



# Fascist Civil Warfare: Mussolini's Wars in Spain and Italy, 1936–1945

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Fascist Italy developed a policy of extreme violence in its colonial practices, in the context of the world war and occupation (in the Mediterranean, the Balkans and Russia), and in civil wars. Nonetheless, Mussolinian Fascism has survived media scrutiny rather well, a circumstance paradoxically assisted by the alliance it forged with Nazi Germany in the Spanish Civil War. Reduction *ad hitlerum* of the genocides during the Second World War has been a significant factor in glossing over Italian culpability in Africa, the Balkans and the Mediterranean. Italian war crimes and crimes against humanity during Mussolini's regime range from poison gas bombing in Ethiopia to the deportation of Jews to Auschwitz, and to the 'marvellous' Italian aviation actions, as Mussolini put it, in the bombing of Republican civilians in Spain.<sup>1</sup>

It is not easy to find a historical analysis that connects these bellicose practices with the nature of the Italian Fascist regime, with its militarized foreign policy, with fascism as the great political praxis of interwar Europe, or with its violent and—in the most extreme case—eliminationist aim. In this chapter, by analysing two cases of Fascist participation in an intrastate war, we will examine how the concepts of civil war and fascist war are interrelated. We look first at Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War,

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and then at the four-way war (partisans, Salò Fascists, Nazi occupiers and Allies) in northern Italy from 1943 to 1945, which also became a civil war between fascists and anti-fascists. These two very different contexts both display how fascism developed explicitly ideological and total warfare. We will also explore how civil war might be the ideal context for waging a war of occupation, ethnic cleansing and fascistization. Fascism, understood as a state of ‘permanent civil war’, makes civil war the confrontative space between ‘two types of civilization and conceptions of the world’, as Mussolini described it.<sup>2</sup>

Both of these conflicts were internal wars between fascism and anti-fascism, waged with tremendous violence on the civilian population. However, this does not make them exceptional in twentieth-century internal wars. From the Russian Civil War to Nagorno-Karabakh, from China to Colombia, they were all national total wars against the civilian population. Certainly, the Fascist rhetoric of violence spoke of a founding utopia for the Italian regime. From 1922—but especially from 1925—on, the concepts of creative violence and a state of permanent war became elements of their ethos and identity, elements of fascism itself. They took their place alongside mass rituals, ultranationalist xenophobia, the sense of a new beginning, the desire for palingenesis of the nation, the construction of a national community that is homogenous and strong but also experiences of suffering and pain, the threat of the enemy within and the enemy without. All of this is incomprehensible without war in the equation.<sup>3</sup> The same can be said of the German regime from 1933.

Italian Fascism proclaimed itself the only authentic movement of the ‘new Italians’, who had been regenerated by war, prophets, apostles and evangelists. They were soldier-citizens of the religion of the homeland, purified in the fire of war. However, the reality is more complex than its cultural constructs or mythic-poetic projections.

Both the intervention in Spain and the internal war of 1943–1945 contain recognizable elements within the parameters of what we call *fascist warfare*,<sup>4</sup> a concept addressed extensively in the introduction to this book. This was not only due to its utopian dimension: its specific way of dressing war in voluntarist, positivist, and transformative rhetoric, its desire for fascist nationalization or the convergence of weapons and ideas of political fascistization that facilitated the construction of a kind of blood brotherhood. These utopian elements were present in varying degrees and measures in the civil wars of both Spain and Italy. Above all, here we address some aspects inherent to fascist warfare, and the qualitative leap it represented

for European warfare. These include war of aggression, fascination with air weaponry as the mechanism for *cleansing* the enemy hinterland, eliminationism directed at civilian co-nationals (in Italy but not in Spain, logically), and the ruthlessness of anti-partisan warfare against anti-fascists that was evident in the two civil wars that featured direct fascist participation.

### REGULAR WAR: 1936–1939—A THIRD BELLIGERENT IN SPAIN

Italy's intervention in Spain was decided and launched in July 1936. A few months later, it materialized as a massive military, political, and cultural operation. Until then, Mussolini had limited his participation to sending matériel—after erasing all traces of their Italian provenance—and some specialists, who arrived in Spain via Cadiz and Vigo in September to join Italo-Spanish units. In October–November 1936, however, Italy became a third belligerent in Spain.<sup>5</sup> This war experience opened a new chapter in the use of diplomacy and propaganda within the frame of the fascistization of Europe and expansion through total war. The Spanish war most fully revealed Italian Fascist ambitions for Europe, the Mediterranean and Spain. It also best revealed Italian foreign policy in relation to the surrounding nations. It also marked the inseparability of fascism from war, expansion, penetration, combat, and creed. Though 78,474 combatants (about 45,000 in the regular army and 29,000 in the Fascist militias) might not seem excessive, what was 'just' an intervention to support a friendly faction in an internal war surpassed the entire contingent of the International Brigades in Spain by almost 20,000. Mussolini disbursed the equivalent of an entire year of armed forces expenditure—8.5 billion lira—in Spain and truly internationalized the Civil War.

Far from being banal or insignificant, the intervention was part and parcel of increasing anti-communist and authoritarian tendencies on the Continent and the construction of a fascist Europe. Mussolini and the Fascist hierarchy sought to construct a new Continent, a New Order based on anti-communism and the armed deployment of the fascist utopia. As Mussolini himself indicated after the fall of Barcelona in January 1939, that 'splendid victory... is another chapter in the history of the new Europe we are creating... At this moment many of our enemies are biting the dust'.<sup>6</sup> Mussolini's aspirations in Spain were far from modest: they represented a supremacist, imperialist battle to fascistize Spain. As the coup d'état of July 1936 gave way to a long civil war, this form of belligerence became

more evident in late 1936 and early 1937. Both Hitler and Mussolini firmly believed in the victory of Franco, to whom the Duce referred as the premier fascist in Spain.<sup>7</sup>

In the space of 45 days, 36 fully equipped battalions were mobilized, trained, organized into four camps (Nocera Inferiore, Eboli, Naples and Caserta) and transported. Another 12,000 men of the Littorio Division—the origin of Mussolini's expeditionary corps in Spain—were organized by the Ministry of War and moved from Gaeta. This organizational triumph could not be underestimated. It was controlled from Italy and channelled through the fascist expeditionary force known as the *Corpo Truppe Volontarie* (CTV or Corps of Volunteer Troops), which enjoyed an extraordinary degree of autonomy from the Rebel army as a foreign belligerent in a civil war. In command was the former chief of intelligence Mario Roatta, who went on to be Chief of the Defence Staff in the Second World War. The CTV combatants were organized into three Blackshirt volunteer divisions of 6300 men each (*Dio lo Vuole*, *Fiamme Nere*, *Penne Nere*) along with the Littorio Army Division (7700), the Francisci Infantry Group (3600), troops in mixed brigades such as the *Frecce Nere* and *Frecce Azzurre* (2500 men each), an artillery group (4100), a specialized group (600), and the logistics corps (5000), comprising a total Italian force of 43,567 troops in March 1937, with 1964 officers, 3697 non-commissioned officers (NCOs), and 37,915 regular soldiers. The *Milizia Volontaria di Sicurezza Nazionale* (MVSN, Voluntary Militia for National Security, known as the Blackshirts) planned to supply around 30,000 men altogether, the army around 20,000 men.<sup>8</sup>

From the very beginning these forces were deployed so as to accomplish what the commanders, especially Mussolini, envisioned: a fascist war. It was intended to be rapid, motorized, aviation-intensive, and with objectives that would be remembered by the local population and the international community. While still in training, the troops were first called to action for the Malaga campaign. To take this Republican stronghold, Roatta had at his disposal the *Aviazione Legionaria* (Legionary Air Force) and 10,000 militia troops, some scarcely trained. From 5 to 8 February, the troops of the *Dio lo Vuole* Division fought in the hills around the city. Once they had broken through Republican defences, with air support, the Italian and insurgent troops entered the city without much difficulty and were received with 'accolades for Italy and its liberating Army',<sup>9</sup> according to the Fascist propaganda. In Roatta's brief address to his troops, he affirmed that in three days they had 'liberated a province from Red barbarism, restored

peace, liberty and life. That is how Fascism does it and you, its armed vanguard in the fight for an ideal, have transmitted its spirit and manifested its dynamism'. The occupation of Malaga was a bridgehead for the insurgents, while for the Italians it demonstrated the viability of their *guerra celere*, rapid warfare: mechanized advance, fast takeover, few casualties. It validated what Mussolini had heard from his friend Luigi Barzini, correspondent for *Il Popolo d'Italia* in Spain, that one or two divisions of a modern army such as that of Italy would slice through enemy lines like a knife through butter.

The *Duce* must surely have thought his troops invincible and felt his historical destiny to ultimately be a renewal of the victorious campaigns of the Roman legions. 'The conquest of Malaga is the work of Italian troops', wrote Ambassador Cantalupo.<sup>10</sup> Their prestige and technical prowess were superlative. The Malaga campaign might transmit a sense of Italian military maturity to anyone, but perhaps especially to the Germans: 'There is widespread admiration for our army'.<sup>11</sup> In conjunction with the *guerra celere*, the occupation of Malaga involved the elimination of Republican fighters. After the Malaga victory, Francoist warfare came into sharper contrast with that of Mussolini's troops. In fact, in 1937 many Italian commanders expressed clear disdain for *nazionalisti* warfare, the mindset of Spanish commanders, and the antiquated functioning of a command that was always in difficulty on large, stable fronts, with virtually no knowledge of the enemy. Franco drove Mussolini to despair, to the point that the latter predicted Franco's defeat in the Republican offensive of the Ebro in 1938. The *Duce* thought that *Generalissimo* Franco had wasted every opportunity he had been given to win the war. He was probably right, but the mistrust was mutual: neither Franco nor his generals wanted the Italian troops to win the Spanish Civil War.

Nevertheless, Franco's unwillingness to use the Italian legionnaires sounds more like an apocryphal legend. In fact, Roatta began to specify the first lines of action for the CTV at the end of the Malaga operation. He was already working on the Guadalajara offensive (8–23 March 1937), as part of the mission to fall hard and fast on the hinterland of Madrid and wage a rapid, mobile war in synchronized cooperation with Spanish troops. The result was an absolute fiasco, with no one to blame for the defeat but the Italians themselves. It is not true that Franco was looking for a defeat to bring Italian aspirations back into check. This collides with at least three facts. First, Franco himself considered the Italians an asset for his cause. Second, the operational plan for Guadalajara had been discussed

with, and approved by, the *Generalísimo*. Third, Italian documentation refutes it. With maps of the area no better than the Michelin Guide, on a scale of 1:400,000,<sup>12</sup> Roatta arranged to carry out operations using Fascist militia units, plus the Littorio division with its conscripted troops and regular officers. His force consisted of around 35,000 men supported by four Fiat Ansaldo tank squadrons (small armoured personnel carriers weighing 3 tons, equipped with a machine gun but no cannon), 160 pieces of field artillery, 1500 trucks and four squadrons of Fiat CR32 fighter planes. However, these eighty planes were initially useless due to poor visibility and muddy aerodromes in the hinterland. This last deficiency proved more decisive than any other, including the lack of logistical support that left the soldiers for eight days with only the most basic supply of munitions. The misfortune of the Fascist troops, which might have made the difference at Guadalajara, was the even more deficient infrastructure of the aerodromes used by the insurgent army in the province of Soria. Muddy earthen airstrips made air support impossible. By contrast, the Albacete aerodrome that was used by the Republican Popular Army aviation had concrete runways.<sup>13</sup>

Due to deficient Italian organization, which relied excessively on motorization, the attempt to relieve the *Fiamme Nere* with the *Penne Nere* Division on the front lines turned into a gigantic pile-up of trucks, tanks and artillery pieces blocking the road, threatened by the Republican aviation. Furthermore, there were no distraction manoeuvres to prevent the concentration of defensive troops from the Popular Army. Altogether, it was the perfect scene for a disaster.<sup>14</sup>

The Italian troops had recently arrived from the warm Andalusian climate and most of them were wearing the colonial uniform designed for Abyssinia. They were pushed into combat in extremely harsh conditions and went several days without a warm meal. In temperatures well below freezing, none of the legionnaires, including those who had spent several days immobilized in trucks along the highway, had woollen gloves or balaclavas. In this context occurred the famous episodes of Italians fighting Italians. In one, Fascist troops must have mistaken Littorio soldiers for a Garibaldi Brigade patrol (Italians fighting with the XII International Brigade); in another, political commissar Luigi Longo instigated the *garibaldini* to give false orders in Italian over loudspeakers, with tragic outcomes. To Captain Nanni Devoto, the twenty days of hell in that battle seemed like a '*bellezza meravigliosa*', a marvellous beauty, the true life they had dreamed about in the monotony of the garrison: 'This life should test every youth of New

Italy: the life of a man alone facing death and pain, from which enthusiasm and faith are born'.<sup>15</sup> Here, we see the propaganda manufactured after the event. As Davide Lajolo wrote, when the Littorio entered combat, they found in the ditches along the highway cadavers, rucksacks, and rifles under a crust of water that had turned to ice. This at last was the 'face of war. The dead, the wounded, shrieks, exploding grenades, shrapnel falling from the sky'.<sup>16</sup>

The defeat at Guadalajara chilled the relations between the two armies and their commands, as mutual reproach escalated to insult. Few armies have had to endure such a campaign of public shame and ridicule as the Italian army in Spain. Consequently, few armies have ever found themselves obliged so brazenly to bolster the self-esteem of their troops. Mussolini rejected the 'lies and calumny' campaign of the international press; claiming that they had turned the fall of one battalion into a total defeat. More than failure, non-success or 'unsuccess', the *Duce* thought they should talk about Fascist success, an Italian victory stunted by events. It ended with a reminder: those who died at Guadalajara died for an ideal, and would be avenged as a matter of dogma. Roberto Farinacci, former secretary of the Fascist National Party and a member of the Fascist High Council who was on political mission in Spain, went to great lengths to convince him of the contrary. He was sure that the blame for what had happened in Guadalajara did not lie with Franco or the Spanish soldiers, but with Italian improvisation, excess confidence, erroneous estimation of enemy troops, lack of coordination and even of news between lines and operational units, or poor use of war matériel. A territorial offensive of such depth without defensive air support left the troops continuously exposed to bombardment and the machine guns of an enemy that had evidently been underestimated. It clearly exposed the rashness of those like Ciano, who thought that the Italians could even take Madrid in 'eight days'.<sup>17</sup> However, this was no reason to stop believing in fascist war. As Spanish Ambassador to Italy Pedro García Conde wrote, the 'discouragement was on a par with the over-confidence' with which they had started.<sup>18</sup> Instead of giving in after the defeat of Guadalajara, the Italian generals looked for a way to recover their military prestige and avenge Italian deaths: 'those who died burned inside us'. The order was revenge, 'and never was an order received with greater enthusiasm'.<sup>19</sup>

The next phase of this fight for fascist victory took place in the north of Spain. Faced with a lack of reserves, Franco brought in the CTV and Piazzoni's *Frecce Nere* Mixed Brigade. They would assist his effort to close in

on the defensive belt around Bilbao, in something like the antithesis of the speedy *guerra celere*, but with ample air coverage from the German Condor Legion and the *Aviazione Legionaria*. The bombing of the villages Durango and Elorrio on 31 March by Savoia airplanes from the Italian air force, escorted by Fiat CR-32 fighters, left 250 victims, most of them civilians. This was a foretaste of the bombing techniques that the Italian squadrons would use throughout the war: repeated flyovers and, at times, high-altitude bombing to avoid anti-aircraft guns. Most significantly, however, the bombing had no declared military objective other than to terrorize the population. The Savoia-Marchetti planes gave cover and support to the Condor Legion on 26 April, when it bombed the town of Guernica. Afterward, the *Corriere della Sera* news correspondent who accompanied the *Frecce Nere* when they entered the town wrote categorically that ‘Guernica no longer exists’.<sup>20</sup>

There was nothing new in this. It had been happening over Madrid since November and would soon happen over Valencia, the capital of the Republic. Terror bombing from the sea and air was constant over Republican cities along the Mediterranean. On 14 February, 125 shells were fired from the Italian cruiser *Duca d’Aosta* into the city centre of Valencia. That was just the beginning: Italian military SM-79 and SM-81 aircraft based in Mallorca bombed the city repeatedly in February, May, July, August, September, and October 1937, leaving hundreds dead and wounded. The same occurred in many other coastal cities such as Alicante, Sagunto, Castellón, Peñíscola, and Benicarló. The port and city centre of Barcelona were also targets for Italian bombardment. Naval attacks commenced there in February (70 shells fired at the city centre from the *Eugenio di Savoia* on 13 February caused ‘nervousness and disorder’<sup>21</sup>); the Savoia-Marchetti began their raids in late May. The 1 October attack on the Catalonian capital destroyed the neighbourhood of La Barceloneta, a bloody antecedent to the famous air raids of March 1938. One report of the CTV Information Office, the *Ufficio Informazioni*, indicated that the main objective, a factory that produced war matériel, was only hit by a single bomb, while the other twelve or thirteen fell in an arc of some 400–500 metres. One fell on a school, accounting for a good portion of the 112 fatalities and the 201 injured in the attack.<sup>22</sup> Italian bombs also fell on Reus, Badalona, and Tarragona.

The CTV had no power or authority regarding violent practices in the field, judicial investigation, or the treatment of prisoners and civilians in newly occupied areas or quartering sites. Many CTV members noted that



the references to the integration of the defeated into the community which characterized the statements of the military and political authorities ran contrary to the policies of cleansing and repression being implemented by the 'nationals'. This situation is referred to in numerous reports. Ettore Muti lamented in 1936 how in Badajoz and Mérida, where the Italian Savoia-Marchetti 81 airplanes had been very prominent, all prisoners were shot 'in reprisal for their valiant and exhausting defence'. He stated that 'our beautiful fascism is something entirely different'.<sup>23</sup> Sandro Sandri observed that the 'Whites', upon entering a village, began 'cleansing', not by torturing, but simply by killing. 'From the *Generalísimo* to the last soldier, all are willing to exterminate mercilessly'.<sup>24</sup>

In Malaga, in the North, and in Alicante, the reports composed by Italians in Spain spoke of horrible actions and mass executions. However, in the interest of clarity it should be noted that, according to the existing documentation, Italian disgust with these practices was not indicative of benevolence or humanitarian feeling towards the victims. Indeed, Gaetani, Ambassador Cantalupo's envoy to Malaga, saw the violence as something which was completely necessary, even if it was proving excessive in the Spanish case. Instead, the Italian attitude stemmed from a concern that the 'nationals' were making tactical and political errors—seen as a product of the Spanish character—which would create serious problems for future reconstruction. As the *Duce* would have been able to read in a 1937 report, in contrast to his own good heart, 'the sanguinary nature of Spaniards is most violently manifest in this war (...) torturing prisoners, the execution machine operates incessantly'.<sup>25</sup> However, Italian disdain for Rebel violence seems rather paradoxical if we consider that Italian soldiers continually praised the proactive beauty and creativity of war: the broadest possible sphere of violence, cleansing, and purification. For them, destruction was a prerequisite for reconstruction and coexistence, with violence a necessary condition for integration into a fascist national community. Italian surprise, disapproval, or rejection of Rebel violence must therefore be understood in a nuanced way. First, such expressions were usually purely personal or exceptional and did not reflect the political, military or legal position of the Fascist state and its representatives. Secondly, the Italians—officially or individually—were not opposed to violence as such, only to excess. It was essentially a question of scale: they did not reject the nature of violence but its extent.

Extensive use of foreign aviation was a fundamental part of fascist warfare in Spain, since Franco had no operative aerial weaponry. Yet he saw

the need to limit the use of other main arm of Italian intervention, the infantry. On the pretence of wanting to safeguard Italy's prestige, Franco kept the Italian troops from entering Bilbao and taking the Basque capital. Everyone thought that they would be used to conquer the city, in a repeat performance of the *guerra celere* in Malaga, but Franco indicated that he could not expose the Italians to an action 'so harsh and difficult as this breach', an action 'that might fail'. The *Generalissimo* never questioned the political and moral reasons behind the Duce's request for quick and decisive use of the Italian troops. '*I volontari italiani si battono o ritornano*' ('Italian volunteers either fight or go home') Mussolini wrote.<sup>26</sup> Yet they were not used, and this was tantamount to a double humiliation: Guadalajara and now Bilbao. After that, only one thing mattered: recovering their prestige. All sights were set on Santander. However, Santander and Asturias had their own armies, defending these two provinces by spreading out and making use of the complicated terrain, which was unsuitable for rapid, mechanized warfare. Thus, in order for the Italians to win, they had to depart from the swift, crushing, aerial model of fascist warfare. After the hard-fought victory, future CTV Commander-in-Chief Gastone Gambarà telegraphed to Ciano: 'Guadalajara's deaths avenged stop Victory hard but complete and brilliant stop We are extremely happy stop Long live Italy'.<sup>27</sup>

Despite all the fascist paraphernalia, however, the Spanish troops of General Dávila were chiefly responsible for putting an end to Republican resistance. CTV participation was relatively minor in these complex and especially severe battles. Davide Lajolo indicated years later that after the second day of fighting they stopped counting the dead; by the fifth day, the soldiers and officers were completely exhausted and beyond recognition, besieging a city that seemed impenetrable.<sup>28</sup> However, Fascist propaganda made Santander the subject of the most exalted rhetoric. Victory in the Cantabrian capital was projected as demonstrating the antithesis of Guadalajara: heroism, courage, and valour.<sup>29</sup> So much heroism, so much exaltation surrounded the taking of Santander that CTV Commander-in-Chief Ettore Bastico organized a 'parade to show off the volunteer troops'. It was tolerated out of respect, despite the distortion of reality it entailed. There was no stopping the propaganda machine, which portrayed the combatants fighting 'like lions' with an enormous spirit of aggressiveness and enthusiasm that had generated the admiration of everyone: a 'thing well organized, studied and directed' that had restored the value of Italians (after Guadalajara). They were so proud that, to reinforce the 'strong impression' they

had made on Republican Spain after taking Santander, Ciano ordered Bastico to execute a 'mass air strike' on Valencia on the night of 26 August, to 'destroy the morale of the population'<sup>30</sup> through terror. Here, as on many other occasions, the Fascists unleashed their fury. Everyone needed to hear their victory celebration, not just the civilians in the north.

Throughout 1937, the Italian Fascist conception of the war in Spain changed substantially. The CTV, despite its seeming insignificance after taking Santander, was very important later on, even more than in the north, where it had played a significant role that was exaggerated by Fascist propaganda. Yet they were decisive in the offensives of 1938 and 1939, where their motorized infantry regiments supported by artillery and armoured vehicles were used to spearhead the Francoist attack on Aragon. Despite the changes and adaptations required by circumstances, and his opinion that Franco and his generals waged war in a very slow and timorous way, the Duce remained firm in his support for the insurgent cause. In late 1936 and early 1937, with the failure of the initial coup plan and the progressive sliding towards a total war, Italy became a belligerent on Spanish soil and turned the Civil War into an international war, not just an internationalized conflict. Italy had moved from participation 'without interference' to virtually unconditional support for Franco, as Spain experienced massive fascist political and commercial intervention. Many Francoist political structures bore the imprint of Italian fascism, from the Single Party to the vertical trade union and the militias. This difficult tension between pride at being different and unconditional support despite the difference resolved itself with greater conviction from 1938 until the end of the war in April 1939, as Mussolini, Ciano and all the national political and diplomatic actors understood even more explicitly that the Spanish Civil War was a European war being fought on Spanish soil.

### *Irregular War 1943–1945: Fascist Civil War*

The Spanish conflict was the first but not the only civil war in Europe that openly featured armed combat between fascists and anti-fascists. The Italian war of 1943–1945 was both an internal conflict and a war along the southern European border of the Third Reich. As is well known, there has been strong conceptual, political, and historiographical reaction to the revisionist idea of identifying this context of resistance, war of occupation, and partisan war as also involving a civil war.<sup>31</sup> Like many other internal conflicts in which civil war overlaps with a war of occupation, resistance,

and collaboration, the Italian case has generated more than a few debates and questions, even at that time. Resistance leader Ferruccio Parri said that internal liberation—civil war as a way of eradicating Salò Fascism—was equally or more important than liberation from the occupying enemy.<sup>32</sup>

The escalation into civil war stemmed from the state rupture that accompanied the fall of Mussolini, the armistice of Pietro Badoglio and his government with the Allied forces in September of 1943, occupation of Italy by Nazi Germany, the creation of the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (RSI, the Italian Social Republic), the landing of the Allied armies in the south and military submission to the Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories.<sup>33</sup> Italy was divided into two zones: the south, under Badoglio, with continuity for the monarchy, and Mussolini's RSI in the north, which inherited the legitimacy of Fascism and its institutions. As in France, Greece, or Yugoslavia, a world war plus occupation coincided with an internal struggle between fascists and anti-fascists for legitimacy and sovereignty. The war between the armed resistance and Salò Fascism for control of Italy was one of the overlapping wars fought on Italian soil from 1943 to 1945, when the Axis was defeated. Within a few weeks, the fracture in national-territorial sovereignty became an internal multilateral war that involved fascists and anti-fascists vying for turf in the RSI-controlled territory in the northern half of the country. This struggle also had features of what we identify here as a fascist war.

It is important to clarify this from the beginning. The armed clashes, massacres, and reprisals of four sides (Fascists, anti-fascists, Germans, Allies) along with their extreme effects on the civilian population, all of which characterize fascist activity in the context of an internal war, were above all the result of the hostilities initiated with the armistice of 1943. In occupied areas they exhibited many features of a civil war and irregular war, where small groups of armed men defended a dispersed territoriality, very linked to the knowledge of local and regional geography. However, they were also the result of the juxtaposition of conflicts and wars between fascism and anti-fascism, occupiers-collaborators and the resistance. This was evident in a 1944 editorial in the Communist daily *l'Unità*, which urged people to wage patriotic war against the invader, political war against reactionary forces, and civil war against fascist collaborators.<sup>34</sup> On one side was Italy, anti-fascist in some cases and post-fascist in others, but always against German occupation. On the other side was the RSI, with its return to *sansepolcristo*—the origins of Fascism—and its multi-directional violence, which

set in motion a kind of internal palingenesis and extreme radicalization of the Fascist project developed in the context of war.

Unlike the Civil War in Spain, the irregular war of 1943–1945 in Italy was not continuous combat with stable fronts suitable for the deployment of a *guerra celere* with motorized and aerial warfare. However, it does bear the traits of an anti-partisan war and a war against the civilian population. From October 1943 to spring 1944, the guerrilla parties (in Abruzzo and Piedmont especially) consisted not of an organized mass of combatants but of fugitive soldiers, men who refused to be recruited into the Fascist army, and ex-detainees from camps. It is difficult to speak of those early months as a civil war, though the *Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale* (National Liberation Committee) presided over by Ivanoe Bonomi began to operate from Rome and there were isolated actions such as the terrorist-style operations of the *Gruppi di azione patriottica* (GAP, Patriotic Action Groups). What gave the resistance movement muscle and military capacity was the refusal of men to be recruited into the army after the founding of the RSI. Many active and future guerrillas took to the hills to avoid conscription. Meanwhile, Mussolini decreed the famous *Bando Graziani* in February of 1944, dissolving any link between the Italian people and the king. In other words, the fragmentation of sovereignty, territoriality, and armed forces materialized in the decisions of armed men to follow one set of orders or another, to submit to being drafted into the RSI or oppose it. The key to the internal fracture of Italy in 1943–1945 should be understood in terms of defining national identity, legitimacy of power and territorial control.<sup>35</sup>

For the Fascist writer Giorgio Pisanò (1924–1997), partisan communism had caused the war, since unlike the guerrilla fighters, neither the government in the south nor the RSI had any intention of destroying Italian society or setting Italians against Italians. This argument holds that when Salò declared war on the resistance by announcing that any unauthorized person found with weapons would immediately be shot, it did so in reaction to continual assassinations by the partisans. Despite the weakness of the argument, this image of civil war was reinforced by the fact that both the Allies and the Badoglio government recognized the *Corpo Volontari della Libertà* (CVL, Volunteer Liberation Corps)—a combined force of partisan units formed in June 1944 under General Raffaele Cadorna (1889–1973)—as an Italian national army and therefore a belligerent in the war of liberation. However, until 1944 the war of the *Resistenza* was more a war of the CLN than of the royal government of Badoglio. Its relationship with the head of state and government was highly conflicted, at

least until the liberation of Rome and the rise of Bonomi to Prime Minister. The CLN was the organization that best reflected the complexity of anti-fascism: alongside the strength of the Italian Communist Party led by Palmiro Togliatti were liberal, Christian Democrat and socialist organizations, which did not always have identical agendas or concepts of the political architecture that would give shape to the post-war, post-fascist institutional edifice. The six-way political pact, which excluded important anti-fascist actors, also implied ideological and organizational control of the partisan groups. These were predominantly communist: approximately half of the more than one thousand partisan groups that operated in the territory along with the nearly two hundred that were affiliated with the *Partito d'Azione*, from which would come the post-war Prime Minister Ferruccio Parri. However, numerous partisan units did not belong to CLN political organizations, and therefore did not follow commands from Rome. Variability and autonomy of organization and command became a differentiating feature of the Italian war.

This internal war actually did at times involve the clash of two organized armies, but not always to the same degree, or even with defined or rigid territorial control. Leaving aside the existence of seventeen or eighteen partisan republics (such as those of Montefiorini in Modena, or Val d'Ossola, Carnia, and Alto Monferrato), most of which lasted a few months during 1944 before being annihilated by Axis troops, the CLN had a diffuse, ambiguous territoriality based in Rome, as did the *Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale Alta Italia* (Committee for the Liberation of Northern Italy—CLNAI) led by Alfredo Pizzoni. On the other side, completely shattering the basis for any assumption that northern Italy constituted a political and territorial *civitas*, the RSI was subordinate to the military and territorial control of Nazi Germany—exactly as was the NDH, the Independent State of Croatia. The new state was also deprived of control over some of its territories in the northeast, which were annexed by the Third Reich. Yet the Germans usually ceded the anti-partisan campaign, the dispute for sovereignty and territorial control of the hinterland, to the Italian Salò forces, first out of military convenience and second because it was the most efficient way to wage a partisan war that ultimately identified the partisan with the territory.<sup>36</sup> So the fighting between the two Italian sides does correspond to the classic image of a civil war as a war between compatriots, a fratricidal war.

Prominent among the RSI units that specialized in anti-partisan man-hunts and fascist warfare were the *Guardia Nazionale Repubblicana*, the

*Brigate Nere*, the *X Flottiglia MAS* (*Motoscafi Armati Siluranti*, a marines unit that fought on land, named after a torpedo-armed motorboat the Italians used in the Mediterranean during the Second World War), the Milanese *Legione Autonoma Mobile Ettore Muti* (named after the Fascist aviator responsible for the first air raids in Spain in 1936 and other feats), and the *Banda Carità* (after Mario Carità, founder of the *Reparto dei Servizi Speciali* of Florence, under the *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale*). All military groups were faithful to the RSI, Fascism and the Duce. They were known for their considerable autonomy and ruthless determination in the war against those in the hills. The Republic of Salò thus waged a fascist war against compatriots whom they identified as traitors and enemies of the nation: an openly eliminationist and palingenetic war of fascistization, radicalization, and cleansing of the nation.

The anti-partisan war unfolded in three general phases. The first, in autumn-winter of 1943–1944, began dealing with the initial partisan formations in German-dominated areas of central and northern Italy. The second phase began with the first anti-partisan operations of spring 1944, led by German units with the help of RSI troops. The third phase includes the fighting that arose in the summer of 1944, after Rome was captured by the Allies, given the reinforcement of both the strength of the partisan groups and of Salò, who instituted forced militarization and the Black Brigades. It lasted until the general uprising of April 1945. Autonomous forms of fascist violence left a trail of radicalization, xenophobia, and fighting ‘to the end and to the death’.<sup>37</sup> Italian forces operating independently of the German occupiers were responsible for 21% of the 5607 episodes of violence recorded in the *Atlante delle stragi naziste e fasciste in Italia* (Atlas of Nazi and Fascist massacres in Italy) with 23,669 killed outside combat (actual numbers were higher) during the Italian civil war of 1943–1945.<sup>38</sup>

In this irregular conflict, the civil war took the form of highly asymmetric armed confrontations, in which territorial distinctions were not always clear. This was demonstrated in the Axis reprisal campaigns of autumn and winter 1944, which left the partisan movement exhausted and anxious for the arrival of the final Allied offensive. The Axis offensive in the second half of the year had conquered and practically eliminated some of the free zones under partisan territorial control. After the winter of 1944, the final defence of the national territory against Allied invasion—the defence of Fascism and of Italy (which were one and the same for the *Salò* youth)—was an Italian affair, as was their defeat. However, the institutional dispute was never binary: when the North American troops took Rome in June

1944, it seemed the Resistance had formed a precise chain of command. Nonetheless, Resistance military action was never strictly linked to the command centre in Rome, and at times not even to that of Pizzoni. In fact, the variety of partisan formations is not entirely explained by the political diversity of their members. Apart from communists and socialists in the ranks of the Garibaldi formations, there were also Christian Democrats, urban liberals of the *Partito d'Azione* in the *Giustizia e Libertà* units, and even monarchists. This also cannot be explained by the different situations that each guerrilla party had to confront, whether on the exposed mountain tops of the Aosta Valley or in the medium-size cities of Emilia, Piedmont, or Lombardy, where the GAP operated. Isolation may have been the main reason for the lack of coordination. Once Rome was lost, German occupation and Republican reinforcement were based on the effective separation of north and south along the Gothic Line. Resistance units often depended on their own resources; once they were surrounded, coordinated action was rare and generally ineffective. Each intervention was also followed up by increasingly severe reprisals.

To no small degree, this war between Italians took the form of man-hunts, cleansing the hinterland, and terrorist action. Generalized torture took place in specialized centres, as a form of punishment and to obtain information about a population often perceived by the occupiers as hostile.<sup>39</sup> In the hinterland—which was also the southern front of Nazi Germany in Europe—some areas had been liberated by partisan groups. The security of the Wehrmacht and the Reich, especially in its retreat to the north in 1944, depended on the pacification (through violence) of this area. Beginning in June of that year, civilians were officially held responsible for partisan presence or attacks in their areas. The effort to control hostile forces and secure lines of retreat led to the widespread massacre of partisans and civilians, such as those that took place in Sant'Anna di Stazzema in Tuscany and Marzabotto near Bologna, both at the hands of young troops of the 16th Panzergrenadier Division Reichführer-SS.<sup>40</sup> The first was a retreat action based on a scorched-earth policy in which the German troops, supported by members of the 36th Mussolini Brigade, executed more than 500 civilians (who had not obeyed the German order to evacuate) in the plaza of the small town of Stazzema, in the Tuscan Apennines, on 12 August 1944. The area had been the recent site of heavy clashes between Germans, partisans and Fascists of the *XMAS*. One month later, the same unit, which specialized in the cruellest and most effective forms of anti-partisan warfare, carried out the massacre of Marzabotto in



the mountain area of Monte Sole that encompassed three municipalities to the south of Bologna. From 29 September to 5 October 1944, in an anti-partisan cleansing operation of the first rearguard behind the Gothic Line, at least 770 persons were killed, mostly women and children, on the pretext that they were helping the guerrillas. Those who had taken refuge in the church of Santa Maria Assunta were brought out and shot down with machine guns in the adjoining cemetery. The infamous *rastrellamento*, the house-to-house search for partisan guerrilla collaborators, took the already ruthless persecution of civilians to the extreme. At Monte Sole, dozens of children were decapitated or thrown alive into the fire in the arms of their mothers. In Sant'Anna di Stazzema, the youngest victim was 20 days old.

The anti-partisan campaign alone does not explain such extreme brutality. Both massacres, like so many others recorded in the historiography,<sup>41</sup> reflect the terrible reality inflicted on the civilian population, regardless of whether it was a civil war, a war of occupation, or both at the same time. It was an incredibly disproportionate war waged on civilians. Though planned, as always it featured elements of improvisation and was placed in the hands of specialized units with local support. It was waged in areas of territorial fluidity and military instability. Prior to Sant'Anna di Stazzema, 72 civilians had been massacred in Forno in the same region. Shortly after, the same occurred in Fivizzano, leaving more than 340 dead; it was repeated in Camaiore and Mezzano. All of them, except the last, were the sites of concentration camps where mainly women and children were interned. There were massacres in other cities in the north, some of them veritable symbols of the internal war in Italy. On 17 July 1944, Republican forces opened fire in the Piazza Tasso of Florence, leaving five dead in reprisal for the historically leftist, anti-fascist leaning of the San Frediano neighbourhood, according to the common interpretation. In August, the *Legione Muti* murdered fifteen partisans in the Piazzale Loreto of Milan in revenge for sabotage actions. In the same *piazza*—not by coincidence but in macabre compensation—the partisans hung Mussolini's cadaver upside-down on 29 April 1945, the day after his death. The chain of violence—massacres, attacks, public lynchings—is too long to describe. Such policies of violence reinforce our thesis of the increasing convergence in the praxis of German and other Axis forces in the East and West from mid-1943 but especially from 1944 on. In a way, it was the fruit of their own vulnerability and growing sense of being surrounded.

What happened in Italy in 1943–1945 was far from being a conventional civil war. Since then, it has been difficult to break wars down into a

succession of battles. The war that concerns us here clearly shared characteristics of the Russian and Spanish wars, including a preponderance of civilian victims over those in uniform: 120,000 of the more than 187,000 victims recorded by Claudio Pavone for 1943–1945 were non-combatants.<sup>42</sup> Estimates indicate that torture, executions, and deportation in fascist reprisals, and violence against partisans and the civilian population, ended the lives of 10,000–15,000 people (7400 according to data from the Carabinieri). The border between the world war, the civil war, the guerrilla war, and revolutionary insurrection was porous and is therefore difficult to trace. Besides the battles in the partisan war, the most significant armed confrontations took place in the insurrection of April 1945, with the takeover of urban nuclei that had been abandoned by Reich troops in the centre and north.<sup>43</sup> Thus success depended as much on the lack of German resolve to defend the remnants of the RSI as on the strength of the resistance. The greatest armed victory, after more than a year of wear and tear from counterinsurgent operations and a lack of resources, came at the end, when the Allied offensive of April 1945 coincided with the general partisan uprising.<sup>44</sup>

As the German defensive lines crumbled, the first guerrilla units entered the city of Imola. Two days later, on 16 April, amidst the disorderly German and Fascist retreat, the CLNAI gave orders to take all capitals and urban centres. Bologna was liberated on 19 April by partisans, and North American infantry troops arrived soon after. In this, the Emilian capital set the pattern for northern Italy: the partisans took control of the cities before the Allied armies arrived. Perhaps the most important among them was Milan, where the insurgent committee began an uprising on 25 April. It remains etched in memory and public commemoration as the iconic date of the *Liberazione* and the end of the war, though Fascist and partisan units continued fighting in the streets of cities like Turin (Piedmont) until at least 1 May, when the Allied troops arrived. Mussolini's wars ended in unmitigated defeat in the context of a civil war. Perhaps it could not have been any other way.

## CONCLUSION

The concept of *fascist warfare* is now under scrutiny and gives rise to much discussion. The objective of this book is to contribute to this trans-national and comparative debate. In this chapter, we have analysed the features of

fascist warfare in two civil wars: the Spanish war of 1936–1939 and the Italian war of 1943–1945, searching for traits that we understand to be inherent to fascist warfare. The results, however, cannot be entirely conclusive. On the one hand, civil war is the enabling context for the construction of fascist regimes in their maximum, most perfect expression, as demonstrated in the Italian or Spanish cases, along with others such as Croatia or France in the Second World War. Civil war is the most developed form of armed and violent national purification, which doubtlessly fits with the ideological constructs and bellicose expressions of fascism. On the other hand, it is not clear if the ideal characteristics of fascist warfare are manifest in contexts such as the Spanish or Italian wars to the degree that would qualify them completely and categorically as fascist wars in the terms proposed here.

Clearly, there is no single model of fascist war. In fact, the fascist combat experiences in Spain and Italy show important differences. The first was a regular war with voluntary mobilization and the second, an irregular anti-partisan war with mandatory compliance on the part of the RSI—the rejection of it was ultimately the trigger for the fragmentation of the armed forces and for civil war. The Italian war in Spain was an international intervention in the context of a civil war. That of 1943–1945 was a civil war ignited by an international intervention. Fascist warfare shares traits with contemporary total wars that are at the same time specific to European fascisms and clearly present in both wars examined here: fascination with aerial weaponry, anti-partisan warfare, and ruthlessness in dealing with compatriots as a form of cleansing the national community. However, whether these phenomena constituted the gravitational centre or the periphery of the Spanish and Italian wars studied here remains unresolved. In Spain, the Italian Fascists complained of the difficulties in deploying what they considered their own type of warfare. While this does not cast doubt on the characterization of Italian intent, it does call into question whether the Spanish Civil War was entirely a fascist war. Miguel Alonso addresses the issue more extensively in his chapter. In the Italian case, the activity of the RSI reflected a desire for palingenetic national purification as well as extreme cruelty against civilians considered traitors to the homeland. However, though clearly a war of aggression, it was not a *guerra celere* nor were aerial weapons particularly important. It ended up being a war against civilians, exactly what the Italians had claimed to reject in Spain. Evidently, then, there is no single, pre-defined model of fascist war. In fact, in these few pages we have seen two radically different types of war: one regular, the other irregular. However, in both cases the war served as the enabling

frame for fascistization, radicalization, cleansing of the nation, and the convergence of society with the fascist utopia. This was successful in one case and failed in a spiral of eliminationist violence in the other. Nevertheless, in both cases there was a clear convergence of civil war and fascist warfare.

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