

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘For me, it was life-changing’: the Italian contact zone of occupation and the encounter with otherness in oral history recollections

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Abstract

This article examines the experiential and perceptual environment in which social encounters between soldiers and civilians occurred in Allied-occupied Italy (1943–45) and its enduring impact on the lives of those who experienced it. It does so by applying Mary Louise Pratt’s theoretical framework of the ‘contact zone’ to the case of occupied Italy and by exploring it through the lens of oral history sources. The critical analysis of interviews with Antonio Taurelli, an Italian teenager in 1944 who fought with American soldiers, and Harry Shindler, a British veteran who married an Italian woman during the war, sheds light on how ordinary individuals shaped their own experience of occupation within the contact zone as well as on the life-changing impact of their encounters with ‘otherness’. This article aims to contribute to our understanding of the social experience of the Allied occupation of Italy and the impact of military-civilian encounters in occupation environments more broadly.

Keywords: Second World War; Allied occupation of Italy; contact zone; oral history; military-civilian encounters; otherness

Introduction

Twenty-first-century conflicts, such as those in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Middle East and Ukraine, suggest that military occupation remains a persistent – and controversial – corollary of modern warfare. The ongoing struggle to define the slippery features of occupation, however, keeps clashing with the reality that this multifaceted phenomenon cannot be considered ‘as a fixed condition’, with scholars often describing it ‘as a factual situation’ (Stirk 2009, 53–54). Occupation practices and experiences can differ significantly across time and space, and approaching the issue from the top or the bottom – or even a horizontal investigation within various actors involved – can yield diverse and even contrasting insights. Indeed, the ‘factual situation’ created by military occupation is largely shaped by subjective perceptions. Therefore, researching how the social and cultural clash between occupiers and occupied is perceived and experienced on the ground – the social and cultural interactions with the ‘other’ and the sense of ‘otherness’ that comes from the enforced cohabitation – is central to grasping the occupation phenomenon from the perspective of those experiencing it.

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In the last decades, there has been a considerable expansion of academic interest in the contested social space where encounters with ‘otherness’ occur during instances of occupation (e.g., Gildea, Wieviorka and Warring 2006; Fritzsche 2020). This is especially true for research on occupations that occurred in the context of the Second World War, with particular attention having been paid to exploring social interactions during the German occupation of Europe and the Allied occupation of Germany (e.g., Erlichman and Knowles 2018; Roshwald 2023). Despite some limited earlier attempts to engage with the social dimension of war and occupation in Italy (e.g., De Marco 1996; Buchanan 2008, 2016; Porzio 2011; Williams 2013), however, scholars have only recently moved beyond a long-standing focus on the Nazi occupation and the Resistance to engage more systematically with the often hitherto marginalised lived experience of the Allied occupation. This has led to a range of new studies that have put social interactions, daily life, and cultural exchange centre stage (e.g., Escobar 2019; Laffin 2024; Lowe 2024; Simonetti 2025).

This article contributes to this new wave of research on the experiential environment in which encounters between soldiers and civilians took place during the Allied invasion and occupation of Italy. Building on Mary Louise Pratt’s theoretical framework of the ‘contact zone’, it traces the durable impact of encounters between Italians and Allied soldiers, exploring for the first time how these shaped the biographical self-narratives of individuals. In doing so, it draws on the unique possibilities that oral history provides to directly interrogate living ‘sources’ as well as its capacity to generate insights into subjective perceptions of an experience *a posteriori*. The article utilises oral history sources to unearth and bring to the fore the ways in which ‘ordinary’ occupiers and occupied made sense of their own experiences of invasion and occupation. At the same time, the critical interpretation of interviews conducted with those who experienced this multicultural encounter first-hand will shed light on the long-term impact of the Allied cohabitation with Italians on the lives of those who lived through it. The liminal social, experiential and emotional environment that Italian civilians and Allied soldiers were forced to share in occupied Italy – a space lying between war and peace, exploitation and negotiation, conflict and dialogue, misunderstanding and cultural enrichment – will be explored through the notion of an Italian ‘contact zone of occupation’.

The article will first provide a conceptual discussion of the ‘contact zone’. Subsequently, this theoretical framework will be applied to the analysis of two interviews that are particularly relevant for investigating the long-term biographical impact of multicultural encounters in the contact zone. These interviews have been selected from a large corpus of egodocuments relating to the encounter between British soldiers and Italian civilians in Allied-occupied Italy (Simonetti 2025). Mostly centred in Nettunia,¹ on the Lazio coast, the wartime experiences of Antonio Taurelli, then an Italian teenager, and Harry Shindler, a British veteran – whom I interviewed respectively in 2017 and 2019 – will shed light on the transformative impact of military-civilian interactions within the contact zone of occupation, even if that moment of exceptional social contact only endured for a limited time.

While their experiences cannot, of course, be considered representative of those of all soldiers and civilians in occupied Italy, they exemplify the potentially life-changing impact of such encounters. Indeed, to seek a single representative experience of war and occupation would be misleading, since such an approach would overlook the diversity of individual trajectories and subjectivities that oral history brings to the fore. The relevance of Taurelli’s and Shindler’s experiences lies above all in the striking sense of agency and opportunity that emerges from their oral testimonies, and that calls into question simplistic notions of power relations between victors and vanquished, occupiers and occupied. As such, Taurelli’s and Shindler’s ways of attaching specific meanings to their lives

during the Allied occupation period shaped not only the way they made sense of their wartime experiences but also fundamentally affected their postwar lives, illustrating the transformative potential of such encounters for both soldiers and civilians.²

The Italian contact zone of occupation

American literary theorist Mary Louise Pratt (1991, 34) first defined ‘contact zones’ as ‘social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermath as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.’ In refining the notion, Pratt specifically referred to ‘the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict’ (Pratt 1992, 8). Pratt’s interest in this distinctive ‘space’ was originally triggered by her work on the socio-cultural environment that developed in Latin America following the Spanish colonial conquest of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Subsequently, moving on to travel literature and women’s writings, Pratt’s work sought to lay bare broader hierarchical dynamics of domination and subordination, giving voice to previously marginalised or silent actors (Pratt 1992; Pratt 1993).

Since its introduction, the concept of the ‘contact zone’ has migrated to a wide variety of academic fields thanks to its inherent flexibility (Hall and Rosner 2004). Examples include its application not only to historical contexts such as the ‘sexual contact zone’ of post-Second World War Japan (Tanaka 2012), decolonised Korea (Kim 2024) and occupation literature (Buschmeier and Glesener 2024), but also to fields as diverse as museology (Poulter 2014), cinema (He and Tan 2023) and the multicultural classroom (Collins 2021). As far as the Allied occupation of Italy is concerned, Pratt’s theoretical framework has so far been applied predominantly to the exceptionally rich cultural landscape of Allied-occupied Naples. As such, Ruth Glynn (2017) and Marisa Escolar (2019) have successfully employed the concept to explore the complex literary environment that emerged out of the Allied presence by examining and comparing gendered representations of occupation.³

Building on this ongoing academic debate, this article argues that by shifting our attention to the exploration of human relations within socially and culturally conflictual environments such as spaces shaped by war and occupation, the concept of the ‘contact zone’ provides an effective lens to explore the role played by transnational encounters and individual agency. It also sheds light on the power imbalance driven by newly formed hierarchical dichotomies, uncertainty and bewilderment arising from the forced interaction with ‘otherness’, and the interplay of negotiation and mis/communication in the contact zone. These elements are central to occupation environments and warfronts such as Italy in 1943–45.

The application of this research lens, however, requires starting from the observation that the very existence of the contact zone was imposed by the will – and the military force – of the occupiers. Although the occupation environment was complex and multifaceted, this imposition immediately created a new, hierarchical and dichotomous kind of society: on the one hand, the invading soldiers who enforced occupation; on the other, the locals subjected to it. The resulting power imbalance was always evident to those who experienced it. It manifested itself primarily through the military and economic power of the occupiers that stood in stark contrast to the social status of the war-weary, impoverished, and hungry occupied.

Such a dichotomous relationship, alongside language and cultural barriers and the authorities’ attempt to force soldiers and civilians to live segregated lives, made interactions fleeting and communication highly problematic, triggering the creation of

new social dynamics (Simonetti 2025). While Pratt (1991, 37) argued that ‘the contact zone is intended in part to contrast with ideas of community’, occupation studies expert Peter Stirk (2009, 45) has emphasised that, ‘by its very nature, independently of any perverse aims that the occupier may, or may not, pursue’, occupation inevitably ‘poses a threat to the integrity of the community’. Indeed, I argue that the imposition of new rules, hierarchies, and geographies in the occupied territory led to what can be referred to as an ‘anti-community’. This novel social environment was characterised by the forced cohabitation of foreign soldiers and local civilians in a space transformed by occupation and perceived as ‘other’ by both. This ‘anti-community’ can be negatively defined by the absence of a shared common language, interest or heritage, and by functioning around interactions based on fleeting encounters and superficial knowledge of each other in a context of semi-permanent social and cultural conflict.

The inherently temporary nature of occupation – and, consequently, of the contact zone – is not only a defining feature of this phenomenon (Erichman 2021) but also a major factor influencing soldiers’ and civilians’ attitudes and behaviour. None of those who experienced it knew when occupation would come to an end but, since their first encounter, both soldiers and civilians were aware that – at some point – it would. The awareness of living in a liminal and transitory environment coinciding with the establishment of a foreign and often contested authority without sovereignty (Stirk 2016, 5) inevitably undermined its legitimacy. This circumstance, in turn, loosened the bounds of moral and ethical responsibility, ushering in a resurgence of military-civilian criminality and instances of reciprocal exploitation. War and occupation went initially hand in hand, though the latter lasted longer than the former. Both were characterised by the collapse of the pre-existing social and political order, creating a state of exception in the lives of individuals that upended many pre-existing norms and certainties, while bringing them into close contact with people that were initially perceived as culturally different (Gildea, Wieviorka and Warring 2006, 9).

Pratt’s approach was based on the fundamental insight that the analysis of the social dynamics of the contact zone could not be limited to the use of ‘traditional’ written or official documentation, and she therefore shifted her attention towards the extraordinarily rich ‘literate arts’ of the contact zone (Pratt 1991, 37). In the case of occupied Naples, Italian and Allied autoethnographic texts – a literary genre identified by Pratt (1991, 35) in which ‘people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them’ – proved to be so effective in conveying experiences and perceptions of the occupied city that these fictional texts based on personal experiences have been widely employed as a substitute for, or alongside, traditional autobiographical sources such as diaries and memoirs.⁴ Similarly, a number of British veterans of the Italian Campaign (e.g., Baron 1950; Lett 1955; Hood 1963; Newby 1971; Lewis 1978) published popular memoirs or autobiographical fictional works that, for decades, filled the gap left by the absence of a comprehensive historiographical analysis of the war in Italy, inevitably shaping how the British presence in Italy was remembered.

There are, however, different possible paths that can be undertaken to decode perceptions of the multifaceted world of the contact zone. Although the use of personal recollections – and especially interviews – as historical evidence is often regarded as controversial due to their inherently subjective nature, this article will employ oral history sources precisely because of their intrinsic ‘diversity’ (Portelli 1998, 68) and their capacity to provide a new layer of information on how soldiers and civilians perceived ‘otherness’ and the contact zone. Oral historian Paul Thompson famously intervened in the debate over the reliability of oral sources by arguing that the issue poses a ‘false choice’. The use of oral history sources as ‘simply one more document’ – he wrote – marginalises ‘the special value which they have as subjective, spoken testimony’ (Thompson 1988, 101). Like any other

source, interviews need to be assessed critically, especially as regards possible distortions caused by the passage of time and the impact of other media and collective memory on individual recollections. Yet, as Alessandro Portelli argued, theirs ‘is a different credibility’. Their relevance, in fact, ‘may lie not in [the interviewee’s] adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge’. Consequently, seemingly “‘wrong” statements’ may still be ‘psychologically “true”’, raising a whole new range of historiographical challenges and opportunities (Portelli 1998, 68).

The critical use of oral history sources therefore plays a crucial role in understanding *perceptions*, formed over several decades, as well as the long-term impact of the contact zone that developed in 1943–45 Italy. In fact, not only do such sources inform about a historical event, but they – first and foremost – shed light on what the event meant for the speaker, assigning it a subjective meaning that is otherwise unattainable. The subjective process of narrative creation allows one to make sense of a succession of experiences, events and perceptions – ultimately, of history. According to Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi (2023, 25), ‘[s]torytelling can be considered one major way we organise our experience of time and understand it.’

The following two sections draw on this theoretical framework to examine, based on oral history interviews, the cases of Antonio Taurelli and Harry Shindler, whose experiences reveal different dimensions of some of the distinctive social dynamics inherent to intercultural encounters within the Italian contact zone.

Antonio Taurelli: the contact zone labyrinth

War abruptly broke into the life of Antonio Taurelli on 22 January 1944, the day of the Anglo-American landings on the shores of Anzio and Nettuno, then small seaside towns about 50 kilometres south of Rome. At the time, 17-year-old Taurelli was working as a shepherd in the countryside outside Nettuno, near his family farm and vineyards. He had been doing the same since a very young age, as he could not attend school following his father’s death when he was only three years old.

Italy entered the war on the Axis side on 10 June 1940, as Germany’s victory over France seemed certain and Britain’s defeat imminent. The prolongation of the conflict, however, exposed the weaknesses of Mussolini’s Fascist regime and its military, widening the gap with the Italian people. A series of poor campaigns culminated in the Allied invasion of Sicily and the fall of Mussolini in July 1943. On 8 September, the new Badoglio administration announced an armistice with the Allies, while the government and monarchy fled to Allied-controlled southern Italy, leading to the collapse of the Italian army and society. The result was a country simultaneously occupied by German forces in the north and by the Allies in the south, with the frontline advancing northwards only extremely slowly. *Operation Shingle*, the Allied landings in Anzio and Nettuno, was conceived as an attack behind the German lines to facilitate the capture of Rome and induce the Germans to retreat from the heavily fortified Gustav Line and the seemingly impregnable Monte Cassino front. Although the landing had initially caught the Germans by surprise, the hastily prepared operation faced shortages due to the imminent invasion of Normandy (Gooderson 2008, 249–280). As the Germans regrouped and encircled the beachhead, *Shingle* transformed into a new, bloody stalemate (Clark 2006).

Unaware of the situation, in the early hours of 22 January Taurelli and his family, who were hosting relatives following the German evacuation of the coast of Nettuno, were woken by what they thought was thunder approaching from the sea:

We heard thunder from the sea. ‘Maybe it’s raining, who knows...’ We went back to sleep, and in the morning I got up early to buy some milk for the kids. As soon as I went

out... I saw a group of soldiers, crouched down [in the vineyards]. ... I looked [at them] but I still thought of the Germans. It was around six in the morning, but it was still dark. ... They didn't say anything, I carried on walking and I went to the shack. There was this woman who had the cows and was selling some milk. ... I just got in and... 'Antò, did you see the Americans?!' There were two soldiers inside, they were making coffee. They turned to me and said: '*Paisà, bongiorno!*' Bloody hell! These... came from America and could speak Italian, right? '*Com'on, bongiorno!*'⁵

The view of Italian-speaking GIs – possibly some of the hundreds of thousands of Italian Americans enrolled in the US Army – drinking coffee with his neighbour shocked Taurelli. Recollections of the first face-to-face encounter with the 'other' in the contact zone – particularly amongst the weaker party, the civilians – are often framed as a rupture, a gateway to an upside-down world that eyewitnesses often struggled to grasp in its complexity. Throughout the interview, Taurelli repeatedly used the expression 'the end of the world' to convey his bewilderment before such instances. Since food had been his family's main concern for many years, the sudden availability of groceries initially made available by the Allies struck him as a dramatic change:

Sweets, cigarettes... [...] I, for example, despite all the troubles I went through, felt like a lord during the war, what I ate with the Americans I never ate even on feast days in Italy. I ate pineapples – they had pineapples! ... The arrival of the Americans moved Italy 200 years forward. ... The Americans didn't bring liberation, they brought light.

In most civilians' recollections, the initial generous Allied – especially American – food distributions to the famished population greatly contributed to shaping the first encounters with the Allies as a 'liberation', in contrast to the 'occupation' previously imposed by the Germans. Indeed, the full extent of the Allied occupation would become apparent only over time (Simonetti 2025, 198).

Just a few hours later, a German aircraft was shot down near Taurelli's home, signalling that it was too early to celebrate. One of the fiercest battles of the Italian Campaign was about to begin. As the Germans recovered, they encircled and bombed the Anzio-Nettuno beachhead day and night for almost four months, reducing the towns to rubble. Taurelli, whose hatred for the Germans had been exacerbated by their brutal treatment of the population during the months of occupation, instinctively felt compelled to join the fight:

With my cousin, a little younger than me... 'let's go around and see the Americans.' [...] We saw a battalion coming from the inland. And so I... I'm goin' to ask'em. 'Take me with you!' But they didn't understand or didn't answer to me. And so, while walking, I asked one: 'take me with you!' One at the front stopped and said: 'where's the Germans?' 'They're not here, they went towards Littoria. Take me with you! I, too, can shoot the Germans!' '*C'mon!*', he said. He gave me two ammunition boxes and put me in the middle of the squad. I didn't know anything, I stayed there. And I told my cousin: 'Go home, tell mum I'm going to war!' Like I was going to the theatre.⁶

Taurelli's encounter with a foreign language was one of the most defining aspects of his encounter with 'otherness'. He had barely travelled to Rome before, and communication with his new companions from overseas proved highly problematic. Throughout the interview, he seemed constantly worried that his narrative was making sense. Yet, it was he who struggled to understand the new dynamics of the contact zone: 'we talked, but I didn't

understand anything', he recalled; or 'he did like this [with his head], but I didn't understand shit! I pretended that I did ...' Almost 80 years later, many aspects of his experience remained unintelligible to him.

The morning after he joined them, the American 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, Company F, had its first casualty on the beachhead: a soldier shot in the chest just a few metres away from Taurelli. Distressed, he was urged to collect the wounded soldier's helmet and rifle, and just carry on. On another occasion, while on night guard duty with their machine gun positioned just a few metres from the German lines, Taurelli and his American companion fired some shots with very low visibility. The following morning they found two bodies but struggled to identify them:

One was short, black hair, the other looked almost like me, all red, his hair. Now I don't know... I almost never said this because we don't know if they were Germans, if Italians ... they could have well been Italian, who were goin' home ...

Taurelli still recalled the details of their faces and their belongings, including a photograph of a young woman and an internment camp card. Yet, his hesitation in narrating this tragic episode reveals his complex relationship with this memory, highlighting the coexistence of shame alongside pride. Indeed, as Portelli has argued (2010, 9), the 'inter-view' reflects not only the interviewee's exchange with the interviewer but, above all, their relationship with the past. When he compared their appearance to his own, Taurelli emphasised his ongoing struggle to find his place in the contact zone. Although he admitted to feeling a strong sense of belonging with his American comrades, repeating 'they treated me like an American, better than an American!', he could not avoid feeling somewhat different from them. In his own words, the identity crisis he experienced in the upside-down world of the contact zone is rendered into an economic and generational clash:

The Americans were like kids. Big boys. Good ... brats, really. [...] I was a hundred-year-old man, they were kids. Because since I was [a boy] I had to go round looking for something to eat and they always had something to eat, the Americans.

The excitement, fear, bewilderment and alienation he felt from the day he joined the GIs marked a powerful turning point in Taurelli's life – something completely 'other', when compared to his humble past and anything he would experience thereafter. Ultimately, the experience challenged his own identity. This transition was symbolically marked by a brief confrontation – an initiation rite – with Lieutenant Stanley R. Navas, his constant reference point on the battlefield, who had renamed him Tony: 'Tony, io americano; [tu] oggi americano'. Taurelli was given a full US uniform and became his unit's guide, interpreter and assistant machine gunner: 'they dressed me up as an American, I was a soldier like them', he recalled. Antonio Taurelli was now 'Tony, 504a Divisione, Compagnia F, 4a Squadra mitraglieri', a ditty he learned by heart and kept repeating. For two months, Taurelli marched, ate, slept, laughed, fought, killed, got sick, and lived with his American comrades. He felt especially close to Navas, who allowed him in the group on their first encounter and whom Antonio carried on his shoulder after he stepped on a mine and lost an arm during a night patrol. On that night, Taurelli fell gravely ill, struck by a fever probably caused by such a distressing experience.

Not surprisingly, when the time suddenly came for him to part from his unit, the experience proved as traumatic as their first encounter. On 22 March, the 504th was ordered back to Britain to prepare for the forthcoming landing in Normandy. Its men, including Taurelli,

were allowed to spend some time in Naples before leaving. Taurelli recalled their last day with great emotion:

We went all together ... with the rifle around our neck, to the port. There was a foot-bridge before the ship, they were calling the names and they embarked on the ship. Then, when we were there, Lieutenant *Shwentz* [Richard W. Swenson] told me: 'Tony, you finish war' Cause they couldn't bring me with them, 'cause I'm Italian, right? Here I could stay [with them] 'cause I was Italian, not there. Lieutenant [Navas] had told me he'd bring me to America and made me an American. But that was it, they left.

Taurelli was able to return home only after the front had moved northwards. At that point, he started facing the unbearable weight of his incredible experience. Nobody amongst his neighbours knew what had happened to him when he left Nettuno, and few believed his story. For him, the perception of having suddenly been part of the big wheel of history, followed by the equally abrupt departure from it, proved to be a highly distressing experience: 'I saw them die. Like brothers. This stayed inside me'. He decided he would not give up meeting again with his former comrades and obtaining recognition for what he did.

Harry Shindler: finding love in war

Harry Shindler's first encounter with war occurred in London, his birthplace, during the Blitz: 'I was in Trafalgar Square, watching London burn. The whole of London looked on fire, you could see it in the sky, the sky was all red.' Drafted into the British Army in October 1941 at the age of 20, Shindler interrupted his work in an engineering factory and his night school studies to join the Royal Fusiliers and, soon after, the Royal Electrical Mechanical Engineers (REME), a new specialised Corps responsible for repairing the technical equipment of all units. In 1943, Shindler was deployed to North Africa and, after a two-month wait, to Italy. In his interview, he recalled that on his troopship nobody had ever been out of Britain, and the only Italian he had ever seen was a 'rather large lady, dressed in black, obviously *Siciliano* [sic]' who owned a coffee shop in Portobello Road. Shindler crossed the gate of the Italian contact zone of occupation in war-weary Naples, which appeared 'dusty and chaotic' to him. The first interaction he had with an Italian proved disappointing. As he tried to buy some food, he entered a bombed-out café where he tried to make himself understood by an old lady:

So I went there and said 'I want a chicken', and I went like this [he 'flaps' his hands]. She went round the back and I wondered what was coming out. And she came out with what I now know is called a *uovo al tegamino* [a fried egg].

Shindler's narrative portrays an inquisitive and determined individual who, during the war, discovered his deep fascination for the inherent 'otherness' of the contact zone. Disappointed by such a first encounter, he recalled that in Algiers he always needed an interpreter to talk to locals. As he looked at the map of Italy, Shindler realised that this was not enough for him:

I thought we've got a long way to go, Italy is a long boot. [...] If we're going to go right up there, I'd better learn some of the language, you can't keep asking people. So I got a Collins book, a little [English-Italian] Collins dictionary. And I thought here, now, I should learn Italian and speak.

As part of the occupying force, Shindler was allowed more agency in the contact zone, and he exercised it actively from the outset. His proactive approach reflected his intention to master the contact zone by acquiring the tools necessary to navigate it. One of the most important means of enabling social interaction between soldiers and civilians was the bilingual dictionary or phrase book. For soldiers arriving with no knowledge of the language, these small volumes – issued by the army or obtained locally – served as vital bridges between two cultures, encouraging communication and facilitating the first steps toward mutual understanding (Simonetti 2020, 174–76). Shindler could not have known it then, but his decision to purchase a dictionary would ultimately prove life-changing.

Although he would always remain an anti-war activist, Shindler truly believed that the Second World War was ‘a different kind of war [...] a just war’. According to his recollections, the Italians showed a friendly attitude towards the Allies, although he admitted that this was predominantly due to their relief in seeing the Germans leave, following their brutal occupation: ‘Go and make friends with them, that’s what it was. Because [...] we had to demonstrate that we are a liberty-loving nation, and if you support us we’ll liberate you.’ In truth, although the Allied authorities never imposed in Italy strict anti-fraternisation rules of the kind issued in occupied Germany in 1945, they still – mostly unsuccessfully – tried to limit contact between soldiers and civilians in various ways. These included the attempt to ‘segregate’ soldiers in designated areas of Italian cities where Allied facilities such as restaurants and clubs were available. Their objective was to prevent soldiers from visiting local homes or premises and to restrict the exchange of any goods between soldiers and civilians (Simonetti 2025, 199, 213).

Later on in the war, Shindler’s language skills allowed him to empathise better than most with the harsh realities of wartime Italy. This was, for example, true with the *scugnizzi*, impoverished Neapolitan street urchins who largely lived off illicit activities: ‘I made friends with them’ – Shindler recalled – ‘whereas the other English officers ... “get out of the way!” Not me!’ Shindler felt deeply sorry for them and, although illegal, used to buy them cakes from the army canteen. The words he used to describe their prematurely lost youth closely resemble those of Antonio Taurelli, highlighting how both occupiers and occupied were immediately struck by their different upbringing and circumstances: ‘they were little kids, but they were men, if you see what I mean’. Contrary to what happened to many other Allied soldiers, nobody ever touched his army motorbike when parked in Naples: ‘Don’t worry mister, your bike is as safe as my little sister!’, they used to tell him – an instance that, in his recollection, reflected both his growing connection to the local community and his capacity for empathy.

On the night of 23 January 1944, Shindler embarked on a convoy from Naples to an unknown destination. ‘Where I was going there won’t be any Italians’, he recalled, disheartened at the thought of reaching the battlefield. He would later describe the Anzio-Nettuno beachhead, the place where he would spend the next four months of his life, as ‘hell’. Shindler reached the shores of Anzio at dawn, two days after the beginning of Operation *Shingle*. It was the time when German reinforcements were reaching the beachhead to begin their encirclement. While disembarking amongst falling shells, he had the sensation ‘of being part of a herd of animals the moment before their slaughter’ (Shindler and Patucchi 2016, 50–51).

Like the other Allied soldiers stationed on the beachhead, Shindler lived underground, leaving his foxhole only for necessary duties, such as when guns needed repairing: ‘I spent most of my time down there praying the grenades would not find me’ (Shindler and Patucchi 2016, 54). As the towns had been evacuated, Shindler had no chance to practise his Italian in Anzio but kept studying his dictionary. Learning Italian in the Anzio trenches soon proved to be much more than a pastime for a curious soldier. It became a ‘therapy’ to

keep his mind out of the horrors of war. When the Allies broke the German encirclement and headed towards Rome, at the end of May 1944, Shindler was eager to immerse himself in the Italian contact zone once again.

With time, his growing mastery of the language made him an asset to the British Army and allowed him to be withdrawn from the frontline, sparing him the last bloody battles of the Italian Campaign. He was then stationed in Ascoli Piceno, in the Marche region, working as an interpreter while the British trained the reformed Nembo division of the new Italian co-belligerent army, established following Italy's declaration of war against Germany on 13 October 1943. There, while playing football with fellow soldiers on an improvised pitch, he had the encounter that changed his life:

[Ida] worked with a lot of other girls at a pasta factory and to go home they had to come through this square [...]. So, I was playing goalkeeper, and while she was there of course you got the chance for a chat, and in the end we got on chatting and chatting.

Ida was a young local woman who had endured a difficult childhood, having lost her parents at a very young age. When she first met Shindler, she was living with an adoptive family while her only brother was imprisoned in a British POW camp. Since then, Shindler always played in the goal, hoping to have more chances to speak with her. Aided by his dictionary, the two started to meet regularly and gradually got to know each other. However, overreliance on such dictionaries and guidebooks, either distributed to soldiers or produced by locals, often led to critical misunderstandings: 'I remember I got myself into a lot of trouble because in this guidebook they said you must be very careful with Italians because, they said, they're very ... very generous and if they offer you something, they said, it's not very clever to refuse'.⁷ To calm down the nerves before going to Ida's home, Shindler used to eat something at a nearby coffee shop with some fellow soldiers, without knowing that 'a very good meal' would await him soon after:

Of course I should have known, but they're not quite easy. You know, when you say thanks and they just keep going ... so, [when] I go down [to their home] and they say 'oh, but you must have a meal with us!', I couldn't say I've had one, 'cause they're touchy, you see. So, I'd have one there as well. What I didn't know was that what I was eating there was *their* supper. They were giving me theirs. When I found that out, I then started to bring down the food.

Disregarding army regulations that strongly discouraged soldiers from marrying locals (Simonetti 2025, 274–275), without asking for the Army's permission, Shindler secretly married Ida in a church in 1945, when the war was still on.⁸ Since Shindler's unit was stationed further north and Ida only had a few relatives who could attend, their wedding in Ascoli Piceno was a very small affair:

I remember we had nothing of our own, or hardly anything. There was only a drink, nothing to eat. So, we told [some local] women who went outside in the country and they came back with a couple of sandwiches. We had some wine, of course, and some fruit, like cakes. And that was our wedding thing.

While Ida saw in her wedding the possibility of leaving her troubled past behind and starting anew, for Shindler the ceremony marked the beginning of a lifelong tie with the Italian contact zone. As the couple had married outside of the army jurisdiction, when Shindler was demobilised he had to return to Italy at his own expense to take her – and their son, 'further

proof of the effects of that dictionary' (Shindler and Patucchi, 2016, 149) – to London, where they established their new Anglo-Italian family.

The postwar legacy of the contact zone

Antonio Taurelli and Harry Shindler's willingness to engage with the 'other' profoundly shaped their wartime experiences and affected their entire lives. Indeed, the stories of their entanglements with the Italian contact zone were far from over in 1945. As the war and, later on, the Allied occupation came to an end, the factors that made the contact zone possible disappeared, and while Allied soldiers were gradually repatriated, the Italians slowly adjusted to peacetime in a new democratic republic. Yet, the war never seemed to be over for Taurelli and Shindler, whose minds remained seemingly trapped in the contact zone.

While many decided to leave wrecked Nettuno, Taurelli stayed, but found it hard to settle down. Similarly to many returning war veterans (Gray 1998, 28), he struggled to feel purposeful again: 'I've done everything in my life, even been a hustler', he recalled. Significantly, his first postwar job involved dangerous deep dives to assist in the recovery of Allied shipwrecks sunk along the coastline, a practice symbolically akin to his efforts to keep the memory of his wartime experience alive. In the first days following his return, Taurelli began what seemed a hopeless struggle to be recognised as an active fighter. His task was especially complicated by his liminal status, straddling the roles of civilian, soldier, and possibly partisan. For decades, though, this only led to his growing frustration and social alienation. As he put it, because of the absurd complexity of the postwar Italian bureaucracy he was always missing a document, finding office doors closed, or was told he was out of time. Even his mother's cries went unheard after the tragic death of his 14-year-old sister Marisa, who was fatally burned in an accident during the family's wartime evacuation from Nettuno. His ambiguous institutional position seemed to mirror the fractured self-identity he had developed over the course of the war.

Following his encounter with the 'other', Taurelli felt changed and his perception of society was drastically altered. When he abruptly found himself in the contact zone, young Taurelli felt completely unequipped to master his journey and spent the rest of his life retelling – and thus consolidating – his story to come to terms with it. His self-identity seemed to have been at stake. The memory of the encounter with 'otherness' in the contact zone – an extraordinary episode in the otherwise ordinary life of a young man of rural origins – became a significant reference point for him, leading him to idealise his experience. Through frequent storytelling, Taurelli transformed his time in the contact zone into an epic account of how, against all odds, he actively participated in the Second World War, voluntarily joined the struggle against Nazi Germany, and assisted the Allies on the Anzio–Nettuno front as part of what would become the world's mightiest army. In his narrative, silences speak as loudly as his daring deeds. When I prompted him to recall his earlier experiences, he reluctantly admitted – 'I didn't even want to mention it...' – that he had spent two months as a volunteer in the Fascist Regia Marina in Pola before the armistice chaos, an element he believed might have somewhat undermined the role he later played alongside the GIs. Ultimately, his focus on this exceptional period of his life made him feel that he somehow belonged somewhere else.

Taurelli kept visiting the newly built Sicily–Rome American Cemetery of Nettuno, hoping to meet his former comrades again. Finally, in 1987, a chance encounter with the cemetery manager and the repetition of the ditty containing the details of his unit provided him with a lead. The manager received numerous letters, among which was one from Stanley Navas:

The lieutenant said: 'I'm glad you're alive, I'm coming straight to Nettuno!' So the lieutenant came to Nettuno, we hugged in the main square ... so many tears, bloody

hell! People were asking me if he was a relative from America ... much more! He's more than a relative to me. We went to the town hall, they held a ceremony.

Taurelli was appointed an honorary member of the 504th Infantry Regiment and was eventually invited to the US, where he marched alongside American veterans on Memorial Day. He also obtained recognition as a partisan fighter – although without compensation, he stressed.⁹ He became well-known in Nettuno and was interviewed several times about his experience. Up to his death in 2021, each 22 January, Antonio Taurelli accompanied local schoolchildren to the American cemetery and laid 150 roses over the graves of his 'brothers' – as he used to address them. 'These people, I never forgot', he wrote in a poem he dedicated to them (Vitale 2016, 183).

Similarly, Harry Shindler's journey into the contact zone never stopped influencing his postwar life. Shindler's Anglo-Italian family moved to Rome in the 1980s and remained there until Ida's death; soon after, he moved again, this time to the Marche region, his wife's birthplace, where he lived up to his death in 2023. After moving to Italy, Shindler attracted growing attention by assisting people still coping with unhealed wounds or unresolved queries relating to the Italian Campaign. He identified nameless fallen or missing soldiers as well as the parents of individuals who were born from Italian-Allied relationships; he reunited former Allied POW escapees with their local helpers and allowed descendants – such as Roger Waters of Pink Floyd – to uncover previously unknown aspects of their wartime family histories (Shindler and Patucchi 2016). Shindler was also politically active and worked towards strengthening Anglo-Italian relations: he was awarded an OBE in 2021 in recognition of his decades-long campaign to secure the right to vote for British overseas citizens in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, which he tried to overturn at the European Court of Human Rights. He also successfully campaigned to erect a small monument dedicated to the liberation of Rome in the capital, '[m]ade possible' – as the inscription reads – 'by the sacrifice and heroism of the Allied forces, Italian partisans and the people of Rome' (Shindler 2008). By acknowledging the joint efforts of Allied soldiers and Italian civilians, the monument – including a bronze bas-relief depicting an Italian woman welcoming an Allied soldier – can be read as a recognition of the crucial role the contact zone played in the experiences of those who went through it. On a scale even larger than Taurelli's experience, Shindler's activism placed him in the public eye and prompted him to research, retell and even write his own story multiple times. Through these narrations, he forged a powerful narrative of Anglo-Italian intercultural encounters, exemplified by his marriage to an Italian and his move to Italy, which became a symbolic extension of that dialogue.

As sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992, 34) showed in his seminal work, memories cannot exist in a vacuum, and are shaped more by the present than by the past. Through storytelling, Taurelli and Shindler consolidated not only their wartime narratives but also the meaningful trajectories they attributed to them, turning their recollections into a palimpsest of wartime experience and later reinterpretation. After all, memory is 'not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings' – or storytelling (Portelli 1998, 69).

Conclusions

The study of multicultural encounters during military occupations sheds light on ordinary people's experiences of war and occupation and helps broaden our understanding of how such liminal experiential and perceptual 'space' shapes the sphere of human relations. The use of oral history sources is pivotal in such analysis, providing historians with the tools to 'shape' their sources by directly questioning them, exploring both subjective perceptions

of intercultural encounters during occupation and their often-neglected long-term impact on the lives of those who lived through them.

The experiences of Antonio Taurelli and Harry Shindler in the contact zone offer revealing insights into the dynamic power relationship inherent to military occupation. Indeed, although they belonged to the two opposite ends of the hierarchical dichotomy established following the invasion, they both demonstrated a significant degree of agency in bridging the gulf separating the occupiers from the occupied by making crucial choices that profoundly shaped not only their wartime experiences but also their entire lives. Both Taurelli and Shindler actively challenged the roles assigned to them. Taurelli moved beyond his condition as an occupied civilian by voluntarily joining the Americans, thereby acquiring a significant degree of agency and transforming his own position in the context of the occupier-occupied dyad. Shindler, by contrast, distanced himself from his role within the occupying army, challenging army regulations and drawing closer to the local population, ultimately marrying an Italian woman. For both, the contact zone provided the opportunity to live through previously unthinkable – exciting as well as traumatic – encounters and experiences that significantly transformed them, altering their perspectives and leading them in unforeseen directions.

Decades after the end of the war, instead of concentrating on elements of suffering, their memories lingered predominantly on often-overlooked features of occupation: the encounter with ‘otherness’ and its existence within a temporary state of exception that allows room for profound personal transformation, adventurism, romance, as well as social and physical mobility. After all, as Mary Louise Pratt (1991, 37) effectively argued, the contact zone needs to be seen both as a fertile environment made of dialogue and interaction, where collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, and vernacular expression develop, and as a dangerous state of mind, devoid of understanding and trust, where miscomprehension rules.

In the last years of their lives, both Taurelli and Shindler became ‘ambassadors’ of the contact zone as they were frequently invited to speak to local schoolchildren about the importance of open-mindedness, inclusivity and transnational collaboration. Taurelli put it simply during his interview: ‘for me, it was life-changing’; as for Shindler, during our last meeting he demonstrated the lasting impact of his encounter with the ‘other’ by pulling from his bag his well-loved wartime English-Italian Collins dictionary.

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Notes

1. On 27 November 1939, a royal decree joined the neighbouring coastal towns of Anzio and Nettuno to form Nettunia. Since in June 1945 the towns split again, for simplicity, from now on I will use the best-known terms ‘Anzio’ and ‘Nettuno’.
2. Unless otherwise specified, all the quoted extracts refer to the author’s interviews with Antonio Taurelli (1926), recorded on 6 November 2017, and Harry Shindler (1921), recorded on 23 January 2019. Imperial War Museums, sound files 37420 and 37424.
3. Other instances of the application of the contact zone framework to the Allied occupation of Italy – but not referring to Naples – are, for example, Leavitt (2020) and Gordon (2018).
4. See especially widely quoted literary works by Italian and Allied eyewitnesses of occupation such as Eduardo De Filippo (1945), John Horne Burns (1947), Curzio Malaparte (1949) and Norman Lewis (1978).
5. Text in italics reproduces the interviewee’s original pronunciation and has not been translated.

6. It was not unusual for GIs to rely on locals for guidance, intelligence and support in war zones. These arrangements were generally informal and were encouraged by payment and shared interest. Another such case on the Anzio-Nettuno front can be found in Vitale (2016).
7. British and US Army guidebooks and handbooks, which were meant to prepare soldiers and officers for their 'encounters' with Italy and the Italians, projected a highly stereotyped – often racialised – image of the Italians. See, for example, Escolar (2019, 17–41) and Simonetti (2020, 234–239).
8. Although the exact number is unknown, estimates suggest that at least 11,000 Anglo-American soldiers married Italian women in Italy. See Simonetti (2025, 271).
9. Although he was never a proper *partigiano*, on the 'Partigiani d'Italia' database (<https://partigianiditalia.cultura.gov.it/>) Antonio Taurelli is recorded as a 'partigiano combattente; formazione: isolato' – a title used predominantly in Southern Italy, where Resistance was less structured – from 25 January 1944 to 30 April 1944.

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Italian summary

Questo articolo si propone di esplorare da un punto di vista esperienziale il contesto nel quale si svolse l'incontro fra soldati e civili durante l'occupazione alleata d'Italia (1943–45) attraverso l'applicazione del concetto di 'contact zone', coniato da Mary Louise Pratt, e la lente delle fonti orali. L'analisi critica delle interviste a Antonio Taurelli e Harry Shindler, un adolescente italiano che combatté al fianco dei soldati americani e un veterano britannico che sposò un'italiana durante la guerra, mette in luce sia come delle persone comuni abbiano contribuito a plasmare la propria esperienza dell'occupazione, sia l'impatto che l'incontro con l'alterità della 'contact zone' ebbe sulla loro vita. Questo articolo intende contribuire alla comprensione dell'occupazione alleata in Italia da un punto di vista esperienziale e approfondire la discussione sull'impatto degli incontri tra militari e civili nei contesti di occupazione.

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