

THE RESISTANCE MOVEMENT IN AND AROUND IMPERIA (1943-1945) (FRANCESCO MORIANI)

The signing of the Armistice on 8 September 1943, the constitution of the Fascist Republic (RSI) of North Italy and the consequent German occupation marked the start of the Resistance movement and the fight for liberation in this area. At the same time as the Committee for National Liberation was set up in the Province of Imperia, the first spontaneous partisan groups were also formed, mainly comprising those young men who, as recruits, had refused to fight for the Republic of Salò in the service of Nazi Germany. They were led by men of exemplary moral virtue, like Dott. Felice Cascione "u Megu", gold medal for bravery (and who, before his tragic death at Alto, in January 1944, wrote the lyrics to several songs, including "Fischia il vento", which became the anthem of the entire Italian resistance movement), like Nino Siccardi "u Curtu" (who from early 1994 was the Commanding officer of the "First Operations Zone Liguria" covering Ventimiglia and the area around Albenga) and like, in Valle Argentina, Commanding officer Guglielmo Giuseppe "Vitò" (who had been a volunteer in 1936 with the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War).

The mountainous hinterland of this region, rising up to the buttresses of the Ligurian Alps, provided a natural theatre for armed resistance, which for twenty long months was made possible by the support of the rural population who, alongside the partisans, paid a high price in terms of deprivation and Nazi-Fascist reprisals; the latter resulted in the loss of numerous lives, including 650 civilians, as well as deportations and the destruction of entire villages.

In December 1943 the first real battle took place between the group led by F. Cascione and the Nazi-Fascists at Colla Bassa, between Montegrazie and S. Agata di Imperia. The first political deportations began early that month in Imperia, with the arrest – after being betrayed by informants – of a group of anti-Fascists who were organising the Resistance: among them were the brothers Enrico and Nicola Serra, Bruno Gazzano, Raimondo Ricci and the brothers Alberto and Carlo Todros, all of whom were deported to Mauthausen, and the first three never returned.

Due to the constant arrival of new forces, June 1944 saw the formation of the "Garibaldi" 9th Assault Brigade comprising 21 units. Shortly afterwards, it was turned into the "Felice Cascione" 2nd Assault Division, subdivided into three Brigades. In early July 1944 the first large Nazi-Fascist round-up was carried out with the aim of eliminating the Resistance movement throughout the province: there were reprisals, devastation, fires, and civilians were killed in Triora and Molini di Triora. Despite this, the Resistance continued to grow throughout the summer, intensifying its military activities. The organisational structure was strengthened and it acquired an effective information and liaison service with the towns along the coast, as well as medical infrastructures, such as the small partisan hospital in Valcona in the Alpine area of Mendatica. One of the most daring actions of this period was the attack on the "Comandone" barracks of Diano Castello, resulting in a massive booty of weapons, which were desperately needed by the Resistance, and the freeing of 80 political prisoners from the gaol in Oneglia, an event that was reported on "Radio London".

August was also packed with events, including major resistance operations and reactions of equal magnitude from the Nazi-Fascists: in early August a round-up operation was carried out against the 1st Brigade of the Upper Val Tanaro in Valle Arroscia, from which the partisan units led by Commanding officer Silvio Bonfante "Cion" – gold medal for bravery – escaped intact and established themselves around Piaggia, Mendatica and in the wood at Rezzo. At the same time a tragic fate awaited a unit from the 5th Brigade on Grammondo, behind Ventimiglia, where 12 partisans were killed in action and a further 15 were captured and shot in Sospel on 12 August. The massacre of Monte Faudò took place on 17 August when, during the course of an unsuccessful round-up of partisans from Badalucco and Montalto, the Nazi-Fascists took revenge by killing countless civilians in cold blood: 11 were killed in Badalucco and Montalto, including two priests at the Sanctuary of Acqua Santa, and a further 13 who had been in cutting hay on Mount Faudò, in the locality of Bramosa. On 24 August a group of partisans wiped out an important station held by the "S.Marco" division in the area of Diano; together with others from nearby areas, about 120 "Sanmarchini" were captured, many of whom would remain with the Resistance. Other precious booty comprised a couple of mortar guns which contributed to the major partisan victory at the battle of Monte Grande on 4-5 September 1944. The Free Republic of Pigna in Val Nervia was proclaimed that same day and, under its own democratic rules and with the participation of the entire population, it remained in existence from 29 August to 8 October when, defended by the units led by Commanding officer "Vitò", it was defeated after bitter fighting during the major round-up that came to a tragic conclusion at Upega on 17 October.

The Battle of Mount Grande

After July's failed round up in Valle Arroscia, a large new operation was carried out by the Germans and Fascists in order to encircle and eliminate most of the units sheltering in the wood at Rezzo. The gun posts on the summit of Mount Grande acted as the fulcrum of the operation, capable of firing over a vast radius of the converging Maro, Carpasina and Rezzo valleys. Wiping out this gun post was the key to escaping from this cordon, which became complete after the Germans occupied Passo della Mezzaluna, and all the ridges around the upper valley.

The partisan action started from S. Bernardo di Conio and Mount Aurigo above it, from which two precious 81-mm mortar guns started to hammer the German positions; at the same time, the "Garbagnati" assault detachment, consisting of 17 men, moved to the slopes of Mount Grande under cover from the vegetation, waiting for the right moment to attack the summit as soon as the mortar fire had been adjusted. Led by Gismondi "Mancen" and Franco Bianchi "Stalin" and in spite of the intense fire from an enemy with 30 times stronger, they reached the German positions. The latter put up a fierce fight in spite of heavy mortar fire, but buoyed by their numbers and dominant position. The decisive surprise assault by a few partisans took place at close quarters, under an intense hail of hand grenades and bursts of light machine-gun fire. At last, the strong motivation of the partisans finally overcame the superior German forces which disperse in disarray across the slopes, leaving a huge number of weapons and materials on the ground, as well as a large number of casualties. The cordon was broken, opening a clear escape route for several hundred partisans whose fate was already sealed.

This was one of the most important victories of the Resistance in eastern Ligurian, not only in military terms. Since then, every year, on the Sunday closest to 5 September, a celebration is held to commemorate this symbolic day at S. Bernardo di Conio, where you can also visit the war memorial to Gold Medals for bravery awarded to resistance fighters from Imperia.

The retreat to Piedmont

After the Battle of Mount Grande, the activities of the partisans intensified in every sector of the 1st Ligurian Zone: one need only think of the Battle of Badalucco on 25 September, where an attempted reprisal by the Germans and Fascists was energetically repulsed (leaving around eighty casualties, wounded and prisoners) and the elimination of the Fascist "bersaglieri" of Ceriana carried out on 30 September. But the enemy reaction on a wider scale was not long in coming: the following month would be the hardest and most tragic for the Resistance movement in the province of Imperia.

On 4 October a huge German force attacked the Republic of Pigna because it was a dangerous example that could not be tolerated. The partisans of the 5th Brigade of Vitò repulsed the attack after a few hours of bitter fighting. The next day Pigna was heavily bombarded until late afternoon by the batteries at Isolabona. The major battle that followed was drawn out until 8 October when, after a strenuous resistance and having inflicted heavy losses on the enemy, the partisans were forced to retreat from the village along a line from Carmo Langan to Cima Marta. This marked the start of the strategic retreat to Piedmont. The same day the "garibaldini" from the 1st Brigade of Silvio Bonfante "Cion" launched the "battle of the bridges" in Valle Arroscia in order to cut the lines of communications used by the dangerous German forces: the bridge at Ranzo was destroyed and a bitter struggle took place at the bridge in Vassalico which the Germans tried to reopen. The action was successful but the Commanding officer "Cion" suffered a serious leg injury during the clash and had to be carried to safety by his companions who retreated towards Piaggia.

In the meantime, the round-up operation continued with the aim of eliminating the "Cascione" Division: a total of some 5,000 men were involved in these operations. After Pigna, Ormea, Pieve di Teco, Badalucco, Triora were occupied with considerable bloodshed. Most of the forces concentrated in the area of Piaggia – Upega – Carnino as they prepared to cross the Mongioje mountain range heading towards Fontane in the Upper Val Corsaglia. The command of the "Cascione" division was established in Piaggia, a position from which it could direct the withdrawal operations; by 15 October the situation seemed desperate when an enemy attack on S. Bernardo di Mendatica meant that the town was evacuated. Detachments from the 1st and 5th brigade left the main body and headed in the direction of Carnino, while the division command moved from Piaggia to Upega, which was thought to be safer, across Valcona, Margheria di Binda and La Colletta. The field hospital of Valcona was also evacuated and all the wounded were moved to the same place, across Le Salse and La Colletta. On 17 October, the enemy forces, moving from the Upper Val Roia, crossed the Navette and launched a surprise attack on Upega. The commanding officer Nino Siccardi "u Curtu" and the commissaire of the "Briganti Giulio" tried in vain to mount a desperate resistance so that the others could carry the wounded to safety, including the commanding officer "Cion" who, seeing the futility of the attempt, killed himself rather than be taken alive by the enemy. More than 20 partisans were killed at Upega, including the divisional commander "Giulio" and Dr De Marchi, head of the Medical service. Between that

night and the morning of 18 October, the main body of partisans crossed over the snow-covered Bocchin d'Aseo and headed towards Fontane. A further 6 partisans who had become separated were captured and taken to Saorge in Val Roia, where they were shot a few days later.

The remaining resistance fighters gathered in Fontane and the depleted units were re-organised despite their lack of clothes, food and with scarce munitions. The reorganisation period lasted about twenty days; on 10 November all the formations had returned to their starting positions. After Upega, Fascist propaganda made the serious mistake of believing that the Resistance movement had been beaten: November and December marked the start of a new phase that led, in a crescendo of activities throughout Italy, to the liberation of 25 April 1945.

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