

The Repatriation of Italian Prisoners of War from Yugoslavia after the Second World War (1945–1947)

URŠKA LAMPE

Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy

Institute IRRIS for Research, Development and Strategies of Society, Culture and Environment, Slovenia

e-mail: Urska.Lampe@unive.it

Abstract

Despite the issue of Italian prisoners of war during the Second World War receiving some significant attention, the fate of those prisoners held by the Yugoslav state has not yet been thoroughly examined. This is largely a consequence of the lack of sources, which is also why this issue has been treated superficially in the literature. The present article aims to fill this gap, focusing in particular on the repatriation of Italian prisoners of war held in Yugoslavia after the Second World War. Employing material from archives in the UK, Italy, Serbia, Slovenia and Switzerland, the author will reconstruct the process of repatriation by delving into international diplomatic circumstances and Italo–Yugoslav relations, as well as the political and ideological dynamics which affected the fate of those prisoners. The study will also provide a count of the number of Italian prisoners of war in Yugoslavia, which up to this point has been unclear.

Keywords

Italy, Italian prisoners of war, repatriation, Second World War, Yugoslavia

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement (grant number 839474) and the Slovenian Research Agency (grant number Z6-9361).

When examining the issues of Italian POWs during the Second World War, one must take into account numerous factors that influenced their situation. Among these, the most crucial were the material conditions and ideological nature of the war itself, which conditioned different captors' policies towards Italian POWs – depending on the location and reasons for captivity. The historical literature concerning POWs in general is substantial.¹ This also applies to studies concerning Italian POWs during the Second World War.² However, far fewer studies address Italian POWs in the Balkans, especially those held in Yugoslavia.³ There is also a paucity of research regarding German POWs in Yugoslavia, although the latter has received more attention.⁴ Constantino Di Sante's *Nei campi di Tito. Soldati, deportati e prigionieri di guerra italiani in Jugoslavia (1941–1952)* remains the most in-depth study of Italian POWs in Yugoslavia. It addresses the problem of Italian POWs and internees in Yugoslavia on several levels, in particular highlighting Italo-Yugoslav diplomatic relations

¹ i.e. S. P. Mackenzie, 'The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II', *The Journal of Modern History*, 66, 3 (1994), 487–520; S. P. Mackenzie, 'The Shackling Crisis: A Case-Study in the Dynamics of Prisoners-of-War Diplomacy in the Second World War', *The International History Review*, 17, 1 (1995), 78–98; B. Moore, 'Turning Liabilities into Assets: British Government Policy towards German and Italian Prisoners of War during the Second World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 32, 1 (1997), 117–36; B. Moore and B. Hatley-Broad (eds) *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace. Captivity, Homecoming and Memory in World War II* (New York 2005); J. Beaumont, 'Prisoners of War in the Second World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 42, 3 (2007), 535–44; proceedings in S. Scheipers (ed.) *Prisoners in War* (New York 2010).

² i.e. R. H. Rainero (ed.) *I prigionieri militari italiani durante la Seconda guerra mondiale. Aspetti e problemi storici* (Milano 1985); F. G. Conti, *I prigionieri di guerra italiani 1940–1945* (Bologna 1986); G. Rochat, 'I prigionieri di guerra, un problema rimosso', *Italia Contemporanea*, 171 (1988), 7–14; Istituto Storico della Resistenza in Piemonte (ed.) *Una storia di tutti. Prigionieri, internati, deportati italiani nella seconda guerra mondiale* (Milano 1989); G. Rochat, 'La prigionia di guerra' in M. Isnenghi (ed.) *I luoghi della memoria. Strutture ed eventi dell'Italia unita* (Bari 1997), 381–402; P. Toldo, 'Militari italiani deportati nella Germania nazista: Una ricerca nel territorio dell'ex D.D.R.', *Storia contemporanea in Friuli*, 23, 24 (1993), 161–200; G. Schreiber, *I militari italiani internati* (Roma 1992); U. Dragoni, *La scelta degli I.M.I. Militari italiani prigionieri in Germania (1943–1945)* (Firenze 1996); A. Natta, *L'altra Resistenza. I militari italiani internati in Germania* (Torino 1996); G. Hammermann, *Gli internati militari italiani in Germania* (Bologna 2004); M. Avagliano and M. Palmieri, *Gli internati militari italiani. Diari e lettere dai lager nazisti 1943–45* (Torino 2009); L. E. Keefer, *Italian Prisoners of War in America, 1942–1946: Captives or Allies?* (New York 1992); K. Fedorowich and B. Moore, 'Co-Belligerency and Prisoners of War: Britain and Italy, 1943–1945', *The International History Review*, 18, 1 (1996), 28–47; K. Fedorowich and B. Moore, *The British Empire and Its Italian Prisoners of War, 1940–1947* (New York 2002); I. Insolubile, *Wops. I prigionieri italiani in Gran Bretagna (1941–1946)* (Napoli 2012); M. Rossi and F. Cecotti, 'Oggi si cammina in suolo Lituano. L'esperienza dei prigionieri italiani attraverso le lettere e i diari' in A. Vinci (ed.) *Trieste in guerra (1938–1943)* (Trieste 1992), 501–25; M. Rossi, 'Primi documenti della propaganda sovietica verso i prigionieri italiani' in L. Tomassini (ed.) *Le diverse prigionie dei militari italiani nella seconda guerra mondiale* (Firenze 1995), 83–115; M. Rossi, 'I prigionieri italiani in Russia nei documenti riservati degli archivi ex sovietici' in A. L. Carlotti (ed.) *Italia 1939–1945, Storia e Memoria* (Milano 1996), 205–21; M. T. Giusti, *I prigionieri italiani in Russia* (Bologna 2003).

³ E. Aga Rossi and M. T. Giusti, *Una guerra a parte. I militari italiani nei Balcani (1940–1945)* (Bologna 2011).

⁴ K. W. Böhme, *Die Deutschen Kriegsgefangenen in Jugoslawien 1941–1949* (München 1962); K. W. Böhme, *Die Deutschen Kriegsgefangenen in Jugoslawien 1949–1953*, (München 1964); J. Beer, G. Wildmann (eds), *Leidensweg der Deutschen im kommunistischen Jugoslawien, I–IV* (München 1992–1995); R. Kaltenecker, *Titos Kriegsgefangene: Folterlager, Hungermärsche und Schauprozesse* (Graz 2001); A. Rodinis, *Velika praznina, Njemački ratni zarobljenici na radu u Bosni i Hercegovini* (Tuzla 2017); S. Ilić, 'Vrednovanje rada i životni uslovi Nemačkih ratnih zarobljenika zaposlenih u privredi Jugoslavije 1945–1949.', *Istorija 20. veka*, 37, 2 (2019), 157–76.

and the conditions in the camps.⁵ Di Sante employed sources primarily from Italian archives, and thus his analysis presents only one viewpoint on the issue. The other, Yugoslav viewpoint, was partially studied by Nevenka Troha, who has brought to light the conditions of captivity and fate of those POWs.⁶

The lack of historiographic literature is likely owed to the fact that on 18 March 1950, on the basis of a decree from the Yugoslav Ministry of Internal Affairs concerning the regulation of archives from December 1949, the Ministries of the Interior of the People's Republics issued an order for the general destruction of archival documents relating to POWs.⁷ As a result, archival information regarding POWs in Yugoslavia during and after the Second World War was largely destroyed. There are, however, numerous indirect archival sources which can delineate the situation of POWs in Yugoslavia after the war.⁸ The author of this article has conducted research in various archival institutions in Belgrade, Serbia (*Diplomatski Arhiv Ministarstva spoljnih poslova Republike Srbije, Arhiv Jugoslavije*), Ljubljana, Slovenia (*Arhiv Republike Slovenije*), Trieste, Italy (*Narodna študijska knjižnica*), Rome, Italy (*Archivio Istituto Gramsci, Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri*), London, UK (*The National Archives, Kew-London*) and Geneva, Switzerland (*Archives du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge*).

The aim of this article is to fill the existing gap by addressing the issue of the repatriation of Italian POWs from Yugoslavia. Examining collections from numerous archives, this article seeks to determine the number of Italian prisoners in Yugoslavia and the process of repatriation itself. It will focus primarily on the international diplomatic circumstances of the time and the Italo-Yugoslav political and ideological dynamics which affected the fate of Italian POWs in Yugoslavia.

[line break]

⁵ C. Di Sante, *Nei campi di Tito. Soldati, deportati e prigionieri di guerra italiani in Jugoslavia (1941–1952)* (Verona 2007).

⁶ N. Troha, 'Italijani v vojnem ujetništvu v Jugoslaviji 1944–1947', *Annales, Series Historia et Sociologia*, 10, 2 (2000), 325–40; N. Troha, 'Fojbe v slovenskih in italijanskih arhivih' in J. Pirjevec et al., *Fojbe* (Ljubljana 2012), 253–96; N. Troha, 'Pogrešani: kdo so bili ljudje, ki so jih maja 1945 v tržaški pokrajini aretirale jugoslovanske oblasti', in N. Troha (ed.) *Nasilje vojnih in povojnih dni* (Ljubljana 2014), 157–230.

⁷ ARS, fond Republiški sekretariat za notranje zadeve (SI AS 1931), t. e. 1448, arhivska enota (a. e.) 13, dokument (d.) 3, *Odločba o ureditvi arhivov republiških ministrstev za notranje zadeve in njihovih ustanov*, 18. 3. 1950.

⁸ For further examples see studies that have dealt specifically with the issue of those Italian POWs who were captured after the liberation of Trieste (region of Venezia Giulia) on 1 May 1945 and deported to Yugoslavia (the so-called "deportees" from Venezia Giulia): G. Bajc, 'Aretacije, internacije in deportacije po prvi in drugi svetovni vojni na območju Julijske krajine: oris problematike in poskus primerjave', *Acta Histriae* 20, 3 (2012), 389–416; U. Lampe, "'Revolucija v polnem pomenu besede!': izsledki jugoslovanske preiskave deportacij iz Julijske krajine po koncu druge svetovne vojne', *Acta Histriae*, 25, 3, (2017), 767–84; U. Lampe, 'Guerra gelida a Belgrado: le deportazioni in Jugoslavia dalla Venezia Giulia nel secondo dopoguerra: la questione degli elenchi e nuove fonti', *Acta Histriae*, 26, 3 (2018), 691–712.

During the years immediately following the Second World War, Italo-Yugoslav diplomatic and political relations were complicated. The major issue between the two neighbouring countries was determining a new border, as well as the fate of Trieste, the capital of the Venezia Giulia region.⁹ Doubtless, the fate of the POWs also influenced relations. The prisoners themselves, like their families, eagerly awaited repatriation. As stressed by the International Committee of the Red Cross at the end of the war, the '*period of captivity went far beyond what appeared inevitable*', and the prolonged captivity had a negative impact on the morale of the POWs.¹⁰ The negative impact was also felt by their families, since the situation affected their everyday lives and economic situations and, as a consequence, the general socio-political dynamics in the home country – Italy, in our case.

As explained by Nevenka Troha, we can divide Italian POWs in post-war Yugoslavia into three groups, depending on the way in which they were captured: (1) the smallest number was made up of members of the military, paramilitary and police units who were taken prisoner in May 1945 in Venezia Giulia (largely referred to as the 'deportees' from Venezia Giulia); (2) the largest group was made up of Italian soldiers previously taken prisoner by the Germans and kept in camps in Yugoslavia; (3) the last group was composed of Italian soldiers captured in Germany and in the occupied countries, who at the end of the war sought repatriation through Yugoslavia and instead were held in Yugoslav territory. After being detained as soldiers of the occupying state, they were forced, as explained by the Yugoslav authorities, to participate in the reconstruction of the state they had helped to destroy.¹¹

The exact number of Italian POWs in Yugoslavia at the end of the Second World War has thus far not been definitively known. The Yugoslav government never provided official information on the number of POWs of any nationality, mainly because state leaders regarded

⁹ Regarding the Italo-Yugoslav diplomatic relations of the period, especially the dispute over Trieste, the border and the situation in Venezia Giulia that had an indirect impact on the resolution of the conflict regarding POWs, see R. Spazzali, *Foibe. Un dibattito ancora aperto* (Trieste 1990); N. Troha, *Komu Trst? Slovenci in Italijani med dvema državama* (Ljubljana 1999); J. Pirjevec, G. Bajc and B. Klabjan (eds), *Vojna in mir na Primorskem. Od kapitulacije Italije leta 1943 do Londonskega memoranduma leta 1954* (Koper 2005); J. Pirjevec, '*Trst je naš!*' *Boj Slovencev za morje (1848–1954)* (Ljubljana 2007); J. Pirjevec, *Foibe. Una storia d'Italia*, (Torino 2009); M. Verginella, 'Tra storia e memoria. Le foibe nella pratica di negoziazione del confine tra l'Italia e la Slovenia', in L. Accati, and R. Cogoy (eds) *Il perturbante nella storia: le foibe. Uno studio di psicopatologia della ricezione storica* (Verona, Bolzano 2010), 25–89; R. Pupo, *Trieste '45* (Bari 2010); V. Petrović, 'Josip Broz Tito's Summit Diplomacy in the International Relations of Socialist Yugoslavia 1944–1961', *Annales, Series Historia et Sociologia*, 24, 4 (2014), 577–92; M. Kosmač, 'Organizirana izselitev prebivalstva iz Pulja: problematika meje in "obramba italijanstva"', *Acta Histriae*, 23, 3 (2015), 511–30; F. Tenca Montini, 'I partiti comunisti italiano e jugoslavo e la questione di Trieste tra politica interna ed internazionalismo', in *Cantieri di Storia IX* (Padova 2017), 35–9; F. Tenca Montini, 'La soluzione migliore per Trieste: la proposta jugoslava di amministrazione congiunta del Territorio libero di Trieste (1952–1953)', *Acta Histriae*, 26, 3 (2018), 713–32.

¹⁰ A. Durand, *From Sarajevo to Hiroshima: History of the International Committee of the Red Cross* (Geneva 1984), 642–3.

¹¹ N. Troha, 'Italijani v vojnem ujetništvu v Jugoslaviji 1944–1947', 326.

this as a state secret.¹² The numbers cited by authors vary widely. British sources at the end of April 1945 reported approximately 30,000 POWs,¹³ while Yugoslav sources from July 1945 report 12,123 Italian POWs.¹⁴ At the end of September 1945, according to Italian authorities, 40,000 were still to be found in Yugoslavia.¹⁵ A wide range of different estimates on Italian POWs is likely due to the fact that during summer 1945 more men were captured, but still the majority were quickly released and sent back to Italy. It is therefore difficult to provide an exact number before autumn 1945, since the chaotic situation inherent in that period of arrests, imprisonments, releases and repatriations renders it almost impossible. It is for this reason that the first, more accurate figures come from the period after September 1945. Nevenka Troha asserts that between 15,000 and 17,000 of those prisoners were still somewhere in Yugoslavia in the autumn of 1945.¹⁶ Various numbers are also mentioned by Italian authors, for example Constantino Di Sante, whose findings alleged that during the war Yugoslavia had captured approximately 57,150 Italian POWs.¹⁷

Despite no official statement from the Yugoslav authorities, the delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Belgrade, François Jaeggy, was personally informed of the number of Italian POWs in Yugoslav hands. On 14 September 1945, at a meeting with General Ilija F. Pavlović, who was in charge of the POW issue, the latter explained to Jaeggy that there were still some 17,000 Italian POWs in Yugoslavia. Jaeggy also cited the numbers of other POWs in Yugoslavia in that period: 70,000 German, 15,000 Austrian and 2000 Hungarian POWs. According to his statement, of the more than 50,000 Italian POWs who had been in the country, up to 35,000 had already been repatriated.¹⁸ This is confirmed by a secret report on the repatriation of POWs, prepared by the Section for POWs of the Yugoslav

¹² Diplomatski Arhiv Ministarstva spoljnih poslova Republike Srbije (DAMSP), Politička arhiva (PA) 1946, fascikla (f.) 51, broj (br.) 1849, dokument (d.) 2, LI/33, MNO, Odelenje za ratne zarobljenike, *Izveštaj o repatriaciji zarobljenika*, to MIP (X. Otek), 18. 2. 1946.

¹³ Bajc, 'Aretacije, internacije in deportacije po prvi in drugi svetovni vojni na območju Julijske krajine: oris problematike in poskus primerjave', 400.

¹⁴ *Partizanska i komunistička represija i zločini u Hrvatskoj 1944.-1946. Dokumenti. Knjiga 3* (Zagreb 2008), document no. 148, 519.

¹⁵ Bajc, 'Aretacije, internacije in deportacije po prvi in drugi svetovni vojni na območju Julijske krajine: oris problematike in poskus primerjave', 406.

¹⁶ Troha, *Komu Trst?*, 64.

¹⁷ Di Sante, *Nei campi di Tito*, 85.

¹⁸ Archives du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge (ACICR), Archives generales (AG) 1918 – 1950 (ACICR-AG), Groupe G (Generalites: Affaires operationnelles) 1939 – 1950, Camps – listes des effectifs – courrier des delegations CICR (B G 17 05-238), Jaeggy to CICR, Reymond Wilhem, no. 280, 17 September 1945.

Ministry of Defence. Dated 18 February 1946, the report noted that 34,101 Italian POWs were repatriated in 1945.¹⁹

Thus, during and after the Second World War, Yugoslavia had captured something more than 50,000 Italian soldiers. The majority (around 34,000) were repatriated before September 1945, when their repatriation was interrupted by Yugoslav authorities. At the beginning of 1946, approximately 17,000 Italian POWs awaited repatriation.

In early 1946, control of POWs was taken over by the Yugoslav Ministry of the Interior, the Department for POWs (*Odeljenje za ratne zarobljenike*). This ministry's archives are inaccessible for the period after 1945, making it difficult to obtain direct information regarding future plans for repatriation. There were, however, some details revealed in the correspondence of the time that the Ministry of Defence was collecting information for the peace negotiations in Paris. According to the Yugoslavs, 10,087 Italian POWs were still in Yugoslavia on 16 July 1946, of which 704 were non-commissioned officers, 9303 soldiers and 80 officers of lower rank.²⁰ In contrast, Italian sources claim that in July 1946 the number of prisoners was around 12,000,²¹ while ICRC sources cite 11,000 Italian POWs.²² Thus, from the beginning of 1946 until July 1946, we can deduce that around 7000 Italian POWs were repatriated. However, since during this period, the Yugoslavs had halted repatriation, it is not clear when or how those POWs had been repatriated.

[line break]

Since May 1945, numerous letters, enquiries and requests for the release of Italian POWs and deportees from the Venezia Giulia region began to arrive in Yugoslavia. They were addressed to various institutions: the Yugoslav Foreign Ministry, the Slovenian Communist Party, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY), the Yugoslav Red Cross, the ICRC and its delegation in Belgrade, as well as to the Yugoslav Advisory Committee in Rome, and even personally to Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito. They were written by relatives and/or individual organisations (such as *Associazione Congiunti dei Deportati in Jugoslavia* [ACDJ], the Italian Red Cross), the Allied Military Government (AMG), the Yugoslav Embassy in the Vatican, etc.²³

¹⁹ DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 51, br. 1849, d. 2, LI/33, MNO, Odeljenje za ratne zarobljenike, *Izveštaj o repatriaciji zarobljenika*, to MIP (X. Otsek), 18 February 1946.

²⁰ DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 35, br. 1227, XXXV/533, MUP ORZ, Vele Miletić to MNO GŠ, *Ratni zarobljenici*, 16 July 1946.

²¹ Troha, 'Italijani v vojnem ujetništvu v Jugoslaviji 1944–1947', 329.

²² ACICR, B G 3 48z-10, Mission de Georges Dunand en Yougoslavie, Voyage de G. Dunand à Belgrade: Prisonniers de guerre en Yougoslavie, no. 5, 8 July 1946.

²³ Many of those requests are kept by various archives and archival fonds, i.e. Arhiv Republike Slovenije (ARS), fond Glavni odbor KP Julijske krajine in Centralni komite KP Svobodnega tržaškega ozemlja (SI AS 1569),

Correspondence between the Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Department for POWs clearly demonstrates that these entreaties had no effect. On 20 December 1945, the Foreign Ministry asked whether they should continue to submit the requests for the repatriation of Italian POWs which they were receiving in great numbers.²⁴ Some days later, they received an answer stating that the department had not yet begun to address these requests. They added that as soon as the future of the issue was known, the department would issue a regulation. Until then, they refused to receive any further requests for the release of those prisoners.²⁵ The requests of the families waiting for their relatives to be repatriated, thus, had no effect. What is interesting to note, however, is that the Yugoslav leadership was clearly planning a joint solution for the repatriation of Italian POWs.

In order to understand what the Yugoslav plan was, we must first focus on the circumstances that brought the repatriation of Italian POWs to a halt. As previously explained, after having repatriated some 34,000 people, repatriation was suddenly interrupted in September 1945. Some historians have already addressed the issue,²⁶ stating that Yugoslav authorities had made the repatriation of Italian prisoners conditional upon the repatriation of around 30,000 Slovenians and Croats who were in Italy, and the extradition of Yugoslav political refugees.²⁷ Namely, according to Di Sante, there were around 30,000 Yugoslav collaborators in Italy, among them Ustashas, Chetniks and Belogardists (White Guards), who were held in refugee camps by the Allies.²⁸ Despite the fact that these detainees were not being held under Italian authority, but by Anglo-American forces on Italian soil, the Yugoslavs conflated their situation to that of the Italian POWs. This was confirmed by Pavlović, who had told Jaeggy that the '*repatriation was suspended until the solution of the issue of Yugoslav prisoners in Italy*'.²⁹ This was also stated in a secret report from February 1946, claiming that the repatriation of Italians had stopped '*because the Italian government is hindering the repatriation of our citizens, in particular the Istrians*'.³⁰ Why the Yugoslav leadership

arhivska enota (a. e.) 415, tehnična enota (t. e.) 11; ARS, SI AS 1569, a. e. 417; Arhiv Jugoslavije (AJ), fond Kancelarija maršala Jugoslavije, spoljnopolitička pitanja (AJ-836), I-5/6 and I-5/7; DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 41; Narodna študijska knjižnica (NŠK) OZE, fond Narodno-osvobodilni boj (NOB), f. 23a.

²⁴ DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 49, br. 7220, d. 4, XLIX/129, O. Juranić to MNO, Odeljenje za zarobljenike, 20 December 1945.

²⁵ DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 49, br. 689, XLIX/130, MNO, Odsek za ratne zarobljenike to MIP, Političko odeljenje, 25 December 1945.

²⁶ Troha, 'Italijani v vojnem ujetništvu v Jugoslaviji 1944–1947', 333–335; Di Sante, *Nei campi di Tito*, 140–3.

²⁷ Troha, *Komu Trst?*, 64; Troha, 'Italijani v vojnem ujetništvu v Jugoslaviji 1944–1947', 334; Di Sante, *Nei campi di Tito*, 89–90.

²⁸ Di Sante, *Nei campi di Tito*, 141–2.

²⁹ ACICR, ACICR–AG, B G 17 05-238, Jaeggy to CICR, Reymond Wilhem, no. 280, 17 September 1945.

³⁰ DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 51, br. 1849, d. 2, LI/33, MNO, Odeljenje za ratne zarobljenike, *Izveštaj o repatriaciji zarobljenika*, to MIP (X. Otsek), 18 February 1946.

decided to make this a quid pro quo is not quite clear. On the other hand, Italian authorities were convinced the two issues were entirely unconnected. For this reason, on 30 October 1945 the ICRC delegation in Rome received a request from Geneva to obtain a formal statement from the Italian government that they were not holding Yugoslav POWs or civilian internees, emphasising that those Yugoslav citizens still in Italy were there of their own free will.³¹ In response, Colombo transmitted a statement from the Italian Government, dated 15 December 1945, by which the latter ensured Yugoslav authorities that Yugoslav prisoners were not being detained.³² Despite this statement, the Yugoslav leadership did not change their minds regarding the repatriation of Italian POWs, which indicates this may not have been the only reason repatriation had been halted.

The second reason for the cessation of repatriation is unsurprising, as the POWs represented a source of labour, particularly important for the reconstruction of the demolished Yugoslav state.³³ As Colonel Pavlović said, '*considering the political situation and the mobilisation campaign near our borders, we believe that healthy prisoners are not to be repatriated because they have enough work here [...]*'.³⁴ After the Second World War, Yugoslavia faced a devastating economic situation and a lack of material goods due to the exhausting and destructive nature of the war and the occupation.³⁵ A workforce of POWs, a common practice during the postwar period, was advantageous to the rebuilding of Yugoslavia (but problematic in terms of diplomatic relations).

Moreover, in the second part of his claim, Pavlović partially explains what the third reason was: '[...] *but if they intend to use them for some other purpose, then it is better if they stay in our hands*'.³⁶ But what was the *other purpose*? During the first months after the war when the first POWs were repatriated from Yugoslavia, stories about the poor conditions in Yugoslav custody had begun to rapidly spread around Italy and especially the Venezia Giulia region.³⁷ As a consequence, the Yugoslav government decided to take all necessary measures in order

³¹ ACICR, ACICR-AG, B G 17 05-240, Perrin to Direction Générale des Délégations du CICR en Italie, no. 3998, *P. G. Italiens en Yougoslavie*, 30 October 1945.

³² ACICR, ACICR-AG, B G 17 05-239, Colombo to Délégation du CICR a Belgrade, no. 232, *Rapatriement des p. g. Italiens en Yougoslavie*, 30 January 1946.

³³ Troha, 'Fojbe v slovenskih in italijanskih arhivih', 286.

³⁴ DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 51, br. 1849, d. 2, LI/33, MNO, Odeljenje za ratne zarobljenike, *Izveštaj o repatriaciji zarobljenika*, to MIP (X. Otsek), 18 February 1946.

³⁵ See i.e. J. Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford 2001), 699–717.

³⁶ DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 51, br. 1849, d. 2, LI/33, MNO, Odeljenje za ratne zarobljenike, *Izveštaj o repatriaciji zarobljenika*, to MIP (X. Otsek), 18 February 1946.

³⁷ The rumours were at least partially justified, especially due to the bad conditions and treatment of Italian POWs and deportees from Venezia Giulia in Slovenia; the most ill-reputed was the Camp of Borovnica, located in Dol pri Borovnici in the surroundings of Ljubljana (see i.e. Di Sante, *Nei campi di Tito*; Troha, *Komu Trst?*, 64–5; R. Pupo, *Trieste '45* (Bari 2010), 213).

to avoid those prisoners becoming the source of a political campaign against Yugoslavia or spreading adverse propaganda about the communist regime.³⁸ Repatriation was thus suspended as a reaction to the media campaign against Yugoslavia and the negative propaganda of those who had already returned.³⁹ This also explains the fact that until 1946 (barring exceptions in the first months), those repatriated were all partisans (Garibaldines) and in general those who could in any way prove they were anti-fascist.⁴⁰

Yugoslav authorities were clearly aware that the POWs would have to be repatriated at some point. To ensure that those prisoners would not be the source of an even worse campaign towards the Yugoslav state, they took pains to re-educate them.⁴¹ Di Sante explained that 'political re-education' was the idea of the Italian Communist Party (ICP). For this reason, the ICP sent its personnel to the repatriation base in Dubrovnik from the very beginning of the repatriation process. The expedition was composed of the commissioner Piero Mirandola, Mario Socrate and Danilo Dolfi. The base was responsible for the repatriation of Italian partisans, which took place up to July 1945. After the base in Dubrovnik was closed, the cadre continued their work in Belgrade within the *Unità* battalion.⁴²

The political work with Italian prisoners was not merely opportunistic. On the contrary, archival sources indicate that there was an agreement between the ICP and the CPY regarding the re-education of POWs. This can be confirmed by the CPY proposal, personally delivered to the ICP by a former POW in Yugoslavia, Alessandro Armandola. He was repatriated in February 1946 and explained to the ICP leadership that the Yugoslav authorities greatly contributed to political work with prisoners. For this purpose, they granted permission to 'a group of colleagues' to visit the camps. In January 1946, the group came to an (informal)

³⁸ See also Di Sante, *Nei campi di Tito*, 91–104.

³⁹ Di Sante, *Nei campi di Tito*, 89.

⁴⁰ Troha, 'Italijani v vojnem ujetništvu v Jugoslaviji 1944–1947', 334.

⁴¹ In fact, re-education was one of the important characteristics of POW captivity during the Second World War (e.g. H. Faulk, *Group Captives. The Re-education of German Prisoners of War in Britain, 1945–1948* [London 1977]; A. L. Smith, *The War for the German Mind. Re-Educating Hitler's Soldiers* [Providence 1996]; F. Biess, "'Pioneers of a New Germany": Returning POWs from the Soviet Union and the Making of East German Citizens, 1945–1950', *Central European History*, 32, 2 [1999], 143–80; A. Hilger, 'Re-Educating the German Prisoners of War: Aims, Methods, Results and Memory in East and West Germany' in B. Moore and B. Hatley-Broad (eds) *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace. Captivity, Homecoming and Memory in World War II* (Oxford 2005), 61–75). For the ideological aspects of the re-education of POWs in Yugoslavia see U. Lampe, 'Prevzgoja nemških vojnih ujetnikov v času druge svetovne vojne v Jugoslaviji', *Acta Histriae*, 22, 4 (2014), 955–70.

⁴² The Italian Partisan Battalion *Unità* ('Battaglione partigiano italiano *Unità*'), initially counting 600 members, was composed of Italian partisans who had been placed in prison camps. It was created with the intent to prepare this group to soon be repatriated and spread the word about the good conditions in Yugoslavia. Thus, an important part of the Battalion was a clandestine party organization with political and military appointments, especially focused on the political propaganda among their members. Consequently, a group of 541 soldiers was repatriated in May 1946, after receiving 3 months of excellent treatment in view of repatriation. For more details see Di Sante, *Nei campi di Tito*, 91–104.

agreement with the Yugoslav authorities to continue working with POWs. The group was not particularly satisfied with the agreement as they were concerned that the new methods being applied would not be successful. It was, however, acceptable for the simple reason that this was giving them the possibility of further work with the prisoners. Among others, this agreement stipulated that there should be no more talk about repatriation, that the prisoners would be mobilised toward the reconstruction of the Yugoslav state and 'orientated' towards party policy.⁴³

What Armandola brought to Italy was, in fact, a proposal from the CPY to reach an agreement with the ICP regarding the POWs. As is clear from reading the text, the Yugoslav party leadership had no desire to cooperate with the Italian government on this subject, but at the same time had a significant interest in cooperating with their party colleagues in Italy. The undersigned Committee for the Aid of Veterans and Soldiers (*Comitato Assistenza Reduci e Soldati*, C. A. R. S.) suggested they take the proposal seriously, since this would improve relations between the Yugoslav and Italian nations, and especially the two Communist parties.⁴⁴ At the same time, the proposition was a valuable opportunity for the ICP to affect the repatriation of POWs from Yugoslavia, which could be skilfully used in a political campaign. If the ICP were to be given the possibility to decide who would be repatriated (as suggested), those whose families were not members of the ICP could be repatriated sooner, which would spread the political influence of the Party.⁴⁵ As Mario Socrate noted in one of his reports, the CPY had a marked interest in helping the ICP fight for the 'democratisation' of Italy. In fact, both sides were well aware that the suspension of the repatriation of Italian POWs had not been well received in Italy, especially among anti-Yugoslav circles in Italy.

⁴³ Archivio Istituto Gramsci (AIG), Fondo Mosca 1939 – 1958 (AIG-Mosca), Serie Jugoslavia e Venezia Giulia, MF 097, pacco (p.) 1, busta (b.) 56, z, 5, Questione prigionieri Italiani in Jugoslavia, documento (d.) 5, C. A. R. S. to Segreteria P.C.I., *Note rilevate dalla relazione fatta dal compagno Armandola Alessandro rientrato in questi giorni dalla base di Dubrovnik in Jugoslavia*, 8 February 1946.

⁴⁴ This was not the only attempt on the part of the Yugoslavs to interfere in Italian politics, which was not rare especially after the Cominform resolution of 1948, when Yugoslavia began to turn towards the West, see i.e. S. Bianchini, *Valdo Magnani e l'antistalinismo comunista* (Milano 2013); S. Mišić, 'Yugoslav Communists and the Communist Party of Italy, 1945–1956', in V. Pavlović (ed.) *Italy's Balkan Strategies (19th–20th Century)* (Belgrade 2015), 281–291; F. Tenca Montini and S. Mišić, 'Comunisti di un altro tipo: le simpatie filo-jugoslave in Italia (1948–1962)', *Acta Histriae*, 25, 3 (2017), 785–812; N. Dimić, 'In Search of an Authentic Position: The First Phase of Political and Ideological Cooperation between Yugoslavia and the West European Left, 1948–1953', *Acta Histriae*, 27, 1 (2019), 55–74.

⁴⁵ AIG, AIG-Mosca, MF 097, p. 1, b. 56, z, Questione prigionieri Italiani in Jugoslavia, d. 5, C. A. R. S. to Segreteria P.C.I., *Note rilevate dalla relazione fatta dal compagno Armandola Alessandro rientrato in questi giorni dalla base di Dubrovnik in Jugoslavia*, 8 February 1946.

Those circles were eagerly awaiting the repatriation of these prisoners in order to exploit them for their own benefit.⁴⁶

Although until now it was commonly believed that repatriation had been delayed as a result of the Yugoslav-Italian dispute, it is now obvious that the CPY saw other advantages in delaying repatriation: maintaining a much needed work force to help reconstruct a demolished state and, at the same time, help the party affiliate in Italy to garner broader political support and in this way, encourage the spread of communist propaganda. To be more realistic, the desire in Yugoslavia was most likely that the returnees would not spread negative propaganda regarding the situation in Yugoslav camps and the communist regime in general. Thus, the Yugoslav leadership suspended repatriation and waited for a favourable moment to allow Italian prisoners to return to their homeland. In the meantime, they tried to orient the POWs towards a communist ideology.

Even though repatriation had been suspended, without the knowledge of the Italian authorities or the Allies, smaller groups of POWs had returned to Italy during this period. Based on Yugoslav sources and calculations, between February and July of 1946, as many as 7000 Italian POWs (i.e. almost half of those who remained) were repatriated.⁴⁷ This is a significant number, since we know that during this period the Yugoslav leadership had no intention of organising a general repatriation of Italian POWs. When in February 1946, Sloven Smodlaka, a representative of the Advisory Council for Italy in Rome (*Savjetodavno vijeće za Italiju*),⁴⁸ met with a delegation of the wives of Italian POWs, he was asked whether the Italian POWs could return from Yugoslavia.⁴⁹ He explained that the situation was on hold pending a solution for all POWs in Yugoslavia, and expressed personal doubts that this would happen before the end of the peace negotiations.⁵⁰ In the leading Italian communist newspaper *L'Unità* his words were misinterpreted, reporting that prisoners from Yugoslavia would be

⁴⁶ AIG, AIG-Mosca, MF 097, p. 1, b. 56, z. d. 4, *Relazione del comp. Socrate ai compagni Iugoslavi all'inizio di una nuova fase di lavoro per i prigionieri di guerra Italiani (seconda decade I./1946)*, s.d.

⁴⁷ The number is based on the basic calculation among those who, according to the February 1946 report, were still in Yugoslavia (i.e. 17,000) and in July 1946, when there were still approximately 10,000 Italian prisoners in the country.

⁴⁸ Regarding the Advisory Council for Italy and the postwar Yugoslav diplomacy see S. Selinić, 'Jugoslovenska diplomatija 1945–1950: Stvaranje partijske diplomatije', *Annales, Series Historia et Sociologia*, 24, 4 (2014), 553–62.

⁴⁹ On 9 February, a congress of relatives of POWs was held in Florence and a delegation of their wives came to Rome with the intention of meeting with De Gasperi and the ambassadors, thus advocating for their repatriation. For this purpose, they also asked for a meeting with a representative of the Yugoslav delegation in Rome – Sloven Smodlaka, who did not want, as he claimed, to reject this offer, since this would prove hostile towards the Italian nation (DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 49, br. 2414, d. 1, XLIX/14, pov. br. 265/46, Sloven J. Smodlaka-Rome to MIP, *Primanje 21/2 1946 delegacije žena ital. ratnih zarobljenika*, 21 February 1946).

⁵⁰ DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 49, br. 2414, d. 1, XLIX/14, pov. br. 265/46, Sloven J. Smodlaka-Rome to MIP, *Primanje 21/2 1946 delegacije žena ital. ratnih zarobljenika*, 21 February 1946.

repatriated before the conclusion of the peace agreement.⁵¹ As Sloven Smodlaka reported, the delegation refuted this story and sent an official statement to the editorial board of the newspaper.⁵² The official denial was published in the newspaper on 26 February.⁵³

In the meantime, on 13 February 1946, the Mission of Italian War Disabled in Yugoslavia (*Missione mutilati Italiani in Jugoslavia*), composed of six members and led by Ugo Giovacchini, representative of the Association for War Mutilated and Disabled (*Associazione mutilati ed invalidi di guerra*, AMIG), arrived in Yugoslavia. Though informal in status (Yugoslav leadership would not have received any other kind of delegation from Italy), the mission was asked by the Italian Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi, to investigate the conditions of the prisoners and possibilities of their repatriation. On 25 February, they had a meeting with Yugoslav President Tito, who in informal talks assured them that Yugoslavia was willing to accept an informal commission from Italy which would help with repatriation.⁵⁴ Since the meeting was held during the same period when Mario Socrate was discussing the issue of the re-education of Italian POWs in Yugoslavia, we can deduce what kind of *commission* Tito had in mind. This is likely also why Tito insisted on the non-official status of the commission.

As a consequence, in April 1946 the Italian government began internal discussions on who would be on the commission sent to Yugoslavia. In May 1946, they internally proposed a delegation composed of five members, to be later joined by another five to six people. Curiously, the proposed delegation did not include Giovacchini, who was dismissed immediately after returning from Yugoslavia, nominating in his stead Giuliano Paietta, a visible representative and deputy from the ICP.⁵⁵ In an interview with *L'Unità* in November 1946, however, Paietta claimed that despite informal talks, the commission was never formed. Sloven Smodlaka reported to the Yugoslav government that both Giovacchini and Paietta visited his office several times but never asked for a visa for themselves nor for any delegation – their visits were always purely informal.⁵⁶ The commission was never formed nor sent to Yugoslavia.

⁵¹ 'L'agitazione dei mezzadri all'esame del Consiglio dei Ministri', *L'Unità* (22 February 1946).

⁵² DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 49, br. 2414, d. 1, XLIX/16, pov. br. 266/46 Sloven J. Smodlaka-Rome to MIP, 22 February 1946.

⁵³ 'Precisazione jugoslava sui nostri prigionieri', *L'Unità* (26 February 1946).

⁵⁴ Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASDMAE), Affari politici 1946–1950 Jugoslavia (AP 1946–1950 JUG), b. 23, *Relazione della missione mutilati ed invalidi di guerra*, 8 March 1946.

⁵⁵ ASDMAE, AP 1946–1950 JUG, b. 23, *Invio di una Missione non ufficiale in Jugoslavia per il rimpatrio dei prigionieri italiani*, 17 May 1946.

⁵⁶ DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 55, br. 14429, d. 6, LI/281, pov. br. 1212/46, Delegation Rome-Smodlaka to MIP, 24 November 1946.

In April 1946, Sloven Smodlaka, likely having intuited a certain favourable attitude on the part of the Yugoslav government, proposed to the Foreign Ministry in Belgrade a gradual start to the repatriation process. As he stated at the time, this would '*improve the atmosphere*' in Italy towards Yugoslavia. He proposed the POWs return at intervals of 15 days and in smaller groups (around 500 people), the first group to be composed of pro-Yugoslav prisoners.⁵⁷ On 15 April, Stanoje Simić, the Yugoslav Foreign Minister, replied that the return of Italian POWs was not an option. There are two notations added to his dispatch written by an unknown hand: the first reads that the issue was being reconsidered and the other comment was that the decision should wait until the return of the delegation from Paris.⁵⁸ Most likely the Yugoslavs were waiting for the outcome of the peace conference; the issue was left open in case they felt the need to make a 'friendly' gesture toward the West. As of April 1946, general repatriation was still not being seriously considered by Yugoslav leaders.

In ~~later~~ correspondence from August 1946, we learn that in May and June several groups of Italian POWs were repatriated. This was explained by the Ministry of the Interior as having been the result of instructions from the Yugoslav leadership, while individual applications were still not taken into account, awaiting a general solution for all the POWs.⁵⁹ According to some historians,⁶⁰ 7500 prisoners returned by the end of July. There are, however, no official reports regarding these repatriations.

In May 1946, even the AMG came to realise that the repatriation process was not usual. In fact, on May 21, a group of 58 Italians arrived unannounced from Yugoslavia at the Displaced Persons Assembly Centre in Trieste.⁶¹ According to the head of the Anglo-American Office of the Welfare Division & Displaced Persons Branch, Major John Kellett, they were in '*shocking physical condition*' and '*suffering considerably*'. The report continues:

⁵⁷ DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 33, br. 4021, d. 6, XXXIII/135, br. str. pov. 187, Sloven J. Smodlaka-Rome to MIP, 1 April 1946.

⁵⁸ DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 33, br. 4021, d. 6, XXXIII/136, pov. br. 4021, Simić-MIP to Delegation in Rome, 15 April 1946.

⁵⁹ DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 49, br. 10220, d. 4, XLIX/139, pov. br. 1436, Georgijević-MUP ORZ to MIP, 26 August 1946.

⁶⁰ Troha, *Komu Trst?*, 66.

⁶¹ The National Archives, Kew-London (TNA), Foreign Office (TNA-FO) 371 – Political Departments: General Correspondence from 1906–1966, FO 371/59559, R 9235/2/92, *Report on Party of Italians from Yugoslavia at "G" Displaced Persons Assembly Centre 21 – 22 May 1946*, D. Bannister-Camp Commandant to Chief Displaced Persons Officer, AMG, 31 May 1946.

'All were lice infested and 3 had scabies, 8 had swollen limbs, 6 had pulmonary trouble, 1 had advanced tuberculosis, some had pleurisy, 1 was almost blind and another completely blind, 9 were suffering through old wounds and amputations'.⁶²

After this group, prisoners from Yugoslavia were no longer sent to Trieste, but Major Kellett heard that hundreds had landed in Venice and their physical conditions were similar to that of this previous group. The major expressed his suspicion that the Yugoslav authorities intentionally sent prisoners to places where the Allied powers were not present (such as Venice), in order to avoid investigation by their authorities, *'well knowing that the Allies are punctilious in dealing with prisoners [...]'*.⁶³

That smaller groups were arriving in Venice is confirmed by the report on the arrival of 400 prisoners on 28 June 1946, issued by the Regional Delegate of the Association of War Invalids. Prisoners from this group were, again, in very poor physical condition⁶⁴ and since they were welcomed by the delegate of the Association of War Invalids, we can deduce that those were mostly assessed as being wounded or disabled in some manner.

According to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, approximately 1100 people were repatriated at the end of May and in early June 1946.⁶⁵ In addition to the fact that the circumstances of this repatriation are not clear, this number also fails to explain the fate of approximately 6000 Italian POWs who 'disappeared' from Yugoslav records. It is almost impossible to believe that thousands of prisoners returned to Italy without anyone taking notice, even if they returned in small groups. However, due to a lack of sources we only know that those 6000 prisoners were no longer listed in Yugoslav records as POWs. They could have been repatriated, but there is also the possibility that they remained in Yugoslavia for various reasons (some for work, some may have been tried and transferred to prisons or labour camps, etc.).

[line break]

In autumn of 1946, 10,000 POWs awaited repatriation from Yugoslavia. It is not clear whether an agreement on POWs between the CPY and the ICP had been reached at some point. There are, however, indications to suggest that there was an agreement (even if

⁶² TNA, TNA-FO 371/59559, R 9235/2/92, *Report of Italian POW*, John Kellett-Displaced Persons Division, 3 June 1946.

⁶³ TNA, TNA-FO 371/59559, R 9235/2/92, *Report of Italian POW*, John Kellett-Displaced Persons Division, 3 June 1946.

⁶⁴ ASDMAE, AP 1946-1950 JUG, b. 23, f. 3, Alfonso Barra Caracciolo-AMIG to Ministero per l'Assistenza post-bellica, 4 July 1946.

⁶⁵ ASDMAE, AP 1946-1950 JUG, b. 34, f. 2, *Situazione dei cittadini italiani deportati in Jugoslavia*, Zoppi-MZZ to General Consulate in Geneva, 19 August 1946.

informal) between the two parties. The most obvious indicator is that serious moves to resolve the issue of the repatriation of Italian POWs occurred only after talks between Tito and the Secretary of the ICP, Palmiro Togliatti, in November 1946.⁶⁶ The background of Togliatti's departure for Belgrade was unclear from the very beginning. As one Yugoslav secret report on the political situation in Italy shows, the political circles in Rome were certain from the very moment of his departure that this was not just a courtesy visit. Since Togliatti left overnight during the weekend, none of the government representatives had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the reason behind his visit.⁶⁷

What the two discussed behind closed doors can only be gleaned from Togliatti's media statements. Although the media focused primarily on the issue of the future border and the affiliation of Trieste and Gorizia, during his visit the secretary of the ICP obtained a significant promise from Tito regarding the repatriation of Italian POWs. An interview with Togliatti was published by the most prominent Italian communist newspaper, *L'Unità*, on 7 November. Togliatti had returned to Rome the evening before and this was his first official statement after meeting Tito, likely arranged to ensure that the agreement was not influenced by government circles. The newspaper article was titled '*Marshal Tito is willing to leave Trieste to Italy. Immediate return to Italy of all the officers and all the Italian soldiers still prisoners in Yugoslavia*', clearly indicating that discussing repatriation was one of the most important achievements of the meeting.⁶⁸ Only on the morning of 7 November, when the newspaper was already printed, did Togliatti meet with Foreign Minister Pietro Nenni, thus it is clear that the ICP wanted to take all the credit for the coming repatriation.

Repatriation actually did take place in the following weeks, taking by surprise not only the Italian government, but the international community as well. Preparations started very quickly, since on 15 November Aleksandar Ranković, the Yugoslav Minister of the Interior, sent a telegram to the ICP in order to discuss the details. The fact that Ranković personally held the negotiations makes clear the general importance of this repatriation in diplomatic terms. There were two plans for the repatriation of the first group of 7010 Italian POWs. The first envisaged a repatriation by land, along the Belgrade-Zagreb-Ljubljana-Trieste railway line. The second option was the railway route to Split, from where a ship would sail to

⁶⁶ i.e. Troha, *Komu Trst?*; Troha, 'Italijani v vojnem ujetništvu v Jugoslaviji 1944–1947', 334; Di Sante, *Nei campi di Tito*, 104–9.

⁶⁷ ARS, Rodbinski fond Edvarda Kardelja (SI AS 1277), t.e. 28, dosje XIX/1946, 28/3677, 63, *Iz taljanske političke situacije*, August 1946; the report is dated August 1946, but we know from the contents that it derives from a later period, certainly after November 1946.

⁶⁸ 'Il Maresciallo Tito è disposto a lasciare Trieste all'Italia. Immediato ritorno in Italia di tutti gli ufficiali e di tutti i soldati italiani tuttora prigionieri in Jugoslavia', *L'Unità* (7 November 1946).

Ancona. The Yugoslav government favoured the second option, as in this way the prisoners might avoid the Allies. The Yugoslavs, as they claimed, were afraid that the Allies would hold the prisoners in their camps for a longer period, thereby reducing the effect of the repatriation. However, we must add that the opposition to the first solution was also likely due to the problems the Yugoslavs had during the repatriations in the first half of 1946, when the inspection in Trieste revealed that the prisoners were in poor health. But, as Ranković continued, if in Ancona they fell into the hands of the '*Italian anti-fascist organs*'⁶⁹, they would be able to get to their homes more quickly. It is important to note that the first 7010 prisoners to be repatriated, according to Ranković, held '*anti-fascist feelings*'. Ranković urged the ICP for a quick response, since '*the sooner the repatriation takes place, the greater the political effect will be*'.⁷⁰ In a telegram a day later, the leadership of the ICP agreed to the prompt repatriation via the Split-Ancona line.⁷¹

The purpose of the agreement between Tito and Togliatti was, thus, to increase political support for the ICP and, at the same time, damage its political opponents, in particular De Gasperi's Christian Democrats, which was the leading Italian party during that period. We should bear in mind that in the first post-war years, the political situation in Italy was considerably unstable – general elections were held four times between July 1946 and May 1948. It was believed that the repatriation of Italian POWs from Yugoslavia could have a positive impact in favour of the communist party. For this reason, the Yugoslav leadership did not yield when, at the end of November, the Italian government attempted to intervene in order that the prisoners would be repatriated to Venice and not to Ancona, as previously agreed upon between the two parties.⁷² This is not surprising as it was crucial for the communist leadership to take all credit for the repatriation, embarrassing the Italian government.

While the political and media war regarding this repatriation in Italy was in full swing,⁷³ Yugoslavia carried out intensive preparations for the repatriation of the first 'anti-fascist' group. On 28 November 1946, the first steamship, called 'Gorica,' with 3144 Italian POWs on board arrived to Ancona.⁷⁴ Another steamship followed the next day, with likely a little under 4000 prisoners, as the Yugoslav authorities' plan was to repatriate 7010 POWs on 28

⁶⁹ And by 'organs', he likely meant the representatives and supporters of the ICP.

⁷⁰ AIG, AIG-Mosca, MF 097, p. 1, b. 56, z, d. 1, Ranković to PCI, 15 November 1946.

⁷¹ AIG, AIG-Mosca, MF 097, 1 p. 1, b. 56, z, d. 1, Longo-PCI to Ranković, 16 November 1946.

⁷² DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 49, br. 14000, d. 5, XLIX/146, str. pov. 119, Telegram Smodlaka to Velebit-MIP, 23 November 1946.

⁷³ See also Di Sante, *Nei campi di Tito*, 105–6.

⁷⁴ DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 51, br. 15357, d. 7, LI/309, pov. br. 1830/46, Delegation Rome-Secretary Čedomil Veljačić to MIP, *Izveštaj o repatriaciji italijanskih zarobljenika iz Jugoslavije*, 28 December 1946.

November.⁷⁵ Naturally, the arrival of both groups (especially the first one) created a media frenzy, which was accurately reported on by the Yugoslav Delegation in Rome on 18 December 1946.⁷⁶ On 29 November, *L'Unità* covered the news of the arrival of the first group in a front-page article,⁷⁷ publishing a partial list of the repatriated POWs the following day. The list of those POWs from the first and second groups of arrivals were published in the regional editions of this newspaper.⁷⁸

As reported by Sloven Smodlaka, on 20 November Togliatti urged the Yugoslav Foreign Ministry to quickly approve a mission coming to Yugoslavia to assist in the repatriation. Having received no answer, he repeated the request on 26 November.⁷⁹ After obtaining approval, a delegation from the National Association of Partisans of Italy (*Associazione Nazionale Partigiani d'Italia*, ANPI) travelled to Yugoslavia in early December 1946, departing from Rome on 9 December, as reported by *Primorski dnevnik*, the most prominent Slovenian communist newspaper of the period.⁸⁰ The commission was chaired by the president of the ANPI, Ilio Barontini, who met with Tito on 16 December.⁸¹ As a result of this visit a new group consisting of 2684 of the remaining prisoners was repatriated on 24 December 1946.⁸²

The festive atmosphere upon the arrival of the last groups is described by the Italian soldier as follows:

'When we are about to arrive to the port of Ancona, we hear a great ringing of bells and sirens: we also hear the siren of our ship and the others [boats] respond. We are surrounded by boats, fishing boats, motorboats and tug boats, all full of flags. They look like they are having a big party. For who? For us? [...] What are all those stalls on the platform, those big tents full of lights, with all those girls? On the tables there is every gift from God, those are Italian foods! We wonder who has prepared this kind of welcome for

⁷⁵ DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 49, br. 14000, d. 5, XLIX/148, pov. br. 14000, MIP-Velebit to Delegation Rome, 25 November 1946.

⁷⁶ DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 51, br. 15357, d. 7, LI/309, pov. br. 1830/46, Delegation Rome-Secretary Čedomil Veljačić to MIP, *Izveštaj o repatriaciji italijanskih zarobljenika iz Jugoslavije*, 28 December 1946.

⁷⁷ 'L'urlo delle sirene di Ancona ha salutato la nave dei reduci', *L'Unità* (29 November 1946).

⁷⁸ 'I romani reduci dalla Jugoslavia', *L'Unità* (30 November 1946).

⁷⁹ DAMSP, PA 1946, f. 49, br. 14008, d. 5, XLIX/149, str. pov. 12, Delegation Rome-Smodlaka to MIP, 25 November 1946.

⁸⁰ 'Odhod komisije v Jugoslavijo', *Primorski dnevnik* (10 December 1946).

⁸¹ 'Maršal Tito sprejel komisijo za italijanske ujetnike', *Primorski dnevnik* (17 December 1946).

⁸² ASDMAE, AP 1946–1950 JUG, b. 23, f. 3, Ministero della Guerra-M. Anfosso to MAE, *Rimpatrio dei prigionieri di guerra dalla Jugoslavia*, 30 January 1947.

us. Was it the government, or some Vatican help centre? It was certainly the Italian Red Cross! I can't understand the acronyms: DC, PC, PSI, PRI, UQ, UM, PA.⁸³ Boh!!!⁸⁴

His memories continue with the description of the expectations the Yugoslavs had of the POWs' attitudes upon their arrival in the port of Ancona, which clearly demonstrates the overall purpose of the quick repatriation after the Tito-Togliatti meeting:

'Then a loud, rather unpleasant whistle and... "[...] Italians, pay attention and come immediately to the deck. It is the military command of the escort who speaks. I must remember the pact made in Spalato [Split]... Your other companions are still in Yugoslavia. You have to go down singing 'Bandiera rossa',⁸⁵ carrying Yugoslav and Italian flags with the signs that you made. Understand?'⁸⁶ We all get in line, take the flags and signs praising the fraternal Italian-Yugoslav friendship and begin the landing along the catwalks, singing in a weak voice. We sing. Perhaps our predecessors to repatriation did not sing 'Bandiera rossa', but we do, because we know what 'staying' means and it is the price we have to pay to avoid retaliation against our comrades still in captivity.'⁸⁷

Thus, in less than a month, over 9500 Italian POWs were repatriated from Yugoslavia. This caught not only the Italian government, but also the general public by surprise, and especially the ICRC. On 3 December 1946, representative of the ICRC Pierre Colombo, wrote to the ICRC delegation in Rome that as far as the Belgrade delegation was concerned, the Yugoslav authorities had not made any formal statements about this repatriation.⁸⁸ A day later, Jaeggy reported that the Yugoslav government had officially announced the repatriation of Italian POWs in one of the November issues of *Borba*, the official party newspaper.⁸⁹ On 6 December, Colombo attacked the delegation in Belgrade, saying that they were very surprised in Geneva to learn about the repatriation 'from external sources' and not from their delegation

⁸³ Acronyms of Italian political parties.

⁸⁴ L. Rossi Kobau, *Prigioniero di Tito 1945–1946. Un bersagliere nei campi di concentramento jugoslavi* (Milano 2001), 161-2.

⁸⁵ 'Bandiera rossa' (Red flag) is a famous song from the Italian labour movement that glorifies the red flag, a symbol of the socialist and communist movement.

⁸⁶ The speech made by the commander was given in broken Italian. The translation has been done in a more clear manner in order to render the content comprehensible.

⁸⁷ L. Rossi Kobau, *Prigioniero di Tito 1945–1946*, 161-2.

⁸⁸ ACICR, ACICR-AG, B G 17 05-243, Colombo to Délégation du CICR a Rome, no. 4884, *Rapatriement des PG Italiens en Yougoslavie*, 3 December 1946.

⁸⁹ ACICR, ACICR-AG, G 86/R 1149, 1149 *Rapatriement de PG, Yougoslavie*, Delegation CICR Belgrade-Jaeggy to CICR-Galopin, no. 441, 4 December 1946.

in Belgrade. He expressed the conviction that *'it is not possible that such a repatriation would be improvised and carried out within a few days'*. The delegation in Belgrade would certainly have known about the repatriation, and the ICRC did not understand why they had not been informed. He added that on 14 November the delegation in Belgrade had continued to claim that Yugoslav authorities were not planning any repatriation of POWs. Colombo felt that the developments put the committee in an unpleasant situation, mainly because a new shipment of aid packages for Italian POWs had recently been dispatched. In addition, the ICRC recently informed some families in Italy that repatriation was not to be expected any time soon. The ICRC concluded their dispatch by requesting a detailed report on repatriation and, in particular, information regarding whether all Italian POWs were to be repatriated.⁹⁰

On 26 December, Jaeggy delivered a comprehensive explanation of the situation that arose around the unexpected repatriation of Italian POWs. He claimed that he had forwarded Togliatti's repatriation statement to Geneva and, in this way, announced that the Yugoslav government would shortly issue an official statement regarding repatriation.⁹¹ The statement on the general repatriation of Italian POWs was announced on 7 December in *Borba*, reporting the departure of 6000 Italian POWs. According to the delegate's assessment, the repatriation was organised very quickly. Since Jaeggy was travelling around Yugoslavia during that period, and he thought that Togliatti's statement had been received in Geneva, he did not consider it necessary to report on the Yugoslav government's official statement. He confirmed that the repatriation was the result of Togliatti's visit to Belgrade and rejected the rumours that appeared in the *'tendentious circles in Italy'*, claiming that preparations had been going on for some considerable time and that the ICP only took advantage of this opportunity. He added that the delegation in Geneva probably understood from Togliatti's statement that the Yugoslav authorities expressed the desire for repatriation to be conducted in such a way as to leave no doubt that these (i.e. anti-Yugoslav) circles, which had *'always spread falsehoods about the camps throughout Yugoslavia and methods which were not to be envied'*, were not to take credit. Jaeggy added that those circles *'continually slandered'* everything coming from the East.⁹²

⁹⁰ ACICR, ACICR-AG, B G 17 05-250, Colombo to Délégation du CICR a Belgrade, no. 486, *Rapatriement des PG Italiens retenus en Yougoslavie*, 6 December 1946.

⁹¹ It is not known whether this declaration was ever received by the Geneva committee; the author did not find it among the documents in the archive.

⁹² ACICR, ACICR-AG, B G 17 05-249, Jaeggy to Colombo-CICR Geneve, *Rapatriement des P. G. Italiens*, no. 617/1946, 26. 12. 1946. Since this paragraph is particularly interesting, we fully cite it in the original: *'Vous avez probablement remarqué dans la déclaration de Togliatti qu'il a insisté sur le désir exprimé par les autorités yougoslaves que le rapatriement soit fait d'une manière qui exclue l'intervention de ces milieux qui depuis toujours se sont fait une habitude de répandre sur la Yougoslavie toutes espèces de calomnies et de faire à*

He continued by focusing on the repatriation and reported that 6000 POWs had already been sent back from Split to Ancona in early December, and 2682 had been repatriated on 23 December. During the month of December approximately 9000 prisoners were repatriated, while the rest were still waiting. The aid packages Colombo mentioned were handed to the prisoners at the beginning of November when there was still no evidence repatriation would soon take place. In addition, he stated that he had written the message received on November 14 in Geneva on 18 October, but there was obviously a delay which could not have been his fault, since during that time he was traveling around Yugoslavia.⁹³

As correctly stated by Jaeggy, the process of repatriation was not finished, since a group of 614 prisoners arrived in Ancona on 5 March 1947.⁹⁴ According to Carlo Mottironi, a delegate of the Italian Red Cross in Geneva, after this group there were about 1200 Italian POWs still awaiting repatriation from Yugoslavia.⁹⁵ On 30 April 1947, Colombo explained to Jaeggy that he was not sure what the Yugoslav authorities intended to do with these prisoners or when they would be repatriated.⁹⁶ On the same day, he reported to Mottironi that in the course of correspondence with the Yugoslav Red Cross, he had been informed that Yugoslav authorities were waiting for these prisoners to form a sufficiently large number for one convoy which would then be repatriated.⁹⁷

According to ICRC sources, the repatriation of the last group of Italian POWs was therefore suspended for technical reasons – the group still waiting was too small. The Committee in Geneva was, however, interested in when this group was scheduled to be repatriated.⁹⁸ On 22 June, Olga Milošević, president of the Yugoslav Red Cross, announced that the repatriation was expected to take place in July 1947.⁹⁹ However, already on 27 June 1947 another 849 persons were repatriated. According to some indications, the captain of the steamer

propos des camps en Yougoslavie une campagne qui n'a rien à envier aux méthodes en vigueur dans ces régimes passés, lesquels se faisaient une spécialité de lancer des calomnies contre tout ce qui venait de l'Est'.

⁹³ ACICR, ACICR-AG, B G 17 05-249, Jaeggy to Colombo-CICR Geneve, *Rapatriement des P. G. Italiens*, no. 617/1946, 26 December 1946.

⁹⁴ ASDMAE, AP 1946-1950 JUG, b. 23, f. 3, Ministero della Difesa-Eraldo Pallotta to MAE, 9 April 1947. According to Italian and ICRC sources, the arrival of this group was announced for 26 February 1947 (ASDMAE, ASDMAE-AP 1946-1950 JUG, b. 23, f. 3, Ministero dell'Assistenza Post-bellica-Fausto Nitti to MAE, 24 February 1947; ACICR, ACICR-AG, B G 17 05-245, Mottironi-CRI Delegation in Geneva to Diane Dumont, 18. March 1947).

⁹⁵ ACICR, ACICR-AG, B G 17 05-245, Mottironi-CRI Delegation in Geneva to Diane Dumont, 18 March 1947.

⁹⁶ ACICR, ACICR-AG, B G 17 05-245, Colombo to Jaeggy, *PG Italiens*, 30 April 1947.

⁹⁷ ACICR, ACICR-AG, B G 17 05-245, Colombo to Mottironi, 30 April 1947.

⁹⁸ ACICR, ACICR-AG, G 86/R 1149, Colombo-CICR to Yugoslav Red Cross, 29 April 1947.

⁹⁹ ACICR, ACICR-AG, B G 85, carton (c.) 1113, Croix-rouges (CR) Yougoslave (YOUG), Olga Milošević-YRC to Colombo-CICR, no. 6798, 22 June 1947.

announced the arrival of another 800 people in July.¹⁰⁰ We have, however, no information to indicate if and when this group arrived in Ancona.

In the period from November 1946 to July 1947, more than 11,000 Italian POWs arrived in Ancona. This is about 1000 more than the internal Yugoslav records accounted for in July 1946. The number was mentioned by Jaeggy in December 1946, when he reported that 6000 Italian POWs were repatriated, while 5000 were still waiting.¹⁰¹ According to his information, 11,000 Italian POWs were still in Yugoslavia before the general repatriation following the meeting between Tito and Togliatti.

At the same time, Yugoslavia was holding a large number of German POWs. It must be stressed, however, that according to Georges Dunand, a representative of the ICRC who went on a mission in Yugoslavia in 1946, the manner in which POWs of different nationalities were dealt with was not uniform.¹⁰² Although his statement does not contain any further information, we can deduce from the context that he was referring to the question of repatriation. In fact, while the majority of Italian POWs were repatriated at the end of 1946, German POWs were repatriated only at the end of 1948 and beginning of 1949.¹⁰³ However, the situation of POWs of different nationalities in Yugoslavia is hardly comparable when discussing repatriation. Italy was a cobelligerent and keeping Italian POWs and preventing them from being repatriated for political reasons was not well-accepted in Italy or by the Allies, especially Anglo-Americans. Although the Western Allies themselves, in particular the British, had their own concerns regarding the repatriation of Italian POWs, most of the Italian POWs held by American forces had already been repatriated in 1945, while those from the United Kingdom were repatriated by the end of July 1946.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, keeping German POWs of war with the intention of putting them to work was acceptable, especially since they were being detained in other Allied countries for the same motive.¹⁰⁵

[line break]

To conclude, during and after the Second World War Yugoslavia had captured a little over 50,000 Italian POWs, while by the end of 1945 something more than 34,000 of those were

¹⁰⁰ ASDMAE, AP 1946–1950 JUG, 23, 3, b. 23, f. 3, *Prigionieri di guerra reduci dalla Jugoslavia*, MG to Presidenza del consiglio dei ministri, 3 July 1947.

¹⁰¹ ACICR, ACICR–AG, B G 17 05-249, Jaeggy to Colombo-CICR Geneve, *Listes des camps de P. G. en Yougoslavie*, no. 620/1946, 26 December 1946.

¹⁰² ACICR, B G 3 48z-10, Mission de Georges Dunand en Yougoslavie, Voyage de G. Dunand à Belgrade: Prisonniers de guerre en Yougoslavie, no. 5, 8 July 1946.

¹⁰³ Ilić, 'Vrednovanje rada i životni uslovi Nemačkih ratnih zarobljenika zaposlenih u privredi Jugoslavije 1945–1949.', 160.

¹⁰⁴ Fedorowich and Moore, *The British Empire and Its Italian Prisoners of War*, 205–17.

¹⁰⁵ Mackenzie, 'The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II', 502–3.

repatriated. In September 1945 the repatriation was suspended, meaning that at the beginning of 1946 there were approximately 17,000 Italian POWs still awaiting repatriation. Between September 1945 and November 1946, there were groups of POWs repatriated under unusual circumstances, as also noted by AMG authorities. Following the meeting between Tito and Togliatti, between November 1946 and July 1947 around 11,000 Italian POWs were repatriated and the Yugoslav government officially put an end to the issue of Italian POWs, as all were supposed to have been repatriated by that time.

While the conventional belief has thus far been that the main reason for this prolonged captivity was that the Yugoslav authorities made repatriation conditional upon the extradition of Yugoslav political refugees, it is clear that there were other reasons for the delay. As we have seen, the repatriation of Italian POWs from Yugoslavia to their homeland was not only a “military operation”, as it should be according to the *Geneva Convention*, but in particular a diplomatic solution affected by relations between Italy and Yugoslavia. If we reconsider Simon P. Mackenzie’s general assertion that to ‘*fully comprehend POW treatment we need to understand not only the material context [...] but also, and perhaps even more importantly, the ideological context [...]*’,¹⁰⁶ we must agree that when discussing Italian POWs in Yugoslavia, the prevailing fact that influenced their captivity and especially the delay in their repatriation, was ideological. The repatriation of Italian POWs was a carefully planned move made by the Yugoslav government and, in particular, by the CPY. The two main objectives were (1) maintaining a labour force to help reconstruct the demolished Yugoslav state and (2) help the party affiliate in Italy, encouraging the spread of the communist-socialist influential zone. This was not an uncommon situation in post-war Europe. In order to achieve this goal, repatriation was carried out quickly after the Tito-Togliatti meeting, making the impact as great as possible. No one was informed of the details, with the exception of the leadership of the ICP. Naturally, the Yugoslav leadership had no interest in negotiating with the Italian government. The whole matter was carried out in such a way as to leave no doubt that it was the ICP who was meant to take the credit. On the other hand, the Italian government consistently claimed that they were working hard for the repatriation of prisoners from Yugoslavia; thus, the intent was to ensure that the Italian nation would be aware the ICP managed to resolve the problem quickly, with a single visit. The secondary purposes of the agreement between Tito and Togliatti are clear: to improve the image of Yugoslavia in the eyes of the Italian public and above all, to ensure the ICP victory in the next general election.

¹⁰⁶ Mackenzie, ‘The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II’, 489.

As was explained in September 1947 by the Yugoslav representative in Rome, Mladen Iveković, there was an initial positive impact as the ICP was '*practically freed overnight from the negative and injurious reputation because of the territorial requirements of Yugoslavia*'.¹⁰⁷ But not for long. Although it had been hoped that the repatriation of Italian POWs would constitute a turning point in Yugoslav-Italian relations, this was not the case, since after the peace treaty between the two countries in February 1947, their relationship was still far from stable or friendly.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ DAMSP, PA 1947, f. 48, br. 418030, d. 10, 48/132, str. pov. br. 5/47, Rome-Mladen Iveković to MIP, 11 November 1947.

¹⁰⁸ See i.e. F. Tenca Montini, *La Jugoslavia e la questione di Trieste (1945-1954)* (Bologna 2020).