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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Forgotten Resistance of the Sinti and Roma

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Abstract

The role that Roma communities played in the Resistance during the Second World War is a little-known part of history, especially in Italy. Through consideration of their involvement, we can highlight the complexity of the Resistance, and recognise Roma communities as an integral part of Italian society. Roma involvement in the Resistance had distinctive characteristics compared to that of the *gagi* (non-Roma), particularly in how they viewed it not only as a fight against fascism, but also it as a means of honouring the *mulé* (the dead). However, only a handful of Roma partisans are recorded in the Ricompart archive, which contains documentation relating to those who participated in Resistance activities. To trace history, personal testimony, in addition to secondary historiography, is key. Roma communities share a rich oral tradition, which forms the basis of a significant part of this article, and which offers an account of civil resistance and armed action both within partisan groups and as part of small formations based on ethnicity. This piece examines the reasons why the Roma partisans who fought and died in the Resistance did not receive full public recognition, a form of historical amnesia of the postwar period rooted in the absence of a cultural 'defascistisation' whereby fascist-style racism permeated the Republic.

Keywords: history; Resistance; antifascism; Roma; prejudice; memory

Introduction

The Roma, Sinti, Manouche, Kale, Yenish, Xoraxane, Travellers, Romanichal, and Ashkali form a set of communities of North Indian origin now widely dispersed around the globe. I will refer to them henceforth using the umbrella term 'Roma' (a term chosen by those communities at the first World Roma Congress of 8 April 1971), which simply means 'man'. I will only use the word 'Sinto' or the plural 'Sinti' when referring to individuals belonging to that specific community. In Italy, the Roma are often referred to using the derogatory term '*zingari*', which stems from the Greek *athinganoi*, meaning 'untouchables'. The disempowered, casteless people of India, or the Dalits, were also historically labelled 'untouchables', indicating the negative connotations the term carries. '*Zingaro*' or the plural '*zingari*' is used here in inverted commas only where it is found in Fascist-era documentation.

The '*zingari*' partisans called themselves the *ćiriklé*, (little birds or sparrows), since they were forced to hide in the woods like birds. The Fascists were dubbed the *kastènghere*, or baton-wielders. Roma partisans were primarily active in northern Italy, where they stood

opposed to these baton-wielders. They specialised in sabotage, stole weapons and supplies, and acted as couriers, for they are a generally peaceful community and have traditionally refused to practise war. However, the unique pressures of the Second World War, which targeted civilians directly, saw some Roma deviate from tradition, participating in armed action, either in small groups or within broader partisan brigades.

Yet, archival records on Roma partisans are scarce. For example, they rarely appear in the Ricompart archive, which contains documentation relating to those who participated in Resistance activities. The intense social stigma that Roma communities have faced throughout history meant that many did not seek to be officially recognised as partisans once the war was over. After giving up their weapons, most returned to their traditional trades, and simply went on with their lives in silence – silent, that is, in the eyes of 'mainstream society', but not within their own families. For the Roma, memory is something to be preserved and relived in the warmth of the community. As such, talk of their activities during the struggle for Liberation has been kept within the confines of the family in its nuclear or, more often than not, extended form. For these reasons, oral accounts are invaluable for reconstructing Roma histories, including the role they played in the Resistance.

This article forefronts oral testimony not solely because of the deficit of other types of sources, but also because it is inherently rich in detail. Indeed, even when it is factually unreliable in part or in full (we will see an example of this later), it offers insight into an entire 'cultural world' and its social fabric, which only the inhabitants can weave together and testify to. Oral accounts – informal, dialogic, and deeply personal – are fundamental, even when they are 'imperfect', particularly when they pertain to the 'subaltern'. These are 'sources of memory', and 'the reservoir of memory is undergoing constant change. Memories can be corrected, reinterpreted and rewritten, but also erased' (Contini 1993, 52). Oral narrative reconstructs the past through imagination, desire, fantasy, and subjectivity (Portelli 2017, 4).

Consider the case of Vicenzina Pevarello:

> My father, a *gagio* [Roma word for non-Roma], had gone to Germany and France as a young man, to work in the mines, and he could speak German as though he himself were German, that's how well he spoke it. One day we saw two truckloads of Germans arrive … they wanted to blow up the village, they had laid mines, because they knew that there were partisans there. It was 1945 … My father … spoke German to the commander, who, thank God, was a good man and listened to him. He asks my father if there are partisans in the village and my father says no. He was a great magician … so he says they should play a game. The German liked magic tricks and my father says he'll show them one, but only if the soldiers put down their weapons … they agree and put them all on the table in the tavern. He performs the magic trick, chatting away for some time, and then he gives the Germans the order to get rid of all the mines in the village. That's how my father saved the entire village. (Nencioni 2024, 146)

This account of how Pevarello's father saved an entire village just moments before mines planted by the retreating Germans were supposed to detonate, by putting on a magic show and persuading them to clear the ground, borders on the mythical and is hard to believe. Yet, it is important not only because it highlights the cunning and skill of the Roma, but above all because it illustrates their solidarity with the broader struggle against the Nazis and Fascists, and the support they gave to the civilian population.

The autobiographies of partisans Giuseppe Levakovich and Giacomo De Bar, which we will revisit, further illustrate the complexity of the Resistance experienced by Roma

communities. Some accounts focus on the individual, others are polyphonic. In many, we find a strange mixture of pride in the roads taken and disillusionment at the marginalisation imposed by mainstream society, even in democratic Italy, after the Fascist period. In contrast to how the Resistance is remembered in other European countries, the Roma's role in the Italian Resistance remains largely unacknowledged. This is not because Roma communities are uninterested in sharing their experiences; rather, it is due to the persistence of anti-Roma stereotypes in Italy. This long historiographical silence is linked to the relegation of Roma communities to the margins of society, caused by the absence of a cultural 'defascistisation' which has allowed Nazi and Fascist racial theories to permeate Republican Italy.

Roma communities during the Italian Resistance

Records of Roma involvement in the Resistance are fragmented and often unreliable, making it impossible to fully reconstruct or accurately determine the exact number of Roma partisans (or that of partisans in general), although we know that their number exceeds one hundred.

On the eve of Liberation, the pre-Republican monarchic government of Italy issued decree no. 158[1] of 5 April 1945 to establish a special Commission in Rome which would confer official recognition upon individuals as patriots. The Commission was chaired by a representative of the ANPI, an organisation founded by those who participated in the Resistance against the Italian Fascist regime and subsequent Nazi occupation of Italy. A sister commission was also created to examine proposals for rewards for those considered patriots. A secretarial office was established for both commissions, responsible for collecting documentation on partisan activities in support of these applications. This office would then issue certifications or rewards based on the decisions of the two commissions. This process was solidified by pre-Republican decree no. 518 of 21 August of the same year which established regional commissions. Article 12 of this decree states that 'recognition of status … and applications for rewards must be submitted within six months of the effective date of this decree', i.e. 22 August.

There were two barriers for Roma partisans who wished to benefit from this scheme: the vast majority were illiterate, making it impossible for them to apply; and general, widespread anti-Roma hostility compelled them to stay hidden and conceal the fact that they were partisans. Even filling in an application was a frightening prospect. Moreover, the Ricompart archive (rightly) does not record the ethnic origins of those who received their patriot certificates, making it a useful but imperfect tool in the search for Roma partisans. Of the twenty or so partisans considered in this article, just under two thirds are registered in the Ricompart archive.

Archival and oral sources indicate that the Roma contribution to the Resistance was varied and diverse. Some served actively as combatants in partisan movements, both local and national, and many were allies and supporters of the partisans. Many more staged passive resistance to the Nazis and Fascists by avoiding national military conscription firstly under the Fascist regime and later under the German puppet state of the Italian Social Republic, and by going into hiding (Spinelli 2021, 284–285). This is exemplified by Rocco Spinelli, also known as Pilòtse, (Spinelli 2016, 193), and Omero Grandini. Grandini, who had served in the armed border guard, was captured after Italy signed an armistice with the Allies and fell under German occupation, refused enlistment, and was therefore deported to Germany, where he remained until 1 January 1944.[2]

Generally, Roma found protection amongst the partisans and were well-treated. They responded with their solidarity and support, and not only when it came to armed resistance. This bond between Roma and *gagi* (non-Roma, or rather, those who do not belong to

the multitude of Roma communities) partisans engaged in the struggle for liberation is reflected in numerous stories from Roma oral tradition. For example, Vittorio 'Thulo' and Luigi Vittorio Reinhardt describe how their father used his knowledge of German to save a commander of the Garibaldi Brigades:

> Before the end of the war, we were hiding under a farmer's hut, with straw bales all around. The Germans and the Fascists there started rounding people up. They came up to Moncalvo, Asti, and we knew they were coming, we had been warned by the partisan sentries. The partisan commander, he was called Lupo, the nickname for partisans of the Garibaldi Brigade, my dad hid him under the straw. The Germans came and asked my father if he had seen anyone, he told them 'no', speaking to them in German. (Nencioni 2024, 156–157)

The veracity of this story matters little, as does the true identity of 'Lupo'. The story clearly demonstrates where the loyalties of the Reinhardt family lay. Other members of the family, meanwhile, were directly involved in the Resistance. 'Thulo' explains: 'my brother ..., he had joined the partisans, he was a soldier with the partisans, his name was Vittorio Reinhardt .... He fought in Piedmont, Alba, Bra, Canelli. Around that area' (Nencioni 2024, 134). Similarly, his brother-in-law, Cocho Held, fought in Lombardy, 'but before becoming a partisan, he worked in a factory. But this was under Fascism, to get the job in that factory he had to join the Fascists; then, when he left, he joined the partisans' (Rizzin 2020, 79). The Held family's involvement in the Resistance is further confirmed by Alberto Suffer, whose father and other relatives were in Germany:

> Then there was Bruno Held, my uncle, my father's brother, who joined the partisans. My uncle Bruno and my father each had a price on their heads before they started fighting because they were deserters. They did not want to go to war, they did not want to fight, because we Sinti are a pacifist community. (Nencioni 2024, 130)

Faustino Held,[3] born on 7 August 1921, served in the Comando di Piazza di Venezia from 1 June 1944 to 1 May 1945 and is also listed in the Ricompart archive as a recognised patriot.

Between Liberation, pacifism and patriotism

After 8 September 1943, many Roma in Italy escaped from the internment camps where had been held since September 1940, taking advantage of the lax security of the authorities. But how had they ended up there in the first place? This was the result of two memorandums: memorandum no. 442/12267[4] 'Provisions for Concentration and Confinement Camps' of 8 June, and telegraphic memorandum no. 63462/10[5] of 11 September 1940 from the Ministry of the Interior, General Directorate of Public Security, and Police headquarters. The latter was signed by Chief Magistrate Arturo Bocchini and was sent to all police stations. The memorandums gave the order to combat the so-called '*zingaro* plague' by rounding up, arresting, and interning all Roma individuals, including Italian citizens, in order to keep them 'under strict surveillance' in designated areas. Several concentration camps were specifically created for this purpose, mostly located in small towns such as Agnone (Isernia), Boiano (Campobasso), Tossicia (Teramo), and Prignano sulla Secchia (Modena) (Nencioni 2024, 73–76).

The Roma imprisoned in southern Italy survived thanks to the Allied liberation of those territories. However, things were much more difficult for those in the North, which was under the control of the Fascist Italian Social Republic. Many were captured by the Nazi-Fascists and sent to extermination camps. But others were able to hide and

joined the Resistance, either in hopes of rescuing family members imprisoned in concentration camps, or out of deeply-held antifascist sentiments. Vicenzina, who we saw above, shared those sentiments:

> we were all antifascists in my family. Two of my brothers were partisans. My father was also an antifascist; he was a socialist. They made my father drink castor oil, and they beat him up many times, those murderers! Among the Sinti partisans there was a cousin of mine, two brothers, one is in Rome now, the other is a cousin of mine. But I didn't know that my brother was a partisan. I found out from the others. He called himself 'Tarzan', but his real name was Osiride. His surname was Pevarello. (Nencioni 2024, 147)

Osiride operated on the Asiago plateau, while Vicenzina's cousin, Archilio Pietro 'Balino' Gabrielli, codename 'Piero'[6] moved between Vicenza and Belluno.

Massimo Lucchesi also recounts his father's antifascist activities:

> My father was little more than a boy when they imprisoned him in the concentration camp at Prignano sulla Secchia ... The Sinti called him Fiore, but his legal name was Fioravante Lucchesi ... My father Fioravante, as soon as he was free again, decided to go up into the mountains with the partisans and joined the Modena Armando division. While he was involved in the Resistance he fell ill with typhus and so he went down to the valley and went to a church to ask for help. The monks there treated him. (Rizzin 2020, 33–34)

His participation in the struggle for Italian Liberation is documented in the Ricompart archive. It notes: 'Fioravante Lucchesi,[7] legal name Fiorenzo, born in Bastia Umbra (Perugia) on 26 February 1924, was interned with his grandparents at the Prignano sulla Secchia camp in the autumn of 1940' (Trevisan 2010, 7–33). After his escape in September 1943 (Trevisan 2018), he joined the 'Adelchi Corsini' Brigade, part of the 'Modena Armando' division, as per his testimony, and fought in the Resistance from 15 June to 16 November 1944.

As we can see, the Roma participated in the Resistance not as a separate group, but as an integral part of the society in which they lived. 'Ethnic gangs' composed exclusively of members of different and clearly demarcated family units were rare. It was more common to find 'lone wolves' – generally very young individuals, some orphaned, who were entirely devoted to the partisan cause, or who were freed by the partisans and decided to join them.

One such individual was the Sinto, Giacomo Sacco.[8] Born on 18 May 1902 in Savigliano, in the province of Cuneo, he adopted the codename 'Ivan' and joined the 'Saluzzo' Brigade of the 2nd Alpine Justice and Freedom Division, which had liberated him from the Nazi-Fascists in 1943.[9]

> They captured me and 17 other people while I was on my way to *manghel* [Roma word for beg]. We were freed by partisans at the Turchino Pass. I decided to stay with them, take part in the liberation of Genoa, and fight the Fascists and Nazis. I shared the ideals of the partisans. I was the only Sinto in the brigade and I became a courier. I heard about another Sinto fighter who was one of the leaders, leading the attacks. (Borsier 1999, 13–36)

Roma participation in the partisan struggle had some specific characteristics as compared to that of the *gagi*. For them, it was also a way of honouring their *mulé*, loved ones killed by the Nazi-Fascists, in a society deeply rooted in the veneration of the dead.

Undoubtedly, the Roma fought for their own lives and for those of their loved ones while facing the constant threat of annihilation. It is more difficult, however, to argue that they did so out of a patriotic attachment to a country in which they had lived for centuries, but which also forced them to endure a long history of discrimination. Political persecution against the '*zingari*', as they were disdainfully called, even existed during the historic Kingdom of Sardinia. The first law outlining administrative measures against vagabonds or '*zingari*' passed in 1852 and was titled 'Interim Measures on Public Security' (Cagna Ninchi 2022). The Kingdom of Italy subsequently introduced its first legal measure against '*zingari*', who were considered 'dangerous foreigners' regardless of citizenship, in 1872 (Spinelli 2016, 170). We can then delineate four distinct phases of Roma persecution in Fascist Italy: from 1922–38, they were refused entry into and forcibly removed from Italian territory; from 1938–40, ethnic cleansing orders were enacted in the border regions and detentions took place in Sardinia; from 1940–43, Roma were systematically arrested and specific concentration camps for them were created; and from 1943–45, under the Italian Social Republic, they faced arrest and deportation to Nazi concentration camps (Nencioni 2024, 51). Some Italian Roma passed through Auschwitz, but they were not sent to the '*Zigeunerlager*' ('Gypsy' camps). Determining the exact number of Roma deported to Nazi camps is impossible, as only at Auschwitz were they categorized as '*Zigeuner*' (Gypsies). In other camps, they were broadly classified as 'asocials', making precise records difficult to trace.

As the Fascist regime intensified its persecution, many Roma saw their families decimated. For many, joining the partisan struggle was a way to fight against Nazi-Fascist oppression, honour the memory of loved ones, and oppose the social and cultural disintegration caused by forced family separation. This was the case for the South Tyrolean Sinto, Vittorio Pasquale Mayer, who joined the struggle for Liberation when his family members were arrested by the Fascists in February 1944. His mother, Giovanna, and sister, Edvige, were taken to the Gries concentration camp near Bolzano. His father made his escape during the journey from Gries to Verona, getting off the train in Domegliara and taking refuge 'in the mountains with the partisans until the war ended' (Turrina 2000). Edvige died at Gries (Di Sante 2019, 122) on 28 April 1945 at the age of 21 (Venegoni 2004, 252) and their mother was later deported to Ravensbrück where she too died (Di Sante 2001, 184). Vittorio, who was away during the round-up, contacted his father's friend who had joined the partisans in Trentino (Mayer 1965, 35–39) and also decided to join them:

> I was with the partisans in the Non Valley … When the war ended [the partisans] wanted me to stay, be part of the partisan police. But I am a Sinto and I am not cut out for that kind of thing. (Turrina, 2000)

This statement reveals two things about Roma communities: they generally avoid joining formal military structures; and they distrust any form of 'police', a product of a long history of marginalisation, expulsion, and persecution by law enforcement.

In the stories they tell, they speak of 'honouring' rather than 'avenging' the dead, describing themselves as a peaceful community that does not practise war. This pacifism is expressed by of Alberto Suffer in relation to the Second World War:

> they didn't want to go to war, they didn't want to fight, because we Sinti are a pacifist people. In fact, in our language there are no such words for 'surrender', 'charge', 'attack', 'ambush'. If you want to talk about that kind of thing, you need to use 20 or 30 words to make the same point. (Nencioni 2024, 122)

Vicenzina Pevarello also attests to this pacifism: 'we Sinti have never wanted war, we are Christians who don't want war, we don't want anything to do with those terrible things'.[10] The aim of describing oneself and one's community in this way is to highlight the senselessness of the violence wielded against a gentle and peaceful people. It also counters the negative stereotypes that portray them in an unfavourable light.

The civil resistance of Sinti and Roma: saboteurs, informers, couriers

Indeed, many Roma partisans preferred sabotage and theft of weapons to violent action. For example, the story of the 'Lions of Breda Solini' has become almost legendary amongst the Sinti. Named after a locality in the province of Modena, where the Breda industrial plant was located (Nencioni 2021), this group of Sinti had been interned at the Prignano sulla Secchia concentration camp. After making their escape, they worked as travelling showmen by day, transforming by night into Resistance fighters, taking action and stealing weapons and ammunition to supply partisan formations. They then operated in the areas between Mantua, Modena, Reggio Emilia and Cremona (Di Vito 2021, Torre et al. 2003, 33–39). Giacomo 'Gnugo' De Bar, born in the camp on 4 December 1940, recalls:

> They managed to capture people's hearts because they were heroes, and they used the least amount of violence necessary, because we Sinti have never had any desire for war, we have never had the instinct to kill a man just because he is an enemy. One of the Fascists from Breda Solini knew this. During Liberation, he barricaded himself in his house where he had an arsenal of weapons, threatening to shoot anyone who got close or blow up the whole house and himself with it. 'I will surrender only to the Lions of Breda Solini' he said. My parents went to his house, and he surrendered to them, but some other partisans captured him anyway. They locked him in a cellar and beat him to a pulp. (De Bar and Puggioli 1998, 13)

This account reveals a desire to show that the Roma community is deeply committed to resistance (a project to which this group of Sinti skilfully and enthusiastically dedicated themselves), but also to being an inherently peaceful people that abhors violence, which contrasts with the violence seen in other partisan contexts. Their long history of persecution seems to have inoculated them against the impulse to inflict violence onto others.

As part of their unarmed resistance, the Roma engaged in sabotage, or 'an attack on the enemy's war potential', as defined by a technical manual for saboteurs illegally printed by partisans in Rome (Parri 1973). The choice to resist in this manner is linked to their ability, developed over years of social marginalisation, to act covertly, to be inconspicuous, to go unnoticed.

The most famous example of Roma saboteurs is that of 'The Martyrs of Vicenza', four Sinti partisans executed by the Germans by the Ponte dei Marmi bridge in Vicenza on 11 November 1944, alongside six *gagi* partisans. The Ricompart archive records their Resistance activities as ending on the day of their execution, classifying them as 'fallen'.

The four Sinti were: Walter Catter, codename 'Vampa', a circus performer born in Francolino, Ferrara, on 11 December 1914; Renato Mastini, codename 'Zulin', also a circus performer, born in Paese, Treviso, on 13 May 1924; Lino Festini, codename 'Ercole', a musician and theatre performer, born in Verona on 24 January 1922; and Silvio Paina, a *gagio* who married a Sinti woman, born in Mossano, Vicenza, on 22 April 1902.[11] Catter and Mastini were the first of the four to join the 'Argiuna' Brigade, 'Vicenza' Division on 1 January 1944; Festini joined on 1 June; and Paina was the last to enlist.[12] The four operated between Carmignano di Brenta and Belvedere di Tezze sul Brenta, depending on where

they were staying. They had first met in September 1944 in Sant'Anna Morosina. Before settling there, the Mastinis had stayed for a while in Montagnana (Rui 2012), where Renato had first come into contact with the 'Falco' (falcon) brigade of the 'Sabatucci' Division. Captured by the Republican National Guard sometime between August and September 1944 in Bastia di Rovolon, Renato had managed to escape with one other partisan out of a window of the Monselice prison and rejoin his relatives in Montagnana. From there, he and his wife set off towards upper Padua, stopping at Sant'Anna Morosina to join the other three Sinti partisans (Rui 2009, 30–31). On either 21 or 22 October 1944, a Fascist Black Brigade squad surrounded their camp and rounded up its inhabitants. The squad threatened to shoot everyone if the four patriots did not reveal the hiding places of the partisans they had been supporting. Refusing to speak, they were beaten and transported to a prison set up at the Camposanpiero schools, where they were tortured. After a few days, they were transferred to Piazzola sul Brenta, where they remained until early November. Eventually, they were transferred to the Piazza Castello prison in Padua where they awaited execution at dawn on the 11th at the Ponte dei Marmi bridge in retaliation for their act of sabotage. Indeed, on the night of 8–9 November, the 17th saboteur squad of the 'Argiuna' Brigade had blown up a railway bridge on the Milan–Venice line near the Rossi cotton mill while a German convoy was passing by.

Many Roma acted as informers or suppliers for the partisans, using their frequent movement and knowledge of the terrain to their advantage. A curious case is that of Giuseppe Levakovich, known as 'Tzigari', who published his memoirs, *Tzigari. A Nomadic Life* (Levakovich and Ausenda 1976). In 2010, a documentary titled *Tzigari: A Roma Story* was made about him by Paolo Santoni in collaboration with the History Channel.[13] Originally from Istria, Tzigari obtained Italian citizenship after the First World War. In 1936, he became a card-carrying member of the National Fascist Party and found work in Abyssinia. In the spring of 1938, he learned that his family had been sent to a concentration camp in Mangone (Cosenza) because they were Roma. After returning to Italy, he and his second wife, Wilma, moved constantly to evade Fascist round-ups. Despite their efforts, in the summer of 1944, Wilma was arrested in Friuli and deported to Dachau.[14] This led her husband to join the Carnia partisans in the mountains above Gemona, taking the codename 'Tzigari': 'there were Osoppo partisans there, and I joined them' (Levakovich and Ausenda 1976, 85). Records regarding the patriots of Osoppo, however, do not corroborate his involvement in the partisan formation. There, he took on logistics duties. He recounts: 'my job was to go with other men to collect supplies from the farmers who lived on the plain, since I knew the area very well' (Levakovich and Ausenda 1976, 86).

Many women, meanwhile, became couriers, or *staffette*. In Roma culture, in fact, women had more freedom to move around than non-Roma women, as it was common for them to be busy outside the home with activities such as *manghel* (the Roma word for begging). The most famous example of a *staffetta* is the aforementioned Vicenzina, who recounts:

> a man came out of a small street and asked us [her and another woman whose husband had been beaten with Mastini] 'are you Sinto?' And I said 'yes'. Then he said 'take this'. It was a piece of paper folded up small. He said, 'up ahead, not too far away, there is a village called San Giorgio. There's a bell tower near it, it comes almost out into the street. Someone will come up to you and say, "are you Sinto?" Hand him this note. Leave immediately, don't stop, don't ask any questions. And we went. That was the first time, then after that, they knew me in the sense that they knew my husband was a partisan, they came again to the same place, four, five, six times. The second to last time there was an older man, the one taking the pieces of paper was younger, and he told me 'we thank you because you have saved so many people'.[15].

Roma in the armed resistance

While most Roma preferred unarmed resistance, others actively participated in the armed struggle, joining combatant groups. This, however, does not entirely disprove their inclination against using violence. Other Resistance groups, which had rejected violence in theory, also adapted to incorporate it in some ways, given the exceptional circumstances of that period (Santagata 2021).

There is some evidence of Roma partisans taking up arms in Veneto, but the majority of it pertains to Liguria, the Langhe and areas along the Gothic Line, the last line of defence for the Axis forces in Italy. Most opted to join the communist Garibaldi Brigades for two reasons: firstly, those were the largest formations in those areas, and secondly, they were open and willing to enlist volunteers of all backgrounds, including young people, ex-soldiers, or those from the dissolved organisations of the regime, regardless of origin or the community they belonged to.

One such Sinto fighter was Giuseppe Rubino Bonora[16] codename 'Rubino', born on 24 October 1910 in Treviso, who fought in a Garibaldian division that operated between Belluno and Vittorio Veneto in the Cansiglio plateau, as far as Cadore. He joined the Resistance in September 1943 and was active until Liberation, albeit occasionally (Ballarin and Brescacin 2020, 211). Another was the Bolognese Omero Grandini,[17] codename 'Bob', a *gagio* who became Sinto for love and as a life choice. He joined the partisans on 13 April 1944 as a squad leader, serving in the 'Luccarini' battalion of the 'Stella Rossa Lupo' Brigade (linked to the Garibaldi Brigades but partly autonomous) and operated in Vado (Monzuno) where he participated in the battle of Monte Sole.[18] Despite being wounded, he remained active until 21 April 1945. On the day he was formally recognised as a partisan, he was also awarded the rank of second lieutenant. The story of Luciano Giuseppe Catter.[19] Walter's cousin and one of the martyrs of Vicenza, is also heroic. Born on 20 June 1923 in Cortemilia, in the province of Cuneo, and resident in Oneglia, in the province of Imperia, he joined the partisans and took the codename 'Tarzan'. He became part of the 4th 'Arnera' Brigade of the 6th Garibaldi 'Bonfante' division, Operational Zone I, and fought continuously from 28 May to 9 August 1944 in the Media Arroscia Valley, between Pieve di Teco and Vessalico. A round-up took place from 8 to 12 August, during which the commander of the contingent, Arrigo

> led the battle against overwhelming enemy forces trying to cut the advancing column in two but was wounded and fell, dropping his machine gun. Catter rushed heroically to defend him, firing wildly at the enemy in a bid to save the commander from certain capture, but was mown down by enemy gunfire. His sacrifice was in vain … They both gave their lives for the freedom of Italy.[20]

The written record, which includes details of a request made to receive a medal for military valour, offers a succinct and similar description of events, albeit without the dramatic flair. It also adds:

> he was taken to Aurigo (Imperia) and tortured; he refused to speak and was executed by the Black Brigades on 9 August 1944 at Piane Basse di Colle San Bartolomeo in the municipality of Aurigo. (Rubaudo 1992, 343, 399)

In addition to his medal for military valour, Catter was awarded Patriot Certificate No. 166282, signed by Field Marshall Harold Alexander. A contingent of his brigade was named after him, and in 2014, the Italian Recreational and Cultural Association (ARCI) and the Historical Institute of Imperia honoured him with a plaque. Catter is one of

the very rare cases of a Roma patriot receiving official recognition. Another is that of Amilcare Debar,[21] affectionally called 'Taro', whose story seems like something from a novel.

Amilcare, born to Sinti Italian parents, was orphaned and raised in an institute run by nuns in Canale, and then in an orphanage in Racconigi. Eventually, he was taken in by the Bergia family who gave him a job on their farm. In early 1944, he became a partisan courier for the Garibaldi formations, carrying orders, conducting scouting missions, delivering messages, searching for supplies and weapons, and carrying out ambushes in the Cuneo valleys (Various authors 2015, 58–59). After narrowly escaping execution,[22] he joined the partisans of the 48th 'Dante Di Nanni' Garibaldi Brigade with the codename 'Corsaro'. From 26 January 1944 to 8 May 1945, he was involved in the Liberation of Turin and in many other activities in the Langhe area.

Amilcare Debar tells his story:

> My name is Amilcare Debar, and I was born in Frossasco, in the Turin area, on 16 June 1927. I got my other nicknames, 'Corsaro' and 'Taro', later – it's all part of my life story. When I was 17, during the partisan struggle, I decided to go up into the mountains and join the 48th Garibaldi Brigade. This was the 'Dante Nanni' battalion led by Pompeo Colajanni. I started out as a courier for them, and carried messages so that the partisans could communicate with each other. After I gained experience and proved my courage, they allowed me to become a proper fighter and I was involved in many clashes with the Fascists and Nazis in the Langhe. Once I was even wounded; that's how I became 'Corsaro'. I was also there when Turin was liberated. (Rizzin 2022, 194–195)

Up to this point, Amilcare's story is an edifying account of partisan heroism, but there is a unique twist in Taro's tale. After the war, Amilcare started working in the Racconigi police station. One day, while he was checking documents belonging to a group of 'nomads', he unexpectedly encountered his long-lost brother and other relatives.

> When the war ended, I decided to become a policeman and it just so happened that I stopped a group of Sinti, the Debar family, for a security check. Holding their papers, a world of questions about my past opened up. I wanted to meet them again. I carefully retraced my origins, until I could no longer deny, especially not to myself, that I was a Sinto and I had found my family. I decided to leave my job to make up for lost time, immersing myself in the life I had never known. I went to live in the camp, I was happy there. My lifelong struggle continued with the fight for Sinti and Roma rights. I was also able to represent my people at the United Nations … The most beautiful moment was when President Sandro Pertini gave me my partisan certificate. We embraced, like lifelong comrades do. We had both fought for freedom. (Rizzin 2020, 86)

'Taro' appears in the Ricompart archive in an intriguing way. There are two different entries for the same individual, each with the same date of birth. One is in the name of Amilcare and doesn't give very much information; the other is under the name of Osvaldo and gives full details.[23] This is linked to the fact that Sinti children were often born while families were travelling, and their births were sometimes registered twice in neighbouring municipalities. This was particularly the case during Fascist oppression, as it gave a better chance of avoiding security checks, and therefore deportation, by

allowing them to play on a double identity. In order to be less identifiable, some Sinti would give their children the name of their uncle instead of their father. Moreover, having two names – one legal, another used within the community – is common among Roma individuals. This explains why, in the ANPI database, Debar appears once as 'Amilcare', and for a second time as 'Osvaldo', a racially persecuted individual and a Piedmontese partisan.[24]

The absence of 'defascistisation' and the 'imposed silence'

While the Debar story is among the better known, the heroism and sacrifice of more than 100 Roma partisan fighters was shrouded in silence for decades due to the Italian Republic's political, educational, and economic policy towards them. Fascist policy, in fact, had solidified anti-Roma prejudice in the collective imagination, which persisted after the regime's fall (Bontempelli 2022, 28). For example, Italy is the only country that implements the segregationist policy of 'nomad camps'. Ten per cent of the Roma population live in these camps, a practice that has been criticised on several occasions by international bodies such as the Council of Europe and the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). While Law No. 482 of 1999, titled 'Provisions for the Protection of Linguistic and Historical Minorities', protects 12 minority communities, it excludes the Roma. They have also been marginalised in education as a consequence of the 'Romanò Them' pedagogical programme, first implemented in 1963. This involved the creation of special 'Lacio Drom' classes in schools for children considered mentally disabled, born from the belief that '*zingari*' children had a low to average IQ of 0.81 to 0.96, while the mainstream population sits between 0.8 and 1.1. (Bravi and Rizzin 2024). These classes were officially abolished in 1977, but they continued to exist in some towns and cities at least until the mid-1980s. Ultimately, the mainstream culture continued its typecasting and relegated Roma communities to the fringes of Italian society (Bontempelli 2022, 29). The Eurobarometer Survey on Public Opinion in the European Union revealed that Italy and the Czech Republic have the highest levels of anti-Roma hostility. According to data from the Italian Ministry of the Interior issued in 2023, 81 per cent of Italians surveyed do not like Roma much or at all. Common stereotypes associated with '*zingari*' include: being thieves (92 per cent), being closed off (87 per cent), and being outcasts (83 per cent).[25]

Due to the issues outlined above, the heroic stories of Roma who played leading roles in the Resistance have long been forgotten. This form of 'democratic racism' caused the persecution and deportation of Roma communities under the Fascist dictatorship to evolve into discrimination – or subsumption through re-education and assimilation – in the early decades of the Republic (Bravi 2024, 10). This explains the scarcity of historical research on the activities of Roma during the Resistance.

This gap in historiography is almost exclusively the preserve of Italy. In other countries, the Roma are better integrated and more extensive research has been done on their participation in the antifascist Resistance. For example, the very recent publication by Anders Ahlbäcke and Kasper Braskén deals with Lithuania, Ukraine, and Albania, but does not mention Italy (Ahlbäcke and Braskén 2024). Similarly, the 2020 book *Re-thinking Roma Resistance throughout History: Recounting Stories of Strength and Bravery* (Mirga-Kruszelnicka and Dunajeva 2020) overlooks the Resistance in Italy, instead focusing on events in Poland, France, Sweden, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia, Germany, Ukraine, and Spain. The 2019–2022 project *Romaresist – Dislocations et résistances. Violences génocidaires et persécutions des Roms, Sinti et Voyageurs en Europe de l'Ouest, 1939–1946* by the Institut de recherche interdisciplinaire sur les enjeux sociaux de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales di Paris (IRIS)[26] addresses the persecution of

Roma in Fascist Italy, but does not mention their participation in the struggle for Liberation. In his book, Angelo Arlati attempts to fill this gap (Arlati 2022). Chapter XI deals with the Roma's involvement in the Italian Resistance, but it lacks depth and fails to draw from archival material or cite sources.

The perception of the Roma as a perpetually isolated and persecuted community without a homeland of their own is the primary reason why the literature presents them mainly as passive victims of Nazism, with descriptions of Roma as active participants in the Resistance being rare and brief. The Jewish population received similar treatment (Susini 2021, Fantoni 2022). Only recently has the lens expanded to include individual and collective stories of commitment and courage, recognising their contributions to Italian and European struggles against Nazism and Fascism, rather than viewing them as simply victims. In recent years, in fact, the topic of Roma resistance during the Second World War has become a powerful symbol within Roma communities, contrasting the notion of victimhood with the recognition of skill and patriotism. Accounts of their struggles are now receiving attention from activists and (some) scholars. Of note is the website of the new National Museum of the Resistance in Milan which dedicates a webpage to them.[27]

Conclusions

There is still no reliable data on the number of Roma who actively participated in the Resistance. After the war, very few applied for a certificate of official recognition. This was a political and social context still loaded with anti-Roma prejudice, given the failure of democratic Italy to fully rid itself of the ideology of fascism. Fascist ethnic racism did not disappear – its vocabulary changed. In the Republic, the supposed *Wandertrieb* 'instinct for nomadism' and 'asociality' of Roma communities was no longer 'racial' but 'cultural' (Bravi 2024, 12).

The research presented in this article demonstrates that the Roma fought and died in the struggle against the Fascist dictatorship. Despite the multiplicity and pluralism of the Resistance, their contributions have been met with silence. For many years, it was believed that Roma communities were simply not interested in sharing their stories, especially those related to the painful events of the Second World War. This assumption was often used to justify the ignorance surrounding their participation in the Resistance, as though the lack of direct testimony served as an excuse to avoid thorough archival research. But the assumption is an incorrect one. Many Roma have not publicly shared their experiences of struggle due to the marginalisation of their stories, a product of a public policy that sought to ghettoise them. Moreover, Roma communities favour the oral tradition over writing, which accounts for the lack of published diaries of Roma partisans aside from those of Levakovich and De Bar. Consequently, their patriotic efforts and the support they gave to partisans and those who faced capture by the Nazi-Fascists went almost unnoticed outside their own communities. Within these communities, however, the memory of such contributions endured, fostering a collective narrative of symbolic and pedagogical significance.

For those who managed to escape the Fascist round-ups, joining the struggle for Liberation was both a personal and community strategy. It was neither unique nor uniform, but it demonstrated a strong degree of political maturity and a sense of national belonging. This article aims to reconstruct a history of strength and dignity that has been overlooked for too long. By remembering the Roma partisans, it seeks to encourage reflection on our relationship with otherness, particularly our misconception of '*zingari*' as a 'social problem', and how we can properly recognise them as Italian citizens who have not only shared in but actively participated in historical events alongside us, standing firmly on the side of democracy.

> But do you also celebrate Liberation Day?
>
> On 25 April my grandchildren answered proudly and enthusiastically, 'yes, we did … we took part in the celebrations to remember that we are here because our Roma brothers fought in the Resistance too, and we proudly participate every year. We always look forward to 25 April and we never miss it, even though for us, 25 April, Resistance Day, is every day: we resist against prejudice' (from the penultimate page of Aldo 'Iaio' Deragna's diary: Deragna 2023).

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Notes

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Italian summary

La partecipazione dei Rom alla Resistenza è ancora poco conosciuta soprattutto in Italia. Analizzarla contribuisce ad evidenziare la complessità della Resistenza, e restituisce piena cittadinanza ai gruppi etnici che fanno parte dei Rom. La partecipazione dei Rom alla Resistenza ebbe caratteristiche specifiche rispetto a quella dei gagi (i non Rom) poiché i primi videro in essa anche un mezzo per celebrare i loro mulé (i morti). Solo alcuni partigiani rom sono schedati nel Ricompart. Per ricostruire le vicende degli altri, oltre alla storiografia secondaria, sono fondamentali le testimonianze: i Rom hanno una ricca tradizione orale, sulla quale si basa molta parte di questo contributo che dà conto degli atti di resistenza civile, delle azioni militari sia all'interno delle formazioni partigiane che dalle piccole bande etniche. Il saggio si interroga sulle ragioni del mancato riconoscimento pubblico del ruolo dei partigiani rom che combatterono e morirono nella Resistenza, amnesia che si spiega in con la mancata 'defascistizzazione' culturale del dopoguerra, per cui il razzismo etnico di marca fascista è transitato nella Repubblica.

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