

Dan A. D'Amelio
12151 Fremont Street #54
Yucaipa, CA 92399
(909) 790-4219
DanFannyD@aol.com

Italian Women in the Resistance, World War II

In the summer of 1943, Italy was a nation in crisis. Sicily was being overrun by Allied troops and with the economy in shambles, the country had reached a state of semi-starvation and chaos. Fed up with the war, the Italians longed now for liberation from the German/Fascist yoke.

In September 1943, with the assistance of the Committee of National Liberation (*Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale*, CLN), the first partisan bands were formed. In less than a year, the number of partisans grew to 82,000 and partisan activity developed into a serious menace for the Germans. From June to August 1944 alone, according to the German high command, the partisans killed some 5,00 of their soldiers and wounded thousands more.

In late August, following the liberation of Florence, Allied forces brought in replacements and equipment in preparation for the offensive against the last formidable defenses, the Gothic Line. Behind the German line, in such regions as Emilia Romagna, Lombardy and piedmont, underground forces were making preparations to harass the enemy's rear units to coincide with the Allied offensive. To the partisans, it seemed that the liberation of northern Italy was imminent and their spirits were high.

Among those sharing in the elation was Clarice Boniburini, a partisan in Bologna, who in August had been promoted to the rank of lieutenant and was eagerly looking forward to rejoining her family.

Boniburini was only one of thousands of women who had become a vital force in the resistance. At this point in the war—the late summer of 1944, the number of women in the partisan formations had peaked to some 35,0000; and, including the men, the total number of partisans had grown to nearly 200,000. Although the majority of women partisans functioned in non-combat roles, a significant number had already seen action. Some 300 women had fought alongside of men in the street fighting in Florence when the city was liberated a few weeks earlier.

Women had also fought in one of the greatest pitched battles of the resistance. Because it dominated the Modena sector, the town of Montefiorino was used by the socialist, 800-number Roveda Brigade as an operational base. (Each political party had its own partisan units. The parties with the most formations were the communists, socialists and the Action Party—*Partito d'Azione*, which consisted largely of intellectuals, including students and teachers.) When German columns advanced on Montefiorino on July 28, 1944, the partisans moved out into the countryside. The Germans had the advantage in numbers and fire-power, but the partisans were fighting in familiar terrain; so they were elusive and successfully used guerrilla tactics.

The Germans had to bring up reinforcements. Fought over a vast area of the countryside, the battle raged on until August 3, when the partisans were forced to retreat.

It was a victory for the Germans but one that had cost them some 2,000 casualties—six times the number of partisan casualties.

Among the partisans who fought at Monetfiorino was Irma Marchiani, a former housewife, who was later captured. Sent to a prison near Bologna, she was condemned to death, but she managed to escape. Rejoining her brigade, she was promoted to vice-commander and saw more action. In November 1944, she was captured again and executed.

Initially, partisan commanders did not want women in their units. Mirella Alloisio and Giuliana Beltrami in their book, *Voluntarie della Libertà*, quote a woman partisan on this point: “In the early days [of the resistance] they did not want women, saying that we were good for nothing. Then when the men understood that they could not do without us, they accepted us and finally I felt like someone.”

The men were particularly averse to having women in combat. Women who wanted to handle arms, therefore, had to be assertive. When twenty-four-year-old Elsa Oliva joined a partisan brigade in May 1944, she insisted that she could both nurse the wounded and handle arms. She told her commanding officer that she was there to fight and would remain with the unit only if she was given a weapon. She finally convinced the commander to give her guard duty and was given a rifle, and the first time she was in combat, Oliva showed that she could fight as well as the men. She eventually became an officer in the unit.

Killing someone, particularly for the first time, was as traumatic an experience for women as it was for men. Twenty-two-year-old Carla Capponi was with a GAP unit in Rome. (In addition to partisan formations in the countryside, often in the mountains, there were smaller assault and sabotage units that operated in urban areas. Called Groups of Patriotic Resistance, *Gruppi di Azione Patriottica* (GAP), they were usually organized and led by the communists. Squads of *Gappisti* men and women were particularly active in Rome, Turin, Bologna and Milan.) The Gap commander gave Capponi the assignment of killing a German officer after several other *Gappisti* had failed. The officer had important documents on the German defense of Rome. What then happened is recounted in Shelley Saywell’s book, *Women at War*:

With three *Gappisti* covering her, Capponi waited for the officer outside a Rome hotel where the Germans had set up headquarters. As he came out of the hotel with briefcase in hand, Capponi approached him. She remembered thinking, “I almost wanted to call him, to make him turn around...but I knew he was armed.” She raised her revolver at the officer’s back and fired. Quickly, she reached down and picked up the briefcase.

“It was raining and tears were streaming down my face,” she recalled. “He didn’t die right away, but lay there moaning. His moaning was torture to me all through my flight to Piazza Barberini.”

Capponi later took part in a bombing that had disastrous results for the Romans. On March 23, 1944, a *Gappisti* squad set off bombs on Via Rasella, a narrow street near Piazza Barberini. The blast killed thirty-three German soldiers who had been marching down the street. Nazi response was swift and savage. The next morning, 335 Roman prisoners were trucked to the Ardeatine caves at the southern edge of the city and shot.

Following the Via Rasella bombing, Capponi became a vice-commander of a GAP squad. The hardships suffered in Rome—fleeing from the Nazis inclement weather, inadequately dressed, half starved, hiding in damp cellars—resulted in the loss of one of her lungs. In 1949, before a full military review, Capponi was awarded a gold medal for valor, one of fifteen women who received this honor.

Maria Musu also was a *Gappisti* in Rome. She had joined the Communist Party while still in her teens and by 1941, when she was sixteen, she was involved in clandestine activities. Saywell quotes Musu on why she became a communist. “It wasn’t an ideological or theoretical choice, but a rather childish one, due to the fact that it was only the communists who were doing anything about fascism.”

Musu took part in actions with Capponi, in the Via Rasella bombing. She spoke of how she felt about killing. “They say that women have babies, and so don’t kill. I was very young and very determined. At that time it was clear that each Nazi I killed, each bomb I d children. The only feeling I had at the moment was worrying about being caught.”

Being captured was an ever-present fear for the partisans. When caught, both men and women were subjected to torture, which usually took the form of beatings with fists and clubs and whippings with cat-o-nine tails. And sometimes nails were pulled out from hands or feet and eyes were gouged.

Torture was applied to get the names of those in a partisan unit, as well as its location. But sometimes it was used as punishment. An example is what happened to radio operators in Florence.

Partisans in Florence, before its liberation, operated a secret transmitter called Radio Cora. Through its transmissions, the Allies learned in the spring of 1944 that the elite Herman Goering Division was being moved from the Brenner Pass to central Italy. The Allies immediately ordered up plane squadrons which bombed the division and rendered it useless in the battle for Rome.

A few months later, during the fight for Florence, the Germans wreaked their revenge. The staff of Radio Cora, including Anna Maria Agnoletti, was rounded up, then turned over to the Gestapo. After being ferociously tortured, they were dragged outside and shot.

At times German torture took on a simply but terrifying form. Gina Borellini served in her husband’s brigade in the Modena area. They both were captured. One day they were taken out of their cells and stood against a wall, facing a firing squad. They were told their lives would be spared if they talked. They refused; eventually they were led back to their cells.

The next day and the day after, the same scene was repeated, and each time, Gina and her husband remained silent. Later, Gina was released but her husband was still detained. She remained in the area where her husband was being held. When Gina learned that he had been shot, she rejoined her unit, this time in a combat role. She later was wounded and lost a leg.

As the war continued, the functions of women in the resistance expanded. By the fall of 1944, they were functioning in a multiplicity of roles. They nursed the sick and wounded. They collected money, clothes, food and medical supplies for the underground forces. They served as guides and cooks for mountain brigades. They organized demonstrations and, at times, took the lead in factory strikes. (Women, particularly, those in the textile trade, played a notable part in the general strikes of factory workers in northern Italy in March 1944. The strikes—which lasted for eight days and involved more than a million men and women—were in good part a protest against the increased deportation of Italian workers to Germany.)

Women also printed and distributed anti-Fascist literature. They escorted escaped POWs across road blocks and hid partisans, Jews and deserters from the Italian army. In many cases, women had a number of functions, moving from one activity to another.

Among their most crucial and dangerous functions was working as *staffette*, couriers. Every unit, from small assault groups to brigades, had couriers; and they usually traveled with bicycles. (The *staffetta* on a bicycle became the symbolic heroine of the resistance.) In addition to orders and reports, they transported underground newspapers and propaganda materials, as well as weapons, ammunition and explosives.

There were men and women *staffette*, but women were used more often because they were less likely to arouse suspicion. Lina, Merlin, for example, a courier in Milan, boarded a tram carrying a package that contained sticks of dynamite. At a stop further on, two German soldiers boarded the tram and proceeded to search the passengers, many of whom were men.

Lina had the package on her knees. She glanced around the tram, but there was nowhere to hide it. Through the tram window, Lina could see a tree. She felt certain that in a moment she would be taken out, tied to the tree and shot. The Germans looked at her and passed by without doing a search.

Staffette were also used in the extremely dangerous work of spying. When a partisan commander was planning an attack, he often relied on women couriers to obtain intelligence. Typically, the *staffette* maintained a casual yet careful watch over a German position. Then one or two of them would bicycle through the position, noting such things as the location of the machine guns and sentries, all of which they reported to the commander.

At times, couriers had to act outside their usual role. Twenty-two-year-old Diana Sabbi, a former garment worker, was a *staffetta* with the 62nd Garibaldi Brigade, which operated in the Bologna area. In the fall of 1944, the brigade was in serious trouble. It had no food supplies—the men and women in the unit were living on chestnuts they had picked from trees; and they were being harassed by German patrols.

The commander chose Diana to scout out a new location for the brigade. He assigned a local guide to go with her. *Staffette* usually did not carry weapons, but on this occasion, with Germans in the area, Diana was armed. Although she had been trained to use a rifle, she had never fired at anyone.

In drizzle and fog, Diana and the guide set out. As they edged down a hillside, they heard a shot. Quickly, Diana unslung her rifle and crouched in the brush. She glanced at the guide. He had unslung his rifle, too. From out of the fog, two Germans emerged, their guns leveled.

Diana had been a partisan long enough to learn the hard law of partisan warfare: the person who acts first survives. She nodded to the guide, then raised her rifle and fired. Both Germans crashed to the ground.

In addition to courage, the work of a *staffetta* called for physical stamina. Giovanni Pesce was a Gap commander in Turin and later in Milan. In his memoirs, *And No Quarter: An Italian Partisan in World War II*, Pesce recalled the actions of two young *staffette*, Sandra and Narva. (It was common practice in partisan units for rank and file members to be known only by their first names and for commanders to go by a *nome di battaglia*, battle name, so that, when a partisan was captured, he or she could not inform others in the unit or put their families in jeopardy.)

Sandra and Narva were with a Gap brigade in Milan. In June 1944, the two young women were assigned to bring TNT from a secret storage place in Rho, a community some nine miles from Milan. At first, Narva and Sandra traveled to Rho by tram, each time returning to Milan with sturdy handbags stuffed with cast-iron cylinders filled with

TNT. But at times, the tram trips were not possible because of air raids or long delays on the trams.

“At these times,” wrote Pesce, “Sandra and Narva rode their bicycles to Rho, pedaling vigorously. These two slight girls with their youthful appearance, dressed in the style of the time, with high heels made of cork, went smiling on their way. The soldiers began to recognize them due to their frequent bicycle trips and responded to their smiles, not even taking the time to go through the bags... Sometimes, some gallant policeman would carry the girls’ loads of explosives for them.”

In all, during a period of weeks, Sandra and Narva transported a total of 200 pounds of TNT, which was used by the partisans to blow up oil tanks and locomotives at a railroad complex in Milan.

Because *staffette* knew the location of partisan groups in an area of operation, they were repeatedly admonished never to talk if captured. They should accept whatever befell them, they were told, rather than endanger the partisan units. And it was an admonition some adhered to even at the cost of horrific suffering.

Irma Bandiera, as a courier in Bolgna, knew the location of all the partisan groups in the city and nearby mountains. From the moment of her capture, Bandiera had steeled herself to remain silent. For days, she was repeatedly tortured. At first, she was beaten. Then her finger nails were pulled out; and when she still refused to talk, her face was disfigured. Finally, realized that nothing they could do would break her silence, the Germans, in their fury and frustration, blinded her. Then, as she writhed in agony, they shot her.

Bandieri’s name is well-known among Italians today; she is one of the great heroines of the resistance.

Why, in light of the terrible risks involved, did women join the resistance? Among the reasons, according to historian Jane Slaughter, two are most often cited: family loyalty and frustration over the war. Loved one—brothers, father, husbands—were risking their lives, and participating in the resistance was an expression of devotion and support. And after years of war-caused deprivation, women had become fed up with the day-to-day struggle for survival.

In her book on the resistance, Slaughter quotes Maria Guadino’s account of her initiation into partisan activity. One day, while Guadino was on her way to fetch water, shooting broke out in the piazza; suddenly without thinking, she picked up a rifle from one who had fallen. “I fired for more than two hours! I wanted to shoot them all; it had been a year of torment, of bombings, hunger and thirst; and thus that day I was possessed by a great anger. I was seventeen years old, not involved in politics, but I understood very well what the Fascists and Germans represented.”

Women from every geographical area of occupied Italy took part in the partisan movement. According to figures compiled by Slaughter, most women partisans were between the ages of twenty and forty, but almost thirty percent were nineteen or younger. In terms of occupation, the largest percentages, in descending order, were housewives, agricultural workers, factory workers and those in retail and clerical work.

British historian Percy Wilson noted: “...unlike many of the men who got involved because they were faced with a choice between being called up to fight a war they no longer believed in and the life of a partisan, the women were mostly real volunteers, who could have chosen to do nothing.”

In addition to participating in partisan activity, women also volunteered for work in special groups that were called Women's Groups for Defense and for the Assistance of the Freedom Fighters (*gruppi di difesa della donna e per l'assistenza ai combattenti della liberta*). For the underground forces, the *gruppi di difesa* (GDD) collected food, money and clothing, which they washed and mended; and the organization played a key role in motivating women into public activism and guiding them into various resistance functions.

The GDD reached a total membership of about 70,000 and included some 4,500 members in Piedmont, 4,700 in Lombardy and 11,400 in Emilia Romagna. Well-organized, the GDD units operated in city neighborhoods, schools and factories and were directed by a local committee and overseen by the Milan branch of the Committee for National Liberation (CLN).

On October 16, 1944, the Milan branch, which was in charge of the political and military direction of the resistance, gave formal recognition to the GDD, thus allowing the organization to participate in the decision-making bodies of the resistance.

The Allied forces, meanwhile, were locked in fierce battles with the Germans along the Gothic Line. Winding through the Apennines, north of Florence, this last line of German defense stretched for more than 100 miles across the width of Italy. The defenses included a wide belt of minefields and barbed wire entanglements, as well as gun positions and command posts that he been blasted into the solid rock of the mountain sides.

Beyond the mountains were Bologna and the Po Valley. Allied commanders were certain that if they could break out into the broad valley plain—the best tank country in Italy—they could take full advantage of their superiority in motorized equipment and end the Italian campaign.

The Allied assault against the Gothic Line had begun on September 10, 1944 and by mid-October, the fighting on the line was reaching a climatic point. Allied casualties were escalating rapidly. The already strained replacement pool was finding it difficult to bring the ranks up to strength, and the troops on the line were close to exhaustion. With bad weather moving in, air and artillery crews could not provide support. The fog and low-hanging clouds gave way to torrential rains.

On October 26, six weeks after it had begun, the Allied offensive came to a halt—only 10 miles from the Po Valley. The four American divisions that had spearheaded the offensive had suffered 15,716 casualties. With the rain turning to sleet, the Allies dug into defensive positions.

The disappointment of the Allies in not breaking through the Gothic Line was shared by the partisans. They had assisted in what they had been told would be a “victory offensive.” (When the offensive began, the Allied command had ordered the partisans to sabotage the main roads north of the Gothic Line, which the Germans were using as supply routes.) Soon the disappointment felt by the partisans would turn to anger.

Several weeks after the Allied offensive ground to a halt, the commander of the Allied forces in Italy, British General Harold Alexander, announced in a radio broadcast that no major attacks would be launched until the spring and he advised the partisans to go home until then. The general probably thought his advice made good tactical sense, since with the approach of bad weather, an all-out Allied offensive could not be carried out until the spring, and during the winter months, little or no support could be given to the partisans. Perhaps he was naïve or simply ill-advised.

The partisans, however, were furious. Where could they go? Who among them could go home? They were all being sought by the Germans and Fascists. If they returned home, they would be arrested and shot.

The Germans and Fascists, on the other hand, were delighted by General Alexander's message. They had heard every word of it, since the message was made in open broadcast. Assured that the Allies would not launch an offensive during the winter, they could now focus on the underground army and deal it a crushing blow. And this they proceeded to do.

Lacking safe havens, the partisans were easy targets for Germany artillery, which pounded them relentlessly. And when not fleeing from the shelling, the partisans were dodging Fascists, who were sending out patrols in systematic sweeps (*rastrellamenti*) through the hills. In sleet and snow, the partisans, half-starved, not daring to stop in villages, fled for their lives. Throughout northern Italy, underground formations were scattered and whole units decimated. By January 1945, 9,000 partisans had been killed.

Casualties would have been even higher if the partisans had retreated to the higher elevations where they would have been trapped. Instead, they headed down in small numbers, slipping through the enemy lines at night. Eventually, most of the partisan formations regrouped in the low-lying hills and plains and resumed operation against the Germans. But even today, the winter of 1944-1945 is remembered with bitterness by partisan veterans as the nightmarish time when they were left virtually on their own.

In March 1945, the allies began stepping up their supply deliveries to partisan units in preparation for the spring offensive. Since the Allied landing at Salerno a year-and-a-half earlier, the underground forces had received some 2,400 tons of supplies, most of it by air drops. In March alone, they received about 500 tons.

The drops included food, clothing, medical supplies, guns, ammunition, gasoline, explosives, motorcycles and even jeeps—the latter born by four huge parachutes. Roy Farran, a British officer who trained and fought with a partisan unit, described an air drop: "The sky was filled with puffs of countless parachutes, some with grotesque wicker baskets beneath them and others with heavy cylinder containers. Some of the containers broke away from their 'chutes and whistled down like bombs in the snow around us."

Farran was one of some 200 uniformed, commando-type British and American personnel operating in mission teams helping to organize and train partisans. By the time of the spring offensive, there were sixty mission teams in contact with and assisting the partisans in northern Italy.

The American personnel in the mission teams were part of the Office of Strategic Service (O.S.S.) and were called Operational Groups, O.Gs. The O.G. teams were made up mostly of Italian Americans who were fluent in Italian—usually dialects which, though at odds with standard Italian, were familiar enough to the partisans. The cultural background of the Italian Americans, as well as their knowledge of the language, led to both a mutual understanding and a warm relationship, factors that helped contribute to the success of their joint military actions. (The natural bond felt by the two groups has lasted for a lifetime, and many of the partisan veterans and former Italian American commandos have kept in touch and even met at reunions in Italy.)

As the Allies stepped up their preparations for the spring offensive, the Fascist Black Brigade—a special counter-guerilla group formed by Mussolini to combat the partisans, was going about its work with renewed vigor. Each day, an increasing number of partisans were nabbed by units of the Black brigade. Among those caught were two sisters from Turin, 16-year-old Libra and 19-year-old Vera Arduino. Vera had become a

staffetta in a nearby mountain brigade and Libra had provided her older sister with support and assistance. The girls had grown up in a family strongly opposed to fascism, and their father had been arrested a number of times for his outspokenness against the Fascist regime.

On March 13, 1945, the two sisters, and their father, were taken from their cells, led to the prison courtyard and, standing before a firing squad, they were shot. The day after the executions, the GDD organized factory strikes, a large funeral parade and demonstrations at the cemetery. Fascists waded into the crowds and tried to disperse the women, who were singing songs of protest. Many of them were hauled away by the Fascists. In jail, they continued to sing.

Two weeks later, winter began easing its icy grip and on April 9th, the Allies began their spring offensive. Under the Allied onslaught, the Germans began to fall back. On April 14, led by the American 10th Mountain Division, the Fifth Army punched through the last defenses of the Gothic Line. The following week, on April 21, the 34th division and the Italian Legnano Combat Group reached Bologna, which had been liberated the day before by the partisans. The Legnano Combat Group was one of five Italian combat groups, totaling some 4,500 men, fighting with the Allies.

It was not the first time that Italians had served on the Allied front lines. During the previous winter, 1943-1944, in the desperate fighting at Casino, the Allies had brought in Italian army units and, according to the official military history of the first half of the Italian Campaign, *Salerno to Casino*, in December 1943, an Italian unit of 1,600 infantry fought alongside American soldiers on the heights of Monte Lungo, the mountain that overlooks the village of San Pietro Infine. After a week of often hand-to-hand fighting on the rocky slopes, the American and Italian infantry forced the Germans to retreat.

Because of its severe losses, the Italian unit had to be disbanded and the survivors formed a partisan group, which fought in northern Italy. (Many of the partisans in northern Italy were former Italian soldiers, a number of whom were originally from southern regions of Italy.)

With their last defensive line breached by Allied forces, the Germans had run out of mountains; before them now stretched the vast plain of the Po Valley. As the Germans fell back toward the Austrian and French borders, the Allied armies hurried to seal the Alpine passes. It was now a race to the Alps. Robert Ellis, who was a sergeant in the 10th Mountain division, recalls in his memoir, *See Naples and Die*, that although exhausted—in one day his infantry company covered twenty-three miles—there was no time for rest because the order had come down to pursue the Germans without letup.

As they pressed after the Germans, the men in Ellis' company were joyously greeted. "Italian peasants and other local residents, jubilant over our long-awaited arrival and their delivery from the Germans, assembled along the paths we were taking... and inundated us with flowers, wine, food and kisses of gratitude."

Across northern Italy, meanwhile, partisan formations were rising up and liberating towns and cities. Between April 24 and April 28, before American units arrived, the partisans liberated Genoa, Milan and Turin.

On April 28, Mussolini, who had been captured the day before by partisans, was shot. The following day—in an act of macabre justice—the bodies of Mussolini, and his mistress, Clara Petacci, and several of his military advisors, were strung upside down from the girders of a gas station at Piazza Loreto in Milan—the same square where eight months before the Nazis had shot fifteen civilians in reprisal for the blowing up of a German lorry by a GAP unit

In Turin, where there were still pockets of German resistance, the partisans began an impromptu parade in the jubilant city. Ada Gobetti, who was a partisan leader, describes the scene in her *Diario Partigano*: “Crossing the Piazza Statuto, we turned onto Via Garibaldi. At the head of our procession was a truck full of armed partisans. From windows and at street corners, they were still shooting, but the people, not heeding the danger, continued to pour onto the street along our way. ‘Viva L’Italia! Viva gli Americani! Viva i partigiani!’ they shouted.; and they threw flowers; and the mothers lifted up their children and held them toward us, so that they could see us, and remember us.”

By the end of April, virtually all German units were crumbling. Afraid to turn themselves in to the partisans, the Germans downed their weapons and eagerly headed for the American lines. On May 1, the German army formerly surrendered. Victory had been achieved, finally, but left in its wake were the awesome casualty figures. In the twenty months of the Italian campaign, Allied casualties totaled 312,000. Included in this number were 19,475 Americans killed, 80,530 wounded and 9,637 missing. German casualty figures numbered 434,646.

Partisans killed totaled some 45,000 with 21,000 wounded. Of the women in the resistance: 623 were killed in battle or executed; 4,653 were arrested and tortured; and 2,750 were deported to Germany--and many of them never returned. There were also the civilian casualties. In German reprisals and Allied bombings, more than 10,000 civilians were killed.

And the killing went on in the weeks after the war with the wide-spread settling of scores. In a number of Italian cities and towns public hate exploded and mob justice prevailed. There are no precise figures, but it is estimated that as many as 15,000 Fascists were shot.

Italians had been led into war by Mussolini and his followers-- a war they were psychologically and materially unprepared for. Writes historian Henry Adams in *Italy at War*: “Ill-equipped, ill-trained and skeptical of Fascism’s bellicose propaganda, Italy’s troops were probably less motivated than those of any other combatants in World War II.” But between 1943-1945, Italians had a cause worth fighting and dying for, and that was the liberation of their nation from the German/Fascist yoke. And for this, they fought bravely and well.

In May of 1944, even before partisans had reached their peak strength, General Alexander stated that the partisans were holding down the equivalent of six full German divisions—divisions that would otherwise have ended up on other foreign fronts, including the Normandy beachhead. In the words of a report written by a British commander, quoted in the official military history of the second half of the Italian campaign, *Casino to the Alps*, “The contributions of the partisans to the Allied victory in Italy was a very considerable one, and far surpassed the most optimistic forecasts. By armed forces, they helped to break the strength and morale of an enemy well superior to them in number. Without the partisan victories, there could not have been such a rapid victory in Italy.”

Robert Battaglia, who was a partisan commander, speaks of the impact of the resistance on the Italian people in his book, *The Story of the Italian Resistance*:

“It was in this struggle that Italians won back their self-respect after the grotesque debacles of the dictatorship in Africa and Greece.”

It is unlikely that any event, not even the Risorgimento, has had a greater influence on Italian politics, culture and society than the resistance. On April 25th, the anniversary day

of “la Liberazione,” schools are closed and in towns and cities throughout the nation, speeches are made and wreathes are laid on monuments. It is a solemn day—a day of remembrance of liberty attained by the sacrifices of many thousands.

For women, the resistance has a particular significance. They played a vital role in the successes of the resistance. Writes Slaughter, “By the summer of 1945, Italian women could congratulate themselves on having helped to defeat fascism and end the war. They could take pride in and even marvel at the unprecedented number of women who had engaged in political and military activities historically considered beyond the range of usual female experience.”

In the years immediately after the war, women were less inclined to accept, as an old saying went, “being behind, like the cart behind the horse.” Vis-a-vis men, they were dissatisfied with their status and were becoming more vocal in their desire for change. In d equal rights and opportunities for women. Among those guaranteed rights (Article 4): working women have the same rights and, for the same labor, the same pay as working men.

When the first legislature for the republic was elected in May 1948, women—for the first time—held positions in the national government. Of the 801 elected to parliament, more than half had served in the partisan movement. Since then, women have continued to be elected to national office. According to Slaughter, since the war, among the most significant changes for women are their election to government office, their participation in political parties and the appearance of mass-based women’s organizations.

The resistance marked not only the end of fascism and the birth of democracy in Italy. It also marked the beginning of a new era of greater emancipation, which the many thousands of women in “la Resistenza” won for postwar Italian women.