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A fragmented transformation: Giovanni Pirelli's war writings, 1940–1944

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In this paper, I examine the unpublished First World War diaries of Giovanni Pirelli – heir to the helm of the Pirelli tyre company – for their account of how the war and fall of Fascism may have catalysed his dissociation from his family, his class, and his ideological foundation. In the post-war period, Pirelli traced the source of his rejection of his inheritance to his experiences during the Russian retreat, but in the moment, the expression of this kind of transformation is fragmentary and complex. Scholars often look to war diaries and letters for their testimony to the state of the individual in combat. Through close reading, I trace how Pirelli's writings negotiate his immense privilege and his attempt to construct a moral identity in the midst of war. I consider how they demonstrate his break with his wartime ideals and Fascism and how they anticipate his later transition from industrial heir to socialist activist. My examination of these diaries reveals the ambiguities inherent in this transformation of Fascist and bourgeois subjectivity.

Keywords: Giovanni Pirelli; Second World War; diaries; letters; Fascism; Alberto Pirelli

Introduction

In a rare moment of reflection on his wartime experience, Giovanni Pirelli traces the origins of his socialist beliefs to the Russian retreat. Writing in 1962, he describes what he imagines as a 'ladder of values [*scala di valori*]' that each person must construct of rungs like 'God, Fatherland, Family, Progress, Evangelical morality, Freedom of the individual'. When he thinks of his personal ladder of values, however, he finds an absence:

> My ladder? I burned it. It happened in Russia, if I remember well, during the retreat. It was cold. If I remember well, I haven't had a ladder of values since. How do I know, without this ladder of values, where I want to arrive? In truth I don't know, and I don't care to know. It's enough that a society without classes is possible, that it will be better than this one because, if nothing else, it will have values that do not contradict themselves, or at least contradict themselves less. (Albertoni, Antonini and Palmieri 1962, 202–203)[1]

In this narrative, Pirelli presents his experience in the Second World War as the moment he broke with his inherited belief system. Of course, he reconstructs this ideological destruction in retrospect, searching for meaning when, at the time, he may have found it elusive. Shortly thereafter, he would reject Fascism, join the Resistance, dissociate himself from his family and his class, and, in 1948, renounce his inheritance of the Pirelli company. He would then dedicate himself to socialist and anti-colonialist activism and publishing – including *Lettere dei condannati a morte della Resistenza italiana* (1952), *Lettere dei condannati a morte della Resistenza europea* (1954), and the selected works of Frantz Fanon (*Opere scelte,* 1971) – until his death in 1973.

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The collapse of values he describes is widely shared among the generation that experienced the Second World War. Beginning with Ruggero Zangrandi's 1947 *Il lungo viaggio attraverso il fascismo*, a number of accounts have discussed the reckoning with Fascism across classes and wartime experiences. Even the particular character of Pirelli's clash with his familial duty recalls the rebellious trajectories of company heirs like Alberto Mondadori and Giangiacomo Feltrinelli. Like Pirelli, Mondadori and Feltrinelli turned towards leftist politics during the war, and all three later dedicated themselves to progressive publishing.[2] Of these three, however, only Pirelli fought in the war from the beginning of Italy's involvement and documented his shifting beliefs within this context.

In this paper, I examine Pirelli's diaries and letters from 1941 to 1944 for how they bear out his wartime conversion.[3] His diaries have never been edited or published.[4] This fact distinguishes them from those of former partisans like Angelo Del Boca, Aldo Laghi, and Giorgio Vicchi.[5] Unlike Ada Gobetti, Pirelli never fleshed out the diaries or imposed post-war meaning on them. They become more remarkable as the war progresses and his growing doubts seem to press against the confines of the page's limited space. Often the troubling events mentioned only briefly in his diaries will surface in greater detail in his letters home to his family, but here he must filter them for his readers. Upon close analysis, Pirelli's writings reveal the complexity and struggles inherent in his ideological transformation, as he navigates the immense privilege that ensures his survival and attempts to construct a moral identity in the midst of a reprehensible war. They approach not only his direct experience of the war but also his attempts to imbue these experiences with meaning, attempts that evoke the disorienting challenges within the conversion of the Fascist subject.

Pirelli's father, Alberto Pirelli, ensured that from an early age Giovanni understood industrial management and his responsibility to the family company, founded in Milan in 1872 by Alberto's father, Giovanni Battista Pirelli. Although he disapproved of some of Mussolini's decisions – especially the invasion of Ethiopia and alliance with Germany – the elder Pirelli enjoyed a privileged position in Italian society and, for a civilian, had unprecedented access to the inside workings of the government.[6] Giovanni's attitude towards Fascism was clearer. Four years old when Fascist militias marched on Rome, he would later reflect: 'I was a boy, like many others, who believed that "believe-obey-fight" was right, and who was predisposed to fight' (Pirelli 1972, 11).

Pirelli enlisted in the Italian army in 1939. From mid 1940 to late 1941, he fought as a junior officer with the *alpini*, or Italian Alpine troops, in France, Greece, Albania, and Montenegro. In 1941, Alberto persuaded him to accept a position as a supervisor of Italian workers at German factories in Berlin, both to gain experience in industrial leadership and to work in the relative safety of an office. Chafing against what he viewed as a superfluous role, Pirelli returned to service at the Russian front as a communications officer. He retreated with the rest of the Italian army in the winter of 1942–43, witnessing the extreme conditions that caused the deaths of an estimated 40,000 Italian soldiers. After Mussolini's fall on 25 July 1943, Pirelli joined the French front until the 8 September armistice with the Allies. He then managed to escape German imprisonment and avoid conscription by the Repubblica Sociale Italiana (RSI), first by hiding out in the Alps and then by working for the Pirelli company. In early 1945, he joined the Resistance, fighting with the 90th Garibaldi brigade in Valchiavenna. He registered with the Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI) and began contributing to socialist publications like *Avanti!* in 1946, and in 1948, he broke definitively with his inheritance, leaving his position in the company to his younger brother, Leopoldo. He then dedicated himself to writing, editing, and organising on behalf of the labour movement in Italy and anti-colonial movements abroad.

War diaries, like their civilian counterparts, are a written performance of self, fashioned by the consideration of a particular audience, often an imagined interlocutor. They may give the

impression of being private and sincere but can be just as shaped and edited as letters (Culley 1985, 12). The writer acts as both the observing subject and the object of investigation, as, in Margo Culley's words, 'the self stands apart to view the self' (Culley 1985, 10; Smith and Watson 2001, 1). Still, elements of war diaries are specific to the context of combat. Social conventions, the dangers of writing sensitive information, and the inability to articulate new and gruesome experiences limit what the soldier writes. These limitations increase once he attempts to express them to family members in a letter (Hartley 1999, 189). After the soldier's own intuitive composition, the army censor often restricts what will eventually reach the recipient (Winter 2006, 110). These factors complicate the initial impression that war writings offer direct, unaltered testimony to what a soldier witnesses (Bland 2004). A soldier shapes his immediate experience first when he perceives it and then when he attempts to record it or share it with others. How he expresses, constrains, or alters this experience offers us not only an account of warfare but also a window into the writer's sense of self.

The work of these scholars on the degrees of self-fashioning involved in all kinds of life-writing provides the basis of my approach to Pirelli's war writings. It is also necessary, however, to consider the form of the diaries themselves. His diaries are brief notes in a notebook formatted to record daily events. The notebook is very small, designed to be carried easily in a pocket, and indeed its shape leaves no space for lengthy observations or analysis. A typical entry is about five sentences long, commenting on the weather, military movement, and interactions with superiors and troops: in all, the barest account of the day. Often the diaries' sparse form resists interpretation. Extra room at the end of each month gives him the opportunity to pause and reflect, a process that grows increasingly frustrating as the war progresses. Indeed, these moments provide the richest material for analysis. His published letters are longer and more carefully crafted for his familial audience, and they offer a useful resource for understanding the impact of the events of the diaries. The writings thus necessitate a parallel analysis to better comprehend both Pirelli's experience in the war and the fraught course of his ideological conversion.

Greece, Albania and Montenegro

Pirelli's early diaries from 1941 express the frustrations of the Greek front and suggest the tensions inherent in his confrontation with the realities of war. Pirelli joins the Italian army on the Albanian border in December 1940, after Greek forces had repelled the initial Italian invasion. His letters to his parents explore his growing affection for the working-class men in his command and their respect for him ('The esteem that matters most is that of the *alpini'*), as well as his sense of 'responsibility' as a privileged officer (Pirelli 1990, 94, 77). His diaries, on the other hand, quickly catalogue incoherent orders ('Frightening confusion in the units, and in the orders from Command', 24 December), the misery of the soldiers ('The men are exhausted and morale is disastrous,' 25 December), lack of supplies, and bad weather ('Provisions are scarce and it is very cold,' 8 January). In April, the German army sweeps in and crushes the Greek resistance, and Pirelli seems to express embarrassment at the lost opportunities for military glory in an 8 April entry: 'The blondes advance very quickly [...] But is there no task left for us?' His comment suggests that this experience had disrupted the illusion, shared with many Italians and threatened with each military defeat, that the Axis was an alliance of equal partners (Ben-Ghiat 2002, 270). It also echoes the Italian forces' humiliation at being 'defeated invaders', a sentiment which encouraged the intense violence of the later Italian occupation from late 1941 to 1943 (Santarelli 2004, 287). At the end of May, his diary offers a telling moment of doubt: 'I am at war with the superiors, with the systems of the military [*Naia*], with myself.' This line captures his struggle

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within the military's bureaucracy: rather than fighting the enemy, he is fighting his superiors and his own expectations. His frustration with this hierarchical system surfaces long before he articulates any critique of Fascism, offering the first evidence of a series of dissociations from his multi-faceted ideological formation.

Once Pirelli arrives in Montenegro in July 1941, the crisis in his understanding of the war grows more acute, and his accounts of the Italian reprisals there evoke his unwillingness to describe these events. Carlo Spartaco Capogreco (2001), James Burgwyn (2007), and Eric Gobetti (2013) have all documented the atrocities committed by the Italian army in Yugoslavia especially in 1942–43. Although Pirelli transfers before the most violent countermeasures occur, his diaries reveal that the Italian army was already beginning to target villages suspected of harbouring partisans. He arrives in the 'cursed land of Albania' on 5 July and receives orders on 15 July to 'quell a revolution of major proportions' in Montenegro. On 22 July, Pirelli's battalion leaves for Pogradec and meets enemy fire. He writes: 'We post our weapons; in the night shots from every angle. Three women are found and executed. All of the houses are set on fire. Everywhere flames and gunfire.' The passive form here suggests distance from the executions and the fire, as if these were events without a responsible agent. This distance seems to collapse, however, when Pirelli participates in the burning of Petrović on 8 August:

> We had the order to destroy Petrovich. Unforgettable experience. The space does not permit the telling of the events arising from the evacuation of the population and the animals and the sacking and burning of the houses, nor the stirrings of emotions [*moti d'animo*] that I felt.

This short, staccato entry suggests a discord in Pirelli's understanding of the day. He uses the physical space of the diary to excuse his inability to describe the burning of the village, and he refuses to recount the '*moti d'animo*' that this destruction provokes. The structure of the entry, while seemingly uncrafted, nonetheless sketches an internal struggle that he avoids confronting through writing.

On 13 August, Pirelli fleshes out the elisions of the diaries in a letter to his parents, his most thorough reckoning with the violence and concessions of war so far. He shatters the impression given by previous stories of running barefoot through fields and swimming in the river when he refers to a comment from his sister: 'Pa and Ma have received only one letter from Gio, and that one too was all sea sky olive trees contemplation, no news.' Prompted by this criticism, he admits that he does not like writing about these events, a confession that suggests a gap between his experience and his ability to describe it:

> There have been, in this period, also some important events, unforgettable events. But I don't like to talk about them. I have written a few notes just for me, almost an outburst from a troubled mind [*uno sfogo dell'animo turbato*]. For you, just a few hints: the events of the 20th day, reprisals, killing without mercy those who fight for their own faith, sacred for them though opposed to ours. Father wrote to me: 'these problems have become too big for men.' In my case, these moral problems are too big for my spirit [...] We have made ourselves a moral *habitus* [*abito morale*] through our family upbringing, literature, films, contact with people, and it seemed that this should have guided us in every circumstance of life. Instead we have found ourselves facing situations that are so particular, and the response has to be inspired by reasoning that shocks these same morals and emotions. The '*salus rei publicae*' insists on it, international law and even religion legalize it, but these are but fragile defenses behind which the mind seeks in vain to quiet itself. (Pirelli 1990, 143–144)

The letter hints at the events recounted a few days earlier in the diary, with the reference to his '*animo turbato*' corresponding to the diary's '*moti d'animo*.' His unwillingness to articulate his experiences in writing may stem from the difficulty of relating the ambiguities of combat to family members, two noted pitfalls of war communication (Hartley 1999, 189; Bourke 2004, 477).

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He does imply, however, that he is measuring these reprisals – which he perceives as mandated by the state and even permitted by international law and religion – against a kind of protective code of values, one developed within the context of his family and culture, and he finds a gap between them. He continues: 'It's true, we have had few of these thankless tasks. I have avoided them, when possible, and when not possible, I sought to reconcile the firmness required with humanity and equilibrium' (144). He retreats from his doubts, reassuring his parents of his ability to cope and his awareness of his duty, reasserting his self-control. Pirelli's experiences in Montenegro, as reported in these writings, do not correspond to his ideals. While this conflict does not yet suggest that he is questioning Fascism itself, it does reveal an early crisis of his understanding of the war and his role in it.

Berlin

Soon after, Pirelli travels to Berlin – where, according to his father's wishes, he arrived as a supervisor of Italian workers at a Siemens factory in September 1941 – and his concise diaries confront his anxieties about his privileged position compared to these workers. He was reluctant to leave the front, and his 31 January 1942 entry suggests a loss of meaning along with his departure from military life: 'I feel lost. I've left my *alpini*, and I've lost the inner trust that came from that simple life amongst those simple men.' This nostalgic statement idealises his experience of the war and his relationship to the working-class men in his command. He fills this absence with a new dedication to the factory workers, writing on 19 January: 'There is almost a revolution amongst the workers [...] I speak to a large group of them, I felt like I love them almost as I loved my soldiers.' Although paternalistic, these entries suggest that he has begun to fashion himself as an advocate for the working class, whether soldiers or factory labourers. In a 20 January letter to his parents, he emphasises his disdain toward his office colleagues, whom he perceives as frivolous and superficial, far removed from the trials of combat: 'I really do not feel like playing my part with them' (1990, 184). Although Pirelli's dislike of his colleagues still aligns with a Fascist understanding of '*borghesi*' as a pampered and parasitic class, his awareness of social roles, his refusal to engage in them, and his vocal advocacy for the factory labourers suggest his growing class consciousness and his discomfort with his own privilege.

Pirelli felt useless in his office job and longed for what he remembered as the certainty of military life and his role as a man of action. He writes on 28 February: 'I've lost much of the serenity and certainty of victory and of a better future that I had when I was a soldier.' Unable to overcome this nostalgia, he sought permission – first from his family – to go to the Russian front. He explains his decision to his mother in a long letter of 9 May 1942, finally asking, '*Mammina*, can you imagine that I, officer of the *alpini in active service*, could remain a distant spectator of these events, sitting at an office desk where I have no reason to be?' (1990, 214). His determination to return to the front reveals the ambivalent nature of his wartime experience and the cyclical development of his ideological crisis: removed from a military context, he over-emphasises the clarity of combat and longs to regain a simpler perspective on the war. However, his attempt to bridge the gulf between his self-image and his actual position by returning to the front would prove unsuccessful, intensifying his moral questioning of Fascism and its war.

Russia and the retreat

In Russia, the safety of Pirelli's assignment as a communications officer – first with the Eighth Italian Army and the German forces between Stalingrad and the Caucasus, and then with

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the Second Hungarian Army at the Don – frustrates his desire to fight with the Alpine troops in combat, and he must confront his role as spectator to an increasingly devastating military campaign. He writes on 8 July 1942: 'I must not remember my aspirations, and not measure my disappointment, so that I can live peacefully behind the lines, while at the front an immense, perhaps decisive, battle has been unleashed.' Probably referring to the beginning of the Battle of Stalingrad, he highlights his sense of distance from the front and its clarity. At the end of July, he curses the extra page left for the final day of the month because it forces him to reflect:

> Damn this space between the months that leaves me a place for my considerations. I have nothing but black thoughts, impatience, irritation. Right now the *alpini* are arriving, soon they will re-enter the action. And I am here, to be the secretary-waiter of people who are so different from me, so far from my heart and my state of mind.

We have seen before how the entries use the lack of space as an excuse not to recount events, and indeed now the extra space exerts a pressure on him to confess thoughts he would rather keep unwritten. He expresses his discord with his fellow officers and, aligning himself aspirationally with the *alpini*, seems to long for a clear sense of purpose. This entry offers the diaries' most explicit grappling with his mounting disappointments regarding the Russian front, yet still refrains from articulating any explicit reckoning with Fascism or the war effort itself.

As Pirelli's understanding of himself continues to clash with his actual position, his letters home begin explicitly to address his discomfort with his privilege and to confront his father. In August, he writes of finally seeing the *alpini* again and avoiding them: 'Yesterday in the convoy I passed my men. Luckily I did not see them. I dread meeting them, *now*. I had this worry during the whole transfer. I, traveling by motorcar, meeting their columns on foot' (1990, 248) (1990, 248). Pirelli's identification with the soldiers in his command has previously offered him a source of strength and an affirmation of the values challenged by the actual experience of war. Now, material comforts separate him from these soldiers and reinforce his spectatorship and his privilege, a position he feels is unearned. On 12 October he writes:

> Even if my work has obliged me to be a strategist, in my soul, I remain a soldier. The strategist me, that knows too many things, always takes second place behind the soldier me that knows little, but of that little knows everything: he knows his duty and that he must fulfill it to the end. And I want to tell you that I have not at all assumed the mentality of command [*la mentalità dei comandi*]. (1990, 267–268)

Confronting uncertainty and worsening conditions in Russia, he clings to his understanding of himself as a soldier, an idea that has perhaps always been imagined. That he expresses this identity in a letter offers a direct challenge to his father, who hoped that he would learn leadership skills from his position that would be applicable to his future career. His alienation from '*la mentalità dei comandi*' suggests not only his repulsion about being an officer but also his coming rejection of his business role.

In autumn, Pirelli reconnects with Carlo Sacchi, a lieutenant of the *alpini* with whom Pirelli had previously fought in Albania, and Sacchi's death in December seems to trigger a crisis of faith. In his last diary entry of 1942, he writes:

> Sacchi's death has shaken me painfully. It is an almost symbolic epilogue for this year of mourning and failure. On the tomb of my friend I swore faith in the cause for which he died, if nothing else to avenge the dead. But my trust is shaken: I have seen too many errors, I've smelled the odour of defeat without an equilibrated response to restore trust, to put everything on a plan of renewal.

The diary's extra space at the end of the year again allows him to reflect at greater length on his grief, one which encompasses the many failures of this war. Each time he expresses renewed commitment to the cause, he undermines it by returning to his loss of faith and sense of defeat.

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This repetition of resolve and doubt reflects the larger cyclical pattern of Pirelli's wartime ideological crisis. His dissociation from heroic ideals repeatedly approaches larger questions of privilege and political ideology, but each time he pulls back before expressing clearly articulated doubts.

In early 1943, as the tide of the Battle of Stalingrad turns and the Axis retreat from Russia begins, Pirelli's winter diaries waver between suspect silence and an explicit grappling with events. On 8 January, the Red Army launched heavy attacks on Axis troops, surrounding and trapping the Alpine Divisions stationed on the Don. Pirelli, still far from the front, attempted to join his old comrades-in-arms, but his endeavours proved futile. As the fighting approaches his position, on 15 January he writes of a 'terrible drama' in which 'the Italian communications officer will have to fight like a rifleman and show he knows how to die like an *alpino d'Italia*.' This bellicose tone is a remnant of his time in direct combat, a comforting recourse to familiar tropes of military courage. On 16 January, he responds to the German order to resist, seemingly wistful for the chance to die in battle: 'Better "to the last man" here than along the roads of Russia.' The following day's order to withdraw dashes his hopes for a glorious death, and the terrible retreat begins. On 18 January, as the exhausted Italian troops arrive from the front lines, Pirelli writes: 'The spectacle on the roads is frightening. Panic of those who flee, abandoned materials, dispersed men who drag themselves along exhausted (towards salvation or towards death on the roads of Russia?).' He has lost his only means of maintaining order in the war, his sense of duty to the *alpini*, as he witnesses their defeat and deaths. His brief reflections at the end of January hint at what he remembers in 1962 as the final destruction of his 'ladder of values': 'January … collapse of all illusions, all hopes ... Terrible burden of responsibility, for everyone.'

Return and recovery

Pirelli survives the retreat and returns to Italy in March 1943, but his experiences prove too heavy to address in writing once he reaches quarantine in Dobbiaco. His letters dwell on the pastoral beauty of his surroundings and attempt to convince his parents of his good health. His sparse diaries, in the absence of the need to reassure his family, mention very little beyond the brief list of his daily encounters, but now and then a line recalls his recent trauma. On 31 March he notes: 'I torture myself reading *All Quiet on the Western Front*,' which suggests he is examining critical accounts of war and practising his English. On 9 April he rejoins his family but seems unable to process his emotions: 'Strange sensations in these reunions.' The following day he records tours of the countryside with his father and brother, during which 'one avoids talking about Russia.' Pirelli's diary thus neither recounts nor ignores the memory of the Russian front. It negotiates the repression of experience necessary for his relationship with his family and friends, as well as perhaps his own peace, persistently recalling his sense of having 'one foot still there,' as he writes in a 31 March letter (1990, 332).

Pirelli explores the futility of using writing as a means of recovery in a letter to his parents on 10 June. He writes: 'I tried to write a diary, simply a diary written only for me, about the days of the retreat. I tore up the pages,' and continues: 'To fix in writing certain memories, I think, is to mutilate them' (1990, 341). He can neither communicate these experiences to his family nor record them in a personal diary where he is the only interlocutor. Writing of the Holocaust, Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer (2001, 41) elaborate on the fear that in describing an experience 'we have "written it away"'. Pirelli worries how writing may disfigure his memories. In his letters, he settles for these confessions of failed attempts, while his diaries elide more than they recount.

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Even after the Russian retreat, Pirelli remains enlisted, still seeking reassurance in the military's familiar structure. Nonetheless, his diaries from the period between the arrest of Mussolini on 25 July 1943, and the Badoglio government's armistice with the Allies on 8 September, offer glimpses of his increasingly critical perspective on both the military system of command and Fascism. He is home with his parents when Mussolini is 'defenestrated', as he writes the day after on 26 July. The next day he leaves for Nice, hoping to be assigned to a post with the *alpini*. These hopes are again frustrated: as he writes on 5 August: 'Disgusting meeting with the General. Nothing to do: I've fallen into it again. Communications officer with the Germans. Damn.' His knowledge of German and his previous command position made this assignment probable but undesirable, especially given his humiliating experience in Russia and detestation of the Germans. The following entries evoke the extremely tense status of the Italian forces and their alliance with the Germans. On 8 August, he recounts the growing uncertainty of this relationship: 'Everyone is agitated here: they think that any minute the Germans could "make us their prisoners".' The somewhat awkward quotation marks distil the fear of imprisonment and perhaps signal his need to distance the statement from his own thoughts. He notes that he is 'in service' in the midst of all this tension, dining with the Germans and returning to the Italian soldiers.

As more German forces begin to arrive – most likely preparing to invade Italy in the event of an armistice with the Allies – Pirelli must shuttle between their officers, the '*francisti*' ('the French heirs to the Fascism that's dead to the Italians') and the Italian troops. His 26 August diary suggests the tensions inherent in his position: 'Days of terrible uncertainty ... but one must continue. Every seed sown, down to the last, can bear fruit.' Once again, the entry seems split: the proverbial promise negates the preceding suggestion of profound uncertainty and pulls back from an admission of crisis. This emphatic cliché rings forced, and indeed he refrains from elaborating what this fruit might be. The cumulative impact of these entries captures Pirelli's perception of the uneasiness of his practical, moral, and emotional standing.

In a 28 August letter to his parents, Pirelli fleshes out the thoughts that remained skeletal in his diaries and articulates the collapse of his ideological foundation. This time, he implies that his naïve wartime ideals and his larger political formation are emptied of meaning. He first describes the comfort that interacting with the Italian soldiers gives him, still turning to his relationship with them as a source of true values and release in an unstable situation. He then admits to a fundamental crisis of belief:

> Do not be afraid for me. I am ready for everything. I am certain of it, and it is the only thing I know. I feel hollow because everything has dissolved, everything that in reality seemed so solid. Adolescent illusions, ideals of my life as a soldier. Even the backdrop of my childhood destroyed and disfigured, the land that saw the sacrifices of my comrades in arms lost and 'given up'. Every past sacrifice brutally emptied of all meaning. [...] The funeral is over, even if the war isn't over. The grave is covered up and the plow digs into the earth to sow a new seed there. Whether the seed be good or wretched, for the war or for society, it is the seed of a new harvest. (1990, 354–355)

Following his initial affirmation of control – typical of a soldier hoping to comfort his family members and regain agency – his words embrace a void. His assertion of the meaninglessness of this loss of ideals and life undermines his bellicose vocabulary's quasi-religious significance. This open admission of loss is the culmination of years of challenges to his certainty upon entering the war. After this emptiness, however, come new social possibilities, and it is here that Pirelli seems to be looking beyond the war and Fascism towards a new purpose. He continues that he feels the need to 'simplify my life with its unjustified privileges, to orient my every future activity in the firm towards the moral and material elevation of the workers' (1990, 355). He still understands his

path as heir to the Pirelli company, and his words evoke a mix of guilt about undeserved privilege and paternalism towards the lower class. Indeed, the phrasing he uses echoes the discourse of an early generation of socialists concerned with lifting labourers out of their abject conditions. Nonetheless, his dedication to the working class provides him with a renewal of values and a sense of validation.

Towards the Resistance

Pirelli's diaries after the Badoglio government's armistice with the Allies on 8 September, 1943, further suggest that he is beginning to search for an alternative belief system. After the armistice, Germans took Pirelli and his fellow Italians as prisoners-of-war. After the remaining *alpini* were deported as labourers to Germany, Pirelli befriended an electrician who smuggled him out of imprisonment. His diaries recount his successful return to Italy, his continued efforts to cope with his past, and his growing interest in the passage from what Anna Bravo (2005) calls unarmed resistance – refusing to fight for Germany and the Republic of Salò – to armed resistance.

In a letter to his father of 10 March 1946, Pirelli cites his time in Vens – a town in the mountains near Aosta, where he went into hiding with two other former soldiers – as when 'I began to link certain ways I felt with the name of communism' (Pirelli 2002, 102). Tranfaglia (Pirelli 1990, 48–49) believes that Pirelli first made contact with partisans while in the mountains, citing the diary of partisan commander Angre Pautasso, who recalls meeting him there, as well as Pirelli's entry from 1 March 1944: 'We are already known in the federation as the "Vens gang [*banda Vens*]".' Although the diary notebook leaves little space for long reflections, many entries do suggest that he is contemplating alternatives to Fascism. On 2 October 1943, he writes: 'There's no escape from obsessive thoughts, from the questions of the moment ... I felt that I will not be able to remain outside of the struggle [*lotta*] even as the disorientation reaches its peak.' His determination to participate in the '*lotta*' represents an important continuity that helped facilitate his transition from Fascist officer to partisan. The prospect of fighting for a cause, whatever that may be, offers clarity in a moment of ideological ambiguity.

Other entries further hint at his bitterness towards military hierarchy and Mussolini. On 31 January 1944, he comments on the German arrest of General Italo Gariboldi, commander of the Italian forces in Russia: 'There is no page that does not include madness. Down with them all.' On 21 February he refers to an order from Mussolini that sentenced to death all young men who did not enlist in the RSI forces: 'A decree from the Duce condemns us to death. Bloody *naja*.' The discovery of their hiding place forces the three men to leave Vens. Pirelli, though he would prefer to stay in the mountains, must return to Milan and, to avoid conscription, work for the family company. His entry from 28 March suggests his frustration at returning to a civilian existence: 'But is moral life just a series of capitulations?'

In Milan, Pirelli struggled to assimilate into his familiar role as industrial heir. His diaries note his reading material – *Storia del socialismo, Storia del comunismo*, a biography of Stalin – and grapple with nagging feelings of being a spectator in this new, anti-Fascist context: 'Solitary stroll in the city, war songs for 25 July, I feel useless and miserable.' He records feelings of distance from his family – 'an abyss' between himself and Leo on 22 April, 'more disagreements' at a family lunch on 13 June. April entries reference conversations with his father about 'social questions' and Fascism. Alberto's ambiguous position after Mussolini's fall must have entered into these conversations. He had remained in contact with Mussolini and the Republic of Salò, but also provided significant financial support to partisan movements (Tranfaglia 2010, 286). Indeed, in a later letter from 8 May 1946, the younger Pirelli rebuked his father for not having made his

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position clearer: 'If at a certain point you recognized the grave, fundamental errors of Fascism, as you did, when I reached the right age, you should have helped me to understand them' (2002, 103–104). His diaries suggest that he was beginning to confront his father on these issues.

He was also probably aware of the growing anti-Fascist sentiment among the Pirelli employees, beginning with the strikes in March 1943 (Tranfaglia 2010, 286). In a later heated meeting with the workers on 7 October, Pirelli struggles to validate his authority over them: 'I try to ignore the "attitudes", but the "bases" seem confused to me and I am deeply troubled.' Again, his formation as a company heir seems shaken, and he finds it difficult to embrace the mentality of an industrial boss. Given his demonstrated sympathy with factory labourers and his increasing scepticism about his father's choices, these events would have likely influenced his turn to the left.

As Allied bombings hit the Pirelli factory to the north of Milan, Pirelli senses a 'vigorous impulse towards rebirth' and makes oblique references to 'my horizon' and 'my near future' on 20 and 23 October, which probably refer to his desire to join the partisans. This desire is also probably the source of the 'tension [*burrasca*] in the family' on 1 November, given the reluctance of both parents to allow him to return to fighting. Finally, on 14 November Pirelli writes: 'Long conversation with Pa and Uncle Piero. The hopeless suddenly becomes easy. It will be what I have silently tortuously wanted for months. Reckless, selfish? I am crazy with joy.' He continues to navigate his sense of familial duty, and indeed he has to wait a few months more. In March 1945, he joined the 90th Garibaldi brigade – keeping his identity a secret as long as possible – and fought with them until the end of the war (Pirelli 1990, 49–51).

Conclusion

In a March 1947 letter to his father, responding to Alberto's discussion of succession, Pirelli reflects on the peculiar trajectory of his life. He had joined the PSI in 1946, and in 1948 he would definitively leave his position in the Pirelli company. In this letter, he foreshadows his rejection of his inheritance of the company helm:

> By nature and by purpose – traditional and functional – I was attributed a determined role, the defense of certain positions in a game of opposing sides. By my temperament and by the 'unplanned' ['*fuori programma*'] experience of my life, I have arrived on the other shore, that is, I strive to subvert a system of which I should have been a cornerstone. (2002, 119)

The war writings I have examined here narrate this '*fuori programma*' experience as it happens. However, they never constitute a self-aware story of crisis and redemption through anti-Fascism. They provide insight into his attempts to maintain a moral selfhood during wartime: his doubts about the war itself, his pervasive guilt about his privilege, his sympathy for the soldiers in his command and the workers in the factories he supervises. Further, they explore a series of intensifying yet connected dissociations – from the military and its bureaucratic systems, from his family and its industrialist values, and from Fascism – which after the war seem to merge into one fundamental transition. Still, these writings offer no clear epiphanic moment, no decisive crisis that marks Pirelli's turn towards socialism. Indeed, their spare format frustrates attempts to project a conversion on them beyond what they express.

Nonetheless, returning to Pirelli's war writings restores the multifaceted nature of these dissociations and offers a powerful, if fragmented, portrait of his shifting mind. The diaries and letters are significant because they give us access to a fraught ideological conversion that remains incomplete and uncertain until after the war. Many other Italians who came of age during the Second World War have reflected on how from Fascist they became anti-Fascist, and in the haze of retrospect they shape and perhaps simplify these recollections to fit a new political context.

Pirelli's writings offer an original perspective on a transformation of a Fascist subject, an account contemporary with the transformation they describe. Through their ambiguities, their elisions, their brackets and contradictions, they reveal the limits of his attempt to narrate this complicated process, one that struggles within the confines of language itself.

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Notes

1. All translations mine.
2. See Mondadori 1996 for Alberto Mondadori's correspondence, including letters documenting his rift with his father. For Feltrinelli, see Grandi 2000 and Feltrinelli 1999. A comparison of the trajectories of these three radicalised heirs would prove fruitful and interesting.
3. I discuss Pirelli's letters at greater length in my chapter '"Mi sento vuoto, perché tutto si è disciolto." Narrazioni dell'io negli scritti di guerra di Giovanni Pirelli (1940–1944)' in the forthcoming book, *Giovanni Pirelli intellettuale del Novecento*, edited by M. Scotti (Sesto San Giovanni: Mimesis Edizioni).
4. Pirelli's original diaries and a typewritten transcript of the entries can be found in the Pirelli Archive in Milan, Italy. For this article, I consulted the transcript, which closely imitates the format of the original diaries.
5. These diaries include Del Boca 2015; Bolaggi and Colombini 2014; and Vicchi 2015. See also Avagliano 2006.
6. Other biographical information can be found in Tranfaglia 2010, as well as Weill-Ménard 1994 and in Tranfaglia's introduction to Pirelli 1990.

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Italian summary

Quest'articolo esamina i diari di guerra di Giovanni Pirelli – primo erede dell'azienda Pirelli e noto intellettuale socialista e anticolonialista del dopoguerra – per come raccontano la sua esperienza della seconda guerra mondiale, la fine del fascismo e la Resistenza, e per come anticipano il suo distacco dalla sua famiglia, la sua classe, e le sue origini ideologiche. Negli anni del dopoguerra, Pirelli ha ritenuto la ritirata dalla Russia come l'evento alla base di questo suo gran rifiuto, ma durante il conflitto l'espressione di queste trasformazioni è più frammentaria e complessa. Questo articolo ripercorre il modo in cui i diari articolano la sua consapevolezza dei privilegi familiari e sociali, e il suo sforzo di costruire una sua personale identità morale. Un'esame di questi scritti offre un suggestivo ritratto delle ambiguità del processo di trasformazione di un soggetto fascista e borghese. Questo studio è contestualizzato nel quadro più ampio degli studi su lettere e diari di guerra e la loro testimonianza sullo stato dell'individuo in combattimento.

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