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Nuto Revelli's Wars

John Penuel

"Davai. . . . davai, bistra! *Forward. . . . Forward! Get moving!*"

We were hearing that phrase for the first time. Shouted—barked, in fact—by the guards escorting us, it would obsess us for months. They repeated it at maddening intervals, not only to urge on the men walking in the lead but above all to threaten those who, exhausted or limping on feet turned to marble, were shuffling along at the rear of the column. For years we would hear it: to hasten the fall-in, the roll call, the bath, the distribution of rations, the cleaning of rooms, the felling of a tree, the digging of a ditch, the weeding of a row of crops.

Davai. For us, this word has become a symbol; it encompasses the entire tragedy experienced by tens of thousands of Italians in the land of Russia.

—Carlo Vicentini, *Noi soli vivi* (We alone alive)

The pleasant arcaded streets of the old market town of Cuneo, capital of the province of the same name and located in the northwestern Italian region of Piedmont, are laid out in a grid atop a wedge-shaped plateau at the confluence of the Stura and the Gesso Rivers. The tip of the wedge, facing northeast, overlooks a rich agricultural plain dotted here and there with small towns and their outlying clusters of houses, known as *tetti* or *frazioni*. Monte Viso, at 3,841 meters above sea level, far higher than the other peaks in the Cottian and Maritime Alps, draws the eye from the plain, from the hill country around the town of Mondovì, and from the city of Cuneo itself. For their part, the Stura and the Gesso, as well as their numerous small tributaries, form a complex knot of narrow valleys and drain a mountainous area rougher and much poorer than the cheerful plain. Until the postwar industrial boom, many of the sturdy and industrious mountain dwellers made a meager living farming small plots carved out of the steep hillsides and tending to small flocks of sheep and a milk cow or two. They lived in dry-stone houses known as *baite*, and their mother tongue, like that of their cousins just across the border in the French Alps, was often an Alpine dialect of Occitan. Piedmontese and Italian were only second and third

languages. The men of the area typically served in the mountain troops known as the alpini—no other branch of the armed services would do.

Benvenuto (Nuto) Revelli, not himself a mountain dweller, was born in Cuneo on July 21, 1919. His family was comparatively well off (his father worked for a bank). As Revelli himself notes, he would come into close contact with the country dwellers of his province only once he had completed officer training. Until then, his youth was spent like that of many of his middle-class, city-dwelling contemporaries, nearly all of whose schooling, if not all of it, had taken place under the sway of fascism. (Benito Mussolini had become prime minister in 1922; in 1925 he seized dictatorial powers and subsequently—while officially styled as “head of government,” answerable only to the king, Vittorio Emanuele III—he was known as Il Duce.) At the age of nine or ten Revelli swore in the name of God and Italy to obey the Duce’s orders and to serve the cause of the Fascist revolution with all his strength and, if necessary, with his blood. His school became a barracks. His teachers wore the black shirts of the Fascists, and so did he and his classmates. Saturdays he would spend at the local headquarters of the Fascist youth organization,¹ learning to march and to handle weapons. In response to the shouted orders and the whistles, some of Revelli’s companions snapped to attention, while others couldn’t give a damn. “I,” wrote Revelli in *La guerra dei poveri* (Poor men’s war), “snapped to attention.”²

The young Revelli’s zeal earned him trips to the so-called *campi Dux*, large gatherings of Fascist youth from all over Italy, held in a tent city on the edge of Rome. He eventually ran out of room for all the enameled decorations and medals he had collected. “Everything that smacked of strength,” he writes, “military parades, ‘oceanic’ masses, electrified me.”³

Revelli’s father, like many people whose jobs required it, had come to terms with the Fascist Party but was not, to all appearances, an enthusiast. In fact, in a diary entry from the spring of 1943 on his return, sick and disillusioned, from the Russian front, Revelli regrets that his father, “who knew,” had done nothing to temper his earlier zeal. The father had seen that, for his son, fascism meant athletic competitions, fitting in, being like everybody else, and he had said nothing.

In September 1939, Revelli, who had in the meantime qualified as a *geometra*, a surveyor, won admission to the prestigious Military Academy of Modena, the oldest institution of its kind, and began what would be nearly two years of officer training in a climate of rigor and austerity. Rigorous though his studies at the Academy may have been, they were not supplemented by thorough outdoor training. Revelli’s knowledge of aviation was to remain limited to what he had heard of the transatlantic flights led by the future governor-general of Italian Libya, Italo Balbo. And not once in his training did he see a tank.

On June 10, 1940 (Revelli had by then completed his first year at Modena),

Mussolini, taken by surprise by the imminent collapse of France and not wanting to engage in peace talks without a few thousand Italian dead of his own, stabbed a prostrate France in the back. The declaration of war on France and Britain strengthened Revelli's commitment to his studies. But for the inhabitants of the valleys to the west and south of Cuneo, from which many of the men of the Cuneense Division of the alpini were drawn, it was a calamity. Not only did they have to evacuate their villages, but their sons also had to make war on a country they often regarded as a second homeland: Fascist restrictions had not entirely ended the mountain dwellers' tradition of winter emigration, over high, unguarded passes, to France. In fact, for nearly all the inhabitants along the length of the front, from the Mont Blanc Massif in the north to the mouth of the Roya on the Mediterranean, the brief campaign was highly disconcerting and calamitous. Mario Rigoni Stern, for example, recalls descending a mountain in the Graian Alps and coming across two fellow alpini, stretcher-bearers from the Aosta Battalion (and thus likely to be natives of the area), struggling through fresh snow with a stretcher. He turned to the seemingly wounded man, wished him a speedy recovery, and was astonished when the two Italian stretcher-bearers replied to him, "Il est mort,"⁴ letting him know in the language of the enemy that his good wishes were no longer of any use.

Initially, the Italian armies massed in defensive positions along the Western Alps. Several days later, however, the troops were ordered into France. For four days, until the Franco-Italian armistice of June 24, the ill-prepared Italians, buffeted by unseasonal snowstorms, and taking a pounding from a well-defended line of French forts, struggled to make headway. (Many of the men whose testimony Revelli takes in *La strada del davai* attest to the struggles of the brief campaign.) By the time of the armistice, they had managed to occupy a few small tracts of mountain wilderness, a stretch of the middle Roya Valley (upstream from Ventimiglia), and most of the coastal border town of Menton. For the moment, Mussolini, concerned that the French might otherwise decide to fight on (the Italian offensive in the Alps had been a failure), was forced to drop his claims to French territory (Corsica, Savoy, Nice, and Tunis).

In early October 1940, without first notifying the Italians, the Germans began sending troops into Romania, on which the Italians themselves had at one point also had designs. Mussolini, unpleasantly surprised to be informed of his ally's move largely from press reports, intended to return the favor, invading Greece and having the Germans read about it in the papers. For the Italian troops stationed in Albania, the reasons for the invasion were so unclear that even absurd beliefs gained traction. One memoir, for instance, mentions a well-connected young officer who insists that the Greek dictator Metaxas, petitioned by the "powerful Jewish communities" of Athens and Thessaloniki, would accede to Italian demands in an attempt to forestall occupation by Nazi

Germany.⁵ But what became abundantly clear by the spring of 1941 was that the Germans had to invade Greece to rescue the Italians from a promised cakewalk to Athens gone badly wrong. Shortly after the Italian invasion in late October 1940, moisture-laden clouds blowing in from the Ionian Sea had dropped heavy rain and snow on the windward western slopes of the Pindus Mountains, causing rivers to swell, making roads impassable, and hindering troop movements. A fierce Greek counteroffensive in November and December 1940, which also took a heavy toll on the Greeks themselves, had forced the Italians to give up their initial gains, pushing them back from Greek Epirus into Albania, which had been occupied by the Italians since the spring of 1939. That the Greeks might push the Italians back to the Adriatic no longer seemed entirely inconceivable.⁶ In April 1941 the Italians had thirty divisions and slightly more than half a million men in Albania. On no other front would the Italians make a larger commitment of men and materials, and on only one—in Russia—would they suffer a greater number of dead.⁷

As the fighting in Albania and Greece wound down, Revelli's course at the Academy in Modena closed prematurely. With his newly earned commission, Revelli ended up back in his hometown of Cuneo, in the Second Alpino Regiment of the Fourth Alpino Division, referred to as the Cuneense, just as the division was returning from the Greco-Albanian front. The Cuneense had arrived in Albania in December 1941. Although the men of the division had perhaps not been tested as sorely as their fellow alpini of the Julia Division, which had spearheaded the Italian advance from the Albanian city of Korçë in late October and then spent more than two months resisting Greek counterattacks and covering the retreat of other Italian units, they returned to Italy with few of the illusions of the sort still harbored by Revelli himself. From the veterans of the Balkan campaign, who were dreaming only of a month's leave to go back to their farms and their families, Revelli learned, for example, that the Breda 30 machine gun was prone to jamming and that the small Greek mortars were often deadlier than the Italian artillery.

In addition to the Cuneense, which recruited primarily in the province of Cuneo, two other alpino divisions would take part in the subsequent campaign in Russia: the Second Alpino Division, known as the Tridentina, whose men came largely from the mountains of Lombardy (other alpini often referred to the alpini of the Tridentina as the *bergamaschi*, men from Bergamo, a town and province in Lombardy), and the Third Alpino Division, known as the Julia, whose recruiting territory included the Julian Alps in northeastern Italy and in part of what is now Slovenia, as well as the Central Apennines. Companies, as a rule, were made up of men from the same town and immediate surrounding area, so their cohesiveness was, in general, far greater than that of units made up

of men whose ties to each other were less likely to predate or to survive their military service. They were likewise swiftly mobilized.

Carlo Vicentini, who returned to Italy in 1946 after more than three years of captivity in the Soviet Union, recalls that he and his fellow prisoners, officers from both alpine and non-alpine units, would often discuss the relative merits of the various specialties of the Italian armed forces. "The alpini," notes Vicentini,

at least those in my battalion, didn't give a damn about the king or the Duce. It never occurred to them to shout "Savoia!" when they went on the attack. . . . For all that, in combat they acted like people who do their job with diligence and great skill; they ran wild only when a companion was killed, but their furor wasn't long lasting. They knew that taking dead was part of the rules of the game. Their ethic was the honor of the hometown, the valley, that of the battalion, where their classmates, their cousins, their sweetheart's brothers were; this was the mainspring that made them magnificent fighters.⁸

Although Vicentini is not an entirely disinterested observer (he was himself a lieutenant in the Monte Cervino Ski Battalion, a storied alpine unit), his observations are amply borne out by the testimony of alpini in books such as those by Revelli. Neither do the many failures of the Alpine Corps leadership and Vicentini's attachment to his battalion invalidate his simple observation that all of the twenty-one generals from non-alpine Italian units in Russia made it out, whereas one of the six alpine generals died in combat, three were taken captive, and two, together with their units, broke out of the pockets created by the advancing Soviets.

Men from areas of Italy other than those from which the alpini traditionally recruited could join the alpini as well but would have to prove that they were the equals of their mountain-dwelling compatriots. Mountain dwellers, too, could attempt to enlist in branches of the armed forces other than those for which their mountain upbringing ostensibly destined them. Mario Rigoni Stern, for instance, who was briefly with the Monte Cervino and would take part in the invasion of and retreat from the Soviet Union with the Vestone Battalion of the Tridentina Division, recalls descending to Venice from his home on the Asiago Plateau in an attempt to join the Regia Marina (Royal [Italian] Navy). When he told the recruiter at the Arsenal where he was from, he was rejected, none too kindly. And any member of the alpini who considered leaving for another branch of the armed services was viewed as a traitor, as Revelli himself would discover.

The territorial recruitment of regiments of other Italian infantry units was much less pronounced than that of the alpini. Regular infantry regiments recruited men from two different regions but did not effect groupings by smaller areas. And unlike alpino units they were stationed in a part of the country different from the two regions from which their men were drawn. The reluctance to recruit territorially was a legacy of the fragility of the nation that emerged from Italian unification. The aim was to introduce young Italian men to countrymen of theirs from other areas, to promote national unity, or perhaps to ensure that, in the event of internal unrest, the men of the local regiment would have no qualms about firing on the locals.⁹

Although territorial recruitment conferred undeniable advantages on the alpini, it was not entirely without its drawbacks. When, as in Yugoslavia, the alpini were used in anti-partisan operations, their loyalty to each other meant that they were likely to avenge any of their fallen comrades and thus to whip up further hatred of the occupying forces. In addition, the destruction of a single unit of alpini could be devastating for a single valley or town. One of the veterans whose stories of Russia that Revelli collects in *Mussolini's Death March* mentions, for example, the eighteen dead of his hamlet Passatore, a small *frazione* of Cuneo.

Revelli's initial battalion, the Borgo San Dalmazzo, known simply as the Borgo, was, like all alpino battalions, named after a town (or a valley or peak) in the territory from which recruits to the division were drawn. The Borgo was named after a large country town eight kilometers up the Gesso Valley from Cuneo but was stationed in the city, the defeatism of whose inhabitants weighed heavily on Revelli. With barracks life beginning to seem intolerable to him, he requested a transfer to North Africa, where there was fighting, even if it meant leaving the alpini. He expected to be praised for his initiative. But when he was given an urgent summons to regimental headquarters he was first mocked by a staff sergeant who asked him in a shout if he had gambling debts or if he had knocked up a girl and was then told by the commander of his regiment not to tempt fate, that soon there would be war enough for everybody.

On May 30, 1941, before the launch of Operation Barbarossa, Mussolini ordered Ugo Cavallero, Chief of the Supreme General Staff, to ready an Italian expeditionary corps for the inevitable clash between Germany and the Soviet Union. In mid-June, perhaps remembering that he had very nearly waited too long to declare war on France and fearing that the swiftness of the German advance would deprive Fascist Italy of the spoils to which a few more thousand dead would entitle it, Mussolini offered to send Italian troops to participate in the invasion of the Soviet Union. Hitler, who would have preferred that the Italians increase their commitment to North Africa, reluctantly accepted the offer. Thus was born the small CSIR, or Italian Expeditionary Corps in Russia,

commanded by the capable general Giovanni Messe (who replaced the general to whom command of the corps had initially been entrusted after the latter was taken suddenly ill).

Two of the CSIR's three divisions, the Torino and Pasubio Infantry Divisions, were described as truck transportable—that is, if the troops were given trucks they would know how to ride in them. A group of sixty-one three-ton L3 tankettes formed part of the third division, the “Celere” Division, but their unsuitability for the terrain and climate and the lack of spare parts and fuel meant that by early 1942 they were all out of commission or repatriated. Their crews became foot soldiers. A blackshirt legion, the Tagliamento, operated directly under corps headquarters.¹⁰ The first alpini to reach the Eastern Front, the skiers of the Monte Cervino Battalion, arrived in February 1942.

Despite its name, Messe's CSIR was involved in fighting not in Russia but in southern Ukraine. All told, until July 30, 1942, after which it was absorbed into the far larger ARMIR (the Italian Army in Russia, also known as the Eighth Army), the CSIR, which numbered approximately 62,000 men, suffered 1,792 dead and missing and 7,878 wounded and frostbitten, perhaps one-quarter of the 40,000 or so actually involved in combat.¹¹ The results had not been altogether unsatisfactory, but the relatively large number of frostbitten men, as in the campaigns in the Western Alps (in June in Italy and France) and in Albania, boded ill for a second winter in the Soviet Union. General Messe had taken the trouble to obtain a few pairs of *valenki*, the felt boots that ultimately enabled Soviet soldiers to walk as far as Berlin. He then sent the boots to Rome, accompanied by warnings that the Italians' hobnailed boots, which contributed to frostbite, were completely unsuitable for the Russian winter, but nothing came of his efforts. Messe, who made no secret of his opposition to the expansion of the Italian presence on the Eastern Front, was ultimately passed over for the command of ARMIR.

As the CSIR was spending its first winter in the Soviet Union, rumors began circulating in Italy that the alpini would be sent to Russia. In March 1942 the men of the Second Regiment of the Cuneense returned to their bases after five days of long marches on the plain. With these rigorous marches—the men were prevented their usual trick of stuffing their rucksacks with straw—the commanders in Rome deemed the alpini fit for Russia. And, in fact, on July 21, 1942, Revelli's troop train—one of more than 200—left Italy for the twelve-day journey through Austria, Germany, Poland, and a part of Ukraine. Revelli, in the meantime, had been transferred to the Fifth Alpino Regiment of the Tridentina Division (at all events, the Cuneense and the Tridentina arrived in the East at the same time). The men of his new battalion, the Tiràno, were a tough and contentious lot of mountain dwellers, in large part from the Valtellina in northern Lombardy, who had little tolerance for formal discipline; raising their

hands to salute their officers was, for them, an unnecessary waste of energy. Yet the Tridentina, alone among the three alpino divisions of the ARMIR, would avoid annihilation during the January 1943 retreat from the Don.¹²

On the eve of Revelli's departure, an unlikely number of large crates containing crampons, ice axes, climbing ropes, avalanche cords, and other climbing equipment was delivered to the loading station in Collegno, near Turin. Soon after the alpini detrained in Ukraine, however, they were informed that their destination was not the Caucasus, as they had thought, but the Don, a march of hundreds of kilometers across a rolling steppe on which climbing ropes and ice axes, not to mention crampons, would be of little use. The alpini left their climbing equipment behind. The assumption was that the alpini would later be reunited with their heavy mountain equipment, but it was late summer by the time they reached the war zone. Any new advance into the mountains of the Caucasus would have to wait until spring of 1943. The three divisions of alpini would join the rest of the ARMIR along the Don, the positions near which they reached early in the fall of 1942.

The ARMIR, also known as the Italian Eighth Army, had absorbed General Messe's Expeditionary Corps and was hunkered down in strongholds on the low bluffs overlooking the Don. There were the three Regio Esercito (Royal [Italian] Army) infantry divisions (and other assorted units, including a Croatian Legion and the skiers of the Monte Cervino Battalion) of the former CSIR, now known as the Thirty-fifth Corps, and the Alpino Corps (three divisions of alpini, each of which included two regiments of alpini properly speaking and one of alpino gunners, as well as the Vicenza, a non-alpino infantry division initially involved in securing lines of communication and in sweeping the rear for partisans rather than in defending positions along the river; this division thus had no artillery of its own). In addition, the ARMIR boasted three infantry divisions (the Sforzesca, the Ravenna, and the Cosseria), known as the Second Corps. The entire Eighth Army, under the command of General Italo Gariboldi, numbered 230,000 men, about 150,000 of whom were on the Don at the moment of the retreat.

The Italian divisions were deployed on the river in the following order: upstream, to the northwest, Revelli's division, the Tridentina, then the two other alpino divisions (the Julia and the Cuneense), the Cosseria, the Ravenna, the Pasubio, the Torino, the Celere, and the Sforzesca. Downstream from the Sforzesca was a Romanian army that, for its part, was in contact with Field Marshal von Paulus's Sixth Army. Upstream from the Tridentina, deployed as far as Voronezh, was the Second Hungarian Army. The 17,460 men of the Cuneense Division, for example, occupied a forty-kilometer stretch of the Don north of the confluence of the Don and the Kalitva. Roughly fifty kilometers up the Kalitva, in Rossosh, was the seat of the Alpino Corps headquarters.

The alpini of the Cuneense, like those of the Tridentina and the Julia, deployed on the right bank of the Don upstream from the Cuneense, were not in a position to draw on their strengths or make the best use of their resources. Their small 75/13 mountain guns, for example, were made to be packed on mules to positions inaccessible to motor vehicles. Even the mules—the alpini had 15,000 in Russia—were ill suited to the terrain. Bred for stony mountain tracks, with hooves smaller and harder than those of horses and thus distributing their weight over a smaller area, they tended to sink into the mud and snowdrifts of the steppe.¹³ Revelli's battalion had ninety mules for each company—during the retreat, many of them became steaks—and four *autocarrette*¹⁴ for the entire battalion. Revelli remarks that at least the standard individual weapon, the Carcano model 91, a bolt-action rifle, wasn't muzzle loaded.¹⁵

All the same, when it came to modern artillery, “the ARMIR received excessively preferential treatment,” to the detriment of Italian forces in North Africa.¹⁶ It boasted, for instance, the only existing battery of 210/22 howitzers, thirty-six of the fifty-one available 149/40 guns, and all thirty-six modern 75/32 field guns in existence at the time. And although they rarely did more than put harmless little dents in the hulls of medium and heavy Soviet tanks, not even the maligned 47mm antitank guns were entirely useless. In the Spanish Civil War Italian gunners had faced—and learned to defeat—the relatively lightly armored BT-5 and BT-7 models the Red Army was still fielding in 1942 and early 1943. If the modern artillery assigned to the ARMIR could not be used to full advantage by an army of foot soldiers, there was certainly a fair amount of this artillery.¹⁷ At all events, when the Russians broke through their lines between December 1942 and January 1943 and encircled them, the men of the ARMIR destroyed nearly all their heavy artillery and abandoned it. This modern artillery, which Italian manufacturers struggled to produce in sufficient amounts, might have profited the Italians more greatly had it been integrated into such mobile armored units as those Italy fielded in North Africa.¹⁸ Instead, it had been destroyed, to relatively little advantage, in a theater of operations it had been shipped to perhaps above all to keep from losing face before an ally that often looked on the fighting men of its junior partners as *Zigeuner* (gypsies).

Revelli's informants (and Revelli himself) are likely to have had contradictory feelings about what they endured in the Soviet Union. The taste of defeat may have been bitter, and the cause they had fought for a source of shame, but if nothing else they could take pride in having taken the hardest blows and struggled back to their feet. And it was perhaps easier to be proud if defeat, which would then be less bitter, could be blamed on shoddy or antiquated equipment alone. The men on the Don couldn't be expected to know that ARMIR headquarters' failure to make adequate plans for a retreat or Mussolini's folly in sending an army to the Eastern Front in the first place were

the ultimate causes of the catastrophe that had enveloped them. But it was easy for them to compare the performance of their model 91 rifles and that of the submachine guns issued to many of the men dug in on the other side of the river. For these reasons, then, the inadequacy of the Italians' equipment has at times been overstated; by Italian standards, the ARMIR and its men were well equipped. One widely circulated tale would have it that Mussolini sent tens of thousands of Italian troops to Russia wearing cardboard boots; the tale, to all appearances, is entirely untrue.

On the night of December 16, 1942, as part of Operation Little Saturn, Red Army combat engineers threw pontoons across the Don, still not entirely frozen, and the Soviets attacked the lines held by the Cosseria and Ravenna Infantry Divisions, downstream from the sectors occupied by the alpini. The four Italian infantry divisions farther downstream were isolated and encircled (the Romanian Third Army on their southeastern flank had been destroyed in late November) and the right flank of the Cuneense was left entirely exposed. The Julia moved into the positions left by the Cosseria, and the Vicenza, a division of infantrymen involved in low-intensity anti-partisan operations, was rushed from the rear to the Julia's former strongholds between the Cuneense and the Tridentina.

On January 14 the Soviets attacked downstream from the positions occupied by the alpini. The next day, they reached Rossosh, seat of the Alpino Corps headquarters. On January 17 another Soviet thrust, which had broken through the lines held by the Second Hungarian Army, upstream from the alpini, reached Ostrogzhsk. The alpino divisions received orders to retreat only at noon on the seventeenth. By then it was too late; the circle was closing around them, and they would have to fight their way out.

Within little more than a month, then, the entire Eighth Army had been put to flight. In their struggle to break out of the large pocket created by the advancing Soviet forces, men were felled by exhaustion, by the cold, and in combat. Many others were taken prisoner and died on the so-called *davai* marches—from the word the Russian guards used to keep the prisoners moving. They died on the way to makeshift sorting camps or to railheads east of the Don, they died in the cattle cars they were packed into for journeys of several days to prisoner-of-war camps, and they died in the first seven or eight months in the camps themselves. The Italians suffered losses of 85,000 dead or missing and 27,000 wounded or frostbitten (most from the approximately 150,000 men on the Don itself); just over 10,000 returned from captivity in 1945 or 1946. In short, although the figure varies somewhat from one source to another, some 75,000 died. The Cuneense, which lost three quarters of its men, took the heaviest casualties of the Italian divisions on the Don. In 1991, representatives of the Italian government gained access to KGB archives, information from which

made it possible to determine that a total of 2,791 men from the Cuneense had died in captivity. But more than 12,000 had not returned to Italy in the spring of 1943, while slightly more than 900 returned from captivity after the war. More than 8,000 remained unaccounted for.¹⁹

Revelli was one of the approximately 10,000 of the more than 17,000 men of the Tridentina to escape encirclement and severe frostbite. The retreat had shattered what remained of the illusions that had sustained his belief in fascism and in the high command in Rome. On March 10, 1943, he was in Gomel, Belarus. The arrival of a high-ranking member of the Fascist Party, the lieutenant colonel Angelo Manaresi, on a comfort and propaganda mission undertaken on his own initiative (Manaresi, himself an officer of the alpini, was the sole Fascist official to brave the hostile alpini in Belarus, where they had assembled after the retreat), threw Revelli into a rage. In Revelli's telling, Manaresi, dropping in from the home front and bearing personal greetings from the Duce, donned a lieutenant colonel's combat uniform, strode before the cameras, reviewed the men, and made a speech. "Scoundrels!" writes Revelli. "Nobody believes your lies anymore. You disgust us: that's what the survivors of the huge tragedy you wanted think. Your hollow, pompous words are nothing but the final insult to our dead. Go tell it to the people who think like you: those who went through the retreat no longer believe in rank and say to you: 'Never too late . . . to do you in.'"²⁰

Manaresi was nonetheless an acute observer of the states of mind of the men who survived the retreat:

There is joy over the return to the Fatherland, sadness for the Comrades fallen along the way, and at times anger at the ally that did not show itself to be so in the time of difficulty.

The protection of armored vehicles denied, the hijacking of stores for other sectors, obstinate orders to die on the line, while Hungarians, Romanians, and even Germans left without warning, thus enabling the encirclement of our men—refusal to provide fuel for our motor vehicles or to offer our men hospitality on theirs—the failure to provide protection during the retreat, the cornering of village houses for overnight stays, the mockery of our valor from the rank and file and even from the officers: these complaints, expressed by our soldiers almost to a man, have created in them an attitude unfavorable to the Germans, a feeling that they now share with Hungarians and Romanians and that has already led to clashes in Kiev and Odessa.

In contrast to that is the excellent impression many soldiers have of the Russians: kindheartedness of the inhabitants, hospitality in their small houses and aid to the wounded, hiding of stragglers, humane treatment,

even on the part of many Soviet units, with the releases of groups of prisoners who had already been taken, and treatment of the wounded left behind.

Exaggerated and contrasting episodes, to be sure, of acts of cruelty here and there on the part of partisans and soldiers: a state of mind, all the same, not to lose sight of.²¹

Later in the month of March, back in Italy, in Udine, Revelli and his Forty-sixth Company were few: 3 officers, 70 alpini. On the Don there had been 8 officers and 346 alpini. In April Revelli returned to Cuneo, where he was diagnosed with a severe form of pleurisy and given a long convalescent leave. He had also smuggled home a German *Maschinenpistole*, two Russian PPSH-41s (one a trophy he had acquired on his own, the other that of a companion killed in combat), and a supply of ammunition for these weapons.

When he was summoned by the local Fascist headquarters for the third time, he complied so as to avoid a scene with his family, even though he knew he would be told that a good Italian shouldn't speak well of the Russians or with hatred of the Germans:

At the Fascist headquarters, Sclocchini, a poor little fellow "unfit for service," talked to me about patriotism, about slandering the German armed forces, about the sympathy of the home front.

I asked the secretary of the Fascist Federation, the Fascist shirkers, not to bother me. I paid my share in this damned war, I more than paid for my *campi Dux*. The lies, the patriotic rhetoric: they nauseate me. Let the Fascists from the home front go see the Germans up close. Let them get to know the Germans the way we got to know them on the Russian front. There's still time. Today, the Fascists should be at least at Belgorod, on the front line, to stop the "red hordes." Instead, they're in Italy, they're in Cuneo, holed up like marmots.

My voice quavered a little as I spoke. Then I slammed the door behind me.²²

The evening of July 24, 1943, the members of the Grand Council of Fascism, convened for a special session, voted in favor of a motion by Dino Grandi, president of the Italian legislative body, to restore constitutional authority, in particular supreme command of the armed forces, to Vittorio Emanuele III (among those voting in favor of Grandi's motion was Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law and former foreign minister). The upshot was the removal from office of Mussolini, whom the king had arrested the next day. Marshal Pietro Badoglio was made head of government in place of Mussolini.

At the news of Mussolini's fall, the people of Cuneo, like those elsewhere in Italy, erupted briefly into shouts of joy, joy soon tempered by Badoglio's announcement that "the war goes on, side by side with the German ally." Revelli, despite his hatred of the Fascists, had not shared in this brief popular exultation at the sudden overthrow of Mussolini: it meant that his comrades who had died in the Fascist war had died for nothing.

The Germans were meant to be reassured by Badoglio's announcement of the continuation of the war, but it could not escape them that Mussolini had been removed in an attempt to enable Italian withdrawal from its partnership in the Axis. Within days of Mussolini's removal, in fact, Italian envoys were dispatched to sound out British diplomats in Tangier and Lisbon. Neither envoy was empowered to initiate negotiations for an armistice, and both were met with diffidence. A third envoy, General Giuseppe Castellano, traveled by train under a false identity from Italy to the Iberian Peninsula, but his overland return from Lisbon took so long that Badoglio, fearing he had been arrested, ordered a fourth diplomatic mission. The arrival in Lisbon of yet another Italian delegation initially rekindled the suspicions of Italian duplicity that Castellano's evident sincerity had managed to dispel. Between the Allies' wariness and Badoglio's equivocation, the Italians gained time, which they were seeking, but the Germans made better use of it, strengthening their positions on the Italian peninsula.

The unconditional surrender demanded by the Allies, which the Italians first balked at, would prove extraordinarily difficult. As soon as the armistice was announced, the Italians would have the Germans at their throats not only on the peninsula but also in southeastern France and the Balkans, garrisoned by large numbers of Italian troops. Badoglio's emissaries attempted in vain to persuade the Allies to allow Italy to postpone the break with Nazi Germany until after Anglo-American forces had landed on the continent, preferably within striking distance of Rome. Instead, the Allies pushed for surrender before the landings, the planned date and location of which they naturally did not reveal. In short, they were demanding the complete surrender of a country that they had made no assurances they would occupy.²³

Badoglio's announcement of the armistice, signed on September 3, 1943, in Cassibile, Sicily, was broadcast only on the evening of September 8. In Cuneo and elsewhere there was a brief moment of jubilation. An armistice, after all, meant peace. Soldiers took to the streets shouting, as if the war were over. Revelli, for his part, sensed that another was about to begin. He took his smuggled weapons and reported to the first officer he ran into, a captain who admired his Russian submachine guns and told him he would be better off lying low and enjoying his leave.

Whether Badoglio's proclamation (the English version read by Eisenhower

was broadcast first) was premature or came too late has been a matter of no little dispute. But what is fairly clear is that the first orders from the Italian high command following the proclamation of the armistice were ambiguous. Italian forces were enjoined to cease all hostilities against the Allies immediately but to oppose attacks from "any other quarter." The Germans, it seems, could not even be named.

The relative ambiguity of these orders led to responses that differed from one Italian garrison to another. Some Italian commanders were more susceptible than others to German appeals, usually deceitful, to a code of honor according to which turning one's weapons on an ally with whom one had so recently fought side by side would be treason. Some likewise accepted (or professed to accept) German assurances, nearly always false, that surrendering Italian troops would be disarmed and sent home. But others resisted. Most of the Italian survivors—roughly 6,500—of the doomed resistance put up by the Italian garrisons on the islands of Cephalonia and Corfu were executed by the Germans. Thousands of Italians stationed elsewhere in the Balkans joined the partisans fighting the Germans in Yugoslavia, Albania, and Greece. In Italy itself, initial resistance around Rome was fierce, if brief. And although Badoglio and his generals had been unable to persuade the Allies to make their landings near the mouth of the Tiber rather than near Salerno, the king and his government managed to flee Rome. They went by car to Pescara, on the Adriatic, and thence by sea to Brindisi, which would be the capital of the so-called Kingdom of the South until the end of the war. Mussolini was freed by the Germans on September 12 and installed as head of the Italian Social Republic, or the Republic of Salò, a puppet state including nearly four-fifths of the Italian peninsula, less than two weeks later. "The surrender of Italy achieved by the armistice of Cassibile," Garland and Smyth conclude rather acidly, "was not much more than a paper capitulation, for the Allies had neither the Italian capital nor the administrative apparatus of government. What the Allies had was a symbol of sovereignty [the king] scarcely one whit more appealing to the Italian people than the discredited Duce."²⁴

From southeastern France, Italian soldiers left to their own devices scrounged up civilian clothing, cast off their uniforms, and set out for home. Not all made it. In the province of Cuneo alone, which many men had reached over the mountain passes from France, perhaps 5,000 disbanded soldiers were arrested by the Germans and deported. The Italian Fourth Army, stationed in Liguria and across the border in France, vanished within forty-eight hours. In the days of chaos following Badoglio's announcement, military installations in the province of Cuneo itself were also abandoned and looted. Even trucks and mules, not to mention weapons and ammunition, were taken. Some of this equipment would

find its way into the hands of the partisans, among them Revelli, who would soon be operating in the area.

The experience of the artillery officer Giovannino Guareschi, best known for his lighthearted stories of the village priest Don Camillo, is fairly representative of that of many officers stationed on the plains of northern Italy, where German forces were well placed to disarm their Italian counterparts. Guareschi's account of nearly two years spent in German prison camps opens with a depiction of the resistance that, as on many other bases on the peninsula, especially in the north, crumbled before it could really even be offered:

"And the heroic resistance?" you'll ask me.

A single episode will suffice, my son: the most dramatic one.

We were surrounded by then, and the attack was expected to get underway at any minute. I was commanding twenty-five men in defense of the carriage entrance.

The corporal I had sent to the munitions depot came back.

"How many grenades did you get?" I asked.

"None," he replied. "The major says that without a valid voucher he won't release so much as a pin. He doesn't want trouble."

"Fine," I said. "How much rifle ammunition do we have?"

"Just one clip a head."

"It doesn't matter," I shouted. "Be sparing with your rounds. Everybody take aim at his own man!"

"How?" objected one. "They're all hidden in tanks. . . ."

"Everybody take aim at his own tank!" I yelled.²⁵

In short, Guareschi and his men were prisoners of the Germans.

If initial resistance to the German occupation of northern and central Italy after September 8 was generally futile, as in Guareschi's barracks in Alessandria, a small city in Piedmont, the heroic resistance sought by Guareschi's son was certainly to be found, as Rochat notes,²⁶ among the approximately 650,000 Italian prisoners of war (although they were not granted prisoner-of-war status by their German captors) in camps in Germany and in other German-occupied territories.²⁷ To their great credit, the overwhelming majority of these prisoners resisted German attempts to starve them into taking an oath of loyalty to the Italian Social Republic—the puppet state nominally presided over by a Mussolini freed from his Italian jailers in a daring German raid—in exchange for release from the camps and a promised return to Italy, where they would take up arms against such newly formed partisan bands as those led by Revelli. Initial resistance was perhaps facilitated by rumors that the Germans' promises

were false and that those who agreed to take the oath would be sent to the East to fight the Soviets, but, even when it became clear that the destination was in fact Italy, the men—the rank and file even more so than the officers—held firm.²⁸ And at great cost to themselves. Perhaps 40,000 died.

In the camps in Russia and Soviet Central Asia, where the prisoners of the routed ARMIR were being held, mortality was much higher than in the camps in the Reich, although it fell sharply after the initial seven or eight months of chaos. Some 10,000 former prisoners, whose experiences had in many and perhaps most cases turned them against communism, trickled back in late 1945 and early 1946 to an Italy of political parties that did not hesitate to use the tragedy of the ARMIR for their own political ends but otherwise preferred to forget the returned prisoners. It was instead the former partisans, many of whom had been active in Communist formations doing battle with the Fascists of Mussolini's Republic of Salò and with the German occupiers of northern and central Italy, who, to the incomprehension of many prisoners returning from as much as three years of captivity in Communist Russia, set the tone in postwar Italy. A letter from Italian Communist leader Palmiro Togliatti, then in Moscow and close to Stalin, to a fellow Italian member of the Comintern is indicative of the extent to which the Italian Communist leadership was willing to exploit the deaths of Italian prisoners for political gain. The letter was discovered in a Moscow state archive in 1992; the purported falsification of its contents led to a general outcry nearly fifty years after the events it describes. Dated February 15, 1943, and addressed to Vincenzo Bianco, it reads in part:

The other thing I disagree with you about is the treatment of the prisoners. As you know, I'm not at all ferocious. I'm as much a humanitarian as you are. . . . Our position with respect to the armies that have invaded the Soviet Union has been defined by Stalin, and there's nothing more to be said about it. But in practice, if a good number of prisoners die as a result of the prevailing conditions I can raise absolutely no objections—on the contrary, and I'll explain to you why. There is no doubt that the Italian people have been poisoned by the imperialistic and criminal ideology of fascism. Not to the same extent as the German people, but substantially so. The poison has filtered into peasants, into factory workers, not to mention the middle classes and intellectuals—in short, it has filtered into the people. The fact that, for thousands and thousands of families, Mussolini's war, and above all the campaign against Russia, should end in tragedy, in personal grief, is the best and most effective of antidotes. The more widely the people hold the conviction that attacking other countries means ruin and death for their own country, means ruin and death for each citizen taken individually, the better for the future of Italy it will be.²⁹

After the war, it would of course be the votes of the very peasants, factory workers, and intellectuals on behalf of whom Togliatti refused to intervene and in whose personal grief he seems to revel that the Italian Communist Party relied on (Cuneo, a province of smallholders, tended to be warier of the Communist Party than such centers of manufacturing as Turin or agricultural areas where landless farm laborers accounted for greater shares of the population). Many officers held in the Soviet Union believed that Togliatti, then minister of justice, also saw to it that they, unlike most of the rank and file, were not repatriated until after the June 1946 referendum on Italy's political future.³⁰

In its haste to use the Italian prisoners of war in the Soviet Union, dead or alive, for political gain, the right was no less cruel than the left. Thousands of families had their hopes cynically raised by those on the right who, engaged in the pitched postwar battles over Italy's institutional and political future and in an attempt to discredit their opponents on the left, asserted that the men taken captive during the retreat from the Don were still being held by the Communists in the Soviet Union and would one day return. In reality, the men supposedly being held by the Soviet Union had died much earlier, probably during the retreat or in the first few months of captivity. According to Revelli, the Church, too, participated in raising these false hopes, so it is little wonder that, in the climate of the run-up to the referendum of June 2, 1946, in which Italian voters were asked to pronounce on whether the country should become a republic or remain a monarchy, he should have seen, to his dismay, not the rumblings of the revolution partisan Italy had seemed briefly on the cusp of but the stirrings of the forces of a Restoration.³¹ In 1958 Major General Emilio Battisti, the commander of the Cuneense Division when it was destroyed in Russia, ran for office on the ticket of the Italian Social Movement, a neo-fascist party descended directly from Mussolini's Italian Social Republic. Battisti, who had himself spent eight years in captivity in the Soviet Union, was, in substance, asking the people of Cuneo to give their votes to those who had been responsible for the deaths in Russia of thousands of their friends and family members. At a campaign rally he was met by determined protesters and had to be bundled off to safety by the police. The spirit of resistance that had characterized the province of Cuneo during the twenty months of German occupation—it was exemplified by the partisan bands such as the one led by Revelli—was not entirely dormant.

In April 1945 Revelli came down from the mountains in time to take part in the final gun battles for the city of Cuneo. The evening of the thirtieth he was at home, with his father, who had been told by a German, "Get back, old man!" Then he had been shot in the leg. Outside, the city was rejoicing. It was the liberation. Revelli closed the windows.

Revelli the Writer

In his native Italy, Revelli is widely admired by his fellow historians, and his work is relatively well known to the reading public. All the same, as is made clear by a very brief, unsigned foreword to the 1993 edition of his second book, *La guerra dei poveri*, it was not always so, not even after the publication of his first book, *Mai tardi* (Never too late), brought out by a small publisher from Cuneo in 1946: "In 1962, when this book [*La guerra dei poveri*] was published, it seemed necessary to have it introduced by a professional historian, a companion of Nuto Revelli's in the partisan war: at the time, after all, Revelli, as an author, was practically unknown."³² For English-language readers, on the contrary, Revelli, writer or combatant, is as unfamiliar as Revelli the writer was to his own countrymen before 1962. Yet in the forty-five years since *La strada del davai*, the first of Revelli's three great books of testimonies, was first published, not a single professional historian has deigned to make the introduction without which Revelli's work, like so many other excellent Italian histories, will remain largely inaccessible to a broader English-language audience. The causes of this neglect may be, in nearly every instance, comprehensible, but the cumulative effect bespeaks all too clearly the reluctance of Anglophone scholars to make such an introduction and the meagerness of the professional rewards for doing so. It was thus nearly inevitable that the task of introducing Revelli to English-language readers would fall to a hobbyist.

It may well be true that, as the brief note preceding the 1993 edition of *La guerra dei poveri* asserts, the Italians now need no introduction to Revelli's work, but, buying and selling iron products and working quietly on his books in his slightly remote corner of the country, Revelli was at somewhat of a remove from the centers of postwar intellectual life in Italy. In a piece on Mario Rigoni Stern, Robert S. C. Gordon suggests reasons other than physical distance for this remove:

Rigoni Stern, like other soldier-writers such as Nuto Revelli (and indeed their friend the survivor-writer Primo Levi), was a respected but relatively marginalized figure in postwar literary circles in Italy; in part because literary intellectuals are naturally suspicious of the non-literary narratives of real lives; but in part also because the fighting war of 1940–43, the Fascist war fought alongside the Germans, was hard to assimilate into a new vision of Italy founded on the collapse of that war and the redemption of the Resistance against the Germans.³³

Revelli's relatively marginal status in these literary circles may also have to do with what, drawing on the work of his friend Primo Levi, one could term the impurity of his books—that is, the difficulty of assigning them to clearly

demarcated categories. This impurity, to use Levi's term, is partly responsible both for the scant literary scholarship Revelli's work has attracted and for the life such "impure" books as *La guerra dei poveri*, *La strada del davai*, and *Il mondo dei vinti* (The World of the Defeated) radiate. They are impure as the zinc that inspires the chemistry student Primo Levi's encomium to impurity is impure: "In the course pack," Levi notes in *The Periodic Table*, recalling a laboratory exercise,

was a detail that, on my first reading, had escaped me; that is, that zinc, so soft and delicate, so yielding to acids they make mincemeat of it, behaves quite differently when it is very pure: then it puts up a stubborn resistance to the etching. You could draw two contradictory philosophical conclusions from it: praise for purity, which, like a shield, offers protection from evil; praise for impurity, which gives rise to changes, that is, to life. I brushed aside the first one, sickeningly moralistic, and dwelled on the second, which suited me better. For the wheel to turn, for life to live, there have to be impurities, and impurities of impurities: in the soil, too—it's well known—if it is to be fertile. There has to be dissent, difference, a grain of salt and mustard seed.³⁴

In other words, not a single book of Revelli's is literature, history, oral history, military history, sociology, or anthropology alone, but all of them draw on and enrich each of these disciplines. In short, then, Revelli was not a member of anthropological or sociological circles; nor was he a member of a circle of professional historians. One might also wonder if R. J. B. Bosworth is slightly unsure what to call him when he refers to Revelli as "one of the great reporters of Italy's war."³⁵

In a talk to German university students in Marburg, Revelli himself brings up the difficulty of categorizing his work:

This latest book, *Il disperso di Marburg* [The lost soldier from Marburg], was hard work. . . . Really hard work. I spent eight years doing the research. You have called me, I think, "a historian," but I can never pigeonhole myself, not really. Some people call me a professor. I'm not a professor. Some call me an anthropologist. I don't really know what anthropologists are. Some say: "Well you're a sociologist, then." What are sociologists? "You're a man of letters." "No," I say, "I'm not a man of letters." I am what I am: I'm a fellow who has things inside and has to say them and has to do them. I've written all my books selfishly, for me, hoping they would be of use to other people, too, but the great necessity came from within me, and I'm not a writer. Beppe Fenoglio, my countryman, is a writer. He is an artist; he is a

great artist. I have always admired him tremendously. *He* knows how to tell stories; I say “he knows” because for me it’s as if he were still alive. A book of his came out in the last few days, and it’s as if he were still with us.³⁶

It may be in part Revelli’s impurity that, for better or for worse, has kept his work out of the clutches of the literary critics. Like Primo Levi, a chemist and factory manager whose Auschwitz memoir *If This Is a Man* was for years available only from a small publishing house that had printed but 2,500 copies of the book, and Rigoni Stern, a civil servant whose extensive body of work (with the exception of *The Sergeant in the Snow*, an account of the defeat in Russia that enjoyed immediate critical and popular success in Italy) has not been made widely available in English, Revelli was neither professional scholar nor professional man of letters. He did not write imaginative literature. Were it not for their wholehearted, if belated, embrace of the work of Levi, who himself wrote only one conventional novel (*If Not Now, When?*) or their slightly more diffident embrace of such work as Rigoni Stern’s *The Sergeant in the Snow*, which is sometimes labeled a novel, other times a memoir, one might be tempted to think that critics of contemporary Italian literature viewed Revelli and his unclassifiable work as a threat to their purity. Professional historians, for their part, have been much less reluctant to acknowledge Revelli’s contributions to their field.

For Giorgio Rochat, for instance, “the memory of Russia produces the finest books on the Italian war because, in the authors, loyalty toward their companions led out of the pocket or left on the snow lives on; Rigoni Stern writes for his platoon, Nuto Revelli for his fallen alpini.”³⁷ Ostensibly, of course, Rochat contradicts Revelli, who tells the German university students that he writes only for himself, but neither man is necessarily wrong. It may well be that Revelli writes for himself, but precisely because he examines himself and his experiences and those of many of his contemporaries with such honesty and intensity it appears as if he were writing for others, for his fallen alpini, as Rochat puts it, for their families in Cuneo and elsewhere, even for later generations. In short, Revelli, as he describes himself, is “a fellow who has things inside,” but he is hardly alone in that respect; he gets at those things, rather fearlessly, and in so doing lends his voice to those who, such as the men who died in Russia or the marginalized peasants of the mountain valleys of Cuneo, might otherwise have remained unheard, even to themselves. Put simply, in writing for himself, Revelli writes for others, for the world, as he himself terms it, of the defeated.

The voices of the forty-three witnesses—as Revelli calls the veterans whose testimonies he records in *Mussolini's Death March*, taking down their words by shorthand—form a nearly choral lament broken, Revelli notes, only by the

testimony of one Beppe Lamberti, a career officer who had long reflected on the causes of the disaster in Russia. In an interview with Michele Calandri, Revelli says of his informants: "I took down everything they told me, even the things I didn't agree with, even the things I didn't like. Sometimes the witnesses would say to me: 'Don't write now. I'm going to tell you things that shouldn't be made public.'"³⁸

The myth of the kindhearted Italian soldier has to some extent obscured the reality that, in the territories occupied by the Axis and on the front lines, the Italians were invaders and acted as such. One of Revelli's informants, for instance, refers briefly to the sexual bondage of a young Jewish woman picked up in Poland. Another alludes to the cold-blooded killing of wounded Russian troops in their hospital beds. There is contempt for the Albanians. It is not unreasonable to assume that at least some of the stories Revelli's informants preferred not to make public were not stories of humiliations that they themselves had endured. Despite their occasional reticence, however, the men were frank enough to prompt one reader of the book, a colonel in the Italian army, to complain that Revelli had spoken to the forty most disgruntled veterans in the province of Cuneo.³⁹

One also senses—and not just in the prefatory material—Revelli's presence, his humility. In the forty-two testimonies (one of which is the joint testimony of two men), Revelli manages, as he set out to do, to have the soldier, the conscript, "write" his war. The testimonies are marked by their orality, but Revelli's work to make them suitable for print was literary. Indeed, he selected the testimonies, edited them, ordered them, and, in some cases, translated them, in whole or in part, from the dialect in which they were offered. The result is a highly impure book, its provenance neither entirely oral nor entirely literary; it is neither history (the view from the trenches, from behind the wire, of Revelli's unlettered soldiers is hardly conducive to knowledge of strategy, of broader troop movements, of anything beyond the soldier's immediate experience) nor anthropology (though the devastating effects of the war in Russia on the peasant communities in the hills and valleys of the province of Cuneo that supplied conscripts to the Cuneense Division are suggested) nor yet imaginative literature (though the witnesses' tales rival those of any novelist). One may even wonder if, in some respects, *Mussolini's Death March* is not so much Revelli's book as it is that of his forty-three witnesses. "Impurities of impurities," as Levi puts it.

In *Mussolini's Death March* it is of course the survivors who tell their stories, but the book also manages to rescue the dead, the missing, from the oblivion they have fallen into for all but their families. It is surely at least in part for this reason that Primo Levi, who himself felt compelled to bear witness to the de-

struction of a culture, says of Revelli (and Rigoni Stern): "They have written non-useless books."⁴⁰

Historians, geographers, anthropologists, and other scholars have acknowledged Revelli's contributions, sometimes somewhat grudgingly, both to their particular fields and, to some extent, to Italian letters. But it is not merely, not even primarily, for the sake of Revelli's work—which, after all, needs no justification—that professional scholars and their sponsors would do well not to use the impurity of work by such outsiders as Revelli as a facile pretext to yield to the temptation to neglect it. The reasons that it would be advisable for them to champion this work are suggested by Primo Levi's remark, inspired by his lab notes on the behavior of zinc, that impurity gives rise to changes, to life. Levi neglected to state the corollary. Perhaps he thought it was too obvious.



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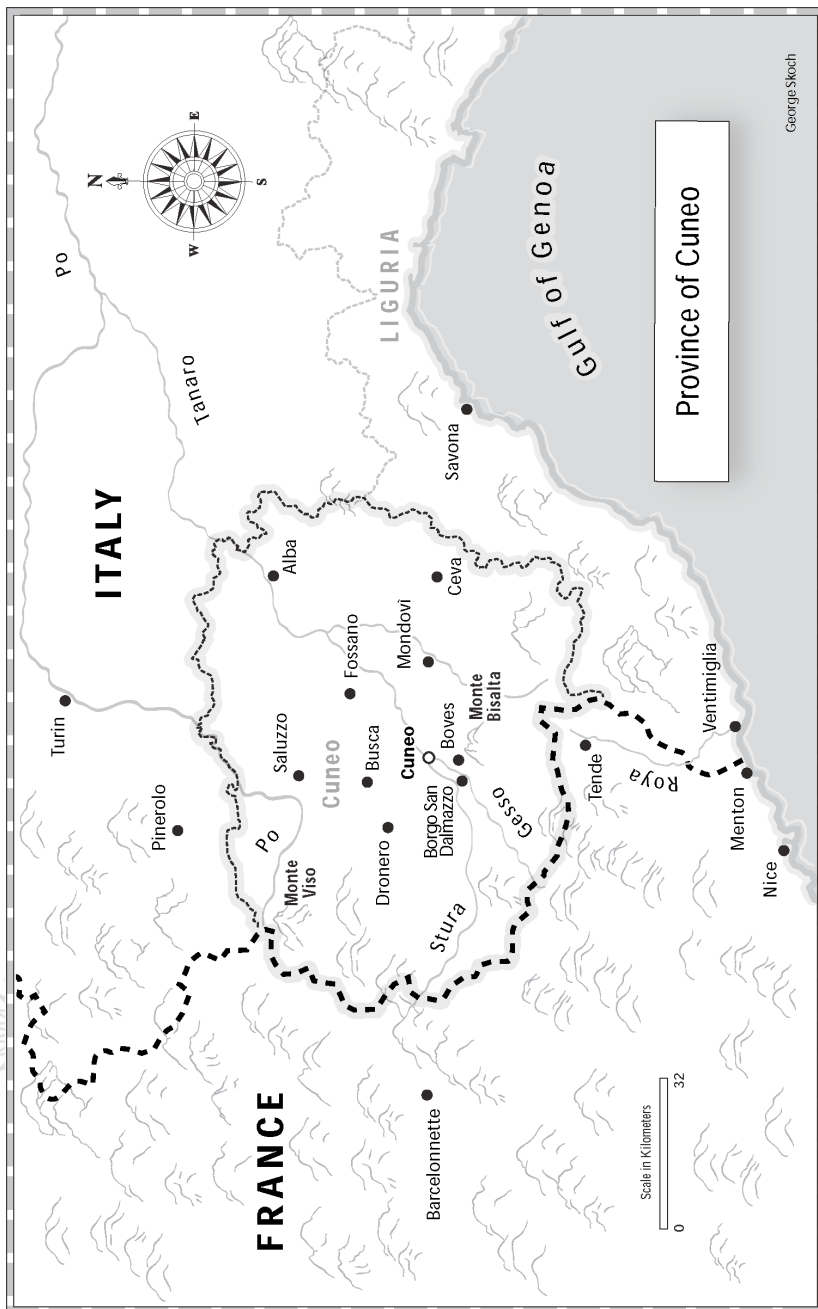
Note on the Translation

Translations of dialogue from Russian to Italian are Revelli's (or his interlocutors') and are generally found in the body of text, where I have translated them from Italian to English. I have placed in footnotes, on their first appearance only, English translations of occasional Russian expressions not translated into Italian by Revelli. I have likewise placed in notes (again, on their first appearance only) English translations of the handful of Piedmontese or Occitan expressions not translated by Revelli. Other than the notes to this introduction, all my notes are in brackets and indicated by *Trans*.

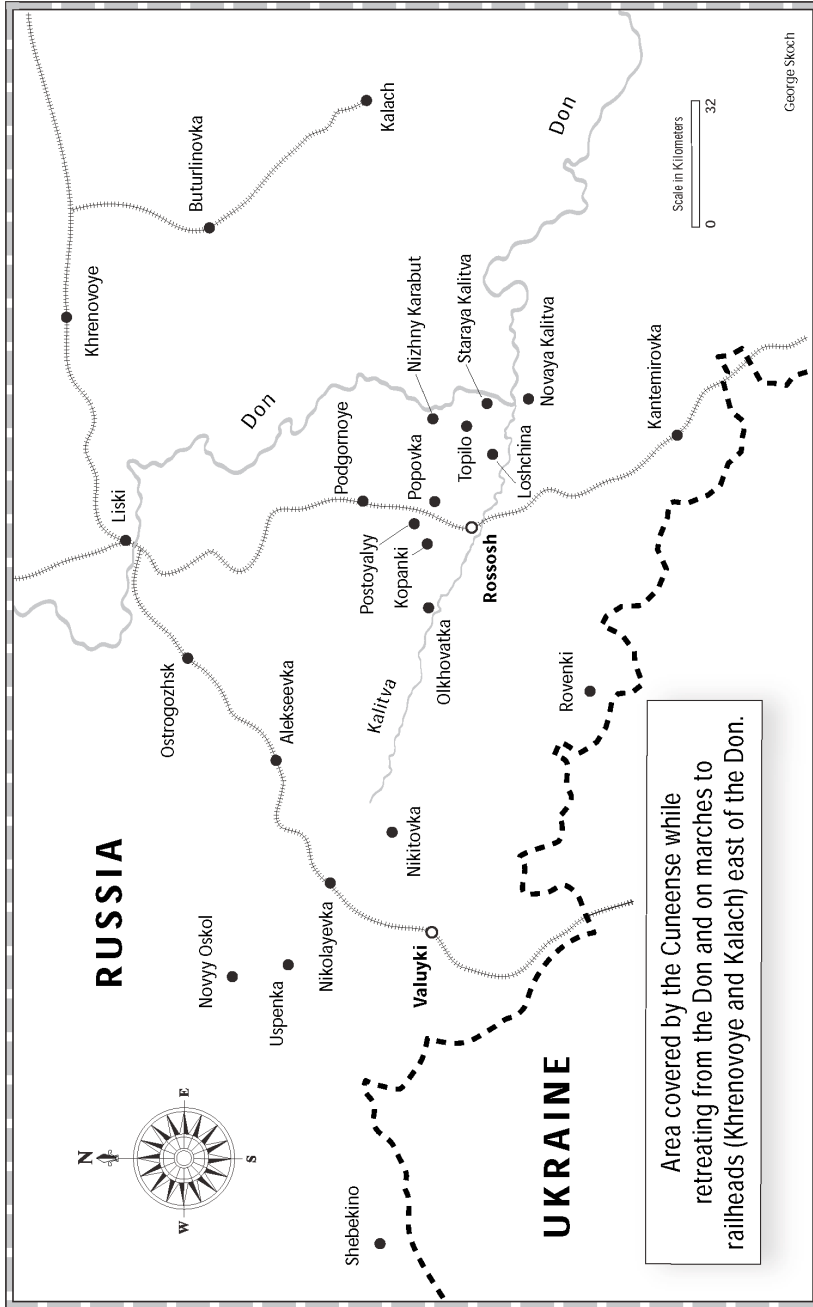
Revelli is a clear and careful writer. Any lack of clarity in this English version of his work, any carelessness, can be put down to a faulty translation.

J. P.





Map 1. Province of Cuneo



Map 2. The Retreat of the Cuneense



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Preface

In 1960, when I met “Mauthausen,” there were a few certainties I held fast to. I hated war, I knew the poor always pay for other people’s sins, and I knew monuments and commemorative plaques are the final passage of the sponge over the slate of unpunished sins. Jingoistic displays bothered me: nothing is worse than noisy speeches that, exalting the dead, the “heroes,” are of use to the living. In pained astonishment, I watched the great chaos of war pensions, the cruelty of certain medical delegations, the monstrosity of Italian bureaucracy. I could see for myself that there was a flipside to the economic miracle: forgetting!

This pessimism was justified. In the distant season of hope, in the post-liberation—when all wounds were still open, when many Italians were still ready to testify that the war did not end on May 8, 1945—I had naively believed in a well-deserved inquest into the war. But day after day I had seen the army gradually becoming Fascist again, the rehabilitation of the worst offenders. The survivors started fighting among themselves, the veterans on one side and the former partisans on the other, forgetting that when the poor fight the rich laugh. The noose had inevitably ended up back in the hangman’s hands. A number of veterans’ associations had become Fascist again. September 8, 1943—the date that all Italians should have remembered—had ended up in the margins of our recent history, in the corner with the disgraces to be forgotten. September 8 had disappeared from the calendar of the army. Bringing up September 8 meant provocation now, if not outright defamation.

Saying only good things about the troops—even the general is one of the troops; sugarcoating defeats, passing them off as victories; equating today’s army and yesterday’s army, the Royal Army; equating the top brass and the conscripts, lumping together the monstrous sins of the leaders of those days and sacrifices of the poor devil, necessarily a citizen in uniform—this was the fraud perpetrated by the forces of the restoration.



It was “Mauthausen”—a poor madman I met by chance—who stirred up this tangle of resentments of mine, of repressed rage, of fanciful meditations, of disappointments, of defeats. Mauthausen, in telling me of his war, spoke a true language, intact, not worn out by time. His memories of the war were my memories of the war. But they were less filtered, less reworked, sparer, more authentic. Mauthausen was a madman, one of the many wrecks of war discharged only in appearance. But war is madness, and every one of Mauthausen’s curses, every one of his shouts, was a sacrosanct truth. As Mauthausen hurled oaths I relived my nights in the open, I experienced the forty degrees below zero again, the collective madness, the crying colonels, the obsessive shout “fire . . . fire,” the abandoned wounded, the gangrene, the snow, so much snow and so many dead. It was the complete chapter of the retreat from Russia reemerging from my poorly healed wounds. Listening to Mauthausen, I realized my war was still in my blood, like a cancer; I realized I had a large debt to pay.

I sought a dialogue; I approached my first witness, Mattio, along the mule tracks that connect the scraggly Bosco dell’Impero¹ and the ancient world of Tetto Giordano and Tetto Cannone upstream from Roccasparvera. Then, still in the area of the Bosco dell’Impero, I met Renaldi, a wise and self-assured farmer from Vignolo. Renaldi was raking leaves. . . . Renaldi and I talked about this and that, about his people, about the poverty of the mountains. I spoke about the Second World War and about the dangers of a Third World War. We’re all generals! The army is the only branch of the state that the citizen gets to know through and through. The soldiers of my generation know a lot about it. After eight or ten years of military life, after years of war, they still remember everything about the army. They speak, in almost technical language, about weapons, tactics, maneuvers, organization, and disorganization. They speak above all about defeats, about retreats! Renaldi agreed to arrange meetings for me with some of the Russia veterans around Vignolo. Antonio Nova, Giuseppe Giraudò, Dalmazzo Giraudò, Andrea Serale. . . . They were almost clandestine meetings, in houses, in barns. I wanted my witnesses to speak as free men, in a peaceful environment, in an environment far from that of the claims staked by the usual combat, confessional, and political imperatives.

There were bounds—the retreat and captivity in Russia—to my particular interest. Recording was impossible; it intimidated the witnesses. The best thing was to take shorthand. To prepare the witnesses, I had asked them to tell me everything from the start, from their first day of military life. The first part of the stories would be a warm up, talk I wouldn’t use.

With total rigor, as if I were gathering evidence, I wrote everything down, noting even the emotions of my interlocutors, their long silences, their fits of weeping, their moments of abandon. But soon enough I realized the whole stories of the witnesses fascinated me, not just the war in Russia.

The bibliography on the Second World War includes hundreds of diaries, stories, and memoirs. But, as always, it's the so-called men of letters who have written for the humble, for the unlettered. Our generals have written dozens of memoirs, often full of wretched belated accusations, often dry like the outlines for command post exercises. Missing was the peasant's war, the mountain dweller's, the laborer's, the poor tubercular, malarial, nephritic fellow's, the never-ending war. My ultimate aim was but one: for the soldier finally to "write" his war, too.

With research devoid of set plans, entrusted to chance, to whatever turned up, I thought I could gather a sufficiently large sample of experiences.

Mauthausen curses the war, the country, everything. He doesn't talk; he shouts.

"How many gold medals does the Julia have?" he shouts. "Tell me how many gold medals the Julia has."²

He shouts and cries.

"They say I'm crazy. Was I crazy when I went off to be a soldier? If I was crazy why did they say I was fit?"

"He's a pain in the ass," the *bien-pensants* say of him; "he's just acting crazy."

Pinu d' Rússia has war on the brain, too. He lives like a stray dog, telling his stories full of madness. After the war he was committed for two years to the asylum for the criminally insane in Aversa.

"He has Mussolini to thank," say the few people who still listen to him.

Mattio is raking leaves; his hill is a wilderness, a mountain. His life is all here.

"Eighty months of military service, France, Albania, Russia. I started when I was twenty and finished when I was thirty. By the time I was six I was out of school; I was earning my bread: if you're a jackass, you live like an ass. I carry everything on my back just like a beast of burden. But if you have some schooling you don't work this way. A wretched life. There's no water here, there's no electricity, no roads. We're godforsaken. When the tax bill comes we pay our pittance. In the summer, I take care of the land; in the other seasons I go down and do day labor here and there, but I can't work out anything permanent. The old proverb is right: 'A rolling stone gathers no moss.' But I have no way out. A *ciabot*³ on the plain would give me enough to live on, but I don't have the guts to rent one. I'd like a steady job in a factory, but how to find one? I'm almost fifty, I have five mouths to feed, and it's late."

Marro works a small *ciabot* just outside Cuneo. He's tired, sick, old, a specter in the raging economic miracle.

"We've been forgotten," he says to me. "There's not even a plaque in Pasatore in memory of our eighteen dead. Let there not ever be any more wars. Even now I often dream and suffer: I dream I'm a prisoner of the Russians."

Arlotto manages a gas station. He's tired, sick with gloom. He has never told his story, not even to his father, who fought in the First World War.

Sasso left the countryside after ten years of working like a dog. He's sick; his liver is killing him; he stands up by force of will. He helps his wife in a bar on the outskirts of town.

"I would have liked to write my story," he says to me, "the story of the stupid and horrible war. I'd like to write; I'd like to thank the people in Russia who helped me. But I keep putting it off. . . ."

Beltramo is a farmer. He doesn't have the strength to work the land.

"I weighed eighty-three kilos when I left for the Eastern Front. In June 1944, in Siberia, I was down to forty-eight kilos. The camp doctors often weighed us; they said if we lost more than half our normal weight we wouldn't survive. Today I barely manage to get up to sixty-six kilos, and I'm always tired, tired like an old man."

Galaverna, a former laborer, caught TB in Russia. His house looks like an izba.⁴ He's on a war pension.

Antonio Nova works for a contractor cutting and tying rebar. A life of poverty, picking up crumbs from the building boom.

"I'm almost done for," he says to me, "no strength, a wreck. With my children still young."

Viale, once a farmer, runs a village tobacco shop. Like all the former prisoners from Russia, he's sick, and it's his first time talking, telling his story:

"Our fathers never stopped talking about the First World War. Even now they talk about it with each other, they bring it up again, they tell stories. For me, for us, it's completely different. I've never told anyone my story; you suffer again when you tell it. And whoever hasn't gone through that experience can't understand it, can't believe it."

Giuseppe Castellino, farmer, Western Front, Albania, captivity in Russia, has gone through intimidating amounts of agony and injustice. He's more dead than alive, hollowed out by fevers and by struggles. But when he recalls the heroic Major Annoni he comes to life again, lights up. Castellino has the right to ten war pensions; he has his papers in order. But the bureaucracy for war pensions is a monster: no small number of the workings of our bureaucratic machine are worse than epidemic typhus. Twenty years later Castellino is still waiting, setting store by the "judges," the "gurus from Rome."

Giordano, a mountain dweller, lives in the upper Grana Valley.

"Our land is poor; we're cut off from the world. I have small children and I don't have the courage to go down to the plain. It's just as well a lot of people were smart and ran off to the plain. The best-looking young man, if he wants to live in the mountains, won't find anybody to marry. The girls go down to work

and they get married there so they don't have to come back to the mountains. In my village there's a church, but it doesn't have a priest."

Giuseppe Giraudò, born in 1916, laborer, the Western Front, Albania, Russia, and a lot of wretchedness, had a "tired" heart and no war pension. He died in 1962.

Giovan Battista Dutto is a day laborer: in addition, he helps his wife work five acres of tenanted land.

"I gave the country ten years," he says to me. "I have four small children to raise. I need five kilos of bread a day. Because of my malaria, two or three times a year I shake like a leaf and my spleen gets this big, like two fists. I asked for a pension, but I never got anything. This morning I got the ballot for the next elections and I said to myself: 'May God never send any more wars.'"



This is the world that inflames me and dismays me.

They knew nothing of fascism. In the easy days they weren't members of the Fascist Youth: they lived free, far from the great national happenings. They didn't even have the black shirt: at most, they could come up with a few set phrases, Mussolini's miracles, and nothing else.

They became a mob on only one occasion, when, drafted, they went to "draw their number." Then, like bands of rebels, they descended on the city with their accordions and clarinets. Under cover of the colors of the annual contingent everything was permitted. They sang, danced, drank. Shy as they were, they often went too far: young girls had to give them a wide berth. They sang the anti-militaristic songs of their elders. Their favorite refrain, "*col vigliac d'la testa plà, l'ha fame abil a fé 'l suldà*,"⁵ they shouted twenty times, in anger, in defiance, even though they had asked to be alpini. If you weren't an alpino, you were at best a reject.

All of them, the survivors of captivity in Russia, are exceptional men. It wasn't just luck that helped them survive: they have antennae at their disposal; they have rare virtues.

Today, as they did before the great ordeal, they live on the margins of society, detached from the environment around them. They all bear a deep, hidden mark. They are sick, tired, old, falling to pieces. All of them had the right to a pension, but the war pensions bureaucracy is an impassable wall: only the shrewd, the cunning, can get around it.

They tell their stories and they suffer. It's the first time they tell all or almost all. As they talk they yield; they weep.

In village houses, on farms, when the wife and children are listening, the story is less cruel, more humane. In taverns they don't want witnesses; outsiders

can't understand; they can't believe. Hardly any of them have ever read a book on the war. They don't curse. They don't hide the truth; only victory is embellished. They say terrible things, shocking things, with the simplicity of someone who is reencountering the past intact. They are ingenuous, resigned, today as much as then.

The war in Ethiopia, the Western Front, and the campaign in Greece are engraved in their memory. But when they relive the retreat from Russia, when they relive captivity in Russia, they go into a trance. Their faces go tense, their hands shake, madness resurfaces in their astonished gazes. It's cruelty to urge them to tell their stories, to make them talk.

They talk about Albania, about Greece, Yugoslavia, Austria, Germany, Poland, Ukraine, Siberia, Mongolia. And then they may not even know where Russia is on the map. Some of the witnesses ask me who those civilians—the Jews—were who marked the long route of the troop trains heading toward the Eastern Front!

They don't know the war against the Soviet Union was a total war. They don't know that Hitler's "new order" was our plan, that three million Soviet prisoners were killed or made to die of hunger and exhaustion, that millions of Russian civilians were deported to Germany. They don't know that in the Soviet rear the population was starving to death; they don't know that the lunacy of Hitler and Mussolini cost twenty million Russians their lives, that six million Jews died in the gas chambers, in the ovens, in the Nazi death camps.

September 8 doesn't belong to their past; they are mutilated. Not having seen "Badoglio's mess," they can't believe it; not bearing the marks of that anguish, they can't understand; not having chosen then, they didn't choose later.⁶

Our struggle for liberation—a war of volunteers, of the people, of rebels—is incomprehensible to the survivors of captivity: they consider it an insignificant chapter of war. In Cuneo and the valleys quite a few families lost one son in Russia and another in the partisan war.⁷ But the partisans, in the talk of the former prisoners, are the phony heroes of an easy war, of a phony war, phony because it was fought at home.

The men who survived captivity don't talk politics; they don't talk about the speculations of a Fascist kind; they don't talk about the electoral fraud always tacked on to the problem of the "missing in Russia." The survivors don't despise the windbags who speculate on other people's suffering; they don't despise alpino hats worn out by festive parades rather than in battle. They don't feel the black nails of the Fascists digging into their flesh. They remember that the families of the "missing" no longer had tears to cry, but they don't say that from too many pulpits the cruel watchwords "they will return" were seeking only votes and tears.⁸



Forty testimonies from men from the rank and file, almost all of them from Cuneo and the valleys, almost all from the Cuneense Division of the alpini. Missing are the voices of the soldiers from Liguria of the First Alpino Regiment, the voices of the men from the Apuan Alps of the Second Alpino Regiment. But the war of my people is the war of all the alpini; it's the war of the men from Lombardy of the Tridentina Division, of the men from Veneto and Abruzzi of the Julia.

Grato Bongiovanni's story has, as an outline, the diary/memoir he wrote immediately upon his return from captivity.

The testimony of the medical officer Aimo (story and diary)—which reconstructs the entire cycle of the retreat—corrects and complements the testimonies of some of the soldiers: the story of the alpini from Mondovì, of the band that revolves around Aimo's sled, nearly merges with the soldiers' stories.

Lieutenant Bianco's testimony—which, in the part having to do with the Eastern Front, expands on and complements an official report submitted in the summer of 1943 to the headquarters of the First Alpino Regiment—is a wide-ranging depiction of the headquarters of the Cuneense and of the First Alpino Regiment in the early and middle phases of the retreat from the Don.

Captain Lamberti's testimony is the only one I didn't get by chance. I considered it indispensable. I wanted the voice of Beppe Lamberti, the voice of this man who, more than rare, is one of a kind, to disrupt the nearly choral harmony of the stories of captivity.

The two anonymous testimonies mask fear as well as indifference to and mistrust of politics: fear that democracy, freedom, will sooner or later disappear; Catholics, Reds, Fascists, all the same, all to be despised.

Aldo Caraglio, a former alpino from Dogliani, is the only one who refused me his testimony. When I asked him to talk about his war, about his captivity in Russia, he went as tense as if I had hit him with a stroke of the lash; then, so little have his wounds healed, he started shaking, suffering.

In the immediate aftermath of the war a search for testimonies in the world of the survivors of captivity in Russia would have been impossible for me. The survivors didn't talk, didn't want to talk. It's with the thaw of recent years that dialogue has become possible. I collected nearly all the testimonies in the fall and winter months. In the other seasons the farmers from the plain and the mountain dwellers don't have the time to tell their stories.

I took the witnesses by surprise, going straight to the point. Here are two significant examples, examples that show how my interlocutors took me for one of their own. Agostino Giordano was playing cards at the Trattoria del Viale in Valgrana. I talked to him about the war, about Russia. He immediately left his game of *tressette*⁹ and started telling me his story, which lasted four hours. I met Giuseppe Vietto one summer Sunday. He was with friends; he was leav-

ing Monchiero for Lequio Tanaro to go to a big *pallone elastico* match.¹⁰ He immediately changed his plans so he could tell me all about his experience of the war.

After more than twenty years you can't expect the memories of the witnesses to be precise, accurate. The dilemma was simple: collect the stories anyway, or let this precious heritage of lived life, of martyred life, vanish for good.



The testimonies of captivity in Russia shake me deeply. It's impossible for me to be numb to stories or to keep them from being a sorrow to me. But always with an eye to the other side of the disaster, the immense sufferings of the Soviet people.

It would be senseless and inhuman not to take into account that the tragedy of the Cuneense, of the Italians on the Eastern Front, came about in an apocalyptic environment, an environment of total war, with the Germans specialized in extermination, in destruction, in genocide.

We shouldn't forget that in June 1941 nearly all Italians were looking with satisfaction at the Nazi armies, which, creating huge pockets, were sowing death and destruction everywhere.

In the big August battle near the Dniester, Mussolini's advance patrol, General Messe's little CSIR,¹¹ an army corps "transportable by motor vehicle" but lacking any motor vehicles, with its weary divisions plodding along, was already involved. Messe's tanks weighed three tons.¹² The Germans were advancing with thirty-ton tanks. The Soviets maneuvered with forty-ton tanks.

In two months of war the Soviet Union had lost 14,000 guns, 15,000 tanks, 11,500 planes, and 5 million men, 1.2 million of whom were prisoners.

Kiev fell on September 18. Leningrad was encircled. The fighting was now 800 kilometers from the old border. Hitler had said to his generals: "We cannot just annihilate the Russian army and take possession of Moscow, Leningrad, and the Caucasus. We must wipe this country from the face of the earth and destroy its people."

In early October the new array of the German armies—a million men, 6,000 guns, 1,000 planes, 2,000 tanks—was ready for the offensive against Moscow. Mussolini started getting antsy again. In the summer he had asked Hitler for the great honor of contributing at least an Italian expeditionary corps to the overpowering German advance, but now he wanted to offer another fifteen divisions.

In mid-November fifty-one German divisions—thirteen of them armored and seven motorized—launched the second Moscow offensive. Ciano hastened to Berlin to offer six divisions to be sent right away to the Eastern Front. In his diary, Ciano noted a fabulous story of Goering's:¹³ the Russian prisoners

who ate each other “also ate a German sentry, in a prison camp. . . . The Russian prisoners are so hungry that to direct them it’s no longer necessary to put armed soldiers on their flanks: all you need to do for thousands and thousands of prisoners to follow like a herd of starving beasts is to put a camp kitchen that gives off the smell of food at the head of the column. And it is the year of our Lord 1941.”



The first troop train with the Alpino Corps on board left Italy on July 17, 1942.

In Poland, in Ukraine, lots of Jews, ragged, filthy, living, comatose, along the trains that stop in the stations. The fate of all these Jews is sealed: they will die like mangy dogs. It’s the SS who have put on the show; it’s the SS who want the comatose Jews along the train tracks, in the stations. Thus, the soldier of the Wehrmacht, on his way to the front, is toughened, tempered, drugged; thus, the soldier of the Wehrmacht, before going into combat, receives final confirmation that Nazism does things seriously, that Nazism doesn’t forgive.

The alpini know nothing of the “final solution.” They don’t know there are extermination camps; they’ve never heard of Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Treblinka, Auschwitz. They don’t know that millions of Russian prisoners were murdered by the Germans. The alpini look at the Jews, but they don’t understand!

Then the detraining operations, the first marches toward the Caucasus. But the direction of the marches changes suddenly; it’s on foot toward the Don. The alpini are loaded down like beasts. The steppe reaps nothing but oaths.

Then life on the front line, watching an enemy they don’t know, an enemy they can’t manage to hate. The dugouts on the bank of the Don recall the valleys of the Cuneese: each bunker, each stronghold, is named after one of our villages, after one of our mountain hamlets.

In the rear, the Germans are hanging, sacking, burning, deporting. In Voroshilovgrad the Germans organize target-shooting contests, turkey shoots: every Russian prisoner is a turkey. The Germans leave the hanged on the gallows for five days running.

In January 1943 the flight home begins. Nights in the open, hunger, cold, madness, in a land where every izba recalls a hanging, a slaughter, a deportation, a murdered Russian prisoner. Some run off, some fight, some throw away their bars, some help the wounded, some die of hunger, some eat and get fat, some travel like a trunk on a stolen sled, some strip the dead, and some cover them with compassion. Each man is naked; lots of men are beasts. The gaze of the mules is full of goodness!

Without the sacrifice of the Julia and the Cuneense, without Kopanki and

Novo Postolayevka, the Tridentina would never have made it past Nikolayevka.¹⁴

A reality even more tragic than the retreat awaits the survivors of the Cuneense in Valuyki. With the villages in flames abandoned, the Soviet army is now speeding west. For the tattered remnants of the Cuneense, at the mercy of the irrational, of chaos, all hope is dead. The disastrous “davai” march begins.

Three years of Siberia. All Russia becomes Siberia.

Finally, repatriation, through a destroyed Europe. After the Brenner Pass the mothers and wives who are looking for the “missing,” who are looking for the “dead” of the Julia, who are begging for a word of hope from the troop train. The survivors, the men brought back to life, are stupefied, in a daze: everything surprises them, disappoints them, frightens them. They're not yet thinking of war pensions; they're not aware of the importance of paperwork. Only the dying, those on stretchers, are lucky: as it turns out, it is with admission to a hospital that medical records are first drawn up, that the basic documents for future pension files appear.

Italy is already distracted, in a hurry to forget. The first few days with the family, at home, are hard, painful. The families of the “missing” show up; they want to know the truth. The survivors talk, they talk, but they don't tell the truth. They *must* forget if they want to start living again.

The results for the Cuneense Division of the alpini on the Eastern Front: 13,470 dead and “missing.” A generation of farmers and mountain dwellers gone for good!



Is there any sense, after more than twenty years, to going back over so many horrible things, so much suffering? Is there any sense to looking at old wounds, poorly healed or still open? There would be no sense to it if Italy had recovered completely from the ills of those days. But too many viruses are still infecting today's Italy.

It takes only the first few statements from my witnesses—the statements about the troop trains leaving Italy—to level a charge against the military and political gangs of the time, against the society of the time, to throw them into the mud. How much blood, how many dead it took for Italy to get back on the right path!

Today, almost as in the years of fascism, the armament, the training, the leaders of the army, the soldier's civic education, the billions of the armed forces, are all taboo subjects to be left in the hands of the few specialists, of the generals. Our politicians know nothing or almost nothing about the army. Public opinion shows a nearly total lack of interest in anything having to do with the armed forces.

More than twenty years separate us from the catastrophic communiqué of September 8. Is it madness to think certain bluffs, certain tragedies, could be repeated?

I wonder. If a unit of alpini, of our people, suddenly had to ship out destination unknown, maybe to Vietnam, how many farmers, how many mountain dwellers, how many citizens in uniform would know where Vietnam is on the map, what people and what war they will encounter, whom they will have to kill, and what they will have to die for?

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On January 15, 1943, the personnel (including officers, troops, and service personnel at the headquarters of the larger units) of the Alpino Corps on the Eastern Front came to approximately 56,000 men. Each alpino division had some 16,000 men.¹⁵

Toward the end of the retreat, from January 31 to February 2, “7,571 wounded and frostbitten were evacuated from Shebekino to Kharkov. With the column (of the Alpino Army Corps or, rather, of the Tridentina), in addition to the hospitalized wounded and frostbitten, 6,500 men from the Tridentina, 3,300 from the Julia, 1,600 from the Cuneense, 1,300 from the Vicenza, 880 from the army corps and its units, eight to nine thousand Germans, and six to seven thousand Hungarians escaped encirclement.”¹⁶

Total casualties of the Alpino Corps in officers and troops dead or missing, wounded, or frostbitten: 43,580, approximately eighty percent.

Casualties of the Cuneense: officers dead or missing: 390; troops dead or missing: 13,080; officers wounded or frostbitten: 50; soldiers wounded or frostbitten: 2,130. Total casualties: 15,650.

In the summer of 1942, more than 200 troop trains had taken the Alpino Corps to Russia: in the spring of 1943, 17 short trains take back to Italy the wounded and frostbitten and the four mules that had gotten out of the pocket.



Only for practical reasons did I not expand the bounds of my research: as I had little free time, I didn't go to the Langhe or the upper valleys of the Cuneense.

Three or four hours each for the Riba, Lerda, Beltramo, Galaverna, Fruttero, Demaria, Chiapello, Dutto, Rossi, Castellino, Raineri, Bellini, and Viale testimonies; five hours for Arlotto, Bongiovanni, Duberti; nine hours for Pattoglio, Candela, Re.

Twenty-nine testimonies from survivors of captivity in Russia, thirteen testimonies from those not taken prisoner in Russia.

In arranging the testimonies, I put the stories that end with captivity in Russia first; that way, the reader is immediately immersed in the heart of the matter, is immediately informed of the experiences of most of the alpini of the Cuneense. The order of this first group of testimonies is the following: two anonymous testimonies, three from members of various units, and, finally, grouped by unit, the stories of the alpini of the Cuneense.

The second group of testimonies provides a means of better understanding the intensity and scope of the complex tragedy.

“Nail drives out nail.” It so happens that quite a few of the survivors of captivity in Russia have blurry memories of the Western Front, of Albania, and even of the retreat from Russia. The non-prisoners may have less to say about Russia, but they fill out the great portrait with more minute descriptions of the various fronts, with a more detailed reconstruction of life on the Don and on the retreat. It is the non-prisoners who immediately brought to the countryside and to Cuneo and the valleys the only true news of the disaster, who brought with them a combat anti-fascism, rudimentary and unformed, but precious all the same.

The testimonies are not without mistakes about dates and places, but it's not military history that matters. The Russian language is subjected to constant mangling, so much so that it is sometimes hard to recognize the original sentence or expression. Place names are often deformed as well: for example, Vulpenshaya instead of Uspenskaya; Akulac, Bulaca, Bulaki instead of Ak-Bulak, hospital no. 2639; Paltara instead of Pakhta-Aral (Kazakhstan, Asia), in the area of which were Camps 29/1, 29/2, 29/3, 29/4, and 29/5; Kukanda or Kokan instead of Kokand (Uzbekistan, Asia); Chياما instead of Chuama, province of Andizhan (Uzbekistan, Asia); Michiuris instead of Michurinsk.

