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L'IMPEGNO DEL DOPO  
AS SEEN IN  
THE WORKS AND METHODOLOGY  
OF NUTO REVELLI

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

PhD

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## ABSTRACT

### 'L'IMPEGNO DEL DOPO' AS SEEN IN THE WORKS AND METHODOLOGY OF NUTO REVELLI

Fiona M Stewart

This thesis examines the extent to which the clearly identifiable individual sense of an 'impegno del dopo' seen in *Mai tardi* (1946), Revelli's first publication, evolves to encompass a sense of 'impegno' on behalf of others. Revelli's 'impegno del dopo' arose from his experiences as an officer with the *alpini* on the Russian front during 1941-1943. During his time as an officer, he built up a relationship with the *contadini-soldati* whom he commanded. This relationship with the rural communities of Piedmont deepened during the Resistance of 1943-1945. After the Liberation, Revelli spent the rest of his life testifying to his own experiences during 1941-1945 and facilitating the testimony of marginalized groups: the *dispersi* (*L'ultimo fronte*, 1971), the *contadini-soldati* (*La strada del davai*, 1966, *La guerra dei poveri*, 1962), and the *contadini* (*Il mondo dei vinti*, 1977, *L'anello forte*, 1985). I argue that the same developing 'impegno del dopo' which arose out of Revelli's Russian experiences is responsible for his later research and publications.

Revelli developed his own methodology in response to his 'impegno del dopo'. This thesis traces the development of Revelli's approach and analyzes its theoretical implications. Revelli's theory and practice is analyzed with reference to the two disciplines his work most closely borders: literature and history. However, Revelli saw himself as an amateur and outside established disciplines; it is argued that in later decades there is a rapprochement between the two. The implications of Revelli's methodology for his 'impegno del dopo'— particularly in respect of his collections of oral testimonies — are analyzed with reference to common theory and practice. This incorporates an examination of Revelli's role as witness, issues in memory and forgetting, and the question of historical truth versus testimonial truth.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Panfilo	Nuto Revelli, <i>Mai tardi</i> (Cuneo: Panfilo, 1946)
GP	_____ <i>La guerra dei poveri</i> (Turin: Einaudi, 1962)
SD	_____ <i>La strada del davai</i> (Turin: Einaudi, 1966)
MT	_____ <i>Mai tardi</i> (Turin: Einaudi, 1967)
UF	_____ <i>L'ultimo fronte</i> (Turin: Einaudi, 1971)
MV	_____ <i>Il mondo dei vinti</i> (Turin: Einaudi, 1977)
AF	_____ <i>L'anello forte</i> (Turin: Einaudi, 1985)
DM	_____ <i>Il disperso di Marburg</i> (Turin: Einaudi, 1994)
PG	_____ <i>Il prete giusto</i> (Turin: Einaudi, 1998)
DG	_____ <i>Le due guerre: Guerra fascista e guerra partigiana</i> (Turin: Einaudi, 2003)
AR1	Author's first meeting with Revelli, 19 September 2001
AR2	Author's second meeting with Revelli, 2 May 2002
AC	Author discussion with Michele Calandri, Istituto Storico della Resistenza in Cuneo e Provincia, 22 July 2005.

## Introduction

Twentieth century testimony writing owes much of its development to records of the Holocaust. On one particular occasion, Italy's most renowned Holocaust survivor, Primo Levi, spoke of testimony writing as an 'impegno del dopo' (an obligation of afterwards). The fascinating aspect of this term is that he used it to unite his own work with that of two of his friends and contemporaries, Nuto Revelli and Mario Rigoni Stern, neither of whom were Jews or survivors of the Holocaust. Nuto Revelli quotes Levi and explains in more detail what he intended by the term:

Avevamo una 'matrice comune' Primo Levi, Mario Rigoni Stern, ed io, così affermava sempre Primo, anche se avevamo vissuto delle esperienze diverse [...] La 'matrice comune' a cui si riferiva Primo? Le nostre esperienze di guerra convergenti, ma soprattutto l'impegno del dopo [sic], quel non voler dimenticare, quel voler testimoniare ad ogni costo.<sup>1</sup>

The chapters which follow trace the origins of Nuto Revelli's 'impegno del dopo' and his response to it in his works and methodology. Nuto Revelli's publications range from his personal diaries of the Fascist war in Russia (1941-1943) and war in Italy (1943-1945), to collections of oral testimonies gathered from the rural communities of Piedmont during the 1960s to 1980s. This thesis argues that Nuto Revelli's publications -- from Russia to rural Piedmont - can be ascribed to his sense of an 'impegno del dopo'. Other than the sense of an 'impegno del dopo', Revelli's publications are united by his desire to give a voice to the marginalized of Italian society, be it the soldiers of the Armata Italiana in Russia (ARMIR), or the *contadini* (peasants) of Piedmont.

Revelli was something of a marginalized character himself. His writing touches on several disciplines yet Revelli refuses to be classified in any. Michele Calandri and Mario Cordero, two of those who knew Nuto Revelli best, described him as 'un personaggio scomodo'.<sup>2</sup> They are referring to Revelli's inherent straight-talking, and his determination to

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<sup>1</sup> Nuto Revelli at the Conference on Primo Levi, Turin, 28/29 March 1988. Taken from Revelli's notes which are held by the Istituto Storico della Resistenza in Cuneo e Provincia.

<sup>2</sup> Nuto Revelli: *Percorsi di memoria*, ed. by Michele Calandri and Mario Cordero (= *Rivista dell'Istituto Storico della Resistenza in Cuneo e Provincia*, 55 (1999)), p. 9.

conduct his research on his own terms. Cesare Bermiani, a friend of Revelli's and a professional oral historian, had a similar opinion: 'isolata e apparentemente eccentrica rispetto ai percorsi sinora evidenziati è l'attività di Nuto Revelli, che eserciterà comunque la propria influenza su molti oralisti'.<sup>3</sup> Yet professionals such as Luisa Passerini recognize the positive contribution of his publications. She described him as 'a narrator of meaningful histories for our epoch'.<sup>4</sup> Claudio Pavone substantiates this opinion in his frequent use of Revelli's work in *Una guerra civile*.<sup>5</sup> Primo Levi, Mario Rigoni Stern, Italo Calvino, Manlio Rossi Doria and Franco Venturi, among others of Revelli's contemporaries, recognized the value and unique character of his work. Revelli's 'impegno del dopo' originates in his experiences on the Russian Front during the winter of 1942-43. The term is used above in conjunction with his war experiences. We want to explore how the idea of an 'impegno del dopo' can be applied to the whole of Revelli's oeuvre.

Much has been written by military historians on the Eastern campaign from the perspective of both Germans and Russians. Little has been written which focuses specifically on the experiences of Germany's minor ally Italy. Revelli presents a record of the Russian Front from his perspective as an officer, and later from the perspective of the ordinary soldier. Much has been written on the experiences of rural Italy, predominantly focusing on the South of the peninsula. Less energy has been devoted to the experience of women. Revelli's work offers a unique contribution to a record of rural Italy as he focuses on the experiences of the northern communities, and allows individuals (male and female) to tell their own story.

Nuto Revelli was a fascinating individual and somewhat enigmatic in that we have very little insight to his upbringing. He focuses our attention on his time on the Russian front and so only permits access to the period that would then shape and inform his life and work. He claimed to be an amateur. We will investigate the truth of this claim and consider how his methodology relates to the context in which he worked. We will consider too whether he has directed our attention only to what he wants us to see of the ARMIR and of Piedmont's

<sup>3</sup> *Introduzione alla storia orale: Storia, conservazione delle fonti e problemi di metodo*, ed. by Cesare Bermiani, 2 vols (Rome: Odradek, 1999), I, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Luisa Passerini, 'La memoria orale: l'opera di Nuto Revelli e la sua ricezione', in *Nuto Revelli: percorsi di memoria*, (see Calandri, above), pp. 21-48 (p. 44).

<sup>5</sup> Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile: saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991).



*contadini*. He claims to have given these marginalized groups a voice; we will consider the extent to which he has achieved this goal. This will necessitate a consideration of theoretical issues involved in testimonial writing and the communication of oral testimonies. These include discussion of memory, the theory and practice of oral history, and the tension between historical truth and testimonial truth. One of the aims of the thesis is to establish the extent to which Revelli's 'impegno del dopo' is equally responsible for his role as witness to war as for his role as facilitator of the memories of the *contadini*. This involves an examination of the interaction between his sense of an 'impegno del dopo', the methodology applied in its discharging, and the extent to which he actually achieves his stated aims for each publication.

The thesis is divided into two Parts. Part I provides the biographical and theoretical background to a study of Revelli's work. This is central to establishing a definition of Nuto Revelli's 'impegno del dopo' as it differs from the notion of 'impegno' prevalent in Italy post-war and associated with neorealist literature and film. Likewise, Revelli's life experience is at the core of his 'impegno del dopo'. While Revelli claims not to have considered the theory and methodology of oral history, it is important to frame his approach by reference to common practice within the discipline. This allows for the identification of potential tensions between his sense of an 'impegno del dopo' and the methodology he developed. Part II then looks at Revelli's response to his sense of an 'impegno del dopo'. Chapters 4 to 6 analyze his response with reference to his writing on three areas: war in Russia, war in Italy, and the experiences of rural Piedmont in war and peace. Chapters 4 and 5 look at Revelli's transmission of personal and collective memories of war in Russia and war in Italy respectively. Revelli refers to the experiences of rural Piedmont as 'la guerra che non finisce mai'. Chapter 6 considers how rural experience can constitute such a war and Revelli's communication of it. Chapter 6 deals with Revelli's record of an environment to which he did not belong and of which he had no personal experience.

## **Part I: The Man and his Methodology**

Part I sets the background and point of origin for the research undertaken in this thesis. Chapter 1 is a brief biography of Nuto Revelli and gives an overview of his experiences during 1941-1943, the period that inspired his writing career and remained the constant point of reference throughout his publications of the succeeding sixty years. Chapter 2 examines the origins and evolution of Revelli's concept of an 'impegno del dopo'. This is analysed in the context of contemporary usage of the term 'impegno' as a form of political engagement. Chapter 2 concludes that Revelli's view of 'impegno' is based more on a sense of moral and civil duty than any party political agenda. The final Chapter of Part I considers the methodology developed by Revelli – particularly in collecting and recording oral testimonies – in response to this sense of an 'impegno del dopo'. Part I establishes a framework within which we can then analyze the implications of Revelli's 'impegno del dopo' on his works and methodology.

## *Chapter 1*

### *A Biography of Nuto Revelli*

I first met Nuto Revelli in September 2001. Michele Calandri, of the Istituto Storico della Resistenza in Cuneo e Provincia (ISRCV), took me along to Revelli's 'local' - a typical narrow, bustling Italian café, just a few yards from his home in Corso Brunet, Cuneo. We sat at one of the tables near the back and I asked Revelli my carefully framed questions. I need not have worried about keeping the conversation going: Revelli had plenty to say and a tremendous recall of events that happened some sixty years previously. One question might give a ten-minute answer and branch out to draw in anecdotes from a variety of points in his experience. Another visit to his home the following year showed that this was a typical conversation with Nuto Revelli.

On both occasions, conversation showed that two groups held Revelli's attention, and had done so for decades: the 'dispersi' and the 'contadini'. The 'dispersi' were soldiers who remained unaccounted for following the retreat of the Armata Italiana in Russia from the Don in January 1943. The 'contadini' were individuals from the rural communities around Revelli's home town of Cuneo and so people with whom he seemed to have no connection. How can we reconcile such an interest in two apparently disparate groups? Was this coincidental, or was there a link between the two?

We begin with an overview of Revelli's life to see the experiences, particularly of his twenties, which shaped his ensuing life and character, and were largely responsible for the writing career begun in 1946. Benvenuto (Nuto) Revelli was born on 21 July 1919 to a middle class family in the town of Cuneo, Piedmont. He had one elder sister, Teresa (1915-1962). His father worked in a local bank and - like many Italians at this time - held a Fascist Party card. This was more in the interests of job security than any real commitment to the party's ideology:

Nella mia famiglia non si parlava quasi mai di politica. Comunque sempre con molta prudenza, quasi sottovoce. Il fascismo era più subito che accettato, ma comunque mai discusso. La nostra era una famiglia benestante. Mi sentivo un privilegiato nei confronti della maggior parte dei miei coetanei, perché non mi mancava niente. (DG, p. 16)

Unlike much autobiographical writing, close family members feature only minimally in Revelli's writing; he gives little information about his father other than that quoted above. His mother and sister receive only a passing mention, included within 'i miei', for example, on occasions such as Revelli's return after the Liberation (GP, p. 376). To date, no biography of Nuto Revelli has been published so biographical detail relies heavily on what Revelli has said himself – either in his publications, or in subsequent interviews.

In *La guerra dei poveri* Revelli describes his obligatory progression through the ranks of the Fascist youth movements of the Opera Nazionale Balilla, or the 'GIL' (Gioventù Italiana del Littorio) as it was known after 1937. The Fascist Party had designed the GIL, its youth wing, to create a generation of young men who were 'strong, courageous, intelligently prepared and militarily organized'.<sup>6</sup> This environment allowed Revelli, a keen sportsman, to develop his ability and compete in Rome at the 'campi Dux', the annual national gathering of Fascist youth (GP, p. 3). As a result, Revelli confesses that, prior to joining the army, he had been an enthusiastic follower of Mussolini. This was not out of any early maturation of political conscience, but purely because of the athletic opportunities afforded by the party. This easy relationship with Fascism was challenged in the autumn of 1939, however, when Revelli arrived at the Accademia Militare in Modena. Here he discovered that there were two elements to his training: military training and the awakening of a political awareness.

During his time at Modena, Revelli, in his own words, performed as a model recruit. He earned himself what at the time was the ultimate accolade to dedication and efficiency: "Sei tedesco", mi diceva a volte il mio tenente, ed era un complimento. Soldato perfetto e tedesco erano la stessa cosa' (GP, p. 5). Yet it was the informal element of his training which really made the greatest impression on this particular young recruit. It was here that Revelli learned for the first time to question the regime: 'In Accademia ho saputo che l'esercito disprezzava la milizia. Così ho cominciato a guardare dietro la propaganda a vedere il nido' (AR1). The veterans in Modena taught Revelli a key lesson about the relationship between the monarchy and the Fascist regime: the king, not Mussolini, commanded the loyalty of the army. 'Il re era numero uno', that is, the

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<sup>6</sup>Richard J. B. Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), p. 293.

Italian army's primary allegiance was to the king, Vittorio Emanuele II, followed by the prince designate, and only then by *il Duce* (AR1; see also GP, p. 5). Such was the indelible impression of this lesson on the young Revelli that even some sixty years later, in 2002, the phrase '*il re era numero uno*' rang almost as a mantra in my conversation with him. This phrase appears frequently throughout Revelli's writing, so much so that it could be perceived as a deliberate author-device to minimize the extent of his Fascism. On the other hand, I believe this suspicion can be refuted if one considers the context in which Revelli grew up: firstly, Cuneo and Piedmont held a particular affection for the royal household which spent its summers in the area, and secondly, the officer corps retained its independence and loyalty to the king.<sup>7</sup>

By the time his training was complete, Revelli was already fighting a sense of disillusionment which led him to ask for a transfer from the 2nd Alpine Regiment: '*Per credere ancora in qualcosa era proprio necessario che partissi per il fronte*' (GP, p. 7). The rationale behind Revelli's decision was a hope that an expeditious deployment to the front and real action would combat the growing disillusionment he felt on hearing, and seeing the effects of, the negative experiences of the veterans of the Greek and Albanian campaigns. His transfer went through and he was deployed with the 5th Alpine Regiment. In the event, the transfer initially made little difference as both units were deployed to the Russian front and arrived almost simultaneously; later in the campaign, however, the transfer probably saved him as the Cuneense, Revelli's original unit, were abandoned to their fate after a breakdown in communications within the *Corpo d'Armata* (DC, p. 108). *Mai tardi* and *La guerra dei poveri* record Revelli's experience on the Russian front as an officer commanding troops drawn mainly from rural townships around his hometown. Since being commissioned as an officer, Revelli had begun to get to know these men, *contadini*, whose priorities in life centred on the patch of land which they owned and cultivated. This was the beginning of Revelli's connection with the rural communities of Piedmont and a relationship which was to be strengthened and developed during the Resistance and post-war years. Revelli

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<sup>7</sup> 'For all Mussolini's careless talk of "eight million bayonets" and a fully militarised people, the Army officer corps had remained a caste, detached from the rest of the population. Its officers were certainly loyal to themselves and perhaps to the institutions of the monarchy. The rest of the country was beyond their ken'.

R. J. Bosworth, *Mussolini* (London: Arnold, 2002), p. 371.

records the increasingly perilous position of the Armata Italiana in Russia (ARMIR) in the run-up to January 1943 when the Axis troops were surrounded by the Russian army. Their retreat from the Don in the winter of 1942-1943 entailed devastating losses of men and equipment. Military historians have found it difficult to enumerate with precision the extent of the losses<sup>8</sup> but estimate that of the 100,000 troops who had originally been deployed with the ARMIR, 64,000 perished. During these months, Revelli developed a strong antagonism to the Germans whom he had once admired. The strength of his feelings comes through in his records of war in Russia and then the war in Italy. The lasting impression of the retreat is starkly illustrated by Revelli in *Le due guerre* where he described the scale of the Italian losses as follows: 'Per trasportare il Corpo d'Armata Alpino in Russia erano stati necessari 210 treni; per il rimpatrio bastano 17 tradotte' (*DG*, p. 112). One of the few survivors of the retreat, Revelli reached Udine in March 1943 and spent a month there in quarantine before returning to Cuneo at the beginning of April to continue his convalescence (*GP*, p. 111).

Following Badoglio's armistice with the Allies in September of that year, Revelli quickly joined the partisans, a decision which he explains in *La strada dei daval*: 'L'8 settembre mi scuote, e la mia scelta è istintiva, immediata....Smonto le mie tre armi automatiche...e le infilo in uno zaino. Poi raggiungo la mia prima base partigiana' (*SD*, p. xxx). Thoughts of vengeance against the Germans, their former ally, were clearly a motivating factor in Revelli's decision to take up arms as a partisan: the band he formed at this point was called the 'Compagnia Rivendicazione Caduti'; the *caduti* being the fallen of the Russian campaign. Over the next few months Revelli's political thought underwent further maturation thanks to the tutelage of Dante Livio Bianco, leader of one of the 'Giustizia e Libertà' bands. Chapter 6 discusses this further and shows that rather than making a transition from Fascist to anti-Fascist, Revelli was moving from the default position of Fascist into which he was born, to a considered stance as anti-Fascist. After much thought and debate Revelli joined Livio Bianco's band and was later appointed commander of the 'Brigate Valle Vermentagna e Valle Stura "Carlo Rosselli"' GL formations, in the winter of 1943-44. Revelli and Livio Bianco fought the Germans predominantly around Revelli's hometown of

<sup>8</sup> Giorgio Rochat, *Ufficiali e soldati: L'esercito italiano dalla prima alla seconda guerra mondiale* (Udine: Gaspari, 2000), p. 133.

Cuneo. They did move across the border into France for a time and are credited by some (unnamed) sources as having a significant influence on the Allies' progress: 'Molti sono gli storici che pensano che è proprio merito di Nuto Revelli e dei suoi uomini di "Giustizia e Libertà" se gli alleati riuscirono a liberare, a fine agosto del 1944, Nizza, sulla costa meridionale della Francia'.<sup>9</sup> Revelli and his men then returned to Italy in time to participate in the liberation of Cuneo.

The years 1941-1943 influenced the course of the rest of Revelli's life. Both the conflict in Russia and the workings, or failings, of the army had left a lasting impression on Revelli to the extent that he had decided even before he returned from the Don that a military career was no longer for him: 'non farò più l'ufficiale effettivo, a nessun costo' (MT, p. 163). As a partisan, Revelli continued to work closely with the *contadini*, the local peasants, who had predominantly made up the troops who served under him in Russia. After the Liberation Revelli worked as an ironmonger which allowed him to make time for his writing, and later, as we will see, for conducting research among the *contadini*.

In 1945 Revelli married Anna Delfino, the fiancée of whom we catch fleeting glimpses in *Mai tardi* and *La guerra dei poveri*. Two years later they had a son, Marco (currently an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Sciences at the Università degli Studi del Piemonte Orientale, and now a historian in his own right). Throughout his life, Revelli remained extremely protective of Anna and his private life, creating a contrast with the exposure inherent in writing of such an autobiographical nature. Revelli published regularly from his initial publication *Mai tardi* in 1946 until 2003 when he published *Le due guerre*, appropriately rounding off his writing where it had begun: with his experiences in Russia. Over the years, Revelli combined his day-job, research and writing with considerable time spent with young people. With no formal qualification other than that of 'geometra', Revelli gave guest lectures in schools and universities because, as he says 'credo nei giovani. Perché voglio che i giovani sappiano' (DG, p191). Retirement in 1978 then provided Revelli with greater time in which to conduct his research. Within the university system, Revelli taught for a year at the Università degli Studi della Calabria (Cosenza) on the subject of oral

<sup>9</sup> Stefania Caratelli, 'Nuto Revelli, il partigiano con la penna e il fucile', *Voci di Piazza*, [http://www.vocidipiazza.it/articolo.asp?id\\_news=943](http://www.vocidipiazza.it/articolo.asp?id_news=943) Accessed 15/1/07.

history (192),<sup>10</sup> and in 1985-86, invited by Giorgio Rochat, gave a series of lectures at the Università di Torino on 'L'Italia nella Seconda guerra mondiale', subsequently published in 2003 as *Le due guerre: guerra fascista e guerra partigiana*. He was also often asked for comment and reaction to political and social developments of import to Cuneo and the *contadini* in particular. Aside from his travels as a soldier and partisan, Revelli lived in Cuneo until his death on 5 February 2004 at the age of eighty-four.

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<sup>10</sup> Revelli offered this information as a passing comment without reference to the academic year in which the teaching took place.



## Chapter 2

### *Defining Revelli's 'impegno del dopo'*

Before we can analyze in chapters 4 to 6 how an 'impegno del dopo' emerges in Revelli's works, it is crucial to understand the origin of such a concept and its ensuing influence on Revelli's life and work. Chapter 2 first establishes a working definition of Revelli's sense of an 'impegno del dopo' within the broader discussion of post-war 'impegno' in Italy. This is followed by a survey of Revelli's output in response to his 'impegno del dopo'. Reading Revelli's publications, it quickly becomes apparent that a difficulty exists in aligning them with any particular discipline.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, to give his work a sense of context, Chapter 2 outlines the broader theoretical framework within which Revelli operates. Such a framework then introduces several theoretical issues including the nature and function of memory. These issues have important implications for Revelli's autobiographical testimony-bearing, and the accounts of the *contadini* he recorded and produced in written form. Structurally it is most logical to discuss these debates after establishing the origins of Revelli's 'impegno del dopo' and the response it evoked.

#### **What created Nuto Revelli's sense of an 'impegno del dopo'?**

If we are arguing that Revelli's work and methodology demonstrate an 'impegno del dopo', we need firstly, to establish the origins of this concept, and secondly, to explain how this one 'impegno del dopo' can result in publications ranging in scope from Revelli's experience of the Russian front to the general life experiences of rural peasants. The phrase 'impegno del dopo' is taken from Nuto Revelli's presentation at the 1998 conference held in Turin in Primo Levi's memory and seems to have been a term coined by Levi:

Avevamo una 'matrice comune' Primo Levi, Mario Rigoni Stern, ed io, così affermava sempre Primo, anche se avevamo vissuto delle esperienze diverse [...] La 'matrice comune' a cui si riferiva Primo? Le nostre esperienze di guerra convergenti, ma soprattutto l'impegno del dopo [sic], quel non voler dimenticare, quel voler testimoniare ad ogni costo.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The question of which discipline best suits Revelli's work, given his insistence on accepting no label other than the denomination of 'amateur', is examined more closely in Chapter 3 in conjunction with an analysis of his methodology.

<sup>12</sup> Nuto Revelli at the Conference on Primo Levi, Turin, 28/29 March 1988.

'Del dopo' immediately signals that something has changed because of what has gone before. We have seen in Chapter 1 that Revelli underwent two dramatic and formative periods in short succession: the Russian campaign and subsequent retreat during July 1941-March 1943, and the Italian Resistance against Fascism from September 1943 to April 1945. The first of these experiences is arguably the more important of the two as it then influenced Revelli's decision to join the partisans following 8 September 1943 (*SD*, p. xxx); in part, this decision arose from a desire for vengeance and justice for those who had perished in Russia (*GP*, p. 128).<sup>13</sup> But to speak above of 'converging wartime experiences' which moulded the three friends in a similar way, Levi and Revelli alike must have been adopting the broadest and most generic of understandings given that his experience on the Russian front was very different from that of Levi in the concentration camp and Rigoni Stern in the Russian prisoner-of-war camp. In addition, Revelli was the only one of the three to make any real contribution to the war of Liberation. Levi frankly admits that the combination of inexperience and a detachment from the real world left him poorly suited to his short-lived role as partisan fighter.<sup>14</sup>

### 'Impegno' and 'impegno del dopo'

At its most basic meaning, 'impegno' denotes a sense of *commitment, obligation, or duty*.<sup>15</sup> Within a cultural context, 'impegno' simply connotes the 'attivo interessamento ai problemi sociali e politici da parte dell'uomo di cultura' after World War II. 'Impegnato' is used to describe either an 'intellettuale o movimento culturale che prende posizione sui problemi politici e sociali del momento', or the work in which such problems are discussed.<sup>16</sup> Revelli's sense of duty was closely aligned with a compulsion to write for, as he says, 'una volta cominciato, scrivere diventa quasi una forma di vizio, non se ne può fare a meno. Per me è un motivo per partecipare, per non addormentarmi'.<sup>17</sup> That is, by writing – rather than involvement in party politics – Revelli believed that he was remaining actively involved and engaged with contemporary events and situations. While Revelli was of the Left politically, I want to argue that his 'impegno del dopo'

<sup>13</sup> Chapter 5 looks at Revelli's decision to become a partisan in more detail.

<sup>14</sup> Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1958), p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> This definition is taken from the entry under 'impegno' in *Collins Dizionario Italiano-Inglese* (Glasgow: Harper-Collins, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> This definition is taken from the entries under 'impegno' and 'impegnato' in *Le Zingarelli 2005* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> Alessandra Mazzotta, 'E la povera gente la mia patria', *Luna nuova*, 12 May 1998.

demonstrates a difference in emphasis to that of the 'impegno' which marked the general post-war mood.

Liberation in April 1945 marked the end of some four years of conflict at home and abroad, and the end of twenty years of Fascism. This had been a novel period of conflict for Italy – and Europe – as war had touched the lives of civilians at home as well as those of soldiers in the field. In Calvino's words, everyone had a story to tell.<sup>18</sup> The many memoirs, war diaries and narratives which resulted reflected an engagement with social and political issues – such as that seen in the work of Vittorini, Calvino and Pasolini. During the 1950s particularly, the correlation of 'impegno' and creative output was typified by the political commitment associated with the emergent neorealist approach to literature and film. Indeed, 'impegno' had a similar longevity to that of the neorealist trend. Burns argues in *Fragments of Impegno* that thereafter, from about 1963 until the 1990s, the connotation of 'impegno' came to signify more the engagement of a writer with the ideas of culture and identity rather than Leftist politics.<sup>19</sup>

Revelli shared this collective 'impegno' to an extent as he had his individual story to tell of the war years. However, the very longevity of Revelli's 'impegno del dopo' sets it apart from general post-war 'impegno'. He seems to have put an unusual emphasis on his war experiences as he returned repeatedly to the period throughout his oeuvre. While many of his contemporaries wrote of their war experiences soon after the Liberation and then moved on to other subjects, war remained integral to Revelli's role as a writer and historian. The combination of longevity of commitment and the focus on a particular period or experience means that Revelli's sense of an 'impegno del dopo' relates more easily to the characteristics seen in writing of testimony or bearing witness than that of the politicized 'impegno' more commonly associated with post-war writing.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> 'L'essere usciti da un'esperienza – guerra, guerra civile – che non aveva risparmiato nessuno, stabiliva un'immediatezza di comunicazione tra lo scrittore e il suo pubblico: si era faccia a faccia, alla pari, carichi di storie da raccontare, ognuno aveva avuto la sua, ognuno aveva vissuto vite irregolari drammatiche avventurose, ci si strappava la parola di bocca. La rinata libertà di parlare fu per la gente al principio smania di raccontare'. Italo Calvino, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (Milan: Mondadori, 1993), p. vi.

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of impegno: Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative 1980-2000* (Leeds: Northern Universities Press, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1958).

### How can the scope of Revelli's 'impegno del dopo' include Russia and rural Piedmont?

We have seen above that Revelli's life and work were shaped by an 'impegno del dopo' originating from a desire to remember and not forget the experiences shared with his fellow-Italians during 1941-1945. But how can we account for the expansion in his self-appointed remit from narrator of his own war experiences to spokesman for rural Piedmont? Early publications were implicitly collective as well as individual in nature. Later there was a decisive move on Revelli's part towards facilitating a collective record of the period. This is due in part to a sense of shared experience, but also to the strength of relationships formed between Revelli and the men he commanded and his sense of responsibility for them. Even after the war, Revelli continued to build on these relationships during the Resistance. The twenty months of Resistance were influential in broadening the scope of Revelli's relationships and sense of responsibility to include not just former *alpini*, but also their families and the wider rural community. We will now trace the expanding scope of Revelli's 'impegno del dopo' in *Mai tardi* (1946), his first publication. This illustrates in miniature what then happened as Revelli's 'impegno del dopo' expanded to include specific goals in representing ex-soldiers, partisans and the rural community as a whole.

In the preface to the first edition of *Mai tardi*, Revelli demonstrates that he was conscious of an evolution in his motivation for *writing* or keeping the diary in the first place. Initially, his goal was no more than to keep a record of his war from a 'lato puramente tecnico, cioè tattico e logistico in particolare e in generale' (Panfilo, p. 13). Following treatment for an injury, which required that he be sent to the rear of the lines, this innocent pursuit took on an accusatory role as Revelli committed himself to documenting the deficiencies of the Italian military command:<sup>21</sup>

Furono tali le sofferenze morali e fisiche patite in quell'esperienza, che mi resi esattamente conto di quale stretta interdipendenza esistesse tra fronte e retrovie. Fissare perciò la disorganizzazione e l'incoscienza caratteristiche delle retrovie italiane, divenne uno degli scopi essenziali della mia osservazione. (Panfilo, p. 13)

<sup>21</sup> Chapter 4 shows that such a view of the Italian military command was in common currency among their own officers.

Revelli then gradually became aware of the need to record and communicate the true extent of the tragedy in Russia to those at home – and so counter the propaganda and misinformation disseminated by the Fascist government following the retreat.<sup>22</sup> The text of *Mai tardi* suggests that even on the battlefield, he was contemplating publication of his war diary, or at least some sort of public testimony to the events he and his fellow-Italians had endured:

L'ordine del giorno di Garibaldi insiste nel dire: 'Ricordate e raccontare'  
Del corpo d'armata alpino i superstiti sarebbero venticinquemila. Credo  
che in Italia non conoscano che una minima parte della nostra tragedia.  
(*MT*, p. 202)

With each of these successive stages the burden of the 'impegno' imposed upon Revelli becomes heavier. Revelli is aware that combat experience produces emotional and psychological scarring which is only exacerbated in a reviewing of events:

'Ricordare e raccontare': così comincia un ordine del giorno dei nostri  
commandi!  
Non è ancora possibile distendere i nervi, guardare alle nostre spalle,  
rivivere i giorni più tristi della nostra esistenza. È troppo triste rivivere  
quanto di più orribile può dare una guerra. (*MT*, p. 195)

As Revelli gradually became more conscious of the woeful – even criminal – deficiencies of the Italian military command, he was gripped by an anger which demanded justice for those who were the victims of such deficiencies.<sup>23</sup> This was an anger which thereafter characterizes much of his war record – whether in his personal testimony, or presentation of the memories of others. Revelli simultaneously acknowledges and dismisses the inherent danger of producing a record born of such emotions in the Panfilo preface – the original diary, he argues, had to be written when and how it was written:

La ritirata non fu che la tragica conferma delle convinzioni che m'ero  
fatte.  
Volli fissare ancora in Russia l'esperienza della tragedia vissuta, senza  
alcuna pretesa di dare un quadro obiettivo o definitivo della ritirata.  
(Panfilo, p. 14) [emphasis mine]

<sup>22</sup> Chapter 4 examines in detail the issue of the 'dispersi', or those missing or unaccounted for on the battlefield. Many of these had been imprisoned by the Russians and did eventually return home – as promised by Fascist propaganda; the vast majority, however, had died or succumbed to the elements on the battlefield and would never come home, despite Fascist assurances that they were in Russian POW camps.

<sup>23</sup> Anger is a recognized characteristic of combat trauma and is discussed further in Chapter 4.

Correspondence between Revelli and the publishers prior to the republication of *Mai tardi* by Einaudi in 1967, shows that Revelli felt strongly that the form and content of the original should be retained:

non ho né il tempo né il modo di ...[sic] rifare la testimonianza. All'Alfieri ho parlato in un dato modo, ed escludo che sia possibile tagliare ecc. senza ridurre il tutto in un pasticcio.  
 Le chiedo perciò di pubblicare il testo com'è (dattiloscritto allegato).  
 Se la cosa NON é possibile rinunci senz'altro alla pubblicazione.<sup>24</sup>

This – as Chapter 4 shows – did not preclude various editorial changes between the Panfilo and Einaudi editions of *Mai tardi*. The initial Panfilo publication, however, shows that Revelli's decision to *publish* in 1946 what is essentially a private war diary is underpinned by the same desire which had first motivated the *writing* of the diary; that is, the desire to communicate to those at home what had happened in Russia. 'Non dimenticare [...] voler testimoniare ad ogni costo' – is still the central commitment driving the publication, but it acts now in conjunction with two other specific goals: the preservation and dissemination of a record of the experiences of the ARMIR, and the recognition of the sacrifice of Italian soldiers during the Russian campaign. This is set against the context of 1946 in which the role of the Resistance and the partisans dominated the Italian people's memories of war and Liberation. As a former partisan commander, Revelli was not underestimating the contribution of the partisans, merely arguing that as a new Italy emerged from the twenty years under Fascism there needed to be a balanced representation of Italy's war years as a whole. Indeed, even prior to the Liberation, Revelli was of the opinion that the men and campaign of the ARMIR were being sidelined and misrepresented – as a result he had tried unsuccessfully to publish his record at that point because he wanted to 'portare un modesto contributo alla chiarificazione delle idee' (Panfilo, p. 15).

So the sense of anger and outrage provoked jointly by the incompetence of military commanders, and the misinformation of government as to the fate of the soldiers in Russia, is not a wild uncontrolled rage, but a focused anger which provokes the initial writing and eventual publication of a testimony. Looking back, such testimony remembered the fallen

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Nuto Revelli to Signor Zucaro of Einaudi, dated 7 September 1961. Cartella 171, *Collaboratori italiani*, Einaudi archives, p.1.

Italian soldiers of the Russian front, and the 'dispersi'. Looking forward, Revelli believed that his writing of the past had a positive role to play in the present – particularly in the shaping of post-war Italy. Later, his collections of rural memories would challenge contemporary society and politics, but with the publication of *Mai tardi*, Revelli believed that its message was pertinent specifically to the rebuilding of the Italian army:

Oggi il mio intento è uno solo: che queste pagine, convulse e illetterate, in questo grave momento della vita del paese, dicano qual'è stato il tormento morale e fisico di chi ha combattuto in quella guerra [...].

Ai nostri morti di Russia il paese deve la stessa riconoscenza che ha verso i partigiani d'Italia. Nel gennaio 1943, come all'8 settembre, si sfasciava un esercito: là in Russia, come sui monti d'Italia, non fu uno stato maggiore, ma il sacrificio dei più generosi, a salvare l'onore del soldato italiano. Di questo il paese deve tener conto nel darsi il nuovo esercito. (Panfilo, p. 15)

Luisa Passerini points out that the message of *Mai tardi* constituted 'una componente importante nella denuncia morale della campagna di Russia'.<sup>25</sup>

Emilio Castellani states that the diary is 'la storia di un'esperienza che, per essere individuale, riflette nondimeno una svolta decisiva nella storia di tutti gli italiani' (Panfilo, p. 1); this is certainly the case, whether or not Revelli was conscious of it at this stage. *La guerra dei poveri* was both individual and collective in nature, and thereafter Revelli's publications demonstrate an explicitly collective perspective – rather than presenting his own memories and experiences, he is acting as a spokesman or facilitator so that ex-soldiers and peasants alike are given a voice. The responsibility he felt for the soldiers he commanded during the Russian campaign expanded over the decades to include their local communities, succeeding generations of the Italian people, and latterly, even a sense of responsibility to fellow-Europeans. The bond he felt with the *contadini-soldati*, 'i miei alpini' as he called them (DG, p. 71), included, not surprisingly, a sense of responsibility for their welfare. Revelli could see that the Fascist regime had taken advantage of these men and sent them to the Russian front as little more than cannon fodder. These men belonged in the fields of Piedmont, not the battlefield. Relationships between Revelli and his soldiers were further strengthened by the sense of shared grief that resulted from their experiences in Russia. Many of their fellow-soldiers and officers had

<sup>25</sup> Passerini, 'La memoria orale', p. 22.

perished; they had witnessed and experienced indescribable suffering, and many had been left indelibly scarred.

Revelli, brought up in a middle class home in the town of Cuneo, was thus given an introduction to the rural communities from which these soldiers were drawn. During the 1960s, while researching *La strada del daval* and then collecting the letters of the 'dispersi' published in *L'ultimo fronte*,<sup>26</sup> Revelli stated that he was conscious of being drawn into a much bigger project: the experiences of rural communities in peace and at war (*MV*, p. xxvi). The subsequent production of the three collections of oral testimonies confirms that the bond and sense of responsibility Revelli felt for his men was to last well beyond the retreat from Russia, and include rural communities rather than just individual *contadini-soldati*. Indeed, these collections show that the sense of responsibility for the *contadini* in combat continued after the Liberation, and manifested itself in Revelli's commitment to address their social marginalization and isolation through his research and writing. When Revelli was asked during an interview in 1999 if, in devoting so much time and research to the *contadini*, he felt 'investito da una missione morale', he replied, 'Più che una missione morale, volevo conoscere e imparare'.<sup>27</sup> Or, as Cooke succinctly put it, 'not then for Revelli the suppression of the past, the erasure of history, the placing of 'una pietra sopra' the many terrible events of the Resistance. Instead, a desire to understand, to relive and see again what occurred during those twenty months'.<sup>28</sup>

### How did Revelli respond to this 'impegno del dopo'?

The previous section has shown that Revelli's 'impegno del dopo' is based on three constituent elements: his experiences of conflict, the relationships he established during these conflicts, and an ensuing sense of responsibility for the men whom he commanded and their wider communities. We will now consider Revelli's response to this sense of an 'impegno del dopo' by briefly introducing each of his publications.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Nuto Revelli, *L'ultimo fronte* (Turin: Einaudi, 1971).

<sup>27</sup> Fabrizio Basso, 'La voce dei vinti', *Tele+Guida ai Programmi Tele+* (February 1999).

<sup>28</sup> Philip Cooke, *The Italian Resistance: An Anthology* (Manchester: MUP, 1997), p. 17.

<sup>29</sup> Chapter 3 examines the methodology involved in this process.



### Autobiography and Testimony

The difficulty in categorizing Revelli's writing has already been mentioned. There are, however, two literary genres in which his early publications could be placed: autobiography and testimony. Although *Mai tardi* and *La guerra dei poveri* focus disproportionately on the period of radical change<sup>30</sup> – the initial experience integral to his sense of an 'impegno del dopo' – rather than his life as a whole, these texts are clearly autobiographical.<sup>31</sup> These texts demonstrate an 'impegno civile' on Revelli's part in that individual and community experience are intertwined. This is Spender's view that 'in literature the autobiographical is transformed. It is no longer the writer's own experience: it becomes everyone's. He is no longer writing about himself: he is writing about life'.<sup>32</sup> The interplay between writer and reader, individual and community is clarified further by Howarth who stated that 'each man writes for his own sake, to confirm the validity of his thesis, and also for the conversion of others';<sup>33</sup> a position which could have been defined with Revelli specifically in mind.<sup>34</sup> Both these early publications and the later *La due guerre* (2003), conform to the thesis that autobiographical writing is part of 'cultural memory', that is 'stories that are told outside official historical discourse'.<sup>35</sup>

Defining Revelli's 'impegno del dopo' above, it was argued that his writing on Russia reflected the characteristics of testimonial writing. That is, writing which testifies to some experience above and beyond the boundaries of normal human experience, and which offers 'privileged access to an experience' otherwise unavailable.<sup>36</sup> Wiesel (himself a survivor of the Holocaust) makes two points about the role of survivor-testimony: firstly, he is the only one in a position to testify, and secondly, he is often writing from a sense of duty rather than a particular desire – 'If someone else could have written my stories, [...] I would not have written them. I

<sup>30</sup> Jean Starobinski, 'The Style of Autobiography', in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. by James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 73-83 (p. 78).

<sup>31</sup> With very little said about life before and after this period, it is more accurate to describe *Mai tardi* and *La guerra dei poveri* as autobiographical, rather than autobiographies as they do not present a whole life view up to the present. See Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte Autobiographique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975), p. 14.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Spender, 'Confessions and Autobiography', in Olney, pp. 115-122 (p. 117).

<sup>33</sup> William L. Howarth, 'Some Principle of Autobiography', in Olney, pp. 84-114 (p. 92).

<sup>34</sup> Bruno Cavagnola, 'Il cavaliere e la memoria', *L'Unità*, 3 October 1994.

<sup>35</sup> Marita Sturken, 'Personal Stories and National Meanings: Memory, Reenactment and the Image', in *The Seductions of Biography*, ed. by Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 31-41 (p. 31).

<sup>36</sup> Olney, p. 13.

have written them in order to testify'.<sup>37</sup> Revelli seemed quite happy to testify to his own experiences and those of others too. In his later role as spokesperson for the *contadini*, he is arguably in a similar position in that who would have spoken for them if Revelli had not? Scotellaro, himself a *contadino*, told the story of the rural communities of southern Italy, but no one other than Revelli seemed interested in acting for the *contadini* of Piedmont. Without the relationships established in Russia and during the Resistance, Revelli may not have developed any interest in the rural communities around Cuneo.

Renza, in 'The Veto of the Imagination', suggests that autobiographical writing is a product of a sense of 'vocation' or 'calling': 'The autobiographical act discloses a spontaneous, an unsought-for intentionality, a "calling" uncalled for that requires different responses from the writer at explicitly different intervals in the evolution of his text'.<sup>38</sup> This parallels the definition we are building of Revelli's 'impegno del dopo' and the motivation behind his early writing. We have already traced the evolution of these 'different responses' within *Mai tardi* – from technical record to a record that will propagate the truth and break down the existing deceptions. If we consider Revelli's whole oeuvre as his 'text', we can trace the particular stages in an ever-expanding vision stretching from individual to national and European.

*La guerra dei poveri*, the publication which followed *Mai tardi*, begins with a verbatim repetition of the first book's chapter on the retreat from the Don. Revelli thus deliberately suggests a continuity from one conflict to the other. *La guerra dei poveri* acts as a link between Revelli's wholly autobiographical first publication, and the bulk of his later works in which he presents the memories of others; that is, *La guerra dei poveri* presents a gradual transition in Revelli's role from writer of personal testimony to facilitator of collective memory through individual testimonies. The diary of the Resistance months has a similar format to *Mai tardi* in that it takes the form of dated entries, but here Revelli goes beyond his own personal memories of the period to compose a record drawn also from the diaries of the partisan bands and recollections of fellow-partisans. The melding of these sources so that a collective record of war in Italy is presented in an

<sup>37</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Louis A. Renza, 'The Veto of the Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography', in Olney, pp. 268-295 (p.292).

apparently autobiographical work, led Giorgio Bocca to conclude that it was 'misteriosamente il più individuale e il più corale dei libri'.<sup>39</sup>

Three decades later, Revelli published another autobiographical work, *Il disperso di Marburg* (1994), an investigative record into the identity of a German 'disperso'. This book bears echoes of Revelli's first publications and is arguably the most complex of his works. Like his earlier works, *Il disperso di Marburg* is in diary-format, or at least a series of dated entries recording the progress of his research. Similarly, he narrates an individual investigation which is inescapably tied to collective attitudes and reactions – during the German occupation, and then in the 1980s when he conducted the research. Revelli's own experiences, memories and methodology come under pressure as he establishes the identity of this 'disperso'. His own experience of German soldiers had left Revelli strongly antagonistic towards them. Intrigued by the idea of a 'good German', Revelli set out to investigate if there was any truth behind this post-war rural 'myth'. The main attraction for Revelli, however, was the fact that the man was a 'disperso', not particularly that he was a German: 'Il mollo, il motivo spingente era il fatto che era un disperso. Non mi interessava se era amico, nemico – soltanto il fatto che era disperso, e io ero così vicino ad esserne uno' (4R1). Nevertheless, to make progress with his investigation Revelli had to work closely with German historians. We will see that this development had both personal and professional implications.

Other investigations are being conducted in tandem with that of the German's identity. Firstly, Revelli analyzes his methodology, and secondly, he documents his concerns regarding the interaction of personal memory and accurate historical investigation.

The reality and implications of war in Italy are examined with fresh chronological distance in the course of Revelli's investigations. Issues examined in Chapter 5 include: the reason for such a quest; the behaviour and culpability of partisans; the attitude of rural communities to Germans, Fascists and partisans; the interaction of memory, truth,

<sup>39</sup> Passerini, 'La memoria orale', p. 23.

'Corale' has two nuances: 'chorality', in the sense of many voices combining in the telling of one tale; and 'unanimity', in the sense of one tale being told. Chapter 5 discusses this concept more fully as Revelli's memories of conflict are set against those of his rural witnesses. The format of *La guerra dei poveri* is examined in Chapter 5.

representation and reconciliation; and Revelli's engagement with the methodological tensions arising from his approach. Chapter 5 shows that questions avoided or hidden in earlier publications are discussed openly in this later work.

### **Facilitating the Testimony of Others**

The transition begun in *La guerra dei poveri* is completed in *La strada del davai* where Revelli's explicit goal is the communication of the memories of others who had fought in the Russian campaign. This is the first of several texts in which Revelli represents the experiences of people unable to speak for themselves. There are a number of reasons why these people might not have been previously able to tell their story: a simple lack of audience; or an inability to communicate, perhaps due to minimal schooling; or a fear of uncovering the past as the memories were too painful.

Working on collections such as *La strada del davai*, Revelli's 'impegno del dopo' remains that of 'non dimenticare [...] voler testimoniare ad ogni costo'; only now he is facilitating the remembering of others. Recognising an omission in the existing historical record, Revelli states in the introduction to *La strada del davai* that

Il mio interesse specifico aveva un confine, la ritirata e la prigionia di Russia [...]

La bibliografia della seconda guerra mondiale comprende centinaia di diari, racconti, memorie. Ma come sempre sono i cosiddetti 'colti' che hanno scritto anche per gli 'umili', per i 'non colti'. [...] Mancava la guerra del contadino, del montanaro, del manovale, la guerra del povero cristo tubercolotico, malarico, nefritico, la guerra che non finisce mai. La mia ambizione diventò una sola: che finalmente anche il soldato 'scrivesse' la sua guerra. (SD, p. ix)<sup>40</sup>

The commitment to giving a voice to those not in a position to speak for themselves continues to emerge in *L'ultimo fronte*: a collection of letters to their family in Italy from soldiers who had subsequently died on the Russian front. Revelli felt a strong commitment to working on behalf of this group for several reasons. Firstly, the men represented here are numbered among the 'dispersi'. As Revelli explained, 'Si chiamavano 'dispersi' invece di 'morti' per tener viva la speranza. Anche per la propaganda contro i russi era meglio dire che sono stati fatti prigionieri invece di dire che sono stati uccisi' (AR1). Accordingly, they constitute a group whose families

<sup>40</sup> Chapters 3 and 4 will discuss the extent to which Revelli actually permitted the soldiers to 'write their own war'.

the government consistently deceived. *L'ultimo fronte*, too, can be seen as a 'denuncia morale', years after the event. Secondly, of all the various Italian groups involved in World War II, here was a group of people who – in a similar way to Primo Levi's 'sommersi' (who were also all dead) were not in a position to recount their own story and so keep their memory alive. In responding to his sense of obligation or duty to testify on behalf of this group, it is clear that Revelli was working to ensure that they would not be forgotten in Italian history of the period; there was a commemorative element to his role.

Levi's discussion of the need to testify is interlinked with the concept of 'survivor-guilt'.<sup>41</sup> It is possible that such a notion influences the intensity with which Revelli wrote during his lifetime (particularly in conjunction with his fixation with the fact that he too could have been a 'disperso'), but Revelli does not use the term explicitly. Allied to this is the concept of the cathartic effect of telling one's story which, although not explicit, is inferred from Revelli's descriptions of the individual and collective scars left by shared combat experiences.<sup>42</sup>

Two further collections of oral testimonies, *Il mondo dei vinti* (1977) and *L'anello forte* (1985), also deal with memories of war, but in the context of a record of rural life in Piedmont as told by the *contadini*. *Il mondo dei vinti* is a collection of testimonies from predominantly male, but also some female, witnesses to rural life in peace and in war.<sup>43</sup> In gathering the testimonies and preparing them for publication, Revelli tells us explicitly of his aim: 'Voglio che parlino gli emarginati di sempre, i "sordomuti", i sopravvissuti al grande genocidio, come parlerebbero in una democrazia vera' (*MV*, p. xxvi). *L'anello forte* is more specialized still as Revelli presents the female perspective on rural life: 'Questo il disegno ambizioso che mi propongo: dare una voce alla donna della campagna povera e meno povera perché finalmente scriva la sua storia' (*AF*, p. xix). As the title suggests, Revelli sees the *contadine* as the lynchpins of these rural communities. When Revelli published *L'anello forte* in 1985, it was a rather forward-thinking publication in that,

<sup>41</sup> Primo Levi address the problem of survivor-guilt in the chapter entitled 'La vergogna' in *I sommersi e i salvati* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986). It is also implicit in the quotation he favours from Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and uses to preface this book: 'Since then, at an uncertain hour,/ That agony returns:/ And till my ghastly tale is told/ This heart within me burns' (vv. 582-85).

<sup>42</sup> Chapters 4-6 look more closely at the relationship between Revelli's commitment to others and his own individual needs.

<sup>43</sup> The format and content of these collections is discussed at length in Chapter 6.

feminist historians had only just begun to appreciate the full scope of their field. For example, Alloisio and Beltrami's publication, *Volontarie della Libertà* (1981) was the first real study of the Resistance from a female perspective.<sup>44</sup>

Even as Revelli gathered the testimonies for *La strada del davai*, he tells us that rural experience and its preservation was gripping him ever more intensely:

A volte erano gli incontri con gente senza nome che mi invitavano ad approfondire il discorso. Maturava così un nuovo impegno: la guerra diventava uno dei tanti terremoti del passato, ormai mi interessava tutto. Ero 'entrato' nel mondo contadino e non riuscivo più a uscirne. (MV, p. xxvi)

This gradual immersion in documenting the rural way of life produced three collections of oral testimonies from the *contadini*, the one linked to the other through Revelli's 'impegno' to represent those he saw to be without a voice. Not only did Revelli make clear that he was acting as spokesperson for this marginalized group, but he also expressed a strong personal condemnation of a government and society he believed had treated the *contadini* carelessly (AR2).

*Il mondo dei vinti* and *L'anello forte* continue to reinforce aspects of Revelli's sense of 'impegno' such as the sense of duty or obligation to educate Italian society as to its own makeup and its past. It is an archival commitment to preserve a record of the past; and a personal commitment from Revelli to learn more about the rural community and its way of life. So, by this point in his oeuvre, Revelli is aware that his 'impegno del dopo' has evolved from a personal record of personal experience to a collective record of the region's experience, which is intended to influence Italy's thinking about the social welfare of its rural communities.

*Il prete giusto*, published between *Il disperso di Marburg* and *Le due guerre*, stands out as its subject, Don Raimondo Viale, requested that Revelli come and record his testimony – rather than Revelli seeking *him* out, as had previously been the case in his gathering of oral testimonies. Don Viale, a rebel priest, and a fascinating and controversial figure, offers a fresh perspective on the Resistance. That Revelli shared Don Viale's determination to preserve memory is seen in the detailed comment he provides at the end of the priest's narrative.

<sup>44</sup>Mirella Alloisio and Giuliana Beltrami, *Volontarie della Libertà: 8 settembre 1943 – 25 aprile 1945* (Milan: Gabriele Mazzotta, 1981).

The didactic element of Revelli's 'impegno del dopo' culminates in his final publication, *Le due guerre*. Originally delivered as a series of lectures at the University of Turin, Revelli's commitment to testify at all costs is clear throughout this final publication. Here Revelli retraces ground covered in earlier publications but with a much more analytical approach than previously as he is addressing a generation unfamiliar with these wars. In *Il disperso di Marburg* and *Le due guerre*, Revelli's sense of responsibility reaches beyond Italy to include the wider European community and the younger generation respectively. Despite the ever-widening relevance of Revelli's writing, only two of Revelli's publications have been translated into other languages. *Il mondo dei vinti* appeared in France as *Le monde des vaincus* (Paris: Maspéro, 1980), and *Il disperso di Marburg* was published in Germany as *Der verschollene Deutsche* (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1996), and then in France as *Le disparu de Marburg* (Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages, 2006).

#### **Other opportunities to testify**

Revelli's energy in fulfilling his sense of an 'impegno' is primarily channelled into his research and writing as outlined above. In addition, Revelli was not reticent in utilizing other opportunities to make the past known. Numerous newspaper articles and interviews show a desire to reach a wider audience than that provided solely by his publications, and simultaneously show an ability and commitment on Revelli's part to engage with the issues of the day in order that the past might not be forgotten. Typically, Revelli would feature in newspapers, and on occasion on television, around the time of commemorations of the Liberation, or a particular anniversary. Such issues included the trial of Nazi and Fascist war criminals,<sup>45</sup> and government policies affecting the rural communities.<sup>46</sup> There were also interviews in conjunction with the award of an honorary degree from Turin University in 1999 and the reception of the Premio Grinzane Cavour in 1986 (later won by Mario Rigoni Stern in 2002), the Premio Gambrinus in 1988 and the Premio "della Resistenza" in 2003 as a 'scrittore di grande impegno civile'.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Oreste Pivetta, "'Quei giudici non conoscono la Storia'", *L'Unità*, 3 August 1996; Nuto Revelli, 'L'impegno di ogni giorno', *Lotte nuove*, 20 April 1964.

<sup>46</sup> Vanni Comero, "'Ormai è troppo tardi. Le campagne sono morte'", *La Stampa*, 3 December 1998.

<sup>47</sup> Web announcement of decision by the Giuria del Premio Letterario Città di Omegna, to honour Revelli in 2003, <http://www.nonsoloparole.com/Public/Recensioni/dettagli.asp?ID=91> Accessed 14th December 2006.

Revelli's lecture series at the University of Turin typified his commitment to educating a younger generation. He also taught an undergraduate course at the University of Cosenza, and made numerous visits to schools in Piedmont. This oral interaction with young Italians was supplemented by the publication of a schools' edition of *La guerra dei poveri*.<sup>48</sup> The range of media and methods employed by Revelli and the longevity of his sense of an 'impegno del dopo' are all evidence of its intensity.

### **Bearing Witness, Memory and History: Issues and Debates**

We have seen above that as the scope of Revelli's sense of an 'impegno del dopo' expanded, so too he employed an increasing number of formats to broadcast his message. These developments, however, raise several issues which need to be discussed in order to establish a theoretical context and framework in which to later analyze his works and methodology.

In defining Revelli's 'impegno del dopo', it was established that the sense of commitment under which he laboured was predominantly that of the witness but also that of the political activist – albeit without any party political element. Revelli wrote as a witness from more than one perspective, beginning with his autobiographical writing and concluding as a witness of the experiences of one generation to another. In this final section of Chapter 2 we will consider Revelli's role as witness, the function of memory, and its interaction with history.

#### **Revelli as witness**

Since World War II, the concept of a commitment to testify and bear witness has been associated particularly with Holocaust survivors. It also includes individuals who have endured other traumas (often war- or conflict-related), and emerged with a determination to record and relate the experience. The most detailed studies of bearing witness post World War II are based on the literature of Holocaust survivors. Due to the subjectivity of perspective, polemics or criticisms levelled against witness' accounts are often very similar to those raised against oral testimonies. The idea of testifying or bearing witness has a number of implications depending

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<sup>48</sup> Alessandra Mazzotta, 'È la povera gente la mia patria', *Luna nuova*, 12 May 1998. Chapter 5 reveals another angle to Revelli's public role: researching *Il disperso di Marburg* he had occasion to visit Marburg and address two different audiences, one young and the other old, with a greatly differing reception.



on the context in which it operates. Agamben, in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, identifies two distinct types of 'witness' within the legal context:

In Latin there are two words for 'witness'. The first word, *testis*, from which our word 'testimony' derives, etymologically signifies the person who, in a trial or lawsuit between two rival parties, is in the position of a third party (*tertius*). The second word, *superstes*, designates a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it.<sup>49</sup>

Revelli can be seen to fulfil both functions in his role as a witness of trauma. On the one hand, Revelli bore witness to his own experiences in Russia and as a partisan, that is, in his autobiographical writing he testified as a *participant*, or *superstes*, in personal and national trauma. On the other, Revelli testified in subsequent publications as an *observer*, or *testis*, of the challenges faced by rural Piedmont in war and in peace. The socio-economic context in which Revelli conducted his research added a sense of urgency to his work. The testimonies of *La strada del daval*, the first of the collections of oral testimonies, were recorded during the late 1960s, just after the economic 'boom' of 1958-63, a period of remarkable change and energy within Italian society and Piedmont in particular. The same boom, however, expedited the demise of the rural communities in which Revelli was working. Young people left in droves, to exchange uncertain yield from the fields for the financial security of working in the new factories (MV, p. xxiii-xxv). According to Calandri, Revelli quickly realized that the histories of the people of these communities was in danger of being lost, Revelli set out to 'capture' or 'establish' a record for posterity:<sup>50</sup>

Assistevamo all'esodo grandioso, grandioso... [sic] scappavano proprio, dal loro ambiente. Allora mi sono detto: una parte di queste persone hanno

<sup>49</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p. 17.

Agamben also discusses the role of the witness within a Christian context, and draws on the Greek, *mártis*, from which comes our English 'martyr'. The earliest Christian witnesses often paid a heavy price for proclaiming the veracity of their message, yet they were committed to its communication. While the Christian notion of witnessing is not pertinent to Revelli's writing, it does transmit something of the intense commitment and sense of responsibility inherent in the proclamation of his message – whether regarding Russia or rural Piedmont.

Within the context of post-war Europe 'martyr' can, however, be a problematic term as it imposes a moral value judgement not necessarily in keeping with the individual's death. For example, within the Holocaust context, Agamben (quoting Bettelheim) states decisively: 'By calling the victims of the Nazis "martyrs", we falsify their fate'. Thus Bettelheim and Agamben take issue with the term 'martyr' as it gives the deaths of the Jews in the Holocaust a dignity and meaning that did not reflect the reality.

<sup>50</sup> From conversation with Calandri at the Istituto Storico della Resistenza in Cuneo, 22 July 2005.

delle esperienze straordinarie da raccontare, o le ascolto io adesso oppure va tutto perduto. Allora ho cominciato. Un lavoro difficile, faticoso.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, it can be argued that – just as the witnessing of the retreat from the Don provoked an obligation to testify firstly in his autobiographical writing and then in his collections of letters and oral testimonies – the witnessing of the turmoil of twentieth century rural Piedmont provoked an obligation to testify on behalf of the individuals and communities involved.

Jelin suggests that normally a witness would testify *either* as a participant *or* as an observer of an event,<sup>52</sup> yet with Revelli's later works we note that his role as witness was a hybrid of participant *and* observer. His role was to facilitate the communication of stories and experiences, whether, in the case of the 'dispersi', through the publication of their correspondence, or through the recording and publication of the oral testimonies of the *contadini*. As a facilitator of testimonies of the Russian campaign or the Resistance, Revelli was narrating incidents he had – to a greater or lesser degree – both observed and experienced; as a facilitator of testimonies of rural experience, Revelli could testify only as an observer.

Agamben introduces and debates a paradoxical element of witness-bearing, that is, the impossibility of the true witness-bearing witness. He states that 'the survivor's testimony has truth and a reason for being only if it is completed by the one who cannot bear witness'.<sup>53</sup> Or alternatively, 'the one who cannot bear witness is the true witness, the absolute witness'.<sup>54</sup> What does he mean? This paradox is drawn from Levi's contention that only the 'sommersi' could fully tell what happened in Auschwitz, and they could not speak from beyond the gas-ovens. At the outset of his work, Agamben had defined a *superstes* as one 'who has lived through something, who has *experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it*'.<sup>55</sup> Levi's 'sommersi' had indeed experienced Auschwitz from beginning to end and in doing so it had become impossible for them to testify. The result of this paradox is that the testimony of

<sup>51</sup> Radio interview with Revelli, 'Il Novecento racconta', edited by Andrea Giuseppini, produced by Flavia Pesetti, published on the web: [http://progettomemoria.it/nuto\\_revelli.htm](http://progettomemoria.it/nuto_revelli.htm). Quoted in Flavio Menardi Noguera, in 'Con passione e con metodo. Rileggendo le opere di Nuto Revelli, *Il presente e la storia* (=Rivista del ISRCI, 66 (2004)), pp. 123-140 (p. 132).

<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory*, trans. by Judy Rein and Marcial Godoy-Anatibia, Contradictions, XVIII (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 61.

<sup>53</sup> Agamben, p. 150.

<sup>54</sup> Agamben, p. 150.

<sup>55</sup> Agamben, p. 17 [emphasis mine].

survivors' of Auschwitz, or in Revelli's case, the retreat from the Don, can only ever be partial as in surviving they had not plumbed the depths of the experience. Clearly, such a paradox in witnessing elicits strong responses from scholars. Lyotard declares that 'the witness is a traitor',<sup>56</sup> while Bernstein states that 'each external accounting [is] a falsification'.<sup>57</sup> Revelli is fully conscious of the fact that the 'dispersi' were unable to tell of their fate, so he took it upon himself to act as a *testis* on their behalf. This was not specifically with the aim of securing legal judgement (although he was concerned with such procedures),<sup>58</sup> but principally to broadcast and make known their thoughts and responses to the situation in which they were placed.<sup>59</sup> If one subscribes to Lyotard and Bernstein's fears regarding witnesses to the Holocaust one must also question the extent to which Revelli, the survivor, can fully testify – to his own experiences or those of others.<sup>60</sup>

Bearing witness is predominantly but not exclusively the narrative expression of trauma. Revelli's writing testifies to different types of trauma. A second complementary dimension to his writing is that of promoting marginalized sectors of society, military and civilian, to the attention of Italian society at large. Unlike the similar debates in social theory outlined by Kelly Oliver in 'Witnessing and Testimony', while the testimonies presented by Revelli do demand recognition by the dominant cultural record for the marginalized, they do not contain any real demand 'for retribution and compassion'.<sup>61</sup> By this, I mean that although there are many voices prepared to highlight the prejudices and difficulties faced by their community, there are very few who are prepared to fight for change – or even believe it is possible. Instead, Revelli portrays the *contadini* as cowed and resigned to a life of marginalization.

<sup>56</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 204.

<sup>57</sup> J. M. Bernstein, 'Bare Life, Bearing Witness: Auschwitz and the Pornography of Horror', *Parallax*, 2004, vol. 10, no. 1, 2–16 (p. 6).

<sup>58</sup> See Agamben, p. 18: 'One of the most common mistakes – which is not only made in discussion of the camp – is the tacit confusion of ethical categories and juridical categories (or, worse, of juridical categories and theological categories, which gives rise to a new theodicy). Almost all the categories that we use in moral and religious judgements are in some way contaminated by law: guilt, responsibility, innocence, judgement, pardon... [sic] This makes it difficult to invoke them without particular caution'.

<sup>59</sup> See introduction to *L'ultimo fronte* for discussion of the Leopoli Commission – set up to investigate the alleged massacre of 2000 Italian troops in 1943.

See also Alberto Pappuzzi, 'Nuto Revelli: la rinascita dei Vinti', *La Stampa*, 6th February 2004.

<sup>60</sup> Chapter 4 will discuss in more detail the extent to which this is an issue in Revelli's writing of the Russian front.

<sup>61</sup> Kelly Oliver, 'Witnessing and Testimony', *Parallax*, 2004, vol. 10, no.1, 78–87 (p. 78).

On the other hand, the *contadini* seem to be working to ensure a betterment of their lives by their own efforts. Lobbying the government for change has in the past only proved futile and left the rural communities with low expectations. This post-war attitude, examined later in Chapters 6, provides an interesting comparison with the variety of attitudes and behaviour in evidence during the period 1941-1945.

A further aspect of witnessing to be considered is that of the role of 'silences' in both Revelli's own testimony and that provided by the *contadini*. Again, the concept of 'silences' is particularly pertinent to testimonies relating experience of the Holocaust, or of the Nazi-Fascist years. Generally, these lacunae manifest themselves in the glossing over of particular incidents or opinions, as if they are of no real import, or as if the speaker has no knowledge of them.<sup>62</sup>

It is evident that a witness might not speak of a particular period or incident for a number of reasons. 'Survivor guilt' often renders a potential witness mute for decades, even the remainder of his life, because the experience undergone was so intensely traumatic that the individual prefers to shield himself from the pain by 'forgetting' (see earlier discussion) or suppressing their memory. Speaking specifically of Primo Levi, Bernstein defines 'survivor's guilt' as: 'a shame at having survived, and with that shame the sense that one's experience is thereby inauthentic, less true than the reality suffered by the many [i.e. who had perished]'.<sup>63</sup>

Lyotard analyses the concept of 'silences' as follows:

To be able not to speak is not the same as not to be able to speak. The latter is a deprivation, the former a negation [...] If the survivors do not speak, is it because they cannot speak, or because they avail themselves of the possibility of not speaking that is given them by the ability to speak? Do they keep quiet out of necessity, or freely, as it is said?<sup>64</sup>

Revelli's work and writing are, we shall see, shaped by such questions. In addition, as those with whom and for whom he worked had previously had no vehicle by which they could readily speak – this is integral to Revelli's sense of an 'impegno del dopo' on their behalf – Revelli wielded considerable power in editing their testimonies and deciding what they should and

<sup>62</sup> Chapter 5 shows where these silences typically arise in the peasant accounts of life under Fascism and during the Resistance.

<sup>63</sup> Bernstein, p. 2.

<sup>64</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. by George Van Den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), §14.

should not say. This is one of the most problematic elements of Revelli's work if we are trying to assess the extent to which he actually acted as a spokesperson, rather than a manipulator of their narratives.<sup>65</sup> A secondary element to be investigated in Revelli's work is the degree to which he engages with the question of war crimes: another aspect which could, and did, on occasion prompt silence on the part of the perpetrators. Others, such as Mauthausen, were psychologically scarred by their time in Russia to the extent that although they spoke out and told about their experiences, those around dismissed them as mad – unless, like Revelli, they saw themselves in his torment:

Era un folle 'Mauthausen', era uno dei tanti relitti di guerra solo apparentemente 'in congedo'. Ma la guerra è pazzia, e ogni imprecazione, ogni grido di 'Mauthausen', era una verità sacrosanta. Mentre 'Mauthausen' imprecava io rivivevo le *mie* notti all'addiaccio [...].  
(*SD*, p. viii)

Revelli speaks here of his own wounds which were ready to reopen with even the slightest pressure (*SD*, p. viii). In such a context, Ventresca's analysis of 'silences' as evidence of an 'ongoing reckoning with the memory and legacy of Mussolini's regime',<sup>66</sup> is typified in the narratives of both Revelli and his rural witnesses. It has, however, been argued that such silences are 'just as meaningful as spoken words';<sup>67</sup> Sumic-Riha balances this with the admonition that 'the danger in handling silence resides then in the temptation of assigning to silence some fullness of being, of succumbing to the ontology of presence'.<sup>68</sup> Succeeding chapters examine the significance of silences in Revelli's response to his 'impegno del dopo'.

A further area, which potentially impinges on Revelli's function as a witness, is that of rhetoric and textuality.<sup>69</sup> Revelli's 'impegno' to bear witness at all costs involved speaking in classrooms, lecture halls, and public fora over the decades. It is, however, his written testimony

<sup>65</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Ventresca, 'Debating the Meaning of Fascism in Contemporary Italy', *Modern Italy*, vol. 11, No. 2, June 2006, 189-209 (p. 189).

<sup>67</sup> Elizabeth Jane Bellamy, 'Laboratories' Against Holocaust Denial – Or, the Limits of Postmodern 'Theory', *Parallax*, 2004, vol. 10, no. 1, 88-99 (p. 94).

<sup>68</sup> Jelica Sumic-Riha, 'Testimony and the Real: Testimony between the Impossibility and the Obligation', *Parallax*, 2004, vol. 10, no. 1, 17-29 (p. 26).

<sup>69</sup> Within the context of Revelli's collections of oral testimonies, I use 'textuality' to connote the 'textualness' of his writing, as opposed to 'the process of producing a text through the transformation of other texts' (Elizabeth A. Meese, *Crossing the Double-Cross: The Practice of Feminist Criticism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 44). That is, given the transfer of medium from oral to written, our interest is in how the *orality* of the original source relates to the *textuality* of the finished publications.

that is the primary focus of interest. Undoubtedly, Revelli wrote to persuade the unaware, the ignorant, of all that had happened in Russia, of all the failings and deceptions of the Fascist machine and consequently of the 'true' fate of so many Italian soldiers.

Carroll, in establishing a definition of 'text' and 'textuality', focuses on the central question of where meaning actually lies; does it, he asks, 'emerge from authorial intention, from the structure of the text itself, or from the reader's own contributions?'<sup>70</sup> Chapter 3 explores this idea further in relation to the implications of Revelli's methodology, specifically in the transfer from oral or aural, to written text, and the degree to which he communicates the words and significance intended in the original narration of the *contadini*.

### Memory: Remembering and Forgetting

Scholars offer various definitions of memory<sup>71</sup> and here, we will consider some of the aspects of memory particularly relevant to testimony-bearing and Revelli's 'impegno del dopo'.

Firstly, then, memory is central to identity. Oppenheimer and Hakvoort state that memory permits 'individuals to acquire, retain and retrieve knowledge related to their own personal experiences and forms an important part of individuals' identities'.<sup>72</sup> Halbwachs argues that memory is far more than merely depositary or archival in nature;<sup>73</sup> it is a dynamic force subject to constant reinterpretation.<sup>74</sup> Such dynamism does lay the faculty of memory open to accusations of unreliability and a lack of veracity. Nonetheless, whether viewed as primarily archival or dynamic in nature, scholars tend to agree on the contribution of memory to the formation of identity, whether on an individual or collective level.<sup>75</sup> Jedlowski, however, warns that tying memory too closely to identity runs the risk of forgetting that 'la memoria è anche ciò che può contraddire l'identità che un soggetto intende assumere in un dato momento'.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Jamie B. Carroll, entry under 'text' in the University of Chicago online 'Theories of Media' glossary, <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/text.htm> Accessed 29 January 2007.

<sup>71</sup> Andrea Mammone, 'A Daily Revision of the Past: Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and Memory in Contemporary Italy', *Modern Italy*, vol. 11, no. 2, June 2006, 211-226 (p. 221).

<sup>72</sup> L. Oppenheimer and I. Hakvoort, 'Will the Germans ever be forgiven? Memories of the Second World War four generations later', in *The Role of Memory in Ethnic Conflict*, ed. by E. Cairns and M. D. Roe (London: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 94-104 (p. 94).

<sup>73</sup> Paolo Jedlowski, *Memoria, Esperienza e modernità: Memorie e società nel XX secolo* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2002), p. 46.

<sup>74</sup> Emanuel Prower, 'Memory as Sign', in *Memory-Remembering-Forgetting*, ed. by Wojciech H. Kalaga, Tadeusz Rachwał (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999), pp. 11-27 (p. 22).

<sup>75</sup> Jedlowski, p. 115.

<sup>76</sup> Jedlowski, p. 115.

Without explicitly tying memory and identity together, Revelli shows in discussion with the *contadini* that the identity they are attempting to project can be destroyed by written memories or records (DG, pp. 8-9).

A second unifying feature of the various interpretations of memory is an acknowledgement of the inescapability of memory and its intrinsic relationship to our present. The past is now only accessible as it is mediated through our present; our memory of the past is subject to numerous influences affecting the manner in which we reconstruct the past.<sup>77</sup>

Memory also has a commemorative role. Revelli wrote many of his publications, as we have seen above, with a view to preserving a memory of particular groups and communities, particularly the *dispersi* of the Russian campaign and the rural communities. Discussion of individual texts in the following chapters examines how this aim worked in practice and the various issues encountered.

Memory is crucial to both autobiography and testimony writing. Yet it can be argued that there needs to be opportunity to forget. Revelli speaks constantly of a commitment not to forget, to remember at all cost, and this sense of duty never falters over the decades. Opportunity to forget is important, however, given the relationship between past events, our memory of them now, and their influence on the shaping of our identity and existence in the present. Pavone speaks of 'the great difficulty in finding a point of equilibrium between the right to memory and the need for forms of forgetting that allow daily life to resume in societies devastated by the general practice of active and passive violence'.<sup>78</sup> If the balance tips too far towards forgetting, the result can be as negative in impact on individual and collective memory as a refusal to remember:

The essence of forgetting is the loss of access to the realm of being. Forgetting means losing contact with being. If unintentional, forgetting is a mere scar to identity; if done on purpose, it becomes a form of suicide, of self-inflicted euthanasia. Forgetting is an evasion of being, an escape from being into the rush of becoming.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Jedlowski, p. 48.

<sup>78</sup> Pavone, p. 279.

<sup>79</sup> Kalaga, p. 39.

### The Interaction of Memory and History

Memory and history are inseparable. Oral history depends on the verbalization of memory. Traditional historical records are drawn from various formats, yet each ultimately depends on the faculty of memory. The interaction of memory and history can be problematic. Drawing on Halbwachs, Mammone argues that 'if memory is often perceived to be subjective, individual and unique, then history, being a coherent and rational scientific discipline, must be more objective, general, global and even universal'.<sup>80</sup> Over Revelli's writing career, memory increasingly engaged with history in the manner Mammone outlines; that is, his subjective autobiographical narratives were followed by more historical – although not necessarily more objective – collections, in the sense that they provided a record of the past from a collective perspective. In earlier writing, it is more difficult to identify an objectivity and globality in Revelli's approach; indeed, we have seen that in his preface to *Mai tardi*, Revelli states explicitly that he has no illusions about the objectivity of his publication.

An important element identified by Mammone and Pavone alike – and practiced by Revelli – is the moral aspect of the historian's role. Arguing from the premise that Italy is 'a country whose post-war democracy was founded on an anti-Fascist consensus', Mammone states explicitly that:

There is a moral obligation to remember those ordinary Italians who fought for liberty and democracy, and against Mussolini. The act of remembering is a duty as well as a source of culture. The original anti-Fascism will die with the last partisan, and the *Decima Mas* will live only in the eyes of some nostalgic right-wing extremists. But memory remains.<sup>81</sup>

Revelli writes of this period of history from the standpoint of one who has fought both for and against Mussolini. Likewise, many of the soldiers interviewed for the collections of oral testimonies had 'fought for liberty and democracy' – after the events of 8<sup>th</sup> September 1943. 'Manipulated memory', seen above in the concept of the myth of the 'inherent goodness of Italians', introduces the possibility that such a stereotype has a moral aspect and implications for history and Italian society. Pavone views such a myth, particularly in the context of the

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<sup>80</sup> Mammone, p. 212.

<sup>81</sup> Mammone, p. 221.



Resistance, as contributing to the assuaging of the Italian conscience after the Liberation.<sup>82</sup> It is only recently that such an attitude has ceased to impose itself on Italian historiography, and been replaced with a more critical analysis of the period than that seen in the early post-war years. Mammone argues, in 2006, that there is still 'certainly a need for greater critical analysis' for the following reason:

Italian public memory may not be absolved from all responsibilities. The dilemma of Fascism was not resolved with the defeat of Mussolini's Italian Social Republic. [...] To this end, historians, and especially young scholars, have the ethical responsibility 'to restore the memory of what Fascism has really been',<sup>83</sup> with the intention of avoiding – as far as possible – the reappearance of bloodshed and dictatorships.<sup>84</sup>

On a similar vein, Jedlowski argues that 'il deficit di memoria storica che molti denunciano corrisponde alla rinuncia da parte delle generazioni attuali ad assumersi alcuna responsabilità di quanto avvenne prima e durante la seconda guerra mondiale in Europa'.<sup>85</sup> This is particularly pertinent to Revelli's sense of an 'impegno del dopo' and the writing it produces in that this is the very reality that he seeks to combat from his first publication onwards.

Time and an individual's present situation influence the way in which memory is reconstructed. Indeed, sometimes it is only the passage of time that actually allows memories to emerge and be reconstructed in a narrative act. One example of this is seen in Robert Gordon's chronology of Holocaust writing which shows that it is not until the 1960s that 'the Final Solution begins to emerge as a key historical phenomenon and as a distinct subject for memory and historical understanding'.<sup>86</sup> Likewise, as Revelli goes around Piedmont recording oral testimonies over the 1960s and 1970s especially, it was not uncommon for him to find that the individual interviewed had not until that point ever recounted his experience of war. And why? Because it is only with the passage of time that memory and narration actually becomes viable. Some have suppressed memory in an attempt to gain equilibrium between the past and the

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<sup>82</sup> Pavone, p. 273.

<sup>83</sup> Paul Corner, 'La percezione del fascismo nell'Italia di oggi', *Il Grande Veltro*, 128 (1995), p. 183.

<sup>84</sup> Mammone, p. 222.

<sup>85</sup> Jedlowski, p. 96.

<sup>86</sup> Robert Gordon, 'Which Holocaust? Primo Levi and the Field of Holocaust Memory in Post-War Italy', *Italian Studies*, vol. 61, no. 1, Spring 2006, 85-113 (p. 87).

ability to function in the present. Revelli sought to release these memories - whether suppressed in response to pain, or in attempt to soothe consciences - in the course of his work.

## Chapter 3

### *Revelli's Approach to Research and Publication*

Chapter 3 sets out how Revelli's sense of an 'impegno del dopo' shaped his methodology as a researcher and writer and so deals particularly with his practice in producing *La strada del davai, Il mondo dei vinti* and *L'anello forte*.<sup>87</sup> The chapter begins by setting Revelli's practice of oral history in the context of accepted professional methodology and thought. The main body studies Revelli's approach to recording the testimonies of the *contadini* of Piedmont, and the editing of the recordings for publication. The chapter then concludes by analyzing potential methodological complexities within Revelli's approach. It should be noted that this discussion of Revelli's methodology correlates his stated practice with the final published collections of oral testimonies, rather than with the actual recordings. Access to the original tapes and transcripts was not possible during the course of my research as some of the people interviewed by Revelli are still alive.<sup>88</sup>

### **Revelli's Methodology and Accepted Theory and Practice**

How do you categorize a man such as Revelli who recorded and published thousands of hours of oral testimonies and yet remained an outsider to the discipline? Any analysis of Revelli's approach and methodology must begin with his insistence on his amateur status. He made no claim to be a professional oral historian, either on the merits of qualification or experience and practice. Instead, he emphasized that his work did not follow any pre-existing methodology: 'Non ero influenzato da alcuna metodologia...me la sono inventata'.<sup>89</sup> Without casting doubt on Revelli's original claim to be an amateur, my aim now is to trace the evolution and refinement of his practice as an oral historian. Revelli began his work, he said, oblivious of the existence of 'oral history' as a school and ignorant of any established methodology. By 1985, when he published the third of his collections of oral testimonies, not only had Revelli

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<sup>87</sup> The main substance of this chapter will be published in the November 2007 issue of *Modern Italy*.

<sup>88</sup> Marco Revelli, Nuto Revelli's son, established the Fondazione Revelli in 2006. The goal of the Fondazione is to preserve Revelli's research – papers and audio material – eventually making it available for consultation. [www.nutorevelli.org]

<sup>89</sup> Taken from an interview conducted by the author with Revelli at his home in Cuneo on 2 May 2002.

developed a supposedly 'home-grown' oral history methodology, but he was cognizant of the theories practised by other oral historians, and indeed had considered them sufficiently to be able to accept or reject their validity. There now follows an overview of the development and practice of oral history, on a global and national level, in order to set Revelli's own methodology in context.

### **The Development of Oral History as a Discipline**

Oral history in the modern era is usually dated from Allan Nevins' oral history project at Columbia University in 1948, although earlier projects do exist.<sup>90</sup> Edward Ives cites one of these, J. Walter Fewkes's article 'A Contribution to Passamaquoddy Folk-Lore' (1890),<sup>91</sup> as probably 'the earliest published use of recorded materials'.<sup>92</sup> Nowadays audible 'recorded materials' form the very crux of oral history sources, yet initially testimonies tended to be stenographed. Valdemar Poulsen, had produced the first tape recorder in 1898,<sup>93</sup> but it was to be some years before tape-recorders would be widely available.

Other sources date production of tape recorders in America to as late as 1948, with general availability still later.<sup>94</sup> Tape recorders and recording equipment had thus only recently come on the market at the time Revelli was gathering the testimonies for *La strada del davai* and he took the decision to stenograph rather than record the interviews. Revelli makes clear, however, that this was a decision taken in order to accommodate the witnesses rather than due to a lack of the technological wherewithal: 'Registrare su magnetofono non era possibile, i "testimoni" si intimidavano. La cosa migliore era stenografare' (SD, p. ix).

During the 1960s, and particularly in the 1970s, oral history expanded and spread across the globe so that by the mid-1970s it was practised virtually worldwide.<sup>95</sup> Revelli had by this stage spent some ten years collecting oral testimonies, having begun in the 1960s (SD, pp.

<sup>90</sup> Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History: The authenticity of oral evidence* (New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1987), p. 42; *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. by David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 1996), p. 8.

<sup>91</sup> J. Walter Fewkes, 'A Contribution to Passamaquoddy Folk-Lore', *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, 3 (1890), pp. 257-80.

<sup>92</sup> Edward D. Ives, *The Tape-Recorded Interview: A Manual for Fieldworkers in Folklore and Oral History*, 2nd ed. (Knoxville, The University of Tennessee Press, 1995), p. 87.

<sup>93</sup> Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2002. © 1993-2001 Microsoft Corporation.

<sup>94</sup> Louis Starr, 'Oral History', in Dunaway, pp. 39-61 (p. 57).

<sup>95</sup> Dunaway, p. 54.

vii-viii), yet Louis Starr's list of the countries involved in oral history projects at this stage, does not include Italy – another indicator of Revelli's 'outsider' status.<sup>96</sup> The reason for an expanding interest in oral history at this point is attributed by Luisa Passerini to 'the crucial shift, which began right at the end of the 1970s, [...] when the subjectivity of oral sources came to be seen as a point of strength, a vital clue to changing consciousness, rather than as an intrinsic weakness'.<sup>97</sup>

During the 1980s, oral history became increasingly more complex in terms of its definition and practice.<sup>98</sup> For example, at this point researchers such as Gluck began to distinguish between 'oral narrative' and 'oral history' as follows:

We are using 'oral narratives' to mean the material gathered in the oral history process, typically utilizing a tape recorder. These narratives take a variety of forms, including life history, topical interviews, and testimonies. 'Oral history', in contrast, refers to the whole enterprise: recording, transcribing, editing, and making public the resulting product – usually but not necessarily a written text.<sup>99</sup>

Hoffman, in her article 'Reliability and Validity in Oral History', offers a definition which also incorporates a comment on the aims and validity of the process: 'Oral history may be defined as a process of collecting, usually by means of a tape-recorded interview, reminiscences, accounts, and interpretations of events from the recent past which are of historical significance'.<sup>100</sup> Lummis, in *Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral Evidence*, focuses on the autobiographical element and defines oral history as 'an account of first hand experience recalled retrospectively, communicated to an interviewer for historical purposes and preserved on a system of reproducible sound'.<sup>101</sup>

Once established, oral history faced and continues to face many questions as to its historical validity. Opponents of the discipline question the purpose of oral history primarily because of its inherent subjectivity and the fallibility of human memory. The standard accusation levelled at oral history is, says Alessandro Portelli, that: 'oral history has no unified

<sup>96</sup> Dunaway, p. 54.

<sup>97</sup> *International Yearbook of Oral History Volume IV: Gender and Memory*, ed. by Selma Leydesdorff, Luisa Passerini and Paul Thompson (OUP, 1996), p. 6.

<sup>98</sup> Dunaway, p. 8.

<sup>99</sup> *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. by Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>100</sup> Alice Hoffman, 'Reliability and Validity in Oral History', in Dunaway, pp. 87-93 (p. 88).

<sup>101</sup> Lummis, p. 27.

subject; it is told from a multitude of points of view, and the impartiality traditionally claimed by historians is replaced by the partiality of the narrator'.<sup>102</sup>

Yet, Portelli argues, this apparent weakness is actually one of the unique strengths of oral history in contrast to its traditional counterpart – a view shared by Robert Perks, a fellow oral historian:

But the unique and precious element which oral sources force upon the historian and which no other sources possess in equal measure is the speaker's subjectivity. If the approach to research is broad and articulated enough, a cross section of the subjectivity of a group or class may emerge. Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now they think they did. [...] The organization of the narrative reveals a great deal of the speakers' relationships to their history.<sup>103</sup>

In *The Battle of Valle Giulia*, Portelli juxtaposes traditional history and oral history, noting 'the dramatic distance and the indissoluble bond between "history" and personal experience, between the private unique and solitary spores of sorrow in houses, kitchens, and anguished memories, and the historian's perception and reconstruction of broad, public historical events'.<sup>104</sup> This tension highlights the equal value of a traditional approach to history (which deals with the events and figures of the day), and the focus of oral history (which expounds the reactions and emotions of people to these events and figures): both are necessary to form a complete picture of a period. In addition, oral history is distinguished from traditional history by 'both the oral and aural quality of the historical source'.<sup>105</sup> If the evidence is then presented in audible format, it demonstrates that oral sources can be 'richer in communicative power, containing as it does, inflections, hesitations, expressions and nuances not reproducible in written form'.<sup>106</sup>

The second line of attack from opponents of oral history is that of the fallibility of human memory, this faculty being the very foundation of the discipline.<sup>107</sup> Hoffman, an oral historian, challenges the accusations of subjectivity and fallibility of memory by showing how

<sup>102</sup> Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes oral history different', in Perks, pp. 63-74 (p. 73).

<sup>103</sup> Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 67.

<sup>104</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. viii.

<sup>105</sup> Lummis, p. 23.

<sup>106</sup> Lummis, p. 23.

<sup>107</sup> Dunaway, p. 88.

the 'reliability' and 'validity' of sources can be safeguarded:

Reliability can be defined as the consistency with which an individual will tell the same story about the same events on a number of different occasions. Validity refers to the degree of conformity between the reports of the event and the event itself as recorded by other primary source material such as documents, photographs, diaries, and letters. Now, while it is conceivable that an oral report might be a true description of an event, its validity cannot really be tested unless it can be measured against some body of evidence. Without such evidence, an isolated description of an event becomes a bit of esoterica whose worth cannot be properly evaluated.<sup>108</sup>

Even within the discipline, what one oral historian sees as an advantage another might see as a drawback. 'Popular engagement', for example, is one of the strengths of oral history and, concurrently, one of its potential weaknesses. 'Traditional historiography has tended to be hierarchical in character on account of its key sources (for example, legal documents and records, government reports, military archives). Oral history redresses this balance by giving 'ordinary people' opportunity to recount past events from their perspective.<sup>109</sup> 'Ordinary people' tends to connote people of lower social classes than those who typically contribute to the traditional historical record. Taken to extreme, the selection of potential interviewees for oral history projects purely on the grounds of class or social standing is, Ives argues, actually unhelpful: 'Elitism/non-elitism is a ridiculous polarity to begin with. Between the two there is no great gulf fixed. No one is common, and "great men" are a dime a dozen, and getting cheaper'.<sup>110</sup> Passerini sees a potentially greater risk in privileging such popular accounts:

Among the gravest of the inadequacies of oral history, I would suggest, is the tendency to transform the writing of history into a form of populism – that is, to replace certain of the essential tenets of scholarship with facile democratisation, and an open mind with demagoguery. Such an approach runs the risk of constructing oral history as merely an alternative ghetto, where at last the oppressed may be allowed to speak.<sup>111</sup>

The following chapters will allow us to consider whether there is an element of this 'ghettoization' or populism in Revelli's approach. At the same time, we will explore the idea of popular memory, that is, the 'generalized collective image of the past'. Lummis contends that this

<sup>108</sup> Dunaway, p. 89.

<sup>109</sup> Lummis, p. 17.

<sup>110</sup> Ives, p. xi.

<sup>111</sup> Luisa Passerini, 'Work ideology and consensus under Italian fascism', in Perks, pp. 53-62 (p. 53).

particular perspective on the past, 'although held by the people, does not come from them' any longer as popular memory has grown to be 'heavily influenced and shaped by the institutions with economic, political and social power'.<sup>112</sup>

There are clearly attested benefits to oral history that reach beyond a mere archival function. Generally, oral history can widen access to ignored sectors of society, and has the potential to impact positively on a social level.<sup>113</sup> For example, research shows that on a personal level the narration of one's individual history has had a therapeutic effect on the elderly or confused,<sup>114</sup> and more widely, oral history has been credited with 'creating a sense of community cohesion and of continuity across generations'.<sup>115</sup>

Oral history in Italy has shared these common debates; Passerini confirms that 'in the context of traditional historical research [...] oral sources and the study of everyday phenomena have a problematic relationship to the mainstream tradition'.<sup>116</sup> Portelli alleges that 'the Italian intellectual community' had dismissed oral history before even making the effort to understand it fully, 'charging oral history with pretensions it does not have, in order to set everybody's mind at ease by refuting them'.<sup>117</sup> This, then, is the context in which Revelli recorded and edited the oral testimonies of rural Piedmont, and yet he always remained aloof from professional oral history and its practitioners. We turn now to consider how this claimed invention of a methodology by an amateur oral historian worked in practice.

### Revelli's Practice in the Recording of Oral Testimonies

An initial reading of the published testimonies gives the impression that the printed text is an exact representation of what was said in conversation; deeper consideration of the texts and Revelli's introductions to them demonstrates that the published versions are more than an unadulterated transcription. The introduction to each of the collections shows a progression

<sup>112</sup> Lummis, p. 123.

<sup>113</sup> Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class*, trans. by Bob Lumley and Jude Bloomfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 129.

<sup>114</sup> Lummis, p. 152.

<sup>115</sup> David K. Dunaway, 'Introduction: The Interdisciplinarity of Oral History', in Dunaway, pp. 7-22 (p. 12).

<sup>116</sup> Passerini, *Fascism*, p. 2.

<sup>117</sup> Perks, p. 63.



both in Revelli's thinking on his work and the way he gathered and used the testimonies.

The first of the collections, *La strada del davai*, gives very little comment on the collation of the testimonies which were all, but for one, 'raccolta a caso' (SD, p. xv). Rather, Revelli lays great emphasis on the emotional impact of testifying. He concentrates on communicating the harshness of the Russian experience, whether in retreat or in imprisonment, and the fervour with which he handles such material is consistent with his personal memories of many of the details recounted by his sources. While Revelli does not discuss methodology in any detail in *La strada del davai*, it is incontrovertible that some methodology, even haphazard at this stage, is integral to the process. Revelli might not engage here with the intricacies of his methodology, but from the inception of his aim to allow the *contadini-soldati* to 'write' their war, methodology has shaped and dictated the content from research to final publication. The later collections illustrate a shift in the balance between content and methodology. This is deduced from the greater level of detail provided by Revelli on how he contacted possible witnesses, how he then conducted the interviews and recording sessions, and how he arrived at the finished publication. Discussion of his methodological approach is confined mainly to the introductions in each of the collections of oral testimonies, but is elaborated on in the text of *Il disperso di Marburg*<sup>118</sup> and *Il prete giusto*.<sup>119</sup> From these it is possible to trace Revelli's methodological approach from initial contact to finished publication; an individual process which frequently set Revelli apart from other oral historians.

Throughout the course of his research, Revelli relied heavily on the assistance of 'mediatori' in locating potential witnesses. The majority of the intermediaries – men and women – were themselves *contadini* although several other professions were represented among them including teachers, priests, and the local mayor. Often originally witnesses themselves (SD, p. viii), the intermediaries would search out potential candidates for Revelli to interview, usually from among their own acquaintances. Usually this was possible because of the standing of the intermediary in his community. They would then act as geographic guide to Revelli through the maze of mountain roads and hamlets, ultimately introducing witness and interviewer. This

<sup>118</sup> Nuto Revelli, *Il disperso di Marburg* (Turin: Einaudi, 1994).

<sup>119</sup> Nuto Revelli, *Il prete giusto* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998).

would culminate in sessions, either with individuals or groups, of anything up to ten people (AF, p. xxxiii). Even at this point, the *mediatori* still had an important role to play in that they were crucial to Revelli – an outsider in these cautious and closed rural communities – ever building a relationship with the *contadini*:

Anche l'incontro organizzato, con il 'mediatore' che mi presenta come 'l'uomo di cui fidarsi', nasce sulla diffidenza istintiva. È sempre la diffidenza il primo ostacolo che mi trovo di fronte, una diffidenza che non mi offende, che giustifico. Non è facile entrare nelle case contadine, non è facile inchiodare un contadino a un tavolo per ore e ore. Senza una rete efficiente di 'basisti', di 'mediatori', non si entra nelle case contadine. (MV, p. xxx)

As Calandri put it: 'All'inizio erano molto importanti – davano credenza a Revelli e il suo lavoro'.<sup>120</sup> Calandri went on to explain that the role of the *mediatori* did change over the years: 'Dopo che Revelli è diventato famoso, il ruolo dei mediatori è diminuito un po': non c'era bisogno della presenza del mediatore in ogni occasione perché avevano visto o sentito che le loro parole erano stampate fedelmente' (AC). Such was the influence that these *mediatori* wielded over the *contadini* that Revelli stated in 'Autobiografia di un impegno' that he would ask them not to introduce him as a partisan so as not to prejudice the ensuing testimony one way or the other (given the range of attitudes among the *contadini* towards the war of Liberation).<sup>121</sup> Revelli acknowledged their assistance in a list at the beginning of *Il mondo dei vinti* and *L'anello forte* respectively of some thirty-seven *mediatori* with whom he had consulted. *La strada del davai* does not include a list of *mediatori* but refers to assistance given by Renaldi in setting up meetings with survivors from the Russian Front, allowing us to conclude that even at this early stage of his research Revelli made use of the local knowledge of *mediatori* to access witnesses.

Given the community in which he conducted his research, before even setting up a meeting Revelli had to consider such practical points as the lifestyle and routine of rural communities. For example, there was no point trying to make recordings during the summer months when the land fully occupied the *contadini* – even the 90-year-olds would be out in the fields. Rather, the bulk of his research was conducted over the winter months when his sources

<sup>120</sup> Taken from a conversation between the author and Michele Calandri, in the Istituto Storico della Resistenza in Cuneo e Provincia, Cuneo, on 22 July 2005.

<sup>121</sup> *Condizione contadina: Ricerca Intervento Sviluppo*, ed. by Giancarlo Grimaldi (Turin: Stampatori, 1979), p. 46.

had opportunity to talk to him at length. Indeed, winter had historically been the season of storytelling in these communities and the sessions in which Revelli would gather testimonies seem often to have become, like the *veglia* of which the witnesses speak, community occasions accompanied by an abundance of wine and music (*MV*, p. xxx-xxxi).

A second aspect of Revelli's research methodology – one which sets him apart from professional oral historians – is that he conducted all actual interviews himself, no mean feat when one considers that in *Il mondo dei vinti* alone he interviewed 270 individuals in sessions which lasted on average about three hours. Passerini, in contrast, did not conduct all the interviews herself, although she does say that she would at least make a point of meeting each of the narrators. Without wishing to suggest that Passerini lacked commitment to her subject, this difference in practice illustrates the extent to which the *contadini* and their experiences had absorbed Revelli. It is also in keeping with his desire to represent these individuals to the best of his capabilities that he noted as many of the minutiae of their personality and manner of narration as possible. One element which could potentially prove a negative influence on achieving this were the very *mediatori* who had more than likely provided the initial contact. Consciously or not, they inevitably exercised a measure of censorship in their selection of witnesses for Revelli, and, during the actual recording, their presence must have influenced the content and delivery of the testimony.

Revelli's desire to overcome the diffidence of the *contadini* at the initial meeting by the presence of the *mediatori* is typical of the atmosphere he cultivated during the actual interview. He believed that by creating a relaxed and positive environment he would encourage the fullest testimonies possible. In order to create such an environment Revelli thought carefully about where the interview should take place, realising that people were most likely to speak openly if they were in a familiar environment surrounded by familiar objects (*MV*, p. xliii). Consequently, family members or neighbours were often present during the relation of the testimony. This was not necessarily a bad thing, but Revelli does note that on occasion the presence of women and children could adversely influence the content and flow of the interview. For example, if the man of the house was relating his experience of the Russian front, the presence of wife and

children often had the converse effect of that desired by causing the witness to self-censor the details he disclosed, softening and making them perhaps less cruel (*SD*, p. xiii). One other key factor in Revelli's gaining the trust of the *contadini* was his ability to converse with them in Piemontese as he discovered that dialect often proved the key to opening a community to his work.

Established oral historians are divided on the wisdom of creating 'a good rapport' between witness and interviewer and tend to advocate caution against creating too relaxed an atmosphere. 'The interview is a serious undertaking of considerable historical value if approached in the right manner. Ives expressed this necessary caution in terms of maintaining the 'stranger value'; that is, the slight element of distance in interaction between witness and interviewer.<sup>122</sup> Lummis shares Ives' caution and encourages oral historians to conduct their research in an 'atmosphere of professional inquiry' so that the witness appreciates the value of their own testimony to the overall project.<sup>123</sup> As he set up his equipment Revelli would initiate what he refers to as a 'momento di rodaggio' (*AR*, p. ix), in which he would explain to the narrator what he was doing and what he hoped to achieve from the testimonies he was collecting. By explanation and breaking the ice through initiating a dialogue, Revelli's primary aim was to put the narrator at ease. We then learn that he would invite the narrator to give a chronological framework to his account, but did not force this point. Should the witness choose to do so, Revelli was delighted; if he did not, Revelli nevertheless encouraged him to speak freely: 'Parlate alla vostra moda' (*MV*, p. xxx).

This attempt to impose a chronological structure on the narrative is one of the areas in which Revelli departs from the opinion of other Italian oral historians. He believed that the imposition of a chronological framework would assist in communicating the significance of an individual's experience for today's society. Passerini, by contrast, stated categorically that she would never ask anyone to start from the beginning.<sup>124</sup> She believed that by allowing the narrator to recount events in their own order, she would be better able to measure the impact of

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<sup>122</sup> Ives, p. 29.

<sup>123</sup> Lummis, pp. 68-69.

<sup>124</sup> Passerini, *Fascism*, p. 7.

an event on the individual; major events naturally being to the fore in their recounting. Understandably, each of the two approaches produces a different type of account: the former should lead, ideally, to a full and sequential account of a person's experience; the latter, an account that allows one to analyze the impact of particular events and experiences upon the individual and their community.

Despite Revelli's preference for a chronological order, it is evident that the testimonies frequently recount events or experiences, which had an impact throughout the community. For example, the trauma experienced by relatives of the *dispersi* is one such recurring theme. On a different level, I also noticed that the testimonies of many of the women linger on the fear experienced in adolescence as they learned to deal with such taboos as menstruation and sexual intercourse. These are only two examples of instances where significant events dominate a narrative despite the chronological framework into which it has been fitted.

A further area of differentiation between Revelli and many professional oral historians is that of his perception of the value of using questionnaires in recordings. Passerini believed that questionnaires could on occasion prove useful, say if a narrator was having difficulty in getting his account underway.<sup>125</sup> Revelli, however, condemned the practice of using questionnaires believing that it could only result in the minimizing of life experiences: "Diffido dei questionari che tendono alle sintesi, che riducono ad opinione quello che è vita" (*AI*, p. 10). That is not to say that Revelli entirely avoids posing questions to the narrator, only that they must be posed with considerable care. He chooses questions intended to stimulate or provoke further testimony, yet he remains wary of asking too many questions. Both Revelli and Passerini agreed that the aim was to allow the narrator to do the talking with the interviewer intervening only to further the details and accounts provided. Whether Revelli agreed with the methodology of his peers or not, the central issue at stake here is that of his cognizance of the methods of professional oral historians. Despite his claim not to have been influenced by any methodology, he clearly demonstrates, as we shall see, a progression in his own thinking on the practice of his research with regard to how he conducted the interviews, how he influenced the testimonies

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<sup>125</sup> Passerini, *Fascism*, p. 7.

given, and how he treated the witnesses who came forward.

A crucial element in recording a useful interview centres on how the questioning is conducted and is closely allied to the ability of the interviewer to listen. Revelli made a point of never interrupting as the narration progressed (*MI*, p. xxxii): his primary role was to listen, whether what the individual was saying actually related to Revelli's area of interest or not. Central to Revelli's methodology was his belief in the need for mutual respect between interviewer and narrator. He realised the sensitivity of the *contadini*, describing them as having 'certe antenne...certe difese', which immediately sensed whether what they were saying was appreciated or not. Accordingly, he took care to listen attentively without sending out any adverse signals which might upset the flow of the narrative. Implicit in this mutual sense of respect was Revelli's claim that he refused to distort or force the conversation in any way; he had begun by inviting the narrator to speak in his own way and he would allow him to do so (*AI*, p. ix). We will shortly consider whether this desire not to manipulate the conversation still held true by the time Revelli reached the stage of editing the final version for publication.

It was highlighted earlier that *La strada del daval* differed from the other collections in that Revelli made a conscious decision not to use a tape recorder as he felt it might intimidate his witnesses (*JD*, p. ix). It seems, however, that he later realised that the potential of recording equipment outweighed any diffidence it might create. Indeed, in recording testimonies on tape, Revelli came to lay great emphasis on the specific positioning of the microphone. Few oral historians would be cavalier in their attitude to the microphone, yet Revelli focused intimately on its role. He considered that the mutual respect between narrator and interviewer demanded that the microphone be placed prominently in full view, and that such a positioning, far from intimidating the narrator, would cause the microphone to act as a reminder of the responsibility of the narrator's role in testifying. Similarly, Edward Ives impressed upon the interviewer the fundamental importance of the microphone:

In order for the sort of interviewing we are concerned with to be as successful and useful as possible, there is a basic concept you should keep in mind: You are not holding a *dialogue* but always a *midogue*, with the tape recorder itself as the third party. Too much interviewing is done with the dialogue structure in mind, the tape recorder being relegated to a

kind of catch-as-catch-can eavesdropper role.<sup>126</sup>

The tape recorder, still a relatively new invention in the early 1950s, seems at the same time to have brought its own moments of light relief. Revelli recounted how he had spent some time talking to Antonio Giraudo, an 87 year old, about his experiences in the Great War, in America, and so on, when Antonio suddenly asked what was in the 'box' Revelli had in front of him. Revelli explained: 'È un magnetofono, un registratore, una macchina giapponese che ha raccolto i nostri discorsi e li ripete'. To which Antonio promptly responded, "Ma lei sa il giapponese?" (MV, p. xxxiii).

Many of Revelli's witnesses seem to have appreciated the historical value of their testimony and been caught up in the novelty and excitement of the recording:

Sono molti i testimoni che prendono gusto al dialogo, che temono di non aver detto proprio tutto, che mi propongono un altro incontro. Quasi tutti i testimoni mi chiedono di riascoltare le loro voci. Si divertono, si meravigliano della fedeltà della registrazione. Scoprono un mondo. Anna del Preit ascolta, poi mi dice: 'È come aver fermato il tempo, è come vivere il passato un'altra volta'. (MV, p. xxxiv)

Revelli must have been quite delighted that this witness had grasped the aim at the heart of his project: to communicate the experiences of one generation to another, of one sector of society to another, with a snapshot, a moment in time, constructed from the testimonies of the *contadini*.

## The Editing Process

After the long hours involved at the recording stage, Revelli had to invest the same time and more as he prepared the oral testimonies for publication. Here, too, we find innovative aspects in Revelli's approach to the editing and final presentation of this oral evidence. Between recording and publication, Revelli would make three written drafts, a relatively common practice among professionals.<sup>127</sup> The first was a transcription of the recording, the second allowed for considerable editing, and the third was the definitive text. On average Revelli required some three hours of transcription for each hour of recording; quite a speedy transference if Edward Ives estimates are typical of transcription rates. In his manual on the practice of oral history,

<sup>126</sup> Ives, p. 39.

<sup>127</sup> Gary Y. Okihiro, 'Oral History and the Writing of Ethnic History', in Dunaway, pp. 199-214 (p. 208).

Ives stated that 'as a good general estimate it takes about fifteen hours to transcribe an hour of interview. Some people can do it in less (the best time I ever heard of was six hours), some take longer'.<sup>128</sup> Ives' conclusion on this ratio was that it varied depending on the intended scope of the project and the level of accuracy set by the historian:

In preparing to transcribe, one of the first things you should decide is the level of accuracy at which you intend to work. This decision will be largely dictated by the purpose the material will serve in your research. A dialectician will be concerned with pronunciation; a historian probably will not be. A psychologist doing pausal analysis will be interested in the length of every pause and the exact number and location of every 'uh' and 'er'; a folklorist might not require this kind of detail at all.<sup>129</sup>

The relative speed with which Revelli transcribed the recordings raises interesting questions about the level of accuracy desired. It seems reasonable to conclude that Revelli is aiming at a dynamic rather than literal transcription; he wants to communicate the substance of what the *contadini* had to say in a format accessible to the anticipated readership. He has considered the significance of word choice in his translation from Piedmontese to standard Italian, and on occasion the Piedmontese is retained, but it should be remembered that Revelli's approach was that of the amateur determined to make these testimonies known, rather than that of a sociolinguist.

The transcription might have been relatively speedy but it still necessitated a great deal of thought and effort on Revelli's part. He was fully conscious of the possible shortcomings of the testimonies he had recorded. For example, in *La strada del davai* he explained the inclusion of faulty Russian place names. The witnesses' aural memory of the various Russian place names — which might never have been an accurate registration of a word's pronunciation in the first place — became oral as the ex-soldati narrated to Revelli, and then received a lexical value as Revelli transcribed what he had recorded. Such a process, Revelli acknowledged quite willingly, inevitably proves fallible in places, but he rationalized, the choice was either make the recording imperfect as it might be, or lose the opportunity to gather valuable oral evidence of the Italian experience in Russia.

The second draft involved a great deal of 'pruning' (4F, p. x) to produce a readable and

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<sup>128</sup> Ives, p. 77.

<sup>129</sup> Ives, p. 77.



accessible testimony to *contadini* experience rather than an exhaustive compendium. Irma Brovida's testimony in *L'anello forte* is a good example of the extent of this editing. She provided 12 hours of recording which were transcribed onto 157 handwritten pages, and in turn condensed into 17 typewritten pages. Evidently, then, the collections are not simply, or idealistically, unadulterated transcriptions of recordings. Revelli further rearranged the testimonies so that they followed a chronological order. He justified this as essential if the content of the testimonies was to prove easily comparable with the experience of the reader who, Revelli hoped, would thus gain a better understanding of contemporary Italian society.

This is typical of the ruthless editorial stance Revelli adopted as he cut dead-ends, repetitions and such like, primarily in the interests of space, but also to create a more readable narrative. Elements cut included themes he felt had been amply covered elsewhere and judgements he deemed rash or atypical of the rural outlook (*AF*, p. x). He wanted a publication which reflected reality - albeit Revelli's subjective interpretation of reality - as experienced by the *contadini*. Anything with a hint of triumphalism was edited out, as was the following extract used as an illustration in the introduction to *Il mondo dei venti*:

C'è chi mi parla soltanto dei milioni e dei miliardi, c'è chi mi dice che i soldi delle fragole è più prudente depositarli alla Posta che non nelle banche, e poi magari conclude: 'L'abbiamo poi trovato noi l'uranio della Bisalta, vent'anni dopo, con le fragole'.<sup>130</sup>  
I soldi e le fragole: un discorso importante, che non sottovaluto. Ma troppo trionfalistico, troppo monotono, troppo arido. È il dialogo che cerco, un dialogo a livello umano, e non l'ostentazione di una prosperità forse più fittizia che reale. (*MV*, p. xxxvii).

One element Revelli strove to maintain was the dialectal phrases used by the *contadini*. He claimed to have preserved almost all the significant dialectal phrases by adopting a simpler 'metodo parlato' over any more 'ortodosso' method favoured by the professional oral historians (*MV*, p. vii). Such dialectal phrases he explained in a footnote. This paradox between striving for readability and maintaining the originality of the material ran throughout the editing process and Revelli emphasized the care that needed to be taken when making such excisions lest the narrator's personality be 'amputated' (*AF*, p. x). He then stated, 'Ho poi verificato con la

<sup>130</sup> Revelli had earlier related how uranium had been found on these slopes during the 1950s. The prosperity anticipated was short-lived as six of the twenty workers from Peveragno died soon after beginning to work in the mine (*MV*, pp. xxxvi-xxxvii).

testimone la validità del testo ridotto' (AF, p. xi). By discussing the transcription with the witness and receiving their agreement that the text represented what they had said, Revelli believed the written piece to have been converted back to primary, rather than, secondary evidence. Whether any format other than the actual recording could be considered primary evidence is, as Ives illustrated, a debatable point:

A primary document is one behind which there is nothing... By analogy, then, it would appear that the tape recording should be looked on as the primary document and any transcript of it considered secondary [...] In theory, the tape recording is still a secondary document, because *the interview itself* is primary, the tape being no more than the best available record of that interview. But since there is no way yet available of returning to the interview itself, the point is moot.<sup>131</sup>

The third and final draft concluded the transformation from oral medium to published text. Just as the process of transcribing varies among professional oral historians in accord with the transcriber's purpose, so too the published format of oral testimonies varies depending on the scope of the overall project. For example, at one end of the spectrum there are basic transcripts with very little or no comment on the narrative. At the other, there are works such as Passerini's *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class*, which is an historical analysis with excerpts of oral testimony included only as quotations backing up the writer's thesis. Revelli's publications, projected principally as the narrator's words, are to be found somewhere in the middle of this range given that they have been manipulated extensively by Revelli to form a chronological and readable entity.

In *L'anello forte* Revelli discussed with care a complexity faced by professional oral historians: the issue of anonymity and protection of the individual. He explained that normally narrators were given the option of including their name, although on some occasions *he* took the decision to maintain the anonymity of the narrator. He justified this as his editorial responsibility towards the individuals interviewed, should their testimony depart so much from the norm, that their anonymity needed protecting. Accordingly, testimonies which included events of a sensitive nature and which could identify the witness – even if included anonymously – were cut. Calandri gave the example of how he had acted as *mediatore* in a

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<sup>131</sup> Ives, p. 74.

testimony gathered from one of his own female relations who had survived an attempt to commit suicide by jumping off a bridge. Despite the fact that this was without doubt a fascinating testimony to include in the collection, Revelli cut it out because by including it there would have been no way of avoiding the identification of the woman given the smallness of the community and the relative recency of the event (AC).

At the root of Revelli's sense of responsibility for the witnesses' privacy was the recurring theme of 'respect' for the *contadini*: 'Tra le regole che mi impongo quella del rispetto umano è la regola che osservo con più rigore' (AF, p. xi). This stance re-opens the question of Revelli's subjective intervention in the evidence: what constitutes 'normal' in the experience of the *contadini*? Revelli distanced himself from any thought of his being a sociologist, yet he freely made judgements and decisions in the sociological realm. The full complexity of this tension between Revelli's claimed sense of responsibility and the methodology he adopted will become clearer, I believe, when access to the original tapes and transcripts is possible. One example which reinforces the complexity of the issue is the likelihood that Revelli has translated the interviews with the *contadini* from Piemontese to standard Italian – creating a first level of censoring which is compounded by the editing techniques applied in preparing the transcripts and then the manuscript for publication.

### **The Implications of Revelli's Methodology on his Aims**

I would now like to consider the implications of Revelli's approach on his overall aim of giving a voice to the *contadini*. I suggest that three areas potentially encroach on a reliable communication of the accounts of the *contadini*. The first is one characteristic of oral history in general and not just Revelli's work, that is, the transfer of medium from aural to written format. We have already commented on the level of accuracy reflected in the recording-transcription ratio and Revelli's unavoidable interventions. To keep this in perspective, it is worth remembering that traditional history also involves subjective interpretation in its narration.

The final published presentation of the testimonies constitutes a second area of potential difficulty in the achievement of Revelli's aim. If the testimonies are read on their own,

without reference to the introduction, one is left with the impression of a series of compelling, spontaneously supplied monologues. They read as authentic first-hand accounts and the reader is inclined to trust Revelli's handling of the oral evidence implicitly - which allows Revelli to achieve in effect the aim he had in mind. Despite the first collection being stenographed rather than recorded, there is no discernible difference in the final published format as compared with the later collections. It is only after closer analysis that one realizes the extent of Revelli's intervention in the collections. Aside from the editing of individual testimonies, Revelli was obliged to choose which testimonies of the hundreds recorded to include in the final publication. He has clearly published the testimonies he deems most 'worthy' of inclusion, thus censoring the testimonies on a further level.

A third area where Revelli's practice may well encroach on his aims is in the balancing of authenticity and readability. As noted earlier, Revelli tells us that in order to convey the individuality of the testimonies, he has deliberately retained as many dialectal phrases as possible, even at the risk, he says, of making the text less readable. The following excerpt in which Caterina, a Calabrian bride, describes her arrival in Alba, illustrates how Revelli used footnotes to incorporate a translation or explanation for clarification. There is, I believe, only a minimally negative impact on the readability of the text:

Io e Carlo siamo scesi dalla macchina, io avevo una minigonna che mi guardavano tutti. Era nel momento della minigonna, il 1972, l'anno della minigonna no? Li ho terrorizzati tutti. Mi sono fatta criticare subito da tutti, sí sí sí. Tutti vestiti seri, alla moda di qui, ed io in minigonna. Mi hanno criticato sa, anche perché *l'avlu gutte manie*, ero senza le maniche..., ero tutta in prendisole e minigonna con il caldo che faceva.

[...] L'indomani mio suocero mi fa: *'Mi vag a pié la pensinn neh, 't dei cheicos, 't vai al mervà, 't cati 'n tuchetìn de stofa e che te slunghi su cutin?'* Me ne ricordo come se fosse adesso, ricordo ancora le parole esatte.

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\*'Vado a prendere la pensione neh, ti do qualcosa, vai al mercato, ti compri un pezzetto di stoffa e che ti allunghi 'sta gonna'. [As found in Revelli's footnote in *L'anello forte*, p. 424.]

Revelli's commitment to including dialect in this way was based on his belief that its presence enhanced the authenticity of the narrative through a transmission of the phraseology of the witness. True, the inclusion of dialectal phrases lends a regional character to the narrative, but it seems inconsistent to argue that this aspect preserves and enhances the authenticity of the

published record – Revelli has already altered the authenticity of the testimonies significantly in translating them from the Piemontese dialect to standard Italian. The preservation and privileging of certain dialectal phrases over others is further proof of the subjectivity of Revelli's methodology, although their inclusion may well have made the collections seem more authentic to readers.

So, drawing together what we have seen of Revelli's methodology, let's consider some of the resulting implications. Let me emphasize again that Revelli claimed to have been uninfluenced by any pre-existing methodology when he embarked on this work. He claimed to have learned only by his mistakes as he developed a personal tried and tested approach. While this may be the case, it is also clear that if Revelli was not aware of any pre-existing methodology at the outset, he did become aware of it over the years. For example, it would have been difficult for him to refute the use of questionnaires as emphatically as he did had he not had some acquaintance with the methodology of other oral historians.

On a basic level, he saw his role as that of intermediary, and while he was learning as he listened, his ultimate goal was that others too would become better informed of Italy's past through his publishing of the testimonies (*MV*, p. xxvi). This interaction between past and present features throughout the collection and editing process, whether in the witness' narration of his past, Revelli's analysis of the content, or indeed, the reader's understanding of rural communities. Each of these levels of understanding and interaction will differ depending on *when* the collections are read (that is, whether at the time of publication, or now, some thirty and forty years later), and *by whom*: Italian readers having one perception of past and present, and non-native readers another.

Questions raised above as to the full extent of Revelli's intervention, and, consequently, the degree to which he truly transmits the genuine testimonies of the *contadini*, can only be answered when and if access to the original tapes and transcripts is possible. A manipulation of the source material, however, does not necessarily imply a manipulation or denigration of his sense of an 'impegno del dopo'. In spite of these issues, Revelli's work has been recognised as

representative of 'un impegno verso le classi subalterne',<sup>132</sup> 'una delle più ampie indagini'<sup>133</sup> and influential, alongside Ermanno Olmi's film *L'albero degli zoccoli*,<sup>134</sup> in reawakening an interest in rural Italian communities during the 1970s and 1980s.

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<sup>132</sup> Grimaldi, *Condizione contadina*, p. 25.

<sup>133</sup> *Quale storia per quali contadini: Le fonti e gli archivi in Piemonte*, ed. by Giovanni De Luna and Piercarlo Grimaldi (Turin: FrancoAngeli, 1987), p. 93.

<sup>134</sup> Eugenio Corsini, 'Considerazioni sull'interesse attuale verso il mondo contadino', in Grimaldi, pp. 49-48 (49).

## Part II: Revelli's Response to his 'impegno del dopo'

Part II now looks in detail at the key themes in Revelli's writing, including the interaction between 'impegno del dopo', methodology and final publication. Chapter 2 argued that Revelli's sense of an 'impegno del dopo' was based on his experiences in Russia during the winter of 1941-1942. In Chapter 4, we consider this period and its representation in Revelli's publications from 1946 until 2003. *Mai tardi* (1946), *La guerra dei poveri* (1962) and *Le due guerre: Guerra fascista e guerra partigiana* (2003) document Revelli's record of personal experience as an officer with the ARMIR. *La strada del davai* (1966),<sup>135</sup> *L'ultimo fronte* (1971), *Il mondo dei vinti* (1977) and *L'anello forte* (1985) transmit the memories of those previously unable to testify to their experience on the Russian Front. Revelli's autobiographical record is analysed with reference to the editing process he adopts. The content of his personal record is compared with that of the *contadini-soldati*. Throughout, the chapter is considering whether Revelli has compromised the integrity of his 'impegno del dopo' in his handling of the source material.

Chapter 5 then acts as a link between the formative experience of Russia and Revelli's decades of research among the rural communities of Piedmont. If Chapter 4 has considered war on the Russian front, Chapter 5 records conflict at home, and in particular the perspectives of Revelli and the *contadini* on the Resistance during 1943-1945. Revelli's record of this period is important to the present study in several ways. Firstly, it illustrates his view that the Resistance was in a sense a continuation of the war in Russia, and secondly, it is a record, from partisan and *contadini* respectively, of the months in which Revelli came to know the *contadini* on their territory. Above all, Revelli's writing of the war in Italy shows the development of his ideas as he moves from recording military experiences to recounting rural experience.

Revelli's 'impegno del dopo' reaches its fullest extent in his work among the *contadini*. Paying particular attention to gender, Chapter 6 analyzes significant themes in the oral testimonies of the *contadini*. We also consider the extent to which Revelli has manipulated this

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<sup>135</sup> 'davai' is from the Russian which means 'Come on!' 'Keep going!'

representation of rural Piedmont and whether this is consistent with his claimed 'impegno del dopo'.



## Chapter 4

### *Writing Personal Experience of the Russian Front*

This chapter examines Revelli's presentation of personal experience of the Russian front, both his own autobiographical account and his facilitation of the testimony of the *contadini-soldati*. Revelli's editing process is examined to show which elements of his personal record of Russia remain constant over the years, which are later omitted or toned down, and which only emerge later. His transmission of others' memories reveals further aspects of Italian experience on the Russian front. These are presented in collections of letters and collections of oral testimonies. Chapter 4 analyzes the integrity of Revelli's response to his 'impegno del dopo', particularly in his handling of the source materials for these collections, whether autobiographical or those of the *contadini-soldati*.

#### **Revelli's Autobiographical Publications on Russia**

Chapter 2 has already shown us that *Mai tardi* is the key to the events of the nine months from July 1942 until March 1943, which were to have such a profound bearing on the course of Revelli's life. Panfilo, a Cuneo-based publishing house run by an ex-partisan and no longer in existence, originally published *Mai tardi* in 1946.<sup>136</sup> Einaudi published a second edition in 1967 on which subsequent reprints are based.

The original diary was one of seven purchased by Perego, a fellow-officer, so that the friends could take a note of one another's addresses and keep in touch after their deployment (*MT*, p. v). Revelli described the physical style of the original diary as follows:

Il mio diario di Russia ha il formato di un libro tascabile. La copertina è rigida, di cartone marone zigrinato. Nell'interno l'intestazione: 'AGENDA PER L'ANNO 1942 – XX DELL'ERA FASCISTA'. Ne ha viste di tutti i colori, questo mio diario. Eppure non è affatto squalcito. Sembra il breviario di un prete giovane. (*MT*, p. v)

More recently, the journalist Bruno Cavagnola had access to the diary during an interview with Revelli in 1994. He described the form and presentation of the diary as follows:

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<sup>136</sup> Calandri explained during discussion on 22 July 2005 that 'Panfilo' had been the *nom de guerre* of Arturo Felici, and that he specialized in publishing works by ex-partisans from Cuneo and the vicinity.

Revelli si alza e va a prendere dallo scaffale che gli sta alle spalle i suoi diari di Russia: un quaderno, a diario vero e proprio, per i giorni 'prima del disastro', invece per i giorni della ritirata un piccolo plico di fogli 'raccattati non so dove, elenchi della burocrazia militare' e poi foglio più fini, quasi di carta velina. La scrittura è ordinatissima, minuta, fitta, fitta, senza correzioni ('scrivevo di getto, come mi veniva dal cuore'); i fogli sono utilizzati da tutte e due le parti, non ci sono spazi bianchi...<sup>137</sup>

We have seen in Chapter 2 that Revelli had initially only intended to keep a record of the practical, technical aspects of war at the front, given that he expected to be occupied with the action of the conflict rather than its recording: 'Sono un ufficiale effettivo, e finalmente passerò dalla teoria alla pratica' (MT, p. v). Whether he had intended to keep a record or not, he quickly discovered that the diary played another role in the war zone: 'Quanto più mi allontanavo dall'Italia, tanto più mi legavo al diario. Scrivevo perché non volevo dimenticare nulla. Scrivevo con una grafia minutissima, ossessionato dall'idea di risparmiare spazio, ma anche perché ero geloso dei miei stati d'animo e non volevo che fossero leggibili dagli altri' (MT, p. vi).

*Mai tardi* is laid out in dated entries, not necessarily with an entry for each day, but with events recorded in their chronological order. The first entry is dated 21 July 1942 and recounts the embarkation of Revelli's unit for Russia; the final entry is dated 10 March 1943 and ends in a tirade against both the regime responsible for the catastrophic losses of the Italian troops in Russia, and its empty rhetoric. Towards the end of the Panfilo edition, and as the futility of their position became apparent to the Italian troops, Revelli's diary entries become conglomerations of sometimes three or four days at a time. By the time of the diary's republication in 1967, Revelli had sorted through these entries splitting them more into individual dated entries. This gives a clearer chronological framework of events that had been chaotic at the time. As a war diary, Revelli wrote *Mai tardi* and *La guerra dei poveri* in the first person and the present tense, focusing on the immediate situation. He presented *Mai tardi* as rigorously authentic and largely unaltered from the minutely handwritten original:<sup>138</sup>

Questo diario è rigorosamente autentico: le pagine che seguono, non sono altro che la letterale riproduzione delle mie annotazioni di allora così come, giorno per giorno, nel corso della mia diretta esperienza, le andavo fissando sul mio taccuino. Appunto per questo, penso, rispecchiano una visione troppo personale ed a volte non passionata: se fin d'allora fossi

<sup>137</sup> Cavagnola, 'Il cavaliere e la memoria'.

<sup>138</sup> The extent to which Revelli's publication is actually unaltered is considered later in this chapter.

stato severo ed intransigente più con me stesso che verso gli altri, la sincerità di queste note sarebbe più profonda. (Panfilo, p. 14)

*La guerra dei poveri*, published in 1962, can be read as a sequel to *Mai tardi* as it continues the story of Revelli's experience of war, beginning with a re-narration of the retreat from the Don and then going on to recount his experience as a partisan commander. Here, in our focus on Revelli's writing of the experience of the Russian front, we examine only the first two chapters, 'Premessa', and 'La ritirata sul fronte russo'. The remainder of *La guerra dei poveri* is examined in Chapter 5, which deals with Revelli's representation of the period 1943-1945. The format of *La guerra dei poveri* is very similar to that of *Mai tardi*: the text is laid out in dated diary entries, again not necessarily for consecutive days, but narrating events chronologically. The 'Premessa' provides detailed background information of Revelli's childhood and training and the development of his thoughts on the Fascist regime; 'La ritirata sul fronte russo' is a word-for-word re-narration of the retreat from the Don as told in *Mai tardi*.

There are some minor editorial differences, for example, some names represented only by the initial letter in *La guerra dei poveri* are given in full in the 1967 edition of *Mai tardi*; Russian place names are often spelt differently, presumably as Revelli became acquainted with a more reliable or generally accepted format. At the beginning of *La guerra dei poveri* Revelli stated explicitly 'In questa nuova redazione i nomi delle persone e la denominazione dei reparti sono reali' (GP, p. 2); that is, the names in the original 1946 edition were not genuine. For example, Grandi – the commander Revelli had greatest respect for – was referred to as 'Marchi' in the first edition (Panfilo, p. 235). Revelli's only explanation of this decision in the Panfilo edition is inserted as an aside: 'Aggiungo che, per motivi comprensibili, ho sostituito i nomi dei reparti e delle persone' (Panfilo, p. 14). There is no explanation in the 1962 or 1967 editions as to why he decided to include the real names of individuals and military units. Perhaps an awareness that the events narrated were still fresh – and painful – memories for many in 1946, and the fact that some of the characters described would still have been alive, account for Revelli's sensitivity in this respect.

The key distinction between the two texts becomes evident when we move into the later sections on the Resistance. Here Revelli also made use of oral testimony from fellow-

partisans, and information from band diaries and logs. This change in technique allowed him to give a fuller account of events than if it were to remain an entirely personal record based solely on his powers of memory.<sup>139</sup>

We have seen in Chapter 2 that Revelli's final publication, *Le due guerre*, returned to the Russian front and its format is distinct from that of his first two publications. In the introduction to the text, Giorgio Rochat explained that, although Michele Calandri edited the lectures, the text remained largely unaltered from that of the original lectures (DG, p. viii). The book is divided into nine chapters (equivalent, one assumes, to each of the original lectures), beginning with Fascism in the 1920s and concluding with the situation in Cuneo post-Liberation. Of Revelli's three publications on his experience in Russia, *Le due guerre* is understandably the most comprehensive. This account of the Russian front and the partisan war benefits from hindsight, and a breadth of vision, not communicated in the diary format of Revelli's original publications. Further, the discursive and didactic nature of the narrative clarified much of the detail of the earlier accounts, and so enabled a younger generation still within the educational system, to better grasp the significance of the experience already recounted in *Mai tardi* for Revelli and the Italian nation as a whole.

### Facilitating the Testimony of the *contadini-soldati*

During the 1960s and 1970s, Revelli compiled three publications in which he permitted the rural communities to present their experiences of war. Two of these, *La strada del davai* (1966) and *Il mondo dei vinti* (1977), were collections of oral testimonies, and the third, *L'ultimo fronte* (1971), was a collection of correspondence from soldiers at the front – who later perished – to their families. Another collection of oral testimonies on rural life, *L'anello forte* (1985), included discussion of conflict from the perspective of the *contadine*. Each of these publications offered a fresh angle on the rural experience of war.

*La strada del davai* was concerned primarily with the Russian Front but also included memories of other conflicts. It was divided into testimonies from soldiers who had survived the

<sup>139</sup> Revelli has not incorporated oral testimonies or other sources in the section dealing with the retreat from the Russian Front. This is because the chapter constitutes a verbatim repetition of the details recounted in *Mai tardi*, his personal war diary.

retreat from the Don, and soldiers who had been POWs in Russian camps. *Il mondo dei vinti* and *L'anello forte* discussed war more generally – whether on the Russian Front or during the war of Liberation – and within the broader context of rural life experience as a whole. *L'ultimo fronte* offered a unique view on the experience of the ARMIR troops as it comprised correspondence written *in situ* and subjected to the usual military and Fascist strictures on freedom of speech. More significantly, however, these were the last communications families had from soldiers who never returned from the front.

To compile *L'ultimo fronte*, Revelli spent a great deal of time and effort travelling around Cuneo and the surrounding areas gathering the letters from the soldiers' relatives. As he explained in the introduction, he realized that the final letter from each of the men was missing, as there should have been one more letter before the disaster of the Italian retreat. It eventually transpired that the government had requested this last piece of correspondence in order to process claims for war pensions. On locating these letters in archives, Revelli unsuccessfully requested access to them for his work. Shortly after, he discovered to his horror that these letters had been delivered to a paper merchant for recycling. In the end, with a combination of detective work and bartering, Revelli was able to purchase the letters (which had not yet been destroyed), several thousand in total, and so conclude his work (*UH*, p. xxvii-xxviii).

### **Revelli's Aims in his Writing of the Russian Front**

Why should a man such as Revelli, who apparently cherished his privacy, document not once, but repeatedly his experiences in Russia during World War II? *Mai tardi*, *La guerra dei poveri* and *Le due guerre* were published in social and political contexts which varied greatly from one another. These changing circumstances are reflected in Revelli's aims for his writing of the Russian front over the decades. Revelli's aims in publishing *Mai tardi* in 1946 were threefold. He wanted to influence the new Italian society emerging from the war years; he wanted to make known what Italian soldiers had suffered in the name of Fascism; and he wanted to preserve a record of the past, in the belief that it should shape present and future (Panfilo, pp. 13-15).

When *Mai tardi* was first published in 1946, Italy was in a period of huge transition. Ferruccio Parri, the leader of the Partito d'Azione and so representative of the vague 'values of the Resistance',<sup>140</sup> was appointed Prime Minister after the Liberation in May 1945. His government remained in power for only five months, during which it was to perform dismally. It gave 'the constant impression of being unable to cope',<sup>141</sup> and worse, according to Mack Smith, represented a squandered opportunity to make a difference in Italian society.<sup>142</sup>

The free general elections of June 1946 were the first that Revelli and his generation had witnessed and the first to allow female suffrage. The Christian Democrats were returned to power with 35.2% of the vote, and the Assembly began work on a new Constitution. Concurrently, De Gasperi had called a referendum on the monarchy, the results of which were to have a significant impact on the balance of power and the progress of democracy. As Ginsborg outlined, the vote of 54.2% in favour of Italy becoming a republic was not without consequence:

The elimination of royal power was no token victory. The king had previously exercised absolute control over foreign and military affairs, and the House of Savoy had always shown scant respect for democracy and a penchant for those who, like Luigi Pelloux and Mussolini, had wanted to destroy it.<sup>143</sup>

This state of affairs left Revelli and many of his compatriots at a watershed with each of their major points of reference simultaneously removed. In Revelli's case, the army was not the efficient, professional unit he had expected and his career clearly did not lie with the military; Mussolini had been deposed and the king, who had headed Revelli's previously clearly delineated view of the Italian social hierarchy, had been removed (AR1). Thus, 1946 was a year of considerable upheaval politically and socially, with unrest in town and country increasing as the summer gave way to autumn.

The expected political influence of 'the wind from the North' had expired quickly, but the impact of the Resistance years on Italian culture and the literary sphere was to be of a more

<sup>140</sup> Martin Clark, *Modern Italy 1871-1995* (Harlow: Longman, 1984), p. 317.

<sup>141</sup> Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy 1943-1980* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 89.

<sup>142</sup> Denis Mack Smith, *Modern Italy: A Political History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 421.

<sup>143</sup> Ginsborg, p. 99.

enduring nature. After the Liberation, the political and cultural spheres had interacted in an innovative way to ignite an 'esplosione letteraria' described by Calvino as 'prima che un fatto d'arte, un fatto fisiologico, esistenziale, collettivo'.<sup>144</sup> A fresh interpretation of *letteratura impegnata* emerged in which writers adopted 'an intentional, sustained, and vigorous concern with *real* issues, *real* people, *real* facts'.<sup>145</sup> This concern characterized the writing and film of neorealism, viewed by some critics as 'the most noteworthy renovating trend of the post-war period',<sup>146</sup> and in evidence throughout post-war Europe. Calvino identified the 'collective' nature of much neorealist narrative: 'L'essere usciti da un'esperienza - guerra, guerra civile - che non aveva risparmiato nessuno, stabiliva un'immediatezza di comunicazione tra lo scrittore e il suo pubblico'.<sup>147</sup> Thus neorealism in this post-war period described literature born of the desire to depict reality in bearing testimony to the experiences of World War II and the Resistance,<sup>148</sup> and later broadened out to include the social and cultural context of a country under reconstruction.

Revelli was very much aware of the social and political context in which he prepared *Mai tardi* for publication. A new Italian society and government was emerging after two decades of Fascism and several years of conflict at home and abroad. As a military officer, these years had added complexities – in Russia he had fought as an officer in the national army under

<sup>144</sup> Calvino, p. vi.

<sup>145</sup> Sergio Pacifici, *A Guide to Contemporary Italian Literature: From Futurism to Realism* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1962), p. 26. This contrasted with the alienated outlook of pre-war writers who, partly because of the strictures of Fascist censorship, sought to escape reality in formalistic literary expression, lyrical *ermetismo* and narrative aphasia. Benedetto Croce, the great intellectual of 20th century Italy, and Ignazio Silone, writer of two searching political novels, *Fontamara* (1933) and *Pane e vino* (1937), stand out among these writers on account of their engagement with the realities of the human condition and society at the time. See also Pacifici, p. 115; Lucia Re, *Calvino and the Age of Neorealism: Fables of Estrangement* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 51.

<sup>146</sup> E. H. Wilkins, *A History of Italian Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1974), p. 504.

Neorealism is something of a problematic label when applied broadly to post-war writing. It was not definable in terms of a particular school, or region, or as adhering to a definitive manifesto (Re, p. 11), rather, it was a product of a unique social, political and historical context: 'Il "neorealismo" non fu una scuola. (Cerchiamo di dire le cose con esattezza). Fu un insieme di voci, in gran parte periferiche, un molteplice scoperta delle diverse Italie, anche - o specialmente - delle Italie fino allora più inedite per la letteratura. Senza la varietà di Italie sconosciute l'una all'altra - o che si supponevano sconosciute -, senza la varietà dei dialetti e dei gerghi da far lievitare e impastare nella lingua letteraria, non ci sarebbe stato "neorealismo"' (Calvino, p. viii).

Cesare Segre placed the first use of the term 'neorealism' in the 1940's, not in the literary sphere, but in the cinematic world of Visconti (*Ossessione*, 1942) and Rossellini (*Roma città aperta*, 1945; *Paisà*, 1946). See Cesare Segre, *La letteratura italiana del Novecento* (Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, 1998), p. 55.

<sup>147</sup> Calvino, p. 6.

<sup>148</sup> Cairns, p. 82.

Fascism; during the Resistance he had commanded a band of anti-Fascist partisans. Post-war, the emphasis of memoirs and novels was on the heroic actions of the partisans – the Fascist campaigns in Russia, Greece, and Albania for example, were pushed into the background. Fascism was no more and Italians did not want to be reminded of its existence. Revelli was aware of these attitudes but held true to his 'impegno'. He kept his distance from professional writers, but in his writing demonstrates that he shared the neorealist focus on real issues, real people, real facts. He and his generation had been brought up in a Fascist society and he had enlisted as an officer in the national army under Fascism. Most of those who chose to tell their story focused on the Resistance years. Revelli's experiences as part of the ARMIR were the greater influence on his life after Liberation. Without them, he did not know what his decision would have been on 8 September 1943 (GP, pp. 129-130).

The months in Russia might now be part of the Fascist era and so a source of shame for Italians, but to honestly record the past Revelli shows that uncomfortable episodes also need to be addressed. When he came to record the testimonies of the *contadini-soldati*, deliberate silence about Fascism was the norm; Revelli refused to take refuge in silence but presented this Fascist war as the formative period of his experience. In some respects, Revelli's war diary functioned as the voice of the individual breaking this collective silence. He had been motivated by military ideals rather than any political agenda and so felt no shame at his involvement in the Fascist campaign in Russia: 'Sono partito per la Russia perchè ritenevo che, venuta la guerra, un ufficiale effettivo avesse l'obbligo morale e professionale di parteciparvi' (Panfilo, p. 13). Rather than writing a 'comfortable' record of the Resistance with no mention of Russia, Revelli's fixation with discovering and presenting the 'truth' obliged him to present a record that might be uncomfortable, but which reflected the reality of Italy's situation in 1946. In common with many of his Fascist generation, the Resistance was the first opportunity that Revelli had to reject this ideology actively and decisively.

Revelli's move to an anti-Fascist position has a parallel sense of continuity which is seen in his decision to include his account of the retreat from Russia, the Fascist war, in the same volume as his record of anti-Fascist Resistance. The reality for post-war Italy needed to be



addressed as the Fascist campaigns had cost thousands of Italian lives, and still affected the lives of many families in 1946 as they waited for husbands and sons to be released from POW camps. Some waited in vain as their men were long dead. *Mai tardi* addressed the false hopes that had been instilled by the Fascist government following the retreat in 1943 by presenting a record of Revelli's perspective on what had actually happened. In addition to a desire to influence the new society for good by presenting an honest record of the past, Revelli was particularly concerned that the new Italian army should be mindful of the actions and sacrifices of his own generation only a few years previously. It might have been a Fascist war but ultimately these were young Italians fighting, they thought, in the interests of their country.

Similarly, Revelli's aim of communicating what Italy's soldiers had suffered was very much in the spirit of neorealism. His commitment to real people and the narration of real facts later drove him to facilitate the telling of the ordinary soldier's experience of war. In 1946, *Mai tardi* the narrated events had transpired only three years earlier. Circumstances had changed quickly in the interim with the fall of Fascism and the Resistance and the Russian front had not been addressed. Revelli had attempted to publish his diary prior to 1946 to rectify this lack, but it was 1946 before he was successful.<sup>149</sup>

Beyond these two aims – which were closely connected to the contemporary situation – Revelli wanted to remember and to recount his memories (Panfilo, p. 14). Revelli saw such preservation as an end in itself and integral to his role of witness. The evidence presented here would allow future generations to judge the behaviour of their forebears, and understand better the society in which they lived. The neorealist trend of the time incorporated 'an uncanny ability to confront [...] complex human situations'.<sup>150</sup> This meant that, in addition to a focus on realistic narrative, many of the works of the post-war years were infused with a didactic element. Revelli had chosen not to shy away from the uncomfortable elements of the past. In common with the neorealist writers and producers, Revelli sought, firstly, to stimulate a degree of

<sup>149</sup> 'Avrei voluto che il mio diario apparisse fin dal periodo della lotta clandestina, ma la mia intensa attività partigiana e le gravi mutilazioni riportate durante la stessa, impedirono che i miei appunti giungessero, fin d'allora, a portare un modesto contributo alla chiarificazione delle idee' (Panfilo, pp. 14-15).

<sup>150</sup> Pacifici, p. 27.

understanding of the past both on a personal and national level and, secondly, to impart a 'moral lesson' in the hope that society might learn from its experiences.<sup>151</sup> Neorealism was of particular relevance to Revelli's oeuvre on account of its close association with the oral tradition of Italian culture, as 'it told stories about ordinary people, and it told them in a language accessible to all'.<sup>152</sup>

Whereas the 1946 edition had been specific as to Revelli's aims in publication, the second edition of *Mai tardi* in 1967 did not have an introduction or a preface. This may be because he felt at that point that there was not the same immediacy in the link between the experiences his diary recounts and current affairs of the day. By 1967, other diaries of the Russian front had been published<sup>153</sup> and these events were better known in Italy. In the interim, *La guerra dei poveri* had been published in 1962, again with no explicit statement of his aims. Revelli nonetheless includes the Einaudi edition of *Mai tardi* and *La guerra dei poveri* in later discussion of his aims in writing of the Russian front. The introduction to the 1989 edition of *Mai tardi* focused only on his desire not to forget, and did not include the preface of 1946. In Italy, 1962 marked the beginning of an economic downturn after the boom of the late 1950s, and ushered in a fresh period of political and social change, which challenged both its supporting infrastructure, and the established frameworks of authority, from the family unit to the State itself.<sup>154</sup> If *Mai tardi* had been published in an atmosphere of post-war optimism and hope, *La guerra dei poveri* was published as Italy emerged from an economic boom to face uncharted political and social territory.

Interviews in later decades give fresh insight to Revelli's aims in writing and re-writing the Russian front. Speaking to Guido Davico Bonino in 1997 Revelli still transmitted the original urgency with which he felt he had to keep the diary: 'Ho cominciato a scrivere perché

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<sup>151</sup> Pacifici, p. 126.

<sup>152</sup> Re, p. 37.

<sup>153</sup> Eugenio Corti, *I più non ritornano: diari di ventotto giorni in una sacca sul fronte russo* (inverno 1942-43), 4th edn (Milan: Garzanti, 1947); Giovanni Messe, *La guerra al fronte russo. Il Corpo di spedizione italiano (C.S.I.R.)* (Milan, Rizzoli, 1947); Mario Rigoni Stern, *Il sergente nella neve* (Turin: Einaudi, 1953); Cristoforo Mosconi Negri, *I lunghi fuochi: Ricordi della guerra di Russia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1956).

<sup>154</sup> Clark, p. 372.

volevo ad ogni costo raccontare la mia esperienza di alpino in Russia'.<sup>155</sup> A year later Revelli was quoted in *L'indice dei libri del mese* where he elaborated further on the personal impact of his experiences in Russia and how this had shaped his work over the years:

Se non avessi tenuto quel diario, non avrei pubblicato il mio primo libro e non ne avrei scritti altri. Al fondo della mia storia c'è sempre quello: l'esperienza di Russia, che mi ha segnato per sempre.[...]Ho pubblicato il diario per dire la mia verità e per aiutare quelli che non sapevano. Tutti i libri che sono seguiti sono stati altre tante tappe del mio bisogno di svelare la verità.<sup>156</sup>

This dual aim of communicating his (subjective) truth and helping others understand these events is restated by Revelli on many occasions. It was developed further in *L'ultimo fronte*, the collection of letters from the *dispersi*, published in 1971. Over the years, he is conscious that his writing is his record of events, but makes no apology for its subjectivity. He was learning from his experiences and he believed that he could help others learn from their narration. Explanation of his aims given more recently certainly benefits from hindsight and a broader view of events. Typically, interviews of later decades retained the interplay of personal and public first outlined in 1946 as Revelli acknowledged his own ignorance at the time and his commitment to address public ignorance of its past:

Allora, cinquantadue anni fa mentre stavo partendo con la mia tradotta verso la Russia, avevo percepito quanto fosse immensa la mia ignoranza, andavo ad ammazzare e non sapevo il perché. L'unica mia salvezza, mi dissi, è cercare di capire e per non dimenticare niente mi sono comprato questo diario: ho segnato tutto, non dovevo dimenticare nulla di quell'esperienza che stavo iniziando nella notte del 21 luglio 1942. [...]Tutte le mie ricerche le ho messe insieme innanzitutto per me, per rispondere ad una mia esigenza personale di capire. Certo c'è sempre stata la speranza che questa mia fatica poi servisse ad altri.<sup>157</sup>

It was to be four decades before Revelli returned to write autobiographically about the events which had occasioned his first book, in a political and social environment quite different from that of 1946 or even 1962. By 2003, when *Le due guerre* was published, Italy had changed dramatically. During the intervening years, Italy had been subjected to something of a rollercoaster ride. Economically, the 'miracle' years of the 1950s and 1960s were followed by a

<sup>155</sup> Guido Davico Bonino, 'Memorie di guerra e pace, per non dimenticare', *La Stampa*, 7 May 1997, Società e Cultura, p. 25.

<sup>156</sup> Nuto Revelli, 'Al fondo della mia storia', *L'indice dei Libri del Mese*, 11 (1998), p. 10.

<sup>157</sup> Cavagnola, 03.10.94

slump in the 1970s, before making a recovery in the mid-1980s. Politically, too, these four decades had been turbulent with Italy often subject to European-wide swells of opinion and demonstrations, such as the student riots in 1968, or internal tension and terrorism as seen in the *anni di piombo* of the late 1960s until the early 1980s. Global events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War in 1989 had significant repercussions for domestic politics in Italy, 'robbing' the Communist Party 'of its doctrinal and international legitimacy and [fostering] its transformation into a social-democratic party'.<sup>158</sup> According to Ginsborg, party government throughout the 1980s had been 'degraded' because of 'its widespread practice of corruption, its incapacity to carry through effective medium-range measures, [and] its overriding smugness and arrogance'.<sup>159</sup> These issues came to a head soon after the general election of 1992 with the 'Mani puliti' investigation of allegations of corruption and Mafia collusion at the highest levels in Italian politics.

Publishing *Le due guerre* in 2003, Revelli showed that this representation of Russia and the partisan war was motivated by two factors: that he was a witness to these events, and so had a duty to testify (*DG*, p. xi); and his belief in each new generation (*DG*, p. 191). Revelli's aims for his readership were thus the same as those he had in mind for the students who had attended the original lectures. He wanted them to understand how life had been during the Fascist period and the Resistance; he wanted to make their country's history relevant to them; and he wanted also to speak on behalf of the 'gente semplice', the soldiers whose accounts and experiences were so often discounted by the military hierarchy, Italian society and culture (*DG*, pp. xi-xv). Revelli had set out with particular aims in mind and, over time, he came to realise the broader potential of his work on Russia; subsequent interviews and publications did at times give the impression that these aspects had been part of his original aims.

Over the years that Revelli wrote of his personal experience of Russia, his aim consistently was to communicate the past. Immediately after the war, this was necessary to address the ignorance of his contemporaries and the deception of the recently ousted Fascist

<sup>158</sup> *Recent Social Trends in Italy 1960-1995*, ed. by Alberto Martinelli and others (Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 1999), p. xv.

<sup>159</sup> Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and its Discontents* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 251.

government. Later, the communication of the Russian front was necessary as a new generation of Italians were growing up in ignorance of their country's past. According to Revelli, the young had to know because the past is relevant to the present. Beyond this, Revelli gives no inclination that his potential readers influenced his writing. Indeed, as Calandri argued Revelli's focus was the *process* of a preservation and communication of the past (be it Russia or life in rural Piedmont), rather than attempting to anticipate his readership (40).

### The 'impegno' behind representing the rural soldier's experience of war

Revelli's aim in communicating the war memories of the *contadini-soldati* in *La strada del davai* was very simple: 'La mia ambizione diventò una sola: che finalmente anche il soldato "scrivesse" la sua guerra' (SD, p. ix). There are a number of reasons why Revelli should have had this ambition. Firstly, the lack of a record of the experience of the ordinary soldier constituted a gap in military historiography. We have noted that Revelli presented himself as an amateur historian and writer. Nonetheless, his introduction to *La strada del davai* succinctly outlines the weaknesses of military histories in the 1960s: 'La bibliografia della seconda guerra mondiale comprende centinaia di diari, racconti, memorie. Ma come sempre, sono i cosiddetti "colti" che hanno scritto anche per gli "umili", per i "non colti"' (SD, p. ix). As Revelli saw it, there was as yet no first-hand account of the ordinary rural soldier's experience of war. He wanted to rectify this by facilitating the communication of their memories in their own words. In addition, the *contadini* were aware that they had a different attitude to each of the World Wars. While the veterans of World War I never stopped talking of their experiences, many of those who fought during World War II had never spoken of what they had endured until they opened up to Revelli (SD, p. xi). After the Liberation there was generally enormous reticence in admitting any involvement in Fascism – Revelli was very conscious of it in the 'silences' of the *contadini* he interviewed. Reluctance to speak about the war years at all was attributed by Revelli, at least in part, to psychological scars which remained raw, even some twenty years later when he conducted his research (SD, p. xiii).

Communicating the experience of the *contadini-soldati* was no light undertaking, which brings us to a second reason why Revelli should have had such an ambition: he had initiated and then cultivated strong relationships with his men on the Russian front. We saw in Chapter 2 the longevity of this connection as Revelli became acquainted with the families and communities of the *contadini-soldati* during the Resistance and after the Liberation. Revelli felt bound, in particular, to the relatives of the *dispersi* (MT, p. 179). During a conversation with Revelli in 2001, he explained to me: 'Ho molto affetto per i contadini e soprattutto per i dispersi visto che anch'io ne potevo essere uno – era così facile perdersi nella notte' (AR1). When I spoke to him the following year, he elaborated on the significance of this 'affetto', crediting it with forming at least part of the motivation for his initial publication: 'Ho cominciato a mettere in ordine il mio diario, pubblicato nel 1946 affinché i parenti dei dispersi sapessero quello che era successo' (AR2). *L'ultimo fronte* was a more direct product of this 'affetto'.

Our existing definition of the *dispersi* as those who did not return from the war, men who remained unaccounted for, is elaborated on by Petacco in *L'armata scomparsa* where he explained further its significance within the context of the ARMIR:

Nel dopoguerra, 'disperso in Russia' diventerà un luogo comune per indicare uno scomparso senza speranza di essere ritrovato. Molti di questi dispersi rimasero in realtà uccisi sul campo senza possibilità di accertamento. Altri morirono nei lager sovietici. Pochi tornarono. I più costituiranno un esercito di fantasmi che marcerà a lungo nell'immaginazione e nella speranza delle mogli, dei genitori, dei figli mentre le fotografie ingiallivano e gli anni prescritti per la 'morte presunta' trascorrevano dolorosamente.<sup>160</sup>

Here, Petacco also shed light on why Revelli should refer to the *dispersi* as 'l'eredità più crudele di ogni guerra'. *Mai tardi* recorded how many soldiers came to be abandoned, as nobody paid any attention when, after sitting down in the snow, they were unable to go any further and eventually succumbed to the freezing temperatures (MT, p. 139). Others were deliberately left behind, and for these Revelli clearly felt a sense of responsibility:

Abbiamo un'ora di tempo per lasciare il kolkhoz, per abbandonare Podgornoje: poi sarà tardi. I sani seguano il reparto, i congelati cerchino un automezzo. Per gli ubriachi non c'è salvezza.

<sup>160</sup> Arrigo Petacco, *L'armata scomparsa: l'avventura degli italiani in Russia* (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), p. 135.

[...] Torno per l'ultima volta nel capannone, giro, guardo uno ad uno gli alpini che abbandonano, ne conto quindici. Alcuni comprendono, mi guardano con le lacrime negli occhi: gli altri ronfano. (MT, p. 127)<sup>161</sup>

Later, in *Le due guerre*, Revelli gave an overview of the retreat and focused particularly on this almost casual abandonment of soldiers to their fate as everyone thought only of their own salvation: 'Ben presto mi abituerò a tutto, e non "vedrò" più i sfiniti, i congelati, gli assiderati, che come tanti paracarri segneranno il nostro cammino lungo la pista della ritirata' (DG, p. 117). At the end of the campaign, 30,000 of the Corpo d'Armata Alpino (DG, p. 112), and about 80 per cent of Revelli's company (MT, p. 198), were missing.

The strength of Revelli's relationship with the *contadini-soldati* and the esteem in which he was held by the rural communities is seen in his ever being able to conduct the research for *L'ultimo fronte*. To compile the book, he needed access to the correspondence held by the families of the *dispersi* – that it was granted proves the level of trust Revelli had built up. Teresa Tomatis, a mother of two boys who had never returned from Russia told Revelli: 'Non ci sono soldi che paghino queste lettere, nel consegnarle a lei è un po' come se mi staccassi un'altra volta dai miei figli' (UF, p. xxviii).

As Revelli got to know the men he commanded, he realized that they had an entirely different perspective on the war and military life. He tells us in *Il mondo dei vinti* that he wanted to explore the past because of its relationship to the present. Even from *Mai tardi*, Revelli has shown his natural curiosity and desire to understand more, no matter the subject. As a consequence he becomes increasingly fascinated with the perspective of his *alpini*. Revelli and his men held much of the Russian front as common experience. There were also points at which their experience diverged, not least their background and consequent perspective. He had been an officer, and had chosen to pursue a military career; fighting on the Russian front was part of his duty and job description. The *contadini-soldati* had been conscripted, taken away from

<sup>161</sup> Similar desperate scenes featured in Corti's diary, including one instance in which he blatantly disobeyed a major's order and went back for those who had been left helpless in the wake of the retreating column (Corti, pp. 103-104). Despite his exultation at having saved some lives, the pain of leaving others to perish was unavoidable: 'Appresi inoltre che molti feriti a stento capaci di reggersi, avevano disperatamente cercato di seguire la colonna, cosicché all'uscita da Arbusov il percorso era, per un chilometro o due, disseminato di disgraziati non più in grado di proseguire. Voi che leggete queste pagine, sapete cosa significhi ciò?' (Corti, p. 105).

their true priority - their land - and deployed to fight in a country they could not locate, and a war they did not understand:

Sono sempre lì a implorare 'licenze agricole'. [...] Mi rendo conto che la loro 'patria' è la casa, e basta. Subiscono la vita militare e odiano la guerra. Sanno che dalla guerra hanno tutto da perdere e nulla da guadagnare. Non sono dei volontari. Sono dei poveri cristi che vivono la naja imprecando, bestemmiando. Sono dei contadini in divisa, ecco tutto. (DG, p. 71)

One only has to think of two well-known literary representations of peasants and war to see that rural communities were perceived as marginalized and detached from the outside world in this area too.<sup>162</sup> For example, in Verga's *I Malavoglia*, two soldiers bring news to Aci Trezza that they have lost a great sea battle at Lissa. Gradually the realisation dawns that the ship involved, the *Re d'Italia* was that of Luca Malavoglia.<sup>163</sup> Eventually padron 'Ntoni and la Longa go to Catania in search of news and are met by the harbour master's astounded question: "Son più di quaranta giorni. [...] Fu a Lissa, che non lo sapevate ancora?"<sup>164</sup> Carlo Levi describes his own experience of this detached rural outlook in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*:

Di discorsi, in quei giorni, se ne sentivano molti, e don Luigino si affacciava a convocare le sue adunate. Era ormai ottobre, le nostre truppe passavano il Mareb, la guerra d'Abissinia era cominciata. Popolo italiano, in piedi! [...] Questa guerra non interessava i contadini.<sup>165</sup>

Revelli seemed to have one final aim in facilitating the war memories of the *contadini-soldati*. His questioning in the oral testimonies makes it clear that he wanted to assess the on-going implications of conflict and the extent to which it had saturated their memories and outlook.<sup>166</sup> He and the soldiers he interviewed shared an obsession with war: 'Il contadino ha la guerra stampata nel cervello [...] Ma io non devo fare il furbo, anch'io ho la guerra piantata nel mio cervello'.<sup>167</sup> When he began working on *Il mondo dei vinti* and *L'anello forte*, Revelli thought he had left the theme of war behind. He quickly discovered that, just as the war had left an indelible

<sup>162</sup> See further discussion in Chapter 6.

<sup>163</sup> Giovanni Verga, *I Malavoglia* (Milan: BUR, 2004), p. 252.

<sup>164</sup> Verga, p. 258.

<sup>165</sup> Carlo Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Turin: Einaudi, (1945) 1990), p. 116.

<sup>166</sup> See Chapter 3 for further discussion.

<sup>167</sup> Nuto Revelli, 'Autobiografia di un impegno', in Grimaldi, p. 44.



impression on his own personality, so too the *contadini* could not help but recount their experience of conflict and its legacy.

## Writing the Experience of the Russian Front

As we have seen, Revelli's writing on the Russian front had a range of aims. We turn now to concentrate on what Revelli chose to recount in his narratives. His records of the Russian front certainly communicated the events of the campaign and the eventual retreat, but Revelli's focus centred on the human element of the drama: people and their words and deeds, their interactions with one another, their triumphs and failings. We examine firstly the constant, or consistently important, elements in Revelli's writing of the Russian front from 1946-2003. We then discuss the elements which dominated his personal accounts but are toned down or missing from *Le due guerre*, Revelli's last autobiographical publication on Russia. Finally, we consider elements which gradually emerged or became more developed with the passage of time.

Samuel Hynes's study on war narratives, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* provides useful comparison with Revelli's writing.<sup>168</sup> The two hold a certain common ground, despite the lack of any Italian dimension to Hynes's work: Hynes writes as an ex-soldier, and shares Revelli's interest in hearing war narrated by the lower-ranking troops. In Chapter 2 we have already seen the duality present in Revelli's work from his first publication; the individual and collective run side-by-side. Hynes presents this same trait in his own handling of war memories. *The Soldiers' Tale*, the title of his study, is carefully explained as follows to show that a complete record of war is impossible to achieve – even with the interaction of individual and collective accounts:

In the title of this book, *Soldiers'* is plural and *Tale* is singular. I have imagined that if all the personal recollections of the soldiers of the world's wars were gathered together, they would tell one huge story of men at war – changing, as armies and battlefields changed, but still a whole, coherent story. Such an entire tale can never exist: the men who could tell it are mostly dead, and while they lived they were inarticulate, or unlettered, or simply distracted by life, so that their wars were left unrecorded.<sup>169</sup>

<sup>168</sup> Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (London: Pimlico, 1998).

<sup>169</sup> Hynes, pp. xii-xiii.

War narratives are an unusual body of literature in that the actual narrative is not bound by any particular format. For example, Revelli wrote *Mai tardi* in the format of a diary, as did Eugenio Corti in *I più non ritornano* (1947). Mario Rigoni Stern wrote his account of Russia, *Il sergente nella neve* (1953), much more discursively, with descriptions which would not be out of place in a novel. It is also a predominantly chronological narration of experience. Guy Sajer, a soldier from Alsace and a volunteer in the German army recounted his experience on the Russian front in *The Forgotten Soldier* (1967).<sup>170</sup> In doing so, he adopted much more the style of a military thriller, writing in colloquial, often barrack-style language with the emphasis on creating dramatic effect – reminiscent of war narratives from more recent conflicts, such as *Chickenhawk*, Robert Mason's account of the conflict in Vietnam.<sup>171</sup>

Hynes identified war narratives such as those above as 'traditionless' stand-alone accounts of a particular conflict from a particular standpoint, narrated in the way which seemed right to the man who experienced these events, but unaccountable to any particular literary genre.<sup>172</sup> Even if we accept that war narratives remain detached from any particular literary genre, we need to acknowledge the presence of particular tropes. For example, the idea of war as isolation, memories of home at the front, the depiction of violence, even the idea of what one is fighting for, are common to representations of war from many eras and genres, classical or modern, fact or fiction.<sup>173</sup> Reading *Mai tardi* and *La guerra dei poveri*, we see that Revelli focused solely on *his* view of *his* war, and suggested that his writing initially occurred almost by chance and without reference to any other record of these events. Hynes' idea that 'war writing

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<sup>170</sup> Guy Sajer, *The Forgotten Soldier* (London: Cassell, 2001); first published in France as *Le Soldat Oublié* (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1967). A certain amount of controversy surrounds this text following the publishing by Edwin L. Kennedy, Jr. of the article 'The Forgotten Soldier: Fiction or Fact?' *Army History*, no. 22 (Spring 1992): 23-25. Kennedy argues that *The Forgotten Soldier* amounts to a 'carefully written novel that cleverly disguises [itself] as a factual account'; that is Sajer has taken available historical evidence and created a fictional factual account. Proponents of Kennedy's view are in the minority. Both sides of the debate are presented in two articles by Louis Brown and Douglas E. Nash, available online at <http://members.shaw.ca/grossdeutschland/sajer.htm>

I have chosen to use this text as it offers contrasts with Revelli's *Mai tardi* and *La strada del davai* in terms of perspective, style and language. Sajer is dealing with the same period as Revelli but he writes as a soldier rather than an officer – in the German ranks rather than those of a relatively minor ally such as Italy – and the character of his text is in stark contrast to that of Revelli's diarized account.

<sup>171</sup> Robert Mason, *Chickenhawk* (London: Penguin, 1984).

<sup>172</sup> Hynes, pp. 4-5.

<sup>173</sup> Homer, *Iliad*; Virgil, *Aeneid*.

[...] is a genre without a tradition to the men who write it', is helpful as it highlights that writers of such narratives – including Revelli – were focused on producing a record of their experiences, rather than making them conform to a well-defined literary genre.<sup>174</sup>

The four works mentioned above proved particularly useful as points of comparison. Rigoni Stern was a friend of Revelli's from a similar Piedmontese background (*UF*, p. xxi), yet his handling of the Russian front is much more lyrical in character. Corti offers his record in a similar format to that of Revelli but from a rather different standpoint: Corti's religious beliefs pervade his diary and his presentation of events. Revelli, by contrast, demonstrates no religious belief or affinity, even in the most desperate of situations. Sajer's narrative is arguably the most engaging in the sense that it draws the reader with no experience of war into the heart of the action and the full spectrum of emotions evoked. Revelli's account is certainly not without passion, but it is a passion born of Revelli's sense of right and justice, rather than one which gives access to his most personal thoughts and reactions.

Two military histories have been of particular help, Arrigo Petacco's *L'armata scomparsa* and Giorgio Rochat's *Ufficiali e soldati*.<sup>175</sup> There are numerous studies of Operation Barbarossa and the Axis campaign in the East, but there are very few which outline in any detail the role of the Armata Italiana in Russia, numbered among the 'second-rate armies' of Hitler's weaker allies.<sup>176</sup>

### Elements constant in writing the Russian Front

Six aspects of Revelli's writing about the Russian front have their genesis in *Mai tardi* and then feature consistently in ensuing publications. In order of prominence, these are: 1) Revelli's antipathy towards the Germans; 2) Revelli's commitment to establishing the truth; 3) the

<sup>174</sup> Hynes, pp. 4-5.

<sup>175</sup> Giorgio Rochat is a civilian specialist in military history and a friend of Nuto Revelli. He wrote the preface to Nuto Revelli's *La due guerre*.

<sup>176</sup> Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War 1941-1945* (London: Hodder Education, 2005), pp. 165. On p. 164, Mawdsley points out that while Italy might have been a minor ally, at the end of 1941 Hitler had 'put personal pressure on the leaders in Bucharest, Rome, and Budapest to make a much greater contribution to the coming campaign', Operation BARBAROSSA. Either way, the commitment of more Italian troops to Russia through an expansion of the Italian 8<sup>th</sup> Army was costly to the Italian efforts in North Africa, and ultimately in the vast numbers of Italian dead – according to Mawdsley, almost 73,000 between those who died in action and those who died in Russian POW camps (p. 165).

endemic failings of regime and military alike; 4) the role of the king; 5) Revelli's own political maturation; and 6) the fate of the *dispersi*. This final aspect is evident in each of Revelli's texts on the Russian front, and in increasing measure as time went by: Revelli devoted *L'ultimo fronte* entirely to the correspondence of these men who never returned from the front. This issue is discussed later in Chapter 4 as part of Revelli's representation of other men's experience of war on the Russian front.

### ***Revelli's antipathy towards the Germans***

As a keen young recruit, we saw that Revelli was delighted to be likened to a German soldier. *Mai tardi* shows that this respect and adulation was rapidly replaced with a bitter hatred for his 'allies'. According to *La guerra dei poveri* the turning point came in conjunction with his arrival at the front:

Subito, appena accampati in un grande bosco, imparammo a temere i partigiani, a odiare i tedeschi.

Noi eravamo molto poveri. Noi avevamo i muli, i tedeschi avevano i carri armati. Eravamo mal vestiti e mal nutriti. I tedeschi, non mancavano di nulla e ci disprezzavano. (GP, p. 14)

Here, Revelli's affirms a growing hatred for the Germans due to their poor treatment of the Italians, and in particular the Germans' arrogant attitude towards the Italian forces. Another anecdote in the 1967 edition of *Mai tardi* suggests that even en route to the front he was beginning to see the Germans in a new and harsher light: 'Un soldato tedesco, un bestione tedesco, lancia una pietra contro un gruppo di ragazzini ebrei. "Juden kaput", urla, e si porta una mano alla testa per dirci che li voleva colpirli' (MT, p. 7). This is one of several instances in which anecdotes or details not present in the original Panfilo edition were added (as here), or enhanced in the 1967 edition, to create a more emotive narrative – in keeping with his anti-German mindset. By the time of these revisions, Europe was much more aware of Nazi atrocities during World War II. Accordingly, an anecdote that mentioned German mistreatment of the Jews would tap into existing prejudices and emotions of Revelli's readers, and so give more strength to Revelli's own anti-German feelings.

Initially, his antipathy had seemed no more than that of the average Italian soldier who regarded the perceived greater seriousness of the Germans with ambivalence:

Arrivano le prime circolari degli alti comandi. Un foglio 'segretissimo' parla di spie tedesche e spie italiane infiltrate tra i russi. In previsione che queste spie un giorno o l'altro rientrino alle nostre linee, tutti i reparti devono conoscere le 'parole d'ordine': le spie tedesche grideranno 'Nulli devà', le spie italiane 'Olga'... Nel commentare questa favola sorridiamo amaramente: la 'parola d'ordine' italiana è un po' troppo frivola e suona falsa, ancora una volta abbiamo voluto scimmiettare i tedeschi. (MT, p. 33)

Just over a month later, getting the better of the Germans was no longer amusing; instead of mocking their excessive order, Revelli cursed them: 'Con l'animo pieno di disperazione maledico i tedeschi, tutti i tedeschi: mi auguro che la Germania perda la guerra, questa maledetta guerra. Sono prepotenti i tedeschi, tutte balle dei giornali il cameratismo. Non ci stimano, ci trattano come servi...' (MT, p. 67). 'Prepotenti', then, becomes the adjective used almost invariably of the Germans throughout the diaries and on into *Le due guerre*. In the respite after breaking out of the Russians encirclement of their positions, Revelli's animosity towards the Germans was cemented into a determined hatred: 'È necessaria, adesso, una sosta: per stendere i nervi, per guardare ancora una volta alle nostre spalle. Poi, tenteremo di dimenticare per sempre tutto, tutto, tutto, fuorché una cosa: di odiare i tedeschi' (MT, p. 191).<sup>177</sup>

From this point on Revelli's animosity towards the Germans was unrestrained, and he described them variously as 'cani' (MT, p. 193), 'bestie' (MT, p. 194) and 'porci' (MT, p. 195). Once the troops had reached a measure of safety, the reflection began. One of the rare extracts of direct speech in *Mai tardi* quotes the forceful words of Zaccardo, one of the superiors for whom Revelli actually held any respect: "È un insulto per i nostri morti parlare ancora di alleanza con i tedeschi: dopo la ritirata i tedeschi sono nostri nemici, più che nella guerra '15" (MT, p. 201). Revelli made it clear that Zaccardo's words might as well have been his own, so heartily did he endorse them: 'Parla da galantuomo [...] Parole semplici, che commuovono. Zaccardo è un coraggioso, con gli alpini è sempre sincero, da molto tempo voleva parlare così' (MT, p. 201).

<sup>177</sup> Castellani emphasizes – forcefully, if rather stereotypically – the importance of another encounter in fuelling Revelli's antipathy prior to this event: 'Dal giorno in cui un sottufficiale "kruko", su un treno, si comporta con lui, ferito ed invalido, come solo i soldati di Hitler sapevano comportarsi, Revelli capisce qual'è il nemico suo e di ogni uomo onesto: il tedesco' (Panfilo, p. 6).

See Chapter 6 for discussion of possibility of reconciliation between Revelli and the Germans.

But what lay behind this individual and national antipathy towards the Germans? There were several possible reasons. Petacco presents a contrasting view of relations between Hitler and Mussolini during Operation Barbarossa to that of Mawdsley. He argues that Hitler did not want Mussolini to send troops to participate in Operation Barbarossa,<sup>178</sup> but Mussolini persisted on the basis that if he did not get involved with the operation, at its conclusion, the disparity between German and Italian prestige would be too great to overcome.<sup>179</sup> Hitler's reluctance to include the Italians in the campaign seems to have filtered down through the ranks as Revelli recorded at first-hand the feeling of being unwanted: 'In tutti c'è pessimismo, quasi un senso di disagio: sentiamo di essere degli intrusi, sia nei confronti dei russi che dei tedeschi' (*MT*, p. 11). Secondly, the Germans' apparently unending arrogance towards their allies engendered a good deal of antipathy, recorded by Revelli and in other war diaries such as that of Corti. So deep-seated was this manifest hatred of the Germans that it pervaded Revelli's writing for the next sixty years.

A third aspect which influenced attitudes between Germans and Italians was the fact that Italians seemed to have been drawn into, or left to resolve, incidents of German brutality. Revelli recounted the German brutality perpetrated against an innocent Russian civilian (*MT*, pp. 17-18); Corti recorded other instances of incredible callousness on the part of the Germans. Corti, however, did not shirk from implicating Italian soldiers in such incidents, even through their apathy. One of the most shocking incidents recounted how a German soldier emptied a house of its occupants, shot them all apart from the most attractive girl, whom he then took back into the house and brutally raped, while an Italian sat in the corner, intent on keeping warm, regardless of what was going on around him.<sup>180</sup> Revelli absolved the Italians of involvement in war crimes (whether this was by deliberate design is unclear) by presenting the atrocities as perpetrated wholly by the Germans. We shall see that when it came to dealing with atrocities committed during the Resistance, Revelli confronted the reality of the situation, acknowledging that such crimes did occur, but distancing his own partisan band from any

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<sup>178</sup> Petacco, p. 10.

<sup>179</sup> Petacco, p. 13.

<sup>180</sup> Corti, p. 109.

sanctioning of it. In the Russian context, Petacco distanced Italian troops from such brutality, portraying them as a restraining influence, although he did acknowledge that they were not completely innocent: 'Gli italiani si imbattono spesso in episodi criminali compiuti dai tedeschi. Spesso dovranno assistere impotenti, ma in diversi casi interverranno anche con le armi per frenare la furia degli alleati. Nei settori assegnati all'ARMIR non si registreranno mai casi analoghi'.<sup>181</sup>

The successive editorial changes are revealing with regard to Revelli's depiction of this hatred towards the Germans. One incident highlights these changes particularly clearly if we trace the evolution of its narration from 1946 to 1967. It should be borne in mind that the text of *La guerra dei poveri's* chapter on the retreat from the Russian front (published in 1962) formed the basis of the Einaudi edition of *Mai tardi* in 1967 (hence the chronological arrangements of the excerpts for consideration). I have underlined key words, phrases, and punctuation altered in each succeeding edition.<sup>182</sup>

Appare un ufficiale kruko e fa il gentile: è un capitano alto, non più giovane. Dice che in quelle case si faranno due ospedali, uno tedesco e uno italiano: lasceremo lì i feriti e qualcuno verrebbe poi a caricarli. Balle! Il maggiore Landi sarebbe stato dell'idea: diceva che senza i feriti si pistava meglio!

Il kruko mi prende per il braccio e mi fa capire che devo uscire. Raggiungiamo un'isba vicina e mi dice che lui ha già sistemato il suo 'lazarotti'. Nelle stanze e nei corridoi ci sono alcuni tedeschi messi in riga: il primo di questi mi mette le mani addosso per farmi uscire, gli dò uno strappone. Il capitano kruko dice alla sua soldataglia di lasciarmi passare perché sono un... ufficiale. Quei porci stanno buttando fuori dalle case tutti i congelati italiani, per la maggior parte fanti: ci sono anche alcuni feriti. Se li passano dall'uno all'altro e li buttano nella neve, sghignazzando. Porci, porci e cani, vigliacchi, bastardi e cani. Questi i tedeschi, i nostri alleati, la gente che combatte per la 'civiltà': questa la razza kruka maledetta. Sento che mi gira la testa. (Panfilo, p. 234)

Appare un ufficiale tedesco, alto, con gli occhiali, non più giovane, un capitano. Fa il gentile. Dice che in questo gruppo di isbe vengono organizzati due ospedali, uno tedesco, uno italiano. Lasceremo lì i feriti, qualcuno verrà poi a caricarli Storie!

Anche fra noi c'è chi dice che senza i feriti si pisterebbe meglio!

<sup>181</sup> Petacco, p. 65.

The consensus among historians suggests that Italian soldiers were guilty of perpetrating atrocities against soldiers and civilians during the Greek and Baltic campaigns, but seem not to have been involved in such behaviour in Russia. Gianni Oliva, *"Si ammazza troppo poco": I crimini di guerra italiani 1940-43* (Milan: Mondadori, 2006).

<sup>182</sup> This comparison of changes between the different editions could be developed much more fully, perhaps even as a study in its own right. Here, I have limited myself to noting points pertinent to the evolution of Revelli's depiction of the Germans.

L'ufficiale tedesco mi afferra per un braccio, mi fa intendere che devo uscire, che devo raggiungere il suo lazzaret.

In un'isba vicina vedo alcuni tedeschi messi in riga, a gambe larghe, da un'angolo all'altro della stanza. Il più vicino, sulla porta, mi mette le mani addosso per non farmi entrare. Interviene il capitano, urla che sono un... ufficiale, che posso entrare. Adesso capisco perché sono schierati in riga, questi tedeschi della malora: sono organizzati in tutto, questi porci. Stanno buttando fuori dalle isbe i soldati italiani: se li passano come sacchi, anche i feriti, anche i congelati, proprio tutti, sghignazzando. Porci, porci, cani vigliacchi, (GP, p. 91)

Appare un ufficiale tedesco, alto, con gli occhiali, non più giovane, un capitano. Fa il gentile. Dice che in questo gruppo di isbe si organizzeranno due ospedali, uno tedesco, uno italiano. Lasciamo lì i feriti, qualcuno verrà poi a caricarli! Storie!

Anche tra noi c'è chi dice che senza i feriti si pisterebbe meglio...

L'ufficiale tedesco mi afferra per un braccio, mi fa intendere che devo uscire, che devo raggiungere il suo lazzaret.

In un'isba vicina vedo alcuni tedeschi messi in riga, a gambe larghe, da un'angolo all'altro della stanza. Il più vicino, sulla porta, mi mette le mani addosso per non farmi entrare. Interviene il capitano, urla che sono un... ufficiale, che posso entrare. Adesso capisco perché sono schierati in riga, questi tedeschi della malora: sono organizzati in tutto, questi porci. Stanno buttando fuori dalle isbe i soldati italiani: se li passano come sacchi, anche i feriti, anche i congelati, proprio tutti, sghignazzando! (MT, p. 182)

The principal changes are between the 1946 and 1962 editions. Revelli replaced the contemporary and derogatory term 'kruko' with the standard 'tedesco' and condensed his list of furious adjectives to exclude the more offensive 'bastardi'. The overall impression of Revelli's feelings towards the Germans remains clear, if marginally less vehement; indeed, moderating the intensity of his antipathy might give more credence to his depiction. He is certainly not employing understatement to make his point, but Revelli is lessening the possibility of his depiction being dismissed out of hand by his reader as excessive. At the same time he has also removed a phrase ('gli dò uno strappone') which did not particularly favour his own behaviour. Revelli may have removed the image of the Germans fighting for civilization due to pressures on space (see Panfilo extract); it does seem more likely that its emotive irony was still too painful in 1962 given Europe's appalling post-war condition. In addition, these excerpts show the removal of Landi's name so that he no longer appeared incriminated, laying the charge more broadly against the Italians and so, one imagines, forestalling any wrangles or legal issues. Few changes were made between 1962 and 1967 other than to remove the remainder of Revelli's list of deprecations and replace them with an exclamation mark, which emphasizes German



contempt for the Italian soldiers. Interestingly, in the example quoted above, the original Panfilo edition provides the most articulate narration of his hatred of the Germans. Why Revelli chose to remove the final explanatory phrase in the 1962 rendition is not clear. At this stage, it should not, I suggest, be misconstrued as a reconciliatory gesture towards the Germans by Revelli; it is only in his later writing that there is any evidence of a change – however subtle – in his view towards them.<sup>183</sup>

A personal narrative such as *Mai tardi* or *La guerra dei poveri* permitted a subjectivity and passion of emotion one would think entirely inappropriate in an openly pedagogic text such as *Le due guerre*. Overall, Revelli attempted a dispassionate and objective assessment of Italy's one time allies, although the emotive language which pervaded his diaries is on occasion allowed to reappear, albeit couched in diplomacy: 'I tedeschi. Ci sarebbe da fare un lungo discorso sui tedeschi nei giorni della ritirata. Dirò soltanto che sono duri, prepotenti, spietati [...]' (DG, p. 119). Describing the Germans' entrance into Cuneo following 8 September 1943, Revelli saw nothing in these troops to dispel the sentiments their compatriots had aroused in Russia: 'Sono proprio come i tedeschi che ho visto a Varsavia, che ho visto in Russia. Spavalidi, pieni di boria, odiosi' (DG, p. 133).

In contrast, Eugenio Corti's narrative, published only a year after Revelli's diary, showed the animosity and antipathy of the Italians towards their allies but was devoid of the all-consuming hatred seen in Revelli's work. This is due in part to the moderating influence of Corti's Christian faith, which Revelli did not share. Corti did confess that, at the time, hatred was a tempting reaction to the behaviour of their allies when faced with incidents such as a German massacre of Russian prisoners-of-war: 'Nel profondo del mio cuore l'avversione per i tedeschi crebbe, e cominciò a trasformarsi in un'ira sorda e costante. Faticavo a obbedire ai comandamenti di Dio e a non lasciarmi prendere dall'odio'.<sup>184</sup>

Rigoni Stern, however, did not indulge in emotive disparaging of his allies but used understatement to be equally, if not more, condemnatory. The tone of this extract is typical of Rigoni Stern's handling of German behaviour: 'I tedeschi si prendono tutti i prigionieri russi che

<sup>183</sup> The evolution of Revelli's attitude towards the Germans is considered further in Chapter 5.

<sup>184</sup> Corti, p. 81.

abbiamo fatto, si allontanano e poi sentiamo numerose raffiche e qualche colpo. Nevica'.<sup>185</sup> It is clear that the Germans have perpetrated another of their frequent war crimes yet Rigoni Stern made no explicit condemnation. Rather he outlined the incident in the same tone with which he then went on to comment on the weather; it is in this way, through the juxtaposition of morally disparate concepts, that he distanced himself from the Germans and dispassionately denounced their behaviour effectively.

Carole Angier, in her biography of Primo Levi, identified the following distinctions between Rigoni Stern, Levi and Revelli:

Mario is a poet-storyteller, Primo a philosopher-storyteller, Nuto an historian-storyteller. Primo was, of course, the rationalist of the three: both Mario and Nuto are instinctive writers, and deeply emotional men. Both are Primo's opposites: soldiers and fighters, strong but at the same time gentle. Nuto would laugh at that. He is bad, he says, *cattivo*: the primitive, aggressive one of the three, who hated and killed Germans for all of them. But that was more than half a century ago.<sup>186</sup>

Angier's identification of the aggressiveness of Revelli's writing is justified but she went on to suggest that in *Il disperso di Marburg* Revelli was able to overcome this hatred of the Germans. *Il disperso di Marburg* was certainly a significant moment as Revelli came to see the German subject of his research not as 'una bestia', 'un cane', or even, as 'un nemico', but as a man to whom he could relate. As Revelli explained in an interview I conducted with him in 2001:

Il mollo, il motivo spingente era il fatto che era un disperso. Non mi interessava se era amico, nemico – soltanto il fatto che era disperso, e io ero così vicino ad esserne uno. Sono andato a Marburg. Nessuno della famiglia era rimasto. La madre del disperso è diventata ricca. Aveva tre pensioni di guerra – i due figli (il più alto disperso nella Russia, e il mio) e il padre, era vedova. Però ho parlato con la gente che la conosceva, e diceva che viveva da povera. Metteva tutti i soldi nella banca per i 'dispersi' quando tornerebbero. Che fine triste. (AR1)

Carole Angier's claim that Revelli succeeded in putting these emotions behind him in the publication of *Il disperso di Marburg* is discussed further in Chapter 5: suffice to say at this point that the substantial antagonism which remained in *Le due guerre* refutes the simplicity of her claim.

<sup>185</sup> Rigoni Stern, p. 122.

<sup>186</sup> Carole Angier, *Primo Levi: The Double Bond* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), p. 546.

### *Revelli's focus on truth*

Just as Revelli's hatred for the Germans can be traced throughout his writing on the Russian front, his focus on truth amidst distortion played a considerable role in these narratives. We have already seen that in the immediate post-war period Revelli's aims in writing included the cultivation of truth and understanding in a national (and, to a degree, international) context of silence and distortion. To be able to move on, there needed to be a reckoning with the past. This necessitated the communication of his truthful, if subjective, record of the Italian army's experience on the Russian front. Secondly, he highlighted the discrepancies between the image the Fascist regime projected of itself, its activities, and the reality. Fascism had been overthrown by the time of *Mai tardi's* publication but, in Revelli's opinion, its legacy needed to be dealt with if the new Italian democracy was to prosper. Thirdly, Revelli recorded his own minor distortion of reality which had the benefit of his family in mind.

Revelli's fixation with transparency and truth post-war had its roots in the army. He first became aware of the consequences of a lack of transparency and reliable information when he took up his post with the 2nd Alpini. As Revelli listened to the veterans speak of the failures during the recent Greek campaign, he formulated an attitude which tempered much of his behaviour during the Russian campaign and his subsequent writing of it:

Raccontando bestemmiavano. Sentivano nel sangue quell'avventura finita male.  
Io ascoltavo con grande interesse. Cercavo la verità anche se mi feriva: tentavo di buttare il falso per fare posto al vero, a costo di sentirmi l'animo vuoto ma pulito. (*GP*, p. 7)

Reviewing the period in *Le due guerre*, Revelli emphasized the importance of truth and understanding by confessing his own sense of post-war culpability:

Una giovane donna riesce a farsi capire parlando in latino. Dice che poco lontano vi è un campo di sterminio: ogni giorno vi muoiono 300 ebrei. In me è come se si spezzasse qualcosa. Voglio capire bene, voglio capire tutto. E guardo, e fotografo con gli occhi tutto quello che vedo. Comincio a guardare i tedeschi con odio. La mia ignoranza è catastrofica. Non so nulla dei campi di sterminio. Ma mi rendo conto che la guerra dei tedeschi non è la mia guerra. E questo sentimento mi spaventa, mi angoscia. Non avevo capito niente del fascismo; nulla della leggi razziali del 1938. E chi non capisce nel momento giusto rischia di capire quando è troppo tardi. (*DG*, p. 96)

Reading these words it seems that an obligation to get to the truth of the matter motivated Revelli equally as strongly in 1985-86 as it did in 1946. In Revelli's experience, truth and a reliable representation of events could and did mean life or death.

A second facet of Revelli's focus on truth amidst distortion is that of the discrepancies between Fascism's projection of itself and actuality. These discrepancies are seen in the regime's use of its rhetoric and propaganda; its silencing of survivors of the retreat from Russia; and its deception of families and society alike regarding the fate of Italy's soldiers. By the time of Revelli's publications, the extent of Fascist propaganda was self-evident. It is not the case that he was painting the Fascists blacker to absolve himself, rather he seems to have been motivated by a sense of outrage at such treatment of the Italian army and the soldiers' families. The effects of Fascist lies were felt for many years after the war; it was more than a decade before the last of the prisoners of war returned.<sup>187</sup>

Revelli's repulsion at the pompous rhetoric and crass propaganda circulated by Rome came through strongly in each of his works on the Russian front, and on occasion even became more vehement in later publications.<sup>188</sup> One example is his relation of the massacre of the Vestone and Val Chiese battalions. In *Mai tardi*, Revelli reported Zaccardo's account of this instance in indirect speech, describing his forthrightness and his view that the action was foolhardy from the outset. It concluded with the official statement from Rome given in direct speech: 'Le ingenti perdite sono dovute all'eccessivo spirito combattivo delle truppe alpine non ancora idonee a combattere in pianura' (*MT*, p. 32). Revelli gave greater weight to the narration of the same incident in *La guerra dei poveri* by using direct speech to report both Zaccardo's scathing words and his relation of the verdict from Rome:

<sup>187</sup> According to Grindrod, 'thousands of [Italian prisoners of war in Russia] [...] still remained unaccounted for ten years after the war ended: thirty-four prisoners repatriated early in 1954 were declared by Moscow to have been the only remaining Italian prisoners then known of by the Soviet authorities'. This was disputed by the Italians as Grindrod explains in a footnote: 'At the UN Committee on Prisoners of War on 10 September 1954 the Italian delegate denied Soviet claims that the 21,000 Italians repatriated since the war ended represented all the Italian prisoners taken by the Russians. He stated his Government's belief that there were still 60,000 Italians detained in Russia'. See Muriel Grindrod, *The Rebuilding of Italy: Politics and Economics, 1945-1955* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1955), p. 132.

<sup>188</sup> Revelli speaks of 'Roma' as the source of such propaganda without clarifying whether he means the military authorities or the Fascist hierarchies. It is possible that, by this stage, he viewed the one to be as bad as the other given his increasing disillusionment with military and political leadership.

[Zaccardo] Riunì subito il battaglione al laghetto. Guardò gli alpini uno a uno, poi parlò chiaro senza peli sulla lingua.

Il sacrificio del Vestone e del Val Chiese, - disse, - è una pazzia di comandanti incoscienti e incapaci. Si fa presto con Roma a cancellare un massacro, bastano poche parole. Per Roma è già partita questa giustificazione: ... [sic] le perdite ingenti sono dovute all'eccessivo spirito combattivo delle truppe alpine, non ancora idonee a combattere in pianura'. (GP, p. 21)

As is well known, not only had the regime in Rome refused to recognize what was actually happening and where the blame lay, it had circulated propaganda among troops and civilians alike. Revelli spoke scornfully of the 'sporca propaganda' that came into his possession at times (MT, p. 21), and the blatantly inauthentic 'reporting' in the newspapers:

Ho visto qualche nostro giornale: tutte balle. Anche le fotografie sono false, giuro che le avranno prese ad almeno duecento chilometri dal fronte: inquadrano trincee e pattuglie in canice bianco su terreno senza neve. Come al solito, poca serietà, cose da far ridere i polli. (MT, p. 100)

While they waited in the rear before deployment to the Don, Revelli had opportunity to consider his environment, and it repulsed him. In each of Revelli's three works on the Russian front it was evident that he was an individual with a strong sense of morality and duty, and consequently often offended in the prevailing atmosphere of 'braggadocio'. At this early stage though, Revelli was still vainly hoping that exposure to the 'real war' - that is, action at the frontline - would somehow answer his questions and quell his doubts: <sup>189</sup>

Il volto della patria mi appariva falso e gonfio di retorica: era il volto del fascismo, dei campeggi, delle adunate oceaniche, dei falsi giuramenti a dozzine, dei gerarchi imboscati, della guerra facile. Attendevo la guerra vera, i fatti, come un'esperienza necessaria e definitiva per tentare di credere ancora. Speravo di non dover combattere con l'animo vuoto. (GP, p. 16)

Even at the end of the campaign, when Revelli and his men had endured the long retreat from the Don, losing the majority of their comrades either to the effects of the Russian elements or enemy attacks, the regime continued its attempts to convince the soldiers of the inevitability of the 'vittoria finale'. *Mai tardi* recorded the reaction of the survivors of the retreat to Mussolini's envoy who, far from encouraging them, only intensified the fury of men such as Revelli. Reaction to this visit closed Revelli's diary in an impassioned rant against the regime and its distortion:

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<sup>189</sup> See also Panfilo, p. 13.

Manaresi ha portato il saluto personale del duce e quello che più conta, le mele del duce. Cialtroni! Più nessuno crede alle vostre falsità, ci fate schifo: così la pensano i superstiti dell'immensa tragedia che avete voluto. Le vostre trionfe parole vuote non sono che l'ultimo insulto ai nostri morti. Raccontatela a chi la pensa come voi: chi ha fatto la ritirata non crede più ai gradi e vi dice: 'Mai tardi...a farvi fuoril' (MT, pp. 203-204).

*La guerra dei poveri* and *Le due guerre* took the story further and allowed Revelli to deal with the regime's silencing of survivors, quarantined on their return to Italy, and then subjected to attempts to control the 'truth' they transmitted of events in Russia and the fate of the Italian soldiers. Unsurprisingly, Revelli had no time for such distortion, describing one pamphlet distributed while in quarantine as follows: 'La predica s'intitola *Lettera a un giovane combattente*, e scrive cose da non credere, invita i reduci a tacere, a non raccontare, perché il nemico ci ascolta. E il primo impatto con l'Italia fascista, con l'Italia falsa e balorda che teme la verità' (DG, p. 125).

The distortion of the truth continued when the survivors returned home, only now it was a cruel deception instilling a futile sense of hope among the relatives of those awaiting the return of their men. Ultimately, the majority never come home and were numbered among the *dispersi*. *Le due guerre* narrated one incident in which Paolo Zappa, a journalist in Russia with 'La Stampa' during the campaign, was touring the country with a message which – as Revelli's language made clear – represented the regime's heartless distortion of the truth. His use of the historic present serves to highlight that his indignation at such a distortion of the truth was as strong as ever decades later:

Voglio ascoltare, voglio capire fino a che punto imperversa la menzogna. Il teatro è stracolmo. Molti i gerarchi, la moltissimi i familiari dei caduti e dei dispersi. Sono lì con mio padre. Paolo Zappa afferma che tutti gli alpini della Cuneense sono vivi, sono prigionieri, e che un giorno torneranno. Questo Paolo Zappa è venuto a Cuneo per illudere i congiunti dei caduti. Dire prigionieri era come dire vigliacchi, che si erano arresi. 'Tutti prigionieri!' Sento una gran voglia di urlare, di gridare la mia verità. Ma taccio. Dopo qualche giorno mi convocano in federazione. Convocano tutti i superstiti della Russia, per catechizzarli, per invitarli a tacere. Hanno paura che le voci girano, che la gente sappia. Non mi presento. (DG, p. 127)

Overall, Revelli represented any twisting of the truth as negative; the only occasion on which it was justified or given a positive light was when he was the perpetrator of the distortion. To be

fair, it is only in *Il disperso di Marburg* that Revelli begins to engage with the tensions between testimonial truth and historical truth. In his initial diary he recorded how on occasion he post dated a letter, played down a situation, or suggested to Anna and his family that he was in some place safer than he actually was: 'Scrivo ad Annetta e a casa: racconto le solite frottole, invento di essere ancora in viaggio' (MT, p. 84). Clearly, this was done with the best of motives in order to give those at home as little cause for concern as possible in the circumstances, and likewise, those at home did the same regarding domestic and familial affairs; behaviour which appears to be a common response when in difficulty and yet wishing to reassure one's loved ones. Intriguingly, however, the particular incident quoted above does not appear in the original Panfilò edition.

Revelli, then, was concerned with securing a true representation of reality – as yet, unaware of the inherent problems presented by the latent subjectivity of his perspective – and rebelled against the distortions prevalent in military and civilian life under Mussolini. Rigoni Stern and Corti writing about their experience of the same period did not tend to place the same emphasis on a personal need for truth and understanding.<sup>190</sup> Given Revelli's singular and particular focus on the pursuit of truth in the aftermath of Fascism, it can be seen how this concern evolved into an explicit aim of his publications: that the truth about the Russian front would be made known to the ignorant and the misinformed, of his own and succeeding generations.

### ***The endemic failings of regime and military***

A third aspect, which featured throughout Revelli's narratives of the Russian front, was that of the endemic failings of the regime and military alike. These failures were well-documented even before the Russian campaign. A lack of preparation and adequate equipment had been a common complaint among troops deployed on earlier Fascist campaigns. Other failings common to the Fascist army and the Russian campaign were incompetence and lack of leadership among the military, and ignorance and incompetence on the part of the regime. We saw in Chapter 2 that Revelli's sense of an 'impegno del dopo' included an anger which

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<sup>190</sup> This was one aspect of their 'impegno del dopo' which Revelli and Levi held in common.

demanded justice for those who were the victims of such failings. Anger is a common reaction to situations beyond our immediate control and is an expression of frustration at one's inability to change things. Anger and frustration come through strongly in Revelli's writing of Russia. In addition, Revelli's portrayal reveals that he could not abide incompetence. These character traits are seen in one extract from *Mai tardi* which captured what Revelli saw as the sheer folly of the enterprise:

Gli alpini, manovrando su un terreno che non è il loro, sembrano pesci fuor d'acqua: noi ufficiali siamo sfasati quanto gli alpini. Il peggio è che l'armamento, l'equipaggiamento, l'intera dotazione dei nostri materiali non sono adatti per una guerra in pianura: siamo attrezzati per l'alta montagna. Dai chiodi per roccia alle corde manilla, dalle piccozze ai ramponi alle funicelle per valanga, tutto è per un impiego soltanto nel Caucaso: se dovessero impiegarci in pianura, certamente subiremmo perdite gravissime con risultati negativi. Che lo stato maggiore non abbia capito che gli alpini non sono carri armati? (MT, p. 17)

Revelli similarly described in *La guerra dei poveri* the ludicrous position of those training to be tank drivers: 'Avevo poche notizie sui carri armati. D'altra parte anche gli allievi carristi si accontentavano di studiare queste nuove armi sui complicati schizzi in sezione trasversale e longitudinale. Mai visto un carro armato vero' (GP, p. 5). The lack of adequate uniforms and the general shoddiness of preparation added to these problems and later had devastating effects: 'Con uomini stanchi, con armi arrugginite, è come andare al massacro' (MT, p. 125). Already identified in earlier campaigns (such as France, Albania and Greece), these problems should have been resolved before any troops were deployed in Russia (DG, pp. 34-36). The reaction of their efficient German allies was therefore predictable: 'Ci guardano dall'alto in basso, ridono dei nostri muli che scalciano contro le pareti di legno dei vagoni' (DG, p. 95).

An initial lack of adequate supplies and equipment was compounded by the corruption of the men in the rear who ensured that very little of the supplies actually reached the men for whom they were intended: 'Nel giro di quindici giorni l'Unione Militare svuotò i magazzini vendendo tutta la merce ai civili russi, a prezzi favolosi' (MT, p. 62). Neither Corti nor Rigoni



Stern made an issue of the quality or quantity of the supplies and weaponry available, but Revelli's portrayal is verified by the work of military historians.<sup>191</sup>

Problems with essential items of equipment were only symptomatic of the general incompetence and lack of leadership Revelli witnessed. He referred frequently to the incompetence of colonels (*MT*, p. 28), of the military hierarchy (*MT*, p. 17) and of those running the hospitals in the rear (*MT*, pp. 54-55): now familiar traits in the context of the Italian army in Russia, and more generally during World War II. Revelli recorded one instance in which clarity was crucial to the safe and effective deployment of his men, and yet this basic requirement remained unfulfilled:

Alle 16,30 ci raggiunge un motociclista del comando di reggimento col seguente ordine: Codesto reparto rientri immediatamente al proprio battaglione che trovasi dislocato ad Ortblajtze presso comando divisione Celere. Tenente colonnello Lantieri.

Cerchiamo sulla carta topografica il paese indicato sull'ordine e notiamo che esistono tre Ortblajtze, numerati progressivamente e che distano alcuni chilometri l'uno dall'altro. (*MT*, pp. 26-27)

Just as issues with equipment should have been resolved prior to the Russian campaign, so too chaotic situations such as this were not new: 'Siamo alla vigilia della guerra contro la Grecia e quegli irresponsabili smobilitano l'esercito. Si crea una gran confusione, la coesione dei reparti si sfascia, chi rimane sotto le armi impreca e chi va in congedo è allegro e si illude' (*DG*, p. 45). Old habits persisted during the Russian campaign - Petacco describes the situation on the banks of the Don as similarly confused, with Italian, Russian and German troops in concentric rings, meaning the front could actually be in any direction at any one time.<sup>192</sup>

On the ground, military commanders floundered and the regime's hierarchy in Rome performed no better. *Mai tardi* made clear that Revelli felt those in Rome to be completely ignorant of the situation of the ARMIR (*MT*, p. 32). He believed the troops had been abandoned to their fate (*MT*, p. 139), and was unrestrained in his bitterness against those in

<sup>191</sup> 'Nessuno poi sembrò preoccuparsi del fatto che i muli erano poco idonei all'impiego nella pianura russa, perché con il carico sovraccarico e con i loro zoccoli piccoli e duri affondavano nella neve e nel fango assai più dei cavalli. Non era che una delle tante prove della rigidità burocratica dell'organismo militare italiano, capace di mandare in Russia 16.700 automezzi, ma non l'olio anticongelante indispensabile per i loro motori (e per le armi automatiche), per non parlare dell'inadeguatezza dell'equipaggiamento invernale' (Rochat, p. 132).

<sup>192</sup> Petacco, p. 42.

Rome responsible for the original deployment of the *alpini* (MI, pp. 203-204; DG, p. 113). Revelli gave a fitting conclusion to his thoughts on the endemic failings of military and regime alike in *Le due guerre* when he declared that:

Ci sarebbe da scrivere a lungo sull'inefficienza della nostra organizzazione logistica, sullo scarso addestramento dei reparti, sul pressapochismo dei nostri comandi.

Se ne può dedurre che il collaudo del nostro esercito sul Fronte occidentale è stato catastrofico. Era proprio un esercito di poveri il nostro, e come tutti gli eserciti di poveri sarà destinato a pagare un prezzo altissimo. (DG, p. 36)

### *The role of King Vittorio Emanuele III*

Another element seen consistently throughout Revelli's work is the hierarchical position of King Vittorio Emanuele III during the period of Fascist power. Historically, the king had been the 'simbolo indiscusso' of the army, and although his role changed under Fascism – given that Mussolini was now making the military decisions – Vittorio Emanuele III continued to command the affections of the Italian army.<sup>193</sup> Soldiers and officers from Piedmont had another connection with the king according to Revelli: 'Nella provincia di Cuneo il re era di famiglia: veniva a Racconigi a passare le vacanze, a Sant'Anna di Valdieri a caccia di camosci e a pesca di trote. Il re era bravo' (DG, p. 25). Yet, Revelli states that, given he had 'cresciuto come fascista', the discovery on arrival at the military academy in Modena that 'il re era numero uno' made quite an impact (ARI). As he described in *La guerra dei poveri*, this was his first introduction to the counter-culture of the army:

A Modena esisteva una diversa gerarchia fra il re e il duce. Il re era il numero uno. Se nei primi tempi quest'inversione gerarchica mi aveva turbato, in seguito l'avevo accettata con disinvoltura. In fondo in fondo, il duce non era che un caporale, e la milizia non era che la brutta copia dell'esercito. (GP, p. 5)

The break in the traditional link between king and army was confirmed rather than initiated, in Rochat's opinion, by the king's flight from Rome in 1943.<sup>194</sup> Revelli's relationship to the King is rather hazy. He tells us he was brought up a Fascist, more by default than any great political commitment on the part of his parents, and then after 8 September he joined one of the

<sup>193</sup> Rochat confirmed that the king was generally held to be the 'simbolo indiscusso' (p. 80) of the army even although he had limited responsibilities during the Fascist period (p. 78).

<sup>194</sup> Rochat, p. 83.

Giustizia e Libertà bands associated with the Partito d'Azione. 'The Partito d'Azione was a radical group whose hostility to the monarchy and to the Church was far more doctrinaire and uncompromising than that of Togliatti'.<sup>195</sup> Discussing the King's flight South in 1943 in *Le due guerre*, any sense of disillusionment is expressed implicitly in the partisans' composition of the *Badoglieide*:

Alle Grangie di Narbona ci siamo sistemati in alto, aspettando gli eventi.  
E lì, tra il 25 e il 26 aprile, nasce *La Badoglieide*, una canzone partigiana che  
se la prende con Badoglio e re Vittorio. *La Badoglieide* è nata su  
suggerimento di Livio. L'abbiamo combinata assieme, in gruppo, nella  
notte tra il 25 e il 26. (DG, p. 160)<sup>196</sup>

Other than this, Revelli directed his antagonism against Mussolini, given that 'il Duce' was responsible for Italy's entrance into World War II. Such a mild expression of disappointment with the monarchy is less than the reaction expected in light of Revelli's frequent references to the primacy of the king.

How then are we to interpret Revelli's focus on the primacy of the king? There is the possibility that despite his mantra-like repetition of the phrase above, Revelli did not actually espouse this view, but was merely conforming to the army attitude during the war years. Revelli's discussion of royalist tendencies within Piedmont focuses more on the views held by others, whether soldiers or *contadini*. His personal loyalty to the monarchy appears to have been limited to the historic loyalty of the military towards their commanding officer. He does not provide any real discussion of the referendum decision to abolish the monarchy after the war. Instead, his roots in Piedmont and exposure to strong monarchist influences during his military training account for the prominence given to Vittorio Emanuele III in his writing. However, to me it seems more likely that his use of the phrase was indicative of a lack of any real party political adherence – his membership of the Partito d'Azione was after all short-lived. By that I mean, he did not wholly share their political ideology. We will see in the following chapter that during the Resistance, Revelli became better versed in the political goals and ideology of *Italia*

<sup>195</sup> Mack Smith, p. 418.

<sup>196</sup> See also *La guerra dei poveri*, p. 194.

*libera*. However, his perspective on the war of Liberation had originated from a need for retribution for the Italian soldiers who perished in Russia.<sup>197</sup>

### ***Revelli as anti-Fascist***

Revelli's narrative gives significant importance to a record of his own political awareness. Over the course of the three texts on the Russian front and the partisan war, it is possible to trace Revelli's development from young Fascist subsumed in the system and its programmes, to committed anti-fascist. In *La guerra dei poveri* Revelli described his upbringing in the Fascist youth programme (GP, pp. 3-4) and then, prior to his deployment on the front, stated that he had given up on Fascism some time previously: 'Al fascismo non guardavo più da tempo. I gerarchi, vestiti di nero, sembravano uccelli di malaugurio' (GP, p. 7). He did not make explicit when this change came. On the basis that he said it was at the Accademia militare that he first learned to question fascism, it seems reasonable to conclude that the political switch occurred at some point during his training: 'Così i primi messaggi di un antifascismo, sia pure un antifascismo di casta, li ho avuti a Modena, all'Accademia militare. Non nella mia famiglia, non nella scuola. Forse perché la guerra ormai andava male. Ma non solo per questo motivo' (DG, p. 56).

As we have already seen, throughout the campaign in Russia, Revelli was not slow to identify or criticise the failings of the regime. The truly formative period for Revelli politically, however, was to come during the Resistance, under the tutelage of Dante Livio Bianco. The decision to join a 'political' rather than 'military' group of partisans was not easy for Revelli, predominantly because of a basic mistrust of 'i politici' (DG, p. 139), stemming presumably from his disillusionment under Mussolini. The significance of Revelli's description of this decision holds true for his later political thinking too. He was a member of the Partito d'Azione, but he always presents 'i politici' as a group to which he does not entirely belong; he was a signed up member, but at heart remained a soldier. After 1946, Revelli was aware of various political ideologies and *au fait* with current affairs but without a party political affiliation. This transmitted into a sense of 'impegno civile' concerned predominantly with the welfare of the

<sup>197</sup> Revelli's motivation in taking up arms as a partisan is discussed further in Chapter 5.

*contadini*, especially those who had returned from the war. Of course, many of Revelli's contemporaries would have undergone a similar transition as the emptiness of Fascist rhetoric and policy became ever clearer. What emerges in Revelli's record of his rejection of Fascism is that a moral and civil sense of responsibility drives him rather than a specifically political ideology.

### Aspects omitted in Revelli's later writing of the Russian Front

Of all the areas covered in Revelli's personal narratives his treatment of death and burial stood out in his initial publication, and then became much less prominent. *Mai tardi* and *La guerra dei poveri* revealed an understandable consciousness of the nearness of death. Revelli documented the deaths of miscellaneous individuals, his fellow-officers and his superior, Grandi, with each category handled in a different way.

Revelli's war writing gives no evidence that belief or religion played any role in his outlook on life or life after death. Indeed, when contrasted with Corti's record, which stresses the role of his faith in a battle situation, Revelli's lack of any mention of God is even more marked. In Russia, Revelli witnessed the full horror of death, and the carnage of dismembered bodies. With the advances in technology for inflicting wounds, and progress in medicine for treating these wounds, this focus on the effects of war naturally takes on a greater prominence in many modern war narratives.<sup>198</sup> Yet in recording his experience at the front line, only once does Revelli give any graphic description of the stereotypical carnage of war. One young soldier caught in a grenade blast seems to have made a powerful impact on Revelli, who otherwise remained detached from events:

Vedo qualcosa di steso: di corso raggiungo il morto.  
L'impressione è macabra. È supino, guarda il cielo. Lungo un fianco, il fucile. Sul ventre, a sinistra, un buco di dieci centimetri di diametro, e fuori un grosso fagotto, l'intestino e un sacchetto di cartilagine bianca: la bocca spalancata, i denti in fuori, gli occhi semiaperti. Le braccia lungo il corpo, le mani con le dita contratte. È un biondino sui diciott'anni. Una bomba a mano l'ha colpito in pieno.  
Anche i miei esploratori sono sconvolti: fanno circolo attorno al morto, non parlano. Rientriamo in linea con una grande tristezza in cuore.

<sup>198</sup> Hynes, p. 127.

Mi è rimasto negli occhi il biondino morto. Vorrei dimenticarlo: lo penso e ripenso e lo rivedo. Con la notte, gli artiglieri dell'osservatorio lo seppelliranno. (MT, p. 46)

Stylistically, Revelli tended to write in brief, staccato clauses and here, combined with such a powerful description, he emphasizes the futility and waste of war; an idea he espoused ever more strongly in the post-war period. This is particularly noticeable in his poignant use of a phrase more suited to describing a teenager who is full of life, rather than the mutilated corpse before him: 'È un biondino sui diciott'anni'.

The depth of comradeship among the *alpini* was evident throughout Revelli's personal narratives and at its most explicit when Revelli was confronted with the deaths of his closest comrades and superior officers. In such instances Revelli tended, in contrast to the visual horror of the 'biondino's' death, to focus on the words and emotions surrounding their deaths. The death of Perego, his fellow-officer, provoked an explosive display of emotion:

Raggiungo l'isba di Perego. Povero caro Peppo. Accanto c'è il suo attendente Clementi, inginocchiato, come se pregasse. Mi piego su Perego, lo bacio, scoppio in un pianto disperato. Da tanto tempo volevo piangere così. (MT, p. 172)

This was part of a diary entry, yet there was no fear or shame in documenting his grief and emotion, and, in a show of affection, he referred to Perego by his nickname, Peppo. This was not the first time the loss of a comrade had deeply moved Revelli. For example, the depth of his loss on Appollonio's death was seen in his hostile reception of General Reverberi, who had promptly attempted to award Revelli a medal (MT, p. 52).

Revelli recorded a range of responses to the continual deaths of comrades in action: grief for Perego was displayed in desperate tears; grief for Appollonio was channelled into hostility against the establishment and its insensitivity. On the death of Grandi, his superior officer, and a man who had earned Revelli's whole-hearted respect, Revelli displayed no outward emotional reaction at the time (MT, p. 178), but continued to pull the body on his sledge for a further day to delay the final separation. When Revelli eventually buried Grandi, the self-control with which he had reacted to his death vanished:

Con la coperta che fa barella lo trasportiamo in un campo, a dieci metri dalle isbe. Il cuore mi scoppia, vorrei piangere, gridare. Scavo col piede

nella neve farinosa, ma la buca è poco profonda, Grandi sentirà freddo per sempre. Lo copro con la neve. Gli dico addio. (MT, p. 183)

The notion that Grandi 'sentirà freddo per sempre' was out of character with Revelli's earthy sensibility and seems to demonstrate the emotional pressure experienced and an attempt to reconcile the surrealism of war with the rational elements of normal daily existence. Mention of Grandi's death in *Le due guerre* was less personal, but still transmitted Revelli's grief, especially his regret that his friend had been 'abandoned' rather than 'buried':

27 gennaio: Grandi muore. È su una slitta, tra i feriti, e non mi sento di abbandonarlo. Lo abbandonerò due giorni dopo, in un mattino buio, ai margini di un gruppetto di isbe. Scaverò con un piede una piccola fossa nella neve gelata... (DC, p. 120).

The description of Grandi's burial in the 1967 edition of *Mai tardi* is followed with the lines: 'Poveri i nostri mortil Torelli è rimasto insepolto, Perego l'abbiamo abbandonato sul pavimento di un'isba...' (MT, p. 183). Neither the Panfilo edition nor the relevant chapter in *La guerra dei poveri* contained these thoughts. This suggests either that at the time of *Mai tardi*'s republication in 1967 his unburied comrades were weighing on Revelli's mind to a greater degree than they had been in 1946 or 1962, or at least that he felt a need to put emphasis here. Circumstances had in many cases made burial impossible, or at best perfunctory in a way offensive to the Italian and Catholic spirit. Tobias Jones, in *The Dark Heart of Italy*, gave the following description of the importance placed by Italians on a respectable burial:

Funerals themselves are spectacular. [...] Flags and fists are raised, huge crowds applaud coffins. It doesn't matter if the deceased is an actor or an anonymous victim of a sadly spectacular murder, the funeral is more than just a send-off, it's a pageant. [...] In more remote parts of Italy there's even someone called the *prefica*, the hired female mourner who guarantees that the wailing will be at a respectable pitch.<sup>199</sup>

Jones' tone might be somewhat irreverent and his experience more recent than the 1940s, yet the norm of marking a person's death with a memorable funeral, sat in stark contrast to the anonymous burial and abandonment of men for whom Revelli held great respect and affection.

Revelli's careful and emotional handling of the deaths of his friends, contrasted with a lack of analysis of his thoughts on his own death. On one occasion he acknowledged that he shared the type of thoughts one has when in danger (MT, p. 93), and on another, he spoke of a

<sup>199</sup> Tobias Jones, *The Dark Heart of Italy* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003), p. 244.

fresh recognition of his mortality following his injury: 'Adesso ho paura delle pallottole: quando mi fischiano sulla testa mi butterei a terra. Questa paura non l'avevo prima di essere ferito. Oggi so di essere di carne ed ossa, so di non essere invulnerabile' (MT, p. 85). Otherwise the possibility of his own death was not discussed. By contrast, Corti verged on an obsessive treatment of death:

Adesso mi sembrava nuovamente che non m'importasse più di morire.  
Pure le cose non stavano così. In realtà, nelle profondità del mio spirito,  
qualcosa, tenacemente, sordamente, si ribellava alla prospettiva della fine.  
Non potevo immaginare me stesso cadavere nella neve, come – anche  
volendolo – non si può tenere la mano su una stufa troppo calda.<sup>200</sup>

Revelli emphasizes the suffocating presence of possible death by stressing his intense desire for life, and a consciousness of the very vulnerability of life: 'Qui dove tutto è morte, dove basta un niente, una distorsione a un piede, una diarrea, e ci si ferma per sempre, il desiderio di vivere è immenso' (MT, p. 154).

Corti gave significant space to the dead in his diary, without documenting deaths of his particular comrades in any detail. Instead, he concentrated on individuals unknown to him and on his own fears. His description of the first dead that he encountered is indicative of both his reaction and his subsequent narration of other deaths in the field:

Ed ecco le prime visioni di morti per lo sfinimento e il freddo: mucchietti oblungi di stracci sulla neve buttata della strada, i quali ai miei occhi che non volevano credere, che dolorosamente speravano d'ingannarsi, si rivelarono fanti ridotti a blocchi di ghiaccio, lo strazio nella chiostra dei denti scoperti.  
Noi passavamo...<sup>201</sup>

Rigoni Stern, on the other hand, wrote of the dead in a manner more akin to Revelli, that is, describing as a matter of fact his grief and the waste of life:

Cos'era? – dissi. – È morto Sarpi, - rispose. Guardai nuovamente il buio e ascoltai di nuovo il silenzio. Il tenente si curvò nella trincea, accese due sigarette e ne passò una a me. Mi sentivo allo stomaco come un calcio di fucile e la gola chiusa come se avessi da vomitare qualcosa e non potessi. Tenente Sarpi. Attorno a me non c'era nulla, nemmeno le cose, nemmeno Cassiopea, nemmeno il freddo. Solo quel dolore al stomaco. [...] Tutto era silenzio. Il sole batteva sulla neve, il tenente Sarpi era morto nella notte con una raffica al petto. Ora maturano gli aranci nel suo

<sup>200</sup> Corti, p. 56.

<sup>201</sup> Corti, p. 21.



giardino, ma lui è morto nel camminamento buio. La sua vecchia riceverà una lettera con gli auguri.<sup>202</sup>

While Corti and Revelli were conscious of their own mortality as they wrote, Rigoni Stern gave the subject only the most fleeting thought: 'Chiudo gli occhi sul niente. Forse sarà così la morte, o forse dormo'.<sup>203</sup> He too recorded the death of his superior officer, but in contrast to Revelli, he did not allow grief to intrude on his memory of the man. He chose rather to include an anecdote which captured for him Martinat's personality:

E anche il generale Martinat è morto quel giorno. Io ricordo quando in Albania lo accompagnavo per le nostre linee. Io camminavo in fretta davanti a lui perché conoscevo la strada e mi guardavo indietro per vedere se mi seguiva 'Cammina, cammina pure in fretta caporale, ho le gambe buone io'.<sup>204</sup>

The variety of ways in which Revelli and his contemporaries narrate death in war illustrates the different responses to loss during the Russian campaign. In Revelli's case, a focus on the deaths of his comrades emphasizes the strength of the relationships built up with his troops and fellow-officers; which in turn explains the longevity and expanse of his 'impegno del dopo' as a writer and researcher.

### **Elements which gradually emerged or became more developed**

Finally, Revelli's writing of his experience in Russia incorporated elements which only came to the fore with the passage of time. These include an enhanced realization of his pedagogic role; an increased determination to testify; an appreciation of the role of memory and forgetting; a sense of isolation; and a sense of commitment to the ordinary soldier.

We have seen in Chapter 2 that Revelli was aware, even before his return from Russia, of the need to teach others about what had really happened during the campaign. He did this through writing and later through public speaking and interviews. Of course, what, and whom, Revelli wanted to teach expanded following his time as a partisan, and again as he became increasingly fascinated by the rural communities of Piedmont. That he wanted to reach beyond his own generation was exemplified in the overtly pedagogic visits to schools: 'Ho girato per

<sup>202</sup> Rigoni Stern, pp. 23-24.

<sup>203</sup> Rigoni Stern, p. 118.

<sup>204</sup> Rigoni Stern, p. 140.

centinaia di scuole. In generale, i giovani si interessavano. Dipendeva dai docenti -- se avevano preparato i giovani c'era questo rapporto di domanda, risposta. Spesso il curricolo non gli dà il tempo. Qualcosa di questa storia i giovani devono sapere' (AR1). We have seen already in *Le due guerre* the care Revelli took within the university context to explain war terminology (see Chapter 2).

In addition to a growing desire to educate, Revelli's desire to testify became increasingly pronounced. The refrain 'ricordare e raccontare' had echoed throughout *Mai tardi* and *La guerra dei poveri*. Given that his original motivation for writing was personal, that is, it was written originally as a personal diary, it was only later that he exploited the testimonial nature of his writing. *Le due guerre* opened with the words: 'Sono un testimone' (DG, p. xi), establishing from the very outset his perspective on the events he would discuss. Chapter 2 discussed two different types of witness: the *testes*, or third-party observer, and the *superstes*, or the witness to lived experience. Revelli goes on in *Le due guerre* to explain that he is a *superstes* to Italy's two conflicts during World War II: the Fascist war in Russia, and the anti-Fascist partisan war in Italy (DG, p. xi). The need to testify to these conflicts was bound up in Revelli's sense of an 'impegno del dopo': he had a duty to testify, to communicate what had happened. A sense of anger and outrage at Mussolini's behaviour towards fellow-Italians, particularly the soldiers deployed to the Russian Front, augmented Revelli's commitment to testify. Rather than fading with time, Revelli's role as witness developed -- as displayed in *Le due guerre* -- to teach new generations about Italy's past and its relevance for the present.

In *Le due guerre*, Revelli also dealt to a certain degree with the issue of historical truth versus testimonial truth, with reference to the outside influences and pressures on one's testimony. For example, General Gabriele Nasci who published his account in 1943 immediately after the retreat, faced an environment in which 'per dire certe verità scomode è costretto ad arrampicarsi sui vetri, deve usare un linguaggio diplomatico' (DG, p. 77). General Emilio Battisti, on the other hand, wrote his account after the war and so did not face the same restrictions: 'Battisti non deve ricorrere alla retorica patriottarda per esporre la sua verità. Lui può parlare da uomo libero, anche se disprezza la democrazia' (DG, p. 78).

Not every account of the Russian front was written with the explicit aim of teaching or testifying to others, although they might subsequently serve such a purpose. Mario Rigoni Stern, for example, narrated his experience with no reference either to a sense of duty or spreading the 'truth', nor to teaching others, but *Il sergente nella neve* subsequently appeared as a schools' edition (2001).<sup>205</sup> Similarly, Eugenio Corti spoke overtly of a desire to record the 'truth' as far as he was able without mentioning any specifically pedagogic aim, although his record fulfils such a function.

If the watchwords of *Mai tardi* were 'ricordare e raccontare', *Le due guerre* picked up on the tension between memory and forgetting; that is, the deliberate forgetting of incidents and events, or 'silences'.<sup>206</sup> Throughout his own accounts, Revelli strove to convey an impression of honesty and openness in recounting his experiences. There are 'silences' in his autobiographical record in that he chooses to say very little about himself, or his upbringing. Yet this is consistent with the focus of his 'impegno del dopo' – he is not writing an autobiography of Nuto Revelli, but presenting his record of a crucial period in Italy's history. Interviewing others about the same period, Revelli discovered that some topics were not open for discussion, Fascism in particular, and in *Il disperso di Marburg*, some aspects of partisan behaviour (*DM*, p. 39) and interaction with the German occupier (*DM*, p. 40). He told of discovering that some individuals attempted to restructure the truth and succeeded only in creating a record full of inconsistencies. For example, one contact denied knowing anything about Fascism – despite his name being listed in official documents as 'caposquadra' – and then insisted that the 'capo' was actually someone else. Such a reaction had its own usefulness for Revelli: 'Succedeva così. Dappertutto. Anche le piccole storie non scritte aiutano a capire. Storie destinate a restare sommerse per la scomparsa dei testimoni' (*DG*, pp. 8-9). Corti did not grapple with the issue of deliberate 'forgetting', although he acknowledged the fallibility of memory throughout his diary: 'Quel che accade successivamente lo ricordo in modo molto confuso, e in parte non lo ricordo affatto'.<sup>207</sup>

<sup>205</sup> Mario Rigoni Stern, *Il sergente nella neve* (Turin: Einaudi Ragazzi, (1956) 2001).

<sup>206</sup> See discussion of memory and history in Chapter 2.

<sup>207</sup> Corti, p. 83.

One important element, which emerged in Revelli's writing of the Russian front, was that of isolation. Some aspects of this isolation are apparent in *Mai tardi*; others are only revealed in *Le due guerre* and conversations with Revelli in 2001 and 2002. These latter aspects include the psychological isolation of war, which outlasted the experience, and whose effects Revelli only came to understand later. 'War is another world' according to Hynes:<sup>208</sup> physically, men are taken to the extremities of the globe; emotionally, they have been snatched from their homes, families and everything familiar to the *traintrain quotidienne*. Home, from the perspective of the front line, represents security and safety, the known and the trusted: nothing about active duty is familiar, whether location, food, shelter, routines or levels of danger:

For everyone except career soldiers, military service is a kind of exile from one's own real life, a dislocation of the familiar that the mind preserves as life in another world [...]

For war is more than actions; it is a culture. Military traditions, values, and patterns of behaviour penetrate every aspect of army life and make the most ordinary acts and feelings different.<sup>209</sup>

*Mai tardi* displayed to an extent this 'exile from one's own real life', as Hynes described it. For example, an offhand comment from Revelli about a companion's past profession is expressed in the past tense: 'Il mio vicino di letto è il tenente dei bersaglieri Cambiani, un Milanese: Ha una gamba ingessata. Parliamo dell'Italia: era un noto campione di nuoto' (MT, p. 54). Using a combination of past and present tenses Revelli conveyed the present separation from a past existence, its incongruity in the experienced present, and the possibility that such a state might never be re-attained in the future.

The isolation from family and the familiar experienced by soldiers at war permits a greater appreciation of the unique bond of companionship formed between soldiers at the front. Indeed, as Hynes pointed out: 'Friendship [...] is different there - different enough to need another name: *comradeship*'.<sup>210</sup> Comradeship was much to the fore in Revelli's diary and in the narratives of Rigoni Stern and Corti. *Mai tardi* recounted various episodes which showed Revelli's interaction with old friends and new, and the inter-dependence of comradeship in extreme circumstances such as those on the Don.

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<sup>208</sup> Hynes, p. 10.

<sup>209</sup> Hynes, p. 8.

<sup>210</sup> Hynes, p. 9.

Revelli's entry for 14 November 1942, described the speed with which friendship sprung up creating an immediate sense of solidarity between soldiers: 'Il giorno 11, alle 6, partenza in tradotta. Mi è compagno di viaggio il tenente Botti dell'autocentro: ci conosciamo da poco e siamo già amici. Parliamo liberamente e me ne conta delle belle: disonestà, incapacità, servilismo dappertutto' (MT, p. 78). Later he recorded the morale boost received on returning to his unit after a period behind the lines receiving treatment for his injury; no medical convalescence compared with the restorative of being among his own comrades: 'Mi sto rimettendo in salute: il miglior convalescenzario d'armata è qui, tra gente simpatico, onesta, e che ti vuole bene' (MT, p. 85).

There came a point, however, where comradeship seemed to wilt in the face of a desperate struggle for individual survival: 'La confusione si è fatta immensa: gente che urla, che corre avanti. Inutile chiedere ad una slitta di un altro reparto, ad uno sbandato in fuga, di accogliere un nostro ferito: la legge è una sola, pensare a se stessi' (MT, p. 171). The desperate struggle for survival during the retreat, as the Italians battled not just enemy forces but also the extremities of the Russian climate, went beyond the bounds of solidarity. An individual's strength and resources were tested beyond their limits in keeping oneself alive and there were only rare instances of one soldier helping another as they tried to escape the encircling Russian forces.

The 'otherness' of war was communicated in the narratives of both Corti and Rigoni Stern. Corti spoke overtly of different worlds and his fear that they might never be reconciled:

Ed esisteva davvero il lontano mondo dell'Italia, come lo ricordavo io?  
Dovetti impormi di non pensare più, perché la mente non mi vacillasse.  
Continuai a sperare dentro di me – timidamente quasi – di poter un  
giorno tornare a quel mondo.<sup>211</sup>

Rigoni Stern illustrated the separation from the familiar through the question of Giuanin, one of his soldiers, which rang as a refrain through his account: 'Sergentnagiù, ghe rivarem a baita?'.<sup>212</sup> Returning from such isolation, it was not simply a question of men picking up where they had left off. Speaking to Michele Calandri and other close associates of Nuto Revelli in 2002, one

<sup>211</sup> Corti, p. 171.

<sup>212</sup> Rigoni Stern, p. 20.

woman related how Anna, Revelli's wife, had told her: 'Non ha potuto parlare delle sue esperienze per mesi e mesi' (4R2). Until the publication of *Le due guerre*, Revelli had only allowed his reader limited access to the overpowering sense of isolation he had experienced on his return to Cuneo from Russia:

A Cuneo ci sono mio padre e mia sorella l'ere ad aspettarmi alla stazione. Avverto subito – nel breve tratto fra stazione e casa – che mio padre non si è reso ben conto della tragedia che ho vissuto. Mi chiede delle mie medaglie, e sento un immenso 'vuoto' dentro. Mi sento più solo che mai. (DG, p. 126)

In conversation in 2002, he shared more regarding the difficulties he faced in readjusting to life after the retreat: 'Piangevo forse due ore di seguito sfogliando le pagine del mio diario...Non volevo uscire...c'era tanta gente che mi soffocavano di domande' (4R2). These questions drained Revelli on an emotional level, as he often had to tell a mother the fate of her son. Other questions Revelli told me of included, 'Ma dimmi, fa davvero freddo nella Russia?' On one hand, Revelli confessed that he found such questions infuriating as they belittled the suffering of the soldiers who had served there, and, on the other, they epitomized the ignorance at home about the horrors of the Russian front, and so reinforced his determination to testify and educate through his writing right from the start.

Questions from relatives of the *dispersi* were only one of the challenges faced in readjusting to life after the retreat. In addition, Revelli had to contend with the psychological trauma of his memories, from which he struggled to escape -- so much so that it was only in *Le due guerre* that he felt free to share the extent of the isolation experienced:

Trascorro le giornate chiuso in casa, prigioniero dei miei ricordi. Ho i nervi scossi. Sento sulle mie spalle il peso dei morti, dei dispersi di Russia. Mi ritorna alla mente lo spettacolo di quella gente sfinita, con i piedi in cancrena, che non riesce più ad andare avanti, che abbiamo abbandonato ai bordi delle piste gelate. Nel sonno rivivo la ritirata, di giorno piango. Rivivo la colonna, risento l'urlo bestiale della colonna, un urlo di violenza, di disperazione, di rabbia. Rivivo i combattimenti e grido 'spara, spara...', e allora accorrono mio padre e mia madre a svegliarmi, a calmarli. (DG, p. 126)

He retreated within himself and spoke only in a limited way to Anna, his fiancée (DG, pp. 128-129); as with other survivors of traumatic events, Revelli felt that the only person who really

understood him was a soldier who had come through the same experience: 'Con Piero parlo a ruota libera, perché so che riesce a capirmi' (DG, p. 129).

A different, positive aspect to the isolation is seen in Revelli's decision to publish his diary. The majority of Italians had in 1946 no concept of what had happened to their soldiers in their name during the Russian campaign – they had been isolated from the war, principally through Fascist propaganda and misinformation. Revelli's decision to address this ignorance goes beyond the scope of Hynes' view that personal war narratives functioned as a form of communication between the initiated:

It may be that this sense of isolation is one motive for the writing of war memoirs, that these books are communications among the members of that secret army, the men who have been there and will understand, as other generations will not and cannot.<sup>213</sup>

The final aspect which gradually emerged in Revelli's writing on Russia, his sense that he provided the voice of the common soldier, is one which proved the stepping-stone to research among the *contadini*. We move on to consider Revelli's representation of the ordinary soldier and the *dispersi*. It will become clear in ensuing chapters, Revelli saw himself as a spokesman for the sidelined and ignored of Italian society – whether soldiers or peasants. Writing about Russia, Revelli had identified an historical need for a record of the experiences of the soldier in the ranks, and not just the generals: 'Manca la voce della gente semplice, manca la voce dei cosiddetti "umili", manca la voce dei soldati. Gli eserciti sono fatti anche di generali e di colonnelli, ma soprattutto di soldati' (DG, p. xiii). Or, as Revelli described it with reference to Rigoni Stern's *Sergente nella neve*, there was an historical need for records showing 'la guerra "vista dal basso"' (DG, p. xiii). Choosing such language, Revelli created an obvious parallel with the necessity that the historical record as a whole draw on a 'storia dal basso': if he was conscious that the experiences of soldier and general were needed for a complete military history, likewise, oral testimonies from all levels of society needed to combine with traditional historiography for a comprehensive record of rural communities.

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<sup>213</sup> Hynes, p. 6.

## Writing the experience of the *contadini-soldati*

Revelli's publication of the war memories of the *contadini-soldati* has a different perspective from his autobiographical writing. His diaries recorded events and impressions as they occurred, his later works gave opportunity to consider the Russian campaign with the benefit of hindsight and distance. As discussed earlier in this chapter, this produced a record of his war experience which in some respects adapts to fit the climate in which it was recounted. The *contadini-soldati* did not enjoy the luxury of honing and developing their testimony over years. Those in *L'ultimo fronte* could only record their experience as it unfolded; they provided an 'up-close' view of life at the front – thoughts of home, the agricultural routine, requests for parcels and particular items. Conscious of the censor, there was very little that they could say, if they had wanted to, about the reality of their situation and their political or ideological response. These letters are very much private correspondence between family members, which focus on points of mutual interest. The collections of oral testimonies offer a different perspective again. At best, the individual recorded had a couple of sessions in which to tell his story. These accounts did have the advantage of chronological distance over the letters of *L'ultimo fronte*. However, the result of the recording is that – unlike Revelli's gradual development of his testimony – the oral testimonies can only present a snapshot of the individual's experience of conflict. They are a collection of thematic and chronological memories as presented in a particular moment, on a particular day – with many potentially variable influences.

Chapter 3 discussed the correlation of authenticity and reliability which comes with the frequent repetition of a memory; in the case of the individuals interviewed by Revelli, many had – according to him – never previously recounted their experience. How could he verify the authenticity of their account? This is where we see the importance of Revelli's concern with chorality, or the excision of dissonant accounts: each testimony could be legitimized by assessing its relationship to other testimonies, among the hundreds recorded.

The *contadini-soldati* had shared many of the experiences recounted by Revelli: arrival at the front, interaction with their German allies and the Russian civilians, and ultimately the retreat. Particular aspects distinguish their accounts from that of Revelli, and include their



ignorance about the war, their experience as prisoners of war in Russia, and their concept of home and the isolation of war. Many conclude with life after Russia, that is, the lasting effect of the experience.

One of the most striking features of their testimonies was the ignorance of the soldiers sent to Russia. They often had very little idea of where Russia was (*MV*, p. 61), and even less as to why they were being sent to fight there: 'Noi non si sapeva nemmeno il perché ci avevano mandati in Russia. Non capivamo nulla di fascismo e non fascismo. Si credeva che fosse una passeggiata [...] eravamo convinti che i tedeschi avrebbero vinto ancora prima del nostro arrivo su quel lontano fronte' (*SD*, p. 110). This is balanced by the huge impact of the experience on these men and their families: often borne in silence, either self-imposed, or from a conviction that no one was listening. Both during the time the soldiers were on the Russian front and then when the few survivors returned home, the *contadini* (and Italian society) had no concept of the horror of Russia. Giovanni Marro, speaking to Revelli in his home town of Passatore, Piedmont, in the early 1960s states: 'Qui la gente non ha la minima idea di cos'è successo in Russia' (*SD*, p. 200).

The emotions of the troops as they left for Russia varied hugely. One father, Giuseppe Antonio Bruno, recorded how his son and others like him clearly had no concept of what war was like:

Al cinematografo avevamo visto assieme la ritirata di Napoleone. Guido pensava che quello spettacolo non fosse vero, che fosse solo per divertimento. Io invece sapevo che era storia vera. Erano tanti i giovani che vinti dalla propaganda partivano per la Russia come ad andare a nozze. (*MV*, p. 204)

Of those who did understand in some measure what lay ahead their send-off was marked either by the tears and desperation of family who did their best to get them out of going (*SD*, p. 68), or by the nonchalance of the seasoned veteran:

Nel pomeriggio, fanfare in testa, si va alla stazione. Molta gente, parenti. Fiaschi di vino, salami. Pianti, lacrime. Io ho il morale alto, me ne frego, morire qui o laggiù è lo stesso. Sono come sempre allegro. [...] Il morale dei più è basso, sono tanti gli alpini che piangono. (*SD*, p. 156)

One intriguing anecdote is that of Lorenzo Chiapello who introduced the idea that drugs were administered to the troops prior to their departure for Russia. Most likely to have been some

form of vaccination one imagines, the tone of Chiapello's narration is such as to suggest some mind altering substance: 'La prevista partenza per il fronte russo mi lascia indifferente. Al 1° alpini, a tutti, viene praticata un'iniezione nella schiena. L'iniezione ci dà coraggio, non c'importa più di partire, siamo tutti leoni' (*SD*, p. 512). This is one particular occasion on which it would be helpful to have access to the tape of the original interview in order to hear the full context of the anecdote and also the tone in which it was told: was Chiapello simply being sarcastic, or was there more to it?

On arrival in Russia, several of the witnesses were in the position of having a brother at the front with them. Understandably, this brought added emotional pressure as the brothers attempted to keep in touch and reassure one another of their welfare. While both Edoardo Dutto and his brother eventually returned home safely (*SD*, p. 474), too often this was not the case. Agostino Giordano had no idea what had become of his brother by the end of the campaign: 'Mio fratello Giacomo della classe 1921 era del Dronero, della 19<sup>a</sup>, anche lui in Russia. È rimasto là, vivo o morto, e non ne sappiamo nulla' (*SD*, p. 503). Beyond family relations, there was also evidence that the 'campanilismo' associated with Italian towns and communities was active (*SD*, p. 41), and that inter-regional rivalry still played its role in the field:

Carichiamo trenta macchine di prigionieri per portarli a Kupjansk, a 250 chilometri. Ogni camion ha su quaranta prigionieri, più due fanti della 'Branbilla' di scorta. Sono analfabeti quelli della 'Branbilla', gente di Napoli, che fanno paura anche al diavolo tanto sono mal messi. Il nostro tenente continua a dirci: 'Se i russi sapessero di che forza sono questi terroni della scorta...'. (*SD*, pp. 54-55)

Home was never far from the minds of the soldiers and some managed to keep abreast of developments, good and bad, while they were at the front. Francesco Rossi, for example, recorded that when he was in the prison camp he had heard about the atrocities committed by the Germans, particularly the burning of Boves, but had not believed it (*SD*, p. 385, p. 436). By the time the soldiers returned home domestic life had often changed significantly: Agostino Giordano returned home to discover that both his parents had died during his time of imprisonment in Germany (*SD*, p. 508). There were also more upbeat recollections, such as that of Marco Duberti who described his homecoming at the end of the war (*SD*, p. 353).

One theme which appeared frequently in the testimonies of *La strada del davai* was that of the level of insubordination and AWOL episodes among the troops, albeit before deployment to the front when the troops were based in their barracks and within reasonable reach of home. Giorgio Mattio represented a common attitude prior to deployment in Russia when he explained:

Nella primavera del 1942 la guerra appare ancora lunga, senza fine. Si incomincia a parlare del fronte russo.  
Chiedo un giorno di permesso e me lo negano. Allora scappo, sto a casa tre giorni. Per punizione mi trasferiscono al 5° alpini, 51<sup>a</sup> del battaglione Edolo, ad Alpignano, dove mi trovo bene fra gente brava e giusta'.  
(SD, p. 458)

Pietro Lerda confessed with some shame to another incident on the eve of departure for Russia. This could be dismissed as a case of youthful high spirits, but in the context, which showed a trend for going home at will, seems indicative of a general lack of discipline among the troops:

Estate 1942. Proprio alla vigilia della partenza per il fronte russo succedono fatti spiacevoli fra noi alpini e la popolazione. Noi diciamo che la popolazione non ci tratta bene, con tutti i soldi che abbiamo lasciato in paese. Allora facciamo i dispetti. Portiamo via tutti i vasi di fiori dei caffè, stacciamo le targhe, un mezzo disastro: portiamo tutto in caserma. (SD, p. 247)

Once engaged in war there remained the rare individual, such as Roggero Pasquale, whose behaviour was most bizarre in a military context: 'Io non ho mai sparato in guerra. Perché sparare? A volte mi davano l'ordine di sparare, quando era di vedetta: piantavo il calcio del fucile per terra e sparavo al cielo, poi ascoltavo che la pallottola tornasse giù, *lì cunus nen chieilli maselu...* [Non lo conosco quello lì, perché ammazzarlo...]' (MV, p. 291).

The military doctor, Giovanni Antonio Aimo, gave a helpful and slightly different picture. Not only did he experience many of the situations described in the testimonies of the troops but he was also in a position which allowed an outside, or more objective, view of the circumstances faced by the Italian troops and their ensuing response. He depicts the *alpini* in a more favourable light with regard to discipline and simultaneously gives a helpful insight to the character of the *contadini-soldati*:

I nostri reparti alpini sono un'altra cosa, sono una famiglia. Gli alpini, gente semplice e poco istruita, un po' mugugnano, magari inveiscono, ma si adattano. Non sono né ottimisti né pessimisti. Non sanno cosa sia il fascismo. Obbediscono sempre. È questo il difetto degli alpini, dire sí a

tutti gli ordini. In questi pochi giorni ne hanno viste di tutti i colori. Continuano a dire: 'Che *ravist*, che casino', ma non pensano al peggio. (SD, p. 560)

The testimonies of the men captured and imprisoned by the Russians dealt principally with the day-to-day concerns of food, conditions and work, transfer from one camp to another and the various journeys involved. Some testimonies were particularly entertaining and revealed the mischievous *furberia* in which the men engaged to supply their needs or for pure amusement. The testimonies of Marcellino Re and Battista Candela suggest those of born storytellers who could keep an audience enthralled for hours as they recount one anecdote after another. Re takes great pleasure in retelling a trick he and his accomplices played, demonstrating to the female doctor of the prison camp how Italians turn on the electrical lights with a match; not surprisingly, he left the poor woman traumatised and more convinced than ever of the madness of her Italian charges (SD, p. 185). Battista Candela, on the other hand, included among his adventures numerous anecdotes describing his trickery of Russian civilians in order to obtain food (SD, pp. 83-84) and a novel theme, his failed attempt to organise a strike within the prison camp (SD, pp. 91-92). While not presenting himself in a particularly honourable light (his actions could perhaps be attributed to the fact that he was starving), Candela provided a consistently entertaining narrative against the gravity of the overall experience.

These particular testimonies do not seem to be those of men who struggled to share painful memories – they make the most of their story so that it takes on the appearance of a performance. A good story-teller is skilled in embellishment. Again, listening to the original recording would allow a better assessment of whether these accounts were embellished performances – hearing the tone, pace, emphases with which the experience was narrated is quite different from reading words on a page. Still, while a passionate and skilled presentation is not necessarily at odds with the substance or veracity of the experience recounted – it had been life-changing in many cases – narrative embellishments can intrude on, or at least influence, memory and its recall.

In a European context which enjoyed a plethora of Allied 'escape stories' after World War II,<sup>214</sup> the witnesses interviewed by Revelli who tried to escape from the Russian POW camps are few and far between. Distance and conditions certainly made a successful escape less likely than for the Allied prisoners held in Germany and Eastern Europe, even so there were only one or two testimonies, such as that of Marcellino Re, which included these details.

One testimony that stood out in the war narratives was that of Giuseppe Lamberti. A captain in the *alpini*, Lamberti's testimony is particularly enlightening as he took a much broader perspective on events than was the norm among Revelli's witnesses. He began his account with the completion of military training and included comment on issues such as the treatment of Jews, Fascist rhetoric, the poor condition and supply of equipment among the Italian troops, and the weak level of leadership and direction within the military hierarchy. In many ways, Lamberti's content and style echoed Revelli's own account of Russia: it was narrated in a chronological and dated format, and documented the progression of his thoughts concerning the army and the fascist regime. Where it differed was in the details presented, presumably because, unlike Revelli's original diary, he utilized the breadth of vision afforded by distance in time. This broader perspective also distinguishes Lamberti's testimony from that of his peers. Lamberti describes his conversion to communism while a POW, a contributory factor in his very breadth of outlook. Once he returned to Cuneo, his politics created problems: 'A Cuneo, con non poca sorpresa, mi vedo preso di mira da un fuoco di fila di calunnie e diffamazioni di origine più o meno anonima' (*SD*, p. 378). The hostility encountered – while it did not surprise him – was due largely to the European-wide fear of Communism immediately after the war. At work, he faced more suspicion as spoke about his experiences in Russia and his subsequent political opinions:

Si crea una situazione di disagio. I miei superiori, colleghi e inferiori sono decisamente in disagio nei miei confronti. Non ho nulla da nascondere, parlo in pubblico e privato, parlo e scrivo sempre e soltanto basandomi sui fatti. Così arrivano i primi arresti, poi i primi interrogatori, preludio a un'inchiesta ufficiale con relativo consiglio di disciplina. (*SD*, p. 378)

<sup>214</sup> See for example, Eric Williams, *The Wooden Horse* (London: Leo Cooper Ltd, 2005); Bruce Marshall, *The White Rabbit: Wing Commander F.F.-E Yeo-Thomas* (London: Cassell Military, 2004); P. R. Reid, *The Colditz Story* (London: Cassell Military 2004); Paul Brickhill, *The Great Escape* (London: Cassell Military, 2004).

Like Revelli, Lamberti grasped the historical significance of bearing witness to one's experiences – even in the face of suspicion from fellow-citizens: 'Non è comunque la nostra piccola persona che conta, ma la speranza che la nostra tragedia, nelle sue cause e conseguenze, possa servire almeno a evitarne altre simili illuminando i giovani purtroppo ignari o male informati' (*SD*, p. 379).

The return home, after retreat or imprisonment, was not always trouble free. As we saw above, domestic circumstances often changed drastically during the soldier's time away and, in addition, very few spouses and neighbours grasped the depth of the trauma undergone by their men. We have seen Revelli's own anguish and isolation on his return to Cuneo in *Mai tardi* and *La guerra dei poveri*, and in the collections of testimonies, it was evident that a significant proportion of the soldiers in the lower ranks experienced similar emotions. Additionally, many now suffered from health problems or injuries, which made it very difficult, if not impossible in some cases, to return to their former work. Giuseppe Viale's description was typical of the situation of many returning *alpini*: 'Contadino, mi sono trovato senza forze, senza salute, senza niente. Per fortuna la mia famiglia mi ha aiutato: nei primi anni infatti non ero assolutamente in condizione di lavorare, e avrei potuto andare a chiedere l'elemosina' (*SD*, p. 34).

Frequently the *contadini* spoke of their difficulty in making a successful claim for a war pension and the scarcity of any other form of recognition awarded by the government, such as war medals, for their service and suffering. One veteran bitterly disappointed with the recognition received was Giorgio Mattio who said: 'I miei dieci anni di vita miliare finiscono con l'aprile del 1945: ottantacinque mesi di naja, di vero servizio, e per compenso nemmeno una croce di guerra mi daranno. Riceverò poi una medaglietta di bronzo con un foglio di carta, una medaglietta che non conta e che non vale nulla' (*SD*, p. 460). Similarly, Giuseppe Castellino pointed out that some forms of recognition were of more practical value than others: 'Non posso lavorare, sono più morto che vivo. Ho una croce di guerra che non serve a niente. Sono invalido al lavoro per due anni. Ma nessuna pensione di guerra' (*SD*, p. 335).

## Issues for the integrity of Revelli's 'impegno del dopo'

Chapter 2 established that, at its most basic, Revelli's sense of an 'impegno del dopo' was a commitment to not forget, and a desire to testify at all costs. The 'impegno del dopo' was based on three factors: his own experiences of conflict; relationships established during this period; and an ensuing self-imposed responsibility for these men. His role as witness was two-fold: that of the *testis* and also that of the *superstes*. Revelli's writing of personal experience of the Russian front demonstrates that consequently there was a natural progression from autobiographical testimony-writing to facilitating the testimonies of the *contadini-soldati*. Whether he succeeds in fulfilling this 'impegno del dopo' depends on Revelli's handling of the sources or memories available: is he simply 'editing' in preparation for publication, or is there a 'manipulation' of the material?

*Mai tardi* shows the editorial changes over several editions of his first autobiographical text. We have already looked at one example of editing in respect of Revelli's presentation of his antipathy towards the Germans. The bulk of Revelli's editing, appears to have been done in preparation for the publication of *La guerra dei poveri* (1962) as its first chapter - which deals with the retreat from Russia - was then repeated virtually verbatim in the 1967 Einaudi edition of *Mai tardi*.

There are several other examples of intriguing editing between the original Panfilo edition and the later Einaudi edition. Firstly, Revelli significantly toned down his diatribes against the Germans in the 1967 edition. Secondly, Anna, Revelli's fiancée, who had not been referred to in the original, is mentioned infrequently in the 1967 edition - leading one to wonder whether Einaudi had attempted to include some, albeit minimal, 'love interest' in the later edition. Finally, it looks as if the 1967 edition was tightened significantly to excise rambling thoughts or potentially insignificant detail.

Even discounting the level of editorial intervention which is evident between the 1946 edition and that of 1967, there are at least two instances which point to revision prior to the diary's publication by Panfilo. In these instances, Revelli appears to write with the benefit of hindsight, or foresight as the case may be. The first of these, the entry of 20th January 1943

(*MT*, p. 137) records both the rumours of the generals' movements and then, in the past tense, what they had done. The second example could be read either as hindsight or as foresight, with Revelli predicting a plausible future scenario: "Alle Kaput", rispose Maccagno, ed i tedeschi restarono impassibili. Erano italiani, i morti, tanti nemici di meno per l'avvenire' (*MT*, p. 197). The only sure method of ascertaining the extent of editorial intervention in *Mai tardi* would be to consult the original diary, known to be extant in 1994;<sup>215</sup> an option which may become possible as the Fondazione Revelli becomes more established.

The overall conclusion after a reading of each of the editions is that the 1946 edition seems the more authentic of the two editions, precisely because of the colourfulness of Revelli's antipathy to the Germans and his inclusion of mundane minutiae from life at the front. Even if the 1967 edition might have lost some of these characteristics, it remains a matter-of-fact portrayal of events at the front. Thus the focus and core of the diary in each of the editions remains the same; namely, that Revelli is publishing his first-hand account of the conflict, the ensuing retreat, and the conditions endured.

Revelli's aims in facilitating the testimonies of the *contadini-soldati* certainly seemed worthwhile as he was rectifying a lack in the historical record. But how achievable was his goal of allowing ordinary soldiers to recount their war? Chapter 3 highlighted the methodological issues involved in Revelli's pursuit of this goal: recording and editing processes showed significant scope for deliberate or unavoidable manipulation of the witness's testimony. Earlier in this chapter, we saw the influence of time on correspondence in *L'ultimo fronte* and oral testimonies in *La strada del daval* and the other two collections. The letter-writing *contadini* had a very narrow perspective on war; they could only report in a limited fashion on the immediate present. The oral witnesses were limited to very few sessions, often as few as one or two, in which to recall and narrate their war experiences. We saw in Chapter 3 the implications of Revelli's methodology in shaping the testimony during recording and reshaping it during editing. There is a sense in which recall and narration of their experiences had to be limited to 'bullet-point memories' by the very nature of Revelli's research project. These individuals were

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<sup>215</sup> Cavignola, 3 October 1994.



often telling their story for the first time, rather than – as he had done – continually considering events as they narrated them over decades.

*La strada del davai* and *L'ultimo fronte* demonstrate collective or choral qualities similar to those of later collections. At the same time, they retain enough distinctive incidents, or accounts, to show that Revelli was listening to the variety of experiences recounted and not merely shaping them to fit a pre-cast mould. The chorality or uniformity of the accounts is such as to authenticate the reliability of the narratives; their individuality is such as to convince readers that Revelli has facilitated the telling of their personal stories (even with the methodological caveats mentioned above and in Chapter 3).

## Conclusion

When Revelli set out to narrate personal experience of the Russian front, his aim for his autobiographical publications was firstly that they might communicate his subjective truth of what had transpired in Russia, and secondly, that they might teach the ignorant. Facilitating the testimonies of the *contadini-soldati*, Revelli's aim was to let the ordinary soldier speak, that is, he aimed to rectify an imbalance in the historiography of the campaign.

The main polemic identified in Revelli's writing of personal experience of the Russian front is that of silences – on his part, rather than that of his witnesses. Reading the testimonies of the *contadini-soldati* it is relatively easy to spot aspects which they might be reticent to discuss; involvement with Fascism is a good example of such 'silence'. Unsurprisingly for an autobiographical account, it is harder to see where Revelli has kept quiet – other than in speaking of his own family and background – until access to original tapes and transcripts becomes possible.

*Mai tardi*, *La guerra dei poveri* and *La due guerre* narrate the realities and complexities facing Revelli's generation during and after World War II. He presents a record of individual and national turmoil. Italian society of the late 1940s did not divide neatly into Fascists and anti-Fascists; Revelli was a good example of a generation which had been brought up as Fascists and then later adopted an anti-Fascist perspective. While the Russian campaign had been largely

forgotten after the Liberation, as part of a collective shame and shunning of all things connected to the former regime, Revelli could see that its effects still needed to be addressed. Many of these effects outlasted Fascism by decades. The revisions in the various editions of *Mai tardi* and the presentation of the Russian front in later publications suggest that Revelli constantly revisited his war experience and its narration so that the force of the message was relevant to succeeding generations of Italians. His 'impegno' to communicate truthfully what had happened in Russia never diminished.

*La strada del davai*, *L'ultimo fronte*, *Il mondo dei vinti* and *L'anello forte* show the stereotypical detachment or marginalization of the *contadini* from the particular perspective of rural Piedmont.<sup>216</sup> Many of those who spoke to Revelli were ignorant of any political rationale; a few were politically engaged. The *contadini-soldati* were, he said 'sfruttati' and their own accounts verify this. Their testimonies give evidence on an individual and community level of Revelli's conviction that the past has consequences for the present – many of these witnesses were still suffering physically, psychologically, and financially as a result of their deployment to the Russian front some twenty years previously.

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<sup>216</sup> The relationship between stereotypes of Italian *contadini* – based particularly on the South – and the realities in rural Piedmont are analyzed in Chapter 6.

## **Chapter 5**

### ***Revelli's Representation of War in Italy, 1943-45***

Revelli's representation of the period 1943-1945 is important in a study of his response to his 'impegno del dopo'. Firstly, he views the Resistance as something of a continuation of the war in Russia; he is looking for revenge for his fallen comrades. Secondly, Revelli shows that the Resistance acted as a bridge between the 'impegno del dopo' which focused on writing his experience of Russia, and the 'impegno del dopo' which saw him devote decades to facilitating the memories of rural Piedmont. As we have said, it was during this period that Revelli first came to know the *contadini* within their home environment.

Chapter 5 begins with an overview of 1943-1945 and the format and content of Revelli's publications on the period. The chapter then divides into three further sections as follows. Section II is a study of how Revelli represents the period through his own experiences and those of the *contadini*. Section III examines the aspects particular to the perspective of the *contadini*. Section IV analyzes the concept of reconciliation, whether that of memory and history, past and present, methodology and 'truth', or reconciliation between generations and nationalities.

## Section I: War in Italy, 1943-1945

Revelli returned to Cuneo from Russia in early April 1943, just less than a year after he had set out for the front. On 25 July 1943, twenty years of Fascist domination ended with the ignominious deposition of Mussolini, arrested on the orders of King Vittorio Emanuele III. Marshal Badoglio, the newly appointed Prime Minister, announced that same evening that Fascism had fallen, but that the war continued. At this point, the detail of the war they were fighting was clear neither to Badoglio nor to the Italian people at large.<sup>217</sup> Badoglio's 'technical' government oversaw an ambiguous transition from Fascism to anti-Fascism during which there was little prosecution of guilty parties. Former Fascists were often absorbed into the new Badoglio infrastructure, giving the disturbing impression that 'Fascism had never been'.<sup>218</sup> Badoglio, however, gave no guidance or decrees as to how Italy should relate to Mussolini's dominant ally, Germany. While he attempted swiftly and secretly to secure an armistice with the Allies, the Italians as a whole were left perplexed: soldiers on the various fronts continued to fight for the Germans, while those at home, such as Revelli, contemplated the possibility of taking up arms against their former allies.

Two months later, on 8th September, Badoglio finally reached an armistice with the Allies, but not before Italy's former ally had anticipated events and begun to consolidate the forces already in Italy. Italy wanted out of the war completely, yet the armistice, which appeared to offer hope of peace, in fact ushered in a period of fresh danger as the Allies and the now hostile German forces engaged in a race to occupy the peninsula. The Italian military was left in a state of unprecedented chaos, even, as Revelli notes in *La guerra dei poveri*, by the standards of what he had experienced in Russia:

Che fare? Il gioco è grande, superiore alle nostre forze. È tremendo assistere a questa lenta agonia, sentire che la divisa, che le armi diventano un peso, un ingombro. È il secondo fallimento che mi arriva sulle spalle, a breve scadenza, ed è più pesante dell'altro. (GP, p. 118)

Nonetheless, by the time Badoglio made a formal declaration of war on Germany a month later, so becoming a lower-ranking 'co-belligerent' with the Allied forces rather than their equal 'ally',

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<sup>217</sup> Clark, p. 299.

<sup>218</sup> Clark, p. 299.

numerous groups of partisan fighters were already springing up.<sup>219</sup> These bands, found predominantly in the North where the occupying forces were concentrated, were prepared to resist the German occupation of Italy and fight for her eventual liberation. In the valleys around Cuneo, a high percentage of these fighters included 'sbandati', that is soldiers from the IV Armata which had disbanded in the area following its return from France and Badoglio's armistice.<sup>220</sup> Indeed, such was the vitality with which these partisan bands went into action that within a matter of weeks of the signing of the armistice, German retribution against the partisans had resulted in the massacre of Boves, only some nine kilometres from Revelli's home town of Cuneo. As Schreiber recounts in his examination of German crimes against the Italian people, *La vendetta tedesca*, Boves was razed to the ground and: 'Fra le vittime vi furono soprattutto persone invalide, vecchi e malati, assassinati in modo atroce e a sangue freddo'.<sup>221</sup> This was to be one of the most infamous German crimes against the civilian population during the entire Resistance and served as an early warning of what lay ahead on the road to liberation.

This Resistance against the Nazi occupier and its Fascist followers was by its very nature and mode of operation to impact heavily on a great many Italian citizens in the north of the country. Many were directly involved as members of one of the partisan bands; others, indirectly, through the provision of shelter, food and other necessities. There were others, such as the inhabitants of Boves, who bore the brunt of German reprisals against partisan actions, innocent though they might have been. Roger Absalom, in *Italy since 1800: A Nation in the Balance?*, described this period as one in which 'Italy became a field of desperate and muddled struggle between armies, classes, and ideologies in many perversely paradoxical combinations which added to the complexity of a situation whose outcomes no one could foresee, far less command'.<sup>222</sup>

Amid this confusion, there nevertheless existed the hope that the Resistance would ultimately play a positive and influential role in the rebuilding of the Italian nation and government. Under pressure from the *Comitato di liberazione nazionale* (CLN) to form a new government with a civilian leader, Badoglio had resigned following the Allies' entry into Rome at

<sup>219</sup> Clark, p. 304.

<sup>220</sup> Santo Peli, *Resistenza in Italia: Storia e critica* (Turin: Einaudi, 2004), p. 23.

<sup>221</sup> Gerhard Schreiber, *La vendetta tedesca* (Milan: Mondadori, 2000), p. 135.

<sup>222</sup> Roger Absalom, *Italy since 1800: A Nation in the Balance?* (London: Longman, 1995), p. 167.

the beginning of June 1944. Bonomi was then appointed as the leader of a government consisting of the six parties in the CLN, so effecting a 'bloodless coup'<sup>223</sup> against Badoglio's "non-political" administration'.<sup>224</sup> The focus of this government might have been difficult to define, but at this point, the CLN was seen as an influence for good, seeming to offer the boundless possibilities and optimism the country desperately required.<sup>225</sup>

This formative period in the development of twentieth century Italy has been analyzed from a variety of historical and sociological points of view. Several histories of the Resistance were published in the decades following the Liberation,<sup>226</sup> and the 1990s saw a new surge in publications beginning with Claudio Pavone's *Una guerra civile*.<sup>227</sup> His study argued that the Resistance movement was not merely a patriotic uprising against the invader, but simultaneously a 'guerra civile' and a 'guerra di classe'. Within this classification, he paid particular attention to the role of violence during these twenty months. Revelli found such a tripartite division ludicrous and took umbrage at what he considered to be Pavone's levelling of the period so that 'tutti i morti sono uguali'; Revelli could not accept that the death of a partisan was the same as the death of a Fascist.<sup>228</sup> By contrast, Rossana Rossanda saw echoes of Pavone in Revelli's outlook in *Il disperso di Marburg*: 'Il "Lied" iniziale del *Disperso di Marburg* riecheggia quello del libro di Claudio Pavone sulla problematica morale di ogni guerra civile, dove puoi finire con il somigliare al nemico' (*DM*, p. vi). Other histories of the Resistance have been published since Pavone's work, though *Una guerra civile* remains a standard point of reference.<sup>229</sup>

Revelli and Pavone might have judged aspects of the Resistance differently, but Philip Cooke highlights the similarities in the freshness of their approach, arguing that *Il disperso di*

<sup>223</sup> Clark, p. 306.

<sup>224</sup> Mack Smith, p. 418.

<sup>225</sup> Clark, p. 307.

<sup>226</sup> Roberto Battaglia, *Storia della Resistenza italiana (8 settembre 1943-25 aprile 1945)* (Turin: Einaudi, 1953); *La storiografia della Resistenza* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1964); Giorgio Bocca, *Storia dell'Italia partigiana: settembre 1943-maggio 1945* (Bari: Laterza, 1966); Guido Quazza, *Resistenza e storia d'Italia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1976); *Enciclopedia dell'antifascismo e della Resistenza*, ed. by Pietro Secchia (Milan: La Pietra, 1968).

<sup>227</sup> Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile: Saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991).

<sup>228</sup> Paola Bastai and Luciano Della Mea, 'L'ebraica sulla tradotta', *Il ponte*, 7-8 (July-August 1996), 91-108 (p. 96).

<sup>229</sup> Romolo Gobbi, *Il mito della Resistenza* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1992); Gian Enrico Rusconi, *Resistenza e postfascismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995); Pietro Scoppola, *25 Aprile. Liberazione* (Turin: Einaudi, 1995); Philip Cooke, *The Italian Resistance: An Anthology* (Manchester: MUP, 1997).

Marburg represents the only (semi-) literary text that comes near to the fundamental 'rethinking' of the period carried out by Pavone.<sup>230</sup> In the preface to the 1994 edition of *Una guerra civile*, Pavone stated that, until this point, Italian histories of the Resistance had paid little attention to the military aspects of the partisan movement.<sup>231</sup> A study of *La guerra dei poveri* shows, I believe, that Revelli's publication went some way to rectifying this apparent omission, as his perspective remained predominantly that of the 'militari', even when he joined the 'politici'.

The period 1943-1945 has been variously depicted in Italian film. Two of the most influential are *Paisà* and *La notte di San Lorenzo*. The Taviani brothers' highly acclaimed film *La notte di San Lorenzo* (1982) contrasted with Rossellini's earlier film, *Paisà* (1946), in a number of ways. *Paisà*, the second film of Rossellini's war trilogy and a neorealist docu-drama, depicted the liberation of the Italian peninsula in sequence with the American advance; the Taviani brothers, on the other hand, focused on the localized liberation of Tuscany in August 1944 and 'the confusing journey of the Tuscan peasants who lack any clear destination or purpose'.<sup>232</sup> *La notte di San Lorenzo* raised several important issues in historiographic representation, including the question of the interaction of memory, myth and history. It also placed a spotlight on the nature of the Resistance as civil war: 'The Christian brotherhood established between Italians and Americans in Rossellini is, in the Taviani's film, replaced by an internecine civil war between residents of the same town, a struggle from which the Americans are physically absent'.<sup>233</sup> The idea of the Resistance as civil war was re-identified by Claudio Pavone,<sup>234</sup> but was already an acknowledged characteristic at the time by those involved and then by Norberto Bobbio.

Post-war presentation of the Resistance as a 'unifying national heroic myth',<sup>235</sup> poses an immediate complexity as it flies in the face of the geographical reality. Partisans were active in Rome (for example, in the Via Rasella incident which provoked the massacres of the Fosse

<sup>230</sup> Cooke, p. 17.

<sup>231</sup> Pavone, p. xiii.

<sup>232</sup> Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*, 3rd edition (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 393.

<sup>233</sup> Bondanella, p. 394.

<sup>234</sup> Gianni Oliva, *Le tre Italie del 1943: chi ha veramente combattuto la guerra civile* (Milan: Mondadori, 2004), pp. 72-73.

<sup>235</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Italian Culture*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Barański and Rebecca J. West (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), p. 11.

Ardeatine), but their sphere of operation was predominantly in the North.<sup>236</sup> Even here, the Partito d'Azione, one of the key political parties behind the partisan bands, was 'quite unable to build any mass following in either city or countryside'.<sup>237</sup> The idea of the Resistance being a unifying force is based more on popular myth rather than any actual unity of action or sense of national involvement.

Within the literary sphere, Resistance writing quickly developed its own conventions but produced very different works. Contrast, for example, Calvino's *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, written from the perspective of a child protagonist, Pavese's *La casa in collina*, which shows the 'lucid and tormented consciousness of the moral and ideal choices the Resistance required',<sup>238</sup> or Fenoglio's *Una questione privata* (1963). What the genre generally lacked until later was the female perspective on the period:

One explanation as to why women did not contribute to stories of the Resistance is provided by the nature of the genre itself. The Resistance, as it was relived in the collective imaginary, shared many of the attributes found in the world of boys' adventure stories where life is lived, often literally, in the wild, beyond the reach of home and family.<sup>239</sup>

Renata Viganò's *L'Agnese va a morire* (1949) and Ada Gobetti's *Diario partigiano* (1956) were two earlier works by women, again each having their own distinct characteristics. The former was a novel depicting the Resistance involvement of a simple washerwoman, L'Agnese, as a *staffetta* and her eventual execution for having killed a German soldier, the latter an autobiographical account of a mother who joined the partisans with her son. The initial exclusion of women from the genre is something of an anomaly given the number of women involved in the Resistance and the role

<sup>236</sup> The number of active partisans reached a peak in the summer of 1944 although there is some dispute as to the total figures involved by this point. To quote Peli: 'Bocca valuta a 50 000 i partigiani in luglio, a 70 000 "e più" quelli di agosto. A metà giugno l'Ufficio di stato maggiore dell'esercito della Rsi segnala, nella sola Italia del nord, 78 200 partigiani effettivi, cifre che anche Pietro Secchia giudica "notevolmente gonfiate", perché "a quell'epoca in realtà, il movimento partigiano contava non più di cinquantamila uomini"' (pp. 74-75).

According to Fascist documents Revelli later secured, the Fascists by this point lived in terror of the partisans, and, to Revelli's amusement, had a grossly exaggerated assessment of partisan strength during this period: "Si parla della Valle Stura in questi documenti, dove eravamo circa 700, e qui si dice che eravamo 3000. E questi suoi dati, il generale Ferraudi [...] ha notizie sicurissime che gli inglesi (sempre "gli inglesi"!)) ci hanno paracaduto dei carri armati smontati...! [sic] E poi dei tecnici inglesi che li stanno montando! Hanno proprio le allucinazioni, i fascisti!" (DG, pp. 166-167).

<sup>237</sup> Ginsborg, p. 54.

<sup>238</sup> Gian-Paolo Biasin, 'Narrative of self and society', in Barański, pp. 151-171 (p. 166).

<sup>239</sup> Ann Hallamore Caesar, 'Post-war Italian Narrative: An Alternative Account', in *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, ed. by David Forgacs and Robert Lumley, pp. 248-260 (p. 251).



they had played.<sup>240</sup> They had contributed both to the immediate conflict and to progress in Italian society: 'Thousands of women were mobilized to fight the oppressors and to end the war, the first mass women's organizations were created, and women gained the vote and assumed public roles to an unprecedented degree'.<sup>241</sup> At the time of its publication in 1977, *Il mondo dei vinti* was rather innovative in that it offered access not just to the testimony of *contadini*, but also to the female perspective on the Resistance.<sup>242</sup>

### Revelli's Autobiographical Representation of 1943-1945

Given the changing context of the years of the 'economic boom', why, when so many were looking to new subjects and new styles, should Revelli choose in 1962 to return to the topic of war and Resistance with the publication of *La guerra dei poveri*? During the 1950s, the Democrazia Cristiana had made a concerted effort to 'demythify' the partisans,<sup>243</sup> which Revelli's publication of his partisan record assists. Overall, Revelli was very much his own man, working to his own agenda, regardless of times and trends. The prime reason for writing *La guerra dei poveri* when he did is more likely that it constituted a necessary sequel to *Mai tardi*, and a fitting conclusion to Revelli's personal record of conflict. The inherent connection in Revelli's mind between the two wars and his sense of an 'impegno del dopo' is seen in his decision to preface his record of the Resistance with a chapter entitled 'La ritirata sul fronte russo', a virtually verbatim repetition of the events with which *Mai tardi* had concluded. Revelli belonged to two different partisan bands. He later joined Dante Livio Bianco and 'Italia libera', but had initially been part of an apolitical band. Revelli's diary entry for 5<sup>th</sup> October 1943 explains the choice of name for this first band and the connections he saw between the two conflicts:

Abbiamo battezzato la nostra formazione: la compagnia Rivendicazione Caduti.

Vogliamo vendicare i caduti di Russia. Il nostro giuramento dice: '...per ogni italiano morto in Russia dieci fascisti e dieci tedeschi accoppiati'. (CP, p. 128)

<sup>240</sup> Sharon Wood and Joseph Farrell, 'Other voices: contesting the status quo', in Baranowski, pp. 131-149 (p. 145).

<sup>241</sup> Jane Slaughter, *Women and the Italian Resistance, 1943-1945* (Denver: Arden Press, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>242</sup> Bianca Guidetti Sera's *Compagne. Testimonianze di partecipazione politica femminile* – two volumes of oral testimonies – appeared in the same year (Turin: Einaudi).

<sup>243</sup> Victoria C. Belco, 'Mutineer Johnny? The Italian Partisan Movement as Mutiny', in *Rebellion, Repression, Reinvention: Mutiny in Comparative Perspective*, ed. by Jane Hathaway (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), pp. 25-44 (p. 37).

In *Le due guerre* Revelli emphasized the sense of burden or obligation sparked by these *casutti*, referring to it as 'quel peso sul cuore che ci spinge a sparare sui tedeschi e sui fascisti' (*DC*, p. 137).<sup>244</sup> He tells us many years later that throughout the partisan conflict, this burden coexisted with a desire for liberty and, as his political awareness evolved, an ideological vision for the future: 'Uno dei nostri sogni era la libertà, dopo la fine della guerra. Sognavamo: giustizia, solidarietà, tutte le strutture fasciste cancellate; non ci saranno più guerra, la pace per sempre'.<sup>245</sup> Even a month or so after joining 'Italia Libera' an extract from Revelli's diary showed a vision that went beyond mere revenge: 'Una certezza ci spinge a pagare di persona: che questa è l'ultima guerra per un mondo migliore' (*GP*, p. 168). Revelli expanded further on his partisan dreams in another interview in *Libera età*, from 1998: 'Sognavo, speravo un paese che aprisse gli occhi, e continuasse a tenerli bene aperti, contro ogni pigrizia, ogni assuefazione, ogni facile oblio'.<sup>246</sup> Writing in *La guerra dei poveri* (with the benefit of hindsight), Revelli suggests that he was already aware that the North-South divide was going to dictate the shape of Italy's future post-war: 'Avremo un'Italia repubblicana: monarchia vuole dire fascismo. L'Italia libera del sud non è l'Italia di domani, non è l'Italia per cui combattiamo: là la baracca gira male, perché manca il nord' (*GP*, p. 165).<sup>247</sup>

The presentation of *La guerra dei poveri* as a war diary is similar to that of *Mai tardi* and additional autobiographical detail of the Resistance is contained in later publications, *Il disperso di Marburg* (1994) and *Le due guerre* (2003). Ostensibly, the 'impegno' behind *Il disperso di Marburg* is the identification of a German *disperso*. A complex and absorbing narrative, *Il disperso* has a hybrid construction of diary, oral testimony, archive entries, and correspondence. However, the real importance of *Il disperso di Marburg* lies not so much in presenting a record of the Resistance, but in Revelli's open analysis – for the first time – of theoretical issues in presenting historical truth (the truth established and accepted by historians) against testimonial truth (the individual's truth). He has not changed his perception of himself as an amateur, but is now engaging with the polemics

<sup>244</sup> In Chapter 4 we saw the strength of Revelli's antipathy towards the Germans. The alliance between Italy and Germany had, as Peli states, been a 'brutal friendship' (Peli, p. 30), and a desire for vengeance against them was common during the Resistance as the Italians held them responsible to a large extent for the losses sustained, particularly during the retreat (Peli, pp. 31–32).

<sup>245</sup> Gigi Ferraro, 'Fascismo democratico? Una bestemmia', *La pagina*, 30 March 1995, p. 3.

<sup>246</sup> Eugenio Manca, 'Il partigiano', *Libera età*, 4, April 1998, 34–39 (p. 35).

<sup>247</sup> *La guerra dei poveri* was only published in 1962, so it is possible that such a statement has been edited to reflect later knowledge.

of the broader discipline as he gathers a variety of 'true' statements from the witnesses contacted, ex-partisans and *contadini*. *Le due guerre: guerra fascista e guerra partigiana* is potentially the most illuminating of Revelli's works on 1943-1945. This is due to its broader perspective and greater level of explanation of events and their significance, both because of the distance in time and the specific remit of the original university lectures.

Chapter 2 provided an examination of the origins and evolution of Revelli's sense of an 'impegno del dopo' across the spectrum of his oeuvre. Reading his record of 1943-1945, we see the origin of his 'impegno del dopo' remains fixed in his experience in Russia and the relationships initiated there with his troops. The following extract from an interview with Guido Davico Bonino in 1997, shows the importance of this period in shaping the future direction of Revelli's research among the *contadini*:

Ho cominciato a scrivere perché volevo ad ogni costo raccontare la mia esperienza di alpino in Russia. [...] Io mi sarei fermato lì [cioè dopo la pubblicazione di *Mai tardi*]. Ma poi vado a fare il partigiano e scopro il retroterra sociale dei miei alpini: sono i contadini delle mie vallate, che il fascismo ha costretto a questo nuovo sacrificio, dopo averli dati in pasto ad una guerra orribile. E allora ho capito che dovevo farli parlare, a prezzo di qualunque sacrificio.<sup>248</sup>

In the same interview, Revelli went on to show that facilitating the memories of others did indeed involve a heavy personal price, whether emotional or psychological, not to mention the time and energy expended:

Scrivere di altri non era il mio mestiere, sono un commerciante, e poi psicologicamente era molto faticoso, dovevo rivivere con ognuno di loro un'esperienza dolorosa e terribile. Comunque, in quindici anni di lavoro, è nata *La guerra dei poveri*, consegnata a Einaudi nel '60 e uscita nel '62.<sup>249</sup>

Of his motivation in producing the later works around the subject of the Resistance, Revelli said: 'Sono suggerimenti del cuore, suggerimenti che sono maturati: ho fatto le cose che sentivo quasi in obbligo di fare'.<sup>250</sup> This commitment to remembering was certainly not unique,<sup>251</sup> indeed, it characterized much of the neorealist production of the post-war period, but for Revelli the

<sup>248</sup> Davico Bonino, p. 25.

<sup>249</sup> Davico Bonino, p. 25.

<sup>250</sup> Massimo Novelli, 'Le mie illusioni che la sinistra ha disperso', *La Repubblica*, 20 July 1999, section Cultura, p. 32.

<sup>251</sup> See also Revelli's introduction to Dante Livio Bianco, *Guerra partigiana*, (Turin: Einaudi, 1954), p. xiv: 'Il diario era per Livio un obbligo, un dovere [...] Livio non voleva dimenticare niente'.

intensity of this sense of duty verged on the religious: 'Ricordare le nostre battaglie, i nostri morti, è un dovere sacrosanto'.<sup>252</sup> Revelli encourages us to believe that, ever since his days at the military academy in Modena, he had consistently searched for a 'true' representation of historical events rather than one camouflaged by rhetoric (GP, p. 7).

His commitment to truth acts in conjunction with a constant search for better understanding, whether of the Russian front, the Resistance or the experience of rural communities in Piedmont. 'Voglio capire' (DG, p. 71, 127) runs through Revelli's narrative, carrying echoes of a sentiment expressed by other survivors of the traumas of World War II. For example, revisiting his memories of Auschwitz in *I sommersi e i salvati*, published in 1986, Levi stated, 'la vendetta non mi interessava. [...] A me spettava capire, capirli. Non il manipolo dei grandi colpevoli, ma loro, il popolo'.<sup>253</sup> In Revelli's case, the initial desire for revenge which had influenced the choice of name for his partisan band was assuaged, and replaced by the desire to understand.

### Rural memories of 1943-1945

The rural community's memories of Resistance, presented in *La strada del duvai*, *Il mondo dei vinti*, *L'anello forte*, *Il disperso di Marburg* and *Il prete giusto*, are essentially a by-product rather than the primary goal of Revelli's research. Revelli gathers their perceptions of the period as a seemingly incidental component of a bigger project to preserve and communicate the memories of the *contadini*.

Only a relatively small number of testimonies discuss the Resistance. In *Il mondo dei vinti*, thirty of a total of ninety-one testimonies discussed the Resistance. This figure included fifteen witnesses who are clearly positive in their attitude towards the partisans, five of whom, including a woman, had been partisans. In *L'anello forte*, six of one hundred and thirty-three testimonies mentioned the Resistance and, of these, four were clearly positive in their attitude. Thus, just over a third of the witnesses who contributed to *Il mondo dei vinti* and less than five per cent of those in *L'anello forte* dealt with the subject of the Resistance. Given Revelli's own reputation within the area as a partisan commander, some of his witnesses may have hesitated to speak freely on the

<sup>252</sup> Nuto Revelli, 'L'impegno di ogni giorno', *Lotte nuove*, 20 April 1964.

<sup>253</sup> Primo Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), p. 138.

subject. On the other hand, Revelli tells us that he would often ask the *mediatori* not to reveal that he was an ex-partisan to pre-empt this problem. In *L'anello forte* particularly, some of the women interviewed were too young – some had not been born, and others would only have been in their early teens in 1943-1945 – to remember or express any firm opinion on the Resistance years. Others, such as the Southern brides had only arrived from the 1960s onwards. Of those who did discuss 1943-1945, the most developed arguments on the pros and cons of the conflict tended to come from the men who had then been in their fifties, rather than the younger individuals one might expect. Giacomo Martinengo was one of these older *contadini*; his well-articulated views came from personal experience of fighting as a partisan, yet in 1943, he was already fifty-seven (MV, pp. 15-19).

## *Section II: Revelli's representation of 1943-1945*

### **L'8 settembre**

Taken by surprise and worried by the immediate popular enthusiasm that greeted Badoglio's announcement of an armistice on 8 September 1943, Revelli seems to have realized very quickly that he and Italy were entering a period of crisis. Speaking in 1983 Revelli explained: 'Avevo una gran pena nel cuore perché capivo che la guerra non era finita, anzi, che ne stava maturando un'altra ben più tragica per il Paese e che, soprattutto, occorreva subito scegliere'.<sup>254</sup> His entry on the day of the armistice reflects similar concerns - although we have seen in Chapter 4 how Revelli edited his first war diary prior to publication:

8 settembre. La notizia dell'armistizio mi entra in casa dalla strada.  
Gridando che la guerra è finita, che Badoglio sta parlando.  
Con Anna scendo in via Rome, quasi di corsa, perché sento che un'altra  
guerra sta incominciando. (GP, p. 116)

Over the ensuing days, Revelli's sense of confusion and crisis augmented as he realized, firstly, that this was the second military failure to assail him and, secondly, that direction was not going to come from military commanders (GP, p. 118). The same diary entry on 9 September illustrated Revelli's awareness that his ideological framework had been dismantled, leaving him unsure how he should proceed: 'Sparare vuol dire credere in qualcosa di giusto o di sbagliato. Qui non si crede più a nulla' (GP, p. 118). Revelli's disorientated response to the armistice contrasts with that of Dante Livio Bianco, another future partisan commander, whose perception and incisiveness Revelli came to admire:

Mai come in quel giorno abbiamo capito cos'è e cosa vuol dire l'onore militare e la dignità nazionale: quelle parole, che spesso ci eran parse insopportabilmente convenzionali e guaste dalla retorica, ora ci svelavano la loro sostanza dolorosamente umana, attraversa la pena che ci stringeva il cuore e la vergogna che ci bruciava. E fu motivo di più, per gli antifascisti, di passare decisamente all'azione. [...] Se l'esercito si sfasciava, se generali e colonnelli mancavano alla prova, se coi reparti regolari non si poteva concludere nulla, tanto valeva che gli antifascisti cercassero di far da sé.<sup>255</sup>

<sup>254</sup> Nuto Revelli, 'Ho deciso d'istinto', *Da 1943-1983: La memoria, i giorni, le parole*, speciale Resistenza (Turin: Regione Piemonte, 1983).

<sup>255</sup> Livio Bianco, p. 7.

Giuseppe Viale, one of Revelli's witnesses in *La strada del daval*, recorded a confusion similar to that of Revelli on the announcement of the armistice. Still deployed in Montenegro, Viale's experience showed the dangers facing troops in the field:

L'8 settembre, nella notte, arriva la notizia dell'armistizio, e tutti si canta e balla, convinti che sia finita la guerra.

Il 9 settembre arriva l'ordine di raddoppiare le sentinelle. I tedeschi sono sempre fermi, silenziosi, quasi invisibili [...]

Il 10 settembre il nostro capitano fa l'adunata e parla: 'Prima di oggi noi avevamo di fronte un nemico forte e feroce, i partigiani. Adesso abbiamo un altro nemico, più forte e più feroce di quello di prima [...]

All'improvviso vediamo i tedeschi ormai a centocinquanta metri che avanzano a ventaglio, con i mitra spianati e le mitraglie, per accerchiarci [...]

Eseguiamo gli ordini, nessuno di noi spara.

Entrano nelle camerate. Mani in alto. Con le cattive fanno uscire i malati e i non malati, tutti fuori. Uscendo dobbiamo buttare in un mucchio le nostre armi. Siamo prigionieri. (SD, p. 21)

By 12 September, the Germans in Italy had occupied Cuneo. After repeated futile attempts to gain direction from military commanders (GP, p. 125), Revelli took to the hills with his guns and so entered a stage in life which he described as 'venti mesi [in cui] diventai adulto'.<sup>256</sup> Despite his confusion, Revelli said that ultimately it was 'una scelta immediata, istintiva'.<sup>257</sup>

### **'Italia libera' and Dante Livio Bianco**

In one respect, Dante Livio Bianco (1909-1953), a lawyer, with no military experience whatsoever, was an unlikely partisan commander. In another, he is representative of the mix from which the partisan forces arose. One of the leaders of the 'Italia libera' band, Livio Bianco seems to have been Revelli's role model during the Resistance in a way similar to the role fulfilled by Grandi on the Russian front. Revelli's first encounter with Livio Bianco came at a meeting of partisan commanders on 13 November 1943 and left him impressed by the logic and vision of the lawyer's contributions:

Chi più m'impresiona favorevolmente è Livio. Chiede chi siamo e che cosa vogliamo da questa guerra. È un grave errore, - dice, - avere alla base dell'azione soltanto la guerra per la guerra, da militari puri. La guerra ai tedeschi e ai fascisti non è che l'obiettivo immediato della lotta. Il rinnovamento profondo della vita del paese sul piano sociale e politico è un problema importante quanto la guerra che stiamo conducendo'. (GP, p. 134)

<sup>256</sup> Nuro Revelli, 'I giorni della Resistenza', *Cuneo-Sotto*, 9 November 1999.

<sup>257</sup> Revelli, 'Ho deciso d'istinto'.

Less than three months later, Revelli joined Bianco's 'Italia libera' band. This transition from an apolitical band with a military outlook to a Giustizia e Libertà (GL) formation had not been easy for Revelli and seems to have involved both a change of thinking and a swallowing of pride:

Ho chiesto a Livio di far parte della banda 'Italia libera': ho scelto.  
 Eto' incerto, non volevo piegarmi: non volevo riconoscere che i 'politici'  
 sono migliori dei 'militari'. Livio ha accolto con un sorriso aperto la mia  
 confessione. (GP, p. 151)

Writing in the introduction to the second edition of *Guerra partigiana* (1973), Revelli elaborated on the import of this decision, stating that: 'Riconoscere che i "politici" erano migliori dei "militari" voleva dire tagliare tutti i ponti con il mio passato'.<sup>258</sup> That is, until now Revelli had assumed that military people made better decisions in combat than political people; to join Livio Bianco's band meant something of a volte-face and an allegiance with those of whom he had previously been suspicious. Peli argues that Revelli's decision to join the 'politici' was aided by the corruption and rhetoric discovered within the army: 'Il vuoto morale, l'entità e l'assurdità dei costi umani della politica di conquista imposta dal regime balzano agli occhi di chi si trova in linea, ben prima dell'8 settembre'.<sup>259</sup> There needed to be a change of tactics and while an armed response to the occupier and the remnants of the Fascist regime was crucial, there also needed to be a political element to make a break with the past and ensure a future for Italy.

Revelli's excitement in this new environment is seen in an extract from 12 February, only a few days after joining 'Italia Libera': 'Quando mi parla di Carlo Rosselli, della guerra di Spagna, dell'antifascismo attivo, mi porta in un mondo che ignoravo o conoscevo malamente. Il mondo del mio fascismo, il mondo della mia guerra di Russia, erano in gran parte sconosciuti a Livio' (GP, p. 153). By the end of March, Revelli had a well formulated – if idealistic – understanding of the politics of the Partito d'Azione and their practice in the current climate:

24 marzo. Quando si discute di politica, del partito d'azione, tutto mi appare logico, accettabile.  
 'Fare politica' vuole dire combattere su un piano di rigorismo morale, di volontario sacrificio, guardando al domani senza guerre: vuole dire fare la guerra ai tedeschi e ai fascisti per un mondo nuovo, il mondo di questa gente, contadini, operai, montanari.  
 Questa è l'ultima guerra: via i fascisti e i tedeschi non potranno più esserci guerre.

<sup>258</sup> Livio Bianco, p. xlvii.

<sup>259</sup> Peli, p. 30.



Il fascismo scomparirà per sempre. (GP, p. 165)

Years later, Revelli attributed his recovery from the disillusionment with Fascism and army alike, after his experiences in Russia, to Livio Bianco, saying 'mi ha ridato fiducia, ha fatto maturare in me una forte coscienza antifascista'.<sup>260</sup> At the conclusion of *Le due guerre*, Revelli argued that his 'impegno antifascista' continued long after the Liberation. Indeed, the perseverance of his personal anti-Fascism is seen in the pride with which Revelli related Cuneo's stance against the neo-Fascist *Movimento sociale italiano* (MSI) (DG, pp. 189-90). In emphasizing Cuneo's anti-Fascist credentials, Revelli is making another point about post-war Italian politics – Italy later reaped what it had sown in leaving remnants of the Fascist regime in office, as neo-Fascism was able to set down fresh roots, sometimes with the protection of the government and its agencies. Revelli cites the various occasions on which the MSI have been thwarted in their attempts to hold public rallies in Cuneo and then concludes: 'I fascisti tenteranno altri comizi a Cuneo. E se riusciranno a parlare, parleranno soltanto grazie alle imponenti forze di polizia, messe lì a proteggerli' (DG, p. 190).

If, as we have said, Revelli was not involved in party politics after 1946, what is the rationale behind his long discussion of neo-Fascism? The answer lies in the 'impegno del dopo' which constrained him to testify time and again to what happened, what he experienced as an Italian, and his belief that we must learn from the past. For this to happen he argued that there must be a continual retelling of events for each new generation: 'Perché ho accolto l'invito dell'amico Giorgio Rochat a raccontare quegli anni terribili? Perché ho voluto rivivere il mio fascismo, la mia guerra fascista, la mia guerra partigiana? Perché credo nei giovani. Perché voglio che i giovani sappiano' (DG, p. 191).

### Revelli as partisan commander

From a military perspective, Revelli's time as a partisan commander fulfilled many of the initial expectations never fully materialized within the regular Italian army – in some respects, for Revelli this was the 'real' Italian army:

Conosco quasi tutti i miei uomini. Parlo molto con loro, non mi stanco di ascoltarli. Mi interessa sapere perché sono saliti in montagna e dov'erano

<sup>260</sup> Revelli, 'Ho deciso d'istinto'.

prima e che mestiere facevano. È questa la vita che sognavo a Modena, prima di diventare ufficiale: così pensavo che fosse la vita militare. (GP, pp. 167-8)

The comradeship seen here did not seem to prejudice Revelli's strict sense of discipline and leadership. In a dispatch to a fellow partisan Revelli's authority and balanced assessment of a situation is stated clearly: 'Non lasciatevi anche voi istupidire dall'euforia del momento, evitiamo fesserie che possono costare caro. Una banda è in garba non per i morti che può contare: tutt'altro. Perciò esegui i miei ordini' (GP, p. 239). Earlier in the conflict Revelli had described a controversial incident in which, in the heat of a German attack on the band, he deliberately consumed a jar of jam, 'la riserva intangibile della banda', while his hungry men could only look on. His justification for the act showed a confidence in his role as leader and an application of common sense: 'Domani avrò una giornata dura. Se questa marmellata mi darà un po' di forza, viva le leggi partigiane frantumate' (GP, p. 188). A revisiting of the incident in *Le due guerre* elaborated on the significance the watching partisans would have read into the action:

Anche Livio mi osservava, stupito, sorpreso. Io ero cosciente di quel che facevo. Ma o mangiavo, o svenivo. Ecco perché ho osato infrangere tutte le regole partigiane della solidarietà, dell'uguaglianza. Il ragionamento che ho fatto è stato questo: vada una scatola di marmellata. Domani devo affrontare un altro giorno di combattimento, poi magari un altro e un altro ancora. Se la scatola di marmellata bastava a tenermi su...Sembra la storia degli spinaci e di Braccio di ferro! (DG, p. 159)

Confident and capable as a commander, Revelli nevertheless engaged in periods of self-criticism and self-analysis (GP, p. 273). The authoritarian approach co-existed with a concern and sense of responsibility for his men that suggested a strength of relationship between Revelli and the partisans under him. Just as the loss of his men in Russia had affected him, so too he was distraught at the human cost to his band, for example, in walking blindly into a German trap:

Sono uscito da un mondo di bestie, sono vivo, a La Bolène.  
Ma il mio cuore è pieno di lacrime. Vorrei nascondermi, vorrei piangere.  
[...]  
L'inventario è triste. Scagliosi vivo, in mano ai tedeschi: gli altri, escluso  
Wolf, dispersi. (GP, p. 302)

At the same time, his insistence on his autonomy as a commander while pragmatic, could make him appear something of a prima donna: 'Non ricevo ordini insindacabili: né dagli inglesi, né da

altre parte. Ho la responsabilità dei miei uomini, ho dietro alle mie spalle un'esperienza sufficiente per "discutere" un ordine, da qualsiasi parte arrivi' (GP, p. 347).

When Revelli joined the 'Italia Libera' band in March 1944, the composition and motivation of its members were diverse:

A Paralup, il 10 marzo, risultano presenti 149 partigiani, età media che non superava i vent'anni. 11 arrivano da Cunco, 25 dalla provincia, 57 da Torino, 23 da altre province piemontesi, 33 da regioni diverse; i meridionali sono 9. Quanto all'estrazione sociale, 86 sono operai, giovani 'bocia' di officina, 26 studenti, 18 contadini, 6 insegnanti, 5 impiegati, 4 commercianti e artigiani, 3 sottotenenti effettivi, 1 industriale ebreo. Alcuni avevano alle spalle scelte ben motivate, altri avevano scelto per istinto, per odio nei confronti dei tedeschi, per disprezzo nei confronti dei fascisti. Per molti la scelta partigiana era una risposta ai bandi fascisti, alla chiamata alle armi. (DG, p. 141)

From these figures it can be seen that workers, students and peasants formed the majority in the band at Paralup.<sup>261</sup> In contrast to general perception, 'sbandati', rather than being the backbone of partisan numbers, were in this case firmly in the minority.<sup>262</sup> Diversity aside, Revelli's initial perception of the band on his arrival at Paralup was positive, if slightly dazed by its novelty, and echoed Livio Bianco's description of his time as a partisan as 'venti mesi di vacanza':<sup>263</sup>

Strano esercito. Uomini senza gradi, senza divise, sbrindellati: gente che parla tutti i dialetti, dal piemontese al siciliano. Molti i colori: maglioni e giubbotti rossi, gialli, con il grigioverde di sfondo, proprio come appaiono i campi di sci prima della guerra.

[...] A Paralup accoglienza fraterna: Livio, Alberto, Ivano, Leo, Dado, sono già miei amici. (GP, p. 152)

Revelli's census of this band shows that those with a military background were certainly rare. In *Le due guerre* he spelled out explicitly the lack of preparation with which he had to contend as a commander: 'Molta della nostra attività è rivolta all'inquadramento militare della formazione. La maggior parte dei partigiani non aveva nessuna esperienza di vita militare, non aveva mai sparato un colpo di fucile. Bisognava quindi prepararli' (DG, p. 146). Revelli was struck by the internal organization of 'Italia libera', which distinguished it from the military bands in the area. Ranks and

<sup>261</sup> See Roger Absalom, 'A Resistance to the Resistance? The Italian Peasant in History, 1943-1948', in *Moving in Measure: Essays in honour of Brian Moloney*, ed. by Judith Bryce and Doug Thompson (Hull: Hull University Press, 1989), pp. 169-179. Absalom argues that *contadini* 'rarely constituted as much as twenty per cent of partisan manpower and those that did join were usually from the peasantry's undisciplined anarchic fringe' (p. 176).

<sup>262</sup> Livio Bianco, pp. 14-15.

<sup>263</sup> Livio Bianco, p. ix.

uniforms played no part in this unit and instead it was shaped by 'una gerarchia non rigida, ma quasi elettiva: comanda chi meglio sa condurre gli uomini al combattimento' (GP, p. 154). Also, rather than having a 'nome di banda'<sup>264</sup> as had been the case in his previous band, the partisans in Paralup were known by their given names. The solidarity and comradeship central to the success of their endeavours sprang from an ethos of equal worth between band members encapsulated in the epithet: 'la vita di ogni uomo vale la vita di tutta la banda' (GP, p. 170; DG, p. 169). Revelli illustrated how this worked in practice when, for example, a partisan was injured; in contrast to the Russian front where many injured had to be abandoned to their fate, here band and individual partisan were mutually dependent (GP, pp. 188-190).

In Revelli's initial band, planned action had always seemed doomed to end in anticlimax as the men struggled to pluck up the courage and commitment to engage the enemy (GP, p. 145). After his transfer to Livio Bianco's band, Revelli's diary recorded his satisfaction as he gradually trained and organized the men into fighting units. Revelli's previous military training was important, but partisan warfare required a new type of warfare (GP, p. 252). He recorded Gideon-like incidents in which the men who lacked commitment to the battle were invited to return home (GP, p. 170). Such a decision could hold as much, if not more, danger for young men keen to avoid being drafted by Mussolini's *repubblicini* or deported by the Germans.

In August 1944, a reduction and reorganization of the partisans produced a new unit, 'la brigata valle Stura Carlo Rosselli': 'un reparto organico, di gente decisa a continuare, magari a denti stretti' (GP, p. 282). Livio Bianco quickly recognized Revelli's ability in a leadership role and in July 1944, judged these skills to be the solution to a command problem in the valle Stura. Countering Revelli's reluctance to make the transfer Livio Bianco argued that 'la tua presenza è indispensabile [sic]' and that 'gli interessi superiori della Causa esigono che tu venga qua' (GP, pp. 243-244). This was not the only occasion on which Revelli disagreed with the decisions of other partisan commanders.

<sup>264</sup> Revelli's testimony shows that two individuals particularly influenced him: Grandi, his respected officer in Russia, and then Livio Bianco during the Resistance. While with his original partisan band Revelli had chosen 'Grandi' as his *nomme de guerre*, emphasizing the high esteem in which he held his namesake. See GP, p. 155.

There came a point in August when the 'Brigata "Rosselli"' (as it had been renamed) found itself trapped between two advancing German fronts, one fleeing from southern France, the other determined to take possession of the Colle della Maddalena. The gravity of the situation resulted in a vote in which Revelli was outnumbered: 'La mia tesi è che dobbiamo rimanere in Italia a ogni costo. Con noi, della Rosselli, ci sono anche Livio, Rosa, e il capitano inglese Flight. Lunghe discussioni e si arriva addirittura a un referendum tra gli uomini. Vince la tesi della Francia' (*DC*, p. 170). Despite stating his own view strongly and disputing the wisdom of the decision, once it was taken, Revelli put it into action. The importance of this same mission is identified by Peli who states that: 'La resistenza che per dieci giorni (17-27 agosto) la brigata GL "Rosselli" comandata da Nuto Revelli oppone all'avanzata tedesca verso il colle della Maddalena resta, con ogni probabilità, una tra le pagine militari più brillanti della Resistenza'.<sup>265</sup> Indeed, such disagreements were isolated incidents by contrast with Revelli's satisfaction in military life as lived among the partisans and his pride in leading his men well. The combination of leading with calmness and experience allowed Revelli to outwit the enemy, safeguard his men and then enjoy the result with great excitement:

Sono le 14,45. La mia esperienza di guerra in montagna è scarsa [...]. Ho però una regola in testa, ben chiara: nelle manovre in alta montagna il ripiegamento verso il basso avviene su appuntamento orario. È probabile che le colonne non prevedano di passare una notte all'addiaccio, a quota 2500[...]

Decido di attendere fino alle 15, poi si vedrà. Soltanto per scaramanzia non dico a Livio che questa storia finirà bene.

Quindici minuti sono lunghi[...]

Alle 15, su tre squadre, muovono verso il basso.

Chi piange, chi mi abbraccia. I pochi che ridono è come se piangessero [...]

Ho una gioia immensa nel cuore, so di aver comandato bene la banda. In segno di giubilo scarico il mio Thompson contro l'aereo, e grido, grido felice. Anche gli uomini sparano divertiti. (*GP*, pp. 199-200)

Revelli's confidence in action here relied not just on his outwitting of the enemy, but his knowledge of the men under him. The importance of this factor is seen in Revelli's consternation, following his transfer to the valle Stura, as he realized that part of the equation for success was missing: 'Il mio posto sarebbe in Demonte, ma devo vedere in basso cosa succede. Conosco i tedeschi, so cosa faranno: non conosco i miei uomini, i miei comandanti di reparto' (*GP*, p. 258).

<sup>265</sup> Peli, p. 104.

In engaging the enemy, Revelli was also able to draw on knowledge of German tactics and behaviour gained in Russia – and enjoy getting the better of them: ‘voglio vedere i tedeschi, sento che dobbiamo sparare per primi. Chi sparerà per primo avrà in pugno l’iniziativa. Ho visto i tedeschi, in Russia, che scappavano come lepri: scapperanno anche qui, se sapremo combattere’ (GP, pp. 179-80).

One aspect developed in Revelli’s record of 1943-1945 is a belief in a justice dispatched with integrity. *La guerra dei poveri* details Revelli’s assessment of the implementation of partisan justice against civilian, partisan and enemy. The primary instance in which partisans meted out judgment on civilians was in response to episodes of banditry. While it has been argued that *banditismo* was already a feature of Italian peasant society,<sup>266</sup> Revelli’s record suggested that it was a new hazard during the Resistance rather than an accepted fact of rural life: ‘Il fenomeno del banditismo si sta allargando. Ex militari sbandati della 4<sup>a</sup> armata e delinquenti locali, mascherandosi alla partigiana, terrorizzano le popolazioni. Basta un cappello alpino, una giubba grigioverde, per confondere le acque’ (GP, p. 130). However, a partisan communication from Cuneo some eight months later showed that on occasion there may well have been some substance to Belco’s view that ‘Italian partisans did share a number of characteristics with “social bandits”’.<sup>267</sup>

A questo proposito faccio presente che in questi ultimi giorni si sono presentati casi di vero e proprio banditismo con furti di biancheria, denaro, argenteria, ecc. Questi episodi hanno fatto una pessima impressione nella popolazione e sia per gli avvenimenti di Borgo che per questi casi di banditismo si è notato esserci un raffreddamento delle simpatie.

Sarà bene che i comandanti delle bande impediscano che gli uomini si diano ad atti, i quali non farebbero altro che nuocere alla reputazione delle bande e dei loro comandanti. (GP, pp. 235-236)

This highlights the grave implications of genuine bandits disguising themselves as partisans and explains the need for an unequivocal dispensing of justice by the partisans on captured bandits, as Revelli put it: ‘Tanti ne pescheremo, tanti ne fucileremo’ (GP, p. 6). An early extract from *La guerra dei poveri* described the shooting of two bandits and the mock execution of a third in an incident Revelli clearly found disturbing, not because he disagreed with the capital punishment, but

<sup>266</sup> Belco, p. 38.

<sup>267</sup> Belco, p. 38.

because his sense of justice and integrity did not regard mock executions as legitimate partisan behaviour: 'A Berto era stata concessa la grazia. Questa sua finta fucilazione voleva essere soltanto una macabra farsa. Berto è vivo, ma è come se fosse morto. Non la condivido questa nostra crudeltà' (GP, pp. 156-127). During an interview in 1983, when Revelli reiterated the partisan policy of shooting bandits, the interviewer asked whether he had ever regretted taking such a strong line: "No, mai – è la risposta – perché noi siamo sempre stati dalla parte dei contadini, e i contadini ci hanno protetto, non certo con entusiasmo, ma con limpida lealtà. Una lealtà a cui noi partigiani abbiamo corrisposto con il massimo di attenzione e di rispetto".<sup>268</sup> Other extracts reveal the strict discipline with which Revelli commanded his own men and his tough stance on partisans who went AWOL (GP, p. 192, 203).

As bands gradually retook valleys occupied by the German forces partisan authority evolved to incorporate the role of civil authority: a situation on which Revelli held an ambivalent view. On the one hand, he could see that these zones provided welcome respite from the oppression of enemy occupation (GP, p. 251). On the other, such was his concern about its negative effect on the security of the partisan bands, he outlined to Livio the impossibility of one man being responsible for both military and civil authority: 'Impossibilità, per il comandante della valle, di dedicarsi continuamente all'organizzazione militare del reparto. Troppi impegni che assorbono, che distraggono. L'amministrazione civile di una valle non è compito di un comandante militare' (GP, p. 253). Such a view illustrates that although Revelli was part of a political band, to his mind he remained a soldier above all.

Describing the treatment of captured spies, Revelli has emphasized the moral integrity of partisan justice as opposed to that of the enemy: 'Noi non torcevamo un capello ai fascisti, alle spie: le fucilavamo. Loro, quando ci prendevano, ci impiccavano. Quindi né schiaffi, né pugni. Niente, rispetto assoluto' (DG, p. 151). In the case of female prisoners, the same rules applied – although one female spy was, Revelli said, too stupid to shoot (DG, p. 152) – and female partisans did the body searches (DG, p. 151). *La guerra dei poveri* recounted the capture and interrogation of one female spy and Revelli has included the text of her testimony in a footnote. This decision may

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<sup>268</sup> Revelli, 'Ho deciso d'istinto'.

have been taken purely on the grounds of providing interesting extra material, but in light of the respect with which Revelli treated fellow human beings (friend or foe), and his desire to present an objective account of the Resistance, its inclusion seems intended to verify or legitimize her treatment by the partisans (GP, p. 176).

The partisan concept of justice is further amplified in *Le due guerre* where Revelli described their dilemma as they realized that they could no longer afford the burden of moving 40 prisoners everywhere they went. The choice was stark but simple: 'O fucilardi tutti [...] o liberardi tutti'. Despite knowing that within a very short time the prisoners would reach the German forces, potentially compromising the band's safety, Revelli and Livio reached the conclusion that the only option was to free them all - as he had said, 'non siamo fascisti'.

### Revelli's assessment of partisan and civilian interaction

*Il disperso di Marburg* opened with an acknowledgement by Revelli that relationships between partisan bands and the peasant population were a 'tema delicato e controversiale' (DM, p. 5). Just how delicate a theme becomes apparent when Revelli's assessment of civilian attitudes to the partisans is set against the testimony of *contadini*. His autobiographical account, *La guerra dei poveri*, projects a positive perspective on interaction between partisans and peasants. From start to finish Revelli frequently affirmed what he saw as the evident solidarity between the two groups. By the time he wrote the introduction to the second edition of Dante Livio Bianco's *Guerra partigiana* (1973), Revelli had begun to gather the testimonies of *Il mondo dei vinti* and was more cautious in his assessment of popular support for the Resistance: 'La grande massa della gente non cerca la lotta, cerca la sopravvivenza e ci subisce. Considera i fascisti e i tedeschi nemici, stranieri. Dei partigiani dice "sono dei nostri". Ma vive nel terrore delle rappresaglie, degli eccidi, delle vendette'.<sup>269</sup> In short Revelli suggested, 'I rapporti con la popolazione sono facili o difficili a seconda del momento'.<sup>270</sup>

Eight months into the war of Liberation Revelli noted in a despatch to Livio that 'la popolazione di Cuneo è sempre più solidale con noi' (GP, p. 211). *La guerra dei poveri* records what he saw as proof of this sentiment in the actions of civilians. For example, women on occasion

<sup>269</sup> Livio Bianco, p. xlviii.

<sup>270</sup> Livio Bianco, p. xlvii.



intervened in partisan attacks to bring food to sustain the men (GP, p. 181) and once, to Revelli's amazement, to point out an enemy position (GP, p. 259). With a typical military view of the civilian, Revelli showed in another entry that civilian intervention in partisan attacks was a distracting influence (GP, p. 262). Over the summer of 1944, Revelli's perspective on civilian involvement in the Resistance remained predominantly positive. One entry recorded a growing network of informers among the 'montanari' (many of whom Revelli could empathize with given that they had lost sons in Russia) (GP, p. 224). Another delineated the degree of civilian commitment to the partisan war: 'Fra la popolazione civile sono molti gli attivisti, veri e propri partigiani combattenti, permanentemente a disposizione dei comandi. Soltanto in Demonte se ne contano a dozzine' (GP, p. 249). He believed that the aligning of the majority of clergy with the Resistance was a factor in encouraging support in the Cuneese for the partisans:<sup>271</sup> 'Non sbaglio se dico che il clero era schierato dalla nostra parte. [...] Un sol prete è stato giudicato come fascista, non nella nostra zona' (DG, p. 161).

The majority of individuals who testified for Revelli offer a black and white view of the partisans; there was no middle ground for them between 'bravi' and 'ladri'. One of these witnesses, Carlo Altare, reckoned that the majority of *contadini* were antagonistic towards the partisans largely due to the ignorance of the rural communities in the face of the realities of the situation: 'Il novanta per cento dei contadini erano e sono critici nei confronti dei partigiani. C'era e c'è ancora una mentalità marcia, dovuta all'ignoranza e all'egoismo' (MV, p. 409). There was, though, support for the partisans on a variety of levels. Michele Giuseppe Luchese was a father who saw his sons as being safe with the partisans – presumably, he meant 'safe' relative to the alternative of conscription by the Republican army (MV, p. 74). If a partisan band included local men this boosted their support among the civilians, as the latter were less likely to be afraid of them (MV, pp. 8, 348).

Typically, Resistance historiographers and writers of literature present the partisans as continually at odds with the rural inhabitants in whose vicinity they operated. Belco, drawing on the evidence of *Il mondo dei vinti*, stated 'few partisans were peasants, and their relationship to

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<sup>271</sup> Livio Bianco, p. xlvii.

peasant society was often an ambivalent or hostile one'.<sup>272</sup> Ginsborg argued that partisans and peasants managed to adopt a '*modus vivendi*'.<sup>273</sup> This is balanced by Absalom who saw in the works of Fenoglio, Pavese and Calvino, for example, 'disturbing images of a peasant Italy distrustful of or indifferent to or ambiguously mobilised by anti-Fascists and Fascists alike'.<sup>274</sup>

The question of requisitions and reprisals lay at the heart of the relationship between partisans and peasants. In *La guerra dei poveri*, Revelli stated categorically that his band secured their provisions legitimately: 'Abbiamo raggiunto una buona organizzazione logistica. [...] Niente requisizioni: compriamo i viveri a Demonte, paghiamo tutto regolarmente' (GP, p. 167). Revisiting the subject in *Le due guerre* Revelli reinforced this policy and explained how it was feasible in practice: 'Niente requisizioni: era una scelta precisa quella di non pesare sulla popolazione della zona. Livio riceveva un po' di soldi da Torino, da Giorgio Agosti [the GL commissioner for Piedmont], e tutto il necessario si comprava, si pagava' (DG, p. 142). If good relations were to be maintained, good organization remained central, particularly as the bands continued to grow (GP, p. 232): 'Una formazione ben organizzata, disciplinata e che non pesasse logisticamente sulle popolazioni, che non requisisse, che non facesse dei torti alla gente, aveva dei rapporti normali'.<sup>275</sup>

Rural communities were known for offering hospitality to those in need, but as Willson observes, it was a different matter when it came to partisans living off communities.<sup>276</sup> The *contadini* interviewed by Revelli confirm that requisitioning was one of the greatest causes of tension between partisans and peasants (MV, p. 22). Spirito Armando presents a particularly objective view of the issue – which corresponds with Revelli's description of partisan routine and discipline: 'Qui i partigiani non hanno mai preso un vitello, erano ancora bravi. C'erano anche le bestie tra i partigiani che ne combinavano senza che il comando sapesse: il comando però era giusto' (MV, p. 136). Others among Revelli's witnesses document attempts to educate the *contadini* so that they better appreciated the partisans and their role, but this remained an area of huge contention (MV, p. 204, 326). Viganò's Resistance novel, *L'Agnese va a morire*, described the pirate-

<sup>272</sup> Belco, p. 38.

<sup>273</sup> Ginsborg, p. 27.

<sup>274</sup> Absalom, *Resistance*, p. 173.

<sup>275</sup> Luciano Gaido and Massimo Moraglio, 'Il vuoto politico', *Chaos*, 5, May-June 1995, 14-24 (p. 17).

<sup>276</sup> Perry Willson, *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy: The Massaie Rurali Section of the Pnf* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 203.

like glee of the partisans as they examined the goods they had managed to procure, paying for some and leaving other traumatised civilians with a receipt for what they had taken.<sup>277</sup> This may be stereotypical, but clearly, behaviour of this sort made it easy for civilians to interpret 'requisition' as 'a partisan euphemism for theft'.<sup>278</sup> Peli, in *La Resistenza in Italia*, speaks of the double-edged sword facing the partisan bands as figures of authority in a chaotic period:

Infine, i partigiani si trovano spesso a riempire un vuoto istituzionale, che li porta a esercitare una funzione di supplenza, amministrativa e di polizia. [...] Ma i partigiani possono anche essere odiati, perché sono clienti ai quali è difficile dire di no, in quanto portano le armi.<sup>279</sup>

In contrast to detailed discussion of how the partisans secured supplies, Revelli did not deal with the question of German and Fascist reprisals against the civilian population in *La guerra dei poveri*. Yet it is clear from the testimonies of *contadini*, such as Andrea Marino, that reprisals were very much an issue within the Cuneese, where Revelli's band operated (*MI*, p. 213). Even if Revelli had no personal experience of reprisals, one would think that he could have drawn on available information to address this issue; particularly as in *La guerra dei poveri* he did have the added resources of oral testimonies and band diaries. One of the few extracts to mention the issue carried an ironic tone that implied an understanding of the gravity of the situation and the vicious circle in which partisans operated:

Il problema dell'attività operativa, con i tedeschi e i fascisti nelle valli Vermonagna e Roia, resta ancora senza soluzione: passare all'attacco vuol dire rappresaglie. Un bando recente parla di cinquanta ostaggi fucilati per ogni tedesco o fascista accoppato. Purtroppo ogni tedesco, ogni fascista, vale tanto! (*GP*, p. 237)

That Revelli did not explore this issue in his record of the Resistance suggests that he had chosen to remain silent about reprisals. Why? *Le due guerre*, his last autobiographical publication, leaves readers in no doubt as to the sense of moral burden arising from question of reprisals - whether on account of individual or collective partisan action is not clear. Here he records that civilian losses (whether from reprisals, bombings or in camps) during the Resistance exceeded the total number of partisan dead: 'I partigiani cuneesi caduti sono risultati 1994, le vittime civili [...] sono

<sup>277</sup> Renata Viganò, *L'Agnese va a morire* (Turin: Einaudi, 1949), pp. 72-74.

<sup>278</sup> Belco, p. 39.

<sup>279</sup> Peli, p. 244.

2432' (DG, p. 175).<sup>280</sup> *Le due guerre* also recorded Revelli's sense of shame and responsibility going to meet a couple from San Giacomo di Demonte whose home had been destroyed when the Germans mined the town following a 'rastrellamento' (DG, p. 163).

The confusion of the period is evident in testimonies such as that of Mattio Rasetto. He exemplifies the position of much of the rural community: 'I partigiani erano dei nostri, i contadini avevano l'idea di tenere per i partigiani, i contadini li avrebbero invitati a cena i partigiani, ma avevano paura dei tedeschi e dei fascisti, avevano sempre paura che arrivassero gli altri' (MV, p. 164). This tension between a desire to support the partisans and a fear of the consequences came through repeatedly in the testimonies of Revelli's witnesses; Willson speaks of the 'grigia zona' which resulted.<sup>281</sup> Giulio Cesare Mascarello, a member of the Cln, observed that 'Qui i contadini tenevano per i partigiani, erano contro i fascisti e i tedeschi. Ma non partecipavano con passione, stavano sempre un po' in disparte' (MV, p. 299).

Giuseppina Pio, in *L'anello forte*, provides an extreme example of the tension between peasant and partisan. She had given shelter to partisans on more than one occasion. Yet, at a point when they were hosting two English partisans, a group of drunken partisans killed this woman's husband (AF, p. 321; see note 9). Unfortunately, such behaviour by a minority often resulted in the disillusionment of *contadini* who had initially supported the partisan cause:

I contadini di San Benigno erano contro i fascisti, all'8 settembre avevano aiutato i soldati sbandati. Ma a poco a poco avevano poi perduto la fiducia nei partigiani, per colpa di quei pochi disonesti. Ancora oggi incontro dei contadini che mi dicono: 'Non parlate dei partigiani...'. (MV, p. 63)

Revelli's own representation of the period showed that his partisans prided themselves on not behaving with the brutality seen in both the Fascists and the *tedeschi*. This was substantiated from the perspective of the *contadini* in the testimony of Giovanni Tolosano who, as a Fascist, had been imprisoned by the partisans: 'I partigiani non mi hanno maltrattato' (MV, p. 245).

To summarize, *La guerra dei poveri*, Revelli's first autobiographical record of war in Italy, shows the relationship between partisans and peasants in a favourable light. His handling of two key issues confirms this. Firstly, Revelli presents his partisans as paying their way rather than

<sup>280</sup> This information appears as a footnote to description of the work of the Istituto Storico della Resistenza di Cuneo in recording the number of fatalities in the area during the war of liberation.

<sup>281</sup> Willson, p. 203.

imposing requisitions on the local community. Secondly, he does not associate his role as partisan commander with the consequences for the *contadini*, the victims of German and Fascist reprisals. It may be that Revelli already knew more about the tensions between *contadini* and partisans than he chose to incorporate in *La guerra dei poveri*. However, his later autobiographical publications suggest that Revelli adjusted his perception of the relationship to take into account what he had learned in recording the testimonies of the *contadini*.

### Revelli's representation of the enemy

*La guerra dei poveri* and Revelli's later discussion of the war of Liberation, particularly in *Il disperso di Marburg*, show a contrasting view of Fascists and Germans, the collective enemy. His portrayal showed a range of emotional responses to encounters with the Fascists but lacked the emotional intensity with which he depicted and related to the Germans, no doubt because he shared a longer and harsher history with the latter. Fascist elements were a real threat to the partisans as they carried out much of the 'dirty work', spying and torturing for their German allies.<sup>282</sup> Thus, we can understand Revelli recording his satisfaction on hearing the news that Cumar, an ex-boxer turned Fascist torturer, had been killed: 'Finalmente la carriera di Cumar è finita. L'hanno ammazzato come un cane. [...] A pugni nello stomaco ha fatto sanguinare più partigiani e antifascisti che non i tedeschi!' (CP, p. 141).

Looking back on the Resistance, Revelli saw the Fascists as wholly reliant on the strength of the Germans ('Senza i tedeschi i fascisti non valevano quattro soldi bucati')<sup>283</sup> and so largely only worthy of partisan contempt.<sup>284</sup> Many accounts of the Resistance similarly present the Germans as the real force to be reckoned with; as Pavone points out, any confidence exhibited by the Fascists was wholly reliant on the protection they enjoyed from the Germans.<sup>285</sup> Just as during the Russian campaign the Germans rather than the Italian army had been the military machine, so too the Fascists were seen by the partisans as little better than German lackies – and were

<sup>282</sup> Gaio, p. 17.

<sup>283</sup> Gaio, p. 17.

<sup>284</sup> Marco Sannazzaro, 'Perché la memoria esca dal silenzio', *Avvenire*, 30 September 1994, p. 11.

<sup>285</sup> Pavone, p. 254.

commonly portrayed as such in post-war films.<sup>286</sup> Contempt did on occasion become pity for the *fascisti* as in the case of an incompetent spy (GP, p. 173). Similarly, Revelli was unequivocal on the involvement of one so young when describing the mascot of the Muti Brigata Nera, captured when the partisans immobilised their vehicle: '[E] un bambino di tredici anni, un bambino già vecchio. Fa pena e rabbia. Nessuno lo deve toccare. Meriterebbe un sacco di legnate, ma pretendo che non gli torcano un capello' (GP, p. 174).

One word sums up Revelli's assessment of the German occupiers: 'odio'. Chapter 4 showed that there had been a time when Revelli admired the efficiency of the German military machine. Thinking back on an incident shortly after his return from Russia, Revelli said: 'Li odiavo a tal punto, i tedeschi, che al solo vederli mi saliva il sangue alla testa. Li consideravo, sbagliando, gli unici responsabili del nostro disastro. Mi ero imposto di non dimenticare nulla, e ne stavo pagando il prezzo' (DM, p. 75). Alessandro Galante Garrone, a fellow-partisan and lifelong friend of Revelli<sup>287</sup> suggests that the change in Revelli's attitude towards the Germans was born of 'una sorta di rivelazione'.<sup>288</sup> 'Rivelazione', however, implies an instantaneous switch in opinion not necessarily in keeping with the more gradual process described in *Mai tardi*. To Revelli's mind, the arrogance of German comportment he then recognized in the troops who occupied Cuneo after Badoglio's armistice only compounded this reprehensible and unfathomable behaviour.<sup>289</sup> On occasion Revelli used stereotypes to describe the machine-like operation of German units (GP, p. 147). He also attempted to encourage the inexperienced men under him by destroying such images of the invincible German soldier: 'Io cerco in tutti i modi di smitizzare "l'invincibilità" del

<sup>286</sup> Roy Palmer Domenico, *Italian Fascists on Trial, 1943-1948* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 28.

<sup>287</sup> *Percorsi*, p. 197.

<sup>288</sup> 'Poi vedeva da vicino i tedeschi, e sentiva qualcosa di istintivo che quasi gli ripugnava, un atteggiamento di alterigia, di distacco, di superiorità.

Ebbe una sorta di rivelazione. Aveva visto, ma senza capire immediatamente, turbe disperate di gente lacerata, facce smunte: erano gli ebrei avviati ai campi di concentramento e di sterminio.

Quest'uomo concepì in quel momento un odio verso i tedeschi, contro la guerra, avvertì lo sdegno per il modo inadeguato col quale era stata allestita'.

From fragment of an interview with Professor Gallante Garrone in *La Rivista militare*, (March-April 1995), p. 7.

<sup>289</sup> Bastai, p. 104.

See also DG, p. 133: 'Il giorno 12, alle ore 14, le SS del Maggiore Peiper entrano in Cuneo.

Ho voluto aspettarli, i tedeschi, ho voluto vederli. [...] Sono proprio come i tedeschi che ho visto a Varsavia, che ho visto in Russia. Spavaldi, pieni di boria, odiosi'.

soldato tedesco, che c'era nei nostri uomini. Non avevano mai combattuto. [...] Dico sempre ai miei uomini: "anche i tedeschi sono di carne e ossa" (DG, p. 148).

If rural communities were divided in their attitude to partisans, Revelli's collections show that there was a consensus when it came to their perspective on the Fascists: fear combined with hatred to produce bitter memories. His observation in *La guerra dei poveri* that 'La popolazione li odia, perché sono vigliacchi, ammazzano più gente che i tedeschi' (GP, p. 147) was now further expanded in hearing the experiences of the *contadini* in their own words. Battista Aimar, one of the female witnesses of *L'anello forte*, gave a broad condemnation of the Fascists, stating: 'Come giudicavamo i fascisti? Pensavamo che erano dei delinquenti, io l'ho sempre pensato e la penso ancora adesso' (AF, p. 167).

Bartolomeo Garro, a partisan, described how he miraculously survived execution by the Fascists (MV, pp. 62-67). One of the most salient aspects of his narrative was not an explicit condemnation of the Fascists, but a description of the fear among the onlookers, which neutralized human compassion, as they held back from coming to his assistance for fear the Fascists would return: 'C'è chi suggerisce di portarmi via, di soccorrermi. Ma restano tutti lì, immobili. Hanno paura che i fascisti ritornino, sono sotto l'impressione del massacro' (MV, p. 65).

Another woman from *L'anello forte*, Maria Fracchia, described the murder of her sister and brother-in-law by the *repubblicani*, after a Fascist spy had betrayed them. Her testimony offered greater analysis of the tensions in play during the Resistance and their longevity post-war, illustrating that nothing was simple or clear-cut for civilians:

Figli, povera mia sorella Meri. Prima di ammazzarli gli hanno dato tante botte... A Meri le hanno sparato in bocca perché lei gridava, perché voleva difendere suo marito. Meri era incinta [...].  
Sì, abbiamo capito che erano i fascisti, che erano i 'repubblicani' che li avevano ammazzati. Ma l'avevamo anche con i partigiani che erano venuti a piantarsi lì, a fare il magazzino nelle case al di là del Belbo, a farsi ospitare nelle nostre case. E da poco sa che non dico più niente dei partigiani. C'è stato un tempo che quando nominavano i partigiani dicevo: 'Che il diavolo se li porti via tutti'. (AF, pp. 388-389)

Don Viale offered a unique perspective on attitudes to the Fascists in *Il prete giusto*. Here, he described how difficult he found it as a priest to hear the confession of a female spy condemned to death by the partisans on the eve of the Liberation (PG, p. 104). This clearly provoked an inner

turmoil for Don Viale, made even more difficult in light of an earlier occasion on which he had heard the confession of thirteen young partisans condemned to death (PG, p. 69).

When it came to attitudes towards the German occupier, the oral testimonies collected by Revelli testified to a general hatred and abhorrence of this enemy. Fear of the Fascists and fear of the Germans tended to be expressed in the one breath, with little if any differentiation (MI, p. 208). The 'Strage di Boves' on 19 September 1943 was one of the most infamous of German atrocities against the civilians of Piedmont. Don Viale described the event from the perspective of the victims among the clergy, although in all some 43 civilians were murdered and many homes razed to the ground: 'Una strage che non si può descrivere. Per molti era una sorpresa che i tedeschi fossero così crudeli. Tutti quei civili assassinati, più di venti, e tra loro due sacerdoti [...] Le loro salme erano irriconoscibili' (PG, p. 46). Don Viale also provided other examples of German brutality, including a lengthy and passionate narration of the execution of the thirteen partisans already mentioned.

Another testimony to German brutality is seen in the vivid dialogue of the Aimar sisters, Anna and Battistina. They relate the appalling incident of Battistina's wedding, interrupted by the arrival of German troops, and the resultant deaths of two partisans and three civilians (AF, pp. 162-167). The death of Margherita, one of the civilians, was particularly distressing. A linguist, well-travelled and intelligent, Margherita had the habit of wearing army fatigues to protect herself against the cold, although she was not a partisan – this habit was to seal her death warrant when she encountered these Germans. As the Germans approached, she had attempted to reassure her neighbours saying: 'Ah, non spaventatevi, i tedeschi sono mica delle bestie, sono gente come noi' (AF, p. 164). Anna Aimar described how Margherita quickly realized her mistake, but it was already too late:

La prendevano a schiaffi ed a calci in culo, con i fucili la colpivano sulla testa, povera Margherita, perdeva del sangue ma non piangeva, non gridava. [...] E lei a dire: 'Sono dei vigliacchi, dei bastardi. Ma sono belve, non sono gente, sono *salò-boche, salò boché*'. [...] I tedeschi hanno confabulato un po' tra di loro, poi hanno afferrato Margherita, ed a calci l'hanno spinta fin sotto il portico di Ballatore. Le hanno sparato. (AF, p. 165)

Acts of such brutality were something of a gamble for all parties involved in a conflict where the line between soldier and civilian was hard to define, and the conflict therefore 'total' and



'inclusive'.<sup>290</sup> As Peli explained, 'la brutalità della repressione è un'arma a doppio taglio' (p. 241). It could provoke no more than 'la tradizionale rassegnazione contadina' with which they faced difficulties, but it could equally provoke hatred and an active search for vengeance against German or partisan.<sup>291</sup>

Fascists and Germans alike, then, were viewed by the *contadini* who suffered at their hands as brutal, hated figures. Two testimonies stand out against this background. Firstly, that of Giovanna Giavelli, who through the omission of any explicit denunciation of the Germans seems by her silence to endorse them even ever so feebly. Given her negative opinion of everyone but the Germans, there was an unavoidable crassness in her manner of expression: 'Poi nel 1944 a Ferriere sono arrivati i tedeschi, ancora tutti bravi. I "Muti" erano poco bravi, avevano la piuma da alpino, ma erano alpini sbagliati. Sembravano galeotti. I partigiani erano solo buoni per le uova e per il burro' (*MV*, p. 125). The other testimony to stand out amongst all those of both *L'anello forte* and *Il mondo dei vinti* was that of Pasquale and Anna Roggero, a couple from the Langhe. Pasquale's memories of attitudes towards the various factions involved in the Resistance — expressed as if representing collective opinion and behaviour — were either penetratingly honest in comparison to other testimonies, or this couple's behaviour was singularly duplicitous:

Poi un'altra guerra, qui c'erano i tedeschi, i fascisti, e i partigiani, *na pau, na pau...* [Una paura, una paura...] I tedeschi, briganti, mettevano i posti di blocco, ore e ore in sosta perché controllavano i documenti a tutti. Venivano i partigiani, eravamo con loro: venivano i tedeschi e i fascisti, eravamo con loro (*MV*, p. 293)

There was, then, a correlation between Revelli's own perception of the enemy and that of the *contadini* and, for the most part, these conform to the existing representation of Germans and Fascists in Italian literature and culture. According to Revelli, he and the *contadini* had only hatred for both the Germans and the Fascists. During the period 1943-1945, Revelli was on a quest for vengeance; legitimately so, he thought, given the Germans 'betrayal' of their allies on the Russian front.<sup>292</sup> Revelli's presentation of the Germans and Fascists as equally hated by the *contadini* is replicated in their own accounts. However, their testimonies show that the *contadini* saw

<sup>290</sup> Oliva, p. 51.

<sup>291</sup> Peli, p. 241.

<sup>292</sup> It is only in *Il disperso di Marburg* that we begin to detect a revision of Revelli's indiscriminate hatred of the German people.

themselves as caught between a rock and a hard place; for many, the partisans were as much 'the enemy' as the Germans or Fascists.<sup>293</sup>

### Revelli's Evaluation of the Partisans' Allies

The partisans of the Brigata Rosselli fought not only in the Cuneese but also over the border as allies of the French *maquis* from August 1944 until April 1945. Revelli's narration of these months is coloured by the fact that he had never thought it a wise course of action (as was shown above). They had received a warm welcome on arriving in Isola (GP, p. 284) which quickly changed into a confusion of cultures: 'Nino, il mio fedelissimo portaordini, è tutt'altro che entusiasta della Francia. Anche fra gli uomini affiorano le prime perplessità. Ieri un francese... ubriaco così ha accolto un gruppo dei nostri: "partigiani italiani, perché non gridate più viva il duce?"' (GP, p. 285). More serious were the disagreements between Italian and French over incidents such as the identification of the intended recipients of an Allied airdrop (GP, p. 292). Cultural misunderstandings disappeared, however, in a shared sense of respect for the dead as seen in the care with which the French women prepared the bodies of the Italian dead: 'Bertone, bucato malamente, l'hanno finito a colpi di moschetto. È iriconoscibile. Una donna del paese, Renée Viguié, ne ricompone la salma, l'avvolge in lenzuola candide, pensa a tutto proprio come una mamma. La sua devozione ci commuove' (GP, p. 287). Relations between French and Italians finally came to a head in the ultimatum of December 1944: 'A Belvedere i nodi sono venuti al pettine. Siamo giunti all'ultimatum francese: se la Rosselli non s'inserirà nel LXXIV battaglione stranieri verrà sciolta. In altre parole: far parte dell'esercito francese o internamento' (GP, p. 320). This situation rumbled on for a fortnight and then became part of a bigger relational conundrum as the Allies became involved (GP, p. 326).

Fascist reports of Allied airdrops of tanks and engineers were gross exaggerations, 'hallucinations' according to Revelli, and facts on the ground certainly showed a different picture of relations between the partisans and the Allies. In September 1944, for example, Revelli saw partisan relations with each of the three Allies as quite distinct: 'I francesi ci tollerano: o meglio vorrebbero avviarci verso un campo di concentramento. [...] Gli americani si disinteressano della

<sup>293</sup> Absalom, *Resistance*, p. 175.

nostra sorte. I soli che ci difendono sono gli inglesi' (GP, p. 171). He struggled in particular to understand the American attitude to the conflict and the Germans:

Sono strani soldati gli americani. Inquadrati da una disciplina sostanziale, barattano le armi in più, quelle raccolte in combattimento; ma per le armi personali hanno una cura particolare. [...] Ho l'impressione che gli americani non riescano a odiare i tedeschi. Nel tedesco vedono il soldato, non la bestia. [...] A volte sembra quasi che non sappiano per che cosa combattono. Forse non sanno cogliere i motivi del terrore e della miseria che li circonda. (GP, p. 335)

Disappointments with the British are, however, a feature of Revelli's publications and likewise those of Livio Bianco. They felt let down by incidents ranging from promised airdrops that never materialized,<sup>294</sup> to a feeling of betrayal in 1944 when the imminent liberation they had hoped for was quashed by a strong German counter-offensive in the Romagna. This in turn saw the fledgling partisan republics overrun and partisan forces, particularly in Piedmont and the Veneto, at their most exposed<sup>295</sup>. General Alexander, deputy to Dwight Eisenhower and Supreme Allied Commander of Allied Armies in Italy since 1943, had issued the following order in the belief that Liberation would not now be possible until the spring: 'I patrioti devono cessare la loro attività precedente per prepararsi alla nuova fase di lotta e fronteggiare un nuovo nemico, l'inverno'.<sup>296</sup> Partisan disappointment and their sense of betrayal at this development can be measured in the inclusion of this moment across the spectrum of Resistance writing<sup>297</sup> from Revelli's *La guerra dei poveri* and Livio Bianco's more succinct overview, *Guerra partigiana*, to works of literature such as Viganò's *L'Agnese va a morire* and Fenoglio's *Il partigiano Johnny*. Belco argued that 'Contrary to glowing Allied reports and Allied directives, the partisans did not look to Field Marshal Sir Harold Alexander as commander in chief for orders'.<sup>298</sup> Revelli expresses a similar sentiment the following spring as he angrily asserted his right to lead his men autonomously:

È proprio per l'esperienza passata, che comincia in Russia e finisce a Torino, che gli ordini insindacabili, mi spaventano: basta con le boiate coperte dai gradi, dalla retorica patriottarda, dalle medaglie. Accetto un ordine nel vivo del combattimento, a caldo: discuto un ordine che parte

<sup>294</sup> Livio Bianco, pp. 51-52.

<sup>295</sup> Ginsborg, p. 56.

<sup>296</sup> Peli, p. 110.

<sup>297</sup> Pavone, p. 195.

<sup>298</sup> Belco, p. 30.

da una villa di Nizza, a freddo, come da un lontanissimo comando delle retrovie! (GP, p. 347)

Historically, General Alexander's order has been read in one of two ways. Either this was a military decision, 'not intend[ed] to make life more difficult for the Resistance',<sup>299</sup> or it was a deliberate political 'manovra anticomunista'.<sup>300</sup> Perhaps 'a subtle tit for tat' in response to the Russians having allowed the Nazis to 'crush' the recent Warsaw rising, and a move to forestall the possibility of 'the political headache of a left-wing mass movement in the North' after the Liberation.<sup>301</sup> *La guerra dei poveri* showed Revelli's thoughts as a GL commander focused on a future Italy and were consciously at odds with those of the British: 'La nostra formazione è politica: è una formazione scelta, soprattutto ben armata. A liberazione avvenuta la Rosselli potrebbe essere una preziosa riserva per l'attuazione dei nostri programmi politici che saranno in contrasto con gli interessi inglesi' (GP, p. 339).

Despite this difference in political vision for the country, Revelli took care to give credit to the British where due by recording the following comment in a footnote of *La guerra dei poveri*: 'Non altrettanto posso dire della missione inglese di Nizza. Pur restando vero che fra noi e gli inglesi esitava un muro di diffidenza, devo riconoscere oggi la buona fede della "missione Betts" nel sollecitare il rientro della brigata Carlo Rosselli in Italia' (GP, p. 338). Otherwise, Revelli's representation of the Allies expresses similar sentiments to those of other records.

### The Disillusionment of Liberation

Nuto Revelli's record of the Liberation in April 1945 is marked by the contrast between the joy around him and his own sense of isolation – due in large measure to the profound impact of the injuries he had received in a motorbike accident in France the previous October. This required months of reconstructive surgery to his face but still left him permanently disfigured (GP, p. 305 ff.). Recovered sufficiently to return to Italy and participate in the liberation of Cuneo, Revelli described the scenes as they passed through Borgo San Dalmazzo, 'Bandiere da ogni parte, osanna ai partigiani' (GP, p. 371). He goes on to tell of the scenario, somewhat surreal to his mind, of civilians spectating at the liberation of his hometown shortly afterwards (GP, p. 372). Such

<sup>299</sup> Ginsborg, p. 56.

<sup>300</sup> Peli, p. 110.

<sup>301</sup> Ginsborg, p. 56.

liberations were not part of the Allied game plan: 'To the Allies' consternation and against their orders, partisans themselves liberated cities before Allied troops arrived'.<sup>302</sup> Revelli narrated both the almost comical situations in which Fascists become 'ex-Fascists' overnight (*GP*, p. 374), and the early victory celebrations which contrasted with his own melancholy:

I bracciali sono sempre più numerosi. Appaiono i primi fazzoletti verdi, azzurri, tricolori, nuovissimi, fabbricati per l'occasione. Scendo in via Rome, sempre in giro a caso, da isolato. (*GP*, p. 376)

An interview in 1998 provided a fuller explanation of Revelli's lack of celebration at the Liberation. Revelli had a number of worries at the time but the real source of his anguish lay elsewhere: 'in me avvertivo troppo grande l'angoscia, troppo forte la lacerazione. [...] Ma soprattutto mi portavo dentro il peso del disastro di Russia, il ricordo di quei dispersi, di quei ragazzi morti per niente là, a migliaia di chilometri dalle loro case'.<sup>303</sup>

By contrast, Revelli judges the sadness at the close of Livio Bianco's partisan diary to be for another reason: 'Finisce così il diario di Livio, con la malinconia, con la tristezza di chi lascia alle spalle la stagione più bella della sua vita'.<sup>304</sup> Again with the benefit of distance, Revelli was able to look back during an interview in 1972 and capture the hopes and aspirations of Italian partisans at the Liberation, likening them to 'quell'aria pulita dopo il grande temporale'.<sup>305</sup>

Relatively few of the oral testimonies from the *contadini* talk of the two years of Resistance and even fewer of the Liberation. Only a couple of Revelli's female witnesses, the Airnar sisters, who had witnessed and experienced the brutality of the German invader and its Fascist sidekicks record the anticipation and joy of eventual liberation: 'Gli ultimi mesi della Resistenza era poi un qualcosa di bello. Cominciavano ad arrendersi i fascisti, quello era proprio bello, ah sí sí, il cuore si apriva proprio. Capivamo che stava per finire' (*AF*, p. 168).

<sup>302</sup> Belco, p. 31.

<sup>303</sup> Manca, pp. 35-36.

<sup>304</sup> Livio Bianco, p. xlii.

<sup>305</sup> Nuto Revelli, 'L'appello di Nuto Revelli', *Lotta continua*, 11 July 1972.

### ***Section III: 1943-1945 - Memories Particular to the contadini***

*Il mondo dei vinti* and *L'anello forte* consist of almost 250 testimonies. That only a handful of these individuals considered themselves former partisans speaks volumes about the level of rural participation in the war of Liberation. Of these, the majority discussed the Resistance in terms of their attitudes to, and interaction with, the various factions involved. Few mentioned, even briefly, the aftermath of 8 September 1943 and the many soldiers – particularly those whose homes were in the South – who were left in a vulnerable situation after the disbanding of the IV army. (MI, pp. 22, 63). We have seen above a number of aspects common to Revelli's own record and some of the *contadini*. In this section, we wish to consider three aspects particular to the perspective of the *contadini* on 1943-1945.

The first area characteristic of the attitudes of Revelli's witnesses is the tendency to distance themselves from the Fascist regime. This is done in a number of ways. The witness might profess total ignorance of Mussolini's regime and current affairs in general: 'Che cosa ricordo del fascismo? Non ne so niente del fascismo, ho mai preso un giornale in mano' (MI, p. 145). Revelli included an anecdote in *Le due guerre* which illustrated the extent of claimed rural ignorance of Fascism: 'Molti minimizzano. Un testimone, uno in gamba, quando gli ho chiesto del fascismo mi ha risposto in piemontese: "il fascismo è durato due o tre anni". "Ma come, - ribatto, - è durato venti anni!" "Ma l'è durà tant parei?"' (DG, p. 24). Discussing the 'latent Fascist attitudes' seen in the villagers of Pavese's *La luna e i falò*, Nicoletta Simborowski describes them as "tutta gente che si è messa il fazzoletto tricolore l'indomani", changing with the prevailing wind and unwilling to take moral responsibility for any of the preceding years.<sup>306</sup> Revelli had witnessed similar behaviour in Cuneo at the Liberation, and *contadini* such as the individual above offer similar descriptions of their own behaviour and that of their communities.

Spirito Magno Rosso offered another perspective on the rural community's view of Fascism. He represented those who considered themselves politically illiterate, Fascists by default rather than

<sup>306</sup> Nicoletta Simborowski, *Secrets and Puzzles: Silence and the Unsaid in Contemporary Italian Writing* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003), p. 73.

conviction who, as he recounted, therefore needed a shocking event to shake them out of their stupor:

In Italia ormai [c. 1925] c'era il fascismo. Per me, per molti di noi, dopo la morte di Matteotti il fascismo era il nemico. Non che ci interessiamo di politica, non ci interessiamo nemmeno oggi di politica perché non siamo colti. Ma è l'assassinio di Matteotti che ci ha spalancato gli occhi. Noi non eravamo fascisti, e quel delitto ci ha messi a terra. L'impressione era quasi come se avessero assassinato uno di noi. Per tutta la gente della mia frazione quel delitto è stata una cosa grossa, decisiva. (MV, pp. 271-272)

The ignorance claimed above – whether genuine or merely evasive – was atypical of those prepared to discuss the Resistance with Revelli. Yet the events referred to suggest that by the mid-1920s, even those 'ignorant' rural communities had seen something of the real nature of Fascism. Generally, those with an opinion on the Resistance had been politically active, or at least more politically aware, than the average *contadino*. Consequently there was something of a 'them-and-us' attitude in their communication of the views of the *contadini* regarding Fascism. Giulio Cesare Mascarello provided an intelligent and detailed discussion of rural politics and was emphatic as to the relationship between the apolitical *contadini* and Fascism: 'Dire che i contadini erano fascisti? I contadini non hanno capito niente del fascismo, erano abbastanza soddisfatti dell'Impero, dell'Italia importante, ma di politica ne capivano niente' (MV, p. 299). Giuseppe Bassignana likewise made a distinction between his own experience and the views of the majority:

Per molti contadini il fascismo è passato senza che se ne accorgessero. Per me il fascismo è stato una pietra sullo stomaco, terribile. Ci hanno in parte catturati tramite i figli, io pagavo sei tessere per i miei figli, a scuola era obbligatorio avere la tessera fascista. Io però non mi sono mai iscritto al fascio. Il fascismo ha diviso i paesi, ha rotto tante amicizie. (MV, p. 323)

Giovanni Tolosano was one of the few to admit to being a Fascist, or at least pro-Fascist, and he acknowledged himself that at the time he was one of a minority: 'La gente è contro il fascio, sono quasi tutti contrari. Io dico la verità, io invece ci credevo al fascio' (MV, p. 244). If we take the more politicized *contadini* at their word – as the others shed little light on the reality if it were different – it is unsurprising that anti-Fascists of longstanding were a minority in the communities in which Revelli conducted his research.<sup>307</sup> Battista Martinengo was one of several members of an

<sup>307</sup> The perspective of another community is offered in the testimony of Ines Siglienti Bedinguer, from Rome: 'I miei genitori erano antifascisti e da quando Mussolini salì al potere, mio padre fu spesso oggetto di percosse e subì la prigione. Furono questi fatti a provocare il mio odio contro i fascisti'. (Alloisio, p. 14)

anti-Fascist family whose testimonies Revelli recorded. He spoke first of his own reaction to Fascism on his return from national service in 1922, and then of the prevailing attitude within the countryside:

Nel 1922 sono tornato da soldato dopo ventiquattro mesi in Sicilia. C'era il fascismo. Qualcuno di noi voleva reagire, ma l'affare veniva stretta, era un pasticcio. [...]

Nel paese avevamo nascosto la bandiera del socialismo. Tutte le notti venivano i fascisti da Fossano, da Cunco, a cercarla. [...] Chi erano gli antifascisti di Margarita? Erano gente come noi, operai, muratori, tutta gente che lavorava sotto gli altri. La campagna era tagliata fuori dal discorso dell'antifascismo, non si interessava di politica. (MV, pp. 20-21)

A second aspect of the Italian Resistance emerges in the oral testimonies of the *contadini*: the role of the *partigiana*. Real discussion of the female perspective is limited to the testimony of Tersilla Fenoglio Oppedisano, an ex-partisan. At the time of publication (in 1977), her narrative offers a rare insight to the experience of a female partisan and her reception by her home community. Describing her decision to join the partisans, Tersilla's position was very similar to that of Revelli, and indeed the majority of their generation: 'Io avevo vent'anni, io avevo la "Patria in testa, io avevo la retorica di Mussolini in testa' (MV, p. 403). Tersilla presented herself as perhaps less politically astute than her partisan comrades, yet she was able to outline clearly the predicament of many young men following the 8: 'A mio giudizio il partigianato non ha avuto una componente volontaristica: l'ottanta per cento dei partigiani proveniva dalle città, dov'era impossibile vivere. [...] Se la Repubblica di Salò non avesse voluto un esercito repubblicano, non avremmo avuto un esercito partigiano così imponente' (MV, p. 405). For women, however, the decision to become a partisan was voluntary and offered the opportunity to enter a world from which they had previously been excluded.<sup>308</sup> Like Livio Bianco, who viewed the Resistance as something of a holiday escapade<sup>309</sup> - Tersilla had positive memories of the period, and particularly of the formative influence of her leaders:

Io ricordo con infinita nostalgia la mia esperienza partigiana. [...] Soltanto dopo la Liberazione ho poi ripensato alle molte cose che mi avevano insegnato i miei comandanti partigiani. Se nel 1948 ho dato il voto al Partito Comunista è perché i miei comandanti partigiani erano comunisti. (MV, pp. 404-405)

<sup>308</sup> Alloisio, p. 24.

<sup>309</sup> Livio Bianco, p. ix.



During the Resistance Tersilla acted as *staffetta* for a communist band where she was the only female among the group. Her memories of the time with the band are marked by the respect she enjoyed from her fellow partisans. Despite being the lone female of the band, and sleeping side-by-side with the men, she claims never to have felt vulnerable or isolated, quite the opposite: 'In banda non ero una donna ma una sorella. Niente scherzi di cattivo gusto, non uno che mi sfiorasse. Se uno mi avesse offesa gli sarebbero volati in dieci addosso, ero circondata da un ambiente di famiglia' (MV, p. 404). Other women were not as fortunate as stereotypes prevailed and male partisans often did not want to be encumbered with female band members.<sup>310</sup>

A strongly religious outlook could have compromised Tersilla's position within this communist band, yet she recorded that the other partisans could not have been more respectful or accommodating of her beliefs and practice:

Io ero credente, tutte le sere dicevo le preghiere e il rosario, tutte le domeniche andavo a messa, mi sentivo preparata alla morte in qualsiasi momento.

Mi impressionava favorevolmente il rispetto che i comunisti avevano per i miei sentimenti religiosi, per le mie idee. (MV, p. 404-405)

It all sounds idyllic, and above all, protects Tersilla's reputation as she argues that she and the partisans were above reproach. Tersilla's testimony may very well reflect her experience, but the protection of one's reputation was a real issue for *staffette* and *partigiane*: 'la vita che conducevano, sempre in giro da una parte all'altra della città nelle ore più strane, anche durante il coprifuoco, l'essere sorprese in compagnia maschile da qualche conoscente, generava pettegolezzi, metteva in pericolo l'"onorabilità"'.<sup>311</sup> Tersilla records the reality of such risks given the reaction of her local community to her role and situation, despite evidence of her religious belief and practice:

Sai che cosa ero io per la gente del mio paese, per la gente di Serravalle? Ero una puttana. Così mi giudicava la gente contadina, così mi giudicava il prete, il farmacista, la gente del mio paese. D'altra parte non potevo pretendere che credessero alle cose che io dicevo. Come potevano credere che io vivevo in una stalla con trenta giovani, con trenta uomini, e mi comportavo con serietà, e tutte le sere dicevo il rosario!

Dopo la Liberazione ho vissuto un anno drammatico perché tutti mi giudicavano una di quelle, tutte le partigiane...erano puttane.

(MV, p. 406)

<sup>310</sup> Alloisio, p. 41.

<sup>311</sup> Alloisio, p. 41.

The Resistance was, however, a significant moment for Italian women and had, according to Alloisio and Beltrami, wide-ranging effect: 'Per le donne italiane è iniziata quella vicenda che le renderà non subalterne di un processo destinato a rompere barriere a tutti i livelli: nel costume, nella famiglia, nella società, nei rapporti con l'uomo'.<sup>312</sup> Women were taking on a role with a greater measure of equality, and enjoyed the sense that they were contributing to society, other than as 'babymaking machines'.<sup>313</sup> Tersilla presents herself as sharing the partisans' common goal of 'un'umanità nuova, un mondo giusto, pulito' (*MV*, p. 404), despite the antipathy of the *contadini*: 'I contadini? I contadini ci hanno sfamati, non ho conosciuto una sola spia tra i contadini. Ma i contadini ci hanno subiti. I contadini non hanno capito niente della Resistenza' (*MV*, p. 405). This assessment was more balanced than those of many other witnesses in *Il mondo dei vinti* and *L'anello forte*.

The third area presented in testimonies from the *contadini* and not part of Revelli's personal experience is that of Italians deported to German camps, or Lager, following the armistice of 8 September 1943. Memories of brutalities perpetrated by the Germans on Italian soil were common among the *contadini*. In addition, some of those interviewed by Revelli could speak of the lasting affront of the treatment they endured at the hands of German prison guards. Lorenzo Falco, a partisan captured by the Fascists in November 1944, eventually ended up in Mauthausen. Relating these events in precise and concise memories Lorenzo transmits to the reader the offence against his human dignity caused by treatment he still struggled to comprehend:

Quattro giorni di viaggio e arriviamo a Mauthausen. Lì ci prendono i pochi bagagli, ci obbligano a svestirci, buttiamo i pantaloni qua e la camicia là. Non ci danno nemmeno una coperta, ci consegnano soltanto una camicia e un paio di pantaloni dei loro. Ci perquisiscono, ispezionano il nostro corpo. Ci guardano in bocca, se vedono delle protesi in oro le strappano via. Cercano gli anelli, le catenine, gli orologi. Ci guardano tra le chiappe, c'è un tedesco che con due dita ci apre le chiappe e guarda che non ci sia magari un anello nascosto, lo giuro sulla memoria di mio padre e di mia madre che i tedeschi si comportavano così. (*MV*, p. 159)

Chapter 3 has already shown that Revelli censored the 'first-hand' accounts of the *contadini* by the methodology he employed in their facilitation. However, Revelli's published testimonies reveal the distinction between his experiences - at home and at the front - and those of the *contadini*. While

<sup>312</sup> Alloisio, p. 29.

<sup>313</sup> Alloisio, p. 51.

many of his witnesses attempted to distance themselves from any involvement in Fascism, Revelli's own record had been more open about his upbringing under Fascism. Individual testimonies also give an insight to experience during 1943-1945 not shared by Revelli and particular to the minority. Tersilla's account of life as a *partigiana* was rare at the time, even among the other testimonies of *Il mondo dei vinti* and *L'anello forte*. Similarly, the perspective of Italians deported by the Germans is not often heard.

### ***Section IV: Reconciliation?***

Revelli's portrayal of the Resistance from the immediate post-war period until his death in 2004 suggests that his testifying involved a process of reconciliation. This is seen variously in a reconciliation of past and present, the reconciliation of memory and history, a methodological reconciliation, and the tantalizing possibility of reconciliation in his view of the Germans. The collections of testimonies from the *contadini* also touch briefly on the concept of reconciliation between Italians following the civil war of the Resistance.

The first of these aspects, a reconciliation of past and present, is the most complex and dominated in Revelli's writing and speech. The reconciliation of past and present in Revelli's witness bearing operated in two distinct but overlapping timeframes: a reconciliation of past and present during 1943-1945, and a reconciliation of past and present from a post-war perspective.

#### **Reconciliation of Past and Present during 1943-1945**

Reading *La guerra dei poveri* and subsequent comment by Revelli on his experience of conflict it is clear that he viewed the Russian front and the Resistance as part of one continuum. Both were the product of Mussolini's Fascist regime, one by his direct initiation, the other a response and rebellion against Fascism. Revelli's time as a partisan was one stage on his political journey from Fascist, to leftwing anti-Fascist and member of the Partito d'Azione. It was seen above that Revelli's initial motivation was the desire for vengeance for the 'caduti di Russia' (GP, p. 128). The link between Russia and the Resistance went beyond simple revenge though: 'Ritorno sovente al 26 luglio, all'8 settembre. Senza l'esperienza di Russia, non so come avrei scelto' (GP, p. 129). In the middle of the war of Liberation Revelli looked back on his first experience of conflict and noted in his diary that 'Il fronte russo è stato una scuola di coraggio' (GP, p. 208). The tendency following Badoglio's armistice was for the politically motivated partisans – whom Revelli later joined – to rubbish the former Italian army, condemning it along with everything else from the Fascist regime (GP, p. 149). In contrast, Revelli argued for the integrity of soldiers such as himself, who had made up this army, with a strength that showed his state of confusion about the recent past:

Sì, è vero, l'esercito è finito male. Ma sono ingiusti a coprirlo di fango. [...]  
 Combatteavamo per una guerra sbagliata, e lo sapevamo. [...] Combatteavamo per il fascismo, per l'Italia, per l'esercito, per noi stessi? Combatteavamo da uomini e basta. Un grande esercito. Un esercito scamiciato, quasi un esercito partigiano. Mancavamo di tutto, come un esercito di disperati. Ma avevamo coraggio, tanto coraggio da poterne vendere! (GP, pp. 149-150)

Revelli's experience as an officer in the Italian army had been a hard one – the reality was in stark contrast to his dreams – 'quasi un esercito partigiano'. Mussolini's management of the army had left it under-supplied, poorly commanded, corrupt, and its men disillusioned instead of proud to represent their country. And yet, Revelli's record of 1943-1945 includes frequent reflections on his two experiences of conflict, aside from Russia having motivated his decision to take up arms as a partisan. These range from a comparison of the degree of hopelessness in each (GP, p. 117) and the morale of the men under him (GP, p. 161), to the organization and discipline of both army and partisan band (GP, p. 154) and the consequent handling of circumstances such as the treatment of their injured (GP, p. 188). Particular experiences or situations seem to have triggered the comparison of his actions as a partisan commander with an earlier situation in Russia. In *La guerra dei poveri*, this trait showed just how close to the surface the memories and trauma of Russia lay many months later (see for example, GP, p. 153, 189, 367). The more intense the partisan action became, the more memories of a previous conflict flooded Revelli's thoughts – often with positive effect as he realized that he could apply previously successful tactics to new military scenarios: 'Mai come in questi giorni ho ritrovato le mie esperienze passate, la mia guerra sul fronte russo. Non ne parlo con nessuno, nemmeno con Livio, perché sono geloso di queste mie cose. Ma i ricordi si affollano, vivi come non mai, e mi danno coraggio' (GP, p. 190).

The past provided a link with the present as Russia was an experience shared in some respect with many of the partisans and civilians Revelli encountered. An empathy with the families of the *dispersi*, and a mutual appreciation of the consequence of the armistice and occupation by the Germans allowed Revelli to interact more closely with civilians: 'Sta nascendo la prima rete d'informatori, con i montanari che hanno i figli dispersi in Russia, con i montanari che hanno i figli renitenti alla leva' (GP, p. 224).

## Post-War Reconciliation of Past and Present

Reconciliation of past and present in Revelli's presentation of the Resistance becomes more complex when viewed from a post-Liberation perspective. Firstly, due to his motorcycle accident in France, Revelli had to grapple with a physical and psychological element which had changed him inside and out (GP, p. 317). Secondly, the period of hope ushered in at the Liberation ended abruptly in disillusionment for Revelli and his fellow partisans as very little of their dreams actually came to fruition. An interview with Corrado Stajano in 1972 showed the raw anger and frustration felt by Revelli as he looked back on what he viewed as a squandered opportunity:

Guardi, la delusione più grossa della mia vita è che dopo la guerra e dopo la guerra partigiana, soprattutto le cose non siano cambiate molto, che viviamo in una società sbagliata, che le lezioni tremende subite in quegli anni siano servite a poco e niente. Mi sconvolge di rabbia il pensiero che chi ci amministra ricordi a malapena che abbiamo avuto un 8 settembre 1943.<sup>314</sup>

Revelli and the 'politicized' partisans had expected, or at least hoped, to see the establishment of a new and better Italian society at the end of the war. In reality there was a great deal of continuity from the tatters of the Fascist regime to the post-war government, many fascists escaped punishment and were able to retain their positions within the infrastructure of society and government. How could such a situation arise immediately following a period such as the Resistance? Had it not been a war of liberation to rid Italy of the occupying German army, and the remains of the Fascist regime? Looking back, 25 April 1945 represented 'qualcosa di decisivo per la storia del paese: punto di arrivo di una vicenda drammatica, punto di partenza della ricostruzione della democrazia italiana'.<sup>315</sup> According to Oliva, a refusal to appreciate this significance of Liberation posed a collective problem:

Anziché una data di inizio, nella coscienza collettiva degli italiani il 25 aprile si è così trasformato in una data conclusiva, in un 'punto e a capo' che ha lasciato irrisolti i 'nodi' della storia passata: sino a che, venute meno le ragioni storico-politiche di quell'operazione, lo stesso 25 aprile si è mutato in 'nodo', stretto fra opposte vulgate.<sup>316</sup>

Summarizing the import of the Resistance for Italy, Guido Quazza stated that 'I venti mesi della Resistenza sono stati troppi per i lutti e il sangue che hanno provocato, ma, nello stesso tempo,

<sup>314</sup> Corrado Stajano, 'I grandi delusi', *Il giorno*, 18 July 1972.

<sup>315</sup> Pietro Scoppola, 'Introduzione', in *25 aprile. Liberazione* (Turin: Einaudi, 1995), 3-8, in Cooke (1997), p. 177.

<sup>316</sup> Oliva, p. 97.

sono stati troppo pochi per il rinnovamento di cui il paese aveva bisogno'.<sup>317</sup> Revelli's rural witnesses expressed in their own words the truth of Quazza's view. Giacomo Martinengo, for example, described the extent of action against former Fascists as witnessed on a local level:

Qui abbiamo ancora dieci fascisti oggi [1970], e sappiamo chi sono... In quel tempo della guerra partigiana il parroco don Vivalda non si interessava, faceva il parroco e basta. Don L. invece era fascista in pieno, da sempre. Eh, alla Liberazione qualche schiaffo e qualche calcio in culo don L. si è presi. Niente, poi abbiamo perdonato tutto, noi eravamo umani, *chei parole 'n po carà* [Qualche parola un po' pesante] e tutto è finito lì. (MV, p. 18)<sup>318</sup>

Cesare Cane offered a similar perspective: 'Alla Liberazione abbiamo perdonato tutti. Hanno preso qualche fascista, l'hanno portato in piazza, gli hanno dato qualche pugno e tutto è finito lì' (MV, p. 318). For others, this lack of punitive action fostered a bitterness which remained in evidence as they reviewed their experience decades later. One example of the rawness of these emotions was the testimony of Bartolomeo Garro:

Li conosco i fascisti che mi hanno fucilato, alcuni li incontro per le strade di Cuneo. Quando li vedo li schivo. Una volta ho incontrato quello che guidava il moto-sidecar, e l'ho insultato. Mi voleva denunciare, mi ha detto: 'Sono già stato condannato una volta, non mi condanni più tu. Stai attento perché ti mando in galera'. Mah! Dopo la Liberazione il processo ai fascisti di San Benigno è durato quattro mesi. Frezza<sup>319</sup> l'hanno condannato all'ergastolo, ma poi l'hanno liberato quasi subito. Adesso sta meglio di me. (MV, pp. 66-67)

Patti's government was accused of excessive and indiscriminate action against former Fascists. This had the effect of turning public opinion against any serious purging of ex-Fascists.<sup>320</sup> At the same time, Italy was especially sensitive to the growing global fear of communism given the prominent role played by communist partisans in liberating the country.<sup>321</sup> According to Revelli, amidst such hysteria, the prevailing attitude among non-communists in the reconstruction of the country was 'better the devil you know': 'L'esercito, la magistratura, la polizia, rinascevano su fondazioni fasciste. "Meglio" — diceva la democrazia sbagliata di allora — "meglio un fascista nell'esercito che un comunista". E tutti i partigiani, proprio tutti i partigiani, o vendevano l'anima o

<sup>317</sup> Guido Quazza, Prefazione a Gianni Oliva, *La Resistenza alle porte di Torino* (Milan: Angeli, 1989), p. xvi, quoted in Oliva, p. 97.

<sup>318</sup> Paola Martinengo describes the same priest Don L. as 'una spia dei primi' (MV, p. 25).

<sup>319</sup> Frezza was the officer who had ordered Garro's execution as a partisan (MV, p. 65).

<sup>320</sup> Clark, p. 318.

<sup>321</sup> Franco Ferraresi, *Threats to Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 16-17.

dovevano subire'.<sup>322</sup> The presence of ex-Fascists in positions of authority proved to be not just a transitional necessity, but the accepted norm even twenty years after the supposed fall of the Fascist regime. Thus, the freedom for which the partisans fought during the Resistance in reality mutated into something quite different. Revelli's response was that the fight had to go on, no longer with guns and military attacks, but in a tenacious commitment to true democratic freedom: 'Chi crede nella libertà deve difendere la libertà'.<sup>323</sup>

### A Reconciliation of Memory and History

Chapter 2 outlined the issues involved in the interaction of memory and history, discussed by Revelli mainly in *Il disperso di Marburg*. Here we want to consider the factors affecting willingness to divulge these memories with regard to Revelli's representation of the years 1943-1945. His own testimony and subsequent research are proof of the view that remembering and testifying constitute a 'duty', and 'an imperative'.<sup>324</sup> This was not the starting point of many of the witnesses he interviewed, and – as Norberto Bobbio states – we should not be surprised for 'la maggior parte degli uomini ha la memoria debole, quando non si tratta delle proprie ferite'.<sup>325</sup> Bobbio then focuses on the consequent imperative that someone take on the commitment to preserve the memories which contribute to the historical record: 'Ci deve pur essere qualcuno che si assuma il compito di rappresentare la memoria collettiva e quindi di non tralasciare nulla che ci aiuti a capire'. Revelli might have been a freelance amateur, but there was clearly a role for work such as that produced by his 'impegno del dopo'.

Reading the collections of testimonies it is evident that Revelli's witnesses have made a choice, to remember or to forget. This choice is then mirrored in the degree to which they appreciate the inescapable link between history and present situation (see Chapter 2), not least

<sup>322</sup> 'L'appello di Nuto Revelli'.

<sup>323</sup> Revelli, 'L'impegno di ogni giorno'.

The other side of this is the suggestion of a violent legacy of the Resistance, and the alleged inspiration for a succeeding period of 'civil war', the *anni di piombo* (Jones, pp. 36-37).

<sup>324</sup> Colin Davis, 'Reviewing Memory: Wiesel, Testimony and Self-Reading', in *European Memories of the Second World War*, p. 122.

<sup>325</sup> Norberto Bobbio, quoted in Luciano Della Mea, 'Nuto Revelli: Antifascismo ieri e oggi', *Il grande vetere*, 118 (1995).



because of 'history's accursed tendency to repeat itself'.<sup>326</sup> Revelli argues the importance and reality of this interaction between memory and history for several reasons. We have seen that he believes that the communication of memory as history is imperative in preventing ignorance – personal and collective. Even many years after the events, Revelli declared in an interview in 1999, with his typically forthright style, 'Rimuovere la memoria vuol dire cadere nell'ignoranza totale'.<sup>327</sup> To measure the full significance of his words it is important to consider the context in which he was speaking. David Ward described the 1990s as 'a time of great intellectual antagonism in Italy' in which Liberal intellectuals made a two-pronged attack on the Italy of the immediate post-war years, and the Resistance in particular. He accused them, firstly, of discrediting 'the Italian Resistance and anti-Fascist movement on which both Togliatti's post-war PCI and the First Republic based their claims to legitimacy', and secondly, of a rehabilitation of Fascism so that it was no longer the 'disastrous experience left-leaning intellectuals had typically depicted'.<sup>328</sup>

Revelli knew that memory was not static, and that it evolved – his repeated narration of his war experiences reflects this and his consequent search for a deeper understanding of the past. Influences and attitudes of succeeding generations also mould and reform memories – the basic components remain the same while their interpretation may evolve.<sup>329</sup> Elie Wiesel expressed perfectly the tension between past and present, memory and history, stating that, in revisiting an experience of which he had already testified, all he could do was 'look again at that testimony with my eyes of today'.<sup>330</sup> However, in the face of the two-pronged attack above, Revelli's vehemence seems quite justified. Immediately after the Liberation partisans had been 'remembered and Romanticized', and held up as 'role models for the next generation';<sup>331</sup> by the 1990s – and not for the first time<sup>332</sup> – they were being held responsible, to varying degrees, 'for civil war and for German (and fascist) violence against the civilian population. The preservation and

<sup>326</sup> *The Fourth Dimension: Interviews with Christa Wolf*, trans. Hilary Pilkington, intro. Karin McPherson (London/ New York: 1988), p. 84. Quoted in Chris Weedon, 'Childhood Memory and Moral Responsibility: Christa Wolf's Kindheitsmuster', in *European Memories of the Second World War*, ed. by Helmut Peitsch and others, (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), p. 246.

<sup>327</sup> Novelli, 'Le mie illusioni'.

<sup>328</sup> David Ward, 'Intellectuals, culture and power in modern Italy', in Baranowski, pp. 81-96 (p. 94).

<sup>329</sup> Weedon, p. 245.

<sup>330</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Tous les fleuves vont à la mer* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1994), p. 104.

<sup>331</sup> Jones, p. 38.

<sup>332</sup> Belco, p. 34.

communication of Italian memories of 1943-1945 was, Revelli argued, imperative to helping society understand the contemporary situation, no matter the decade (*DG*, p. 183).<sup>333</sup>

The decision to remember or to forget then forces another choice: to testify or to remain silent. Within the context of post-war Italy, this was not always a clear-cut or easy decision. Revelli seems to have dealt with his memories, good and bad, by communicating them to others. Many of the *contadini* attempted to cope by keeping a tight rein on their memories, often because of the pain involved in remembering and recounting what had happened. For Don Raimondo Viale, the process of remembering and voicing the past was at times just too painful – as Revelli recognized, ‘Sono troppo atroci le sofferenze di ieri e di oggi, meglio il silenzio’ (*PG*, p. 106).

This pain in recounting might result in individuals not sharing any of their memories, but it often meant that although people were prepared to talk to Revelli about the war and the Resistance, he was only offered a censored access to their memories. For example, gathering the testimonies of *Il mondo dei vinti* during the 1960s, Revelli noted a reticence among the *contadini* when it came to discussing the Ventennio: ‘Hanno paura a parlare dei fascisti e del fascismo, come se ne temessero il ritorno!’ (*MV*, p. cxxiv). These testimonies also show that some *contadini* tried to hide their previous support of Fascism by denying they had ever been involved. *Le due guerre* shows this stance to be untenable – and ineffective as a stalling mechanism – as Revelli was able to cut through one man’s bluster by reading out his name from a list of the 24 local ‘squadristi’ (*DG*, p. 8).

Working on *Il disperso di Marburg* in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there remained a reticence in talking of events of forty years ago and more:

‘Ah, io non parlo, io non voglio più saperne di quella storia,’ è la risposta istintiva di Carlo che gesticola come se una vespa fosse sul punto di pungergli il naso [...] ‘Se erano degli sbandati o appartenevano a qualche banda? E chi lo sa? Una cosa è sicura, non venivano da lontano. Ma io non parlo, non canto. L’ho già detto e lo ripeto, non voglio più saperne di quella storia. E adesso basta, ho già parlato troppo’. (*DM*, pp. 33-34)

<sup>333</sup> Speaking with particular regard to Livio Bianco’s record of the Resistance, Norberto Bobbio said: ‘Eppure siamo convinti che oggi, proprio oggi, queste pagine abbiano ancora la loro attualità, anzi più oggi che ieri. Se in una società sempre più corrotta e volgare come la nostra, abbiamo ancora qualche ragione di guardare al passato e di trarne un conforto, questo passato è la resistenza viva, non quella imbalsamata’ (Livio Bianco, p. xi).

A final factor that had the potential to silence a witness was the climate in which he or she was to testify. Chapter 3 has established that Revelli preferred to interview witnesses in their own homes, or at least in some location in which they felt at ease. Climate, however, extends beyond the spatial environment of a witness to include the political and historical mood of the moment; if it is hostile, a potential witness may not come forward at all. Carlo, one of Revelli's German assistants working on *Il disperso di Marburg*, surmized that this was the case with several Germans he had attempted to contact. He explained to Revelli, 'Dopo le recenti incriminazioni da parte della magistratura tedesca dei responsabili dell'eccidio di Caiazzo,<sup>334</sup> è improbabile che i tre superstiti del Battaglione 617 siano disposti a uscire allo scoperto, a parlarci del loro reparto e di Rudolf Knaut. Avranno paura, saranno prudenti' (DM, p. 161). Revelli had already encountered a similar fear of recrimination in potential witnesses from among local ex-partisans (DM, p. 109).

Revelli encountered others who were prepared to assist his investigation, but only from the protection of anonymity (DM, p. 55). At times, such secrecy had the effect of silencing Revelli in the interests of loyalty and his integrity: "Ma chi sono gli autori di quell'imboscata?" mi domandano in coro. "Mi chiedete l'impossibile, - rispondo. - Ne ho incontrati due di quei "colpisti", forse gli unici ancora vivi, e ho giurato che non farò mai i loro nomi" (DM, p. 150).

Of course, some memories could be nothing *but* silent if forgotten, or indeed had never existed in the first place. One man who fitted this category – unless he had deliberately refused to see at the time – had been employed as a cleaner in the German's barracks. Revelli hoped he could assist in identifying the *disperso*, but he was unable to provide any help because, he claimed: 'Noi eravamo come cieche e sorde, dovevamo lavorare e basta. È anche questo il motivo per cui non so dirle nulla di più' (DM, p. 41).

The voices of those who, like Revelli, were prepared, even determined to make their memories known balance such silences. Integral to this act was an element of remembrance or a sense in which speaking or testifying constituted an act of commemoration. Take, for example, *Il prete giusto*, the oral testimony which Don Viale was determined to record despite ill-health only two years before his death (PG, p. 106). His testimony described at length the execution of

<sup>334</sup> On 13 October 1943, 22 civilians, mainly women and children had been massacred at Caiazzo.

thirteen young partisans, his confessorial role and a duty to break the news to the relatives of the dead. These are memories he *needed* to narrate. In addition, Revelli recounted how this incident evolved into a simple act of remembrance and commemoration carried out annually by Don Viale: 'Tutti gli anni, il 2 maggio, lungo il muro di cinta del cimitero di Borgo San Dalmazzo, commemorava i tredici partigiani fucilati dai tedeschi. Breve la messa, e poche parole, mai retoriche. Eravamo sempre di meno, i presenti: l'esiguo gruppo di noi partigiani, e accanto i familiari dei martiri' (PG, pp. 106-107).

Chapter 2 has already discussed the commemorative role of memory and we see this emerge on a community level after April 1945. After the Liberation, a cult of the *25 aprile* quickly sprung up with partisan reunions every year. Revelli was a regular attendee and speaker at these events (DM, pp. 62-63). An article written by Revelli on the eve of 25 April 1964 shows that he participated in these events with a commitment or *impegno* to utilize the values for which the partisans had fought – disputed and vague though they were – rather than be part of a merely static commemoration of past victories. As we have seen in Chapter 4, Revelli's service as an army officer and then as a partisan, was marked by an abhorrence of rhetoric. After the Liberation and in the development of a day of commemoration for the Resistance, he was acutely aware of the futility of allowing plain rhetoric to become part of the proceedings: 'Ma fedeltà alla Resistenza non vuol dire commemorazioni. Vuol dire l'impegno di ogni giorno perché giustizia e libertà non restino espressioni vane e retoriche, vuol dire combattere ogni giorno per la democrazia, per una Italia migliore'.<sup>335</sup>

Rhetoric was one element in a gradual distortion of the Italian memory of the Resistance after 1945. Commending Livio Bianco's work *Guerra partigiana*, Revelli explained: 'Ripercorrendo con le pagine di Livio i venti mesi della guerra partigiana incontreremo molti invite alla riflessione, molti temi attuali, di oggi: ritroveremo la Resistenza vera, fatta da uomini, non di santi. La Resistenza di santi è storia inventata, storia falsa, imbalsamata'.<sup>336</sup> Earlier in this chapter we saw conflicting views of the partisans in rural communities during the Resistance; with the passage of time and the fading, or influencing, of memory, the partisans became evermore acceptable as

<sup>335</sup> Revelli, 'L'impegno di ogni giorno'.

<sup>336</sup> Livio Bianco, p. xiv.

'culprits'. This is a much more self-conscious process for Revelli in *Il disperso di Marburg* – the process itself is part of the subject of the book. Here we see that, for some of his witnesses, the contemporary environment created a reticence to be identified and interviewed as they sensed that people no longer remembered or cared about the conflict:

Avrei voluto che Vittorio fosse qui con noi oggi, ma lui è più prudente di me, non vuol saperne di parlare. E forse ha ragione, perché i tempi sono quelli che sono, e troppa gente non sa o non ricorda, per cui diventa facile dare sempre e comunque tutte le colpe ai partigiani. (DM, p. 109)

Even prior to the Liberation, there had been little appreciation among Revelli's *contadini* for the partisan values which could shape their individual and collective futures, so it should come as little surprise that these months were forgotten relatively quickly (MV, p. 281). Paola Martinengo, one of the women interviewed in *Il mondo dei vinti*, represented a minority of Italians who like Revelli could not forget the events of World War II and the Resistance, and valued the sacrifices made: 'Sì, al 25 aprile abbiamo perdonato. Ma oggi mi chiedo se sono morti per niente i nostri partigiani. La gente dimentica, la gente ha dimenticato. Vivessi mille anni mi ricordo del fascismo e del male che ha fatto' (MV, p. 27).

Adriano Perona, mayor of Rittana, outlined for Revelli the evolving significance of the 'festa del Chiôt Rosa' he had established to commemorate the Resistance: 'Il giorno della festa del Chiôt Rosa è diventato per tutti noi un giorno di meditazione, di allegria, di speranza' (AT, p. xxxii). Likewise, the inauguration of numerous *Istituti Storici della Resistenza* sprang from a sense of community duty to remember and commemorate the sacrifice of the partisans. Ex-partisans played a key role in establishing these centres – Revelli was influential in the setting up of the Istituto Storico della Resistenza in Cuneo e Provincia – with a view to preserving and promoting collective understanding and remembrance of these years.

When Lorenzo Falco told his story to Revelli nearly thirty years after his deportation to Mauthausen the psychological scars from their experience still pained him (MV, p. 161). These 'long' personal memories of the Resistance contrast with the short collective memory of a significant period in Italian history, appropriation of which was limited to the minority involved: the Resistance was a 'national' milestone that excluded the majority of the nation. As Oliva stated in his conclusion to *Le tre Italie del 1943*:

L'importanza storica e morale della scelta di rottura compiuta dallo schieramento antifascista sta tutta nella dimensione di rinnovamento, nella progressiva presa di coscienza del proprio passato e, dunque, del proprio presente e del proprio futuro. Si tratta di un processo che, nel momento in cui lo scontro armato finisce, continua ad essere patrimonio di una minoranza.<sup>337</sup>

### The Possibility of Reconciliation with the German People

Over forty years after the war, an interview with Revelli in *Luna nuova* demonstrated both that his hatred of the Germans was still present, and that he was unconvinced of the reality or even possibility of effecting a psychological reconciliation with the Germans: 'Con i tedeschi balordi niente da fare: li odio come li odiavo allora'.<sup>338</sup> This interview occurred in the same year that *Il disperso di Marburg* was published. The very decision to embark on such a project shows that Revelli had taken a step towards reconciliation: he was intrigued by the story of a good German. The record of his research within *Il disperso* shows that Revelli had significantly refined his antipathy towards the Germans. Rather than a blanket hatred of all Germans, *Il disperso* shows implicitly that Revelli had come to distinguish between those of his own war generation, and a new younger generation. This is seen in his comments on the reception he received from two different generations in Marburg:

'ci sono andato a Marburg, ospite dell'università per un incontro con gli studenti: ragazzi preparati, curiosi e bravissimi, con cui ho discusso con molta libertà. La sera era invece previsto un appuntamento con la popolazione, c'erano perciò sia ragazzi sia miei coetanei. Il discorso fu corretto ma molto più difficile: c'era una grande distanza che ci separava e percepivo un loro desiderio di evadere, di esorcizzare temi come quello dei campi di sterminio'.<sup>339</sup>

However, *Il disperso di Marburg* illustrates a distinct rapprochement between Revelli the amateur historian, as he liked to term himself, and professional historians – both in terms of interaction with and discussion of theory and methodology. To access German archives, Revelli required the collaboration of professional German historians. There is, I believe, a distinction between a professional reconciliation – which could on another project have involved historians of any nationality – and an emotional or psychological reconciliation with the nation and generation he held responsible for the traumatic and yet formative experiences of which he wrote. The

<sup>337</sup> Oliva, pp. 96-97.

<sup>338</sup> Mazzotta.

<sup>339</sup> Mazzotta.

possibility of working productively with Christoph and other German historians depended on Revelli separating his innate hatred for Germans from his interaction with these collaborators. Revelli had knowingly chosen to research a subject which required him to work with Germans – not because he particularly wanted to work with Germans, but because the subject of his research was a *disperso*: 'Non mi interessava se era amico, nemico – soltanto il fatto che era disperso, e io ero così vicino ad esserne uno' (AR1).

Another collaborator, Carlo, later forced Revelli to consider the issues subjectivity posed in his methodology: 'Carlo ha ragione nel ripropormi la realtà di allora, anche se credo di non aver dimenticato nulla di quei tempi in cui la ferocia era all'ordine del giorno. Ma voglio che ogni tanto i freni della razionalità si allentino, voglio ogni tanto sognare a occhi aperti' (DM, p. 152). In Revelli's writing of Russia, the goal was he says to 'gridare *la mia verità*' [emphasis mine] (DG, p. 127). Writing in the immediate post-war, he was conscious of the subjectivity of his record, but it is only in the 1990s that Revelli seems to acknowledge and engage with such polemics. If, as it seems, this was the case, his discussion with Carlo raises a number of important points about Revelli's thinking on the methodological implications of his subjectivity. Firstly, if this is actually the beginnings of Revelli's methodological analysis (and not just its first public expression), it emphasizes the professional and theoretical vacuum in which Revelli had documented his personal experience of Russia and the Resistance, and facilitated the oral testimonies of the *contadini* (see Chapters 4 and 6). Secondly, it suggests that Carlo viewed emotional reaction to be as much part of the record as its rational and factual components; while Revelli's earlier publications did not dwell on emotional reactions, he suggests here that on occasion he felt constrained in some way by the rationality of his approach. Thirdly, such discussion questions the extent to which Revelli was in agreement with Carlo's approach, although he attempts to rationalize the inclusion of obviously subjective material by suggesting that Carlo, a historian, endorsed such an approach.

Was there any possibility of a personal reconciliation with the Germans? Carole Angier argued in her biography of Primo Levi, *The Double Bond*, that in writing *Il disperso di Marburg* Revelli

had in the process succeeded in overcoming his hatred of the Germans.<sup>340</sup> It would be helpful to know the source of Angier's assertion that Revelli's goal 'was simply not to hate [the Germans]'; indeed, I would go as far as to suggest that it seems inconsistent with Revelli's explicitly stated goals. Revelli's 'impegno del dopo' was based primarily on testifying to his and others' experiences during the war in Russia and then the Resistance, for much of which he held the Germans responsible.

If Angier is basing her argument for reconciliation on *Il disperso di Marburg*, it needs to be noted that Revelli never spoke of aiming 'not to hate them'. At best, such a conclusion appears to be implicit in Revelli's narration of various relationships with Germans. There is a distinct generational difference in Revelli's relationships with the German people, as demonstrated in *Il disperso di Marburg*. Revelli's relationship with a younger generation of Germans, be they school children, or his research collaborator Christoph, was positive and not marked by hatred (*DM*, p. 46); Revelli also seemed keen to encourage cultural interaction on a European level. 'Karl', the ex-Wehrmacht officer, for a time tantalizingly offers the possibility of reconciliation between Revelli and a German of his own generation. Ultimately, the possibility came to nothing – to Revelli's disappointment – although it was the closest he had come to an implicit search for individual or personal reconciliation:

Mi torna alla mente che è trascorso un anno da quando ho telefonato a 'Karl'. E nessuna notizia. La cosa m'incuriosisce e un po' mi rattrista. Apparteniamo alla stessa generazione io e 'Karl', quella degli 'anni ruggenti', per cui un dialogo tra noi si presenta forse più difficile del previsto. Mi ero illuso che potesse essermi amico' (*DM*, p. 155).

*Il disperso di Marburg* shows, however, that Revelli was being forced to consider his behaviour and his attitude towards Germans of the Reich, by none other than a young German, and he is happy to record this. He describes how Christoph, while reading another of his publications, *L'ultimo fronte*, had recognized the rawness of Revelli's hatred and proceeded to counsel him wisely to prevent its negative intrusion on the text. Implicit in the following extract is Christoph's wish – and by its inclusion, Revelli's also – that the same raw hatred not impede their current joint research project:

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<sup>340</sup> Angier, p. 546.



'Magari il vostro odio di allora vi ha accecati, fino al punto che non vedevate più quei tanti poveri diavoli che indossavano pure la divisa tedesca'. Accenna poi allo 'spettacolo avvilente' degli ebrei, e afferma che non per tutti i tedeschi quello spettacolo era eccitante come una droga. Mi dica: 'Nuto, lo sai meglio di me che non tutti i tedeschi erano uguali [...]'. (DM, p. 81)

Colin Davis argues that 'what matters is not the historical truth, but the testimonial truth of the narrative; and for those of us who were not witnesses, testimony is inevitably bound up with questions of rhetoric and textuality'.<sup>341</sup> Despite the tension between Revelli and the methodology of professional historians, one retains the impression of a striving for 'testimonial truth' in his narrative at every stage of his writing career. *Il disperso di Marburg* and *Le due guerre* help allay fears about the historical truth of Revelli's record: they show a gradual appreciation of his influence as researcher and editor on the finished account, and a consequent increase in his self-criticism.

## Conclusion

Chapter 5 has examined Revelli's representation of the years 1943-1945, the bridge between his experiences in Russia and his later research among the *contadini* of Piedmont. Accordingly, the chapter has argued that the same 'impegno' to remember and not to forget which originated in Russia drives Revelli's representation of memories of 1943-1945. Revelli's handling of the period in various publications between 1962 and 2003 demonstrates that over time he is engaging more with professional historians as he discharges his sense of 'impegno'. *Il disperso di Marburg* represents the climax of Revelli's analysis of his methodology and its affect on the testimonies produced. The general issues in the interaction of memory and history outlined in Chapter 2 are relevant here. Revelli's own testimony and his facilitation of the testimonies of the *contadini* demonstrate his awareness that individual memories and individual choices influence the shape of collective memories and attitudes towards the past. Chapter 2 stated that memory is not static, be it individual or collective – attitudes to the past can and do change according to the contemporary political and cultural context. For Revelli, the core truth of what had happened remained the same over the years; the past shaped understanding of the present. What changed was the degree to

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<sup>341</sup> Davis, p. 128.

which the past needed to be interpreted for each new generation, nonetheless, Revelli worked for decades with the mantra 'i giovani devono sapere'.

## Chapter 6

### *'La guerra che non finisce mai': The Experience of Rural Piedmont*

Chapter 6 examines Revelli's collections of oral testimonies from the *contadini* of Piedmont, *Il mondo dei vinti* and *L'anello forte*. We have seen that Revelli's response to his 'impegno del dopo' produced both his personal diary and a record from the *contadini-soldati* involved in the war in Russia. The same 'impegno del dopo' prompted a record of the war in Italy from Revelli's perspective and that of those involved, partisan and civilian. As his research expanded, Revelli gradually grew more attached to the people of these rural communities. He began work on the collections of oral testimonies in the 1960s and so witnessed what he calls the 'terremoto dell'industrializzazione'. Italian economists might have rejoiced at the 'miracle' created in this post-war boom but Revelli argues the same prosperity had a destructive effect on many of the rural communities he visited. Their apparently imminent demise lay at the heart of his decision to collate their testimonies: 'Assistevò all'esodo grandioso, grandioso...scappavano proprio, dal loro ambiente. Allora mi sono detto: una parte di queste persone hanno delle esperienze straordinarie da raccontare, o le ascolto io adesso oppure va tutto perduto. Allora ho cominciato. Un lavoro difficile, faticoso'.<sup>342</sup>

Section I begins by establishing where and among whom Revelli conducted his research. This is then set against the existing picture of the Italian *contadini* and, particularly, the rural communities of Piedmont. Section II examines rural experience as told by the *contadini*. The chapter concludes by considering the relationship between Revelli and the *contadini*, his 'impegno del dopo', his methodology and the final published collections.

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<sup>342</sup> Menardi Noguera, p.132.

## Section I: Revelli's *Contadini* and the Existing Picture

Revelli's research focused on the communities of southern Piedmont in the area around his home town of Cuneo. As he sought out potential witnesses Revelli travelled as far west and south as townships on the French border, as far east as the Langhe, and as far north as the Val Grana and the Valle Maira where the River Maira and River Varaita merge with the Po. The more affluent agricultural communities of the plain south of Turin fell within these boundaries, but these were not the focus of Revelli's work. He did acknowledge the existence of the 'campagna ricca', although his stated mission was to communicate the history and experiences of the communities of the 'campagna povera' who were based more in the hills and mountains of the area. The majority of those interviewed earned their living at least in part from agriculture. A common second source of income was shift-work at one of the recently opened factories in the region, for example, the Michelin factory in Cuneo or the Ferrero factory in Alba. Factories such as these were of significant influence within the rural communities yet Revelli's focus was not particularly on the experience of its workers. The concept of the *contadino-operaio*, that is, the peasant who also worked in a factory, was only one aspect of the community and culture Revelli wished to document. More importantly, Revelli's initial connection with the rural communities originated with the *contadini-soldati* he commanded on the Don. Their attachment to their land had lodged in Revelli's mind. Now, some twenty years after the war, he is delving into the history and character of the communities from which these soldiers originated.

Luigi Capuana argued in 1879 that the *contadini* were somehow inferior to the upper classes: 'L'uomo e la donna del popolo, l'uomo della bassa borghesia ha dell'animale, del selvaggio; è più dappresso alla natura. L'organismo del suo sentimento, l'embrione dell'organismo del suo spirito sono di un'estrema semplicità e possono afferrarsi facilmente'.<sup>343</sup> Since the 19th Century, representation of the Italian *contadini* - whether literary, sociological or political - has been drawn almost wholly from the south of the peninsula. Within such

<sup>343</sup> From review of *I fratelli Zenganno* di Edmond de Goncourt (1879), quoted in *Verga e il verismo: sperimentalismo 'formale' e critica del progresso*, ed. by Guido Baldi (Turin: Paravia, 1980), p. 72.

discussion the definition of a 'contadino', or peasant, varies according to the region and locality represented. Lopreato, whose research was based in Calabria, defines a peasant as 'any worker engaged in *direct* agricultural activity'.<sup>344</sup> Redfield, working in the Crotona describes the peasants as 'rural people who *control* and cultivate *their* land'.<sup>345</sup> Many of Revelli's subjects owned small plots of land but also hired themselves out as day labourers. The following definition from Firth is perhaps most helpful for our purposes:

The term peasant has primarily an economic referent. By a peasant economy one means a system of small-scale producers, with a simple technology and equipment, often relying primarily for their subsistence on what they themselves produce. The primary means of livelihood of the peasant is cultivation of the soil.<sup>346</sup>

With his reference to a second form of income, Firth highlights the fact that while employment in agriculture was one aspect of being a 'peasant', accompanying social and economic factors were just as important. According to Lopreato, some cultures (such as that of Puerto Rico) hold an idealistic or romanticized view of their peasants whilst Italy's attitude to workers of the land has historically been one of disparagement or abuse.<sup>347</sup> Lopreato makes the point that 'in the Italian language all terms (*contadino*, *villano*, *terrone*, *bifolco*, or the like) used to designate the peasant are also synonymous with such words as "stupid", "ill-bred", "uncouth"; not to mention the dialectal terms which 'render even more obnoxious meanings'.<sup>348</sup> Whether 'contadini' shares the same pejorative connotation as the other words is, I think, arguable, however, such historical prejudices about the South have influenced attitudes towards the *contadini* in general. In one sense, that these terms have grown out of attitudes to the South, with no equivalent stereotypes for those of the North, makes Revelli's peasants even more marginalized.

The picture presented varies, but Italian rural communities are typically seen as living a parallel existence to that of Italy's city dwellers. The *contadini* are depicted as marginalized,

<sup>344</sup> Joseph Lopreato, *Peasants No More: Social Class and Social Change in an Underdeveloped Society* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1967), p. 40.

<sup>345</sup> Robert Redfield, *The Little Community and Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press (Phoenix Books), 1960), p. 20, quoted in Lopreato, pp. 40-41.

<sup>346</sup> Raymond Firth, *Elements of Social Organization*, 2nd edn (London: Watts & Co., 1956), p. 87, quoted in Lopreato, p. 41.

<sup>347</sup> Lopreato, p. 89.

<sup>348</sup> Lopreato, pp. 89-90.

traditional and backward looking, and something of an outdated oddity. Two of the best-known literary representations of the experience of the *contadini* have been provided by Giovanni Verga in *I Malavoglia* (1881)<sup>349</sup> and more recently by Carlo Levi in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (1945).<sup>350</sup> Both were set in Southern Italy. Verga's novel was the first of a planned cycle of novels following man's quest for material and social betterment: 'Questo racconto è lo studio sincero e spassionato del come probabilmente devono nascere e svilupparsi nelle più umili condizioni le prime irrequietudini pel benessere'.<sup>351</sup> He represents the peasants as *vinti*, or vanquished; a notion echoed in Revelli's title *Il mondo dei vinti*. Verga's *vinti* are those 'people who try to live rather than merely to exist, the ones who seek some justification for life'; ultimately their quest for betterment is doomed to end in failure.<sup>352</sup> The standard of living of Revelli's *contadini* is reported to improve with each generation, but for the most part they remain intent on eking out enough to survive, rather than attaining a greater prosperity.

Levi's work was based on his own experiences during a period of political exile in the village of Lucania. He struggled to relate to these people. It was like adapting to a new culture or ethnic group, not relating to fellow Italians. Their worlds could not be further apart – just as an Italian or European might find it difficult initially to distinguish between people of different ethnic origins, so too Levi found that all the *contadini* initially looked the same.<sup>353</sup> The *contadini* were aware of how the outside world viewed them yet they do not challenge the perception because it fitted with the harsh existence they knew.<sup>354</sup>

Sociologists began to realise in the 1960s that the historical premise of a chasm between rural communities and the rest of Italian society was not the most useful basis for their study. Lopreato, in *Peasants no more*, acknowledged that 'it has often been said of the southern Italian

<sup>349</sup> Giovanni Verga, *I Malavoglia* (Milan: BUR, (1881) 2004).

<sup>350</sup> Carlo Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Turin: Einaudi, (1945) 1990).

<sup>351</sup> Verga, p. 107.

<sup>352</sup> Giovanni Verga, *I Malavoglia*, ed. by M. D. Woolf (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), p. ix.

<sup>353</sup> Carlo Levi, p. 70.

<sup>354</sup> Instead, with the resignation of the *vinti*, they adopt this lowly view of their own worth: 'Noi non siamo cristiani, - essi dicono, - Cristo si è fermato a Eboli [...] Noi non siamo cristiani, non siamo considerati uomini, ma bestie, bestie da soma, e ancora meno che le bestie, i fruschi...' (Carlo Levi, p. iv). Silone, in his novel *Fontamara*, paints a similar picture by showing that the *contadini* were fully aware of the contempt in which others held them. The mockery Silone's peasants had to endure culminated in the arrival of Fontamara's new 'priest': a shabby old donkey. See Ignazio Silone, *Fontamara* (Milan: Mondadori, 1949), pp. 30-31.

peasant, as of peasants elsewhere, that he is an inveterate individualist and pessimist, hopelessly alienated from his society'. But he said, times had changed and 'whatever the validity of this argument for the past, it is no longer applicable to the southern Italian peasants today' as they have seized on each opportunity as it has presented itself.<sup>355</sup>

Others among Revelli's contemporaries had already highlighted the situation of rural communities. For example, Roberto Roversi used his poetry and dramatic writing to highlight the negative impact of industrialization on peasant culture.<sup>356</sup> The novelist, Ottiero Ottiero, represented the experience of Southern peasants who migrated to the North in *Donnaruma all'assalto*.<sup>357</sup> Ignazio Silone focused on peasant exploitation during fascism in his novel, *Fontamara*.<sup>358</sup>

Sociological studies of the *contadini* have also been predominantly southern based. Redfield,<sup>359</sup> Banfield,<sup>360</sup> Lopreato and Arlacchi provided some of the key sociological studies of the *contadini* over the decades in which Revelli was conducting his research. Each study is concerned with the *contadini* of the Mezzogiorno. Three other writers, De Martino,<sup>361</sup> Rossi-Doria<sup>362</sup> and Scotellaro<sup>363</sup> provided an anthropological view of the South and concerned themselves particularly with the folklore, culture and superstition of rural communities. Whereas the majority of literary and sociological representations have been written by 'outsiders', Rocco Scotellaro provides the perspective of the insider. His motivation in writing *Contadini del Sud* and later *L'uva puttanella* (both left incomplete at the time of his death) was to wage war on the social injustice suffered by the *contadini* of his township. A *contadino* himself, he had fought as Sindaco

<sup>355</sup> Lopreato, p. 4.

Similarly, Arlacchi found during his work in Calabria during the early 1980s that existing preconceptions oversimplified the reality. Like Revelli, Arlacchi worked in different geographical areas: the Plain of Gioia Tauro on the Tyrrhenian coast of southern Calabria, the Marchesato of Crotona, and the hills around Cosenza in northern Calabria. He discovered that each had its own 'distinct, autonomous and notably complex socio-economic system'. This confirmed his 'initial hypothesis that the customary typology of traditional versus modern society was of little explanatory use'. Pino Arlacchi, *Mafia, Peasants and Great Estates: Society in Traditional Calabria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 4.

<sup>356</sup> Roberto Roversi, *Dopo Campoformio* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962); *I disimili cavalli* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1976).

<sup>357</sup> Ottiero Ottiero, *Donnaruma all'assalto* (Milan: Garzanti, (1959) 2004).

<sup>358</sup> Ignazio Silone, *Fontamara* (Milan: Mondadori, (1933) 1988).

<sup>359</sup> Robert Redfield, *La piccola comunità, la società e la cultura contadina* (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1976).

<sup>360</sup> Edward C. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (New York: Free Press, 1958).

<sup>361</sup> Ernesto De Martino, *Note di Campo* (Lecce: Argo, 1995).

<sup>362</sup> Manlio Rossi-Doria, *Scritti sul Mezzogiorno (Saggi)* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982).

<sup>363</sup> Rocco Scotellaro, *L'uva puttanella; Contadini del sud* (Bari: Laterza, (1977) 2002).

of Tricarico, with a good measure of success, for improvements to their lot. This came to an abrupt end with his arguably ludicrous imprisonment in 1948 on charges of corruption. At this point he realised that he had been labouring under an illusion as 'i rapporti di forza tra i contadini che vuol rappresentare e il resto della popolazione sono ancora a favor degli altri'.<sup>364</sup> Nicola Tranfaglia goes on in the introduction to the 2000 edition, which combines his two books, to explain the long term effect of the decision he then took:

Ed è perciò che Scotellaro accantona, a sua volta, la politica in cui si era immerso nei quattro anni precedenti e sceglie la strada dello studio, della ricerca, della scrittura per continuare con altre armi e con altri ritmi la sua battaglia. Non è dunque, neppure per un momento, una diserzione, l'abbandono della lotta, ma è piuttosto la scelta consapevole da parte sua di strumenti diversi e non meno impegnativi per difendere i suoi contadini e far conoscere a un mondo più largo i problemi e i valori del mondo da cui viene.<sup>365</sup>

Like Revelli after the dissolution of the Partito d'Azione, Scotellaro employed these 'altre armi' and 'altri ritmi' to further his work on behalf of others.

Studies of rural communities in Piedmont were published in the late 1960s and 1970s, but it was the 1980s before there was any significant number. These early representations were predominantly from an agricultural, anthropological or folkloric perspective. Domi Gianoglio's *Invito alle Langhe*, published in 1966,<sup>366</sup> opened up one particular geographical area within Piedmont. This was followed in 1969 by Valerio Castronovo's *Economia e società in Piemonte dall'unità al 1914*,<sup>367</sup> and then *Il Piemonte*, a comprehensive history of the region, in 1977.<sup>368</sup> The late 1960s also saw the publication of industrial and demographic reports on the region,<sup>369</sup> and the following decade a study on the state of agriculture within the region.<sup>370</sup> Edoardo Ballone's *Cultura della cascina: mediatori di donne e di bestiame nel Piemonte contadino* bears similarities to Revelli's

<sup>364</sup> Scotellaro, p. xviii.

<sup>365</sup> Scotellaro, p. xviii.

<sup>366</sup> Domi Gianoglio, *Invito alle Langhe* (Turin: Edilibri Andrea Viglione, 1966).

<sup>367</sup> Valerio Castronovo, *Economia e società in Piemonte dall'unità al 1914* (Milan: Banca Commerciale Italiana, 1969).

<sup>368</sup> Valerio Castronovo, *Il Piemonte* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977).

<sup>369</sup> *Lo sviluppo industriale della area depressa del Piemonte*, Centro di Ricerche sull'Impresa e lo Sviluppo della Scuola di Amministrazione Industriale, (Turin: Università di Torino, 1966); Stefano Somogyi, *La dinamica demografica del Piemonte dal 1861 al 2001* (Turin: Associazione Piemonte Italia, 1967).

<sup>370</sup> *Il rilancio dell'agricoltura piemontese*, ed. by Giuseppe Maspoli and others (Turin: Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1977).



work in that it is a study of the same geographical area.<sup>371</sup> It is concerned with just one aspect of those covered by Revelli's work: the role of the *mediatori* in rural Piedmontese communities.<sup>372</sup> The early 1980s saw the publication of two other studies of Piedmont: Gian Luigi Bravo's *Donna e lavoro contadino nelle campagne astigiane*<sup>373</sup> and Walter Gabutti's *Scoutin: Cose e gente dell'Alta Langa*,<sup>374</sup> the preface of which was written by Nuto Revelli. While these publications illustrate there was a renewed interest in 'la condizione contadina'<sup>375</sup> in decades which followed 'un lungo periodo di crisi delle campagne',<sup>376</sup> Revelli had already been working among the *contadini* since the years following Liberation. There still remained, however, a pejorative attitude towards the 'mondo contadino':

C'è infatti in giro troppa gente che ha l'aria di aver capito perfettamente le cause della crisi che nel periodo postbellico ha investito quel mondo, riducendolo alle soglie della distruzione e della scomparsa. Troviamo tra costoro certi teorici dell'evoluzione sociale umana, per i quali 'mondo contadino' è sinonimo di gradino culturale inferiore, fortunatamente in via di superamento e di eliminazione.<sup>377</sup>

Politics of the period also shows an imbalance in treatment of North and South. The South had seen little investment until the establishment of the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno in 1950. Subsequent political debates show that it then seemed that the South was commanding all the attention when in fact Italy had many other deprived areas. In a speech on 17 September 1956 Relatore Lucifredi made just this argument and quoted from earlier speeches in which he had already spoken up on behalf of the deprived areas of Central and Northern Italy saying:

Lamento che in questo caso, come in tanti altri occasioni, si sia voluto credere che le zone depresse esistano solo nell'Italia meridionale e si dimentichi che anche nelle altre regioni d'Italia, nelle zone montane ed appenniniche, vi sono zone altrettanto depresse quanto quelle del Mezzogiorno, che allo stesso titolo avrebbero diritto di essere aiutate.<sup>378</sup>

<sup>371</sup> Edoardo Ballone, *Cultura della cascina: mediatori di donne e di bestiame nel Piemonte contadino* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1979).

<sup>372</sup> Traditionally, the role of the *mediatore* in the rural culture of Piedmont was linked with that of the matchmaker – the *marussé* or *baciatt*. They were also involved in trading animals, wine and other items. Revelli's collections do touch on the role of *mediatore* as matchmaker with reference to the Southern brides, however, his own use of the term simply denotes the intermediary role of an individual from the community who would locate potential witnesses and then make the initial introductions. See Filippo Barbano's 'Prefazione' in Ballone for more detail.

<sup>373</sup> *Donna e lavoro contadino nelle campagne astigiane*, ed. by Gian Luigi Bravo (Cuneo: L'Arciere, 1980).

<sup>374</sup> Walter Gabutti, *Scoutin: Cose e gente dell'Alta Langa* (Turin: Claudiana, 1982).

<sup>375</sup> *Condizione Contadina: Ricerca Intervento Sviluppo*, ed. by Piercarlo Grimaldi (Turin: Stampatori, 1979), p. 7.

<sup>376</sup> Grimaldi, p. 9.

<sup>377</sup> Corsini, p. 49.

<sup>378</sup> Lo sviluppo industriale, p. 312.

As part of 'the industrial triangle', Piedmont certainly benefited from the post-war 'economic miracle'. This so-called 'boom' period did not impact positively throughout the region. Later in the speech quoted above, Lucifredo described explicitly the situation facing deprived areas of Italy, such as Piedmont. This was not, he said, a new crisis but one regularly raised at governmental level. Unfortunately, action taken did not necessarily provide a solution to the central problem of these communities - a struggle to procure the basics for survival:

In caso contrario, quelle zone potranno avere magnifiche strade, eventualmente asfaltate; ma se non vi saranno possibilità di guadagno e di vita, quelle strade serviranno, il più delle volte, soprattutto ad agevolare coloro che intendono abbandonare il paese, cedendo alle attrazioni della sperata vita comoda al piano e nelle città...<sup>379</sup>

### *Revelli's portrayal of the contadini*

The unique characteristic of Revelli's work, in contrast to these contemporary studies, is the fact that - other than in his lengthy introductions to the collections of oral testimonies - he is never writing *about* the *contadini*, but always as the facilitator of their testimony. He sees himself as the channel or medium through which rural Piedmont can tell its story in its own words for the first time. It is this characteristic which gives increased value to Revelli's work and methodology. Using language that drew on his own experience of war and the horrors of World War II in Europe, Revelli shows his understanding of the crisis facing rural Piedmont:

Nelle nostre valli non sono in funzione le 'camere a gas', così l'immagine del genocidio appare forse eccessiva alla folla dei 'benpensanti', dei turisti distratti, dei gerarchi dispensatori di elemosine, dei colonialisti. Ma i fatti parlano, e dicono che non c'è più spazio per gli ignoranti, per i mediocri, per le furbizie elettorali. (MT, p. lxxi)

Like Lucifredo, Revelli points out well-meaning solutions are not necessarily appropriate or constructive solutions. Similarly, he points out that this is not a new problem. The alarm has sounded many times, yet nothing has changed and now it is almost too late. Note that Revelli speaks of 'our valleys'; he does not belong to these communities but his sense of responsibility for their welfare is obvious. His concern for 'i miei alpini' in 1946 has now embraced the men's communities. He has seen the effects of Italians' indifference in the past: the men of these

<sup>379</sup> Lo sviluppo industriale, p. 313.

communities had been sent to distant fronts during World War II. Their families' worries and questions had been dismissed with platitudes and the few survivors who returned had struggled to secure financial support from the government. Revelli seems to be calling on Italian society, making this a collective commitment to act on behalf of struggling communities and cultures. On a more sinister note, Revelli alludes to the consequences for Europe's Jews when nations turned a blind eye. Now he says, Italian politicians are faced with a similar crossroads. If they do not act now, it will be too late for Piedmont's rural communities.

We see that despite his aim of allowing the marginalized to speak, Revelli can hardly avoid making us aware of how he perceives these communities. They are marginalized, ignorant and exploited. He employs a somewhat stereotyped vocabulary as he speaks of the *contadini* as 'vinti', 'sordomuti', 'marginalizzati', 'sfruttati'. This is his opinion after he has spent time with them. We saw in Chapter 3 that Revelli's methodology resulted in a 'choral' testimony of rural life: many voices unite to present a similar experience, or create Revelli's interpretation of a 'norm'. 'I casi limite non mi interessano', Revelli tells us; he might stumble on them by chance, but they are not included in the collections.<sup>380</sup> That is, Revelli again applies his subjective judgement and excludes testimonies which, for example, might portray a greater level of wealth or innovation than that enjoyed by the average *contadini* (*MV*, p. xxxvii). This does not mean that the testimonies become a repetition of the same experiences and opinions, only that the witnesses explore similar themes or areas.<sup>381</sup> Consequently, in the published collections we have a group of complementary testimonies rather than many discordant voices. In the introductions to the collections, Revelli does refer to many of the testimonies he had cut. In so doing, he avoids completely stifling the individuality of character and experience he has witnessed among the *contadini*. So on the one hand, Revelli uses similar vocabulary to that of the accepted picture,

<sup>380</sup> Revelli gives a great example of this scenario in *L'anello forte*. He arrives at the home of two bachelor brothers and their sister of whom he says: 'A prima vista non si direbbero poveri ma dei baraccati [...] Il televisore enorme, vestito con un "grembiolino" che dovrebbe proteggerlo, è l'unico oggetto decente' (*AF*, p. xxvi). He then records his shock when he discovers the amount of land they own and its worth: L16000000 (approx. £7,500 in 1985 or £20,000 in 2005). Clearly, these were not typical *contadini*.

Calculation based on <http://www.measuringworth.com/index.html>

<sup>381</sup> George R. Saunders, 'Peasant Life in Piedmont', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 21, no. 6 (Dec. 1980), pp. 827-828 (p. 827).

or stereotype. On the other, he allows the *contadini* to tell in their own words how they perceive their situation and how they react to the preconceptions of Italian society.

*Il mondo dei vinti* and *L'anello forte* are principally collections of oral testimonies. However, they contain echoes of anthropological, sociological or historical approaches to the study of southern Piedmont. The gathering of the testimonies was done in a context very similar to that of the *veglie* so typical of these parts. In winter evenings *veglie* provided community occasions for storytelling and the recounting of folklore. Thus, the narration of stories and experiences was part of the culture of the *contadini* and possibly aided the telling of their life stories. Revelli's finished publications do refer to the folklore of a *paese*, but they are above all the narration of real events and reactions.

### ***Structure of the Collections and Testimonies***

Chapter 2 briefly introduced the collections. We will now give a more detailed discussion of the structure of the two collections and the layout of their individual testimonies. *Il mondo dei vinti* and *L'anello forte* are presented in a similar format to *La strada del davai*. The testimonies consist of general discussion of life experience, in peace and in war, of a community and way of life fast disappearing at the time of Revelli's research. Revelli begins the collection with a comprehensive introduction in which he outlines the social and historical background of this group of people. He details the progression of his research and discusses the development of his aims and methodology in collecting and publishing oral testimonies from the *contadini*.

#### **Il mondo dei vinti**

*Il mondo dei vinti* is divided into four geographical areas, the *pianura*, the *collina*, the *montagna*, and the *Langhe*, reflecting the boundaries of Revelli's research as described earlier. As in *La strada del davai*, each testimony is given a title - a phrase or epithet lifted from the body of the testimony - and each includes a subtitle. This subtitle provides the name of the witness, his nickname (if applicable), town of birth, year of birth, his trade, the date on which the testimony was recorded and, where relevant, the name of the intermediary. A pattern in the content and arrangement of the testimonies emerges in *Il mondo dei vinti*. Typically, a testimony opens with the individual's family background and includes detail regarding living conditions, diet, and relationship with

parents and siblings. It then moves on chronologically to cover schooling, if any, and/or work as a child, often from the age of about seven. Work as an adult, service in the army or emigration appears alongside marriage and family life. World War I, the coming of Fascism, World War II and the Resistance are other key topics discussed. By this stage, Revelli thought he had moved away from the theme of war to document rural life. He had, however, underestimated how deeply war experience was engrained on the minds of the *contadini-soldati* of World War I in particular.<sup>382</sup> We saw in Chapter 3 the importance Revelli attached to allowing his witnesses to speak freely; he therefore includes the war memories in the published testimonies, despite them contrasting with the self-imposed remit he had adopted.<sup>383</sup> Revelli usually concludes with a series of direct questions dealing with day-to-day life at the time of the interview and the outlook for these communities in a fast changing society.<sup>384</sup>

The published testimonies show evidence of having been formulated around particular themes of questioning by Revelli. At times complete questions are included in the text, apparently echoed by the informant in response to Revelli's original query. One example of this is seen in the testimony of Giuseppe Bassignana: 'Lei mi chiede se i contadini hanno capito qualcosa della guerra partigiana' (*MT*, p. 326). More frequently, the question is repeated directly in the text, sometimes in a manner so obvious that it would appear that Revelli has inserted the question afterwards in order to provide a structured flow to the narrative. This is suggested in the following extract, from the testimony of Michelangelo Isoardi. Analysis of the opening lines of successive paragraphs show a combination of implicit and explicit repetition of Revelli's question:

Devo dire che questa società non mi convince. [...]

<sup>382</sup> 'J'ai consacré vingt-cinq ans à ma guerre puis à celle des autres; je n'en pouvais plus; il fallait que je passe à autre chose, au témoignage du monde paysan sur le thème de la paix, de la vie quotidienne, du travail dans les campagnes, de la famille, de l'émigration vers la France [...] Malgré tous les efforts que je déployais pour leur faire évoquer des situations du temps de paix, la guerre ressortait toujours des entretiens'. Michele Calandri & Nuto Revelli, 'L'Esperience de Nuto Revelli dans la Collecte des Témoignages: 'Campagne de Russie et guerre de partisans dans le Piémont', in *Les guerres du 20 siècle à travers les témoignages oraux. Actes du Colloque de Nice des 14 et 15 décembre 1990*, Université de Nice Sophia-Antipolis, Centre de la Méditerranée moderne et contemporaine, [1991], pp. 109-112 (pp. 110-111).

<sup>383</sup> Revelli realized during this research that the memories of the *contadini* dictated the content of the testimonies, despite the project he might have envisaged. This may account for his approach in *Il disperso di Marburg*, where he refuses to be distracted from his own agenda.

<sup>384</sup> *La strada del darsi* shows a similar layout and conclusion to each testimony

Se la montagna andrà a perdere? [...]

Il turismo da noi non risolve nessun problema. [...]

Che cosa ha significato per me fare il soldato? [...]

Che cosa è per i *contadini* la 'Coltivatori Diretti'? [...]

La politica a Castelmagno? [...]

Il prete?

(*MV*, pp. 283-284)

The witnesses in this collection do include three parish priests but are predominantly *contadini*. While the testimonies cover common ground and each express similar experiences or reactions to situations, they demonstrate a range of styles. Some are long and loquacious, others short and concise; some make an effort to convey the information in as objective a manner as possible, others convey the emotions, good and bad, which surround events. Many include extracts of the Piedmontese dialect, an odd word, or entire sentences, which Revelli explains in a foot note where necessary, as he had done in *La strada del davai*.

### **L'anello forte**

*L'anello forte* consists predominantly of testimonies from women giving the female perspective on life in the rural areas of Piedmont. The content does overlap to some degree with the testimonies of *Il mondo dei vinti* as Revelli is interviewing individuals from similar backgrounds in both. Yet it is an entirely new collection with the focus placed firmly on the woman, the 'strong link', or lynch pin in these communities, and her perspective on life.<sup>385</sup> After dealing with the other family members, surviving and otherwise (infant mortality was still commonplace), the testimony moves on to discuss the land owned, general living conditions, diet, and, on occasion, dress. Schooling and work as children are key elements for many among the older generation as education most often took second place to the agricultural work that needed done. The witness would also talk of her adolescence and the ignorance and innocence with which the majority of girls faced puberty and marriage. Many of the women include details of their living situation following marriage, as it was common to live at least initially with the husband's parents.

<sup>385</sup> Piero Zocchi, 'Storia di vita contadina', *La critica sociologica*, 75-76 autunno-inverno 1985-1986, pp. 168-178 (p. 168).

Interwoven in their recollections is a remarkable degree of superstitious belief and practice. Towards the conclusion of the interview, Revelli asked a series of specific questions based on contemporary events and situations (in a similar way to his practice in *La strada del davai* and *Il mondo dei vinti*). These cover the political inclinations of his witnesses and their opinion on divorce and abortion (legalized in 1973 and 1978 respectively, following referenda). Explicit evidence of Revelli's line of questioning is weaker than in *Il mondo dei vinti*. A similarity in structure between the testimonies suggests either that the structure of the interview has been carefully controlled, or that Revelli has edited the testimonies in a uniform fashion.

Within the collection are several testimonies from a group of women from the Mezzogiorno who had come north in arranged marriages. For the most part the Northern women are traditional *contadine* and work in the fields. Many have also worked in factories such as the spinning mill in Cuneo (*AF*, p. 142), and there are testimonies from women who blazed their own path, for example Maria Grazia Molinaro in Olivero, a nurse, (*AF*, pp. 288-291) and Paola Martinengo, a circus performer, (*AF*, pp. 61-63).

*L'anello forte* consists primarily of autobiographical testimonies from the women of the community; but includes male respondents such as the local priests. Don Filippo Barbero, is one such example, (*AF*, p. 111). Two further testimonies from male witnesses focus on the role and position of woman in society. The first is that of Annibale de Piero, a chemist (*AF*, pp. 404-407), and the second that of Felice Spingola, the mayor of Verbicaro, in Cosenza, the southern region from which many of the brides came (*AF*, pp. 411-415).

Of Revelli's three collections, *L'anello forte*, has the highest proportion of very brief testimonies – some less than a page in the final publication. Many of these expose the darkest elements of life in the rural communities, including child abuse and incest. Conversely, *L'anello forte* also includes some of the most lengthy of all the testimonies. Many of the women are portrayed as inveterate storytellers who thrive on providing these recollections, such as Pinuccia (*AF*, p. xxxvii). Others, such as Margherita (*AF*, pp. 282-286), recount experiences of which they still clearly feel the shame and attached stigma.

## Section II: Rural Experience according to the *contadini*

The *contadini* interviewed by Revelli had no illusions about how Italian society viewed rural communities. They were familiar with the perception that country people were somehow less civilized than their city counterparts. Maria Isoardi, for example, said in *Il mondo dei vinti*: 'Noi siamo gente civile, e vogliamo vivere come gente civile' (MV, p. 278). Her simple statement implies that these *contadini* disputed the pejorative image projected of their community and believed that their communities were being denied the basics taken for granted in 'civilized' urban communities.

Relations between rural communities and the towns were ever a source of tension. One of the frustrations of the *contadini* Revelli interviewed was the patronizing manner in which those from the city treated them. Giovanni Battista Ponzo, for example, bemoans their lack of understanding towards the *contadini*: 'Se la gente della città sapesse la vita che si fa in montagna! La gente della città ci prende ancora in giro, ci dice che siamo fortunati, che qui abbiamo l'aria buona' (MV, p. 236). Far from seeing themselves as 'fortunati', the *contadini* typically describe the harshness of their existence, the burdens of everyday, and the struggle to make ends meet. It was, as Maria Aircaldi said, 'una vita disperata' (AF, p. 85). Franca Tonello described the relationship between town and country another way, saying that 'la gente di campagna è sempre stata snobbata da tutti' (AF, p. 95). So it is no surprise that the *contadini* were characterised by a certain diffidence and suspicion of outsiders. We saw in Chapter 3 that this reserve necessitated the use of *mediatori* by Revelli (MV, p. xxx).

Revelli set out to let the *contadini* in the communities around Cuneo tell their own story. Their accounts are detailed and cover many topics. Here, I want to pick out three strands which come through strongly in the testimonies and so suggest that this is what the *contadini*, or Revelli, considered most important. These include, firstly, the political, economic, and social perspective of the *contadini* on their relationship to Italian society; secondly, the consequences of the tension between field and factory; and thirdly, relationships between the sexes.



## *Relation of the contadini to Italian society*

### **Political neglect – political agnosticism**

Revelli strongly projected – and accurately so in light of the testimony of the *contadini* – his own view of the disengagement of the *contadini* from politics and government in the introduction to *Il mondo dei vinti*. He saw the *contadini*, conditioned to be subservient, as incapable of making a political choice as individuals in their own right (*MV*, p. xx). In *L'anello forte*, Revelli shows the minimal political interest and interaction of the typical peasant: 'La politica, dalla maggior parte delle testimoni, è vissuta come un qualcosa di lontano, di estraneo, che ogni tanto si concretizza nell'operazione meccanica del voto' (*AF*, p. lxxxvii). The testimonies of the witnesses confirm this and show that the rural communities tended to be politically ignorant, politically indifferent, and ignored by Italy's politicians. This is balanced by the view of a minority who were politically engaged.

Many from among the rural communities express ignorance of the political process. Chapter 5 showed that political ignorance could be used to deflect difficult questions about the Fascist years and the Resistance. In this particular context, there seems no motive to affect ignorance. Ortensia's frank response shows how many went along with the process without understanding anything of it: 'Per chi voto? Ho votato l'edera [Il Partito Repubblicano] ma non so se ho votato bene o male, non ne capisco niente, *sima nen 'd gent stidiata* [Non siamo gente colta]' (*MV*, p. 375).

Indifference to the political process was a common position among Revelli's witnesses. Disillusioned after years of broken promises, many were left wondering whether there was any point to the process. Revelli initially had to coax Martin del Torc into speaking; once started, there was no stopping his narrative (*MV*, p. lxxii). Del Torc believed that politicians were only interested in the *contadini* as long as they needed their vote: 'Si ricordano di noi solo quando ci sono le elezioni, allora mandano tanta propaganda per posta, volantini, lettere, facsimili delle schede con sopra la mano che fa la croce. Oh, ne abbiamo già di croci noi qui...' (*MV*, p. lxxiii). As Revelli shows, Martin's scepticism was all too understandable when viewed in light of the accomplishments of succeeding governments:

La storia delle promesse elettorali dedicate ai cuneesi è proprio un libro senza fine. Sono trent'anni che la gente delle Langhe aspetta l'acquedotto. Sono trent'anni che la gente della Valle Bonmida aspetta che il fiume non inquinì. Sono trent'anni che la Democrazia Cristiana promette la ricostruzione della ferrovia Cuneo-Nizza, semidistrutta dai tedeschi nell'aprile del 1945. Trent'anni! (MV, p. lxxx)

The minds of the *contadini* linked past and present indissolubly so that their attitude towards contemporary politics was filtered through past events. Giacomo Martinengo, a Communist and one of the more politically engaged of the rural communities, saw this attitude as a real obstacle if rural communities were to make more of the political process: 'Oggi la campagna vota tanto Democrazia Cristiana, sia i contadini piccoli come i grossi. [...] Quando parlo di politica con la gente di campagna o stanno ziti o mi dicono "andé 'n po a viddé 'n Russia [Andate un po' a vedere in Russia]". Tutto quello che sanno rispondermi' (MV, pp. 18-19).

The *contadini* interviewed by Revelli saw themselves as forgotten by politicians (MV, p. 387), discriminated against (MV, p. 12), and ignored when they did exercise their democratic rights (MV, p. 328). Pinuccia describes their position in words very similar to those of Levi's *contadini* in Southern Italy: 'Qui siamo dimenticati da tutti [...] Nusgnur bele si l'é gnin passà [Il Signore da queste parti non è passato]' (AF, p. xxxvii). One of the most angry of the testimonies in *Il mondo dei vinti* is anonymous and expresses the view that the Italian government was entirely corrupt:

Siamo dimenticati da tutti, dal governo per primo. Perché abbiamo un governo che protegge il distruttore, non il costruttore. [...] Abbiamo un governo malfattore. Succedono certe cose in Italia che fanno schifo, che se volessero eliminarle in ventiquattro ore le eliminiamo tutte, invece proteggono quelli che fanno del male, i ladri, chi ammazza[...] Chi rovina l'Italia sono tutti quelli che sono installati sul seggiolone a Roma, al Parlamento. (MV, p. 387)

Alessandro Galante Garrone, in the introduction to *Immagine del "mondo dei vinti"* said of the political and social position of the *contadini* interviewed by Revelli: 'Di questo disgregarsi e sfasciarsi di un mondo, non sono responsabili i contadini, ma chi li ha dimenticati, ingannati, sfruttati, da sempre'.<sup>386</sup> He does see them as 'vinti', exploited and marginalized, but that is a reflection of shoddy government behaviour rather than a defeatist mentality among the *contadini*.

<sup>386</sup> Paola Agosti, *Immagine del mondo dei vinti: 102 fotografie di Paola Agosti* (Milan: Mursia, 1998), p. 9.

Revelli interviewed a few individuals in rural Piedmont who became actively involved in politics only to find that it was not always a particularly rewarding experience. Giuseppe, a socialist, described the frustrations facing the few who did stand in elections: 'Con pochi compagni ho fondato la sezione socialista. Alle elezioni il "socialista" è rimasto in minoranza perché il popolo non capiva, ma siamo riusciti eletti quattro. I contadini avevano paura dei socialisti, dicevano che era l'anarchia' (MV, p. 203). However, the prevalent attitude to politics was one of disillusionment – what incentive was there to engage with the political process given that the communities only experience of it was one of broken promises? This suggests that rather than being marginalized from politics by default, in many cases, there has been a deliberate choice not to engage with the process. For Revelli's *contadini*, political neglect had led to political agnosticism.

### The struggle for economic survival

One of the priorities in the testimonies of the *contadini* was the narration of their struggle for economic survival. Stereotyping aside, economic viability was the driving force in most families interviewed by Revelli. Emigration featured prominently as a seminal experience in these oral testimonies. Some of Revelli's witnesses dated the first of the waves of emigration to 1868 (MV, p. 259), others to the turn of the century (MV, p. 28). The scale of emigration then increased steadily so that the number of Italians resident abroad, 220,000 in 1861, had by 1914 grown to some five to six million.<sup>387</sup> This colossal movement of people then dropped off. This was due in part to the coming of World War I, and in part to America having set a limit in 1921 of approximately forty thousand Italian immigrants per year, '3 per cent of its share in the U.S. foreign-born population as of 1910 in the 1920s'.<sup>388</sup> The thematic predominance of emigration seen in *Il mondo dei vinti* and *L'anello forte* is reflected in other depictions and studies of the *contadini*, whether from the north or south of the peninsula.

Revelli associates emigration with retaining a sense of pride and describes it as 'l'unica via di scampo, l'unica strada della speranza, l'unica scelta di civiltà di cui il contadino povero

<sup>387</sup> Clark, p. 214.

<sup>388</sup> Mack Smith, p. 352.

disponeva' (*AV*, p. xcvi). For some, this choice was counter-balanced by their attachment to even the most minute piece of land: 'L'attaccamento a quei fazzoletti di terra comprati al prezzo di enormi sacrifici ha quindi rappresentato anche per i contadini astigiani l'unica possibile difesa contro l'emigrazione e la fame ed ha costituito un innegabile ostacolo al mutamento'.<sup>389</sup> Nationally, whether emigration was seen as a way of escape<sup>390</sup> or an essential choice,<sup>391</sup> it was motivated by general dissatisfaction with their existing situation and the pressure of specific national, social and economic issues ranging from poverty and high taxes to the American need of workers.<sup>392</sup> The flipside of emigration was, in Lopreato's words, that the experience marked 'the major source of achievement for the southern Italian peasant';<sup>393</sup> that it was similarly central to the experience of *contadini* from Piemonte is seen in the time dedicated to its narration.

Those who emigrated were not only *contadini* in search of prosperity or at least an improved standard of living. Historians, such as Mack Smith and Clark, and sociologists, too, recognise emigration as a 'safety-valve', a feature which protected the welfare of the country. Emigration helped relieve the over-population of the countryside and also removed many individuals for whom 'society had no place': 'single salaried workers, illegitimate sons and daughters, rebels, deviants, criminals, peasant families 'declassed' by sudden impoverishment, all sorts and conditions of outsiders [...] In effect, they had been expelled'.<sup>394</sup>

Nationally, the prime destination for Italian emigrants was America. In the context of longer term emigration, Revelli's *contadini* headed for similar destinations as their fellow countrymen, but the search for employment also generated an annual migration of *contadini* as Revelli described in *L'anello forte*: 'L'emigrazione verso le Americhe, soprattutto verso gli Stati Uniti e l'Argentina, coinvolgeva centinaia di persone. Ma era verso la Francia che il flusso migratorio assumeva le dimensioni di un vero e proprio esodo' (*AF*, p. lxiii). One or two reached Canada (*AF*, p. 218) or Australia (*AF*, p. 292). The destination chosen made for a range of experiences and varying degrees of success in acclimatizing: 'Il contadino che emigrava in

<sup>389</sup> Bravo, p. 24.

<sup>390</sup> Lopreato, p. 226.

<sup>391</sup> Clark, p. 214.

<sup>392</sup> Clark, p. 214.

<sup>393</sup> Lopreato, p. 4.

<sup>394</sup> Arlacchi, p. 62.

Argentina si ambientava facilmente: riusciva a capire 'la lingua della Castiglia', riusciva a comunicare, a farsi intendere. Il contadino che emigrava negli Stati Uniti incontrava invece delle difficoltà enormi' (*MV*, p. xcix).

On arrival in America the *contadini* often found 'il mito dell'America' (*MV*, p. xcix) to be exactly that. While some did succeed in 'making their fortune', it is well attested that for many Italian immigrants the situation on the ground could be very little better in material terms than that left at home. The circumstances they had left behind were certainly difficult yet Foerster illustrates that the Italians often found themselves at the bottom of the immigrants' hierarchy:

'Men, women, dogs, cats, and monkeys eat and sleep together in the same hole without air and without light'. They buy stale beer at two cents a pint from a rascally Italian in a basement, and they break into endless brawls. During the summer they work on the railroads and in the fields; 'in the winter they return to fill the streets of New York, where the boys are bootblacks and the men either are employed at the most repulsive tasks, scorned by workmen of other nationalities – carrying offal to the ships and dumping it in the sea, cleaning the sewers *et similia* – or they go about with sacks on their shoulders rummaging the garbage cans, gleaning paper, rags, bones, broken glass'...

'And while the workmen fag from morning to evening, the bosses smoke tranquilly and superintend them with rifles at their sides and revolvers at their belts. They seem –and are – real brigands'. Whoever tells these natives of Avellino, of the Abruzzi, of Basilicata, that they are being cheated, loses his words. '*Signorino*', they reply, 'we are ignorant and do not know English. Our boss brought us here, knows where to find work, makes contracts with the companies. What should we do without him?' The Camorra flourishes as in the worst Bourbon times and 'the Italian, illiterate, carrying the knife, defrauded and fraudulent, is more despised than the Irish and the Chinese'.<sup>395</sup>

A similar picture of prejudice against Italians is seen in Angela Giusiano's testimony in *Il mondo dei vinti*: 'Là i neri erano segregate, l'ultima categoria erano i neri e i giapponesi, poi venivano gli italiani. I giapponesi erano addetti ai lavori lungo le ferrovie o giardinieri: ai neri e agli italiani spettavano tutti i lavori più umili' (*MV*, p. 145). So it was understandable that, in an attempt to avoid such discrimination, Lorenzo Blua pretended to be French (*MV*, p. 192). Giacomo Andreis demonstrated that even among themselves the Italian immigrants operated a discriminatory hierarchy against those from the South, in parallel with that of the Americans towards Italians:

<sup>395</sup> R. F. Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of our Times* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 326; quoting A. Rossi, *Un italiano in America* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Treviso, 1907), pp. 65-71, 80, 217ff, 301.

Gli italiani eravamo ben visti perché *lavoravamo* [Lavoravamo]. Non erano tanto ben visti quelli della bassa Italia. I padroni apprezzavano noi, *i vitun*, i montanari: un po' meno *i patoc*, quelli della pianura. I meridionali, *i blele bego*, non erano apprezzati. Li conoscevano dal fisico e dal loro modo di parlare, dalla pronuncia. (MV, p. 239)

The testimony of Giovanni Giacomo Ruatta stands out in that he described not only his work in the States (for a time with cowboys) and his travels, but also the role of the unions and natural events, such as the earthquake of 1905. He also recorded the shadier activities of the Italian expatriate community, particularly in Chicago:

Quelli della bassa Italia hanno organizzato una società, 'la mano nera', chiedono soldi, la città sembra fatta apposta per i ricatti, ammazzano. I negri hanno un loro quartiere, come quelli della bassa Italia. Gli Italiani non sono ben visti né a Chicago né a San Francisco, la storia di Sacco e Vanzetti lo dimostra, erano anarchici innocenti, è lo spagnolo che ha ammazzato, loro erano innocenti eppure sono finiti sulla seggiola elettrica. (MV, p. 151)

Often the men emigrated on their own in search of work and fortune so that, as Anna Parola in Nittardi described: 'Molte donne erano come vedove, avevano i mariti lontani, in Francia o in America' (AF, p. 128). A high proportion of those who emigrated to America did return to Italy – some permanently, others to return again to America at a later stage. Whether their period abroad was short-lived or not, the experience tended to leave a lasting impression, sometimes leaving the ex-emigrant feeling frustrated and stifled by attitudes and behaviour at home. Lopreato accounted for this in terms of broadened horizons. Those who had travelled now had other customs and cultures against which to compare their situation in Italy: "Why can't the Italians, who practically live with the pope, behave like good Christians, as the Americans do?" an emigrant once complained aboard ship while returning to Canada after a brief visit to his family in the Abruzzi.<sup>396</sup> A contrasting picture of the returning emigrant is seen in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* where Levi stated: 'il contadino è quello di prima, come una pietra su cui sia passata per molto tempo l'acqua di un fiume in piena, e che il primo sole in pochi minuti riasciuga'.<sup>397</sup>

Once they returned, it was common for the Southern emigrants to flaunt their 'success' in some way, whether they had made their fortune or not. This could be in the style and size of

<sup>396</sup> Lopreato, p. 227.

<sup>397</sup> Carlo Levi, p. 38.

their house,<sup>398</sup> or in the number of gold teeth they possessed;<sup>399</sup> little seemed to have changed from Verga's image of everything in life being measured in terms of economic or material worth. The testimonies gathered by Revelli diverge from this picture, as they do not depict returning emigrants as ostentatiously displaying their experience and success. This distinction suggests that, given the far needier situation found in the South, material prosperity made a bigger impression on the individual and the status he acquired within his community than it did in the north of the country.

Notwithstanding Levi's argument that the *contadini* who returned were much the same in character as when they had left, historians argue their experience had a wider benefit to the community. Mack Smith believed that the experience of emigration made *contadini* better educated and more aware of the outside world: 'The *Americani* who returned [...] brought back new habits, new needs, new skills, a higher level of education, a greater sense of independence, and a consciousness of their rights against the *padrone* and the government. They were convincing proof that literacy paid'<sup>400</sup> Mack Smith further argued that emigration provided the necessary impetus to make schooling compulsory given the need for communication between emigrant and family at home, and, on a legislative note, to fulfil the American immigration requirement that one was literate.<sup>401</sup> Revelli's *contadini* do not discuss the educational benefits of emigration but show its practical assistance, for example, in allowing a couple to establish a restaurant in their home town of Peveragno (*MV*, p. 33).

The interviews in *Il mondo dei vinti* frequently concluded with Revelli asking the witness their view on the situation as it then was and how they saw the future. Most recognised that they were part of a community slowly succumbing to the advances of industry in the plains around them as factory after factory was built. Spirito Magno Rosso, seventy-eight years old when Revelli interviewed him, could see that in one sense it was already too late, but he insisted on clinging to some measure of optimism for the future:

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<sup>398</sup> Carlo Levi, p. 38.

<sup>399</sup> Carlo Levi, p. 112.

<sup>400</sup> Clark, p. 216.

<sup>401</sup> Clark, p. 216.

Se si fossero ricordati di aiutare la montagna venti anni fa, facendo le strade, qualcosa avrebbero salvato. A Frise hanno fatto una bella scuola nuova, ma quando la scuola è stata finita non c'erano più gli allievi. Oggi in montagna non c'è più il modo di vivere. Lo sviluppo economico della pianura è stato troppo rapido, ha attirato tutte le forze valide della montagna, tutti i giovani.

Eppure alla lunga la montagna ritornerà buona, ritornerà abitata. Ci vuole qualcosa di grosso, di grave, che faccia di nuovo apprezzare la gente contadina, la nostra montagna. (MV, p. 272)

This enduring individualism among rural communities had grave implications for the progress and continuation of agriculture within the Cuneese in that the majority of *contadini* refused even to consider the idea of joining an agricultural cooperative. This became an option after World War I<sup>402</sup> but, even during the 60s and 70s, had no real uptake among the *contadini*, despite the system offering the potential to earn a living from the land alone, rather than combining factory and agriculture. A lone advocate of the cooperative among Revelli's witnesses was Franca Tonello: 'Credo che la cooperativa sia l'unica soluzione adatta per la campagna come la nostra, la cooperativa almeno per la vendita dei prodotti' (4F, p. 96).

The other key phenomenon relevant to the economic struggles of the *contadini* was the 'economic miracle' which was in its closing phases as Revelli began work on *Il mondo dei vini*. We will shortly see that he referred to the period with good reason as the 'terremoto dell'industrializzazione'.

### Rural Piedmont: 'traditional versus modern society'?

The testimonies of Revelli's *contadini* suggest that their rural communities were less marginalized on a social level than stereotypes suggested. For example, individual testimonies show that the new 'consumer society' had infiltrated rural communities. Many of the witnesses speak of their televisions and their choice of viewing. Vittoria, a vivacious eighty-one year old was clearly a seasoned channel-surfer: 'Ne abbiamo due di televisioni. Mi interessa il telegiornale, i film, Portobello non l'ho mai perduto, i cantanti no perché sono tutti uguali. La politica non mi interessa, quando c'è un dibattito cambiamo canale. La politica ed il football non mi interessano' (4F, pp. 340-341). One or two of those interviewed saw television as useful for keeping abreast of current affairs, Elisa Allemandi in Balma for example said: 'Quel che mi

<sup>402</sup> Castronuovo, p. 311.



interessa di piú è il telegiornale, perché ci collega con il mondo' (*4F*, p. 306). Yet the picture she got of the outside world left her somewhat bemused: 'Il mondo di oggi non lo capisco, vedo solo cose brutte, sequestri, violenza...' (*4F*, p. 306).

One of Revelli's standard questions seems to have addressed what the witness made of one of the great events of the decade: man's landing on the moon. The responses certainly varied, some thought it credible, others did not, some had no real interest in the event, and others saw it as a violation of the natural order (*MV*, p. 81). Maria Goletto had clearly given the event some thought but was left none the wiser as to how such things could be: 'Sì sí, dicono che l'uomo va sulla luna, ma io non ci credo. Come fanno ad andare sulla luna, come fanno? Che la luna si apra e loro ci vadano dentro? E poi la luna si sposta, è vero o no?' (*4F*, p. 123).

In common with urban society of 1960s and 1970s rural society was subject to secularization and changing moral standards. Revelli's witnesses were alert to the changing times. Some of the relevant aspects identified included the waning influence of the church, a change in attitude among the younger generation, a disparagement of 'the old ways', and – on a positive note – the recognition that life had vastly improved within their own or their parents' generation.

Priests had once wielded enormous influence and power in the community, but by 1970, when Revelli interviewed Enrico Draj, it was evident that things had changed: 'Toco alla volta la religione va giù, da tutte le parti. Una volta i carabinieri andavano sempre dal prete per le informazioni' (*MV*, p. 154). Despite efforts to reverse the trend, Don Aurelio Martini, parish priest in Vinadio, had to conclude that by the time of Revelli's research, religious practice was based simply on the habits of each family rather than the strong community faith that used to exist:

Qui la religione è nel tradizionalismo di famiglia, se i genitori sono religiosi anche i figlio lo sono. Altrimenti no. [...] Qui a Vinadio, nel passato, tutte le sere nelle stalle dicevano il rosario. A Trinità nel Vallone dell'Arma, ho tentato di salvare questa tradizione del rosario, ma poi tutto si è perso anche là. (*MV*, p. 229)

Teresa Garro, an eighty-three year old, supported this conclusion saying, 'la religione era un dovere. [...] Noi siamo stati educati proprio al rispetto della chiesa, della religione' (*4F*, p. 7).

There was no impression of a vibrant personal faith in the religious practice of these *contadini*; it was merely a duty to fulfil. This being the case, it is less of a surprise that such levels of superstition were bound up in daily lives and practice. Maria Airaldi in Barberis, commenting on her grandmother and aunts' evening rosary ritual, testified not to indifference, but to an overt antipathy towards religious belief and practice: 'Eh, quella del rosario era una *menada*, una scocciatura, altroché religione. Per i vecchi sarà stato un dovere, ma noi lo mandavamo al diavolo quel rosario' (4F, p. 82).

While it is evident that the priests' influence had diminished as the population shrank, there were still many among the *contadini* who held their priest in great affection. One of these was Maria Airaldi who (despite her impatience with religious practice at home) clearly enjoyed a good relationship with Don Curti, her teacher (4F, p. 88). Concurrently, the church continued to play a significant part in the moulding of ideas and behaviour notwithstanding *contadini* resentment. This is seen in several testimonies which detail the interference of the parish priest in marriage relationships. The priest often spoke frankly to women who in the eyes of the church had not produced enough children. Such interference had the opposite effect to that intended and left many of the women humiliated and indignant at the intimacy with which the priest had spoken to them. Among these women was Angela. Denied any sex education prior to marriage, Angela was traumatized by the idea of a sexual relationship with her husband. Clearly, the insensitive interference of her local priest did nothing to help this unhappy young woman: 'Andavo a confessarmi, e lì un'altra tortura. Il prete voleva sapere perché non compravo dei figli, e mi chiedeva che cosa facevo con mio marito, e mi parlava chiaro e tondo, e quelle cose dette da un prete mi indignavano, e provavo disgusto e vergogna' (4F, p. 60). Carlotta Re, already the mother of a son, recalled that, in questioning similar to that experienced by Angela, the priest went as far as to threaten her with the withholding of absolution (4F, p. 177).

Changing attitudes were also seen in a growing contempt among the young for the 'old ways': 'Eh, i giovani di oggi non ragionano più come i loro padri. Nel passato i contadini parlavano con i proverbi, regolavano la loro vita con i proverbi. Oggi i giovani dicono: "Con i proverbi dei vecchi oggi i giovani morirebbero di fame"' (MV, p. 90-91). The new factories

were seen to offer exciting new economic possibilities but brought a general disparagement of the old in favour of the new, and were not without substantial cost. According to Piercarlo Grimaldi, this resulted in a 'processo di crisi di identità culturale' in which: 'il contadino tende a abbandonare tutto ciò che ricorda le sue origini; il tavolo di legno viene sostituito con la formica e qui si fa sentire l'opera di antiquari che hanno speculato su questo momento di crisi, e così via'.<sup>403</sup> There is no doubt though, in speaking to the older *contadini*, that life had greatly improved since their parents, or even the witness, had been young: 'La gioventù di oggi è ricca e non sa di esserlo, non ha l'idea della vita che abbiamo fatto noi' (*MI*, p. 14). The witnesses do focus on the harshness of rural existence, but also evidence a gratefulness for the conditions they now encounter (*MI*, pp. 83-85).

The breaking of taboos is another area in which we see that rural communities cannot simply be classified as 'traditional' as opposed to the 'modern' urban communities. Revelli's witnesses suggest that the *contadini* were largely keeping time with the rest of Italian society during the 1960s. The sexual revolution of that decade had implications for the women of the rural communities too. How far this revolution affected practice is not clear, but the women show that they had overcome historic inhibitions in discussing fundamental elements of human experience: puberty, sexual relationships and pregnancy.

Many of the women interviewed by Revelli had reached adolescence with no instruction or guidance on the physical changes that would ensue. Angela, for example, spoke clearly of the fear and ignorance that resulted: 'Quando mi sono venute le mie cose ero da *serventa*. Ho nascosto tutto e mi sono spaventata tanto. Sapevo niente, e pensavo che fosse una malattia grave. Mi vergognavo a parlarne' (*AF*, p. 58). According to Anna Giordano, discussion of these topics was taboo:

Nel momento del mio passaggio di età sapevo niente. Tenevano tutto nascosto. Avevo quindici anni. Ho chiesto all'una e all'altra, ma nessuno mi diceva niente. *I zii, i papà, non sono morta, sono qui a contarla*. Ognuna nascondeva, anche tra sorelle. [...] Ah, noi siamo stati proprio allevati come le bestie. (*AF*, pp. 47-48)

<sup>403</sup> Grimaldi, p. 14.

Likewise, sexual relationships between men and women were never explicitly discussed. Rather, as young women, their mothers might warn them covertly against falling pregnant – without actually explaining the mechanics involved. Franca Tonello says: 'L'educazione sessuale? No, assolutamente niente. Non chiedevo e non mi dicevano niente in famiglia. Sapevo che erano discorsi proibiti. [...] E poi magari i miei mi dicevano: "Pa' poi attenzione..." Pa' attenzione a cosa, che ti dicevano niente' (AF, p. 96). Such innocence and ignorance seems incomprehensible today in a world that revolves around a cult of sexual consumerism.

One of the most protracted discussions of changing sexual mores came, not as one might expect from the 'liberated' younger generation of the 1960s, but from a sixty-one-year-old, Angela, who concluded: 'Ah, le ragazze di oggi sono sveglie, sono più preparate, più spontanee, normali. Non vivono più il sesso come una colpa degradante. È come se fossero sposate. Oggi vanno con uno, domani con l'altro. Forse siamo passati da un'esagerazione all'altra' (AF, p. 60). Agostina, at forty-seven one of the younger women interviewed, was explicit about sexual relationships and the changes seen even between her own generation and that of the late 1970s:

Dico soltanto che era difficile essere donna. Parlava sempre l'uomo, non potevi mai fare un discorso tuo, lui ti faceva proprio sentire inferiore. E ti imponeva l'atto sessuale. Tu subivi, non raggiungevi l'orgasmo, ah no no, non sapevi nemmeno che cosa voleva dire l'orgasmo. Tutto in fretta, e speravi soltanto di non restare incinta. Non per niente ho atteso la menopausa come una liberazione. (AF, p. 270)

This is not the place for a detailed study of the sexual mores of rural Piedmont, but suffice to say, the reluctance of the women to initiate intercourse arose not just from the dominance of the husband, but also on account of the size of their existing family, and a consequent desire to prevent further pregnancies. Contraception was still a major social taboo and not usually easily discussed by the couples Revelli interviewed: 'Fosse dipeso da me ne compravo di meno di figli, due o tre. Comandava l'uomo. La donna su questo problema comandava zero. Non si poteva discutere, bisognava aver pazienza' (AF, p. 236).<sup>404</sup>

<sup>404</sup> Until 1971 it was illegal to advertise contraception and, of course, very much contrary to the teaching of the Catholic Church.

A minority of Revelli's informants discuss a darker side to rural sexual behaviour. This included physical and sexual abuse, including incest. Letizia told of her father's imprisonment after involvement in a sexual scandal where five sisters, all minors, were left pregnant (*MV*, p. 358). Ortensia (like Letizia, only identified by her first name) stated that incidents of incest did occur within rural communities: 'Marcellina a undici anni è rimasta incinta del padre. [...] Erano rari i casi in cui il padre andava con la figlia, ma ce n'erano almeno due per paese' (*MV*, p. 369).

Margherita's testimony recounts an unusual sexual aberration. One of the younger women interviewed by Revelli, she told how at the age of eight she was involved in 'un gioco di gruppo' with boys aged thirteen and fourteen: 'Una storia di giochini, per me era come giocare a nascondino. Io non sapevo, non capivo. Facevamo tutto, proprio tutto, c'era il coito completo. [...] Non è che io avessi il morosetto, non provavo delle sensazioni: per me era come fare qualsiasi altro gioco' (*4F*, p. 283). Perhaps Margherita did not actually think the incident that important, despite the extent of these sexual games, as she described it as an 'esperienza pazzesca', not a disgrace, but 'una specie di iniziazione che si tramandava nel tempo'. However, given that she is identified only by her first name, it seems more a minimization designed to cope with the emotional scars and confusion she still felt fifteen years later.

According to the women of *L'anello forte*, just as menstruation and sexual relationships had not been up for discussion during adolescence, so too pregnancy and childbirth were experiences which were not discussed by mother and daughter. Rather than a cause for family rejoicing, a pregnancy could signal only further misery and financial hardship for an already stretched family. To avoid any awkward discussions with their older children, mothers seem to have concealed their pregnancy as far as possible (*4F*, p. 189). Margherita told the story of visiting, at the age of twenty, a woman who had just given birth. Her ignorance is more astounding even than the reticence of her mother to speak plainly:

Entriamo nella stalla, 'sta povera donna era coricata sulla paglia, accanto aveva il bambino con una testa lunga lunga, e c'era una vicina di casa che spingeva, che premeva la testa lunga del bambino con uno straccio. Io ho detto a mia mamma: 'Ohmì, che testa lunga che ha'. 'E ben, l'hanno trovato sotto un mucchio di fascine, l'hanno dovuto tirare per la testa. Ma premendo con lo straccio piano piano viene normale'. Io mi chiedevo: 'Ma perché si coricano 'ste donne quando le portano un figlio?' Ma non osavo parlarne. (*4F*, p. 226)

Should the reader be left wondering whether Margherita was having Revelli on, she then stated explicitly: 'Mi sono sposata, e non sapevo che le donne dovevano avere i bambini, credevo che li trovassero. È così?' (AF, p. 227). The testimonies of the older women, such as Caterina Occelli in Occelli, document the changes in attitude and behaviour between one generation and the next: 'Guai se avessero sentito che si parlava di queste cose, chi ne parlava era giudicato un matto... Non si poteva parlare del sesso, il sesso era peccato. Adesso anche i preti hanno cambiato opinione' (AF, p. 189).

Where the rural communities diverge from their urban counterparts is the cultural sphere. They argue that rather than being marginalized from Italian society, they share a different set of cultural values: within the testimonies of the *contadini* there is a collective pride. Franca Tonnello explained that 'il contadino non saprà scrivere e parlare bene come gli altri, ma sappiamo tante cose che gli altri non sanno, abbiamo anche noi la nostra cultura' (AF, p. 95). As they narrate their stories, the *contadini* show that collectively they recognize that their way of life is under threat due to the changes in industry and society.

The idea that rural communities have their own culture and heritage is a concept which has been developed in sociological studies; how does such a community's history and culture sit within the national framework? The testimonies in Revelli's collections suggest that the *contadini* measured time and events by their impact on the culture and routine to which they belonged. Although they were quite 'modern', in that they were keeping pace with developments in Italian society, there was not necessarily any sense of connection or involvement in a national history. One example of this would be the perception of the *contadini* that fascism had never reached their localities: 'Noi non eravamo pratici del fascismo. Quando il fascismo è arrivato qui, non ce ne siamo accorti' (AF, p. 224).<sup>405</sup>

Rocco Scotellaro went further to argue that the *contadini* as a body have a 'storia autonoma', which is distinct from that of the peninsula as a whole and particularly suited to oral narration: 'La cultura italiana sconosce la storia autonoma dei contadini, il loro più intimo

<sup>405</sup> We saw in Chapters 4 and 5 that this is balanced by the testimony of individuals willing to discuss the implications of fascism.

comportamento culturale e religioso, colto nel suo formarsi e modificarsi presso il singolo protagonista'.<sup>406</sup> Redfield, however, argued against Scotellaro's thesis of autonomy. According to Redfield, autonomy might have been possible were the *contadini* a primitive people or tribe. Given that they are not, he concluded: 'La cultura di una comunità contadina...non è autonoma. È un aspetto o una dimensione della civiltà di cui fa parte'.<sup>407</sup> This thesis then leads to the question of the definition of 'culture'. Walter Gabutti's definition in his study on the Langhe is broad in scope and encompasses the range of content seen in Revelli's collections. Culture is an evolving concept – like memory. Beyond its traditions and artistic qualities, Gabutti argues that culture also includes 'il sistema di rapporti con le persone, la struttura della famiglia[...] È cultura il modo di porsi di fronte alla natura e ai momenti della vita: la nascita e la morte, il lavoro ed il gioco, la gioia e la tristezza'.<sup>408</sup>

Despite the evidence of marginalization among the testimonies collected by Revelli, it would be inaccurate to say that the *contadini* of the Cuneese and the Langhe were a separate entity within Italy. Their memories are of the distant past, for example, childhood, and memories of past traditions; as Zocchi argues, the *contadini* do have difficulty in relating to present events, and particularly events of the recent past.<sup>409</sup> However, when we consider that recent history includes World War II and the Resistance their reticence is no more than that of Italian society as a whole. Fascism was a period that Italians wanted to forget; the Resistance had its own polemics.

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<sup>406</sup> Scotellaro, p. xxi.

<sup>407</sup> Ballone, p. 103.

<sup>408</sup> Ballone, pp. 7-8.

<sup>409</sup> Zocchi, p. 176.

### *Factory versus fields*

Agricultural work was the traditional form of employment, but during the post-war period Italy as a whole was in transition from agricultural to industrial nation.<sup>410</sup> More and more individuals from the rural communities of Piedmont were turning to the factories that were springing up. Paul Corner in *Contadini e Industrializzazione* argued that *contadini* and industry are traditionally portrayed as at odds with one another.<sup>411</sup> While his study was based on debunking this portrayal, it is indisputable that tension existed on various fronts between *contadini* and industry, as represented by factory work. Throughout Revelli's testimonies, there is evidence of a tension between working the land and working in the factory, and sometimes between the individuals employed in each.<sup>412</sup>

The majority of the *contadini* around Cuneo owned some land, albeit often in very small amounts. In addition, they would rent or work on other land. Land ownership immediately gave these *contadini* a level of prosperity and sense of worth. This set them apart from many of the southern *contadini*, including the communities studied by Arlacchi in the Crotonese. Discussing its economic conditions, Arlacchi explained that 'there existed in the Crotonese a very numerous category of people possessing and selling in the market place only one type of merchandise, their own labour'.<sup>413</sup> These conditions were, he suggested, 'in effect, the classical Marxist definition of the proletariat'.<sup>414</sup> In drawing comparisons between the lives of the *contadini* interviewed by Revelli and their southern counterparts, the difference in quality of living cannot be ignored or downplayed. Figures from the *Atti della Commissione Parlamentare*

<sup>410</sup> The bulk of Revelli's testimonies are from those who worked the land. These sit next to the recollections of individuals who had made their own way in the world, adopting ingenuous ways of earning a living. Some were well-known money-making ventures in the countryside. For example, Daniele Mattalia from the age of fourteen began buying hair from the women of the poorest communities (*MV*, p. 257). As Maddalena Andreis explained, this allowed these women to raise some money, but at a cost to one's pride, 'Erano i più poveri che vendevano la caviada, avere i capelli a zero era come denunciare la propria miseria' (*MV*, p. 247). Others, such as Sabino, adopted dubious scams, for example, selling diuretics to unsuspecting women as contraceptives; doubly dubious, one would have thought, given the grip the church still held on these communities well into the 1960s. Of all the women he conned, he claimed that only one came back to complain that she had fallen pregnant (*MV*, p. 381).

<sup>411</sup> Paul R. Corner, *Contadini e industrializzazione: Società rurale e impresa in Italia dal 1840 al 1940* (Bari: Laterza, 1993), p. 3.

<sup>412</sup> There are also testimonies from those employed outside these sectors.

<sup>413</sup> Arlacchi, p. 151.

<sup>414</sup> Arlacchi, p. 151.



*d'Inchiesta sulla Miseria in Italia* published in 1953 show that while Revelli's *contadini* testified to hardship and deprivation, it was on a much lesser scale to that seen in the Mezzogiorno (Table 1).

**TABLE 1. Families Classified as Wretched and as Needy per 100 Families with Family Head as Coltivatore Diretto\*, by Region:**

Region	A, Percent Wretched	B, Percent Needy	A + B, Total
Northern Italy	1.0	3.5	4.5
Central Italy	6.9	12.3	19.2
Southern Italy	25.4	24.2	49.6
Islands	17.2	22.7	39.9
Italy	11.7	13.5	25.2

\*Includes most agricultural workers except farmhands<sup>415</sup>

While Table 1 tells us of the percentage of 'wretched and needy', there is no indication of the comparative living conditions of the poorest in each area. However, this general background makes it easier to understand why marriage to a *contadino* from northern Italy should be viewed as a means of escape by the *calabrotte*.<sup>416</sup>

Rural communities in Piedmont tended to be found in the area surrounding the land its inhabitants worked.<sup>417</sup> Working the land involved long days, sometimes fifteen or twenty hours per day (*MV*, p. 137). One woman, Lucia Abello, recalled how work in the fields could not stop even on her wedding day: 'Mi sono sposato l'8 luglio 1920, alle ore otto, nella parrocchia. [...] Siamo tornati a casa dalle nozze [...] Poi subito a lavorare, lo stesso giorno già a lavorare, era nel pieno dei fieni' (*AF*, pp. 210-211). This was to be the pattern of family life in rural communities, and much as Verga's family the Malavoglia had attempted, families worked together: 'Tra tutti cominciavamo a fare qualcosa, mio padre poteva comprare una vacca, poi un'altra' (*MV*, p. 44).

<sup>415</sup> Source: *Atti della Commissione Parlamentare d'Inchiesta sulla Miseria in Italia* (Roma, 1953), Vol. 1, Tomo II. Reported in Lopreato, p. 52.

<sup>416</sup> Zocchi, p. 175.

<sup>417</sup> Their southern counterparts usually lived in townships large distances from the fields (Arlacchi, p. 26). One of the unavoidable implications of this setup was the extension of the Southern working day to include travel time, as described by Levi in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Carlo Levi, p. 34).

### Benefits for the *contadino-operaio*

The pull of work in the factory with its shift system over the long hours on the land is easily appreciated. Stefano Abrate made the transition from fields to factory – in stages – and was quite satisfied with his employment:

Ho lasciato la cascina, ma andare a lavorare subito in fabbrica mi sembrava che non andasse bene. Era un salto troppppo lungo. Allora ho trovato la strada di mezzo, il frutteto. [...] Ho lavorato cinque anni alla frutta. Poi ho trovato un lavoro in fabbrica, a Bra, e mi trovo benissimo, faccio le mie otto ore e basta. (4F, pp. 107-108)

Another benefit of working in the factory was the security of a pay packet over the uncertainty of a harvest: 'In fabbrica fatto il lavoro torni a casa. Hai lavorato otto ore, sai cosa hai guadagnato. Qui in campagna lavori dieci o venti ore, e cosa hai guadagnato?' (4F, p. 194). Seeing the benefits enjoyed by friends who had made the move to factory work often enticed others into doing the same (4F, p. 98), in spite of the disadvantages to be considered. Some men and women did both for a time adopting a punishing daily schedule in order to survive and hopefully prosper (4F, p. 102). Others worked in the factories only because it was the sensible option at the time: 'la mia passione è con le bestie [...]. È un anno che sono in fabbrica ma un giorno o l'altro cambio ancora, torno in montagna. In fabbrica non ho nessuna soddisfazione, solo quello di prendere la busta paga' (MV, p. 282).

### Issues facing the *contadino-operaio*

Those who chose to work in the factory faced many potential difficulties – which, on balance, outweighed its benefits. On a practical level, factory employment entailed a lengthy commute for many *contadini*. Nuto Revelli points out in his introduction to Walter Gabutti's *Scantini: Case e gente dell'Alta Langa* that commuting only suited some communities: 'Nell'Alta Langa il pendolarismo dell'operaio-contadino è una realtà viva, consolidata nel tempo. Nelle valli alpine il pendolarismo dell'operaio-contadino si è invece esaurito rapidamente'.<sup>418</sup> Indeed some left their hometowns in the mountains to secure factory employment.

The move from country to town was a major transition, and without the support network of their home community, factory work potentially had a more negative effect on the welfare on the *contadino-operaio* than his urban colleague (4F, p. 291). This is borne out in the

<sup>418</sup> Gabutti, p. ii.

testimony of Letizia Raina, who also continued to work her land, and said that: 'Ho avuto l'impressione di andare in una galera, anzi peggio, sempre sotto l'oppressione dei sorveglianti, otto ore, non potevi nemmeno girare la testa che ti osservavano. [...] Il passaggio dalla campagna alla fabbrica è stato il principio della fine della mia salute' (*AF*, pp. 259-260). Paolo Borgetto saw it as no surprise that factory work damaged the health of the *contadini*: 'Quando uno fa otto ore attaccato a una macchina per forza diventa nervosa. In campagna la vita è più sana' (*MV*, p. 131).

Over and above the effects on the individual, others, including the following anonymous witness, recognised that the factories had a negative impact on the environment: 'E la nebbia 'dla Val Bormida? [E la nebbia della Valle Bormida?] È una vergogna, una schifezza, è una rovina da Cengio fino a Bubbio. Sa cosa ci vorrebbe? Una bella bomba atomica. Ma il *contadino* non è unito' (*MV*, p. 389). Speaking from his own experience, Revelli gives a damning verdict on the attitude and impact of industry on rural communities: 'vedo [...] i fiumi inquinati, ridotti come fogne, parlano di violenza, di rapina, di disprezzo nei confronti del mondo contadino. I contadini protestono, denunciano. Ma escono inesorabilmente sconfitti. L'industria ha sempre ragione, l'industria stravince sempre'.<sup>419</sup>

At the minor end of the scale, the prejudiced attitudes and behaviour of workmates who were not *contadini* could be a source of frustration for those who worked in the factories (*AF*, pp. 103-104). Antagonism or criticism from within the home community of the *contadino-operaio* was more worrying. Luigina, a rather forthright sixty-six year old, was one such critic. Speaking about the scarcity of land to work she said: 'Poi ci sono quelli della Michelin che fanno i due lavori, la fabbrica e la campagna. Quelli rubano il pane agli altri, né vendono né affittano la terra' (*AF*, p. 57). Concerns such as these have been elaborated further by Gianfranco Tamietto in *Il rilancio dell'agricoltura piemontese*. Published around the time of Revelli's research, this study pointed out the negative impact of this development and warned against encouraging a

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<sup>419</sup> Agosti, p. 15.

burgeoning in the number of *contadini-operai*. 'Il *part-time* di fatto ostacola un qualsiasi intervento strutturale e di attivazione dell'agricoltura'.<sup>420</sup>

### *The relationship between sexes*

One of the most serious effects of the growing number of *contadini-operai* was its influence on the marriage prospects of the *contadini* who continued only to work the land: factory workers from the town offered many women an easier life than that as the wife of a *contadino*.<sup>421</sup> Francesca Giraudo in Parola explained to Revelli that: 'il contadino ha nessuno orario. Lavora diciotto ore su ventiquattro, poi una tempesta o una bestia che va male, la *mesada* [Il profitto di un anno di lavoro] è lì...Io dico che le ragazze di oggi fanno bene a non più sposare i contadini' (AF, p. 177). The refusal of many women to marry the men of their rural communities obliged the *contadini* to think innovatively if they did not want to resign themselves to bachelorhood.<sup>422</sup> *L'anello forte*, describes the courtships between the *contadini* of Piedmont and their Southern brides. These marriages were mutually advantageous given the situation in the local communities of bride and groom respectively: 'L'industrializzazione ha segnato la svolta. Le donne del Meridione sono rimaste senza uomini, ed i contadini del Nord senza donne' (AF, p. 113).

Detailed description is given in the testimonies of *L'anello forte* of the practicalities of trips south to meet potential brides and, importantly, being approved by the girl's family. If 'approved', the couple became engaged, exchanged gifts and the man then headed north again to wait for the wedding (AF, pp. 196-199). After the wedding, these women had significant adjustments to make in adapting to life in Piedmont. Amongst these changes, there was a

<sup>420</sup> Maspoli, pp. 21-22. Tamietto went further and argued that it was time for hard decisions to be taken if agriculture in Piemonte was to flourish: 'Personalmente sono convinto che il nostro Paese, nel momento attuale, si trova di fronte ad una scelta di vitale importanza per il settore, tra una esperienza di agricoltura simile a quella francese, che è di tipo professionale, ed un'altra quale quella tedesca fondata sul *part-time farming* alle dipendenze dell'industria, però con un sistema industriale decisamente meno fragile del nostro' (Maspoli, p. 22).

<sup>421</sup> During the decades of Revelli's research, this issue was further exacerbated by the changing role of women then emerging across Europe.

<sup>422</sup> The reality of singleness for the *contadini* Revelli interviewed contrasts with the optimistic picture given in *Il rilancio dell'agricoltura piemontese*. This study on the state of agriculture in Piedmont in the 1970s, suggested that there was a: 'sempre più diffusa volontà e determinazione, particolarmente nei giovani ancora occupati nell'agricoltura, a rinnovare le proprie aziende, rendendole più rispondenti ai modelli d'impresa offerti dai settori extra-agricoli' (Maspoli, p. 8).

language barrier to overcome and a new division of work: in the South, women would often have been more concerned with the domestic rather than the agricultural. One unpleasant aspect these women had to confront was the underlying prejudice of their new neighbours in the North – not that an anti-South prejudice was a new concept. Revelli confronted this prejudice in *L'anello forte* where he described the typical attitude of the Piemontese *contadini* towards the Southern brides in their community:

Avvicinavo la gente nei bar e sulle piazze dei paesi, sollecitavo il dialogo, poi al momento giusto ponevo la solita domanda: 'Che cosa ne pensate delle donne del Meridione "trapiantate" nella vostra zona?' Quasi tutte le risposte erano uguali, come fabbricate in serie. 'Sono mica cattive 'ste *tarune*', mi diceva la maggior parte della gente. 'Sono donne serie, che lavorano. Sono *abbastanza* gentili, quando le incontriamo ci salutano per prime'. Gira e rigira, poi anche dalle risposte che non volevano essere né cattive né polemiche affiorava quell'antimeridionalismo istintivo che mi feriva, che mi offendeva. (AF, p. xciii)<sup>423</sup>

A particularly informative element of *L'anello forte* is the delicate manner in which Revelli is able to discuss relationships following marriage. Once married, relations between the spouses were often difficult for a number of reasons. Many of the *contadine* had entered marriage grossly ignorant of what was involved. We saw above that sexual relationships and pregnancy were among the great taboos never discussed as they grew up. This lack of information and education had serious implications for many a marriage in the early decades of the 1900s. Rinuccia Martini said: 'Mia mamma metteva una paura dell'uomo addosso, io avevo paura del matrimonio, ho risentito tanto della mia impreparazione, ho avuto la fortuna che mio marito mi ha capita ed aiutata' (AF, p. 100). Others were not so fortunate. Angela's testimony is particularly tragic as her abhorrence of sexual intercourse seems to have been the cause of her husband's infidelity. Recounting her own experiences, she implied that she was not an isolated case (AF, p. 59). Others, she said, herself included, were rebuked by their husbands for never initiating intercourse – the few who tried it seem to have been in a no-win situation as the anecdote from Angela's friend illustrates:

Una mia amica, che era tanto più sveglia di me, che sapeva com'era la vita, un giorno mi aveva confidato: 'Guarda, io il mio uomo una volta l'ho

<sup>423</sup> *Tarune* above seems to be a generic term for women from the South. As Revelli explains, there were various names for women from southern Italy: '*Tarune* o *Napoli* sono gli appellativi più comuni. L'appellativo di *calabrotte* è il più raro e cordiale, quasi affettuoso' (AF, p. xciii note).

cercato. Sai cosa mi ha detto? Che solo le bagasce cercano l'uomo. Io da quel momento non l'ho mai più cercato'. (*AF*, p. 60)

Levi offered a different perspective on rural sexuality and morality. He described the sexuality of the people of the rural communities as 'bestial' and, unlike Revelli's witnesses, an easy topic for discussion: 'Le donne, chiuse nei veli, sono come animali selvatici. Non pensano che all'amore fisico, con estrema naturalezza, e ne parlano con una libertà e semplicità di linguaggio che stupisce'.<sup>424</sup> Interestingly, Levi's perspective had been published some forty years previously, yet it had taken several decades for Revelli's *contadini* to reach anywhere near the level of free speech described by Levi. However, Revelli's *contadini* generally saw themselves as 'civilized' people, whereas Levi portrays the peasants he met as uncivilized, and so without such inhibition or sense of decorum.

Many of the women describe how they lived at least initially with the husband's parents. Often this proved to be a stressful situation: some brides became the virtual slaves of the household, which could consist of the husband's mother and father as well as other sons and their wives (*AF*, p. 36). Others, Caterina Lombardo for example, were able to make a conscious decision to live peaceably with the mother-in-law at all costs: 'Io stavo sempre zitta. Il filo era nero? Lei mi diceva che era bianco, io dicevo che era bianco, ah, bisogna fare così se uno vuole andare d'accordo' (*AF*, p. 236). One exception to this norm of domestic strife was the relationship of Elisa Allemandi in Balma and her daughter-in-law Concetta Laurito in Balma, originally from Reggio Calabria. Far from tension between the two, the mother-in-law was full of praise for Concetta: 'Io sono contenta di Concetta, di mia nuora. Ha portato un po' di gioventù. Ad una certa età si incomincia a guardare il passato, a pensare che cosa è stato della vita. [...] Concetta è brava, è svelta come me' (*AF*, pp. 303-304).

The testimonies also shed a great deal of light on the dynamics of the husband-wife relationship. Economic survival was a bigger motivation in rural marriages than romance (*AF*, pp. 70-71); nonetheless, there is evidence in the testimonies that many women demonstrated genuine affection for their husbands and showed that they worked well as a team, dividing tasks between them. The woman carried a large share of the daily workload, but the husband was

<sup>424</sup> Carlo Levi, p. 89.

clearly the head of the house - whether they always merited the respect of their wives was quite another matter. Revelli's witnesses agree that women carried the heavier burden in the countryside. Franca Tonello suggested that women were obliged to work harder than the men (*AF*, p. 94). Anna Gazzera in Favole was more dogmatic, but also acknowledged that things had now changed for the better: 'la donna di campagna al tempo nostro era una martire, adesso è meno sacrificata perché ha le macchine, e poi le famiglie non sono più grosse' (*AF*, p. 39). Caterina Chiapasco gave an example of her workload and described how she attempted to get through it: 'La donna era forse più sacrificata dell'uomo. Io di notte facevo la sarta. Di giorno, mentre tiravo i buoi, riuscivo a lavorare a maglia: infilavo il braccio nella corda dei buoi, le mani restavano libere, *ié scapin* [i.e. calze] li facevo tutti tirando i buoi, camminando' (*MV*, p. 347). Elisabetta Forni supports this picture in *Donna e lavoro contadino* where she describes a woman's typical workload:

Oltre a ciò [la viticoltura] la donna svolgeva lavori agricoli di appoggio all'attività maschile e sopportava sulle proprie spalle totalmente il peso della complessa e articolata vita domestica, tra cui i lavori dell'orto, l'allevamento di animali di bassa corte, la pulizia e la manutenzione delle parti rurali della casa, la tessitura di stoffe per il fabbisogno familiare e per il piccolo commercio extra-agricolo cui era anche finalizzata la produzione di burro e formaggi, la vendita dei propri capelli, l'allattamento dei bambini presi a balia.<sup>425</sup>

Don Filippo Barbero endorsed the subjective views of these women in his own testimony, where he gave an insight to the dynamics of a peasant family (*AF*, p. 111). Other witnesses, such as Luigina, who had the misfortune to live with in-laws who treated her badly, found her fulfilment in her work: 'La mia soddisfazione era il lavoro, lavoravo da un sole all'altro a zappare in campagna' (*AF*, p. 55).

In many marriages, basic communication was non-existent or at best very poor. One of the issues, which had significant impact on family dynamics, was the number of children the couple should produce. Yet this was rarely if ever discussed. Adele, a mother of ten children, is typical of many women who simply had no interaction or communication with their husbands and even at the age of eighty the frustration and lack of recourse available was evident as she talked to Revelli. We saw above that the priests put pressure on the women to have large

<sup>425</sup> Elisabetta Forni, 'Il lavoro della donna contadina', in *Bravo*, pp. 21-39 (25).

families. In Adele's case, this was nothing compared to the impossibility of reasoning with her husband: 'A me faceva solo paura quando il mio uomo cercava per avere dei bambini, solo averli e poi metterli a soffrire, come avevano messo anche me a soffrire nel mondo' (AF, p. 124).

To sum up, the testimonies of the *contadini* show that only to an extent were they marginalized from the rest of Italian society. From a political perspective, this manifested itself in a sense of neglect. The standard of living had certainly improved as the 20<sup>th</sup> Century progressed and the women were better educated regarding sexual relationships and procreation. There was a price to pay, however, as the social framework of rural communities was challenged by the new autonomy of the women and economic options offered to the younger generation. Economically, the *contadini* shared the national trait of emigration, but had a different perspective on the 'economic miracle'. They enjoyed some of the benefits of the new consumer society but ultimately industrialization contributed directly to the demise of their communities. From a social perspective, the *contadini* had a culture and sense of history particular to their communities. Yet in some respects, the same communities were in-step with changes occurring generally in post-war Italian society.

### How did the *contadini* relate to Revelli?

In the introduction to *Il mondo dei vinti* Revelli explains that he encountered difficulty, on a regular basis, in covering particular topics with both men and women: 'la gente contadina, quando parla, quando racconta, è sincera. Ma non è libera, si blocca di fronte ad alcuni temi che giudica troppo scabrosi, troppo impegnativi. Il tema del sesso: tutti lo sfuggono, come se fosse peccato il solo parlarne' (MV, p. lix). How then can we account for the open discussion of these very topics, and more, within the two collections and *L'anello forte* especially? There are two factors in action here. Firstly, Revelli's approach to the recording sessions, and secondly, the changing times in which he was conducting his research. These combine to allow the possibility of open discussion.



Reading the three collections of oral testimonies it becomes evident early on that Revelli had a gift for encouraging his witnesses to speak freely. Yet the dynamics of *L'anello forte* are particularly unusual in that here we had a middleclass man from the town of Cuneo eliciting details of an intimate nature from both young and elderly women of the rural communities. Not only a stranger to this way of life, but also of a different sex to his witnesses, Revelli was nevertheless able to broach subjects usually the reserve of female historians and writers.

Revelli extracted memories of more delicate subjects, such as abuse or sexual education and behaviour, in a frank and yet sensitive manner. Elisabetta Centenero's reference to Revelli's 'confessional' qualities illustrated his ability to tease out details the women hardly realized they were volunteering (*AF*, p. 225). Adele is a good example of this as her testimony shows that she has started to discuss sexual relationships in some detail, then seems to become aware of what she is saying and clams up:

Se la donna avesse detto 'no' lui subito si arrabbiava, allora sí che erano scene, oh per carità, guai, oh, non poteva la donna rifiutarsi, no no no, ahì. Lui incominciava: 'Eh cristu, smia che't fas mòri... [Eh cristo, sembra che ti faccia morire]'. Io ho tante cose che non posso dirgìele, e non le dico, eh, stiamo solo zitti, ehi, la verità è che la donna subiva. (*AF*, p. 125)

Revelli was working in decades of social change between the 1960s and 1980s when old inhibitions were being overcome and a new frankness, or shamelessness, was emerging in European society. These influences can account in measure for the freedom with which certain topics were discussed. However, we have seen above – for example, in the priests' interference in marital relationships – that the majority of the *contadine* remained significantly inhibited.

Analysis of Revelli's methodology and the content of the testimonies presented leads us to one of two possible conclusions. Either Revelli had built relationships with the *contadine* to the extent that he had privileged access to even these intimacies;<sup>426</sup> or the *contadine* were now without inhibition. The former is more likely, but the latter is not without its influence.

<sup>426</sup> We saw in Chapter 3 the diffidence that characterized individuals from rural communities. Revelli had clearly overcome this and was received with hospitality when he arrived at a home to record a testimony: 'In tutte le case il bicchiere di vino è d'obbligo, così i dialoghi appena avviati regolarmente si interrompono e incomincia il rito del vino fatta in casa, del "vino di uva, speciale, del nostro" [...] Se non accetto, offendo' (*MF*, p. xxx).

## Conclusion

Revelli's representation of the *contadini* as *vinti*, marginalized from Italian society, initially comes across as stereotypical. His opinion is based on an intimate knowledge of these rural communities and their way of life. The oral testimonies of the *contadini* endorse Revelli's perception of marginalization and simultaneously show that their situation is much more complex than the accepted stereotype. Analyzing their narration of the rural social, political and economic situation it is apparent that the *contadini* are marginalized in as far as they do have a different culture and way of life from that of urban Italy. The detail of their testimonies reveals that there are areas in which the experience and attitudes of the *contadini* reflect that of the rest of contemporary Italy.

Methodological issues influence how far we accept the testimonies as the voice of the rural communities. He has censored the content of the collections on two levels: firstly, in editing the individual testimonies so that they conform to his perception of a rural 'norm', and secondly, in selecting which of the hundreds of testimonies to include in the final publications. Nonetheless, the minutiae provided in their narrative makes Revelli's work an invaluable point of access to twentieth century rural Piedmont, and he has succeeded in giving the peasants a voice and an audience.

One of the striking features of these collections is the diligence with which Revelli has collated and prepared the material in a 'straightforward reporting of ethnographic realities'.<sup>427</sup> This diligence mirrors Revelli's approach to recording his own experience and that of the *contadini-soldati* on the Russian front. His work among the rural communities arose from the same 'impegno del dopo' to remember, to testify and to teach. 'This was not the work of a rural nostalgic, Revelli was not even advocating the preservation of such an existence. He was protesting against the lack of timely government action to better the situation of the *contadini* (*LFI*, p. xvi). Ultimately, however, the focus of Revelli's work was the preservation of a record, and the representation of the memories of rural communities soon no longer to exist.

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<sup>427</sup> Saunders, p. 827.

## Conclusions

Throughout his career, Revelli's writing was inspired by an 'impegno del dopo'. This study has established a working definition of Revelli's 'impegno del dopo' and then considered how his response to it appears in his writing. Having more in common with testimony writing, such as that of Primo Levi, than the post-war notion of politicized 'impegno', it incorporated a commitment to remember through commemoration and the preservation of an historical record, and to communicate both his testimonial truth and that of marginalized groups in Italian society. It was a vibrant and active 'impegno del dopo' which went beyond the mere preservation of a record to include actively teaching the ignorant, be it Revelli's post-war contemporaries, or succeeding generations of Italians. This rested on Revelli's conviction that the past and present are inextricably linked: we must learn from our history.

Revelli responded to this 'impegno del dopo' by publishing his personal record of the past and facilitating the publication of rural memories of war and peace. His personal record of the Fascist war in Russia represents the evolving nature of his 'impegno del dopo'. His diary began as no more than a technical record of military experience, but quickly changed to record the realities of the experience and so counter Fascist propaganda, particularly in respect of the fate of the *dispersi*. *Mai tardi* shows the origins of his 'impegno del dopo', his antipathy towards the Germans, and helps explain his switch from Fascist to anti-Fascist during the Resistance. This personal record also had a collective element as on the front he was already conscious that ordinary Italians had no idea what was happening in their name to their fellow countrymen.

As the scope of his 'impegno del dopo' developed, so Revelli needed to expand the formats in which he presented his testimony. Personal diaries were replaced by collections of letters and oral testimonies as he moved from the position of participant-witness to observer-witness and facilitated the testimonies of the exploited *contadini-soldati*. Publication of *La strada del davai* and *L'ultimo fronte* was motivated by the same desire not to forget, to communicate real experience, and teach the ignorant or misinformed.

Whether presenting the Russian front autobiographically or facilitating the memories of others, Revelli's publications confront the complexities facing his generation. They are not 'comfortable' or even heroic war memoirs; they are realistic records presenting the difficulties facing Italian society as it emerged from the experiences of Fascism, World War II and the Resistance. Revelli did not present himself as a neorealist writer, but in keeping with the post-war trend, his writing is marked by the belief that this recent past was of relevance to a country under reconstruction. While the neorealist trend had largely faded by the end of the 1950s, Revelli continued to write with the same principles throughout his career. At the same time, it is possible to identify certain 'silences' in these records; Revelli was conscious of the lacunae in the memories of his witnesses, but is, unsurprisingly, less forthcoming about such areas in his own account.

Revelli's writing of war in Italy, 1943-1945, was a key stage in the development of his 'impegno del dopo' as it represents a bridge between his commitment to communicating the truth of the Russian front, and his later commitment to preserving and communicating the experience of rural communities in Piedmont. For Revelli, the Resistance was, in a sense, a continuation of the war in Russia; it was an opportunity for revenge against the Germans (and the Fascists) whom he held responsible for the deaths of his comrades. Revelli's discussion of the Resistance is significant in that it demonstrates the development of his ideas: politically in *La guerra dei poveri*, and then methodologically in *Il disperso di Marburg* and *Le due guerre*. These publications show the importance Revelli attached to his relationship with the *contadini-soldati*: as the scope of his research continued to expand and include the oral testimonies of civilians as well as ex-soldiers, his sense of responsibility for the soldiers he once commanded now also embraced their families and communities. In *La guerra dei poveri*, Revelli distanced himself from the two key areas of tension with the *contadini* of the Cuneese: partisan requisitioning and reprisals. Whether Revelli honestly believed he and his partisans were not responsible for such incidents, or whether he was presenting himself, as partisan commander, in the best possible light, later publications present a more balanced picture. As the scope of his research expanded, he became ever more attached to and informed about the experience of rural communities. This

explains his respect for their perspective on the Resistance, and later, his more balanced assessment of the period, ostensibly in response to what he has heard from his witnesses.

We have seen that Revelli's sense of 'impegno' in representing the marginalized – military or civilian – often led him to adopt an innovative and pragmatic approach. In the published collections of testimonies, this offers an unrivalled perspective on previously unrepresented communities. Revelli claimed that he had not been influenced by the theory and practice of professional oral historians and writers. He adopted an innovative methodological approach in order to maximize the value of people's life experiences. A later publication, *Il disperso di Marburg*, shows that Revelli, the marginalized writer and historian, was now engaging with professionals and considering the implications of his own methodology on the record he produced. In this text, Revelli reaches a methodological climax as he shares the extent to which his self-criticism has developed.

This study identified a number of issues in Revelli's methodology. His approach to recording the testimonies focused positively on giving the *contadini* scope to speak freely of their experiences. His editing process, however, shows that despite this claim, Revelli was working to his conception of a rural 'norm': he edited testimonies individually to fit this notion, and then chose those for inclusion in the published collections on a similar basis. In both the publications on Russia and rural Piedmont, Revelli has directed our attention to what he wants us to see of the ARMIR, the Resistance, and the experience of Piedmont's *contadini*. Revelli's later concern about the effect of his subjective memories and experience on his approach to research suggests that this had been almost subconscious. This approach does mean that extremes, or major variants, of experience are not published, although Revelli often referred to the testimonies he had cut in his lengthy introduction to a collection. This approach creates a tension between Revelli's methodology and his sense of an 'impegno del dopo'; the two are not, however, mutually exclusive.

Over the decades, Revelli became increasingly self-critical of his methodological approach. This shows a progression from his initial position of amateur auto-didact to theoretically aware researcher and writer. *Il disperso di Marburg* showed that this realization forced

an analysis of the extent to which subjective memories could interact with his research if he was to communicate a historical truth, rather than just a testimonial truth. *Il disperso di Marburg* also demonstrated that Revelli's all-inclusive antipathy towards the Germans during the Resistance was later refined to those of his own generation – those who had been part of the experiences which had triggered his antipathy.

Revelli's personal writing offers an insight to twentieth century Italian experience from the perspective of a middle class former military officer. His writing on behalf of the *contadini* facilitates a record of the same period from the perspective of rural Piedmont. In this way, his work makes a significant contribution to the historical record of twentieth century Italy which professionals within the historical discipline have acknowledged. As Calandri explained, working in years of rapid change, Revelli's priority was to 'print' or 'fix' a 'choral history' of rural communities in danger of disappearing forever. Thus, while the individuality of experience is certainly preserved, the chorality of military and rural experience is undeniable. Yet Revelli's approach to his work among the *contadini* was not the product of a sentimental populism, nor did it resemble the Fascist misrepresentation of an idyllic or romantic country existence.

In this study, we have seen that Revelli's oeuvre, from his diary of the Russian Front to his collections of oral testimonies from the *contadini*, shows one developing sense of an 'impegno del dopo'. We have seen that his 'impegno' shaped the methodology he applied, and in turn influenced the extent to which he fulfilled his 'impegno del dopo'. The publications resulting from this life-long commitment to the marginalized – military or civilian – constitute a unique record of twentieth century Italian experience and thinking.

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### ***Meetings with Revelli***

The author had the privilege of meeting Nuto Revelli on two separate occasions. These meetings, arranged through Michele Calandri of the Istituto Storico in Cuneo e Provincia, were informal.

On 19 September 2001, the author met Nuto Revelli in his local bar between approximately 18.45 and 19.45, just along from his home in Corso Brunet, Cuneo. She was able to ask Revelli questions she had prepared and made notes of his answers afterwards. Given the location, with its background noise, the author did not record this conversation. References to this conversation are shown as (AR1), representing 'author's first meeting with Revelli'.

The author also had opportunity to meet Revelli in his home on 2 May 2002, between approximately 16.00 and 18.00. This was another informal occasion and the author was one of perhaps five present (other names unknown), including Michele Calandri. Over coffee and cakes, the author had opportunity to question Revelli and listen to his responses to questions from others. Revelli answered these at length, and with many digressions. Conscious of having privileged access to this company, the author did not record the discussion, but made detailed notes throughout. References to this meeting are shown as (AR2), representing 'author's second meeting with Revelli'.

### ***Meeting with Calandri***

The author had several discussions with Michele Calandri of the Istituto Storico della Resistenza in Cuneo e Provincia during the course of her research. One in particular, on 22 July 2005, was particularly helpful in addressing specific questions regarding Revelli's methodology and outlook. References to this discussion are shown as (AC), representing 'author's discussion with Michele Calandri'.



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