewing a group of his fellow soldiers gang rape and murder a young Italian girl: "He couldn't unsee what he couldn't deny was beyond the general's liberal directive of *tout est permis.* Surely this act wasn't covered by *tout est permis*. Anything goes…except this. This was not war." (ibid., 33)

After his escape, Amdu finds himself in the garden of La Chiatta, where he encounters Adriana Nardi. In their first meeting he saves her, in fact, from some stray bullets as they fly over her garden. When he takes her into his arms he muses on the fact that she "wasn't unlovely" and that it felt good to hold her, "and to smell the sharp lime smell of crushed grass mixed with the dry brown spines from the hedge and to feel the body beneath him accept its defeat" (ibid., 66). But, Amdu does not take advantage: "In some ways, it would be easier to have his way than not, and for this reason most men in Admu's position would have continued with the expected action. But Amdu wasn't like most men" (ibid., 66). He was not like the other soldiers in his regiment. He is, and this becomes increasingly clear as the novel goes on, an exception. He is, like Rosetta, almost too good, too saintly for the war. He is also, unlike the other French Colonial soldiers in Scott's novel and in Moravia's *La Ciociara*, a fully-developed character and not only a rapist.

Once Adriana and Amdu get over the initial strangeness and foreignness of each other, they become friends and a kind of platonic love develops between the two. Adriana brings the hungry Amdu food and nurses him back to health when he falls ill. But, their love is, in the end, impossible. Eventually, Amdu will pay with his life for the crimes of his fellow soldiers. He is killed by a bomb that was planted on his regiment's ship by the citizens of Elba as retribution for the violence committed by the French colonial soldiers.

Liberation is a story about young love but it is also a story about the horrors of war and about the meaning of the word 'liberation'. The liberation, in Scott's novel, brought new threats to Elba, though the most prevalent of all was rape:

> From the start, it is clear that Scott intends the word 'liberation' to be fraught with irony. The rape by the Moroccans, who are also Allied soldiers, provides a focus for this theme, its horrible details accumulating throughout the book. As she takes on the absurdity of war, Scott makes it increasingly obvious that for most of the local population being liberated is often not much better than being occupied. (Freed 2005)

Still, unlike Moravia's novel and Andrea Z.'s testimony where there is no love and only rape during the liberation of Italy, Scott's novel is not about 'a rape' – although there is rape – but about love amidst much violence. From the publication of Moravia's *La Ciociara* to the uses and abuses of the film by De Sica in Italian political discourse to Joanna Scott's recent *Liberation*, a hegemonic narrative of sexual violence in World War Two Italy emerges. It is the sexual violence committed by the French colonial troops that appears to be the most thoroughly etched in the memories of Italian civilians – especially those who lived in the South – and to have been most frequently represented in literature and political discourse. As Helena Janeczek wrote of the rapes in her novel *Le rondini di Montecassino*: "Questo resta il solo ricordo dei francesi in Italia" (Janeczek 2010, 334). While the development of this narrative is partially explainable by the fact that the Moroccan troops seem to have been statistically the most violent of the occupying troops, it also seems to have been shaped by the way this violence has been perceived, that is, by the association of the colonial troops with sexual danger both during and after the war. The representation of these rapes in civilian memories, political discourse, and in literature not only paints a view of

the liberation of Southern Italy that is fraught with sexual trauma but it also obscures the complicated history of sexual relationships and sexual violence between Italian civilians and the other occupying troops.

Notes

[1] Andrea Z. was responding to RAI television network's call for testimonies from Italians who had lived through World War Two for their series *La mia guerra*. For a useful critical perspective on these documents see, for ex., De Luna, Giovanni. *La repubblica del dolore: le memorie di un'Italia divisa*. Milano: Feltrinelli, 2011.
[2] Andrea Z., Terracina, March 2, 1990, Fondo RAI – *La mia guerra* in archivio INSMLI, b. 18, f. 2156. "Before the armistice, the relationships with those soldiers [the Germans] was marvelous. In a town where nothing ever really happened, a festive atmosphere was created among us youth and every day we used to bring them eggs, fresh fruit, sweets, and they would give us candies, chocolates, cigarettes in exchange, which we would bring to the adults."
[3] Ivi. "Some mothers, brothers, and fathers were killed for defending their honor. In a few hours our 'liberators' succeeded in cancelling six months of German barbarism." The statistics of reported rape in occupied Italy are still uncertain. For statistics on the Allies, see Porzio, Maria. *Arrivano gli alleati: amori e violenza nell'italia liberata*. Roma: Laterza, 2011: 78s., which notes 1159 cases of rape committed by the Allies in Lazio of which 1035 were committed by the French Moroccan troops and 33 by the American troops; on the statistics of rapes committed by the French Moroccan troops see Ponzani, Michela. *Guerra alle donne: partigiane, vittime di stupro,'amanti del nemico'*. Torino: Einaudi, 2012: 235s. and Gribaudi, Gabriella. *Guerra totale: tra bombe alleate e violenze naziste, Napoli e il fronte meridionale 1940–44*.Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2005: 545–548.
[4] Ivi. "But there were acts of love between soldiers of all the armies."
[5] For an analysis of the construction of this trope see: Focardi, Filippo. *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano: la rimozione delle colpe della seconda guerra mondiale*. Bari: Laterza, 2013.
[6] See, for ex., Norman Lewis's wartime diary in Naples, *Naples 44*. New York: Pantheon, 1978.
[7] Orietta M., Roma, 11 April 1990, in Archivio INSMLI, fondo RAI- *La Mia Guerra,* b. 21. f. 2640. "When the Americans arrived in Rome, there was an incredible joy, which is difficult to describe. There were also the Moroccans who assaulted the young women! But there were also the young women who broke up with their Italian fiancés to be with the Americans. And their shaved heads were covered with nice scarves!"
[8] In *Arrivano gli alleati,* Maria Porzio discusses the women who were punished by having their head shaved because of their relationships with the Allies.
[9] Giovanna B., Vergato, 17 April 1990, in Archivio INSMLI, fondo RAI- *La mia* guerra, b. 1, f. 96. "We knew that the Americans were nearby… They would ask about the positions of the Germans and we would always tell them what we knew: a commander told us women to not get too close to the soldiers because it could cause jealousies and tragedies (in fact, for this reason, a girl who was only 15 years old was murdered)."
[10] In many cases, the nationality of these soldiers is either unclear or confused; in many of these testimonies, these soldiers are simply referred to as black or "colored" troops. For a discussion of anti-black racism and Italian fascism see MacMaster, Neil. *Racism in Europe: 1870-2000*. New York: Palgrave, 2001: 134; and Pisanty, Valentina. *La difesa della razza: antologia 1938-1943*. Milano: Bompiani, 2007. For a study on the construction of racial hierarchies in the Italian fascist empire see Barrera, Giulia. "Mussolini's Colonial Race Laws and State-Settler Relations in Africa Orientale Italiana (1935-41)." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* vol. 8, no. 3: 425–443.
[11] Margherita F., 1990, in Archivio INSMLI, fondo RAI- *La mia* guerra, b. 9, f. 1030. "On that occasion, for the first time, we truly knew fear, that fear that takes the breath and strength away. We tried to smile, to be hospitable and relaxed, but we didn't succeed very well. The colors of the faces were the most terrifying: yellowish, olive-colored: we had never seen them like that before."
[12] For example, Andrea Z. wrote in his testimony, "Come si vede, le nostre disgrazie più grande coincidono anche con le liberazioni." Andrea Z., Terracina, March 2, 1990, Fondo RAI- *La mia guerra* in archivio INSMLI, b. 18, f. 2156.
[13] The history of sexual violence, and gender relations more generally, during the occupation, as historians such as Michela Ponzani have noted, remained a relatively understudied topic until the 1990s when scholars for a variety of reasons – including the memorials marking the 50th anniversary of the end of World War Two and, perhaps, most prominently, the war crimes trials/prosecutions of the mass rapes carried out during the genocidal wars in Bosnia and Rwanda – began to more fully study the topic. For some studies on sexual violence in World War Two Italy see, for ex., Gribaudi, Gabriella. *Guerra totale*; Ponzani, Michela. *Guerra alle donne*; Venturoli, Cinzia. "La violenza taciuta: percorsi di ricerca sugli abusi sessuali fra il passaggio e l'arrestarsi del fronte." In *Donne, guerra, politica. Esperienze e memorie della resistenza*, ed. Gagliani, Dianella. Bologna: Clueb, 2000: 111–130; Marcello Flores (ed.). *Stupri di guerra. La violenza di masssa contro le donne del novecento*. Milano: Franco Angeli, 2010.
[14] The exception is, of course, Elsa Morante's 1974 novel *La Storia*, though it is a German soldier that is the sexual aggressor in Morante's novel.
[15] It should also be noted that this violence has also been used by journalists to highlight the victimization of Southern Italy vis à vis northern Italy; see, for example, di Fiore, Gigi. *Contrastoria della liberazione: Le stragi e i crimini dimenticati degli alleati nell'italia del sud*. Milano: BUR Rizzoli, 2012.
[16] Fiorentino, Flavia. "Sofia Loren contro AN: via la Ciociara dai manifesti anti stupro." *Corriere della* Sera, June 28 (2005). See also Celes, Luciano. "Back to the Future: The Visual Propaganda of the AN." *The Journal of Modern Italian Studies* vol. 15, no. 2 (2010): 232–311.
[17] "Manifesto antiviolenza a sfondo razzista", *Corriere di* Bologna, April 15, 2009.

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