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INTRODUCTION

From liberation to occupation: rethinking Allied rule in Italy

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Abstract

This introduction situates the Allied occupation of Italy as a distinctive yet comparatively underexplored case within the broader history of mid-twentieth-century military occupations. It traces the origins, peculiarities, and contradictions of Allied rule, foregrounding the tension between liberation and occupation that shaped both contemporary experiences and subsequent historiography. After outlining the fragmented development of the field and the long predominance of liberation-centred narratives, it calls for recontextualising the occupation of Italy within wider transnational and comparative frameworks. Rather than examining the Italian case solely through an exploration of its domestic impact, the article proposes treating it as an early laboratory for Allied ruling practices that were later applied elsewhere. In addition, it suggests exploring the Italian case through a set of research themes that have emerged from the new comparative field of Occupation Studies. The special issue advances this agenda by combining attention to hitherto marginalised aspects of the era with critical reflection on established subjects, thereby contributing to a reassessment of Italy's place within the history of Allied rule in mid-twentieth-century Europe.

Keywords: Allied occupation of Italy; Second World War; liberation; Occupation Studies; historiography; cultural memory

On 11 June 1943, the British 1st Infantry Division landed unopposed on Pantelleria. Following a month of Allied naval and air siege, the small volcanic island, located between the coasts of Sicily and Tunisia and depicted by Fascist propaganda as an impregnable stronghold, surrendered even before the landing began (Holland 2020, 84–90). A combined British–American military governorship was immediately established, and the Allies issued their Proclamation Number 1 in both English and Italian to impress on the roughly 12,000 civilians still living there that 'the armed forces of Great Britain and the United States [were] to occupy' the island (AMGOT 1943, 28). Pantelleria thus became the first patch of Italian territory to fall under Allied occupation during the Second World War, soon followed by the Pelagie islands of Lampedusa, Linosa and Lampione.

Alongside the disintegration of Pantelleria's administration and the breakdown of the local infrastructure and supply machinery, the Allied occupiers were confronted with Italian civilians whose attitudes were strikingly friendly, 'sometimes almost embarrassingly so' (Harris 1957, 33–34). Although the seizure of the small island clearly had limited objectives and was a minor episode in the broader trajectory of the war, it foreshadowed some

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of the central features that would characterise the subsequent invasion and occupation of Sicily on 10 July 1943, and later of mainland Italy. These included the near absence of Italian military resistance; the generally welcoming or non-hostile stance of civilians; the immediate establishment of an Anglo-American administration through the Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories (AMGOT); and the persistent challenge of sustaining a war-weary, hungry Italian population amid the collapse of local governance. Above all, the occupation of Pantelleria brought to the fore the central tension between the benevolent and repressive aspects of the Allied occupation, exposing the underlying conflict between notions of 'liberation' and 'occupation' that would come to shape much of the subsequent debate about the era.

The peculiarities of an Allied occupation

Allied rule in Italy, a country that had experienced a violent dictatorship for over 20 years, stands out as an especially intricate case of occupation in the mid-twentieth century. The occupation began in Pantelleria on 11 June 1943, but it would take the Allies 691 days to secure full control of the peninsula. Following the fall of Fascism and the armistice with the Allies signed by the Italian government on 8 September 1943, German forces occupied central and northern Italy, establishing the Italian Social Republic in Salò as a puppet regime. Only on 2 May 1945 did German troops in northern Italy surrender under Allied pressure and a concerted insurrection. By then, the Italian state had shifted from being Germany's principal Axis partner to a 'co-belligerent' of the Anglo-American forces. The ambiguity of this semi-allied status exposed the country's loss of real sovereignty in the wake of defeat, and the reality of a dual occupation: Allied in the South, German in the North. Amid this institutional chaos, Italy became a contested battlefield, and its population endured widespread suffering. Occupation formally ended on 31 December 1945 with the dissolution of the Allied Military Government, which had already abandoned references to the 'Occupied Territories' earlier, as Italy's political rehabilitation and integration into the nascent Western bloc progressed (Harris 1957, 366).[1] Allied troops, however, remained stationed in Italy until the end of 1947, when the democratic constitution of the new Italian Republic came into force.

Despite a number of commonalities, therefore, the nature and duration of occupation, as well as its impact and experience, varied significantly across regions and over time, reflecting the rapid changes in the military, political, and diplomatic context. This was most evident in the stark contrast between the situation in the North and South of the peninsula. More generally, however, it also applied to differences in the experience of occupation between areas directly on the front lines, and those that saw only a transient presence of foreign troops.

The Allied landings in Italy marked a turning point in the Second World War and in the country's modern history. As Allied forces slowly advanced northward, they precipitated the fall of Fascism, fostered the emergence of the Resistance, and propelled the rise of new political parties, culminating in the expulsion of German forces and the creation of a democratic republic integrated into the Western bloc during the ensuing Cold War. Beyond the fundamental political legacy, however, the occupation also had a lasting cultural and social impact. Between 1943 and 1947, Italians encountered British and American troops in cities, towns, and rural areas, and engaged with members of societies that they perceived as markedly different from their own. This experience of 'otherness' profoundly shaped postwar Italian society (Ellwood 2012; Bonsaver 2023).[2] This was not, however, a simple story of beneficial cultural exchange. Despite its comparatively brief duration, the Allied occupation of Italy became a contested undertaking, marked by its deeply contradictory nature. Although Italy had been a key Axis power, Allied propaganda framed the British

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and American presence as 'liberation' to bolster legitimacy, while the generally non-hostile reception of invading Allied troops by large sections of the Italian population deepened confusion on the ground about the purpose of Allied rule. The result was a highly contradictory treatment of Italians by the Allies after the September 1943 armistice: a deliberately ambivalent friends-and-foes stance, which for decades hindered open debate in Italy and beyond about the realities of Allied invasion and occupation (Simonetti 2025, 77–86, 175).

Historiographical lineages

The complex history of the occupation is reflected in an equally intricate historiographical trajectory. As such, scholarly literature has long been shaped by the frequent conflation of discourses on Allied *occupation* with the broader notion of *liberation*, a concept rooted more in wartime propaganda and contemporary perceptions on the ground than in the realities of military and political strategy. This framing tends to privilege the story of expelling German occupying forces from Italy and defeating Fascism, while obscuring the role of the Allies as occupiers. That the liberation narrative should have been overemphasised is not surprising. During the war, it served as a powerful tool to promote the Allied cause and facilitate Italy's gradual rehabilitation. In the postwar period, it reinforced notions of Italian victimhood by shifting popular attention from the country's role as an Axis power (1940–3) to the brutality of German occupation (1943–5), which was subsequently remembered as the only occupation affecting Italy during the Second World War. The emphasis on Allied liberation rather than occupation long diverted attention from Anglo-American policies in Italy, foregrounding instead the impact of the German occupation, the defeat of Axis forces, and the contribution of the Resistance. This narrative entrenched the dominance of a celebratory liberation discourse in public memory and academic scholarship.

The historiography of the Allied occupation of Italy developed slowly and unevenly. For decades, work on the period remained fragmented, focusing either on Allied plans for the Mediterranean theatre or on exploring specific aspects of life in 'liberated' Italy. Rather than by systematic academic research, this gap was largely filled by journalists, non-professional historians, and cultural works such as autobiographical novels, popular cinema, and theatre (among the many, see Hersey 1944; De Filippo 1945; Macmillan 1967; Stefanile 1968; Lewis 1978). The field's slow maturation is evident in the enduring prominence of David Ellwood's seminal work (1977, 1985), which to date remains the only comprehensive analysis of the politics and economics of the occupation.

From the late 1980s, the gradual declassification of Anglo-American wartime records and the rise of bottom-up approaches spurred new research, primarily by Italian scholars. These studies explored civilians' lived experiences in specific cities and regions, with Rome and Naples receiving particular attention. This owed much to the impact of early works such as the collection of essays on Rome and southern Italy edited by Nicola Gallerano (1985), Paolo De Marco's study of everyday life in occupied Naples (1996), and a volume edited by John A. Davis (1997) that revealed the influence of GIs and American culture on Italian society. The early tendency to focus on Rome and southern Italy, which were occupied by the Allies for much longer than the northern part of the country, continues to this day.

Only in the early twenty-first century did a growing body of monographs and a more dispersed set of articles and chapters (e.g. Baris 2003; Chianese 2004; Ellwood 2007) begin to address the Allied 'occupation' more directly. The 2010s marked the consolidation and internationalisation of the field, with the publication of widely-cited studies focusing on the experiences of women as well as on crimes committed in occupied regions (Porzio 2011; Mangiameli 2013; Williams 2013; Cassamagnaghi 2014). Further strands of scholarship have since emerged, including works on specific aspects of Allied policies towards occupied Italy (e.g. Di Nolfo and Serra 2010; Patti 2013; Buchanan 2016; Aterrano 2017) as well as novel

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analyses of cultural responses to the occupation period (e.g. Glynn 2015, 2017; Gordon 2018; Leavitt 2019).

The growing number of both academic (e.g. Escolar 2019; Fusi and Pretelli 2022; Laffin 2024; Sambuco 2024; Erlichman and Corduwener 2024; Simonetti 2025) and non-academic publications (e.g. Avagliano and Palmieri 2019, 2021; Lowe 2024) that have appeared in the last decade reflects a consolidation of the Allied occupation as a central concern in the historiography of mid-twentieth-century Italy. So does the increasing output of doctoral theses offering original perspectives on the subject (e.g. Outterside 2015; Ruvolo 2016; De Paola 2018), as well as the fact that the 2025 international conference of the Occupation Studies Research Network at King's College London featured more papers on the Allied than on the German occupation.[3]

Recontextualising Allied rule in Italy

The Allied occupation of Italy has largely been explored as a subject internal to Italian history, and, to a lesser extent, to the histories of the nations that took part in the occupation. Consequently, most scholars frame their work within historiographical debates rooted in these national contexts. That this should be so is not surprising. The significance of the occupation period has typically been derived from its impact on what followed, leading to the development of a research agenda that reflects a set of historical problems focused on the legacies of the period. The transformation of Italy in the aftermath of the Second World War from a Fascist state to a stable democracy has been at the centre of this interest (Pavone 1995; Gilbert 2024). This has led to a concentration on the ways in which the Allies contributed to Italy's political, economic, and cultural reconfiguration, and how these changes prefigured some of the central dynamics that shaped Italy's position during the postwar period and in the ensuing Cold War (Harper 1986; Duggan and Wagstaff 1995). For many scholars working in this tradition, the occupation also offers a way to study the diplomatic history of the United States and the United Kingdom, including their broader role in southern Europe and the Mediterranean (Gat 1996; Buchanan 2014; Mistry 2014). For those focused on the social and daily life history of the period, it is instead the broader effect of the occupation on the texture of Italian society, and in particular on the distribution of power between different groups, that renders the occupation era a central moment in twentieth-century Italian history (Laffin 2024, 2025).

This nation-centric focus clearly has its merits, and, for good reasons, will likely remain dominant among scholars. At the same time, however, such an approach can be unduly self-limiting, diminishing the wider significance of the Italian case. As with other mid-twentieth-century occupations that have been studied largely in isolation (e.g. Erlichman and Knowles 2018, 16–19), there is a need to situate the case of Italy within a broader temporal and spatial framework.

There are at least two ways in which this might be achieved. First, the Allied occupation of Italy must be placed within a wider European context. The occupation represented the first Allied experiment with foreign rule in continental Europe during the Second World War, and as such shaped the broader Allied experience of occupation in the mid-twentieth century. What happened in Italy influenced the ways in which Allied planners and strategists, occupation officials, ordinary soldiers, and aid workers behaved in other territories that subsequently came under their control. This includes, most notably, their activities in the 'occupied' states of Austria and Germany, but also in the 'liberated' territories of France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg. Italy, then, stands at the beginning of a longer sequence of interwoven experiences of Allied rule in Europe. Scholars are still at the very beginning of understanding the nature of this interrelated dynamic, but novel research has shown how the occupation of Italy functioned as a laboratory for ruling techniques

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that were subsequently employed elsewhere. Mikkel Dack (2023), for instance, has recently argued that Allied 'defascistation' practices in Italy marked a turning point within the transnational history of antifascism campaigns, political lustration, and retribution, shaping notions and practices that would subsequently travel across the world. Other recent work has shown how indirect ruling techniques, such as the practice of 'advisory government', were tried out in Italy and then used in other places, leading to shared socio-political legacies across western Europe (Erlichman and Corduwener 2024). Likewise, the installation of inter-Allied bodies to run occupied countries, such as AMGOT, were tried for the first time in Italy. More generally, it was the actual management of occupier–occupied relations and the ruling techniques deployed for that purpose, the implementation of relief efforts, the perceptions of people who fell under Allied rule, the ways of 'seeing like an occupier', to modify James Scott's influential phrasing (Scott 1998), and the collective store of knowledge on how to rule a foreign people that moved between different instances of occupation. To understand these processes, the Italian case is of fundamental importance and needs to be situated within the transnational history of foreign rule in Europe.

Second, the Allied occupation of Italy is still largely insulated from the wider comparative field of Occupation Studies (Erlichman 2021). Consequently, the broader set of questions that have given stimulus to this emerging field over the past years, including those concerning interactions between occupiers and occupied, as well as the social, political and cultural legacies of occupation, have rarely been related to the Italian case. The fundamental tension between 'occupation' and 'liberation' – and more generally between the punitive and benign dimensions of occupation rule – are, however, fully brought to the fore by the Italian case. In a wider sense, the case of Italy sheds light on some of the core features of the occupation phenomenon. They include the experience of daily life under occupation and strategies of survival in a 'state of emergency' (Gildea et al. 2006, 6–9); romantic and sexual encounters; the history of emotions; power relations; co-operation, collaboration and conflict; the development of racial and cultural stereotypes; crime, violence and abuses of power; retribution and political purges; the artistic legacies of occupation; and the collective and individual memories of occupation. Each of these themes can be explored in microscopic detail through the Italian case, while also contributing to a broader understanding of occupation as a global phenomenon. As a new generation of historians of the Second World War is demonstrating, the experience of foreign rule and occupation was emphatically global (Erlichman and Streicher 2026). Such a broader comparative perspective, therefore, makes it possible to situate Italian history within wider transnational contexts. While it remains essential to give due weight to the specificities and the immediate context of the Italian case, it is through engaging with a number of innovative overarching themes in a manner that extends beyond the concerns of Italian Studies that scholars can make a meaningful contribution to an understanding of occupation across time and place.

New perspectives on the Allied occupation

The articles in this special issue showcase how the Allied occupation of Italy can be examined productively through thematic lenses that are intermeshed with these overarching analytical concerns. They do so by concentrating on three interrelated themes: the legacies and cultural memory of the occupation; the interactions and power relations between occupiers and occupied; and the political features of occupation. In his exploration of the 'contact zone of occupation', Fabio Simonetti fuses these leading themes to demonstrate the methodological potential of oral history for uncovering how the occupation was experienced and perceived by ordinary soldiers and civilians. Drawing on life interviews with an Italian man who fought alongside American GIs as well as with a British soldier who married an Italian woman, Simonetti reveals how individuals navigated the complex boundaries of

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intercultural encounter. In doing so, he shows how those living under occupation were not passive objects of high policy and military circumstances. Rather, they exercised significant agency, challenging and transgressing the rigid roles of occupiers and occupied. These choices shaped the trajectories of their subsequent lives. Instead of revolving around suffering, their present-day memories of the occupation centre on the life-altering experiences of personal transformation, adventure, and love.

The question of how to remember and ascribe meaning to the occupation era also lies at the heart of Charles Leavitt's analysis of Agostino degli Espinosa's influential 1946 eyewitness account, *Il Regno del Sud*, which chronicled the territory under Allied control after the September 1943 armistice. As Leavitt shows through an exploration of degli Espinosa's broader corpus of writings, his work grappled with contested notions of loyalty and betrayal in a nation torn by civil war. His narrative ultimately sought to legitimise the Italy of King Vittorio Emanuele III while delegitimising Mussolini's new Fascist republic. Yet, as Leavitt's close reading reveals, degli Espinosa's work also brings to the fore the extent to which he shared a profound sense of unease and despair, marked by a feeling that, despite his own loyalty towards the so-called 'King's Italy', the Allied occupation had engendered a fundamental crisis for the Italian state. The occupation thus became central to the formation of a divided nation where 'mass loyalty' to the state proved unattainable. This fracture gave rise to a 'divided memory' of wartime and occupation that still shapes public debate in Italy today, providing revisionists with powerful ammunition to question the order that was established in the postwar period.

The contested place of the occupation period in Italian cultural memory is vividly captured in Ruth Glynn's analysis of its cinematic representations. Focusing on Liliana Cavani's filmic interpretation of *La pelle* (1981) and Francesco Patierno's documentary *Naples'44* (2016), both of which represent remediations of pre-existing literary works on Naples under occupation, Glynn reveals how these films seek to reshape the cultural memory of occupation against the backdrop of the political and social concerns of the respective times in which they were produced. Cavani's interpretation offers a feminist counter-memory of the occupation, foregrounding the transgression of social norms in Naples and framing the Allied presence as an act of rape. In doing so, the film sought to provoke public debate about the suffering of the Italian population, and of women in particular, during this era. Yet, given the marginalisation of feminist perspectives within the Italian film industry at the time, its impact on public perceptions remained limited. Patierno's documentary approach, by contrast, adopts an anthropological and elegiac lens rather than a polemical one, thus neutralising rather than reigniting the memory of the occupation. In the final analysis, Glynn argues, neither film succeeded in reshaping cultural memory, laying bare the extent to which the Allied occupation remains marginalised in the Italian cultural imaginary.

Building on gendered perspectives of occupation, Silvia Cassamagnaghi's article explores intimate encounters between Italian women and American servicemen by focusing on the experience of war brides. Combining oral history testimonies and memoirs, as well as US Army marriage regulations and contemporary newspapers, Cassamagnaghi reconstructs how such relationships developed at the intersection of emotional attachment, material need, and coercion. In doing so, she shows how the occupation environment produced both enduring love stories and complex societal anxieties. Above all, the article emphasises the striking diversity of individual trajectories and the role played by class, age, education, and regional background. In foregrounding women's perceptions, it challenges emotionalised accounts of wartime romance and restores visibility to experiences that have long been dismissed as marginal. The choices women made under occupation had enduring consequences, forging transnational links and embedding the occupation within wider social and cultural contexts that extended well beyond the end of Allied rule.

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The circulation of American food within occupied Italy functioned as a critical site for negotiating emotional and power relations between occupiers and occupied. Through the analysis of wartime diaries, Psychological Warfare Branch reports, and cultural outputs such as John Hersey's *A Bell for Adano*, Patrizia Sambuco shows how food and food exchange acquired a role that went well beyond questions of nutrition. Food became a currency, a marker of wealth, a medium for intercultural contact, and a means through which both sides exercised agency. American provisions operated as instruments of soft power, stirring a sense of nostalgia among GIs while offering Italian civilians a glimpse of the promised prosperity, even as this promise was undermined by the exploitative realities of occupation. Italian responses were not passive; bartering and black-market trade revealed an occupation marked by contradiction. While some saw American abundance as liberation, others were negatively affected by the inflationary economy it produced, a tension captured in Hersey's tragic image of an Italian child dying while reaching for American sweets.

Marco Maria Aterrano's contribution shifts attention from experience and memory to the institutional structure of the Allied occupation. Focusing on the Advisory Council for Italy, a comparatively marginal and understudied body within the Allied occupation machinery, Aterrano reconstructs how the Allied decision-making process emerged through inter-Allied negotiation, strategic compromise, and competing visions. Drawing on extensive archival materials, the article shows that the occupation developed not as a coherent or pre-planned system, but as a contingent arrangement shaped by the shifting balance between military necessity and political calculation. Although formally limited to an advisory role, the council exerted significant influence on key policy debates, particularly regarding the extent of Italian participation in governance. By interlinking his case with the wider history of Allied occupations in Europe, Aterrano demonstrates how Italy functioned as an early testing ground for Allied approaches to political reconstruction.

In his concluding essay, David Ellwood reflects on the ambiguities inherent in the liberation/occupation dichotomy and identifies overarching themes that have influenced the historiography of the Allied occupation of Italy. Building on the long-term development of scholarship and his own contributions to the field, he emphasises how military rule, prolonged exposure to brutal violence, and daily interaction with foreign armies shaped Italian society and culture profoundly. Ellwood also draws attention to the long afterlife of the phenomenon, showing how postwar memory and commemoration have tended to privilege liberation while marginalising the coercive and disruptive dimensions of occupation. Such dynamics, he argues, left durable political and cultural legacies in postwar Italy, including an entrenched sense of pacifism and a lasting ambivalence towards the hegemony exercised by superpowers.

The present special issue does not seek to provide a comprehensive survey of the experience of Allied rule in Italy. Instead, by zooming in on specific aspects that have hitherto been marginalised in the extant scholarship, while also casting new light on themes that have attracted sustained attention, it aims to demonstrate the potential of novel research as well as the value of studying the Allied presence in Italy as a discrete case of military occupation. In doing so, it seeks to encourage scholars to interrelate the Italian case productively with the broader history of mid-twentieth-century Europe, while showcasing how it can be examined through an overarching set of themes that are central to the broader study of occupations across time and place. If future work on this key moment in twentieth-century Italian history takes the implications of this distinctive analytical framing seriously, then this special issue will have met its central objective.

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Notes

1. At that point, all regions still occupied by the Allies, with the exception of the contested territories of Udine and Venezia Giulia, were returned to the sovereignty of the Italian government, which was still operating under the supervision of the Allied Commission.
2. The presence of the numerous other Allied nationalities in the United Nations coalition is much less marked in Italian collective memory.
3. See the conference programme at https://fasos-research.nl/occupationstudies/events/.

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Italian summary Questa introduzione si propone di trattare l'occupazione alleata dell'Italia come un caso distintivo ma relativamente poco esplorato nella storia più ampia delle occupazioni militari della metà del Novecento. Ne ricostruisce le origini, le peculiarità e le contraddizioni, mettendo in primo piano la tensione tra liberazione e occupazione che ha plasmato sia le esperienze contemporanee sia la successiva storiografia. Dopo aver delineato lo sviluppo frammentario della relativa storiografia e il lungo predominio di narrazioni incentrate sul concetto di liberazione, questo saggio invita a ricontestualizzare l'occupazione alleata dell'Italia all'interno di cornici transnazionali e comparative più ampie. Piuttosto che esaminare il caso italiano esclusivamente in termini di impatto nazionale, l'articolo propone di considerarlo un primo laboratorio di pratiche di governo alleate, successivamente applicate altrove. Inoltre, suggerisce di analizzare l'esperienza italiana attraverso una serie di temi di ricerca emersi nel nuovo settore degli Occupation Studies. Questo special issue porta avanti tale prospettiva combinando l'attenzione su aspetti finora marginalizzati con riflessioni su temi consolidati, contribuendo così a una rivalutazione del ruolo del caso italiano all'interno della più ampia storia delle pratiche di governo alleato nell'Europa della metà del Novecento.

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