



# Introduction

PHILIP COOKE

The last ten years or so have seen a remarkable resurgence of interest in the Italian Resistance movement. It is doubtless a crude measure, but in 1989 the Italian National Bibliography registered an all-time low for books on the subject. However, the years 1993–5, which marked the 50th anniversary of the Resistance, inevitably helped to bring the whole issue back to the attention of the publishing houses as well as to the reading public. The victory of the Berlusconi/Fini/Bossi alliance in 1994 led to a record turnout at the 25 April celebrations in Milan, as thousands marched through the pouring rain to recall the Liberation and register their protest at the direction Italian politics were then taking. The trials of Erich Priebke in 1996 and 1998 for the massacre at the Ardeatine Caves in Rome, and the scandal that surrounded them, have also functioned as a stimulus.

While some publishers invested in new works, many simply republished old texts. There is, of course, nothing intrinsically wrong with this (particularly when the works in question are good), but it could be argued that this reliance on repeat performances has had a negative influence on new work.

One of the more notable aspects of publishing on the Resistance has, however, been the use of new technologies. Laterza produced a CD-ROM of the Resistance which is an extremely useful resource, particularly as a teaching tool. As far as websites are concerned, for a long time these were predominantly neo-fascist, but there are now a large number which deal directly or indirectly with the Resistance, and the main ex-combatants' association, the ANPI, has just launched its own site.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout this period of a Resistance revival the Italian mass media has played a pivotal role. The film *Porzus*, which recounts the killings of 'Osoppo' partisans by members of a PCI formation, was sold bundled together with an edition of the magazine *Panorama*. The documentary-style *Combat film*, shown on Rai-Uno in April 1994, provoked a nation-wide debate, and is the subject of Simona Monticelli's article in this volume. All major newspapers have made an effort to put the various debates, arguments and polemics about the Resistance onto their pages. One thinks of the sensationalist coverage of the *triangolo della morte* (the triangle of death) in 1990, the furore over Claudio Pavone's work, the obsession with publishing digestible interviews with major historians and so on. To give an idea of the general lowering of the tone of discussion in newspapers, an article which appeared in the *Corriere della Sera* on the 23 May 1997 screamed that Renzo De Felice: 'writes uncomfortable truths, splinters the official iconography, opens wounds rather than closing them.' The fortunate readers of the *Corriere* did not, however, have to go out and read De Felice's work which had just been published, because the paper offered a taster of 'the most important passages'. In contrast to much of the Italian media one of the principal channels for serious work on the Resistance is the network of Institutes

which have their headquarters in Milan at the Istituto Nazionale per la storia del movimento di Liberazione in Italia. During the 1990s the web of Resistance Institutes have endured their share of troubles. Financial backing for them has not been particularly generous and several appeals in parliament have so far fallen on deaf ears. With the deaths of Guido Quazza and, more recently, Massimo Legnani, they have been robbed of two of their most important figures. Laurana Lajolo is now in charge, but she has an uphill struggle, particularly against the Milanese authorities who wish to move the Institute from its historic location in Piazza Duomo to Sesto San Giovanni. Despite this potential upheaval, the Institute's journal *Italia Contemporanea* continues to be published quarterly and its long-awaited historical atlas of the Resistance is nearing completion. The Institute in Florence, one of the most important and well stocked of them all, has also had its problems. Over the last few years there has been a bitter polemic over the constitution, statutes and scholarly credentials of the Institute. Thankfully, most of these issues appear to have been resolved, but the sudden death of the Institute's newly elected president, Paolo Barile, has created more uncertainty.

Another figure who has been much in the news is Luciano Violante, who used to collaborate with the Resistance Institute in Turin in the early 1970s. At the opening of the new legislature on 10 May 1996 Violante, in his role as speaker of the house, delivered a speech in which he singled out the Resistance for discussion:

The Resistance and the war of liberation involved only a part of the country and a part of the political forces. I ask myself in what way that part of Italy which believes in those values and which wants to build and strengthen them into universal values for the struggle against tyranny and the emancipation of peoples, not as an exclusive property, albeit a noble part of its civil and political culture, I ask myself, I was saying, what that part of Italy must do in order that the struggle for freedom from Nazifascism might become a national value and how we might leave behind, in a positive manner, the lacerations of the past. I ask myself whether the Italy of today shouldn't start reflecting on the defeated of yesterday. Not because they were right, or for some kind of unacceptable equalization (*parificazione*) of both sides. We must try to understand, without any false revisionisms, the reasons why thousands of young men, and above all, young women, chose to fight for Mussolini and the Republic of Salò, and not for the side which represented rights and freedom.<sup>2</sup>

This is but one of the many pronouncements that Violante has made on this subject—frequently to the disgust of ex-partisans and others (Rossana Rossanda referred to 'Violante's distracted generation' in an article in *Il Manifesto*). Whether or not one agrees with Violante's sentiments, it is instructive that for him the key point is that Italians of today should go back to the period 1943–5 and look at it with fresh eyes. The methodological thrust of this collection of articles is quite different, for they are united in their belief that in order to understand the Resistance we also need to understand the complex processes that shaped (and continue to shape) the formation of its memory and legacy during the period stretching from 1945 up to the present day. The first article in this volume, by Stephen Gundle, provides a broad survey of the issue of the Resistance as a failed secular religion. The three remaining articles have a narrower focus: Sarah Morgan studies the massacre at Schio which took place after the official cessation of hostilities;<sup>3</sup> Philip Cooke analyses a social move-

ment from the 1970s which was formed by ex-partisans; and Simona Monticelli investigates the *Combat film* episode which was a key media event of the mid-1990s. As such, an attempt has been made to cover a variety of topics and periods. All the authors would, however, agree that there is much work still to be done and that there is great potential for further research into the Resistance legacy.

## Notes

1. <<http://www.insmli.it>> and <<http://www.anpi.it>>
2. The original Italian reads as follows: 'La Resistenza e la lotta di Liberazione hanno coinvolto solo una parte del paese e una parte delle forze politiche. Mi chiedo in che modo quella parte d'Italia che in quei valori crede e che quei valori vuole costruire e potenziare nel loro aspetto universale di lotta alla tiranide e di emancipazione dei popoli, non come proprietà esclusiva, sia pure nobile della sua cultura civile e della sua parte politica, mi chiedo, dicevo, cosa debba fare quest'Italia perché la lotta di liberazione dal nazifascismo diventi davvero un valore nazionale e perché si possa uscire positivamente dalle lacerazioni di ieri ... Mi chiedo se l'Italia di oggi non debba cominciare a riflettere sui vinti di ieri. Non perché avessero ragione, o per una sorta di inaccettabile parificazione tra le parti. Bisogna sforzarsi di capire, senza revisionismi falsificanti, i motivi per cui migliaia di ragazzi e soprattutto di ragazze, quando tutto era perduto, si schieravano dalla parte di Salò, e non dalla parte dei diritti e della libertà.'
3. On the whole issue of postwar violence in Italy see the very useful collection of essays in Jonathan Dunnage (ed.), *After the War: Violence, Justice, Continuity and Renewal in Italian Society*, Troubador, Market Harborough, 1999.