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History *versus* Memory?  
A Discussion on Italian War Crimes in World War II

*Abstract*

Focusing on the case study of Greece under Axis occupation, my paper will address the controversial issue of Italian war crimes in World War II. In particular, I will address the relationship between so-called historians' history and collective memory, being it public, institutional, social or culture memory.

In light of the mutual influences between historical research, collective memory, and international justice, my paper will concentrate on the debate on war crimes in post-1945 Europe. From that angle, I will analyze the proceeding of Allies' international justice, and its impact on the construction of historical paradigms concerning the experience of Fascist Italy's occupation of the Balkans.

According to the documentation submitted soon after the Liberation by the Greek government to the United Nations, several hundreds of Italian citizens were held responsible for war crimes against humanity. The long list of atrocities committed by the Italian army in Axis occupied Greece included burning of villages, torture, mass rapes, massacres of civilians, internment and execution of hostages.

As recent scholarship has documented, within Axis-occupied Greece the Italian troops were massively mobilized for large scale counterinsurgency operations, aimed at uprooting the Resistance organizations from rural areas of the Greek mainland. Historical evidence documents how, beginning in the late 1942, the Italian repressive policy turned into a war waged against civilians.

More than sixty years after the end of World War II, we have trouble recognizing the bloodstained portrait of the Italian occupation force as the – to us more familiar – icon of the “good Italian soldier.” From the 1950s onwards, both in Italy and abroad this icon has been consecrated by cinema, literature, and public discourse, as well as by historiography. Despite the gloomy scenario sketched by observers in the years immediately following the Liberation, in post-1945 Europe it gradually prevailed the perception that the Italian occupation had been mild and for the most part bloodless in character.

Such a historical narrative seems to have been enforced even by the collective memory of the victims. In contemporary Greece, in fact, historical representations of the period of Axis occupation have generally emphasised the theme of fraternization between the Italian occupying troops and the Greek occupied population, while remarking the violent character of the concomitant German occupation.

In appearance, never have history and collective memory seemed to offer us such discordant versions of the past. Such a paradox, and the sense of dislocation deriving from it, are revealing of the problematic relationship which, in post-1945 Europe, has occurred between the traumatic legacy of World War II, and the narrative paradigms which later informed the historical representation of the war period.

In this paper, I will explore the origins of that paradox, concentrating on the connection between judiciary paradigms leading post-war international justice and the shaping of collective memory of World War II.