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'The fiery circle of temptation: opt, opt': why a minority of Italian Military Internees chose to cooperate with the Nazi-Fascists

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Between 8 September 1943 and the end of the war, Italian Military Internees were confronted daily with a stark choice between continued resistance and opting to assist the Reich by fighting or working. Extraordinarily, over 600,000 said no, and endured internment or forced labour until they were liberated or died. Paradoxically, the minority who made the more predictable choice of opting to cooperate, the so-called *optanti*, constituted an anomaly. This article examines their motivation by giving an overview of the political background, the experience of deportation, the *Lager* environment and the phases and methods of propaganda. Primary sources indicate that hunger was a common denominator in their decision, but that the weight of other factors, which varied with individuals, broadly speaking fell into three categories: bleak honesty, specious cynicism and maverick idealism. These categories are illustrated by four case studies: the mass adhesion at Biala Podlaska and the individuals Pietro Faraci, Tranquillo Frigeni and Remo Faustini.

Keywords: Italian military internees; *optanti*; anomalous; cooperation; Nazi-fascists

Introduction

As Claudio Pavone observes, from the announcement of the Armistice on 8 September 1943 until the end of the Second World War, all sectors of society in the north of Italy found themselves constantly called upon to make an ever tougher choice between disobedience and Nazi-Fascism at an ever higher price (2006, 23–25). However, the choice made collectively by approximately 600,000 captured members of the Italian military was unique. Hitler thrust them outside the protection of the Geneva Convention by denying them POW status and designating them Italian Military Internees (IMI). Gabriele et al. (2012, 133)[1] correctly observe that POWs are generally given no choice. However, from the moment of capture onward, the IMI were repeatedly faced with the option of collaborating or not, working or not and, if working, in what capacity (Sommaruga 1995, 79). Those who opted to support the Nazi-Fascist war effort were known as *optanti* and they 'adhered' by signing a form intended to give them the illusion of empowerment and the process a semblance of legality (Ferioli 2005, 5–6).

The IMIs' unarmed resistance remained largely ignored in Italy until the early 1980s when there was an explosion of interest in them, manifested mainly in the publication of primary sources, either individually or in anthologies, and the proceedings of conferences such as the Associazione Nazionale Ex Internati (ANEI) *Convegno di studi storici* held in Florence in 1985 and 1991[2] respectively, at which both first-hand accounts and historiographical articles were

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presented. Sometimes, as in the case of Claudio Sommaruga, contributors were both survivors and historiographers. Interest was fuelled by the groundbreaking work of the German historians Gerhard Schreiber (1997) and Gabriele Hammerman (2004), backed by their armoury of official German and Italian sources. Even so, Aga Rossi (2003, 12) feels that the IMI have been sidelined because they were connected with the Italian military, which had fought in a Fascist war, and their sense of fealty to the monarchy did not, on the whole, interest historians. This neglect applies even more to English-language historiography.[3] The *optanti* have been more neglected than the *non-optanti* by both Italian and English-language scholars and, to my knowledge, the only focused historiographical treatment that they have received has been the article by Ferioli (2005). I agree with his view that they are mostly evoked negatively to highlight the contrast with the majority who refused to cooperate. His focus is somewhat diffuse and he includes details of the formation of Mussolini's New Army, motives for opting, Guareschi's view (mainly based on his *Gran Diario*), the post-opting and post-war experience of the *optanti* and an examination of an unpublished memoir. In contrast, the present article focuses on the reasons for their all-too-human response, which was paradoxically anomalous in the context of the act of mass heroism by the *non-optanti*.

Given the relative paucity of historiographical material, I have, of necessity, had to rely heavily on first-hand accounts. Moreover, the main, although not exclusive, focus will be on officers, largely since more of them kept diaries, because of their higher educational level and their desire to fill empty time. They were not obliged to work until autumn 1944, in contrast to soldiers who, under the Geneva Convention to which the Germans occasionally subscribed, had to choose between fighting and working. There is general agreement that fewer soldiers than officers opted,[4] but the reasons for this would require treatment in a separate article. A common complaint of historians is the difficulty of establishing satisfactory data.[5] Sommaruga (1988, 225, n.1) discounts the Ministry of Defence's figure of two per cent for *optanti*. He estimates it to be closer to six per cent for soldiers and 33 per cent for officers (209–210).

Background

On 25 July 1943, King Vittorio Emmanuele III obliged Mussolini to resign as Duce, had him arrested and replaced him as head of government with Marshal Badoglio. The Armistice was signed on 3 September 1943 but only publicised on 8 September. A day later, the king and Badoglio decamped to southern Italy and the Regno del Sud (Kingdom of the South) was created on 11 September. Contrary to the best military traditions, Badoglio left the troops adrift and unprepared for the foreseeable ensuing chaos when he broadcast the sibylline and 'tragically inadequate' statement (Rochat 2005, 427; author translation) that the Italian forces should henceforth cease all hostile acts against the Anglo-American forces and react to 'possible attacks from any other source' (Dragoni 1996, 24), without specifying either the source or the nature of the reaction intended. Only on 13 October did the Kingdom of the South declare war on Germany, thus becoming a co-belligerent of the Allies.

Meanwhile the Germans had not been caught unawares and had been entrenching themselves in Northern Italy. As Nuto Revelli, transformed from Fascist soldier to disfigured partisan, dryly remarked: 'They're Germans and they know how to wage war' (1962, 308). After the proclamation of the Armistice, they occupied all locations across Europe and in the Balkans where Italian forces were stationed and called on the men to disarm. They pretended that the removal of their arms was a 'temporary' measure (Fiorentino 1946, 30) and deceived them with the promise that they could return to civilian life. About two million members of the military deserted

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(Rochat 2005, 431), often encouraged or assisted by members of the public (Pavone 2006, 16 ff.), but most remained where they were for several possible reasons. From a young age, they had been deeply indoctrinated by 20 years of the Fascist dogma of obedience. For some, flouting the code of military honour was unthinkable: when asked by an NCO whether the men should shoot at the Germans or the English, an officer replied: 'We will shoot at whoever we are ordered to shoot at. We are soldiers and we don't play politics. We follow the orders of the king who is above politics and to whom we have sworn allegiance' (Fiorentino 1946, 12). War weariness was another factor, as graphically illustrated in Revelli's work. On 12 September 1943, the Germans placed Mussolini at the head of a puppet state constituted on 23 September with the official name of Repubblica Sociale Italiana (RSI), colloquially known as the Repubblica di Salò (from the name of the town on Lake Garda where Mussolini's Ministry of Propaganda was headquartered).

The *non-optanti* were transported in cattle trucks under unspeakable conditions to concentration camps (*Lagers*) dotted across Germany and Poland.[6] These concentration camps fell under the Wehrmacht, unlike extermination or work and punishment camps, which were administered by the SS and where some IMI ended up in the course of their internment. Few IMI have written about their deportation, but their accounts of the 'antechamber to hell' coincide (Schreiber 1997, 328ff.). The trucks were built to accommodate six horses and 40 men (Fiorentino 1946, 36) but that number was grossly disregarded. The men often endured days without food or water or evacuation breaks. In desperation, they had to improvise by making a toilet bowl of their knapsacks (Biasion 1948, 59), billycans or balaclavas (Consigliere 1992, 419). Interestingly, Allied POWs were subjected to similar atrocious treatment in transit to the camps where they were formally registered, because it was only at this point that the Germans regarded them as covered by the Geneva Convention (MacKenzie 2004, 65 ff.).

Lager living conditions

Lager administration largely conformed to the Geneva Convention. Each camp was assigned a German *Kommandant* and, as per Article 43, a representative (*Anziano*) was chosen by his fellow-prisoners as an intermediary with the Germans.

Officers' experience of internment was fairly homogenous (Rochat 1986, 30–32) and will be treated as such in this article; it was characterised by insanitary and overcrowded living conditions, cold, hunger, inadequate medical care and arbitrary brutality. Let us briefly look at each element.

Living conditions in the *Lager* were 'catastrophic' (Schreiber 1997, 612). That they were 'dismal modern catacombs' (Betta 1955, 201) is illustrated by the factual detail provided by Colonel Pietro Testa, the exemplary *Anziano* of Wietzendorf (1947, 5 ff.). The camp was divided into four sectors, each with four huts (55x17 m) whose walls were made of cement blocks barely held together with lime and whose roofs were made of planks covered with tarred board, allowing cold air and water to penetrate easily. Every hut was divided into six non-interconnecting dormitories of 500 square metres, each with a total bed capacity of 52. The number of occupants could rise to over 90, in which case the overflow had to sleep on the cement floor or tables or find someone willing to share his narrow bunk bed. The Italians dubbed the two- or four-bunk beds *castelli* (castles). The straw mattresses were made of twisted paper with braided cords and filled with wood shavings. They were never changed and eventually disintegrated, becoming a nest for filth and parasites.

Each hut was provided with three rudimentary night toilets equipped with a shaft for faeces. Sometimes urine ran into the huts, since the entry and latrine doors were the same, and the smell was appalling. The day toilets were located in sheds, and faeces and urine fell into large cement

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containers which were periodically emptied into casks on *carri M[erde]* (shit carts – the prisoners called them *carri M[ussolini]* – drawn by hapless Russian prisoners or Italian soldiers used as draught horses (Sommaruga 2001a, 170). Sewage and waste water flowed freely around the barracks. There were wash-houses, but these functioned only intermittently because of faulty engine pumps. Only when they functioned was drinking water available. Exacerbating the overcrowded and insanitary conditions was the cold: in the winter of 1944–1945 the temperature could hover at -10°C, sometimes falling to -20°C, and the only heating was provided by ‘human warmth’ (Sommaruga 2001a, 77). There were even cases of third-degree frostbite (Testa 1947, 252).

The IMIs’ exclusion from the protection of the Geneva Convention – and hence of the International Red Cross (ICRC) – had a major impact on their food supply and medical treatment. The Italian Red Cross (CRI) was of little help. As Mariani notes, it had been progressively fascistised by the regime from 1923 (2006, 209) and, after the Armistice, was broken into two branches, corresponding to a divided Italy. In November 1943, an aid agency, the Servizio Assistenza Internati (SAI), was created, theoretically empowering the RSI to act as the IMIs’ protecting power and supply food and clothes, as well as visit the camps – naturally, only with German permission. The SAI, working in tandem with the CRI, officially began work in March 1944. It largely remained what Giovanni Ansaldo, the opportunistic *non-optante* Fascist and intimate of Galeazzo Ciano, son-in-law and minister of Mussolini, called ‘the office of good intentions’ (1993, 53). One internee calculated that each IMI had received from the SAI on average 500 grams of food a month over 18 months (Odorizzi 1984, 159)[7] although the theoretical amount per IMI was five kilograms a month. A trenchant summation of the SAI’s abysmal performance was given by the *Anziano* at Hammerstein: ‘it didn’t manage or know how or want to carry out more than a tiny part of its mandate’ (De Toni 1980, xiii). The Germans had little interest in making the system work, the RSI was more concerned with its image than with saving lives, organisation left much to be desired and internal conflict between SAI and CRI further weakened their effectiveness.[8]

Moreover, the CRI was often unable to provide medical assistance. In March 1944, Colonel Testa attributed the death of Captain Guido Mancini, who had been gratuitously shot by a sentry and wounded seriously, but initially not fatally, to various factors, including inadequate first aid because the infirmary was poorly equipped and there was no ambulance to take him to a treatment centre (1947, 239). There was an acute shortage of medicines and supplies, including cotton wool (Mariottini 1947, 185), and those sent by families were often confiscated by the Germans for their own use (Schreiber 1997, 638). The infirmary tended to be overcrowded: for instance, at Biala Podlaska, a camp in eastern Poland, there was no place for men afflicted with malaria or scabies (Mariottini 1947, 176). Men often tried to avoid the infirmary because of the rumour that patients moved out of the camp on German orders would be used as human guinea pigs (Mariottini 1947, 187). Technically, the seriously ill were supposed to be repatriated, but in practice few were (Schreiber 1997, 731–732).

Pressures to opt

The main driver in the decision to opt, or cooperate, was probably the Germans’ weapon of ‘black hunger’, with or without ancillary factors discussed below. Collingham shows that the German Aryan population was ‘adequately fed’ throughout the war (2012, 348), so it was clearly a conscious political decision on the part of the Germans to starve into submission all prisoners and foreign workers, not just Italians (Rochat 1986, 60). For instance, despite the fact that British POWs received more rations than the IMI – as well as Red Cross parcels – these were still pitiful,

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especially after the Germans cut rations by one-third precisely because of the parcels, causing malnutrition and incipient starvation (MacKenzie 2004, 155 ff.). There were complaints in family letters to IMI that post offices would not accept their parcels (Testa 1947, 206) and in 1945 a scandalous half a million parcels for IMI and Italian workers were found lying undelivered in Northern Italian post offices (Schreiber 1997, 743).

There was often no drinking water available. For example, at Beniaminowo, also in eastern Poland, there was one water pump for 3,000 Italian officers and, with the advent of the cold, it was often blocked (Vialli 1983, Fig. 22). By 1945 IMI were receiving less than 1,000 calories a day, but calories were not the only factor (Schreiber 1997, 612). Vitamin deficiency was caused by the almost total absence of meat, fat, and fresh fruit and vegetables, particularly since the basic ingredients were often rotten (Avagliano and Palmieri 2009, 219–220). The men were fed like 'sparrows' (Mattanza 1992, 407) on 'too little to live on and too much to die on' (Piasenti 1983, 181). At Liberation, no internee weighed more than 60 kg, many weighed around 40 kg and at least one came in at 30 kg (Avagliano and Palmieri 2009, 220). The Germans used a stick and carrot approach to food. Those who stood firm were subject to a relentless reduction in rations (De Toni 1980, 81; 77) whereas those who opted had to agree to propagandise their choice by parading their temporarily more generous rations (Rochat 1986, 61).

'Little by little hunger strips souls bare' (Biasion 1948, 139) and makes men 'bestial' (Zàggia 1945, 212). For example, an officer slipped away early from midnight mass to steal food from a friend (Dragoni 1996, 253) and a doctor raised no objection to all of his patients – even those suffering from frostbite – being taken outside while the infirmary was searched; the same doctor was, in fact, short-changing them on rations and selling them on the black market (De Toni 1980, 74). Although hunger may have made internees bestial, their captors were perceived as human towards animals but bestial towards humans. In one incident, camp staff tied four internees to a tree and beat them with their belts with metal clasps for stealing pigswill (Coslovich 1992, 426).

The effects on cognition and morale of starvation, particularly in the context of brutality and overcrowded and insanitary living conditions, should not be underestimated. At best, they made men irritable, and prone to raised voices, rows, brawls and cursing (Poggio 2007, 101; 107). At worst, they lowered resistance to disease, such as dysentery, pneumonitis, TB, pleurisy, various forms of typhus (e.g. Piasenti 1983, 112–113) and a host of other conditions. Lethargy, exhaustion and depression affected the ability to think rationally, placing internees into a 'state of mental apathy' and enveloping their thoughts 'in a constant fog' (Mariottini 1947, 179). In addition, for those unlucky enough to receive few or no food parcels, the only ways of dealing with hunger were the black market, theft and the sale of personal possessions or some or all of the contents of available parcels (Sommaruga 1992, 258).

From the outset the Germans displayed particular animus towards the IMI whom they regarded as traitors (Devoto 1986, 141) and they were cruelly inventive in their methods of abuse which Rochat sees as having a two-fold intention: humiliate the individual and bend collective resistance (1986, 32). There was the twice-daily roll call (*Appell*) held outside in all weathers; the physical hardship of standing sometimes for hours was compounded by the depersonalising reference to the individual IMI by number, not name. Dogs were arbitrarily set on the men as they went to the latrines or water fountain, or even when they were in barracks (De Toni 1980, 163–165), and dog bites often led to severe injuries. If the dogs were roaming freely, the men were afraid to go to the latrines and would urinate outside the barracks, which led to further German reprisals (De Toni 1980, 78). Officers could be whipped in the face (De Toni 1980, 80) and there were injuries from firearms and fatal lesions from blows and whipping (Piasenti 1983, 112–113). Arbitrary shootings were not uncommon: for instance, even after showing the sentry his pass to the infirmary, one man

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was shot in the back at a distance of ten metres (Zàggia 1945, 149). Another refinement of cruelty was the disinfestation procedure, which could involve a 17-hour wait for a three-hour procedure (Zàggia 1945, 176) during which the IMI had to undergo having all their bodily hair (including in the groin and underarms) shaved off by Russian prisoners, after which the affected parts were painted with a pungent, greenish, liquid irritant (Zàggia 1945, 175). In Hammerstein in August 1944 the procedure was repeated within two days. This was the last straw for some IMI and they opted rather than face it again (De Toni 1980, 112).

The role of propaganda

Into this mix of unspeakable living conditions, hunger and brutality was thrown overt propaganda, the two main instruments of which were *La Voce della Patria* and official visits by Fascist officials to the camps.

La Voce della Patria was a newspaper published in Berlin from September 1943 to September 1944 and the only authorised outside source of information in Italian in the *Lager*. Its main themes were: the duty of the military to atone through fighting or working for the 'treachery' of the Armistice, for which it had not been responsible, and to collaborate for the sake of an Italy overrun by the enemy, as well as to mitigate the unshakeable German desire for revenge backed by powerful weapons. The first leading article kindly advised the IMI to avoid dramatising 'relatively light evils such as internment', 'highly pathetic' though this was (Piasenti 1990, 56–57). According to an internee, the degree of success of the paper's stale propaganda is hard to assess (Piasenti 1990, 64). Its main function seems to have been its use as a welcome source of toilet paper (Testa 1947, 88; Fiorentino 1946, 186), like the fate of its English-language counterpart for Allied POWs (MacKenzie 2004, 159). Fascist propaganda visits to *Lagers* were more effective and the propaganda process may be roughly divided into four phases. In the first phase that began upon capture the IMI were invited to join the SS. They were told that the Führer was aware of their value and hence was offering them the 'honour' of enrolling in the SS. Initially operating on the principle that you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, the Germans first held out the honey of possible service in Italy (Fiorentino 1946, 64), quickly followed by the vinegar of the threat of summary execution for refusal (Zàggia 1945, 37). As Giovannini notes, this was probably the only time that some *optanti* were strongly motivated by a genuine pro-Fascist conviction (2010/2011, 45). Opportunism inevitably played a role because, other than a few hotheads enthused by Nazi-Fascism, most *optanti* were driven by their bellies and their desperation to return home to help their families (Fiorentino 1946, 64), with some intending to desert and join the partisans on their return to Italy. Others, now and later, were naïve enough to believe in German promises of repatriation (De Toni 1980, 108). Not many IMI took advantage of the offer and, in any case, what the Germans were really wanting were Italian workers, not Fascist soldiers (Bolla 1983, 113).

The second phase began in October 1943. Holland (2009, 95) observes that Mussolini wanted to create a 'New Army' as a means of salvaging some kind of reputation, both for himself and Italy. Hitler had initially refused but now he permitted the creation of four symbolic division-sized military formations that would supposedly give to the RSI government the appearance at least of formal autonomy (Schreiber 1997, 475). There followed a slew of visits by RSI personnel to transit camps, where they exhorted the IMI to atone for the king and Badoglio's betrayal by enrolling in the new Fascist army. The *patria* was said to be above Fascism; the men were told that only a German victory could save them, that in Naples and Sicily communists were seizing children to brainwash them and that Americans were raping their wives. The appeal to atonement

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and honour was sweetened with the bait of repatriation; the men should save their lives in order to save their families and, in any case, many of them would be able to go back home, since five divisions were already fully staffed. No mention was made of the fact that at that point only two had been constituted (Betta 1992, 176). A further sweetener was the claim that many of the men who returned to Italy would not have to fight and that all the Germans wanted was a pro forma signature on the adhesion form; otherwise the IMI would be 'left to die in this horrible country in winter' (Betta 1955, 90–91). On 1 December 1943 Mussolini declared himself in favour of having conscripts for his army trained in Germany (Schreiber 1997, 497) and RSI representatives again visited the camps, displaying a crude lack of empathy for the IMIs' situation. In January 1944, a commission told the inmates of Biala Podlaska that it was 'delighted to note that in all camps our German comrades are truly treating you as guests and the physical, psychological and sanitary conditions of all of you are satisfactory' (Fantasia 1987, 55). These visits yielded few results (Mercatali 1995, 47). Nevertheless, the visits could produce a delayed reaction and trigger agonised soul-searching (Vialli 1983, Fig. 34), which could then flare up into fear of German reprisals, anxiety that loved ones at home would not understand (Esposito 1992, 313), recriminations and broken friendships. For instance, when *optante* CRI nurse Antonia Setti Carraro, interned in Paderborn lazaret, obtained permission to go to Zeithain lazaret to persuade her doctor fiancé to opt and so be transferred, he refused and terminated their engagement. Moreover, during her visit, she was ostracised by *non-optanti* colleagues (1982, 150 ff.).

In fact, at all stages, resistance was weakened by the fact that Fascist propaganda was more successful at home than abroad (Testa 1947, 182). Giuseppe De Toni, the inspiring *Anziano* of Block I, Hammerstein, believed that family pressure was a greater factor in opting than physical suffering (1980, 175), so much so that he took the extraordinary step of requesting Lieutenant Carlo Bernini to opt so that he could take papers and explanatory letters back to Italy in order to give the home front a truer idea of IMI motivation (1980, 89 ff.). Bernini was successful and the tone of letters from home changed. The material itself was photocopied, published in the clandestine Catholic partisan paper *Il Ribelle* and ultimately broadcast on the BBC's *Radio Londra*, possibly reaching London via Switzerland (De Toni 2012, 156).[9]

In the third phase that ran from January to June 1944 the emphasis was on calls to volunteer for civilian work in Italy or Germany 'temporarily' until the end of the war (Betta 1955, 114). Until now, 'the weak rhetoric of the representatives and the haranguers had not been successful, but the dreadful eloquence of hunger, cold and fear had huge persuasive power' (Odorizzi 1984, 52) and the pressure became more insidious. Rations were consistently reduced and IMI death tolls from pneumonitis and TB began to rise (Fantasia 1987, 54). In a not untypically inconsistent nod to the Geneva Convention, officers were required to sign a formal acceptance of work (Rochat 1986, 39). This time the bait was the prospect of better living conditions and the promise to prospective volunteers that their relatives in other camps would be released and sent to work (Schreiber 1997, 560).

Again, takers were fewer than had been hoped and Mussolini was becoming increasingly concerned about his loss of prestige in the face of so many thousands of IMI refusing to recognise the RSI. He certainly did not want them repatriated to whip up anti-German feeling in Italy, but he needed it to appear that the RSI had their interests at heart. Hence in the fourth phase beginning in July 1944, Hitler agreed to his suggestion that officers be 'civilianised' by being unilaterally demoted to civilian status and hence subject to 'obligatory labour', a euphemism for 'forced labour' (Testa 1947, 185). By September 1944 a policy of forced labour without individual officers' consent was underway and officers were culled for work except for permanent force members (Schreiber 1997, 588). The Italian authorities appear to have been blissfully – if not

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wilfully – ignorant of the IMIs' state of mind. Luigi Bolla, a politically unimportant civil servant, grandiosely declared that this was a big step forward in the direction of 'saving our people from perdition' (1983, 203). The reality was otherwise. Although some IMI saw it as an honourable escape from hunger, others endured it with minimal cooperation and a minority refused to work, for which they paid heavily in punishment camps, including Belsen (Testa 1947, 218). The Germans were surprised that only 30 per cent accepted the change of status, despite the threat or actual use of violence and intimidation, such as forcing them to stand in the open all night despite Allied air attacks (Schreiber 1997, 582) or obliging them to endure the so-called 'slave market' in which farmers came to check out potential workers like cattle, even fingering them to judge their level of physical fitness (Ravaglioli 2000, 183). Only the end of hostilities in April 1945 prevented all officers from being drafted. Actual gains were minimal and the men soon found that they had been tricked and simply relabelled (Schreiber 1997, 601).

Although hunger seems to have been the common denominator in explaining the weakening of the will to resist, the weight of other factors varied with individuals. For one, the cold was the second major factor after hunger (Mariottini 1947, 140). For another, the increase in the numbers of officers opting for work in February 1944 was attributable to hunger, boredom and the fact that no end to the war was in sight (Zàggia 1945, 135). For a third, hunger was combined with the fear of having to stay in Germany forever (Dragoni 1996, 126). Some men opted because they felt that they were at their last gasp and would not be able to last much longer (Mantelli 1995, 186; 191). Ferioli (2005) has rightly noted that, for obvious reasons, most *optanti* have been understandably reticent about their choice. Therefore there are few primary sources in print and a systematic sample selection was not possible. The following case studies illustrate the three broad categories of *optante* seIf-justification that I have identified: bleak honesty, specious cynicism and maverick idealism, exemplified respectively by the mass adhesion at Biala Podlaska; Pietro Faraci and Tranquillo Frigeni; Remo Faustini.

Biala Podlaska

Biala Podlaska is a town in eastern Poland and its concentration camp saw what Rochat has termed the 'most serious moral crisis of internment as a whole' (1986, 35) when, in January 1944 after four months of imprisonment, about 2,400 officers or 96 per cent opted, as against 144 who did not (ibid.). Inevitably, precise figures are hard to come by. For example, Odorizzi (1984, 52–53) gives the figure as 2,455 versus 145 and Fantasia (1987, 58) as 2,400, versus 144. What began as a 'slippage' with few takers, turned into a 'landslide' and ended as an 'avalanche' in the wake of an RSI propaganda visit to the camp (Ravaglioli, 2003). In fact, the earliest published account (1947) by a Biala *optante*, Naldo Mariottini, bears the title *La frana* (*The Landslide*). Redacted in the winter of 1944-1945, it is bleak and factual, without special pleading or hollow proclamations of jingoism. In the first 188 pages Mariottini delineates the environment and then, in chapter eleven, starkly charts the inexorable collapse of morale from the initial *No!* to a sullen, deadened acceptance of German terms. Hunger and the survival instinct seem to have been his main drivers: he saw resistance as a 'slow death' and opting as 'resurgent life' (214). His motivation was not political: the Germans were 'allies with whom we have never fraternised and whom we do not like' (18). Once the die was cast, a heaviness fell over the camp and 'empty-hearted' men felt ashamed of having lied in order to get out of the camp, of having, as it were, disavowed their previous sacrificial resistance (202–203). Mariottini was lucky: the Germans honoured their promise and he was repatriated.

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Analysis by Biala *non-optanti* tends to be more detailed. Matteo Fantasia (1987, 56) relates how initial solidarity started unravelling after mid-December 1943 when the Germans reduced rations, and IMI deaths from jaundice, pneumonitis and TB started escalating. He, too, sees the propaganda visit in January 1944 as the trigger for things to fall apart within days, leading to violent mood swings and interminable discussions among internees. He believes that fear, more than hunger and cold, is the main driver (62) and identifies two other key factors: weak leadership, with the Italian command and the chaplains caving in, and the absence of the binding force of cultural activity in the camp. Both proved crucial to group solidarity.[10] It is significant that when the *non-optanti* were isolated in two huts and shunned by the *optanti* before being deported to other camps, they spent their evenings reading the classics, like Dante, Leopardi and Pascoli (152).

One *non-optante* said that although the mass adhesion could not be fully explained, contributing factors were contagious mass panic; lack of sleep (which affected judgment) because of prolonged frenetic discussions about whether or not to opt; a desperate desire to trust German promises; the belief that the Fascist government was the only one able to keep continuity of government in North Italy; 'psychosis' about further reprisals by the Wehrmacht and the SS, based on the IMIs' experience of the Germans to date (Esposito 1992, 315–316). Unsurprisingly, the choice raised a 'barrier of hate and contempt' (Fantasia 1987, 61) between *optanti* and *non-optanti*; in fact, the contention in the camp reflected the civil war raging in Northern Italy (Ravaglioli 2000, 133). Some *non-optanti* refused to shake an opponent's hand, whereas others visited *optanti* huts to 'cadge' a glass of vodka, and *optanti* conducted a thriving black market (Ravaglioli 2000, 118) with their surplus rations.

Pietro Faraci and Tranquillo Frigeni

Mariottini's avowal of his sense of shame forms a stark contrast with the cynicism and hypocrisy of Faraci and Frigeni. Pietro Faraci is an example of a particularly crass opportunist. His *Memorie di un reduce* (1977) is a rare account by someone who opted on capture on 12 September 1943, was interned in Przemysl in south-eastern Poland and then tricked his way into a civilian position at the SAI in the Italian Embassy in Berlin. A survivor he certainly was – his Fascist sympathies were strong: like 'almost all Italians' he was a fan of Mussolini and wanted to contribute to a victory that would bring the 'disinherited' Italian people a 'place in the sun', as well as employment and social justice (1977, 11). He congratulates himself on his 'moral courage in not abandoning old allies or betraying a common idealism' (21), although he had no problem with doing just that at war's end when he passed himself off as an ex-IMI and a civilian and returned to Italy, together with his Yugoslav girlfriend. He claims the moral high ground, dedicating his book to his wife and children so that they may understand him better and 'reflect on the harsh fate of the defeated'.

A less crass opportunist was Tranquillo Frigeni, later a well-known Tasso scholar. He took longer to opt than Faraci, doing so on 6 January 1944. In *Tradotte e reticolati* (1983), his purported 'prison diary', formatted more like a memoir than a diary kept *in situ*, his depiction of deportation, internment and repatriation is vivid, but he barely alludes to the dilemma of choice (54). His self-justification is expressed in insubstantial hyperbole: without overtly declaring himself for or against Fascism, he claims to 'have always lived for noble ideals that give a touch of azure to the cloudiness of human life' (54) and to have resisted initial pressure because of his love for the *patria.* However, he did not hesitate when promised repatriation by the father of a friend and head of the Fascist commission recruiting volunteers for the RSI divisions *Monterosa* and *Littorio.* His ostensible reasons for cooperating were that his health was being steadily undermined and he had

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qualms about allowing 'personal convenience' to prevent him from assisting the *patria* [and] supporting his mother with heart disease and his wife, 'suffering and alone, once given the chance to still be useful'. His 'sole wish was to return to live, fight for his ideals and love liberty' and he 'could not bear to be buried alive in various *Lager*s' (55). At bottom, of course, was a raw desire for survival, a motive that seems more acceptable when expressed in the bleak language of a Mariottini than in these rotund periods. Significantly, Frigeni says little about his military training, other than a detailed account of the infernal trip to the huge training camp in Nuremberg, from where he left for Italy, probably in April 1944 (Sommaruga, 2001b, 52), and nothing about his subsequent service in Italy.

Remo Faustini

So much for *optanti* who can be easily categorised, unlike maverick Remo Faustini, later a distinguished professor of veterinary science, who opted to serve the RSI in the transit camp of Trier-Augusta in November 1943, was sent for military training to Heuberg-Stetten, where he became a member of the Italia Division, and was sent back to Italy. Like Frigeni, he says nothing about any anti-partisan action in which he was involved, although, given the reputation of the Italia Division, it is hard to imagine that there was none. His *Ottantacinque mesi* (1946) is unusual from several points of view. Faustini has been described as an idealist who hated both Germans and Fascists and despised the monarchy (Sommaruga 2001a, 18). The book does not follow the narrative structure common to many memoirs. There is no division into chapters and few dates or stark descriptions. It mostly consists of freeze-frames, many of which are debates and conversations between Faustini and his fellows.

Faustini was a robustly independent anti-Establishment thinker. He dismisses the king as a 'fugitive in English hands' and Mussolini as a 'self-appointed German functionary' (1946, 156). He thoroughly dislikes the Germans, finding them bullying and arrogant (133), vindictive (187), dishonest (225) and diabolically clever (162). However, with characteristic objectivity, he says that it is not their fault that Italy has got itself into the post-Armistice mess (137) and is undecided whether the root cause is German strength or Italian weakness (162). Faustini seems to have been fearless: he did not hesitate to stand up to the German overlords, even if they were of a higher rank (200; 228). His fearlessness was allied with active compassion: towards war's end, he refused to report deserters (253) and continued to authorise soldiers' leave, well knowing that they might use the opportunity to desert (255).

Faustini's dislike of Fascism hardened as the war progressed. He mentions that he joined the Fascist student organisation *Gruppo Universitari Fascisti* (GUF) at university (78). Typically, he does not justify himself: one can only surmise that it was because, although membership was not compulsory, GUF controlled all university life, including sporting, social and cultural activities (Kroon 1985, 189) and by 1937 it had become a 'career springboard' (196). However, once in the army he struggled to reconcile what he had been taught aged 7–28 with reality (123). His disillusionment had a solid basis. In Greece he was observing at first hand hopeless supply management (92), including a shortage of uniforms (202), and inadequate medical care (71ff.), as well as a lack of proper planning, such as mixing exhausted veterans and fresh soldiers (29).

Faustini reveals himself as an acutely intelligent and highly analytical man, with a biting, often sardonic, sense of humour. For instance, upon arrival at the *Lager*, the rations consist of 'Broth: Hot water and cabbage. Nothing else for today! Well doctors say it's good to follow a light diet when you have a change of scene' (147). He was self-questioning: when challenged by someone he respected he would ask himself 'What if they're right?' (202; 208). Individual integrity was

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crucial to him, which was why he did not judge others who thought differently from him, even those who joined the SS (156–157), provided that they were 'sincere, upright and convinced' (173). With regard to himself, he felt that he had to do his duty, even at the possible cost of losing the love of his brother (202) and his fiancée (206).

Why did such a man of such integrity opt? He categorically refuted hunger as a motive when he obtained permission to go to the lazaret *Lager* of Fullen to explain his motivation to his *non-optante* CRI fiancée: he said that he had not gone through the deep and tragic crisis of swearing a new oath for a 'handful of potatoes' or for an inglorious straggle back to Italy (ibid. 206–207). He was taken in by Mussolini's War Minister Marshal Graziani's alleged a-Fascism (160) and promise of an apolitical army, and was led to believe that Mussolini's position would be temporary and that there would be free and fair elections (164). He saw himself as a soldier of the Italian republic, not of Mussolini, and took the name of the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* literally as denoting that it would be republican and socialist, not Fascist (160). He believed these ideals could be promoted by Italian soldiers stationed inside the RSI (164) because they could defeat the Germans from within (166). He sardonically asked how Italian soldiers could be prolonging the war when they were incapable of fighting it in the first place (207). It remains unclear why Faustini appears not to have entertained the choice of becoming a '*Lager* volunteer': one can only hypothesise that this would have been too passive for him because, even when back in Italy, he saw the choice as being solely between the courage to opt or the courage to join the partisans in the mountains (243).

Conclusion

For the last 18 months of the war, the IMI were faced with a 'fiery circle of temptation' to opt (De Toni 1980, v). The main sources of temptation were near-starvation, the atrocious living and environmental conditions of the *Lager*, and Nazi-Fascist propaganda. The preceding case studies have shown that the weight of motives for opting varied with the individual, running the gamut from basic survival through opportunism to maverick idealism. The pressures exerted by the Germans made opting an all too human choice and the wonder is that only 15 per cent of captured IMI (Avagliano and Palmieri 2009, 47), including one-quarter of officers (Rochat 1992, 143), did so. The fact that the natural became the anomalous, that only a minority of IMI failed the 'superhuman test in subhuman conditions' (Bertinaria 1986, 128), enhances rather than tarnishes the sacrifice of the majority (Nicolardi 1963, 34).

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Notes

1. Their *Rapporto della Commissione storica italo-tedesca* provides a concise overview of the IMI issue and was created by a team of eminent scholars appointed by Villa Vigoni, a bilateral German-Italian association. However, the report lacks source references.
2. See Della Santa 1986 and Labanca 1992.
3. See Sanders 2016, 760 on this point.
4. See Rochat in Della Santa 1986, 50; Gabriele et al. 2012, 135; Sommaruga 1988, 209–210.
5. See e.g. Hammermann 2004, 371; Schreiber 1992, 58; Gabriele et al 2012, 122–123; Aga Rossi 2003, 13; 2016, 12.
6. See e.g. back inside cover of Schreiber 1997 for a clear map of *Lagers.*
7. See also, e.g., Fantasia 1987, 174; Fiorentino 1946, 92.
8. See details in Schreiber 1997, 699 ff. Also, Betta 1955, 12.
9. The full text may be found in De Toni 2012, 156 ff.
10. See Sanders 2016, 15–17, for the contrast with the leadership at Wietzendorf.

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Italian summary

Tra l'8 settembre 1943 e la fine della guerra, gli Internati Militari Italiani dovettero far fronte quotidianamente ad una scelta spietata fra continuare la loro resistenza e optare per combattere o lavorare per il Reich nazista. Straordinariamente, più di 600 000 ne risposero *No!* e patirono sia l'internamento sia il lavoro forzato fino alla liberazione o alla morte. Questo articolo analizza la motivazione di quelli che optarono attraverso una veduta panoramica dello sfondo politico, l'esperienza della deportazione, l'ambiente del *Lager* e le fasi e i metodi propagandistici. Le fonti primarie indicono che la fame fu un denominatore commune, ma che la ponderazione degli altri fattori variava secondo gli individui che si possono dividere, grosso modo, in tre categorie: gli onesti tetri, i cinici benpensanti e gli idealisti. Le categorie vengono illustrate da quattro casi emblematici: l'adesione di massa a Biala Podlaska, Pietro Faraci e Tranquillo Frigeni, e Remo Faustini.

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