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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Italy's Catholic partisan: history and narrative

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Abstract

This article reviews the evolution of the representation of Italy's 'Catholic partisan'. In essence, this involved adaptation of the model of the Catholic soldier, who was able to kill out of love and 'without hatred', to the context of a civil war. With particular reference to the case of the central Veneto, this examination looks back to earlier Italian experiences during wartime to help explain how Catholic activists and the partisan groups linked to the Catholic world addressed the key issues of the legitimation of Resistance violence and the control of its use. It emphasises the disparity between the rhetoric directed at containing the violence and the realities of guerrilla warfare. The article goes on to analyse the different models of the 'Catholic partisan' put forward in the immediate postwar period (1945–1950): the 'Catholic soldier', with his military bearing; the 'pure martyr', who never initiated violence; and the 'devout partisan', who managed to restrict his use of violence, assessing its costs and benefits, and was characterised by his inclination to forgive and, especially, to kill as little as possible. The conclusions consider how a particular rhetoric helped to shape the narrative of the active involvement of Catholics in the Italian Resistance.

Keywords: Italian Resistance; Catholic partisans; political violence; Veneto

Introduction

The central concerns of this article are the presence of Catholic activists in the Italian Resistance against German Nazism and Italian Fascism and the specific problems that they faced in this context: how to justify and practise violence. In a necessarily summary manner, given the space available, I will be using examples and drawing selectively on primary sources and the secondary literature in order to address these issues. Starting with a focus on the central Veneto, a paradigmatic case, I analyse the rhetoric that was deployed and contrast this with the actual practice of guerrilla warfare. I then develop the theme of memory, examining portrayals of Resistance martyrdom and how these established a sort of model for the Catholic partisan and a narrative with a particular political and religious orientation.

The 'Catholic partisan' is a relatively recent object of historical research. It was only in the 1990s, after the publication of Claudio Pavone's ground-breaking book (2013 [1991]), that studies started to focus on the combatants as individuals, and therefore on issues relating to the decisions they had to make (Pavone 2001, 708; Santagata 2017). In the last few years, new work has attempted to give a clearer picture of the imaginary and rhetoric of the

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partisan war fought by Catholics, placing this within a longer-term perspective (Santagata 2021; Vecchio 2022; Ceci 2024).

This article represents both a synthesis and a development of the thinking that led to publication of my most recent book (Santagata 2021), in which I presented a contribution to reflections both on the specific ways in which Catholic activists justified their use of violence in the context of civil war, taking a well-developed and distinct approach, and on the unavoidable gap between the rhetoric and the practice of warfare. Having taken the case of the Veneto as a starting point, I broaden my perspective to the national context in order to put forward some ideas about the issue of '*moralità*', not meant as a synonym for a set of moral precepts but as an individual and collective space in which 'politics and ethics meet and clash' (Pavone 2013, 2).[1]

Before going any further, we should note the main theoretical contributions that have indicated the way forward. These range from the thinking of Sergio Cotta, an eminent philosopher of the Catholic movement in the Republican era and the first to talk about 'justified' and 'guiltless' violence (1997, 103–105), to the observations of Gabriele De Rosa (1997), Pietro Scoppola (2003), and, especially, Vittorio Emanuele Giuntella (1981) and Francesco Traniello on Italy's Resistance as an instance of independence from the Church's leadership and thus the space for a real reduction in the level of 'external management of people's consciousness' (Traniello 1997, 55). Another current of research addresses, more specifically, the relationship that Catholics had with political violence, and with the violence of warfare. During the twentieth century, as Daniele Menozzi explains, Church teaching pursued a slow process of delegitimisation of wars and increasingly constrained the circumstances that might make the recourse to arms legitimate – the centuries-old doctrine of the 'just war' – even for defensive purposes (Menozzi 2008). The principal problem for Catholics considering involvement in the Resistance was how to 'legitimise exercising the *jus vitae ac necis* (right of life and death) without any secure institutional cover' (Pavone 2013, 503). As discussed later, the absence of any legitimation from the state was a fundamental issue for those who referred to the teaching of St Paul on obedience; at the same time, the question of how to exercise 'just violence', supposing this to be permitted, was used to challenge the way in which the Communists were taking the Resistance forward. Furthermore, it was an issue that directly related to the nature of the civil war and also, therefore, to the form that anti-Fascism took within this.

The origins and features of Catholic anti-Fascism

The Veneto, while having its own peculiarities, meets all the requirements of a testing ground for study of the Catholic Resistance and its memory. Moreover, although Catholics played a part in the Resistance throughout occupied Italy, not everywhere saw the creation of significant partisan groups linked to the Catholic world; in the North East, however, this phenomenon was particularly notable. In addition, while political Catholicism and the presence of the Church had long been features of Italian history in general, Catholics had developed a particularly strong political tradition in the Veneto, where the Church and its affiliated organisations were deeply rooted (Brunetta 1974; Ventura 1978). This is illustrated by the legacy of the region's Catholic trade unions (the 'White Leagues'): the active part played in the great struggles of the early 1920s had left both an enduring strong memory and a kind of continuity through some of their leaders (Tramontin 1995; Lanaro 1978).

The mark left by the Partito Popolare Italiano (PPI: Italian Popular Party), dissolved in 1926 under Fascism, was also very important. Catholic political anti-Fascism in the Resistance had its roots in this tradition of Christian social and political activism, which had been kept alive in the Veneto. A more recent influence was the 'religious anti-Fascism' that had developed during the 1930s: while not politicised, this was in competition with Fascism,

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and has been seen by some scholars as a crucial explanatory factor in the arrival of believers within the opposition to the regime (Scoppola and Traniello 1975, 10–14). This development took place within the framework of Catholic Action, which had almost 80,000 members in the diocese of Vicenza and an even larger number in that of Padua, making it a strong competitor with the Opera Nazionale Balilla (the Fascist youth organisation) in mobilising the younger generation. Catholic Action was organised by age group and activity focus, and had an ideology distinct from that of Fascism; over time, despite some obvious similarities, this became incompatible with the regime, especially as Mussolini became closer to Hitler (Moro 1979). In particular, the Federazione Universitaria Cattolica Italiana (FUCI: Italian Catholic University Federation), which had had Giovanni Battista Montini (the future Pope Paul VI) as its ecclesiastical adviser, was an effective training ground for Catholic thinking, feeding on Church social doctrine but also, albeit in lesser degree, on the influences of French personalism from the 1930s. At the same time, it should be pointed out that the prominent Catholic figures Giuseppe Dossetti and Giuseppe Lazzati, when interviewed in 1984, condemned the total absence in Catholic Action circles of any anti-Fascist education based on the diametrical opposition of freedom and dictatorship (Dossetti and Lazzati 2003). Only well into the Second World War, with Pius XII's radio broadcast of Christmas 1942, was it evident that the Church had moved into active opposition (in varying degree and form) to the regime (Forlenza and Thomassen 2024a).

Francesco Piva (2015) highlights the role of the education provided by the Gioventù Italiana di Azione Cattolica (GIAC: Italian Catholic Action's youth wing), the main lay organisation under the control of the Church leadership. In particular, he analyses the aspect of spiritual and behavioural purity, above all sexual, which the ecclesiastical advisers believed would help young people to control other instincts, including towards violence. This led to a revival of the traditional theme of Catholic teaching on war, the idea of killing without hatred: this meant fighting in the spirit of charity and forgiveness. The call for purity, in both peacetime and wartime, was central to, for example, the 'Forti e puri' campaign promoted in Vicenza by Don Bruno Barbieri; this drew in young people such as Mariano Rumor and Michelangelo Dall'Armellina, later prominent politicians in the Republican era. The life stories of Resistance fighters from Catholic Action, recounted by Andrea Pepe (2023), also confirm the importance of this theme.

If we return to the initial question, we need to understand whether and how the traditional mechanisms for authorising the use of force made their contribution to events in which Catholics (like everyone else) took part of their own free will: their involvement was not enforced by the state authority that held the monopoly of violence, nor legitimated by it in some other way, and they were going against the de facto (although illegal) power. Catholics engaged in this conflict – an unlawful one – without being able to count on guidance from their bishops, who, at least formally, were supporting the maintenance of order; it was thus an exceptional situation, in which the combatants had to act alone in providing a justification for their decision to take up arms, and also the rules by which to do this.

We need to bear in mind, first of all, that during the occupation by Nazi Germany, in the effective absence of the official Italian state after the king and his prime minister General Badoglio had taken flight, the Church of Pope Pius XII to some extent acted as a replacement. In view of the increasing tension between the Church and Mussolini's regime during the 1930s, and the outbreak of a war that the Vatican had been trying to avoid right up to the last moment, it is hardly surprising that Pius XII chose not to recognise the legitimacy of the Italian Social Republic (RSI), adhering to the customary Vatican position on self-proclaiming regimes during wartime. On the other hand, the Church had certainly not become an anti-Fascist institution. An anti-modern and paternalistic ideology had underwritten the long marriage with Mussolini's regime sealed by the Lateran Pacts, as

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important research by Giovanni Miccoli has shown (1985, 112–130). Above all, the Church and Fascism had shared the same enemies: liberals, Freemasons and, first and foremost, the Communists.

The formation of partisan groups and evolution of the underground struggle were therefore very difficult for the Church to relate to: firstly, these developments represented a threat to its own safety and that of the population, clearly requiring caution and a degree of separation between its pronouncements and any practical support it provided, but they also raised the possibility that the Resistance might be an early stage of the path towards a Communist revolution. Although the individual bishops, depending on their particular positions, varied in their closeness to or distance from the Resistance, the Church leadership decided not to opt for a silence that implied tacit approval, as was the case in other European countries, but to take a position against the armed partisan struggle, sometimes in a specific way but more often using sweeping generalisations (Franzinelli 2000).

In the pastoral letters of 1944 composed by the episcopal conferences of central and northern Italy (for Lombardy, Piedmont, Tuscany, and the Veneto), the German occupying forces were asked to preserve order, and it followed that Catholics were asked to obey the ruling authority. Over time, the collaborationist tones were softened, sometimes with ambiguous phrases that seemed to allow for disobedience (Tramontin 1990). Catholics who chose the path of armed struggle could have reasonably assumed that they would not be explicitly condemned, although there was no immediate prospect of legitimation. Moreover, in their open letters, the bishops made no secret of their great distance from the new Fascist regime and their condemnation of its violent methods, while maintaining relationships with the Resistance; in particular, they remained in contact with the Catholics who were now organising themselves in partisan groups that were described as 'autonomous', to indicate that they had not been formally organised by any of the political parties, but which often had links with the new underground party, Christian Democracy. Furthermore, the logistical support of Church structures often proved crucial for development of the armed Resistance. It would seem that the Church's leaders were keeping relationships open on several fronts given the prospect of a postwar future that they supposed, and in many cases hoped, would no longer be Fascist, while, more or less knowingly, leaving ordinary Catholics with the onus of choosing sides.

The military groups with Catholic links

Establishment of the groups was usually a spontaneous process, determined by a range of factors, often random, and connected, above all, to the avoidance of conscription into the RSI forces. It should be remembered that the generation in question had grown up under the Fascist regime and had no idea what active politics might be like. For many of them, the acquisition of political awareness was a gradual process that took place over the months of the partisan war.

The most important formations linked to the Catholic world and active in northern Italy included the 'Fiamme Verdi' (Green Flames) brigades, in Lombardy and Emilia; the 'Osoppo-Friuli' brigades; and the autonomous groups of the Val d'Ossola. The 'Monte Ortigara' Division, active between Vicenza and Padua, had in fact been set up at the priest's residence in Povolaro in the presence of Don Luigi Pascoli and the leaders of partisan brigades with Catholic connections, including Giacomo Chilesotti, Angelo Fracasso and Italo Mantiero. Other groups, operating mainly in the plains, included the 'Damiano Chiesa' and 'Pierobon' brigades, active around Este, and the 'Guido Negri' brigade under Antonio ('Toni') Ranzato, supported by priests such as Antonio Pegoraro (himself a partisan) and Guerrino

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Gastaldello, which operated on the border between the provinces of Padua and Venice and later formed the 'Rutoli' brigade (Santagata 2021).

These groups were largely established in the late spring and summer of 1944, and thus later than, and partly in response to, the first armed Communist brigades. The 'Damiano Chiesa' and 'Guido Negri' groups deliberately adopted the names of two heroic Catholics who had fought in the Great War; Negri, in particular, was enshrined in popular memory as the 'saintly captain' and 'heroic crusader' from Este who had died on Monte Colombara with his company of soldiers dedicated to the Sacred Heart.

For the most part, the groups concerned declared themselves formally autonomous, not from the Comitati di Liberazione Nazionale (CLN: Committees of National Liberation), but from any political party. While their composition was far from uniform – some members were non-religious, some were former soldiers – the groups were linked in varying degree to the Catholic world, so much so that later some of them became explicitly Christian Democrat 'Brigate del Popolo'. The decision to present the conflict first and foremost as patriotic, fought against the German invaders and Fascist traitors, should not be seen as proof of the lack of any political rationale, which was instead evident in the Christian Democrat press and in the groups' own publications, some of which took a politically progressive tone; rather, it was a way of justifying the Resistance, which was simultaneously both a war of liberation and a civil war, and therefore a political one. Nor should this decision be mistaken for an absence of anti-Fascist conviction, which in fact became stronger as the conflict continued; it resulted, instead, in a different rhetorical emphasis in presentation of the struggle, including the struggle against the Fascists, which was rendered secondary to the war of liberation from the Germans. This subordinating representation did not, of course, always prevail, as can be seen in the rhetoric of *Il Popolo*, Christian Democracy's national newspaper, in its Rome edition after the city's liberation. We therefore now need to return to a fuller examination of the issue of motives.

The statements made by various prominent figures in the political and military leadership of the Catholic Resistance, such as Ermanno Gorrieri, Benigno Zaccagnini and Paolo Emilio Taviani, are illuminating (Santagata 2017). Their testimony is representative of a perspective also evident in accounts of the lives of partisans from the Veneto, including Giovanni Carli (1910–1945), a lecturer in electrical engineering and 'political commissar' for the partisans of the Asiago Plateau; Giacomo Chilesotti (1912–1945), the most well-known commander in the area around Vicenza; and Luigi Pierobon (1922–1945), a FUCI representative and student at the University of Padua. A prominent recurring theme in their commitment to the Resistance was the wish to defend the fatherland, now invaded by the Germans. In portrayals of these partisans, this was usually presented alongside other closely related themes, sometimes adopted later: the moral uprising against Fascism, and especially against the partnership of Italian Fascism with Nazism, with its repressive methods; the belief that it was a Christian duty to rebel against a tyrant; the religious rejection of Nazi paganism and religious persecution in Germany; the desire to build a new Christian society and new anti-totalitarian 'Christian democracy' (Conway 2020, 162–198); and, but not so importantly, the legacy of political anti-Fascism in the mould of the PPI, which later contributed to the Christian Democrat political programme. In brief, it can be said that there were varying degrees of anti-Fascism, which was espoused by some who were highly politicised and virulently anti-Fascist but also by others who were almost entirely apolitical, or were declared supporters of Badoglio.

The emphasis on patriotism was not the exclusive preserve of the Catholics. Rather, as Pavone (1959) observed, all the partisan groups tried to present their struggle as a 'Second Risorgimento', and as a primarily defensive war; their intention was to distinguish their military action from Nazi and Fascist violence and to avoid, by means of the rules drawn up by the CLN, the potential excessive violence of a fratricidal war and any senseless cruelty.

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However, it is important to bear in mind that the reconciliation of Catholics with the Italian nation state had been a long and difficult process. Furthermore, the Catholic partisans, unlike the other groups, declared that they were simply fighting a war of liberation from the German occupation and Fascism, and did not want to descend to the level of violence that the Fascists had imposed on the civil war, but which could be seen as typical of any civil war.

As a last point, it is important to avoid the error of confusing the culture of the leadership with that of the general membership of the partisan groups, which was largely composed of peasants and factory workers: men and women who were barely literate and very often oblivious to the dynamics investigated here, and whose varying backgrounds had often been characterised by violence (Peli 1999). However, we should also avoid the other extreme, which would be to ignore the exchanges, influences and, more straightforward, the educational role performed by the urban minorities. The relationship between the peasant world and the Resistance has been a very difficult issue to unpick. One persuasive theory was put forward by Ventura (1978), who argued that the Catholics, in their own particular way, were able to mobilise social groups that would otherwise have remained outside the Resistance.

The issue of religious legitimation of the Resistance

Over the centuries, the Church had developed its concept of the 'just war'. This was supposed to be a war fought by a conventional army, only undertaken for defensive purposes or some equally valid reason. In reference to these criteria, and often to justify political motives, some twentieth-century conflicts, starting with the First World War, had been blessed by national episcopates and presented as patriotic and religious crusades: there was condemnation of war itself, as a disaster or divine punishment for humanity's estrangement from the Church, but certainly not of the national cause that had been placed under the umbrella of 'Catholic nationalism', seen in contrast to the 'extreme nationalism' of secular origin (Menozzi 2008).

Within this framework, the Church and its educational bodies had developed their approach to just violence. This was based on the *jus ad bellum* (the right of states to resort to war), but also on minimising violence under the *jus in bello* (law governing conduct during war), including the principle of proportionality, which primarily protected civilians but also the enemy. Soldiers were to fight without hatred and in the spirit of charity. These latter principles were the same as those found in Thomist teaching on tyrannicide, whereby Christians were duty bound to oppose and bring an end to an authority that abused natural laws, oppressed the people and went against Christian teaching. The theologian and Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, most famously, drew on this approach in his public opposition to the Nazi programme. The Code of Camaldoli, drafted in July 1943 on the initiative of Italian Catholic Action's Movimento Laureati (graduate movement) and drawing on the 1927 'Malines Code' on social doctrine, asserted that 'obedience to laws is not blind, but rational and conscious. It is therefore right, and often a duty of conscience, not to obey and to resist unjust laws'. Some references can also be found to Thomist teaching on just violence in Italy's underground Catholic press after September 1943, although for the most part these publications tended to avoid direct mention of Church doctrine.

Although the concept of the just and patriotic war and teaching on tyrannicide were not in conflict, Italian partisans of Catholic inspiration chose to refer especially, although not exclusively, to the first model during the Resistance period, in the quest for legitimation from an established authority, in this case the Kingdom of the South, whose own legitimacy had initially been rejected by the groups on the left; these tended, instead,

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to see the CLN as their source of legitimation. This validation would have been rendered unnecessary by recourse, instead, to the teaching on just sedition, although this had fewer supporting texts, especially recent ones, once the papal encyclical *Firmissimam constantiam* of 1937 had been set aside: not well known, this had focused on defence of the Church's freedoms in Mexico, a country bathed in blood a few years earlier by the violent 'Cristero war'. Furthermore, it would have been difficult to fight the partisan war by respecting the restrictive criteria envisaged by the theorists of legitimate sedition: specifically, these criteria would have discouraged rebellion if there had been a significant risk that the conflict would degenerate into a situation worse than its cause, in this case into a prolonged civil war, and would have required observation of the principle of proportionality, thus sparing the population from violence.[2] More crucially, there had been no formal support from the Church, which in Spain, by contrast, had given its backing to the Francoist forces. These difficulties did not mean that Italy's Catholic partisans, when acting independently of the Church leadership, made no reference to the right and duty to rebel against the unjust oppressor, as illustrated by the title of the magazine produced by Brescia's 'Fiamme Verdi' groups, *Il Ribelle*; however, they explain why many of them opted for autonomous groups of a military, patriotic and apolitical nature, and largely avoided invoking the concept of the crusade or the idea of a holy war and, therefore, holy purificatory violence (Menozzi 2020).

In the light of this and other factors, the civil war, criticised as a fratricidal conflict, was sometimes forthrightly rejected (Pavone 2013, 320–322; Forlenza and Thomassen 2024b, 97–104), but was more often acknowledged and presented as a situation imposed by the Fascists, which believers intended to get through, and surmount, without embracing its political violence. Some of the arguments employed were present right across the underground press output, including, for example, the theme of expulsion of the enemy from the community because of his acts of betrayal (Ranzato 1994; Pavone 2013, 269–320).[3] However, the left-wing parties and their associated military groups argued that the political aspect of the conflict could not be abandoned, and, from this perspective, provided a different interpretation of the civil war: it was understood as an ideological war within the context of the 'European civil war' of the last 30 years (Traverso 2016). In other words, the Catholics who had become involved in the Resistance, and especially the Christian Democrats amongst them, preferred to present themselves as above the civil war, which they understood as a struggle between political factions bent on taking power through violence in order to impose their vision of society – an accusation that was constantly directed at the Communists. Essentially, they wanted to place themselves above the intrinsically violent and annihilating nature of a conflict that sidestepped the 'rules' of conventional warfare, 'not aim[ing] at a just peace with a legitimate adversary but rather the destruction of the enemy' (Traverso 2016, 75); they thus wanted to be above any form of political violence that endorsed the legitimacy of executing the enemy as a result of his active allegiance to the Fascist side.

To fight without hatred: the function of the underground press

We now need to consider how this vision of guerrilla warfare was portrayed, and to what extent it could be translated into practice. Study of the press with Catholic affiliations confirms the presence of the arguments discussed above and also demonstrates how they were adapted to the image of the partisan. Within a framework shared by all elements of the Resistance, which presented its violence as defensive, necessary, and different from that of the Nazis and Fascists in both purpose and method, the journalism of religious inspiration – the various issues of *Il Popolo*, for example, but also publications from the autonomous

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brigades – set out its model of the good partisan, who was not necessarily Catholic but certainly adhered to Christian values. He was morally superior to the enemy, but as a result to the 'other' partisans as well, because he shunned wanton violence in the name of a wholesome and restrained use of force.

This partisan was thus a model patriot whose manner of fighting the civil war aspired to purity in its methods as well as its motives. There were plenty of obvious contradictions: in the magazines linked to the autonomous brigades, alongside praise for an exclusively defensive violence, there were, for example, calls for summary justice, lists of spies to be killed, and glorification of various terrorist attacks. The Christian Democrat press, in contrast, was more consistent in its condemnation of hatred, violence, revenge, terrorism and summary justice.[4]

Although there is not space here to present a comparative analysis, it should be noted that the Communist press not only frequently invoked the idea of hatred but also had typical ways of presenting violence that verged on contradiction: as military, but also political; codified, but also summary; understood as a form of justice, in political terms, for Nazis and Fascists, who were all viewed as criminals (Omezzoli 2019).[5] The Communists advocated escalation of the armed conflict as a more effective form of 'defence', in order to reduce the length of the war and, even more importantly, redeem the country in its reckoning with the Fascist era. While they saw the patriotic war as a priority, which should be fought in unity across the political spectrum, the anti-Fascist left-wing groups, with the Action Party at the forefront, were intent on winning the long European civil war, in which Italy's Resistance was only the final stage. Within this strategy, which saw the country's civil war as a necessary and politically regenerative way forward (Dondi 2004; Traverso 2021), there was space for the terrorism of the Gruppi di Azione Patriottica (GAP), who were organised by the Communists and consisted solely of party activists. Their approach was set out clearly by Luigi Longo in his famous letter to the leadership in Rome, dated 8 January 1944: they rejected the principal of weighing costs against benefits and undertook political executions (Ranzato 2019, 379–382; Peli 2014; Ranzato 2024, 88–127). It is well known that the declared intention of the Italian Communist Party after Togliatti's return from Russia was to place itself in the vanguard of a people's Resistance that would lead to a new democratic order, postponing indefinitely the moment of true revolution. The Garibaldi brigades (the '*garibaldini*') were in fact conceived of as patriotic, united and non-party units, although they were usually identified as Communist, since they were almost exclusively led by Communists. As Pavone has shown (2013, 375–493), however, the party's change of strategic direction in March 1944 did not mean that it relinquished the class war that the Christian Democrats deplored and feared might degenerate.

An awareness of this political landscape allows us to better interpret various key articles in the press that influenced the direction taken by the Catholic Resistance, which was permeated by a longstanding anti-Communist discursive tradition. In a July 1944 issue of the magazine *Il Ribelle*, which had published the writings of the Catholic partisan Teresio Olivelli, Laura Bianchini sparked a debate by arguing that partisans should 'disarm the spirits': while not giving up the use of weapons, they should distance themselves from anyone who was preaching and practising 'hatred, violence and contempt for life' (Vecchio 2022, 285–334).[6] Subsequently, there was no shortage of variations on this theme, in, for example, *Voce Operaia*, a magazine published by the Partito della Sinistra Cristiana (Party of the Christian Left, the new name for Rome's Christian Communist Party). For most organised Catholics, however, the declaration that they were above the civil war, as stated by the Christian Democrat commander in Modena, Ermanno Gorrieri (1966, 291), was necessary so that they could in reality continue fighting in a manner that was supposedly legitimate and, furthermore, different

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from the insurrectional guerrilla warfare practised by the *garibaldini*. We now need to explore whether this rhetoric affected the way that the brigades operated and, if so, how.

The reality of guerrilla warfare

First of all, portrayal of the conflict as purely defensive was an unmistakeable misrepresentation of the reality of the partisan war, which was, in fact, 'total'. More specifically, the Nazi occupiers and Fascist forces unleashed what has been called a 'war on civilians', fed by the racist ideology of Nazism, to root out the partisan groups and punish the Italian population, which was viewed as traitorous and racially inferior. In this environment, the war dictated the rules of engagement; to claim to be calculating whether the advantage of a partisan initiative outweighed the probable harm to the population from reprisals, as Don Aldo Moretti argued that the 'Osoppo' brigades were doing, could only have been, at best, a fanciful aspiration (Mascialino 1978). More fundamentally, as illustrated by the controversy that broke out immediately after the partisan attack on 23 March 1944 on a German column in Via Rasella, Rome, major doubts were expressed about the approach that had been adopted, which was debated a number of times, including amongst Catholics: it was argued that it had taken on the burden of guaranteeing proportionality and protecting civilians from those reprisals for which only the enemy should have been seen as responsible, and which were part of a well-established strategy that paid limited attention to rebel actions.

In brief, from the military perspective, and in the face of real events, partisan groups of all political colours were forced to follow combat models that were essentially the same; representation and praxis present analogies and connections, but seldom coincide. Evidence of this mismatch comes both from historical accounts and from brigade diaries: while the latter are self-representing texts and subject to deliberate repression and manipulation, they have still proved to be reliable indicators of trends confirmed by the comparison with Fascist sources. The arguments of the apologists who maintain that the Catholic groups fought a different type of guerrilla warfare, morally superior to action taken by the Garibaldi brigades, being more respectful of human life, are thus not credible. Just as implausible are the criticisms that were already being voiced during the war by the groups' left-wing detractors, who claimed that the Catholics waited passively for the arrival of the Allies, without ever really hitting the enemy. However, when a closer analysis is undertaken, differences can be identified both in the praxis and, especially, in the account of the Resistance that was constructed.

The first difference relates to appearance and organisation. Studies on the autonomous partisan groups have shed light on how and why they chose a much more intensely military structure than the others: a strict selection process for members, at least as the avowed aim, contrasting with the 'Yugoslav model' of a large popular army built from the masses; adoption of army-style disciplinary regulations and military uniforms whose features alluded to, for example, Italy's elite 'Alpini' army units (Perona 1996; Piffer 2020); and rigid application of the procedures for military justice (both internally and as regarded the enemy). I would argue that this mode of organisation, which developed with the wish to present the partisan brigades as units within the regular army, was intended to bring them closer, in form as well, to Catholic teaching on 'just war' between armies, and to the previously regularised involvement of Catholics in warfare. The objective was validation from the only state with any form of international recognition, the government of liberated Italy, and in consequence legitimation of the violence against other Italians, who had supposedly become 'internal enemies' as traitors, with their decision to take sides against the legitimate government by uniting with the Germans. This approach continued to operate despite the fact that the formal legitimation that would

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have come from absorption of the partisans into the regular army never materialised, even after the discussions with the Allies on partisan command structures in December 1944 (Peli 2006, 128–134).

A second interesting aspect relates to military strategy. The documentation generated during the war by the 'Mazzini' and 'Sette Comuni' brigades active on the Asiago plateau, like the studies on the autonomous brigades in Lombardy, highlights some shared and distinguishing features. These included the rootedness of the brigades in the areas where they operated, which heightened the desire to have a protective function for the local population: small communities, remote from the state, that had established themselves as self-sufficient worlds whose separateness from each other could be seen in their different dialects. This resulted in the brigades having less ability to move about and, in some cases, steered them towards undertaking 'low intensity' guerrilla warfare, to avoid or at least minimise the possibility of reprisals, but also to protect the communities from all the potential disruptive elements, including partisan groups from other areas and the supposedly rabble-rousing Communists.

In the different environment of the plains, where it was materially more difficult to organise underground military units, the brigades of Catholic inspiration focused their energies on sabotage of the infrastructure and on disarming small garrisons and enemy patrols: in brief, on low-key types of guerrilla action, which very often left no trace in the Fascist record. This form of fighting was very different to the approach taken by the GAP, for example, which in February 1944 earned an indirect mention from Pius XII in his condemnation of 'thoughtless violence' (Bocchini Camaiani 1997, 213). The mode of warfare adopted by the Catholic groups in the plains generally appears to have avoided direct clashes, but not excluded them. In particular, they rejected the idea of terrorist action whose primary aim would have been its propaganda value. Once again, public self-representation should not be confused with the actual ventures of individual groups, which were often spontaneous, uncontainable, and determined by the ways that the conflict developed. At the point of outright rebellion in April 1945, for example, partisan groups of every political colour, while still voicing concerns about the dangers inherent in popular insurrection, both moral (regarding, for example, unchecked sexual impropriety) and political, engaged first in full-on attacks on the retreating German forces and then in trying to check an unrestrained 'settling of accounts'. However, the diaries and reports left by the autonomous brigades also draw attention to the elimination of spies and Fascist officials over the preceding months: attacks and other action against people that were certainly not covered by a paradigm of defensive violence, or violence that was at least necessary and restrained. Moreover, as the documentation produced by the Christian Democrats of Emilia clearly shows (Gorrieri 1966), the rejection of terrorism did not mean renunciation, in specific circumstances, of the tool of partisan reprisal, nor did it stop partisans from going ahead with the execution, without trial, of individuals seen as a danger to 'the safety of the partisan movement'.[7] Essentially, we can say that across the different Catholic groups, the views on initiatives taken by the GAP, with their dual and ambiguous military and political nature, ranged from support (from the Christian Communists); acceptance, especially if there had been prior agreement; criticism of their morality, which failed to value human life; belief that their strategy was counter-productive; rejection; and accusations that their activities fell outside what could be permitted in war, especially when the GAP targets were Fascists not involved in the conflict, or ordinary militiamen. Finally, numerous sources confirm the collaboration – albeit with many tensions and some direct clashes, the Porzûs killings being the best known – between the autonomous groups, the Garibaldi brigades, and the groups aligned with the non-Communist 'Giustizia e Libertà' movement (Carrattieri and Silingardi 2018).

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From life stories to hagiography

We can gain valuable insights into how the rhetoric examined here translated into action from the correspondence and personal diaries kept by some young commanders of the Catholic brigades active in the area around Padua. Evangelista Groppo, born in Loreo in 1918, a medical student and president of Padua's FUCI group from December 1944, provides a good example. While an in-patient at the sanatorium in Bassano, where he joined the Unione Cattolica Malati, he had started to keep notebook diaries; continuing these afterwards, he left a wealth of personal material. In July 1944 he became involved in logistical and medical initiatives supporting the partisans, and then joined the 'Guido Negri' brigade thanks to his fiancée, the sister of its commander 'Toni' Ranzato. In January 1945, he was given command of the 'Rutoli' brigade; however, his involvement in the Resistance continued to have a mainly organisational nature and was largely restricted to Padua itself.

This is not the place to review the full range of theological and evangelical reflections and thoughts about everyday spirituality that pervade both Groppo's diary and other texts such as his book *Conversazioni in veranda* (1943), a collection of short stories that had previously appeared in the weekly magazine *Noi Giovani*, and his 'Meditazioni sul Vangelo', never published, which were developed on a daily basis from May 1943 until 3 June 1944 (Santagata 2021, 223–226). It should, however, be emphasised that the theme of purity, starting with sexual purity, makes frequent appearances in Groppo's writing, throwing light on the issue of 'just violence': something necessary and therefore charitable, understood exclusively as a duty and undertaken without hatred. We see this in a diary passage dated 16 June 1945:

> Yesterday passed laden with so many things; the current climate has brought its suffering into the souls of brothers: struggle for an ideal and also against the impossible, conflict between men, and sufferings … Suffering … It should be the struggle of good against evil, not struggle of man against man … The essence of the relations that should course between man and man is charity alone. Charity consists of justice and goodness. Charity is the perfect practice of man, between the paternity of God and fraternity with all beings. We have to fight evil in humanity to save humanity. To struggle and suffer through love. (Santagata 2021, 225)

The theme of the control of passions is almost ubiquitous in the life stories of the young members of Catholic Action (Pepe 2023) and in the profiles of some celebrated brigade commanders who kept notes while in combat, such as Emiliano Rinaldini of the 'Fiamme Verdi', some who left correspondence, such as Guido Revoloni and Luigi Pierobon, and others who recounted their experiences after the war, in this case with some obvious distortions.[8]

The fact remains that for Catholics the problem of the legitimation of Resistance violence had been a real issue. In the period immediately after the end of the war, mindsets were already being transformed into written narratives and memories of the fallen into stories of martyrdom, developing, as a whole, into a particular form of justificatory commemoration. This is illustrated by an article of April 1946 in *Il Momento*, published weekly by the Christian Democrats in Vicenza, on Giacomo Chilesotti, who had been killed in April 1945:

> His was a real apostolate. He did not become a partisan out of thirst for revenge, love of adventure, taste for leadership, or fear of calamity, but out of pure and simple love:

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> for his embattled country, for his persecuted and beleaguered brothers, for real and damaged liberty, for the worthiness of Italians, called into question after the collapse of so many hopes and illusions. It seemed a dream, to hear the pure words from his lips urging people to kill as little as possible and to inflict the least harm on the enemies who were trying to kill him, at a time when retaliation and revenge had become the harsh necessities of war even on the side of those fighting for liberty and justice. It was so unlikely to see a partisan leader, amidst countless concerns and responsibilities, hunted to death with no respite, kneeling down at night in the hovels of his poor hosts and praying to God for himself and his lads, and in the morning, on his knees, greeting the dawn in the name of the Lord.[9]

This extract has all the rhetorical elements discussed earlier, including the obvious weakness of the anti-Fascist aspect. When this and similar texts are compared with the accounts of martyrdom published at much the same time in the Communist press, which are also often restrained in regard to violence, two different portrayals of heroism emerge: the Communist model based on the celebration of courage and military valour in battle, and the Catholic based on praise for the ability to limit the use of violence. While the good Garibaldi brigade member was seen to have impressive skills as a conspirator and combatant, in line with socialism's subversive tradition, the Catholic was portrayed as bringing a burden of suffering to guerrilla warfare, which obliged him to experience the partisan commitment exclusively as a duty. For the Catholic partisan, there was a distinction between the ideas to be fought and the soldiers and militiamen who had to represent them, who despite being enemies were still brothers. He was marked out by his ability to moderate the use of weapons with wisdom, and to be the best because he was the most honourable: a quality treasured by all partisans, but clearly understood in different ways.

All partisan martyrisations drew on the same aspects of a long tradition that ran from early Christianity to martyrdom in the cause of Fascism, passing through the 'martyrs for freedom' of the Risorgimento and the Great War; these included, for example, the theme of the heroic death, often suffered in a stoical and gentle manner in the hands of the enemy, and undergone without betraying either the cause or companions in arms (Perry 2001; Janz 2008; Paiano 2022). However, there were variations even within what would become a sort of model of the Catholic partisan. A first version offered a conventional revival of the '*miles Christi*' (soldier of Christ) or Catholic soldier: these partisans fought and killed without hatred, but were no less vigorous as a result; similarly, they felt no hatred for their political enemy; and they were able to forgive. This group was exemplified by Gino Pistoni, member of the GIAC in Ivrea, who died in his first engagement while trying to help a wounded enemy. A second and broader group consisted of people portrayed purely as martyrs, usually from the ranks of the GIAC and the FUCI, who had never been involved in armed action (Caliò 2022, 65–107). A third group were the partisans able to exercise 'just violence', such as Chilesotti and Pierobon (Santagata 2021, 283–286). The most noble version of this last group, distinct not only from the model of traditional heroism but also from the tradition of Catholic nationalism, had never fired a shot, not because he had opted for non-violence, but thanks to his ability to kill only when necessary: that is, to not kill, when he might have wanted to, and to pull the trigger when he had to and might not have wanted to. In various ways, this type corresponded with the idea of the partisan who had been summoned to fight for the Resistance as if it was the last battle, leading to a better world with no further conflict; however, it also fitted very well with the figure of the 'good Italian', seen in opposition to the 'bad German' who was presumed to be totally responsible for the war (Focardi 2023).

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Conclusion

This is not the place to go over the history of the memory of the Catholic Resistance, other than very briefly: the mode of '*memoria grigia*' (grey memory), as it has been called, in opposition to the paradigm of the armed anti-Fascist (De Giorgi 2016); the tensions around the celebrations of 25 April 1948, and then a partial reconciliation between the different elements within anti-Fascism after the tenth anniversary of Liberation, in 1955; subsequently, the emphatic return of the theme of Catholic violence in the 1960s, thanks in part to the Second Vatican Council and later to Catholic engagement in the movement of 1968. The reasons for the conflict of the postwar period – the 'war over memory' (Focardi 2005, 2020; Parisella 2005; Cooke 2011) – need to be looked for in Catholic culture as well as elsewhere: in regions such as the Veneto, it led to a crisis in the memory of the Resistance, which was portrayed by the regional and local institutions as a Risorgimento-like war entirely devoid of anti-Fascism, and at the expense of the Catholic partisans, who were sidelined by a Christian Democrat leadership that no longer had any real interest in preserving the anti-Fascist values of their legacy (Vanzetto 2015). Similarly, the fulsome commitment from the Church leadership towards leaving the war behind and achieving national reconciliation falls within the framework that I have set out in this article, explaining, at least partly, the limited importance of anti-Fascism within the Catholic sphere.

In conclusion, examination of the rhetoric deployed by Catholics during the civil war, in their complex relationship with the actual conduct of this type of conflict, reveals a composite picture with some strong contradictions and difficulties over adopting a position, and also over transposition of the tradition of 'holy violence', within an ideological framework that had aspects distinguishing it from the perspective of secular left-wing groups, especially some elements of the labour movement, but which was essentially aimed at legitimising partisan and anti-Fascist violence.

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Notes

1. For an earlier and less fully developed version of this article, see the paper 'I cattolici nella Resistenza armata. Riflessioni a partire dal caso Veneto' presented at the study day 'Dal Codice alla Carta. I cattolici italiani tra Resistenza, realtà internazionale e impegno costituente (1943–1948)', Monastero di Camaldoli, 24 August 2023, and now published in *Dal Codice alla Carta: i cattolici italiani tra Resistenza, realtà internazionale e impegno costituente (1943–1948)*, edited by M. Margotti, 25–50 (Camaldoli: Edizioni Camaldoli, 2024).
2. Two explorations of this issue by the Jesuit Andrea Oddone were published in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the first in September 1944 and the second in January 1945. Oddone reminded the authorities that if Christians were asked to overstep accepted moral boundaries, they would have to disobey. He thus took up the Thomist distinction between 'active' and 'passive' resistance, and emphasised that there could only be recourse to violence against the tyrant in exceptional circumstances, meeting four conditions: first, the tyranny had to be prolonged; second, the gravity of the situation had to be clear; third, any attempt at subversion had to have a good chance of success; and fourth, the fall of the government must not result in a yet more tragic situation (Durand 1991, 138–139; Ceci 2024, 31–86).
3. For a more general discussion of this issue, see the book by Stathis Kalyvas (2006).
4. See, for example, condemnation of the killing of Giovanni Gentile in the Florence edition of *Il Popolo* for April 1944.
5. See, in particular, the analysis of mechanisms of partisan justice in the short-lived 'partisan republic' of Ossola and the clashes between the Communist sector and more moderate elements, first and foremost those from a Catholic background (Omezzoli 2019, 197–213). In addition, it should be borne in mind that the July 1944 directives of the Corpo Volontari della Libertà (the newly established partisan command structure) regarding partisan justice forbade political executions and death sentences based on membership of the Fascist Party, and was more lenient when dealing with the lower levels of the enemy leadership. In practice, however, the decisions made by the CLN

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and the brigades clearly made much greater use of the death penalty, and even in the autonomous brigades there were some significant divergences. On the variations and contradictions within this system, which was at times chaotic, see the important study by Tullio Omezzoli (2019).

6. Penelope (Laura Bianchini), 'Il disarmo degli spiriti', *Il Ribelle*, 25 July 1944. Olivielli was the author of the famous 'Preghiera del ribelle' (Rebel's prayer) and originator of the expression '*ribelli per amore*' (rebels for love).

7. In other contexts, for example for the Christian Democrats of Friuli, executions without a trial were always unacceptable (Mascialino 1978, 80–81). Similar testimony exists for the Veneto (Santagata 2021).

8. Rinaldini's diary was first published by La Scuola in 1947 and has more recently been reprinted (Rinaldini 2015); see the new introduction by Daria Gabusi (2015).

9. 'Anniversario. Giacomo Chilesotti', *Il Momento*, 26 April 1946.

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Italian summary

L'articolo si propone di ripercorrere la genealogia della figura del 'partigiano cattolico'. In estrema sintesi, si tratta della rimodulazione del modello del soldato cattolico, in grado di uccidere per amore e 'senza odio', ma nel contesto di una guerra civile. La ricostruzione, che ha al centro il caso di studio del Veneto centrale, prende la mosse dagli anni della guerra cercando di mettere in luce come le formazioni partigiane legate all'area cattolica hanno affrontato il nodo della legittimazione della violenza resistenziale e quello del suo disciplinamento. Si mettono in risalto la distanza tra determinate retoriche di contenimento della violenza e la prassi della guerriglia. Infine, l'articolo ricostruisce i diversi modelli di 'partigiano cattolico' che sono stati avanzati nel primo dopoguerra (1945–1950): il 'soldato cattolico' con il suo portato militarista; il 'martire puro', che non ha mai agito la violenza; il 'partigiano devoto', capace di dosare l'uso della violenza, calcolando il rapporto tra costi e benefici e che si distingue per la sua propensione a perdonare e soprattutto ad uccidere il meno possibile. Nelle conclusioni si riflette su come determinate retoriche abbiano contribuito a plasmare una determinata narrazione della Resistenza dei cattolici italiani.

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