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Italian-Speaking Austrian POWs in Russia and the Italian Involvement in the Siberian Intervention 1918–1920¹

Abstract: In 1914, the Italian unification process was still not complete. Two northern regions, around cities of Trento and Trieste, mostly inhabited by Italians, still belonged to Austria-Hungary. The outbreak of World War I was perceived by many Italian nationalists as a chance to conquer these territories and accomplish the process begun in the 19th century with the Risorgimento. When the war broke out, Italy remained neutral in order to decide later whether to join her Austrian and German allies, or the Entente. Meanwhile, thousands of Italian-speaking Austrian citizens were sent to the eastern front, serving in the army of the Habsburgs. Italian nationalists maintained that these soldiers were brothers, forced to serve to their oppressors. Italy eventually joined the war in May 1915 and, then, taking care of the Italians from Trento and Trieste serving in the Austro-Hungarian army became less important, although potentially useful for propaganda purposes. Thus, the Italian government sent a military mission to Russia to save Italian-speaking soldiers who were taken POWs on the eastern front. The Russia's 1917 collapse left thousands of Italian-speaking Austrian POWs and members of Italian rescue missions stuck thousands of miles away from home. Gathered in Siberia, these people became involved in activities of the Entente's international expeditionary forces against the Bolsheviks. Forced by the situation, they enlisted in the Italian Army while they were still in Siberia and there, through training, work and military service, they gained the opportunity of becoming Italian citizens.

Introduction

Italy, for decades, had directed its foreign political and colonial aims towards the eastern Mediterranean the Balkans and the Horn of Africa. Thus, Italian interests

1 The research that led to this paper has been made possible by the Fondazione Caritro in Trento which provided a postdoctoral grant supporting my research on Italo-Austrian soldiers in World War I. The grant allowed the author to research new sources in the Italian archives which have only recently been made fully available. However, the research is still in progress, and further results, including Austrian sources and a more thorough analysis of additional Italian sources, will be published in a forthcoming book.

obstructed respectively Austrian, French and British spheres of influence. Because of this, Italy had rivals in both the Triple Alliance and the Entente, and remained neutral for almost a year after the 1914 July crisis. During this time, Italy evaluated her options in order to take the right side in the conflict or stay out of it. Political actors and public opinion split into two conflicting factions, one supporting neutrality (neutralists) and the other asking for war against Austria-Hungary (interventionists).

The latter was a noisy minority, strongly influenced by nationalist and irredentist ideologies in Italy and by Italian separatists living in two regions of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.² Those regions centered on the cities of Trento (Trentino) and Trieste (Venezia-Giulia) and were a cause of ongoing dispute between Italy and Austria-Hungary. The neutralist field was composed of politicians from various parties – socialists, conservatives, liberals – as well as by Catholic authorities and the majority of public opinion.³

Tensions grew as Austrian general mobilization involved 100,000 ethnic-Italians in the war. During the fall of 1914 more than 20,000 ethnic-Italians became POWs in Russia after Austrian defeats in Galicia. The Russian government tried to exploit them by acknowledging Italian claims over Trentino and Venezia-Giulia in an attempt to involve Italy in the conflict.

This paper will analyze how events in Europe and Russia evolved and what influence they had over the repatriation of POWs from the eastern front, and the attitude of Italy towards them. In doing this, initial Italian war aims will be considered as well as their development and change according to both the way the war progressed, and the post-war situation. The Italian involvement in the Russian civil war and its effects on the treatment of ethnic-Italian POWs will be especially considered.

Italian objectives in the international domain at the eve of World War I

The July crisis of 1914 produced a rapid escalation of the opposition between the Triple Alliance and the Entente. This confrontation had been going on for several years, and the Balkan crisis was merely the spark that finally set Europe on fire. Italy stood in-between the two camps.

2 Although ethnic-Italians mostly inhabited the two mentioned regions, separatists represented a small minority but with strong political support from Italian nationalists.

3 The region around Trieste claimed by nationalists included Istria, Dalmatia and part of today's Slovenia. To simplify this, we will refer to the whole area as Venezia-Giulia.

At the beginning of the XX century, Italy was considered a 'second-class' power. The disgraceful defeat at Adua (1895) and the difficulty of achieving total control over Libya after the war against the Ottoman Empire (1911–1912) seriously damaged Italy's image as a major European power. Furthermore, national unification achieved in 1861 had left two regions inhabited by ethnic-Italians under the control of Austria-Hungary, namely Trentino and Venezia-Giulia.⁴

In order to improve her geopolitical situation, Italy looked for the patronage of other powers, and since 1882 had been bound to the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria. German patronage was essential to Italy. The most important reasons for that were German investments in the Italian economy, and the military protection that the Reich guaranteed against France. Because Italy aimed to expand her political influence and domination over the Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa, there was competition with France and Great Britain. In particular, France was threatening Italian aims. This pushed Rome further under Berlin's protective wing.⁵

German patronage was double-sided. Italy could rely on German military protection while pursuing her interests in the international politics. However, the relationship also made Italy extremely dependent on Germany's economy and benevolence. Furthermore, the Triple Alliance included an inconvenient ally for Rome, namely the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Vienna threatened both Italy's interests in the Balkans, and her claims over the regions of Trentino and Venezia-Giulia.⁶

At the outbreak of World War I Italy did not join the Triple Alliance, declaring her neutrality by affirming that their allies had started an offensive war, which was against their agreements. This political position, however, collided with the informal understandings between the German and Italian Chief of Staff. The Italian General, Alberto Pollio, had a strong pro-German attitude and made continuous efforts to assure his German counterparts that Italy was ready to support them in a preventive war against France. However, Pollio's promises were empty, as the Italian Chief of Staff was subordinated to real political power, but the German military authorities were unaware of the situation. It is reasonable to think that Germany strongly relied on Italian help when the war started, while Rome never

4 Richard Bosworth, "Britain and Italy's Acquisition of the Dodecanese, 1912–1915," *The Historical Journal* 13, 4 (1970): 703–704.

5 Michael Palumbo, "German-Italian Military Relations on the Eve of World War I," *Central European History* 12, 4 (1979): 345–351.

6 René Albrecht-Carrié, "Italian Foreign Policy, 1914–1922," *The Journal of Modern History* 20, 4 (1948): 125.

really considered the idea of joining their allies in the aggression against Serbia and France.⁷

Italy avoided any commitments and chose neutrality on 4 August 1914. Rome also chose not to join the Entente at first because her leaders were trying to obtain promises of territorial and political advantages from both camps before taking any decision.

At first, Italy set a high price for her neutrality by threatening Austria. Rome asked for the cession of Trento and Trieste and territorial compensation in the Balkans in exchange for the promise not to join the Entente. Vienna was unwilling to give up Trieste – her most important port and only access to Mediterranean. The negotiations showed Berlin was more willing to meet Italian demands when compared to Vienna. Obviously, the Austrians had something to lose while the Germans did not. Besides, the Austrian ambassador in Rome, Mérey, considered the possibility of Italy joining the Entente unlikely.⁸

However, while Rome was negotiating her neutrality with Vienna and Berlin, the Italian minister of foreign affairs, Sidney Sonnino, was offering the Entente full military aid in exchange for territorial rearrangements after the conflict. Those gains were specified in the Treaty of London, and included a dominant position in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean as well as important claims over Germany's African colonies.⁹

It seems likely that the negotiations with the Central Powers only served to gain time and show to the neutralists in Italy that every effort had been made to avoid the war while defending national interest. In contrast, the Pact of London shows that Italy did not merely aim to protect her rights over the Balkans and achieve national unification. Rome also played a difficult diplomatic game – keeping the balance between contrasting interests – in order to get a deal that would have strengthened Italy's geopolitical position and, most important, given her the major power status she was looking for.

This choice had, however, considerable consequences for the ethnic-Italian population of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and, within some limits, on the fate of the ethnic-Italians who fought in the Austro-Hungarian army.

7 Palumbo, "German-Italian Military Relations," 343–347; William A. Renzi, "Italy's Neutrality and Entrance into the Great War: A Re-Examination," *The American Historical Review* 73, 5 (1968): 1417–1420.

8 Leo Valiani, "Italian-Austro-Hungarian Negotiations 1914–1915," *Journal of Contemporary History* 1, 3 (1966): 116–120; Renzi, "Italy's Neutrality and Entrance into the Great War," 1424.

9 Albrecht-Carrié, "Italian Foreign Policy, 1914–1922," 125.

Ethnic-Italian POWs in Russia: a matter of politics

It was commonly held in Italy that Trento and Trieste naturally belonged to the ‘motherland’. The Venezia-Giulia and the Dalmatian coasts were ancient possessions of the Republic of Venice, and an Italian bishop ruled Trentino before the Austrian Empire seized them. In 1914, the interventionists put the “liberation” of Trento and Trieste at the top of their political agenda. The dominant narrative considered the Italians of Austria as people impatiently awaiting their emancipation. Separatist organizations in Austria disseminated this idea and strongly supported any action of Rome that would bring about the annexation of the two cities and the surrounding regions. However, both interventionists and irredentists were nothing but influential minorities who could rely on political support and propaganda from important personalities in the cultural and economic realms.

In 1915, it seemed the irredentist and interventionist minorities won the battle when Italy joined the Entente by declaring war on Austria-Hungary. Italy’s aims were far from simply patriotic and included the acquisition of colonial and geopolitical power on the Mediterranean, and part of Africa. Nevertheless, irredentism and nationalism proved to be very functional as an ideological umbrella to dissimulate the actual war aims towards public opinion.

After the declaration of war, irredentists raised the issue of ethnic-Italian soldiers in the Austrian army, and POWs in Russia. Those people became a political problem, as the irredentists expected Rome to take decisive action to bring them back to the ‘motherland’.¹⁰

The overwhelming majority of ethnic-Italian soldiers were sent to the eastern front in Galicia by the Austrian command. During the battles of autumn 1914, several thousands of them had been captured by the Russian army and sent to POW camps. It is likely that around 26.000 Italians were prisoners in Russia during the war.¹¹

Those prisoners represented a problem for both the Russian and the Italian government. During the first months of war, the Russians captured more prisoners than expected. The tsarist army did not have the logistical capability to handle that

10 For more information about assessment methods see: Hans Heiss, “I Soldati Trentini Nella Prima Guerra Mondiale. Un Metodo Di Determinazione Numerica” in *Sui Campi Di Galizia (1914–1917). Gli Italiani d’Austria E Il Fronte Orientale: Uomini Popoli Culture Nella Guerra Europea*, ed. Gianluigi Fait (Rovereto, TN: Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra, 1997).

11 Quinto Antonelli, *I Dimenticati Della Grande Guerra. La Memoria Dei Soldati Trentini (1914–1920)* (Trento: Il Margine, 2008), 155–159.

number of POWs and decided to transform them into resources. In particular, they wanted to use the multinational character of the Austro-Hungarian army and turn it against Vienna.¹²

As far as the Italian prisoners were concerned, the Russians tried to use them as leverage against Rome to bring it onto the side of the Entente. Krupensky, Russian ambassador in Rome, proposed to acknowledge the Italian claims over Trentino and Venezia-Giulia, and return the prisoners in exchange for an Italian involvement at the side of the Entente.¹³ In that period, however, Rome was still negotiating with Vienna and Berlin, and the situation on the battlefield was too uncertain to convince her to withdraw from neutrality. Furthermore, receiving prisoners belonging to a foreign country was illegal according to international agreements.¹⁴

The Russian proposal was inconsistent. Krupensky knew that, because of the situation of transportation and logistics in Russia, repatriating all Italian prisoners would be impossible. Notwithstanding that, some personalities took care of the fate of the Italian prisoners, in particular the Marquise Gemma Guerrieri Gonzaga, and the matter became of political importance in the debate between intervention and neutrality.¹⁵

In the winter of 1914, the Russian government was particularly active in trying to get Italy into the conflict. The situation on the field was difficult, and any help that could relieve the worn-out and unprepared tsarist army was welcome. On the other hand, Russia's attitude changed at the beginning of 1915, when it was clear that Italy had interests in the Balkans and in the Dardanelles. Furthermore, the

12 Reinhard Nachtigal, *Kriegsgefangenschaft an Der Ostfront 1914 Bis 1918: Literaturbericht Zu Einem Neuen Forschungsfeld* (Frankfurt am Main [u.a.]: Peter Lang, 2005), 79–80; Alon Rachamimov, *POWs and the Great War*, 1. publ. (Oxford [u.a.]: Berg, 2002), 89–90.

13 Rossi, *I Prigionieri Dello Zar*, 1997, 44–48.

14 Luisa Pachera, *La Marchesa Gemma Guerrieri Gonzaga Nata de Gresti Di San Leonardo* (Rovereto: Osiride, 2008), 77–79; Quinto Antonelli, *I Dimenticati Della Grande Guerra. La Memoria Dei Soldati Trentini (1914–1920)* (Trento: Il Margine, 2008), 186–190.

15 Pachera, *La Marchesa Gemma Guerrieri Gonzaga*, 77–78. Gemma Guerrieri Gonzaga was a noblewoman from Trentino. During the neutrality period she could travel in Italy and personally met Krupensky. She took great care of the situation of the Italian prisoners in Russia and actively operated to find and help displaced people in Russia maintain active correspondence with their families, and enable them to receive goods and money from the motherland.

situation was now favorable to the Entente, and the Russians no longer considered Italian intervention essential for the war.¹⁶

However, when Italy entered the war negotiations with Russia re-started, and, within a short time, a decision about Italian prisoners was taken. The Italian embassy in Sankt Petersburg organized a mission to the POW camp in Kirsanov in order to investigate the situation of the captives and prepare all the necessary arrangements for repatriating them. In contrast with Italian expectations, only a small number of prisoners accepted taking Italian citizenship and the consequent freedom. Despite the nationalist propaganda which depicted the soldiers from Trentino and Venezia-Giulia as patriots eagerly waiting to join the motherland, the most of them merely tried to understand what advantage they could get from either remaining Austrian or becoming Italian.¹⁷

It took patient work by the members of the Italian delegation in Kirsanov to gather around 6,000 volunteers wanting to go to Italy, and the vast majority of them wanted certainty that they would not have to do military service. In fact, the Italian government rapidly abandoned the initial idea of employing former prisoners at the front. This could have led to reprisals against the Italian population in Austria and, would certainly have violated international laws. Furthermore, the Italian government had significant concerns about the patriotic commitment of the prisoners.¹⁸ A debate over the actual opportunity of repatriating prisoners and taking care of the political and practical consequences started within the Italian government. Repatriated prisoners were not conscripted. Furthermore, the authorities did not fully trust the loyalty of the ex POWs, and refused to simply set them free.¹⁹

Moreover, the practical obstacles of repatriating thousands of prisoners from Russia consistently delayed the whole process. In 1916, around 4,400 prisoners arrived in Italy after a long journey from Archangelsk through Britain and France. Those POWs were considered loyal and reliable, as they accepted going to Italy immediately and without particular conditions. The others were considered less reliable,

16 Cedric J. Lowe, *Italian Foreign Policy, 1870–1940* / C. J. Lowe and F. Marzari (London: Routledge & Paul, 1975), 540.

17 Quinto Antonelli, *I Dimenticati Della Grande Guerra. La Memoria Dei Soldati Trentini (1914–1920)*, (Trento: Il Margine, 2008), 187–189; Marina Rossi, *I Prigionieri Dello Zar* (Milano: Mursia, 1997), 48–51.

18 Archivio Centrale dello Stato (hereafter: ACS), Rome, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, Ufficio Centrale per le Nuove Province, folder 142, *Lettera del Ministero degli Esteri alla Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, Roma 08.09.16*.

19 ACS, Rome, PCM NP Folder 98, *Lettera del Ministero degli Affari Esteri alla Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, Roma 26.04.16*.

and Rome wanted to handle the situation carefully. The revolutionary events in 1917 Russia actually helped Italy to avoid the impasse, significantly delaying the repatriation of the POWs. In fact, the mission sent in 1917 could not reach Archangelsk and had to travel through Russia searching for another way out.²⁰

As the situation in Russia intensified, the POWs and their escort mission became unwillingly involved in the civil war. This theatre became a place in which the processes of the 'forced nationalization' of POWs has been applied.

The Russian Civil War, Brest-Litovsk and the Italian intervention in Siberia

After the outbreak of the revolution, Russia was no longer a safe place, and this affected the Italian military missions operating there. The provisional government was unfriendly towards the Entente and the Italians. In 1917 it was intended that a second group of 2,000 former POWs was to be sent to Italy. They were gathered by a mission commanded by the Captain of the Carabinieri – Italian military police – Cosma Manera. After realizing that the port of Archangelsk was not reachable he decided to find another way out of Russia. They travelled on the trans-Siberian railway until reaching the Italian military base of Tien-Tsin in China.²¹

In addition, Manera also wanted to take care of the prisoners who were unwilling to go to Italy. According to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, all the Austrian POWs had to return to Vienna. However, ethnic-Italian could be suspected of treachery and exposed to reprisals from the Austrian authorities.²² The efforts of Manera to establish a permanent rescue-point for ethnic-Italian POWs in safe areas of Russia received unexpected help from the changing situation both in Europe and in the former tsarist empire. The collapse of the tsarist power affected the war in Europe in many ways. The most important was the closure of the eastern front and the consequent transfer of German and Austrian troops to other battlefields. This brought, for instance, changes to the offensive of Caporetto on the Italian front, where Germans and Austrians joined forces, mostly retrieved from the eastern front, and then advanced into Italian territory as far as the river Piave.

20 Antonelli, *I Dimenticati Della Grande Guerra*, 94; Pachera, *La Marchesa Gemma Guerrieri Gonzaga Nata de Gresti Di San Leonardo*, 102.

21 Rossi, *I Prigionieri Dello Zar*, 1997, 54–57; Antonelli, *I Dimenticati Della Grande Guerra*, 209–212.

22 ACS, Rome, PCM NP Folder 98, *Lettera della Unione Economica per le Nuove Province alla Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri*, Roma 07.12.17.

Besides the effects on Europe, the revolution in Russia resulted in a power-vacuum in the world's largest biggest country. Generals and local leaders took over peripheral regions of the Empire, creating a mosaic of different more or less legitimized authorities. Some of those 'warlords' supported the Bolshevik forces, while others joined the 'whites' and the counter-revolution. The Entente also decided to intervene in the Russian affairs.

Entente powers had a strong interest in bringing the situation in Russia to normality. First, the eastern front was still considered vital for winning the war in Europe. Second, large amounts of weapons and supplies sent by the Entente lay abandoned in the most important Russian ports. Third, the entire system of POW management collapsed. Besides the humanitarian emergency that this represented, there was the risk that former Austro-German prisoners could join the Bolsheviks and use them to support German interests.²³

Within the Entente, a long debate developed about the opportunity of sending an expeditionary force to Russia to secure supplies and prisoners and to assist the white forces against the revolution. Finally, in 1918, troops from several Entente countries occupied bridgeheads in Russia. Their main forces gathered in Siberia under Japanese command.²⁴

Despite the difficult situation on the home front, Italy joined the Entente in Siberia. In July 1918, the *Corpo di Spedizione Italiano in Estremo Oriente* (Italian

23 Clifford Kinvig, *Churchill's Crusade: The British Invasion of Russia, 1918–1920* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 5–11. For an analysis of how the situation of POWs worsened after the revolution see: Nachtigal, *Kriegsgefangenschaft an Der Ostfront 1914 Bis 1918*, 24–25.

24 Kinvig, *Churchill's Crusade*, 57–59. Several countries participated in the operations in Siberia. For details about Canada's involvement see: Benjamin Isitt, *From Victoria to Vladivostok: Canada's Siberian Expedition, 1917–19*, Studies in Canadian Military History (Vancouver, BC [u. a.]: University of British Columbia Press, 2010); The United States played a crucial role in the intervention, mostly trying to contain the expansion of Japan. See Robert L. Willett, *Russian Sideshow: America's Undeclared War 1918–1920*, 1st ed. (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2003); Victor M. Fic, *The Collapse of American Policy in Russia and Siberia, 1918: Wilson's Decision Not to Intervene (March–October, 1918)* (East European Monographs: Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs, 1971), 411. Finally, the official reason for sending troops to Siberia was to aid the Czechoslovak Legion, hunted by the Bolsheviks. See Joan McGuire Mohr, *The Czech and Slovak Legion in Siberia, 1917–1922* (Jefferson, NC [u. a.]: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publ., 2012).

Far East Expeditionary Corps), commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Edoardo Fassini-Camossi, left Italy with 1,500 soldiers and 50 officers.²⁵

The Italian participation could not equal the more powerful American, British and French troop numbers, nor the 72,400 strong Japanese detachment. However, it represented a considerable effort for a country that one year earlier in Caporetto had suffered one of the most catastrophic debacles of the war. It shows how much Rome wanted to be part of an international expedition which would see her status as major power acknowledged.

According to the statements of Sidney Sonnino, minister of foreign affairs, the Italian expeditionary corps had humanitarian goals, namely to help the Czechoslovak forces surrounded by the Bolsheviks in some parts of Siberia. Sonnino also recalled that Czechoslovak volunteers had helped the Italian army stopping the Austro-German invasion in the autumn of 1917, and affirmed that Italy had a debt towards the Czechoslovak people. At the same time, the minister claimed that Italy did not want to interfere in Russia's internal matters.²⁶

The Italian Expeditionary Corps was an independent military effort unrelated to the previous military missions to rescue the POWs.²⁷ In fact, the two missions had different political referents and ignored each other's existence. The Military Mission for the POWs depended on the foreign minister, while the Expeditionary Corps relied on the war minister. In August 1918, the Expeditionary Force arrived in Quingdao for resupplying. There, an emissary of the Italian government informed the commander that around 2,000 ex POWs of the Austrian army awaited enlistment in Tien Tsin. Until that moment, Fassini-Camossi was unaware of Cosma Manera's mission.²⁸

The Italian emissary in Quingdao affirmed that the ex POWs were in excellent condition and they received military training to serve in his Corps. As the Expeditionary Corps moved to Tien-Tsin, Fassini-Camossi realized that the situation was different from what was expected, and only 300 POWs volunteered.²⁹

25 Francesco Randazzo, *Alle Origini Dello Stato Sovietico: Missioni Militari E Corpi Di Spedizione Italiani in Russia (1917-1921)* (Roma: Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito. Ufficio Storico, 2008), 72-76.

26 Marina Rossi, *Irredenti Giuliani Al Fronte Russo: Storie Di Ordinaria Diserzione, Di Lunghe Prigionie E Di Sospirati Rimpatri (1914-1920)* (Udine: Del Bianco, 1998), 61-62.

27 Rossi, *Irredenti Giuliani Al Fronte Russo*, 58-62. Marina Rossi, according to soldiers' memories, partially adopted the idea that the enlistment of former prisoners and the constitution of the Expeditionary Corps were strongly connected.

28 Randazzo, *Alle Origini Dello Stato Sovietico*, 72-76.

29 Randazzo, *Alle Origini Dello Stato Sovietico*, 76-77.

What actually happened in the Far East remains partially unclear. In a letter sent from Vladivostok in 1919, Cosma Manera affirmed that he entrusted a small section of the POWs to the Expeditionary Corps, and then moved the remainder to Vladivostok, in order to use allied transport ships and send them to Italy.³⁰

However, a later report from the war minister claimed that 500 volunteers enlisted in the Expeditionary Corps when it arrived in Vladivostok. As this explanation contrasts with both Fassini-Camossi and Manera, it is possible that the minister confused some data while drafting the report.³¹ Given the current state of knowledge, there were two different cooperating Italian missions in Siberia in 1918. The mission of Fassini-Camossi had clear military aims and mostly operated in the region of Krasnoyarsk. Its duties included training the 'white' forces, providing military and logistic assistance to them, and cooperating with the Polish and British expeditionary corps.³²

In Vladivostok, Manera started a parallel mission to find and rescue further ethnic-Italian POWs displaced in Russia. For both political and military reasons, this mission changed its aims and became a part of the international anti-Bolshevik efforts.

Raising new Italians in Siberia: political activities of the *Legione Redenta*

In Vladivostok, Cosma Manera created the so-called *Legione Redenta*. The term refers to the concept of 'redemption'. The ethnic-Italian Austrian POWs, through this mission, became Italian citizens. In that sense, they were 'redeemed' and could join their 'motherland' after decades of Austrian domination. The *Legione* aimed at finding and rescuing ethnic-Italian POWs in Russia [...] displaced in Siberia, languishing in the concentration camps or subject to exploitative and inhuman

30 ACS, Rome, PCM NP 141, *Lettera di Cosma Manera al Ministero della Guerra e al Comando Supremo, Vladivostok 01.09.19.*

31 ACS, Rome, PCM NP 142, *Lettera del Ministero della Guerra alla Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, Roma 19.02.20*; The enlistment of the POWs in Tien Tsin was confirmed in an additional and extensive report drafted by Cosma Manera in 1920. See: ACS, Rome, PCM NP 142, *Lettera di Cosma Manera alla Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, Roma 26.08.1920.*

32 Randazzo, *Alle Origini Dello Stato Sovietico*, 79. Randazzo's book provides the best available account of the operations of the Italian Far East Expeditionary Corps. It relies mostly on sources from the Italian Chief of Staff Archive and the accounts of Edoardo Fassini-Camossi. In terms of a partial comparison with the international literature, it seems the role of Italian forces is overestimated.

masters, or wandering abandoned without a guide nor a direction, carrying on with little ways.³³

It was a difficult task. Bolshevik authorities were hostile to the Entente because it was helping the counter-revolutionary forces. Furthermore, Manera identified some specific obstacles to its work. The first mentioned was the ‘Yugoslavian propaganda.’ This was spread by the Russians in an attempt to attract the former Austrians of the Littoral area (Trieste, Istria and Dalmatia) into their ranks.³⁴

Altogether, it was clear that the mission was no longer only looking for the quick repatriation of prisoners. Manera’s actions were strongly affected by political considerations, and the fear of Bolshevik and Slavic interference. As distinct from the initial humanitarian reasons, a critical and cynical attitude dominated in this period. In Manera’s words:

‘As the war ended with the armistice consequent to our glory victory, the crowd of the cowards and the emotionless started to gather around our mission. They could not expect nor fear anything from Austria and then tried to mind their own business by asking Italian protection.’³⁵

33 ACS, Rome, PCM NP 141, *Lettera di Cosma Manera al Ministero della Guerra e al Comando Supremo, Vladivostok 01.09.19.*

34 ACS, Rome, PCM NP 141, *Lettera di Cosma manera.* The problem of nationality in the Littoral area was not new. In fact, the area surrounding Trieste was far less linguistically and nationally homogenous than Trentino. In the latter, Italian and Germans were almost clearly separated and identifiable, while in the Venezia-Giulia, Italians and Slavs were often confused. It must also be noted that the Austro-Hungarian identity and loyalty was stronger in the Venezia-Giulia. Finally, in the post-war years Italy struggled against the creation of a Yugoslav state in order to protect her interests and see her claims over the Adriatic fulfilled as they appeared in the treaty of London. See Angelo Visintin, “Militari, territori e popolazione nella Venezia Giulia del primo dopoguerra (1918–1919)” in *Esercito e città dall’ unità agli anni Trenta: convegno nazionale di studi, Spoleto, 11–14 maggio 1988 Esercito e città dall’ unità agli anni Trenta: atti del Convegno di studi, Perugia [ma Spoleto], 11–14 maggio 1988, n.d.*; Angelo Visintin, “Occupazione militare e accelerazione delle dinamiche politiche nella Venezia Giulia del primo dopoguerra”, *Acta Histriae*, 20 (2012): 44–58; Sterling J. Kernek, “Woodrow Wilson and National Self-Determination along Italy’s Frontier: A Study of the Manipulation of Principles in the Pursuit of Political Interests”, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 126, 4 (1982): 243–300; H. Burgwyn, *The Legend of the Mutilated Victory: Italy, the Great War, and the Paris Peace Conference, 1915–1919* (Westport, CT – London: Greenwood Press, 1993); Elio Apih, “Il Problema Della Frontiera Austro-Jugoslava e La Politica Italiana Nel Primo Dopoguerra”, *Qualestoria* 1 (1979): 1–5.

35 Apih, “Il Problema Della Frontiera Austro-Jugoslava,” 1–5.

Manera's mission had to deal with those POWs who did not abandon Austrian citizenship until the very end. Some of them, Manera said, did not even believe that Italy had won the war. Furthermore, many POWs fraternized with the Bolsheviks. The *Legione Redenta* took over a new and complicated task: to rescue the last of the POWs and transform them into Italian citizens before allowing them to return home.³⁶

Fassini-Camossi had the idea of giving military and ideological training to the POWs at the beginning. Manera realized this goal. The problem first arose when the prisoners, hosted in three barracks in Sborni-Punto, 8 km outside Vladivostok, grew in number. Inactivity and laziness could have unleashed their 'insane tendencies'.³⁷

The prisoners did not welcome the training activities at first. Many of them were still Austrian citizens and reluctant to change into Italians. However, after a small number of them volunteered, others followed. The moral and material advantages of accepting Manera's conditions were evident and, slowly, the majority of POWs joined the *Legione*. Starting from the winter of 1918, hundreds of POWs found rescue in Vladivostok. Manera eventually moved them to a bigger military base in Cornostai. Besides military training, Manera organized leisure activities.³⁸ Moving to Cornostai represented a turning point in the *Legione's* life. Staying in a wide isolated area helped the better management of the POWs. Most important, they were apart from the other allied and Russian troops "[...] among which the symptoms of the Bolshevik propaganda were noticeable since some time."³⁹

In his reports, Manera stressed his capability to transform those raised in Austria surrounded by anti-Italian propaganda into citizens willing to join their families in the new 'homeland'. The Italian nationalizing propaganda worked through political work as well as through theater and music education. Within some months, the barracks in Cornostai became an autonomous colony with power supplies, small handcraft shops and a breeding farm. The number of ex

36 Apih, "Il Problema Della Frontiera Austro-Jugoslava," 1–5. A minority of Italo-Austrian POWs joined the Bolshevik formations. An account based on some personal memories can be found in: Rossi, *Irredenti Giuliani Al Fronte Russo*, 63–69.

37 Rossi, *Irredenti Giuliani Al Fronte Russo*, 63–69. In later reports, Manera attributed to itself the idea of giving military training to the POWs. See next footnote.

38 ACS, Rome, PCM NP 142, *Relazione di Manera alla Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri*, Roma 26.08.1920.

39 ACS, Rome, PCM NP 142, *Relazione di Manera*.

POWs reached around 2,200. and ultimately, only some still refused Italian citizenship and maintained the status of prisoners.⁴⁰

The problem of nationality was less than resolved after the end of the war. Despite what irredentists thought, the Italian soldiers in the Royal-Imperial army were mostly loyal to the emperor. Furthermore, the post-war settlement attributed to Italy some areas, as South Tyrol and part of the Venezia-Giulia, mostly inhabited by Germans and Slavs. Thus, even with some evident mistrust, the Italian mission had to care also for them and ensure their chance of reaching Italy.⁴¹

According to the final reports of Manera, after the demobilization, in February 1920, only 20 POWs remained in Russia refusing the repatriation to Italy.⁴² Other POWs who did not change their citizenship, however, had been set free in the previous months. The opinion of the Italian minister of foreign affairs was that the government should remain indifferent about their fate.⁴³

However, most prisoners did not choose Italian citizenship because they had no knowledge of the situation in Europe. After the peace treaties, in particular the one of Saint Germain, the residents of Trentino-South Tyrol and Venezia-Giulia automatically became Italian citizens. Many ex POWs displaced in Russia, and even those who passed through the Italian mission in Vladivostok, did not know of changes to their situation because they were so far from home. For this reason, the Italian government left a military attaché in Vladivostok in order to

40 ACS, Rome, PCM NP 142, *Relazione di Manera*.

41 The documents from the mission mentioned a 'Jugoslav regiment' but do not deal with German nationals from South Tyrol. See: ACS, Rome, PCM NP 142, *Lettera di Cosma Manera al Ministero della Guerra, Trieste 26.04.20*. It is most likely that South Tyrolean POWs came back through the Austrian mission after Brest-Litovsk. After the end of the war, however, Italian authorities took care of searching for the displaced (see a series of mail exchanges between the city administration of Bozen and the Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri in ACS, Rome, PCM NP 142. For a wider picture of the problem of nationality in the Austro-Hungarian army see: Oswald Überegger, "Politik, Nation Und Desertion. Zur Relevanz Politisch-Nationaler Und Ideologischer Verweigerungsmotive für Die Desertion Österreichisch-Ungarischer Soldaten Im Ersten Weltkrieg," *Wiener Zeitschrift Zur Geschichte Der Neuzeit*, 2 (2008): 109–19.

42 ACS, Rome, PCM NP 142, *Lettera di Cosma Manera al Ministero della Guerra, Trieste 26.04.20*.

43 ACS, Rome, PCM NP 142, *Telegramma del Ministero degli Esteri al Ministero della Guerra, Roma 31.01.20*.

communicate the effects of the treaty of Saint Germain to any interested people, and to provide support to those wanting to go to Italy.⁴⁴

The reports from Manera hardly mention the military situation. He stated that he decided to give military training to POWs due to the risk of a Bolshevik attack against Vladivostok. However, there is no further reference to military operations.⁴⁵

In another document, describing the military structure of the *Legione*, Manera gave some clues about the operations involving his men. In particular, we learn that there were two companies of machineguns and a light artillery group. Apparently, the *Legione* limited its duties in guarding ammunition depots and supply stores belonging to the Italian or the allied expeditionary corps. In some cases, Manera provided men and materials to the British, Japanese and American troops in order to provide logistic support.⁴⁶

Different was the role of the Italian Expeditionary Corps based in Krasnoyarsk. Although playing mostly a supporting role to the Russian anti-Bolshevik troops, the soldiers of Fassini-Camossi participated in military actions to prevent the incursion of Bolshevik groups into the region. Furthermore, they supported the action aimed at rescuing ex POWs.⁴⁷

Conclusions: the Siberian aftermath

The events at the end of 1919 put an end to the international operations in Russia. The Bolsheviks gained terrain and allied government interest dropped in terms of further helping the failing counter-revolutionary authorities. The European countries found a way of living with the Soviet authorities and did not intend to prosecute a war already lost.

The Italian forces started to leave Vladivostok on 10 February 1920 on three Japanese ships, the *Texas Maru*, the *England Maru* and the *France Maru*. The first two arrived in Trieste two months later, while the third arrived in Naples.

44 ACS, Rome, PCM NP 142, *Lettera della Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri al Ministero degli Esteri, Roma 02.04.20.*

45 ACS, Rome, PCM NP 141, *Lettera di Cosma Manera al Ministero della Guerra e al Comando Supremo, Vladivostok 01.09.19* and ACS (Rome) PCM NP 142, *Relazione di Manera alla Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, Roma 26.08.1920.*

46 ACS, Rome, PCM NP 141, *Memorandum sulla struttura e i mezzi della Legione Redenta*, undated.

47 Randazzo, *Alle Origini Dello Stato Sovietico*, 80–95.

As result of the year of operations in Vladivostok, Manera brought home 2,200 new Italian citizens.⁴⁸

However, the complex situation of the former Austrian soldiers did not end so easily. Administrative chaos and muddled bureaucracy, as well as concerns for public safety, slowed down the return home of the former POWs. Furthermore, hundreds more ex Austrian soldiers were coming back from Russia through the Red Cross and other international missions. Three years after the war the situation was still complex, and rumors persisted that thousands of prisoners were still in Russia, and unable to reach the international prisoners' commissions in Moscow and Saint Petersburg.⁴⁹

During 1921, another mission, commanded by Manera, tried to enter in the Russian territory from the Republic of Georgia. Notwithstanding the obstacles put by the Soviet authorities who refused to let Italian soldiers enter their territory, the operation still managed to rescue another 161 ex-POWs.⁵⁰

In Italy, the repatriation of the former Austrian soldiers was at the core of a standoff between the central government and the local authorities in Trentino and, less strongly, in Venezia-Giulia. Veterans' organizations in Trentino pressed the government in Rome to send a civilian mission to Russia in order to finally resolve the problem. This project bounced for two years between local authorities, the government, the foreign minister and the war minister. Opposition from Russian authorities and financial problems delayed any decision until, in 1922, the chief of government, Benito Mussolini, decided that the question of prisoners in Russia was no longer an issue.⁵¹

48 ACS, Rome, PCM NP, *Lettera del Console italiano in Vladivostok al Ministero degli Esteri, Vladivostok 10.02.20.*

49 For the concerns about public safety and the prisoners see: ACS, Rome, PCM NP 98, *Memorandum sui problemi di ordine pubblico seguiti al rimpatrio di prigionieri dalla Russia in Austria, undated.* About the problems following the repatriation of POWs see: Rossi, *Irredenti Giuliani Al Fronte Russo*, 101–114.

50 ACS, Rome, PCM NP 142, *Memorandum sull'opera svolta in Russia dalla missione per i prigionieri di guerra, undated.* Before the mission of Manera, other two missions operated in Caucasus. One, commanded by Achille Bassignano, was giving support to the White Russian troops of Gen Anton I. Denikin. The second, commanded by Melchiorre Gabba, was attached to the Georgian government in Tiflis and negotiating the possibility of Italian companies exploiting Caucasian oil and mineral resources. See Randazzo, *Alle Origini Dello Stato Sovietico*, 109–147.

51 For a more detailed account of those events, see Alessandro Salvador, "Considerazioni Sul Rimpatrio E La Smobilitazione Dei Soldati Austro-Ungarici Di Nazionalità Italiana Nel Primo Dopoguerra," *Qualestoria*, 1–2 (2014): 59–76.

In 1915, Italy entered the war following a wave of patriotic and nationalistic enthusiasm. Rome was convinced that the war would not last long, and that within months, Italy could acquire the advantages she predicted with the Entente. The repatriation of the first POWs in 1916 further nourished the enthusiasm. Welcomed as heroes, the POWs represented the first 'Italians' taken away from evil Austro-Hungarian domination.

Events of 1917 radically changed this attitude. The eastern front collapsed and the enemy invaded part of northern Italy. Optimism was replaced by fear and paranoia. The revolution in Russia exposed the European powers to fear of contamination. International socialism took over the biggest country of the world and potentially could repeat the result elsewhere. Germany's surrender of Germany, followed by the Spartakist revolution, further nourished the 'red fear'. Italy also saw an escalation of socialist unrest.

All those events influenced the attitude of Rome towards the POWs in Russia. The annexation of Trentino and Venezia-Giulia forced Italy to accept them as new citizens. However, many of them had been in Russia for a long time. Not only they were former Austrian citizens, and therefore potential enemies, they also fraternized with the Bolsheviks and could be infected by the 'socialist disease'.

Patriotic welcoming and enthusiastic acceptance was overtaken by mistrust and political indoctrination. Education, training, and involvement in an anti-socialist civil war became the instruments of forced nationalization. Fear of the future, starvation, years far distant from their families were probably the reasons to accept the offer of repatriation and patiently await their return.

For many of the former POWs, the return to Italy meant further long stays in Italian internment camps. Rome wanted to be sure that they did not have any pro Austrian or socialist feelings before allowing them to go home.