

CONTEXTS AND DEBATES

The Italian Resistance: 80 years later – a roundtable reflection at LUISS

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Abstract

This article chronicles the roundtable held at LUISS University in Rome on 23 May 2025, marking the eightieth anniversary of the Italian Resistance. Organised alongside the launch of the special issue of *Modern Italy* titled ‘The Italian Resistance: Historical Junctures and New Perspectives’, the event gathered prominent scholars to revisit the legacy of the Resistance in contemporary historical, cultural and political discourse. Contributions highlighted emerging research on marginal actors, transnational perspectives, gendered memory and the symbolic dimensions of antifascism. Discussions revealed a shared concern with pluralising memory and resisting reductive narratives. This reflection emphasises the enduring relevance of the Resistance as a site of democratic imagination and critical historical inquiry, as well as the journal’s continued commitment to fostering innovative and inclusive scholarship on modern Italy.

Keywords: Italian Resistance; historiography; antifascism; memory; symbolic politics; democratic culture

On 23 May 2025, the Department of Political Science at LUISS University in Rome hosted a roundtable marking the eightieth anniversary of the Italian Resistance. Organised to accompany the launch of the special issue of *Modern Italy* titled ‘The Italian Resistance: Historical Junctures and New Perspectives’, edited by Gianluca Fantoni and Rosario Forlenza, the event brought together leading scholars in contemporary Italian history for a rich and at times provocative reassessment of the legacy of the Resistance and its place in the historical and political culture of present-day Italy.¹

The day saw the participation of Giovanni Orsina (LUISS), Gianluca Fantoni (Nottingham Trent University and general editor of *Modern Italy*) and Rosario Forlenza (LUISS), who were joined by Toni Rovatti (University of Bologna) and Phil Cooke (University of Strathclyde) in the first panel. The second session – the roundtable – brought together Mariachiara Conti (Istituto Storico della Resistenza di Parma), Roberto Balzani (University of Bologna and head of the Museum of the Liberation of Rome), Marc Lazar (LUISS/Sciences Po), Andrea Rapini (University of Bologna), Alessandro Santagata (University of Padua), Chiara Nencioni (University of Pisa), Rossella Pace (Università Suor Orsola Benincasa) and Francesco Fusi (University of Pisa). The roundtable was chaired by journalist and author Marco Damilano.

The special issue introduced by Fantoni and Forlenza stems from a dual concern, political and historiographical. Politically, the editors argue that the cultural hegemony of post-Fascist narratives has benefited from a decades-long fascination with Fascism in scholarship, popular culture and public memory. Fascism is widely studied and mythologised, while the Resistance and antifascism often remain obscure or oversimplified. As a result, the issue seeks to rebalance this historiographical trend by reasserting the transformative and creative importance of the Resistance, not merely as reactive, but as foundational for democratic Italy.

Historiographically, the special issue addresses the scarcity and obsolescence of English-language literature on the Resistance. It highlights marginal actors and liminal experiences, shedding light on Roma partisans, Catholic underground networks, Italo-American GIs and Liberal women resisters. Contributions include gendered and transnational perspectives, while also considering the Resistance's temporality, not as a closed period but as a continuum with resonances in contemporary politics and civic imagination. The issue posits 25 April as a symbolic threshold: a liminal moment of creative rupture when new political and social imaginaries emerged.

The editors also reflected on methodological choices, favouring horizontal collaboration among contributors and stressing the importance of microhistory and public history, including the work of local institutions (as illustrated in Mirco Carrattieri's contribution). Ultimately, the special issue commemorates both the Liberation's eightieth anniversary and the journal's thirtieth anniversary, offering a timely, multifaceted contribution to the ongoing debate on Italy's democratic identity.

Keynote by Toni Rovatti

The afternoon opened with a keynote by Toni Rovatti (University of Bologna), who explored representations of the enemy during Italy's civil war (1943–5). Rovatti's analysis focused on how the image of the enemy was formed and transformed in both partisan and Fascist propaganda. She emphasised how criminalisation and dehumanisation of the adversary were not only common but necessary to legitimise acts of violence. This applied especially to partisan narratives, where moral superiority was constructed through a deliberate contrast with the brutality of Nazi–Fascist forces.

From the Fascist perspective, partisans were dismissed as bandits and criminals rather than legitimate combatants. This framing justified the most extreme measures, including reprisals against civilians, whom the Fascists and German forces did not distinguish from armed partisans. Rovatti underlined how the German concept of *Bandenbekämpfung* (anti-partisan warfare) was projected as a police action, thereby erasing the boundaries between military and civilian targets.

Crucially, Rovatti situated this violent discourse within a broader wartime dynamic of spiralling escalation. The more the enemy was demonised, the more severe the violence became. This transformation of the enemy into a monstrous figure was intrinsic to the logic of civil war. Her intervention set the tone for the rest of the roundtable: attentive to nuance, ethically reflective, and attuned to the enduring consequences of wartime narratives.

Phil Cooke chaired the keynote address by Toni Rovatti. Cooke's and Rovatti's paths cross frequently as they are both involved in the steering committee of a web-based project dedicated to making the events of 7 July 1960, when police fired on the crowd at Reggio Emilia, accessible to a wider public. Cooke had also recently presented the book that Rovatti co-authored with Alessandro Santagata and Giorgio Vecchio, *I Fratelli Cervi: la storia e la memoria* (Viella, 2024). Commenting on Rovatti's wide-ranging keynote, Cooke highlighted the breadth of the issues she addressed and the consistent use that she made of Roberto Battaglia's *Un uomo, un partigiano*, first published in September 1945. Although the title

is rather redolent of its times, Battaglia's memoir remains a key text and continues to offer interesting insights into the encounter between a Roman intellectual – Battaglia was an art historian by training – and the reality of partisan warfare. Cooke also noted, with reference to the *Modern Italy* special issue, that this was the third time that a monographic issue of the journal had been dedicated to the Resistance, one for each decade of its history.

Marco Damilano and the opening questions

Journalist Marco Damilano launched the roundtable with a series of reflective provocations. Citing the final page of Ada Gobetti's wartime diary, he underscored the idea that the Resistance had inaugurated not just military liberation, but a deeper, moral struggle – a new, more complex battle 'within ourselves' against inertia, preconceptions and compromise. He framed the question posed by the special issue as profoundly current: is the Resistance to be enclosed in a museum, or does it remain alive and urgent? Damilano praised the special issue's choice to focus on marginal figures – Roma and Sinti, Catholics, Liberals, Italo-Americans, and women – as a way of destabilising dominant historical narratives. He invoked the concept of 25 April not as an endpoint, but as a beginning, a threshold into democratic experimentation. Damilano also reflected on the construction of Resistance myths, especially in literature. Referencing Calvino and others, he noted that postwar narratives often centre on the moment of individual moral choice: the decision to become a partisan. This heroic framing, while powerful, risks obscuring the collective and gendered dimensions of resistance, particularly when applied retroactively to women's participation.

Roundtable interventions: scholarship in dialogue

Giovanni Orsina opened with two interrelated provocations. First, he questioned why Catholic Resistance – given the Catholic world's postwar political centrality – remained under-studied. The reason is probably to be found in the legacy of the Cold War. We tend to underestimate, he argued, the enduring influence of the Cold War on the historiographical and non-historiographical narrations we make of the Resistance. Second, he challenged the ethical and analytical posture of some essays in the issue, observing a 'moral distance' from the past but insufficient analytical distancing, particularly regarding the use of the term 'Fascism'. He suggested a Crocean reversal: greater empathy with historical actors, but stricter conceptual clarity.

Mariachiara Conti emphasised the need to reconsider the periodisation of the Resistance. She focused on Rossella Pace's essay on Liberal resistance, stressing how Pace's research, rooted in personal diaries and familial networks, revealed continuities of dissent reaching back before 8 September 1943. Pace's focus on political families, biological and ideological, allowed for a deeper understanding of long-term resistance and offered a subtle critique of rigid temporal boundaries.

Roberto Balzani highlighted the archival dilemmas of studying the Resistance. Without institutional coherence, historians must draw from fragmentary, local and often personal sources. He characterised the Resistance as a *nebula* – that is, a dispersed constellation of narratives requiring interpretive humility. Balzani praised the special issue's microhistorical and pluralist approach, noting its resonance with contemporary historical practice.

Marc Lazar focused his critique on Rosario Forlenza's essay, situating it within the 'fascism generic' framework (as conceptualized by Robert Paxton, George L. Mosse, and Roger Griffin). While admiring Forlenza's conceptual depth, Lazar warned against 'metaphysical'

inflation of the term ‘fascism’, cautioning that excessive generalisation weakens its analytical usefulness. He also lamented the neglect of democratic acculturation – that is, the processes through which postwar Italy gradually integrated even anti-democratic elements into its political culture. Lazar praised the provocative thesis of Andrea Rapini’s essay: that antifascism, since the 1990s, has shifted towards antiracism. He noted the international parallels – especially in France – where this shift has led some to equate Israel with colonial fascism, a trajectory Lazar labelled as politically perilous, though intellectually revealing.

Toni Rovatti re-entered the conversation to suggest that the antifascism/anti-imperialism convergence predated the 1990s, tracing it back to the 1960s and global student movements. She also contested the idea that women’s resistance was marginalised, arguing instead for its increasing public and academic recognition over recent decades. In this respect, Iara Meloni’s essay was lauded for its diachronic mapping of the historiography of women in the Resistance. Tracing a trajectory from postwar invisibility to feminist recovery in the 1970s and intersectional approaches today, Meloni’s contribution also highlighted the role of oral history and family archives. However, Rovatti warned against reductive celebratory narratives, calling for critical engagement with the gendered dynamics of Resistance memory. Meloni’s essay, discussed in absentia earlier, was returned to by several participants. Her research draws on judicial archives of the immediate postwar period to trace the role of women in both suffering and pursuing justice for war crimes and sexual violence. This material complicates the prevailing narrative of women’s resistance as passive or symbolic. Meloni’s work uncovers women who actively demanded legal redress for their victimisation, often leading the charge in trials or public denunciation. Her findings suggest a deeper, often overlooked continuum between wartime suffering and postwar justice seeking.

Andrea Rapini articulated his article’s core argument: that the post-1989 crisis of institutional antifascism allowed for a shift towards civic and societal antifascism. While political parties abandoned explicit antifascist commitments, civil society, particularly immigrant and youth movements, reinvented antifascism through struggles against racism, exclusion and police violence. Rapini also warned that the collapse of institutional filters allowed extremist discourses to proliferate unchecked, especially on digital platforms. Fascist and racist language migrated from fringe groups to mainstream discourse through social virality. The lack of historical literacy and political guardrails, he argued, has created fertile ground for a dangerous symbolic re-legitimation of authoritarianism.

Expanding the conversation: symbolic politics, marginal voices and transnational frames

The second half of the roundtable featured some of the most conceptual contributions of the day. Rosario Forlenza opened with a passionate defence of his essay, which explores fascism through the lens of symbolic politics, drawing on the work of Claude Lefort. Forlenza challenged conventional views that reduce politics to institutional structures, arguing instead for an analysis that foregrounds the symbolic dimension of authority, time and identity. Fascism, in his view, is not simply a regime or a set of policies, but an attempt to resolve social complexity and fracture by installing transcendent forms of authority: the charismatic leader, the mythic past, and the perpetually reinvented enemy. These symbolic mechanisms are not confined to the Fascist era; they remain latent or reactivated in various political contexts. Rather than extending the label ‘fascism’ indiscriminately, Forlenza called for attention to the underlying patterns and symbolic forms that define authoritarian imaginaries. He contrasted these with postwar Italian democracy, especially

in its early years, where figures such as De Gasperi resisted the temptation to substitute the void left by Fascism with a new transcendent framework of authority. Instead, democratic Italy allowed the void to remain open: a space for political contestation rather than resolution.

Rossella Pace's intervention complemented this symbolic reading with a microhistorical perspective on Liberal women resisters. Drawing on archival research and intellectual mentorships rooted in institutions such as the Fondazione Einaudi and the University of Siena, Pace reconstructed networks of elite female opposition, often overlooked by mainstream historiography. These women, active in aristocratic salons, were not passive wives or mothers, but political agents who helped sustain Liberal opposition during Fascism's darkest years. Their commitment continued after 25 April, expressed through political engagement and the struggle for women's rights. Pace also lamented the poor archival visibility of Liberal women. Many documents remain in private hands and in family archives that resist institutional donation. This scarcity complicates the work of historians but also reveals the gendered nature of memory. She cited Ada Gobetti's diary, where a Liberal woman's presence in the foundational meeting of the Gruppo di Difesa della Donna goes unacknowledged by later feminist historiography – a telling omission.

Francesco Fusi, contributing from a transnational angle, shifted the focus to Italo-American GIs, ethnic soldiers whose identities complicate nationalist accounts of liberation. His recent co-authored monograph investigates how Italian-descended soldiers in the US military experienced the Italian campaign. These men, caught between two identities, embody the complexity of modern warfare and national memory. Their participation challenges the simplistic, folkloristic image perpetuated by Italian postwar cinema and literature, which often framed the American soldier as a liberator–redeemer. Yet this narrative served political and symbolic purposes. US military and diplomatic authorities were keen to stress the kinship between Italians and Italian-Americans, promoting a shared political horizon between the two nations. However, the reality was more complex. Not all Italo-Americans embraced this fraternal myth. Many sought to distance themselves from Italian peasants or provincial relatives, asserting instead a distinctly American identity. For Fusi, this reflects the broader dynamic whereby war transforms identity, not only expressing but also reshaping it.

The conversation then turned again to gender and memory. Chiara Nencioni revisited the notion of marginality, stressing how certain experiences, like those of Roma and Sinti partisans, remain doubly invisible. Nencioni, whose essays focused on the Roma and Sinti Resistance, relayed the harrowing oral testimony of a 98-year-old woman, a surviving *staffetta* whose husband was killed in combat. Despite her profound sacrifice, she has never received institutional recognition. Her family endured brutal violence and deportation, and she now lives in a marginalised encampment, underscoring how ethnically marked exclusion persists across decades. The absence of public memory and archival presence for these groups renders their suffering doubly erased.

The closing interventions revisited the role of memory and historiography. Alessandro Santagata raised the underexplored issue of Catholic memory of the Resistance, noting that the Church's complex position – oscillating between reconciliation and Cold War partisanship – has shaped how this past is remembered. He identified three key phases: Pius XII's cautious diplomacy, the political positioning of postwar Christian Democracy, and the Vatican II generation's rediscovery of Resistance values. The Catholic contribution, he argued, is too often dismissed or conflated with conservative silence. Gianluca Fantoni reminded the audience of the special issue's broader aims: to pluralise memory, de-mythologise received narratives and foreground ethical complexity. As the day's conversations revealed, the Resistance is not a closed chapter but a living legacy – contested, refracted and constantly reimaged. The call to return in ten years for the ninetieth

anniversary, made in jest, carried a serious undertone: that the task of writing the Resistance remains unfinished, and perhaps unfinishable.

Concluding reflections: the Resistance as liminal and ongoing

Gianluca Fantoni and Rosario Forlenza closed the event by reaffirming the vision behind the special issue: to place the Resistance at the heart of democratic imagination, not as myth or closure, but as process and provocation. The Resistance, they argued, was a space of political creativity, ethical experimentation and civic formation. Its legacies – ambiguous, plural and incomplete – continue to demand historical attention. Rather than offering a definitive history, the roundtable celebrated the Resistance's fragmentariness and its ongoing after-lives. In the words of Ada Gobetti, the struggle did not end in April 1945. It simply changed shape.

Note

1. *Modern Italy* 30 (2) of May 2025.

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Gianluca Fantoni is Senior Lecturer in the School of Arts and Humanities at Nottingham Trent University. His training is in twentieth-century Italian history, cultural studies and film studies. He is the author of *Italy Through the Red Lens: Italian Politics and Society in Communist Propaganda Films (1946–79)* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), and *Storia della Brigata ebraica. Gli ebrei della Palestina che combatterono in Italia nella Seconda guerra mondiale* (Einaudi, 2022). An English version of the book will soon be published by McGill-Queen's University Press. He is General Editor of *Modern Italy* (Cambridge University Press).

Italian summary

Questo articolo riflette su una tavola rotonda svoltasi presso l'Università LUISS di Roma il 23 maggio 2025, in occasione dell'ottantesimo anniversario della Resistenza italiana. Organizzato in concomitanza con il lancio del numero speciale di *Modern Italy* intitolato 'The Italian Resistance: Historical Junctures and New Perspectives', l'evento ha riunito importanti studiosi e studiosi per discutere criticamente l'eredità della Resistenza nel discorso storico, culturale e politico contemporaneo. Gli interventi hanno evidenziato nuove ricerche su attori marginali, prospettive transnazionali, memoria di genere e dimensioni simboliche dell'antifascismo. I dibattiti hanno mostrato una preoccupazione comune per la pluralizzazione della memoria e per il superamento di narrazioni semplificate. Questa riflessione sottolinea l'attualità della Resistenza come spazio d'immaginazione democratica e di interrogazione storica critica, nonché l'impegno continuo della rivista nel promuovere una ricerca innovativa e inclusiva sull'Italia contemporanea.

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