

Along the Borders:
Co-operation and Conflict between
Italian Partisans and the French Maquis

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As part of this research project, which deals with little-known, neglected, and inaccurately reported aspects of the Italian Resistance, an opportunity has emerged to explore the complex relations that exist between the Italian partisans and the French maquis. The proposed article will expand on this topic, analysing the different ways in which the Italian and French Resistance fighters connected with each other along the stretch of border between France and Italy. Thanks to a great number of letters, reports and minutes of meetings written by the underground fighters during the war period, it is possible to reconstruct how they interacted and why. These unpublished documents clearly show their attempts to establish a stable connection and cooperate in planning cross-border actions to fight against the common enemy. However, the sentiment of brotherhood was often overtaken by old grudges, which could even result in territorial conflicts. In conclusion, this article will examine several aspects of this nuanced relationship, e.g., the treatment of the Italian partisans who sought refuge in France and the controversial issue of the French 'liberation' of some Italian border territories, and will enable readers to have a better understanding of this intricate question.

Keywords: resistance; border issues; co-operation.

Introduction

The present article will investigate the complex relations existing between the Italian and French Resistance fighters. In particular, it will explore the different ways the Italian partisans and the French maquis connected with each other along the stretch of border between France and the Italian region of Piedmont. In order to reconstruct these cross-border contacts, it will not only discuss the existing literature on this topic, but will examine unpublished documents deposited in the Archive of the *Istituto Piemontese per la Storia della Resistenza e della Società Contemporanea 'Giorgio Agosti' (ISTORETO)* of Turin.

Although the literature on the Resistance, both French and Italian, is undoubtedly massive, the specific topic of the cross-border contacts between Italian and French partisans has been only sporadically addressed by scholars. However, transnational studies have recently started to look into this historical phenomenon. A recent publication states that 'Resistance activity came in many forms and guises: it might be local, national, international, multinational and, finally, transnational' (Gildea and Tames 2020, p. 4). Furthermore, it affirms that transnational Resistance 'involved transnational encounters – meeting and cooperating with people of different national origins' (Gildea and Tames 2020, p. 4). Taking into account both the classic historiography on the Resistance and the transnational perspective introduced by recent studies in this field, as well as analysing in depth several unpublished documents, the present article will offer a detailed reconstruction and analysis of the cross-border contacts between the French and Italian Resistance fighters.

A more complex and nuanced picture

The historian Mario Giovana (1952), introducing his study on the relations between the Italian partisans and the French maquis, acknowledged that reconstructing those relations

was problematic. According to him, although the contacts between the members of the two Resistance movements were frequent, on this topic there was a lack of thorough and reliable memoirs. Furthermore, the documents in the archives did not enable the scholars to give a complete and clear picture of the events.

Interestingly, in 1992 Gianni Oliva stated that the situation had not changed much since 1952. There were new acquisitions in the archives and, as a consequence, other important documents became available. However, the framework of the events still remained fragmented and incomplete. Despite these limitations, Oliva attempted a new reconstruction of the relations between the Piedmontese partisans and the French maquis. His article, entitled 'I rapporti fra i partigiani piemontesi e la Francia libera: estate 1944 - primavera 1945' (1992, pp. 357-366), proposed an interesting new interpretation.

According to Oliva (1992, p. 357), the relations between the Resistance fighters of the two countries completely changed after the Allied landing in Provence in August 1944. The first contacts between Italian and French Resistance fighters took place in spring 1944, long before France was liberated. In those days the partisans and the maquis were all members of underground movements and, consequently, they could discuss matters on an equal footing (Oliva 1992, p. 359). Besides, their countries of origin were not officially involved in the agreements they signed.

However, after the Allied landing in Provence and the liberation of France in August 1944, the contacts took place between members of a regular army (the Gaullist Army) and underground fighters. According to Oliva (1992, p. 359), the Free French government-in-exile, which was led by General De Gaulle, had several reasons to hinder the Italian Resistance. De Gaulle believed it would be beneficial for France if Italy was liberated by the Allied forces instead of rising up autonomously. Besides, only a weak country could allow the annexation of some border territories without rising any objection and, as the article will

explain later, France was interested in annexing some Italian alpine valleys. Finally, there was ‘the stab in the back’ of June 1940, when Fascist Italy attacked France while it was already about to surrender to Germany. It was still an open wound for French public opinion, and De Gaulle knew how to use it for the purposes of propaganda (Oliva 1992, p. 359).

However, if these purely political reasons induced a hostile attitude towards the Italian Resistance, other reasons, mainly military, pressed in the opposite direction. Therefore, according to Oliva (1992, p. 360), the relations between the Italian partisans and the soldiers of the Gaullist Army developed within a complex framework, full of contradictions and moments of conflict. He argued that there was a clear and sharp divide in the Franco-Italian relations between spring 1944 and the following period, where France was already free, and General De Gaulle was in charge (1992, pp. 365-366). In his conclusion, he stated that before France was liberated in August 1944, the contacts happened between two spontaneous movements which met in a democratic perspective, while afterwards the cross-border relations, happening between a regular army and a partisan movement, became contradictory and sometimes conflictual (1992, p. 366).

Oliva’s reconstruction is particularly helpful in order to understand the attitude of the Gaullist government towards the Italian Resistance. However, while the Government decisions seemed to be straightforward, the reality of the cross-borders relations was more complex and nuanced. For example, as the article will discuss in detail below, it is possible that a French Commander of the maquis, who was about to sign a co-operation agreement with the Italian partisans, displayed a haughty and arrogant attitude towards his foreign comrades or that, vice-versa, a group of Gaullist soldiers showed sympathy towards an Italian armed formation.

Therefore, if it is generally true that the cross-border relations between the two Resistance movements—which had started in a constructive way, worsened after the

liberation of France because of the Gaullist government's attitude towards the Italian Resistance, leading to the worst possible scenario (a military occupation)—the actual relations between the single members of the French and Italian armed formations did not perfectly match with this framework. Using a micro-historical approach, the present article will explore in detail the contacts between the Italian partisans and the French maquis from spring 1944 to spring 1945 and, thanks to a considerable amount of unpublished documents which are now available in the Archive of the *ISTORETO*, it will also attempt to give a more clear and complete picture of the events. It will concentrate on three main areas.

Firstly, it will discuss the first contacts and the agreements which followed. Secondly, it will explore the cross-border relations in the Gaullist era, in particular concentrating on the reception received by the Italian partisans who, trying to escape the Nazi-fascist violence, crossed the border and sought refuge in France. Thirdly, it will investigate the controversial issue of the French attempt to annex some Italian border territories.

The first contacts

According to Giovana (1962, p. 106), the idea of establishing a contact with the French maquis can be traced back to a partisan Command of the Maira Valley (province of Cuneo) which belonged to the *Giustizia e Libertà (G.L.)* Brigades, the formations organised by the *Partito d'Azione*¹ (*P.d.A.*). Giovana (1962, p. 106) reported that, in early spring 1944, this partisan Brigade sent an officer across the border to make contact with the maquis. As the mission was successful, the Command of the Brigade decided to communicate its positive results to a leading member of the *P.d.A.*, Duccio Galimberti². He was a fervent supporter of

¹ Party of Action.

² Duccio Galimberti was a long-standing anti-fascist and an influential member of the Party of Action. He became one of the leading figures in the Resistance movement in Piedmont. Further to the Armistice with the Allies, on the 8th of September 1943, together with Dante Livio Bianco and other few comrades he started to organise the original group of the partisan formation *Italia Libera* (from whom the *Giustizia e*

Europeanism and welcomed the idea of entering into an agreement with the French Resistance fighters. Consequently, he soon became involved and from then onwards he attended to this question in person, informing the *Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale*³ (*C.L.N.*) of any progress that was made (Giovana 1962, pp. 106-107).

The first document that will be discussed is a long and detailed account addressed to the *C.L.N.* which reported on contacts between the Italian partisans and the French maquis in spring 1944. It is entirely typewritten, except for a handwritten signature in pencil. The name written at the bottom of the last page seems to be 'Lino' or 'Livio' and, probably, was a code name. Unfortunately, as of now the real identity of the author of this report remains unknown. However, as the article will explain, it is likely that this document had been produced by a member of the *P.d.A.* who played an important role in organising the first contacts with the maquis in spring 1944. Still, since his real name is unknown, this article will refer to him as Lino⁴.

At the beginning of his report, Lino (1944) stated that he had been seeking to establish an official and lasting contact with the French forces across the Alps for a long time. However, only in mid-April 1944 were two of his appointees able to make contact with the French maquis. Eventually, on the 12th of May the Commander of the III Piedmontese Partisan Sector met the French Second-in Command of the South-East area in a half-destroyed mountain hut at about 2.800 metres up in the middle of the Alps.

Libertà Brigades originated). In spring 1944, he was appointed Commander of the *G.L.* Brigades of Piedmont and became a member of the Military Committee of the region. In November 1944, he was betrayed and arrested by the Nazi-fascists, then tortured to death in order to get information about the partisan movement. He was proclaimed national hero by the *C.L.N.* of Piedmont region and was posthumously awarded the gold medal for military valour and the gold medal of the Resistance.

³ Committee of National Liberation.

⁴ The article will refer to Lino as 'him' just because Lino is a male name. It likely that a partisan leader such as Lino was a man, however it is worth mentioning here the case of Ada Gobetti. She was one of the founding members of the Party of Action and in 1943 she became a partisan as well. Interestingly, during the partisan war she chose to use a male code name, Ulisse.

Lino (1944) reported that the Italian Commander ‘was able to challenge vigorously an initial haughty attitude showed by the French delegate and to point out the importance of our movement’⁵. In the end, the French representative was favourably impressed by the information he was given and urgently asked for a new meeting with a member of the Italian *C.L.N.* in order to enter into a general and operational agreement with the Italian partisans. It was then agreed that the meeting should take place on the 20th of May, in a location near to the village of Barcellonetta (Ubaye Valley, France).

Since there was not enough time to inform the *C.L.N.* of this important news, Lino decided to attend the meeting personally, acting as a member of the *Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale*. He added that, in spite of the difficulties and the dangers of a night march of 15 hours in deep snow, in a territory which was strongly guarded by enemy patrols, the results of that meeting were so important as to repay for all the hard work. Together with Lino and the three Italian partisan officers who assisted him, the meeting was attended by the French Commander of the South-East, his Second-in Command, other local French Commanders, and a member of the Inter-Allied Commission from Algiers. Lino (1944) stated that it did not start in a friendly atmosphere. He reported that, despite the fact this meeting had been promoted by a Commander of the maquis, the leader of the French delegation opened it by stating, rather contemptuously, that the agreement they there were about to sign ‘would be extremely useful to us Italians in order to cancel the Fascist legacy and prove our right to freedom’⁶.

Lino immediately interrupted him to clarify that the planned agreements would be useful not only to the Italian people, but also to re-establish the ‘Latin solidarity’ between

⁵ ‘Sapeva energicamente eliminare un iniziale atteggiamento di alterigia del delegato francese e mettere in degna luce l’importanza del nostro movimento’.

⁶ ‘Sarebbe stato di grande utilità per noi italiani onde cancellare l’eredità fascista e dimostrare il nostro diritto alla libertà’.

Italy and France⁷. Besides, he added that it would strengthen their common struggle to achieve democratic liberties. Lino attached great importance to the last point, considering democratic liberties as the core purpose of the partisan struggle. This perspective faithfully mirrored the Party of Action's political programme. According to the *P.d.A.*, the partisans should not only drive away the enemy, but also fight for democracy and social justice.

Besides, Lino (1944) was also keen to point out the dangers the Italian partisans were facing, their temerity and the great results they achieved through glorious deeds and sacrifices. On the contrary, after a long and detailed description of the French Resistance movement, he concluded that the present activity of the maquis was limited to acts of sabotage and the elimination of collaborationists⁸. Prudence, secrecy and circumspection were at the highest level. Besides, Lino added that, unlike the Italian partisans, the French ones did not carry out any military action because they waited for the H-hour (i.e. the Allied landing) before going into battle.

Consequently, he stated it was an easy task for him to point out the different complexion of the Italian partisan war, characterised by impetuous and daring deeds. However, he reported that he had to be careful and avoid a too demanding military commitment, which the French were hoping for. Lino (1944) proudly informed the *C.L.N.* that he was able to restrict the agreement to four points which had been worded precisely in order to avoid any misunderstanding. In brief, it was established that the contacts between the formations acting along the border should be more frequent, in particular between the military and political delegates of the two countries. This should allow a permanent co-operation in order to prepare joint military actions.

⁷ The concept of 'Latin solidarity' probably refers to the strong ties existing between the two nations before Fascism seized power and finally attacked France in June 1940.

⁸ Probably, Lino wanted to impress the *C.L.N.* comparing the activeness and boldness of the Italian partisans to the wait-and-see policy of the French maquis.

Besides, in order to officialise this pact it was agreed to broadcast a short announcement by Radio London and Radio Algiers. It stated that between the Italian *C.L.N.* and the *Forces Francaise de l'Intérieur (F.F.I.)*⁹ there had been reached an official agreement which acknowledged the common purpose of their struggle, namely the liberation from the Germans and the establishment of democratic liberties. In his conclusion, Lino (1944) stated that he would communicate to the *C.L.N.* any future development regarding this matter.

As Lino announced, there was soon important news to transmit to the *C.L.N.* On 30th May, following another meeting between the Italian partisans and the French maquis, a new agreement was signed. This second meeting took place in Saretto, a hamlet of the alpine village of Acceglio (province of Cuneo), and was supposed to concern political matters only. However, as this article will explain, the Saretto agreements, which were signed further to this meeting, consisted of two distinct statements, one concerning political questions, and the other military issues.

On the 6th of June 1944, another report informed the *C.L.N.* of the important results achieved during the meeting of Saretto. This document is unsigned but, most probably, its author was a member of the Italian delegation who attended the previous meeting in Barcellonetta, perhaps Lino himself. This delegate reported that the French Commander of the R2 (a French area of the maquis which bordered the region of Piedmont) invited him to attend a political talk on the 30th of May. However, since he had been blocked by a Nazi-fascist mopping up operation, he was forced to appoint the Political Commissar of a neighbouring area to represent him at the meeting. As will be explained in detail afterwards,

⁹ French Forces of the Interior.

the Political Commissar who led the Italian delegation in Saretto was Dante Livio Bianco¹⁰, another influential member of the *P.d.A.*

The author of the report (1944) notified the *C.L.N.* of the two important agreements signed further to this meeting. However, as regards the military aspects, he believed it was safer to observe strict silence on it. On the contrary, he expatiated upon the significance of the joint political declaration, quoting two extracts from the text of the agreement. The first one stated that ‘between the French and the Italian people there is no reason for harbouring a grudge or being on bad terms in consequence of the recent past events¹¹, both political and military, because the respective governments only were accountable for what had happened’¹². Both the French and the Italian people were blameless because they were ‘victims of oppressive and corrupt regimes’¹³. The second extract affirmed that ‘the full Franco-Italian solidarity and brotherhood in the struggle against Fascism, Nazism and all the reactionary forces’¹⁴ was a necessary ‘preliminary stage for the establishment of democratic liberties and social justice in a free European community’¹⁵.

According to the author of the report these statements were definitely a great achievement for the *P.d.A.*, as they expressed precisely its political views, in particular as regards the struggle against the reactionary forces and the establishment of democratic liberties and social justice in the whole of Europe. Consequently, he expressed all his satisfaction and pride for the results his Party was able to gain internationally. However, he

¹⁰ Dante Livio Bianco joined the Party of Action in 1942 and, as was already mentioned, after the 8th of September 1943, together with Duccio Galimberti started to organise the partisan formation *Italia Libera*. In the spring of 1944 he became the Commander of a *G.L.* partisan Brigade and in December 1944, following the death of Duccio Galimberti, he became the *G.L.* representative within the Military Committee of the region.

¹¹ Undoubtedly a reference to ‘the stab in the back’ of June 1940.

¹² ‘Fra il popolo francese e quello italiano non vi è alcuna ragione di risentimento o di urto pel recente passato politico e militare che comporta la responsabilità dei rispettivi governi’.

¹³ ‘Vittime di regime d’oppressione e di corruzione’.

¹⁴ ‘La piena solidarietà e fraternità franco-italiana nella lotta contro il fascismo, il nazismo e tutte le forze della reazione’.

¹⁵ ‘Fase preliminare dell’instaurazione delle libertà democratiche e della giustizia sociale, in una libera comunità europea’.

did not quote another important point of the political declaration signed in Saretto (1944) which stated that ‘the better form of government to guarantee the preservation of democratic liberties and social justice is the republican one’¹⁶. Probably, he omitted to mention this part of the agreement because it was a really controversial statement which would be probably rejected by the *C.L.N.*¹⁷.

Interestingly, on the same day the report to the *C.L.N.* was written, Duccio Galimberti (*Relazione rapporti francesi*, 1944) sent a long letter to Dante Livio Bianco, congratulating him on the positive results he achieved during the meeting of Saretto. However, he also reproached him for two main reasons. Firstly, Galimberti stated it was unnecessary to sign another military agreement, since there was already the one signed on the 20th of May in Barcellonetta. According to him, it would be better not to undertake a too demanding military commitment across the border because it would be detrimental to the partisan struggle in Italy. Furthermore, he feared that the non-fulfilment of this commitment could provoke negative repercussions on the agreements as a whole. Consequently, he warned Bianco not to make on any further military commitments.

With regard to the political agreement, Galimberti considered it as a great achievement, in particular because the French delegates agreed to place on the same footing the faults of the respective governments. However, accusing the previous French government of being oppressive and corrupt was a serious charge. Therefore, he believed that the Commander of the maquis who signed it would be harshly reproached by his superiors. According to him, Bianco made a serious mistake as well by endorsing a declaration which stated that the best form of government to preserve the democratic institutions was the republican one.

¹⁶ ‘La migliore forma di governo per assicurare il mantenimento delle libertà democratiche e della giustizia sociale è quella repubblicana’.

¹⁷ Not all the anti-fascist parties who constituted the *C.L.N.* would endorse such a statement.

Galimberti reminded him that the *C.L.N.* represented all the anti-fascist parties, therefore it could not approve such a categorical statement on a controversial matter as the form of government. Therefore, since it would certainly reject the unabridged text of the agreement, Galimberti, on behalf of the executive council of the *P.d.A.*, asked Bianco to inform the French delegate that the statement concerning the form of government should be removed from the official text of the declaration. How Dante Livio Bianco replied to Duccio Galimberti, if he ever replied, remains unknown. However, according to Giovana (1962), the Italian delegation did not comply with the request made by Galimberti and, consequently, the official text of the agreement was not amended.

As Oliva's (1992) reconstruction demonstrated, after a few weeks the situation completely changed and the season of agreements between the Piedmontese partisans and the French maquis came to an end. What is the legacy of the Saretto agreements, then? According to Giovana (1962), the military pact was useful in order to establish stable communications between the formations acting along the border, whereas the political declaration remained what it ultimately was, an idealistic and moral testimony for the future generations.

The Franco-Italian cross-border relations during the Gaullist era

As was mentioned earlier, the relations between the Italian and French Resistance fighters did not end after the liberation of France and the establishment of the Gaullist government. Therefore, this second section will deal with the contacts established during the Gaullist era. First of all, it will concentrate on the reception received by the Italian partisans who crossed the border and sought refuge in France following a Nazi-fascist mopping up operation in Autumn 1944. Secondly, it will discuss briefly an interesting episode of

collaboration between a Piedmontese partisan formation and a group of French officers of the *Securité militaire* in November 1944.

On the 4th of October 1944, the *Federazione Comunista*¹⁸ of Turin sent a circular (*Cari compagni*, 1944) to the local members of the *Partito Comunista Italiano*¹⁹ (*P.C.I.*) addressing, in particular, the comrades who fought in the formations organised by the *P.C.I.*, the *Garibaldi* Brigades. The *Federazione Comunista* intended to spur the Communist partisans not to give way to discouragement after a series of negative events which happened at the beginning of the autumn. However, it acknowledged that the situation within the partisan formations had worsened, in particular after a recent, vast and successful mopping-up operation carried out by the enemy in the Lanzo Valleys and in the Canavese area.

Owing to this mopping-up operation, an entire *Garibaldi* Division was forced to cross the border and seek refuge in France. The *garibaldini*²⁰ of this Division crossed the Alps hoping for a fraternal reception from their French comrades. However, things went differently. According to the *Federazione Comunista* (*Cari compagni*, 1944), following the cold reception they received, the *garibaldini* could not help but feel dissatisfied and disappointed. It was only their patriotism, their pride, their sense of duty which averted more serious consequences.

The *Federazione Comunista* (*Cari compagni*, 1944) believed that the maquis probably reacted in that way on account of the Fascist attack on France in June 1940, however it could not endorse such an unpolitical way of proceeding. Consequently, the *garibaldini* had a duty to speak out and remonstrate against who was responsible for the appalling reception they had received. However, the *Federazione Comunista* was keen to

¹⁸ Communist Federation.

¹⁹ Italian Communist Party.

²⁰ The partisans who belonged to the *Garibaldi* Brigades.

point out that this episode was not representative of the attitude of all the maquis or, worse, of the people of France. On the contrary, it stated that the French people was embodied by the Parisian workers who fought bravely to drive the enemy out of their city.

Furthermore, it proudly reminded its comrades that ‘we fought and will always fight against every form of chauvinism, of extreme nationalism, wherever it comes from’²¹, because it ‘digs deep rifts between the people’²². It also stated that all ‘the comrades and the freedom fighters, on both sides of borders, fight precisely to attain a new world’²³. Therefore, in spite of all the difficulties they had to face, Communists should not despair. On the contrary, they should fight any form of defeatism among their comrades of the *Garibaldi* Brigades.

Similarly, another document produced by a militant of the Communist Party of Turin (*Caro Paolo*, 1944), stated that the French working class would never treat the Italian partisans in that way. Unfortunately, the *garibaldini* who crossed the border in Autumn 1944 met members of local formations constituted mainly by soldiers and reactionaries and, consequently, received a cool reception. However, the author of this document believed that this could also happen in Italy, where the members of the military formations would prefer to beat up the *garibaldini* instead of helping them. Interestingly, the document seems to suggest that this was a matter of class, more than of nationality.

Since the main purpose of both documents was to spur the *garibaldini* to react positively and not become demoralised, the Communist leaders tried to minimise the seriousness of the situation. According to the Communist Federation (*Cari compagni*, 1944), about 80% of the *garibaldini* were able to come back to Italy. However, other sources

²¹ ‘Noi abbiamo combattuto e combatteremo contro ogni forza di sciovinismo, di esasperato nazionalismo, di qualunque parte esso venga’.

²² ‘Scava solchi profondi tra i popoli’.

²³ ‘I compagni e i combattenti della libertà, di quà e al di là delle frontiere, lottano appunto per la conquista di un mondo nuovo’.

suggested that the Italian partisans (not only the ones belonging to the *Garibaldi* Brigades) who crossed the border were disarmed and forced to stay in France.

On the 1st of December 1944, Eugenio Dugoni, who had been sent to France by the *C.L.N.* in order to establish stable contacts with the French and the Allied forces stationed at the border with Piedmont, wrote a detailed account addressed to the regional *C.L.N.* He reported that, until a short time ago, the Italians received a tough and hostile reception on arrival. Firstly, they were disarmed and then imprisoned in barracks, sometimes intermingled with German prisoners.

However, this deplorable situation changed thanks to the intervention of the British and American missions. The Italian partisans were allowed to find a job, even if some of them were forced to accept not very pleasant tasks (e.g. working as miners or roadmen). In his conclusions Dugoni (1944) reported that the British and the American missions had started rearming and reorganising the Italian partisans so that they could come back to their struggle in Italy.

Interestingly, in that same period, when Franco-Italian relations seemed to be so difficult, a Piedmontese partisan detachment reported on a successful mission across the borders. On the 28th of November 1944, the Commanders of a *Giustizia e Libertà* detachment wrote to their superiors regarding a surprise attack they carried out in co-operation with some French officers of the *Securité Militaire*. During the night between the 7th and the 8th of November, a joint military action against a small and isolated German garrison was successfully accomplished.

According to this report (*Al Comandante*, 1944), the role played by the Italian partisans during this action won the respect of the French officers who, from then on, treated them on an equal footing. Furthermore, it was agreed to maintain contact in order to prepare other joint actions against the Germans. In conclusion, the Commanders of the Italian

detachment believed that these frequent and friendly contacts would be useful to lay the foundations of a fair and warm understanding between the two countries in the future.

The French attempt to annex some Italian border territories

It seems, however, that the near future did not bring good news to the Piedmontese partisans. As was already mentioned, this third section will deal with a controversial issue, the French attempt to annex some Italian border territories. Interestingly, the Italian partisans began to fear a possible French invasion from the end of February 1945. On the 26th of that month, the partisan Commander Aldo Laghi (*Comunicazioni*, 1945) wrote to one of his officers that he hoped that ‘our rulers’²⁴ will succeed in convincing the British and the Americans to prevent a French armed intervention in the Piedmontese Valleys.

On the 14th of March, the same partisan Commander (Laghi, *Istruzioni*, 1945) asked one of his officers to monitor the movements of the French patrols who entered the Piedmontese Valleys with the clear purpose of exploring the area. Commander Laghi professed to be an old friend of the French, however he stated that he did not like to see them wandering about Italian territory. For the moment, the relations with France were friendly, therefore he hoped they would not be troubled by territorial claims.

On the 31st of March, Commander Laghi (*Trasmissione bollettini*, 1945) sent a long letter to the American mission in Guillestre (Provence), asking the American officers to intercede with the superior Commands so that the French troops did not cross the mountain passes to occupy Italian border areas. He strongly believed it was better that the French soldiers did not take part in the military operations on the Italian front, however he was convinced that his words would go unheeded, because decisions had already been taken

²⁴ ‘I nostri governanti’.

elsewhere. He was soon proven right, because on the 4th of April, the Piedmontese partisan formations were informed (Maurizio and Valenti, 1945) that the Inter-Allied Command had established that the French forces would take part in the future operations on the Italian side of the Alps. Besides, the Commander-in-chief of the *Corpo Volontari della Libertà (C.V.L.*, the military organisation which united all the Italian partisan Commands) notified the Piedmontese partisans that they had to co-operate with the French troops.

On the 29th of April, the *Ispettorato Alte Valli (Relazione n.1, 1945)*, a new partisan institution which was in charge of monitoring the situation in the border territories, wrote that the French troops received a warm reception from the Italian partisans as well as the local people. Food and drink were offered generously, considering the scarce availability of provisions. Besides, the villages were decked with French, Italian, British and American flags and the atmosphere seemed festive and peaceful. Consequently, the report written by the *Ispettorato Alte Valli (Relazione n.1, 1945)* proudly pointed out that this warm and friendly welcome surprised the French soldiers. However, the day after it had to admit that situation was much more intricate than was expected.

On the 30th of April, the *Ispettorato Alte Valli (Relazione n.2, 1945)* acknowledged that the French Commands, a few days after their arrival, started to distribute leaflets which invited the local people to declare themselves for the annexation to France. This propaganda campaign contrasted with the public declaration made by the French Commanders, who stated that they were just acting to help the Italians to free their country. Consequently, the *Ispettorato Alte Valli (Relazione n.2, 1945)* gave orders to the local partisan formations to oppose this anti-Italian propaganda by convincing the local people to reject the French proposal. However, the situation became even more complex because the French Commands promised to give salt, sugar and tobacco for free to the resident population, in order to influence their decision.

It seems that the French Commands employed two different strategies. On the one hand, they tried to win the local people over to their cause, by means of propaganda. On the other hand, they simply occupied militarily some border territories. For instance, this is exactly what happened in the village of Tenda. On the 1st of May, the partisan Athos (*Relazione Val Roja*, 1945) wrote a long and detailed account to report what had happened following the German retreat.

The local partisans had already liberated the village when the French troops arrived, on the 26th of April. On that day, a French Colonel took the command of the village, ordered his men to disarm the partisans and, since they dared to complain, forced them to leave Tenda. Even though they were outraged, they could do nothing but obey. In other border areas (e.g. the Moncenisio) the French occupation was temporary. On the other hand, the alpine villages of Tenda and Briga are in France now, as the Paris Peace Treaties of 1947 established.

Conclusion

Thanks to the great number of important documents now available in the Archive of the *ISTORETO*, the present article has been able to explore in detail the topic of the contacts between the Italian partisans and the French maquis. What clearly emerges from these documents is that their relations were not straightforward. On the contrary, the reality of the cross-border contacts at ground level was more complex and nuanced than previously thought.

In 1992 Gianni Oliva proposed an interesting interpretation of the relations between the Italian partisans and the French maquis, which is particularly helpful when it comes understanding the general framework of these cross-border contacts. As was mentioned earlier, according to him there was a clear and sharp divide in Franco-Italian relations

between spring 1944 and the following period. In particular, Oliva stated that before France was liberated in August 1944, the Resistance fighters of both countries (described as members of spontaneous movements) could freely meet and discuss strategy in a democratic manner. The documents produced by the Italian partisans who organised and took part in the meetings of Barcellonetta and Saretto seem to confirm the soundness of Oliva's reconstruction. In spring 1944, after a series of preliminary meetings, the French and Italian Resistance fighters agreed that the common purpose of their struggle was not only the liberation from the Germans but also the establishment of democratic liberties.

However, a careful analysis of these documents also demonstrates that these meetings were strongly desired and promoted by the Italian partisans, whereas the French Commanders who were involved seem to have been less proactive than their Italian counterparts²⁵. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the Italian partisans who tried to establish contact with the French maquis were all members of the *Party of Action*. As a result, the *P.d.A.*'s political views clearly emerge from all the agreements which were signed, in particular from the political statement of Saretto. This explains why Duccio Galimberti was happy, but also concerned, about it: he knew that not all the anti-fascist parties who constituted the *C.L.N.* would endorse it. Finally, the documents analysed also showed that not only were the French Commanders less proactive during the meetings, but sometimes initially displayed a haughty and arrogant attitude towards their foreign comrades. This is particularly important because it demonstrates that the partisans' hope of establishing stable connections and co-operate in planning cross-border actions was often accompanied, also before the Gaullist government was in charge, by misunderstandings and mistrust.

²⁵ Yet, it is important to consider that the documents at issue were all written by Italian partisans who clearly wanted to impress the *C.L.N.* by showing the activeness and boldness of their Brigades.

Following Oliva's reconstruction, after the liberation of France and the establishment of the Gaullist government Franco-Italian relations were no longer spontaneous and constructive as before. According to Oliva, the French maquis, who merged into the Gaullist army, and the Italian partisans now pursued different and conflicting aims. Several documents analysed in the article proved that the Franco-Italian relations worsened after the liberation of France because of the Gaullist government's attitude towards the Italian Resistance. There was the case of the cold reception received by the Italian partisans who crossed the border and sought refuge in France in Autumn 1944 and the French attempt to annex some Italian border territories. However, it is also true the actual relations between the single members of the French and Italian armed formations did not always match with this general framework. For example, as was mentioned earlier, there was the case of a *Giustizia e Libertà*²⁶ detachment who, in November 1944, was able to carry out a surprise attack against an isolated German garrison in co-operation with some French officers of the *Securité Militaire*. It is noteworthy that both sides agreed to maintain contact in order to prepare other joint actions against the Germans in the future.

In conclusion, the simple chronology, based on the idea of a caesura around the advent of De Gaulle, is shown to be unsatisfactory in the light of detailed archival research. Exploring the reality of the cross-borders relations at the sharp end, and using a micro-historical approach can illuminate the complexity of the relations between the Italian and French Resistance fighters and give a more clear and complete picture of the events. The topic of transnational encounters across the Franco-Italian borders is intricate and fascinating and deserves to be investigated in more depth, particularly as it may allow historians to reflect more widely of the dynamics of other liminal zones during World War II.

²⁶ It is interesting to observe that also in this case it was a *G.L.* detachment who took the initiative and contacted their French counterpart.

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