

*The True Cause of the 'Moral Collapse': People, Fascists and Authorities under the Bombs. Naples and the Countryside, 1940-1944**

Gabriella Gribaudo

BOMBING IN ITALY

Six weeks before Italy's entry into World War Two, the British Chiefs of Staff planned a bombing campaign against major Italian cities in the conviction that this would prove decisive in forcing the country to surrender. Italy was judged to be a vulnerable enemy due to its economic weakness, its poorly developed anti-aircraft defences, its lack of military preparation, but above all because the 'Italian psyche was unsuited to war'. It was believed that systematic bombing would easily depress the morale of the Italian people: it was therefore necessary 'to destroy the morale of the Italians with heavy attacks at night and, with suitable weather conditions, during the day against the four most important industrial cities'. The objectives were to be chosen in order 'to increase the moral effects over as wide an area as possible'.¹

The RAF's early raids against specific industrial and military targets in continental Europe, executed with a very small bomber force, proved ineffective, and from February 1942 the strategy shifted to the area bombing of cities, with a view to wrecking the morale of civilians and particularly of industrial workers.² By late 1942 Italy, which was clearly in a state of crisis following the defeat of its forces in Africa, seemed to be the easiest target. It was hoped that intensive raids would provoke a crisis among its ruling classes:

The attack should be concentrated against a selection of the most important cities and naval bases. The provisional list is: Milan, Rome, Naples, Turin, Genoa, Taranto, Spezia and Brindisi ... the monthly scale of attack on Italy should be about 4,000 tons a month. This is comparable with the average weight of attack delivered on Germany over the past three months.³

Between October and December 1942, the main Italian cities sustained large-scale area bombing. In October and November, Genoa, Turin and Milan were

*Translated from the Italian by Colum Fordham.

hit, while Naples was bombed in December. The population clearly became a hostage of war: it was constantly told that it had to separate its destiny from that of Mussolini and Germany, and to rebel and commit acts of sabotage in order to save itself. Together with the bombs, the civilian population was bombarded with thousands of leaflets containing messages to Italians. The latter were described as a pacific people who had been driven to war by the Fascist regime, and must therefore rebel against their dictator. Mussolini, together with the Nazi ally, were the sole culprits for the deaths caused by aerial warfare. And if the population failed to separate its own fate from that of the two dictators, this would be tantamount to signing its own death warrant, as emphasized in a leaflet dropped by the RAF in May 1943:

Hitler and Mussolini have condemned Italy to becoming a 'no man's land'. No man's land: this term is used by strategists to define the desolate sector situated between two fronts of combat. . . . You will learn what it means to become no man's land, the centre of a battlefield fought over with modern weapons . . . what has happened so far is nothing compared to what Hitler and Mussolini are about to bring to your country. If we tell you that Italy will become 'no man's land', we are being perfectly serious; your country will be exposed to bombardment, machine-gunning, and wholesale disorganization; numerous houses will end up in flames, and corpses will litter cities and the countryside. Cold in winter, infections during the summer, dismay and hunger will multiply.⁴

The language could not be more explicit. This leaflet carried an intimidatory message which was designed to instil fear and which threatened a tragic fate to its readers. And indeed, the situation had deteriorated by August, as the second major wave of raids on Italian cities gathered pace.⁵ The Fascist regime had collapsed on 25 July, but the new government headed by Marshal Badoglio had declared that Italy would continue to fight the war alongside their German allies. The bombardment would therefore have to continue with even greater intensity. Such intentions were expressed in a document produced by the Northwest African Strategic Air Force Command on 1 August 1943, with the significant title of 'Psychological Bombardment Operation Designed to Drive Italy to Surrender':

It is firmly believed that now is the time for decisive blows to be dealt against the ragged nerves and crumbling morale of the Italian people, especially during this period of readjustment and reorganization caused by the collapse of Mussolini's regime. This can be done by properly displaying the devastating power of the Strategic Air Force. To make it even more impressive and terrifying, they should be given a list of specially selected Italian cities which are to be systematically isolated and totally destroyed. Operations against these cities should be periodic and spaced between other operations. . . . These cities should be carefully selected so that all of Italy will feel the tremendous effect of such a war. This list should contain cities such as Rome, Naples, Florence, Genoa and Venice as these cities are nearest to the heart of the Italian people.⁶

The strategy of moral collapse was accompanied throughout the war by bombardment aimed at blocking the economic and military activities of the enemy country and by tactical raids linked to naval and land operations. Amongst the various types of 'precision' bombing, we can distinguish between raids carried out on factories which had begun when Italy entered the war, those linked to Allied landings (Sicily, Salerno, Anzio), and ground support



Naples, September 1943. Bombing of the port and of the area of Santa Lucia, via Caracciolo, Riviera di Chiaia: NARA, 342-FH-3A-25340. Courtesy of US National Archives.

operations close to the front lines. Tactical raids in support of the three major landings took a heavy toll on southern Italy. Many cities and towns suffered devastating attacks, and in some cases were razed to the ground, because they were situated on the banks of a river, near a bridge of strategic importance, or because they were considered important railway or road junctions or the location of factories. The scale and relative inaccuracy of 'precision' daytime bombing meant that its results were almost identical to those of area bombing: collective memory has classified both within the category of 'carpet-bombing'.

This chapter analyses the geographical area that stretches from the bay of Salerno, where the Allies landed on 9 September 1943, to southern Lazio, the site of one of the longest and bloodiest battles of the war on the western front (the battle of Cassino, October 1943–May 1944). This geographical area can be defined as an illustrative example for studying ordinary people's experience of bombing in the Second World War. Naples, the largest southern city and one of the largest in Italy, as well as being of critical military importance because ships with soldiers and supplies for North Africa left from its port, was the most heavily bombarded city in Italy. Campania and southern Lazio were also subjected to air raids linked to the Salerno and Anzio landings, and the advance of Allied troops until the long battle of Cassino.⁷

Detailed analysis of Naples and Campania should enable us to respond to several questions which are of crucial importance for research on the war and air raids in particular: What was the experience of the population in the towns and cities that were bombed? What was the relationship between the authorities and the population? What contradictions emerged? What were the internal contrasts within the populations? The Allies' approach to the bombing campaign in Italy briefly outlined above clearly shows the conviction that air attacks would play a decisive role in the country's collapse. Was this really the case? Did the air raids distance Italian citizens from the regime?

From the documents and testimonies of the time an evident link emerges between the progressive growth of hostility towards the Fascist regime and the continual evidence of ineptitude offered by its ruling classes to a population distressed by the sufferings of war. The authorities' loss of legitimacy proceeded simultaneously with food deprivations, queues at food shops, the dangerous and disorganized shelters and the evident inefficiency and lack of responsibility of those who represented the state institutions. Social fractures widened (poor versus rich, city dwellers versus country people), but so did the gap between local communities and the 'leader', who was unable to protect the people he claimed to govern.⁸

STRATEGIC AND TACTICAL BOMBING: NAPLES AND THE LANDING AREA

Naples was struck by air raids right from the start of the war in June 1940, but the first raids were little more than demonstrative. The real raids arrived in

waves in autumn 1940, in the summer and autumn of 1941 and in the winter of 1941–2. In this first period, RAF bombers struck the towns and cities of the bay of Naples. The main targets were industrial districts and the districts of the old historic centre overlooking the sea and the port, which was to remain a key objective until the liberation of the city.

From December 1942 to September 1943, Naples and Campania were attacked by bombers of the United States Army Air Forces, which were assigned the task of striking southern Italy from North African bases. This period coincides with the intense campaign of carpet-bombing that was intended to bring about the collapse of the Fascist regime. Most of the raids took place during the day in accordance with the procedures favoured by the Americans. These raids were particularly devastating. As a consequence, collective memory recalls the British RAF almost as the gentlemen of the air while only the Americans were associated with carpet-bombing. In oral memory the two periods are distinctly separated by the massive bombing raids of 4 December 1942, and the recollection of the greatest hardships, destruction and loss of life is linked to the 'American period'. In reality, as we shall see, the records indicate an increasing crescendo of hardship, fears and discontent beginning from the winter of 1940–1, and this was to continue for the rest of the war.

The period from June to July 1943 was marked by raids in preparation for the Allied landings. The Sicilian cities had already been ravaged by the bombings, and these were followed by the towns and cities of continental southern Italy, and in particular the region where the landings took place on 9 September 1943. The most ferocious raids took place in Campania on 9 September 1943, the day after the armistice, when the population was celebrating the end of the war.⁹ This time the strategic objectives were those points considered to be of crucial importance to the German retreat. After the first heavy bombings, many of the inhabitants of the bay of Naples were evacuated to provincial towns without realizing what lay in store for these areas (chosen as safe havens); after the armistice, they found themselves at the epicentre of the war. The list of air-raid victims across the province of Naples included numerous families who had fled there from the city. For the whole of September the towns and cities that lay between the bay of Salerno and the fortification lines that the Germans were constructing along the roads and railway lines – which were to witness the retreat of the Wehrmacht and the advance of the Allied troops – were devastated by continuous raids.

After 8 September the violence of the bombing was compounded by that of the German troops who occupied Italian territory and fought against the Allied advance in Campania. There was to be further destruction and yet more victims. It was a brutal period, full of uncertainty. Italian institutions were on the verge of collapse. The terrible predictions in the British leaflets were coming true and Campania had become a no man's land. In Campania and in southern Lazio, Allied air raids continued until the German Gustav line was destroyed and abandoned. Naples, on the other hand, which had been liberated on 1

October 1943, was hit by three German attacks, the last of which took place on 15 March 1944 when no one expected it. It was one of the most serious raids of the war. German raids claimed at least 470 victims according to official statistics, even though there is virtually no recollection of the event in the city's collective memory.

VICTIMS

How many victims did bombing claim in Naples? It is almost impossible to give a precise number. Journalist Aldo Stefanile suggests 20,000, without providing the sources on which he based his estimate.¹⁰ In a note dated 1 June 1943 and addressed to the head of wartime affairs at the Italian Ministry of the Interior, the prefect estimated the number of victims in the province of Naples at 1,499, including 1,388 victims in the city of Naples. But this figure does not even correspond to the total number of victims on the lists provided on each occasion by the prefecture itself. If a total is calculated from the official lists contained in the reports made until 21 September 1943, then the figure goes up to about 3,100, to which the 470 victims of the German raids need to be added. With enormous difficulty, given the number of inhabitants and the quantity of civil status registers, I have tried to calculate the number of victims during the most tragic year of the war, 1943, and I have estimated a total of about 6,000.¹¹ However, it is necessary to add the lists for 1940, 1941 and 1942 to this figure. If it is borne in mind that many bodies were not buried, and many people were reported missing, or were never reported or only reported much later, then the figure worked out from the city council registry lists would appear to be mistaken. I am therefore unable to establish how many victims there were of bombings in Naples and its surrounding province, but I would argue that the prefecture's figures are definitely a considerable underestimate.

To the direct victims of air attack we should add deaths caused by typhus or by other infectious diseases, by the cold or by hardship. The case of children can be examined by way of example. We can begin by examining the 'normal' records of the municipal section of a poor district from 29 July to 12 August 1943. Over a period of 15 days, 51 deaths are registered, including 29 children under the age of four, among them a child aged ten months, another four years old, yet another ten-month-old baby, a baby of only 16 days, a one-year-old, two babies aged seven months, a two-year-old and a four-year-old. It is a well-known fact that children are the first victims in these circumstances but reading the list has a profound effect and is a useful exercise in historical understanding. It is worth analysing a few lists. On 15 April 1943 among the 66 victims at Torre del Greco there were six siblings aged from three to 13. During the night of 14-15 December 1940, in a 'minor', 'precision' attack, the victims included Angela Miele, aged 41, and her four children aged from one to 17. On 14 March 1944 in piazzetta San Gregorio Armeno n. 2, Elena Capaldo died with her four

children aged 6, 5, 3 and 2.¹² Her husband, the only one to escape, had lost his whole family in a single fleeting moment of the war.

We can examine another case, chosen from among the towns that were targeted by the bombings linked to the advance of the Allies. Teano is a small town in Campania which stood between two German fortification lines, the Barbara line and the Bernhard line, and along the line of the Allied advance, in other words at the epicentre of the fighting. The town was bombed between 6 and 22 October 1943. Among the 110 victims of the raids who appear in council records (we have no way of knowing the number of unburied bodies, which remained among the ruins and whose disappearance was recorded years later), there were 61 girls and boys aged between five months and 14 years old (22 were under five), more than 55 per cent; among the adults (19–55 years old), women made up 70 per cent.¹³

On 25 November 1943 two brothers-in-law, Claudio Trifiletti and Francesco Adinolfi, came to the council to report the total disappearance of both their families, crushed under rubble in piazza Duomo on 6 October. Trifiletti had simultaneously lost his mother, two sisters, his wife and four children.¹⁴ Most members of the destroyed families had previously lived in Naples and had been evacuated to their ancestral homes to avoid raids on the city. This was the fate of many other Neapolitans who could not have known that the whole region would become a war zone.

Although many Neapolitan victims were killed by collapsing buildings, others were crushed in shelters by crowds seeking escape from the bombs, or died from the epidemics that resulted from the appalling sanitary conditions in which they lived. An important part of the problem was shelter provision. Most shelters in Naples were made, with minimal additional work, from the ancient hollows that lay beneath the city. Of these, some had been the refuge of early Christians, others dug out over the centuries from the quarrying of tuff stone for building, while still others were made from the Bourbon waterworks; they were connected by incredibly long tunnels that stretched throughout the bowels of the city. The underground, with its stations, formed another shelter widely used by Neapolitans. Everywhere there were long, steep flights of steps, underground tunnels and passages where hordes of people thronged, fleeing in panic; a person could easily trip and a disaster ensue. There are endless episodes, as emerges from the records of the prefecture which reports about 20 cases of shelters collapsing and multiple deaths caused by pressing crowds of people. This is one description provided by an anonymous informer in October 1941:

The seriousness and violence of the enemy air raids alarm all parts of the population, who flee in a chaotic rush towards the entrances of the public shelters, fully aware now that the makeshift private shelters do not offer any guarantee of safety, without any proper strutting or adequate support. Everyone says that it is necessary to increase the number of entrances to these public shelters, which provide greater safety. In the poorer areas – between Montecalvario and S. Ferdinando – there is a shelter capable of

taking thousands of people, but there is a completely inadequate number of entrances, and the people remain outside during the bombings waiting for their turn to enter. At the entrance in vico d'Afflitto wild scenes could be observed: children rolling on the ground, people suffocated by the violent pressing of the crowds as they came from all the surrounding streets and lanes. In the darkness scuffles broke out which degenerated into furious fights, creating indescribable panic which lowers the morale of the population who say their lives are not being protected by the authorities.¹⁵

A letter dated 15 November 1941 describes life in the air-raid shelters: sick people and invalids carried by volunteers moved by the spirit of humanity, hundreds of children who 'lie on the floors of public and private shelters on a few rugs or rags, and spend the entire night in cold, damp rooms with stale air which is detrimental to the health and development of these delicate young souls'. On 21 November another informer added further details:

The public complain that the long air raids force them to spend nights in shelters which lack the most basic sanitary facilities, with no proper toilets and no drains; the stench makes the air, which is already rarefied by the considerable number of people sheltering there, almost unbreathable. People complain that they have to spend the night standing since there are no benches or anything else on which to sit. They complain of the lack of water and everything that could be useful for first aid, despite the many cases of women and children fainting due to the lack of necessary nutrition. . . . Following the continued and prolonged enemy raids the inhabitants of working-class neighbourhoods such as Vicaria and Mercato complain about the lack of shelters and the lack of places to sit in any of them. Indeed, on recent nights it has been possible to observe that certain public shelters . . . are crowded with people so that after a few hours the air becomes rarefied and the temperature increases to an extent that breathing is almost impossible. The lack of benches to sit on, toilets and adequate running water lowers the depressed morale of the population who are forced to relieve themselves as best they can at the expense of their decency.¹⁶

In autumn 1943 thousands of homeless families lived on a regular basis in the shelters. As many as 11,930 people lived everyday in the bowels of the city.¹⁷ The commission that conducted the inquiry into the homeless compiled a list of 41 shelters crammed with evacuees in the old quarters of Naples, the area which had been most heavily bombed and had the highest concentration of people with no alternative resources (without relatives with large houses who could shelter them and without the possibility of renting other accommodation). There are several particularly striking cases. The shelter in via Foria n. 76 was inhabited by '43 families affected by the disaster, all of them lacking financial means and accommodation, making a total of 211 people'; in the same street at n.106, 108 and 122 there were as many as 107 families with a total of 876 people; at Montecalvario in the shelter in vico Tofa and vico Lungo Trinità degli Spagnoli there were 400 families with 2,000 people overall; the shelter in the

Petraio, the steps of San Nicola da Tolentino and corso Vittorio Emanuele (the station and the gallery of the central funicular railway station) were home to 150 families with 2,000 people overall, and the shelters of San Lorenzo between piazza San Gaetano, via Nilo, via Tribunali and Porta San Gennaro housed about 230 families with about 1,900 people.¹⁸

The writer Anna Maria Ortese, in her account written immediately after the war, described the situation of roughly 3,000 homeless people housed in the port in the Granili, the old Bourbon warehouses for wheat: an infernal maze of gloomy, foul-smelling rooms, seething with humanity who had been made sick and dirty by poverty, by the dark and by the almost total lack of sanitation. Men and women appeared in the half-light of a few lamps situated between doors 'made of planks, sheets of metal, pieces of cardboard or faded curtains', 'larvae of a life where the wind and the sun once existed' but of which 'they had almost lost all memory'.¹⁹ It was in these conditions that the typhus epidemic spread. The victims of typhus should therefore be included as part of the 'side effects' of the bombings. In order to deal with the epidemic the Allies created a commission, which produced a report on its causes and suggested the measures to defeat it. The report began in this way:

The city had suffered very severe damage. The gas, electricity, water and sewage systems were out of action and a considerable number of people lived more or less permanently in air-raid shelters. It was evident that these factors, operating in a depressed, malnourished, unwashed populace of nearly a million, were ideal for the occurrence and rapid dissemination of infectious disease.... During the period October 1943 to February 1944, there were 1,500 known cases of typhus in Naples and its immediate vicinity. Little information could at first be obtained as to the occurrence of cases in previous months. The initial focus of infection was probably the Russian Front. Contact cases occurred later in the prisons and in the shelter population. No vigorous effort had been made to combat the threatened outbreak at its inception. In the late summer an almost complete disruption of essential services and disorganization of medical arrangements made control almost impossible with the facilities then available to the Italians. By this time the shelter population had increased and the louse incidence in the population was very high. Air raids during October augmented the difficulties.²⁰

In a report dated 4 April 1944 the Allied medical commission presented an official figure of 1,841 cases of typhus, with a mortality rate of 15 per cent, which increased to 50 per cent among those aged over 50. The epidemic reached its peak in January 1944. There are accounts of hospitals where it was impossible to provide treatment; indeed, there was an extremely serious risk that even the doctors might become ill: the Cotugno hospital, which specialized in infectious diseases, had undergone semi-occupation by the armed forces, had been bombed and had no windows left at all. Nearly all the houses and public buildings in the city had no windows during the particularly cold winter of 1943-4. The Allies had taken drastic measures to combat the epidemic. The

most well-known and widely used solution was DDT. Disinfestation centres with insecticide were opened in various quarters, in the railway station, the hospitals, the port and the refugee camps. Italian doctors and nurses were taken on; teams had worked in the shelters during the nights. About 60,000 people had been treated every day and by the end of February about 250,000 people had been disinfested; 60,687 people had been inoculated with the vaccine.²¹

GROWING DISCONTENT

Even though the Fascist regime's propaganda machine worked throughout the war to tone down the most tragic news, to conceal the air raids²² and to minimize the defeats of the army, discontent grew from 1940 on. This is clear from the reports of prefects, chiefs of police and *Carabinieri* who were forced, against their will, to take note of the situation and inform the Ministry of the Interior. From the very beginning of the war the civilian population was aware of the inefficiency of the anti-aircraft defences. This situation was common to all Italian towns and cities, and protests were equally widespread. The records and archives in Naples reveal that there was continual criticism. An informant wrote the following in July 1941:

For an entire night the enemy had full control of the skies of Naples with the chance of striking and hitting the most inaccessible sites. The public is not informed about our defences. Nevertheless they realize that the defences are almost non-existent and are anxious that this is happening in a city which has already been the target of enemy raids and therefore deserving of greater and much more serious guarantees. Twenty-four hours after the first bombings it should have been possible to avoid the disaster of the refineries and the ammunition dumps. There would have been time but the necessary foresight was lacking. This is the general mood; mistrustful opinions and views are not just held by the lower classes but also by the middle and upper classes. A judge I know told me yesterday, 'Not only do we have to resign ourselves to the inefficiency of rationing but also to the inefficiency of our defences.' This judge (president of the Court of Appeal) is not only someone who is concerned with order but a passionate Fascist who yearns for the victory of our forces. One cannot close one's eyes to certain kinds of evidence.²³

The awful performance of anti-aircraft defences and the growing pessimism of the population were underlined by several informants in October of the same year. The population observed that enemy aircraft could fly unopposed for hours, selecting their targets and seriously damaging the economic structure of the city. Informants stressed that mistrust in the regime was growing, and that the propaganda from Radio London and from the Allied leaflets (which described the faults of Fascism and invited Italians to

abandon it) was increasingly popular.²⁴ Evident hints of such mistrust appeared in the anonymous letters sent to the authorities, held among the prefect's files:

'We Neapolitans want to be defended by our soldiers and not by senile militiamen shooting haphazardly'; 'For the anti-aircraft defences we want soldiers and not money-grabbing Fascists'; 'The population of Naples must be defended by soldiers and not by Fascists'; 'It is shameful that not one English plane has been shot down. This depends on the anti-aircraft militia. It would be better if these money-grabbing militiamen were replaced once and for all by soldiers.'²⁵

Besides the criticism of anti-aircraft defence, reports by anonymous informants provide a record of the unrest and protests against the inefficiency of the rationing system, the scarce food rations, the delay in delivering them and the queues. The reports became even more serious and concerned in December 1942 following the massive area bombing raids aimed at inflicting a decisive blow on the morale of Italian civilians. References are made to hours and hours of queuing, rationed goods delivered with more than a month's delay, and numerous protests by women. The famine and inadequate functioning of the rationing system occupy pages and pages of censored letters.

Despite their cautious tone, confidential reports could not avoid admitting the increasing disenchantment with the regime and its propaganda. The population was becoming aware that the war was being lost, and capable of evaluating the relationship between reality and propaganda. All the reports invariably mentioned that the population's morale was particularly low as a result of the news coming from the fronts. And when things did go well, as in April 1941 in Africa, it was clear to Italians that most of the credit went to their German allies:

There is new faith in the certainty of final victory ...; however, it is noted that these opinions exalt the contribution of our ally and its military potential with too much emphasis, losing sight and almost devaluing the immense effort and huge sacrifices that we have made.²⁶

The war unmasked the regime's propaganda and revealed its lies, the empty rhetoric of Fascism:

Our contribution to the war against the enemies of the Axis is judged to be almost insignificant. It is observed that this costs us considerable losses, especially in terms of material resources, in the Mediterranean, due to the continuous combined attacks of submarines and torpedo bombers; and it is feared that very soon, as a result of the deficiency of the merchant navy, it will prove impossible to reinforce and supply our troops in North Africa. The raid on the port of Gibraltar by our assault forces has created an excellent impression; however, the propaganda that the radio and press

continue to make about the raid is not appreciated because it is not judged to be proportionate to the actual results.²⁷

There was growing awareness of both the ineptitude and irresponsibility of the Fascist ruling class. On 27 March 1943 an emblematic incident took place in Naples when a ship full of ammunition exploded in the port. A fire had started in the morning, probably as a result of a technical error, and had not been brought under control; it continued all day until the explosion in the afternoon. The technicians and the various authorities concerned had either failed to intervene or had reciprocally put off taking decisions. In the end the explosion had the effect of a terrible bombardment. The following is the report of the episode by the chief of police:

Nothing was done to sink the ship by flooding it, when initially the extent of the fire might have made this possible by opening the safety valves near the engines. And even if this had not been possible due to the shallow water, no attempt was made to tug it offshore which could have been done without great problems, since the ship was not anchored but moored with tow-ropes which could easily have been cut. What should be emphasized is the indecision shown by the port authorities, the lack of coordination and sense of responsibility, and the inadequacy of the initiatives that were taken. . . . Precious time was wasted as a result of doubts and indecision; neither was there any proper evaluation of the tragic effects that the explosion might have had, so that the only precaution taken was to evacuate the area within a radius of 500 metres, while it would have been possible to avoid many victims in the city if only the authorities concerned had given the order to sound the alarm sirens. . . . I must also add that the officer on duty at the Provincial Committee of Anti-aircraft Protection at the prefecture asked for information about the first explosions which were clearly heard in the city both from the Dicat (Anti-aircraft Defence Militia) and from the Harbour Office which replied, I would venture to say, in an almost superficial manner.²⁸

In the letter enclosed with the reports, the fire-fighting officer sent by the commanding officer to confer with the Harbour office and the Port Authorities at 14.35 reported that he could not find any senior officer in their offices. At the Operations Office of the Port Authorities, where he and the Military Commissioner of the ship *Caterina Costa* had pointed out the seriousness of the situation, they had been told that 'without orders from senior offices, it was not possible to take any decision.'²⁹ The rest of the document is a description of people rushing to and fro across the port, carrying useless messages and trying to make the authorities take decisions that were never taken.

After this long series of omissions, the ship exploded at 5.30 pm 'scattering burning wreckage and a huge number of projectiles in a wide radius all over the city.'³⁰ Naples was covered by

a hail of incandescent detritus, as sharp as guillotine blades. . . . A hail of iron and fire, a hail of red-hot fuses, bullets, cartridge and shell cases, a hail of metal sheets, pieces of

tanks, shapeless metal forms wrenched from the ship and its load, from wharves and from houses rained down on the streets. A piece of ship ended up on the bridge of the Maddalena, where two rows of houses collapsed, burying the inhabitants. It was the most savage and terrible devastation of the whole zone of Granili, Caserma Bianchini, Lavinaio and Borgo Loreto.³¹

The entire city was affected. Nearly all the glass in doors and windows was broken; the force of the explosion caused partition walls and ceilings to collapse in many houses, but the damage done to the districts closest to the port and the number of victims in these areas resembled a full-scale bombing raid. The inspector of the Office of Works calculated that 50,000 buildings had been damaged.³² The historic basilica del Carmine was seriously damaged, a fire broke out in the State Archive, the wharves of the port exploded, and damage was also caused to the bonded warehouses as well as the factories and plants of the industrial zone which had already been the targets of regular bombing raids; the gasometer was seriously damaged, causing interruptions to the supply of gas throughout the city. In some areas, lighting was cut off and tramlines were rendered unusable. The central railway station and the Circumvesuviana station were seriously affected and there was an undetermined number of victims among people packed into trains or waiting on platforms. The backdrops of three theatres collapsed and the ceiling of a cinema fell in. It was Sunday and the venues were crowded; there were dead and injured. The report of the commanding officer of the fire brigade refers to numerous bodies of victims 'collected in the railway station, the port and in the streets, and transported to various storage rooms'.³³

The city was left on its knees as if it had endured an incredibly heavy air raid. An anonymous informant reported that 'the citizens of Naples are still stunned by yesterday's sudden accident and many keep on talking about it and are critical, believing that the blame lay with people and not with fate'.³⁴ For the civilian population this was just the latest demonstration that they were in the hands of incompetent adventurers who were leading them to ruin. This is implied once again by the comment of the prefect himself:

It is obvious that the series of distressing episodes has caused the general public to feel profoundly discouraged and to have the sensation that they were at the mercy of events. The latest tragic event, which could possibly have been avoided or at least attenuated by rapid decisions and precise orders, fully confirms the opinion of the citizens of Naples.³⁵

FROM AUTHORITARIANISM TO ANARCHY: FASCISTS, THE AUTHORITIES AND THE CIVILIAN POPULATION

The explosion of 27 March 1943 illustrates an important point: it was not only air raids that detached the Italian public from the regime. Their alienation was

accelerated by the fact that despite the defeats, the regime continued to indulge in self-celebration. The Fascist dead received different treatment compared with other victims. During a night raid on 20/21 July 1941, for example, seven blackshirts of the anti-aircraft militia who had died were given solemn funerals. The corpses, arranged on four lorries, had been taken from the chapel of the mortuary to the cemetery, followed by relatives, civilian and military authorities, Fascist party officials and representatives of all sections of the army. At Corso Garibaldi the procession came to a halt in front of a stand where the prince of Piedmont, the mayor and senior officials awaited and the customary rite of the Fascist roll-call of the dead took place.³⁶

For the whole period of the war the victims from the military and the Fascist party would be honoured with solemn public ceremonies, while civilians began to die in huge numbers. A gulf gradually formed between ordinary people and the representatives of the regime, and widened steadily. The records from the prefecture reveal further significant traces of apprehension. An emblematic case can be found in documents dating from January 1941. A member of the regime applied for and received an exceptionally generous sum of 10,000 *lire* as compensation 'for losing furniture and other household objects of particular value during a raid'. However, the request was followed by telegrams from the Minister of the Interior and letters from anonymous informants who denounced not only the iniquity of paying such a large sum to a well-off person, given the huge number of homeless people, but also the discovery, in the apartment made roofless by the bombs, of an incredible store of foodstuffs. Even a month after the event an informant claimed that the gossip had not subsided and that people still talked of the scandal, of the food reserves removed from general consumption by a Fascist and of further injustice perpetrated by the authorities who, instead of sending the person into internal exile, as would have happened to anyone else, rewarded him with special compensation.³⁷

In 1943 after three years of terrible bombing, with brothers, fathers, husbands and boyfriends either prisoners or missing, the aversion to war and to those that had led Italy into the war had now spread throughout most of the population. This is documented by many studies.³⁸ There are significant traces in the oral evidence which refer to abuses of power by the Fascists and to neighbourhood arguments between those in favour of or against the war, despite the fear of denunciation by informers. Both oral history and the documentary evidence of the period provide a picture of an extremely tense situation full of potential conflict, not just between the authorities and the population but also among the population, sometimes leading to divisions along class lines. An interesting piece of oral evidence tells us, for example, about the tension between the inhabitants of 'bassi' (basement flats) and those of the upper floors of the same building in the historic centre of the city: the young family members of the 'bassi' were opposed to Fascism and the war while the 'respectable' members of the upper floors defended the regime. Oral evidence is, in this case, substantiated by the written records: it was the young popolano (a member of

the working classes) critical of Fascism who was typically killed by German soldiers during the Neapolitan uprising.³⁹ The places and victims of the uprising in September 1943, mainly members of the working classes in working-class quarters, provide further confirmation of the situation.

As is well-known, the state and all its institutions collapsed after the armistice. The army disbanded. However, the whole of Italian society was abandoned. In some cases, it was the informal structures of society that still resisted and made up for institutional collapse: for example, during the Naples uprising, it was the neighbourhoods, families and groups of friends who acted as the basic social structure during the fighting. Elsewhere, where evacuation and the flight of the inhabitants had temporarily destroyed all forms of social organization, there developed extremely serious conflicts among the population. The most serious was the one that involved the provincial capitals which were destroyed in the bombings of September 1943 and abandoned by the inhabitants. For example, the city of Benevento was entirely cleaned out by crowds of looters, many of whom came from provincial towns to take possession of the property of the inhabitants who had fled.⁴⁰ All forms of civil authority had disappeared. The Germans carried out raids themselves and incited others to do likewise. In the case of Benevento we also find records of the presence of supporters of the occupying forces: local Fascists who had extremely close relationships with local criminals. The siege of Benevento is very much alive in the collective



Benevento after the raids of August–September 1943. Photo by Luigi Intorcia, courtesy of Archivio Fotografico Intorcia.

memory of the city. I could find countless oral testimonies, but there are also memoirs of the time such as the diary of priest Rocco Boccaccino:

The deserted ruins of the city were filled with German troops and plunderers who came in hordes from nearby places, or individual looters who came out of temporary shelters. The houses that were still standing were scoured from top to bottom and the things that were the fruit of hard labour and an entire lifetime were extracted and taken away from the ruins. Furniture and fittings and pieces of household linen hung from half-destroyed balconies or were caught in electric wires, the remains of everything that had been chucked down by the looters. And it was not a rare sight to see in the streets, which were not entirely blocked in the upper part of the city, wagons and carts full of stolen goods. This represented the most disgusting and disgraceful scene: a moral catastrophe that was worse than the surrounding ruins. Lying in wait at the end of various streets were others who preyed on the plunderers. These were gangs of boys and adults who attacked the looters returning with the spoils on their shoulders and in carts and despoiled them of their booty.⁴¹

Demolished buildings, refugees fleeing and wandering in search of food like souls in torment, poor people from the countryside heading towards Benevento to plunder the property of refugees, looters who attacked other looters: it was an apocalyptic vision. At Avellino other looters were discovered and reported. They were put on trial and sentenced. A whole family ended up in prison: they could boast noble origins and included a baron, his wife, his daughter-in-law and two maids, accused of looting the house of their neighbour, a judge who, by virtue of his job, managed to find the culprits.⁴² As at Benevento, country people arrived at Avellino with sacks, carts and all sorts of other forms of transport and took away as much as they could.

Avellino was bombed for the first time on 14 September 1943. More than in other towns and cities, the inhabitants felt they were safe; they thought they did not represent a strategic objective and had managed to avoid the violence of the war. They therefore remained inside their houses, in the streets, in the market and in their workplaces, intent on carrying out everyday tasks. More raids would follow on 15, 17, 20 and 21 September. According to one local historian, there were about 1,500 victims.⁴³ At the same time, as had happened in other towns and cities in ways we have already seen, the German occupiers of the area were particularly brutal; the troops themselves began the looting of property and supplies. Like Benevento, the city was completely abandoned by the public authorities. On the day of the bombing the mayor was on 'authorized leave', the prefect was on a special mission, the chief of police had fled for fear of being deported by the Germans and the military command was in complete disarray. Many of the wounded died without medical help; a man whose wife had died of festering wounds denounced the head of the hospital who had fled fearing further air raids, leaving the sick in the care of a few brave but unskilled nuns. Many of the corpses lay unburied. The list of omissions and cases of neglect of

duty is a very long one. As in other cases, one image that stands out is that of a bishop 'in the street helping the dying and burying the dead'.⁴⁴

At Benevento as at Avellino, the authorities demonstrated a complete lack of responsibility. Their inefficiency and cowardliness exacerbated the state of abandonment of the local population who were caught between Allied bombing and German violence. Ordinary people, on the other hand, appear in the dual role of victims and looters, highlighting another phenomenon that accompanied the flight and evacuation of people caught on the front lines: looting among the ruins, the plundering of abandoned houses (the exact opposite of the striking examples of solidarity that also occurred, as in the case of the Neapolitan uprising against the Germans) in which people gave vent to long-standing resentment (country people against town dwellers, the poor against the rich), giving rise to ancient rituals of sacking the homes of the enemy; however, this situation also presented opportunities to common criminals, adventurers and social outcasts who sometimes took the first steps in their careers among the ruins of war in a society that had been left entirely to its own devices.

CONCLUSION

The war rapidly led the Fascist state and its institutions into crisis. The Allies viewed air raids, which hit a population unsuited to war, according to a traditional stereotype of the character of the Italians, as one of the central causes of the Italian collapse. In reality, right from the start of the war, the civilian population was confronted by the inadequacy of the regime on all fronts: the internal front, where the regime was incapable of defending citizens from air raids and guaranteeing a minimum level of provisions, and on the military front, marked by a continuous series of defeats. The war highlighted the distance between the regime's grandiose dreams and actual possibilities, revealing all its limitations and ineptitude.

As has been so masterfully shown by Marc Bloch with regard to the French defeat,⁴⁵ a nation at war reveals more clearly the cultural and structural traits of the ruling élite inherited from peacetime. The inability to plan for the future, the negligence, the superficiality, the lack of consideration for the fate of ordinary people and the irresponsibility of the ruling classes did not begin with the war and, unfortunately, would not cease with the end of the war. The same dynamics were to lead to the complete break-up of the army and to the flight from Rome of the king and the new government on 8 September.⁴⁶ The experience of the population during the bombings was made worse by the inefficiency, incapacity and corruption of the regime's ruling class. This was essentially the true cause of the 'collapse of morale'.

Notes

- 1 The National Archives, Kew, London. (TNA), AIR 2/7197, 'Operations Against Italy by Bomber Sqdns,' 'Note on Air Offensive against Italy', 3 May 1940.
- 2 Air Chief Marshal Sir A. Harris, *Despatch on War Operations* (TNA, AIR 14/4465, reprint London: Frank Cass, 1995), 192.
- 3 TNA, CAB 120/292, letter from C. Portal to the Prime Minister, 29 November 1942. In a subsequent letter, dated 1 December 1942, Italy was identified as the main target of the moment.
- 4 Archivio di Stato di Napoli (ASN), Prefettura, Gabinetto, b. 1224/1. RAF leaflet of May 1943.
- 5 On 4 August Naples; on the night of 7-8 August Turin, Milan and Genoa; 12-13 August Turin and Milan; 13 August Rome; between 14 and 16 August again Milan; 19 and 25 August Foggia; 23-24 August again Naples; 27 August Catanzaro.
- 6 Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA), Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, Alabama, microfilm A 6013-1621. Headquarters Northwest African Strategic Air Force, APO 520: 'Psychological Bombardment Operation designed to drive Italy to surrender'. Reuben Kyke Jr, Colonel GSC. A-5 to Major General J. H. Doolittle, 1 August 1943.
- 7 I reconstructed the history of the civilian population during the Second World War, in this area, more fully in G. Gribaudo, *Guerra totale. Tra bombe alleate e violenze naziste. Napoli e il fronte meridionale 1940-1944* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2005).
- 8 On the theme of the collapse of the state and the accelerated loss of legitimization of the ruling classes unable to protect the population, see P. Macry, *Gli ultimi giorni. Stati che crollano nell'Europa del Novecento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009), which engages with considerations by G. Agamben, *La comunità che viene* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001).
- 9 The planning of the bombings can be found in the D-Day orders in AFHRA, microfilm A 6013-1621, NASAF Headquarters, APO 520, US ARMY, 2 September 1943.
- 10 A. Stefanile, *I cento bombardamenti di Napoli* (Naples: Marotta, 1968).
- 11 Registers of deaths, Naples City Council. I took into account the central register and the registers of the districts with hospitals or cemeteries.
- 12 The lists of the victims of the two bombings are in ASN, Prefettura, Gabinetto, b. 1224/1 and b. 1227.
- 13 City Council Archive of Teano, Register of the dead, 1943.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 ASN, Prefettura, Gabinetto, b. 1221/1, anonymous letter of 23 October 1941 (my translation).
- 16 Ibid. (my translation).
- 17 ASN, Prefettura, Gabinetto, b.1227, Questura of Naples, 13 February 1944, subject: 'public shelters'.
- 18 Ibid. There were 41 shelters in the districts of Stella, the Port, Mercato, Fuorigrotta, Vicaria, Pendino, S. Ferdinando, Montecalvario, Vasto-Arenaccia, S. Carlo all' Arena, Poggioreale and S. Lorenzo.
- 19 A. M. Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli* (Milan: Adelphi, 1994 - first edn. Turin: Einaudi, 1953).
- 20 TNA, WO 220/414, Allied Force Headquarters, Typhus Commission, 'Notes on the civil typhus outbreak. Italy 1943-44'.
- 21 Ibid., Headquarters, Allied Control Commission, Public Health Sub-Commission, Typhus Control Section, APO 394, 4 April 1944.
- 22 See the prefect's note on 11 November 1940: 'The Ministry of Popular Culture telephoned ordering the newspapers to avoid using the headlines "the bombardment of Naples" or anything similar but instead to entitle the page with the most important news of the day's bulletin' (ASN, Prefettura, Gabinetto, b. 1221/1).
- 23 ASN, Prefettura, Gabinetto, II Deposit, I Category, Provisional orders, b. 53, Anonymous letter dated 12 July 1941 (my translation).
- 24 Ibid., Anonymous letter dated 23 October 1941.
- 25 Ibid., This is the text of 19 letters collected in the last days of October 1941 (my translation).
- 26 Ibid., Report of the *Carabinieri*, Caserta, 23 April 1941 (my translation).
- 27 Ibid., Report of the *Carabinieri*, Naples, 24 September 1941 (my translation).

- 28 ASN, Prefettura, Gabinetto, b. 1130/45, Report of the prefect to the Ministry of Interior, 31 March 1943 (my translation).
- 29 Ibid., Report of the Engineering Officer Della Morte to the commander of the 54th Fire Brigade about the fire on the cargo boat *Caterina Costa* (my translation).
- 30 The words of the prefect from the above-mentioned report dated 31 March (my translation).
- 31 A. Stefanile, *I cento bombardamenti di Napoli*, 88 (my translation).
- 32 ASN Prefettura, Gabinetto, b. 1330/45, Phonogram of the Chief inspector of the Civil Engineers to the Prefect, 29 March 1943 (my translation).
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid., sheet with confidential information dated 29 March 1943 (my translation).
- 35 Ibid., prefect's report mentioned above.
- 36 Ibid., letter from the Chief of Police to the Prefect, 23 July 1941 (my translation).
- 37 It should be emphasized that the hatred of hoarders was one of the strongest motives behind the reprisals of September and October 1943, when, during the anti-German insurrection, the population attacked the local Fascist authorities. The best-known case is that of the secretary of the Fascist Party of Ponticelli, who was killed by the crowd following a German retaliation of 29 September 1943 (ASN, Corte di Assise di Napoli, sentence of 9 August 1946). See also Gribaudi, *Guerra totale*, 266–70.
- 38 See R. De Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato*, vol. 2, *Crisi e agonia del regime* (Turin: Einaudi, 1990); P. Cavallo, *Italiani in guerra. Sentimenti e immagini dal 1940 al 1943* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997); S. Colarizi, *L'opinione degli italiani sotto il regime. 1929–1943* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1991); A. Lepre, *L'occhio del duce. Gli italiani e la censura di guerra* (Milan: Mondadori, 1992); A. Lepre, *Storia degli Italiani nel Novecento: chi siamo, da dove veniamo* (Milan: Mondadori, 2003).
- 39 Interview to Antonio Mari, in Gribaudi, *Guerra totale*, 284–6.
- 40 Benevento, a provincial capital, had been the target of repeated bombings since July 1943. In September repeated raids had reduced the city to a mass of rubble.
- 41 The priest's diary was first published between September and November 1978 in the weekly magazine *Messaggio d'oggi*, on the 35th anniversary of the bombings, and was reprinted in 1993: R. Boccaccino, *Benevento nella terribile estate del '43* (Benevento: Edizioni Messaggio d'oggi, 1993), 39.
- 42 V. Cannaviello, *Avellino e l'Irpinia nella tragedia del 1943–44* (Avellino: Tipografia Pergola, 1954), 61.
- 43 Ibid., 30–37 (my translation).
- 44 Ibid., 69 (my translation).
- 45 M. Bloch, *L'étrange défaite: Témoignage Ecrit en 1940* (Paris: Société des Éditions Franc-Tireur, 1946).
- 46 E. Aga-Rossi, *Una nazione allo sbando. L'armistizio italiano del settembre 1943* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993).