

British Journal for Military History

Volume 6, Issue 3, November 2020

'Everybody to be armed': Italian naval personnel and the Axis occupation of Bordeaux, 1940–1943

Alex Henry

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 25 November 2020

Citation: Alex Henry, "Everybody to be armed": Italian naval personnel and the Axis occupation of Bordeaux, 1940–1943', *British Journal for Military History*, 6.3 (2020), pp. 23-41.

www.bjmh.org.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.



The BJMH is produced with the support of **Goldsmiths**
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

‘Everybody to be armed’: Italian naval personnel and the Axis occupation of Bordeaux, 1940–1943

ALEX HENRY*

The University of Nottingham, UK

Email: Alex.Henry@nottingham.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Bordeaux remains marked by ‘occupation’. Huge U-boat pens dominate the maritime districts of the city, an imposing reminder of the city’s painful history. While such monuments maintain the memory of the German occupation, the Italian wartime presence in the city has been overlooked. Yet the Italian naval garrison had a huge influence on Bordeaux life. This article explores these relationships from the words of captured Italians, whose private conversations reveal how their actions were defined by violence and exploitation. This is a view of Italian soldiery that undermines the myth of the ‘brava gente’ – a people untainted by the brutality of war.

There is an enduring popular perception of the Italian armed forces of the Second World War as *brava gente*, ‘a good humane people, basically untainted by fascism, including its shameful racist policies, and in fact a victim of fascism and the war itself.’ Supposedly, for all of Italy’s wartime flaws, the nation did not collectively lose its decency and remained a ‘civilised bedrock’.¹ Often couched by comparing ‘good Italians’ with ‘bad Germans’, and the ways in which Italian fascism was an aberration from the *longue durée* of Italian history – it is a troubling phenomenon which has impeded investigations of Italian wartime atrocities and criminality.² It is a concept

*Alex Henry is a Research & Knowledge Exchange Fellow at The University of Nottingham.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v6i3.1424

¹Silvana Patriarca, *Italian Vices: Nation and Character from the Risorgimento to the Republic*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 189, p. 215 & p. 232.

²Filippo Focardi, *Il cattivo Tedesco e il bravo italiano: a rimozione delle colpe della seconda guerra mondiale*, (Bari: Laterza, 2013); Benedetto Croce, *Il dissidio spirituale della Germania con l’Europa*, (Bari: Laterza, 1944), 21; Michele Battini, *The Missing Italian Nuremberg: Cultural Amnesia and Postwar Politics*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 23

expressed in many popular novels, books and films, where Italian soldiers are presented as essentially harmless ‘nice guys’ and lovers, but not fighters.³ This is an impression that persists in the popular imagination, though it has been challenged in recent historiography, particularly through the work of historians such as Schlemmer and Rodogno who have demonstrated how Italian soldiers should be seen as ‘invaders, not victims’.⁴ Furthermore, Italy’s overall involvement in the war fought between 1940 and 1943 has been consistently slighted in accounts of the conflict, and while the ‘voices’ of British, American, Japanese and Soviet veterans abound in published works, those of Italian servicemen remain largely absent.⁵

One source that does offer authentic expressions of Italian ‘voices’ are the records of the Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centre (United Kingdom) – or CSDIC (UK). Between September 1939 and October 1945 the staff of this British-run intelligence organisation monitored, recorded, transcribed and translated the private

2007); Filippo Focardi, ‘Italy’s Amnesia over War Guilt: The “Evil Germans” Alibi’, *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 25/4 (2014), pp. 5-26.

³For example: *Mediterraneo* (Dir: Gabriele Salvatores, 1991); *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin* (Dir: John Madden, 2001); *La linea del fuoco* (Dir: Enzo Monteleone, 2002); *Italiani brava gente* (Dir: Giuseppe de Santis, 1965); *The Secret of Santa Vittoria* (Dir: Stanley Kramer, 1969); Eric Linklater, *Private Angelo*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1946); Eric Linklater, *The Campaign in Italy*, (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1959). See also: James Sadkovich, ‘Anglo-American Bias and the Italo-Greek War of 1940-1941’, *The Journal of Military History*, 58/4 (1994), pp. 617-642; James Sadkovich, ‘Re-evaluating Who Won the Italo-British Naval Conflict, 1940-42’, *European History Quarterly*, xvii (1988), pp. 455-71.

⁴Thomas Schlemmer, *Invasori, non vittime. La campagna italiana di Russia 1941-1943*, (Rome: Laterza, 2009); Davide Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁵For example: Basil Liddell Hart, *A History of the Second World War*, (London: Pan, 2014); Alan Allport, *Browned Off and Bloody-Minded: The British Soldier Goes to War, 1939-1945*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Samuel Morison, *Operations in North African Waters, 1942 – June 1943*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1947); Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi invasion of 1940*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For veteran accounts, see: Catherine Merridale, *Ivan’s War: The Red Army, 1939-1945*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2005); Richard Aldrich, *Witness to War: Diaries of the Second World War in Europe and the Middle East*, (London: Corgi, 2005); Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in WWII*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2017); Laurence Rees, *Their Darkest Hour: People Tested to the Extreme in World War Two*, (London: Ebury Press, 2011). An exception is Carlo Ferroni, *Italian POWs Speak Out at Last: Prisoners of War Break Their Silence*, (London: Teneo Press, 2013).

ITALIAN NAVAL PERSONNEL AND THE AXIS OCCUPATION OF BORDEAUX

conversations of thousands of mostly unsuspecting Axis prisoners of war at specialised camps in southern England.⁶ Over 500 Italian soldiers, sailors and airmen passed through the CSDIC (UK) camps between 1940 and 1943, and close to two thousand transcripts – variously described as ‘reports’, ‘protocols’, ‘special reports’, ‘listening reports’ and ‘SR reports’ at the time – were made of their conversations.⁷ While there has been some research into the German transcripts and those from senior Italian army officers, the many conversations between ‘ordinary’ Italian servicemen have not received the analysis they deserve.⁸

These sources offer a unique insight into the thoughts of hundreds of Italian service personnel during the most catastrophic conflict in world history. While the individual conversations may offer just a snapshot of the experiences of these men, they are

⁶These being Trent Park (Cockfosters, London), Latimer House (Latimer, Buckinghamshire) and Wilton Park (Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire). See: The UK National Archives (hereinafter TNA) WO 208/4970, ‘Enclosure I – The History of CSDIC (UK)’; TNA, WO 208/4970, ‘The Story of MI19’. For more on the structure and methods of CSDIC (UK) see: Falko Bell, ‘One of our Most Valuable Sources of Intelligence’: British Intelligence and the Prisoner of War System in 1944’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 31/4 (2016), pp. 556-578; Helen Fry, *The Walls Have Ears: The Greatest Intelligence Operation of World War II*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

⁷The number of Germans was much higher. From 1939-1945, 10,195 Germans were handled by CSDIC (UK), of which 16,960 transcripts were made. This numerical disparity perhaps reflects British assessments that Italian forces posed a lesser threat. Source: TNA WO 208/3451, ‘Appendix C – Analysis of Prisoners Handled and Reports Issued by CSDIC (UK), September 1939 – October 1945’; TNA WO 208/4198, CSDIC (UK), ‘Enemy Atrocities’, 18 November 1942.

⁸See: Sönke Neitzel, *Tapping Hitler’s Generals: Transcripts of Secret Conversations, 1942-45*, (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2007); Sönke Neitzel, and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten: On Fighting, Killing and Dying*, (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013); Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi, *Noi non sappiamo odiare: L’esercito italiano tra fascismo e democrazia* (Milan: UTET, 2010). Harald Welzer, Sönke Neitzel, and Christian Gudehus, eds., *Der Führer war wieder viel zu human, viel zu gefühlvoll: Der Zweite Weltkrieg aus der Sicht deutscher und italienischer Soldaten*, (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2011); Felix Römer, *Kameraden: Die Wehrmacht von innen* (Munich: Piper, 2012); Sebastian Gross, *Gefangem im Krieg Frontsoldaten der Wehrmacht und ihre Welsicht*, (Berlin: Be.Bra, 2012); Tobias Seidl, *Führerpersönlichkeiten: Deutungen und Interpretationen deutscher Wehrmachtgeneräle in britischer Kriegsgefangenschaft*, (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2012); Frederik Müllers, *Elite des Führers: Mentalitäten im subalternen Führungspersonal von Waffen-SS und Fallschirmjägertruppe 1944/45*, (Berlin: Be.Bra, 2012).

nonetheless representations rich in colour and detail.⁹ There are few other sources that bring us as close to the actual conversations of Italian servicemen during the war. Certainly, there is evidence that the Italian intelligence services (SIM) and secret police (OVRA and POLPOL) used bugging devices to record some military conversations; however it was denunciation that remained their weapon of choice. It also bears remembering that – unlike the CSDIC (UK) files – only a residue of surveillance records have survived in the Central Police Records in Rome, with tens of thousands of files were deliberately removed, destroyed or not made public.¹⁰

The CSDIC (UK) transcripts have their limits. We are only left with the material the British Intelligence staff thought important enough to collect.¹¹ Moreover, while there is next to no evidence that the Italian cohort had a great awareness they were being bugged, these conversations occurred within a martial, homosocial and prisoner community. There was always the capacity for bragging and exaggeration, stemming from the trauma of wartime experiences and the shame of captivity, to shape these conversations. Nevertheless, the transcripts are devoid of the distortions of post-war memory found in oral histories and memoirs, and the performative languages of letters. The CSDIC (UK) sources are a fascinating and rich historical resource, even if it is important to be aware of their limitations. In the same set of documents, the perspectives of influential commanders are found alongside those of humbler rank, on a range of topics of enduring historical importance – from perceptions of allies and enemies, to victory, defeat, antisemitism, experiences of combat, military leadership and the Italian political system.

Of the Italian CSIDC (UK) cohort, over eighty percent came from the navy.¹² No explicit reason is given in CSDIC (UK)'s records for this over-representation of *Regia*

⁹See: Alex Henry, 'The *Brava Gente* Caught on Tape: Listening in to Captured Italian Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen in Britain, 1940-1943' (PhD Thesis, The University of Nottingham, 2018), pp. 41-63.

¹⁰TNA WO 208/4193, I/SRX 7, 6 December 1940; Chiara Fonio, 'Surveillance under Mussolini's Regime', *Surveillance and Society*, 9/1/2 (2011), p. 83 & p. 90; Jonathan Dunnage, 'Surveillance and Denunciation in Fascist Siena, 1927-1943', *European History Quarterly*, 38/3 (2008), pp. 244-265.

¹¹Top priority was political and military matters. Many aspects of the prisoners' personal lives were not considered sufficiently valuable and as such they are only mentioned when they intersect with political and military affairs. For example, discussion of an anti-fascist father or a mother struggling under rationing. See: TNA WO 208/4970, 'Appendix F – Editorial Section'; TNA WO 208/4190, I/SRN 517, 30 August 1942; TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 300, 30 November 1941.

¹²TNA WO 208/3451, 'Appendix C – Analysis of Prisoners Handled and Reports Issued by CSDIC (UK), September 1939 – October 1945'; TNA WO 208/3451,

ITALIAN NAVAL PERSONNEL AND THE AXIS OCCUPATION OF BORDEAUX

Marina personnel. It is possibly a symptom both of practical concerns – these POWs were often captured in the seas in and around the British Isles themselves – and of the huge importance of naval matters to the domestic British intelligence services, who highly valued any information which could be used in the struggles for supremacy in the Atlantic and Mediterranean. Whatever the exact reasons, the transcripts constitute a particularly significant body of testimony of the Italian war at sea (1940–1943), within which life in the French port of Bordeaux features particularly prominently.¹³

Part of the German zone of occupation,¹⁴ Bordeaux was nonetheless home to three thousand Italian submariners, *San Marco* marines, *Carabinieri*, technicians and senior commanders of the *11° Gruppo di Sommergibili*.¹⁵ Fighting alongside the German U-Boat Flotilla, which arrived on 15 October 1942, this garrison formed the BETASOM submarine base from which several dozen Italian submarines would go on to sink or seriously damage 112 Allied ships between September 1940 and September 1943. These were victories that cost the *Regia Marina* 15 submarines and the lives of 751 Italian seamen.¹⁶

The operational history of BETASOM has been well-charted.¹⁷ However, historians have overlooked the interactions of Italian service personnel with the population of

Appendix 3 – CSDIC (UK) Analysis of PW Interrogated at CSDIC (UK) up to December 1944'; TNA WO 208/3451, Appendix II – CSDIC (UK) Yearly Comparison of SR Output'.

¹³While French, Italian and German archival material offer additional perspectives, for practical reasons they fall outside of the scope of this article.

¹⁴The Italian zone incorporated the eight south-western French *départments* of Alpes-Maritimes, Hautes-Alpes, Basses-Alpes, Haute-Savoie, Savoie, Var, Isère and Drôme between June 1940 and September 1943: See: Ian Ousby, *Occupation: The Ordeal of France, 1940-1944*, (London: John Murray, 1999), pp. 103; Emmanuele Sica, *Mussolini's Army in the French Riviera*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

¹⁵Mathieu Marsan, 'Bordeaux-Bacalan: Des Bassins à Flot à la Base Sous-Marine', *Aquitaine Historique*, 120 (2013), p. 3.

¹⁶BETASOM was the Italian military acronym of 'Beta' ('B' for Bordeaux) and 'Som' ('Sommergibile' – submarine). See:

http://www.regiamarina.net/detail_text.asp?nid=90&lid=1. Accessed 30 December 2019; Francesco Mattesini, *BETASOM: La guerra negli oceani (1940-1943)*, (Rome: Ufficio storico della marina militare, 2003), pp. 8-9; Dominique Lormier, *Bordeaux sous l'Occupation*, (La Crèche: Geste, 2015), pp. 38-56; Walter Ghetti, *Storia della Marina Italiana nella Seconda Guerra Mondiale: Vol. II*, (Rome: De Vecchi, 2001), p. 26; Janusz Piekalkiewicz, *Sea War: 1939-1945*, (London: Blandford Press, 1987), p. 106.

¹⁷Mattesini, *BETASOM*, pp. 27-484; Jean-Pierre Gillet, *Les Sous-marins Italiens en France: Grandeur et Servitude Italienne Atlantique et Océan Indien, 1940-1943*, (Le Vigen: Les 27

Bordeaux. They are not considered in the research of Robène, Bodin, Héas, Langeo and Soo, and receive only a fleeting mention by Bécamps.¹⁸ This conforms to a wider historiographic trend identified by Varley, whereby relations with Italy and the presence of Italians are overlooked in histories of the occupation.¹⁹

The presence of these thousands of Italian naval personnel had a major impact on the lives of the *Bordelais* they encountered. This article explores these relationships through the words of Italian submariners. The private conversations within the CSDIC (UK) transcripts – which amount to very early oral testimony of the Italian forces in Bordeaux – reveal a tendency to present their experiences as characterised by violence and exploitation of the occupied French population. This is a view of the Italian man in uniform that undermines the myth of the *Italiani brava gente*. The article thus operates on two levels. First, it provides a new perspective on the wartime history of the city and those who occupied it. Secondly, it is representative of wider issues concerning the experience of Italian occupation and the attitudes of Italians as soldiers in this period.

It is important to note at the outset that the *Regia Marina's* submariner and *San Marco* marines were something of an 'elite' force – especially when compared to the under-

Editions Lela Presse, 2002); Juan Benítez, 'The Italian War in the Mid-Atlantic: Blockade Runners and Submarines in the Canary Islands (1940-1943)', *The Mariner's Mirror*, 100/2 (2014), pp. 186-197; Marco Mascellani, ed., *Vedetta Atlantica: Storie di vita nella base dei sommergibili Italiani a Bordeaux, nelle pagine della rivista di Betasom*, (Sarasota: Bianchi Gianni, 2011), pp.10-49 & pp. 382-404.

¹⁸Luc Robène, Dominique Bodin and Stéphane Héas, 'Bordeaux et les Politiques d'Équipement Sportif Durant l'Occupation (1940-1944): Des Enjeux Idéologiques aux Contingences Locales', *Modern & Contemporary France*, 13/2 (2005), pp. 175-192; Erwan Langeo, *Bordeaux 1940-1944: Les Bases de Sous-Marins*, (Bordeaux: Association Bunker Atlantique Patrimoine Archéologie, 2017); Scott Soo, 'Ambiguities at Work: Spanish Republican Exiles and the Organisation Todt in Occupied Bordeaux', *Modern & Contemporary France*, 15/4 (2007), pp. 457-477; Pierre Bécamps, *Bordeaux sous l'Occupation*, (Rennes: Ouest France, 1983), p. 47, p. 64, 77 & pp. 80, 87.

¹⁹Karine Varley, 'Between Vichy France and Fascist Italy: Redefining Identity and the Enemy in Corsica During the Second World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 47/3 (2012), p. 506; Karine Varley, 'Vichy and the Complexities of Collaborating with Fascist Italy: French policy and Perceptions Between June 1940 and March 1942', *Modern and Contemporary France*, 21 (2013), p. 318. See also: Romain Rainero, *Mussolini e Pétain Storia dei Rapporti tra l'Italia e la Francia di Vichy (10 giugno 1940 – 8 settembre 1943)*, (Rome: Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito – Ufficio Storico, 1992).

ITALIAN NAVAL PERSONNEL AND THE AXIS OCCUPATION OF BORDEAUX

trained and poorly equipped massed ranks of the conscript army.²⁰ Significantly for the tales of violence and brutishness recounted below, the proximity to similarly 'elite' German U-Boat personnel appears to have radicalised many Italians. Many BETASOM veterans – both marines and submariners – would fight for the Italian Social Republic (RSI) between 1943-45. By highlighting the radicalism among Italian submariners in Bordeaux, this article expands on and develops the research of Capra Casadio, who has charted the 'radicalisation' and 'fascistisation' of the naval special units through the years preceding the 1943 armistice.²¹

Encounters with French Men

For Italian submarine crews in the Atlantic, the war at sea was bloody and fraught with danger. Whilst it is tempting to think of modern naval warfare as fought over vast distances, with few opportunities to witness the human costs from up close, several CSDIC (UK) reports document the costs of this brutal warfare. Seaman Stefanni remembered that the *Baracca* often came across corpses floating in the water and, on one occasion, 'an entire ship's bridge' - the only remains of a convoy devastated by aerial attack.²² When a gas explosion on the *Ferraris* killed two of his comrades, Gunner De Seta told how their remains were stored in empty torpedo tubes for the remainder of the voyage.²³ In July 1942, Petty Officer Lazzari could not believe the sheer numbers of 'submarines we have lost from our Atlantic base!'²⁴ Engineer Lieutenant Varoli recalled in March 1943 that 'nobody was saved from the *Granito*,' nor from the *Alabastro*, the *Veniero*, the *Marconi*, the *Malaspina* and the *Marcello*.²⁵ These men experienced the ghastly consequence of warfare first hand. Across all of Italy's naval

²⁰Brian Sullivan, 'The Italian Soldier in Combat, June 1940-September 1943: Myths, Realities and Explanations', in Paul Addison and Angus Calder, eds., *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West. 1939-1945*, (London: Pimlico, 1997), pp. 177-205.

²¹Fabio De Ninno, *I sommergibili del fascismo. Politica navale, strategia e uomini tra le due guerre mondiali*, (Milan: Unicopli, 2014); Luigi Fulvi, Giuliano Manzari, Tullio Marcon, Ottorini Ottone Miozzi, *Le fanterie di marina Italiane*, (Rome: Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare, 1998); Massimiliano Capra Casadio, *Storia della Xa Mas 1943-1945*, (Milan: Mursia, 2016).

²²TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 151, 15 October 1941.

²³TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 284, 26 November 1941.

²⁴TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 331, 29 July 1942.

²⁵TNA WO 208/4193, I/SRX 42, 5 March 1943. Respectively these were sunk on 14 September 1942 (Mediterranean); 7 June 1942 (Mediterranean); 28 October 1941 (Atlantic); 10 September 1941 (Atlantic); 22 February 1941 (Atlantic). See: Kevin Moeller, 'The Italian Submarine Force in the Battle of the Atlantic: Left in the Dark' (Masters Thesis, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, 2014), pp. 78-82.

theatres of operations, the Italian submarine service suffered 3,144 personnel killed and lost 98 vessels, which amounted to two-thirds of its total strength.²⁶ These remain proportionally in line with *Kriegsmarine* U-Boat losses in the Second World War. Of the 1,167 U-Boats commissioned between 1935 and 1945, 757 were sunk – a loss-rate of 65 percent. Over 30,000 German submariners were killed with their vessels, roughly 57 percent of U-Boat crewmen.²⁷ Italian submariners were not insulated from the grim attrition of Second World War maritime warfare.

Threats to personal safety did not stop when the submarine crews returned to base. CSDIC (UK) documents provide repeated examples of violence between Italians and the local male population. Even if one allows for occasional exaggeration or bragging, the recorded conversations suggest a constant climate of tension. For example, Petty Officer Marchiol described an incident during which an inebriated French man aggressively insulted him as a ‘sale macaroni!’²⁸ The French drunk was not satisfied merely with verbal aggression: ‘then he raised his hand to strike me. I gave him a shove and he tripped over the curb and finished up on the steps of the bar. He drew a knife and went for me.’²⁹ Luckily for Marchiol, his assailant was soon restrained, arrested and beaten by the *Carabinieri*. The account of the attack, which did not suggest any great personal valour on the part of Marchiol, grants it an air of authenticity. According to Marchiol, when he was questioned by the secret police, the attacker confessed he acted out of hatred for Italians.³⁰

A February 1943 conversation between three naval Petty Officers made clear the dangers faced by submarine crews in Bordeaux. As Petty Officer Pullio explained, in the wake of numerous lethal attacks against them, naval crews took up the habit of carrying sidearms as they moved through the city.³¹ Ordinary Seaman Stefanni confirmed this practice amongst BETASOM personnel, ‘there’s a lot of disorder at the Atlantic base. The sergeants and officers went about armed with pistols after there had been some cases of attacks made on one or two of them who were alone [...]’

²⁶http://www.regiamarina.net/sub_casualties.asp?nid=196&lid=1 . Accessed 30 December 2019.

²⁷Axel Niestle, *German U-Boat Losses During World War II: Details of Destruction*, (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2014), p. 11; Timothy Mulligan, *Neither Sharks Nor Wolves: The Men of Nazi Germany’s U-Boat Arm, 1939-1945*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1999), pp. 251-256.

²⁸Translation: ‘dirty macaroni’. ‘Macaroni’ is a French anti-Italian ethnic slur similar to ‘wop’.

²⁹TNA WO 208/4190, I/SRN 465, 18 August 1942.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹TNA WO 208/4191, I/SRN 1034, 12 February 1943.

ITALIAN NAVAL PERSONNEL AND THE AXIS OCCUPATION OF BORDEAUX

even the biggest fool carried a revolver down there, or a dagger or something.³² It reached a point where orders were issued from BETASOM commanders 'for everybody to be armed.'³³ Stefanni stated that when the 'civil population' began turning away from Italians on the street, even spitting on the ground as they passed, 'several [civilians] got beaten up – we didn't stand for that [...] We were ordered to hit back. The commander said: "The first man who appears here in this base with a black eye will be sent back to Italy (in disgrace)".'³⁴ Street fights 'were just everyday routine.'³⁵ When it came to 'proper' conduct in an occupied territory, maintaining peace with the civil population was subordinated to protect national honour by means of rough justice. Insults from French civilians against the Fascist ideal of the 'Italian warrior' were countered with direct violence, but the Italians were expected also to demonstrate their martial masculinity in such clashes.

While Bordeaux lacks a strong reputation for acts of resistance, the city was by no means a safe haven for Axis personnel. In August 1940 alone, a German sailor was killed, shots were fired at a German patrol and three people were arrested for subversive activity. In September, the telephone cable between La Rochelle and Royan was cut. All this took place before the establishment of an organised resistance framework.³⁶ The first successful SOE operation in occupied France – 'Josephine B' – took place in June 1941 in the Bordeaux suburb of Pessac, causing substantial damage to a power station and hampering BETASOM operations for weeks.³⁷ On 20 October 1941 the resistance killed a German *Feldkommandantur* officer; the Germans shot 98 French hostages in reprisal. On 21 October 1942, there was another killing of Axis personnel in Bordeaux.³⁸ Spanish Republican exiles working for the Organisation Todt were particularly prone to acts of violent resistance, acting as accessories to the shooting of the *Feldkommandantur* officer and mortally wounding another German officer with a sharpened key in 1941. They would go on to commit further attacks on the occupying forces in December 1942 and January 1943.³⁹

³²TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 165, 17 October 1941.

³³Ibid.

³⁴TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 166, 17 October 1941.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 286-287.

³⁷Michael Foot, *S.O.E.: An Outline History of the Special Operations Executive, 1940-46*, (London: Vintage, 2014), p. 243; Michael Foot, *SOE in France: An Account of the Work of the British Special Operations Executive in France, 1940-1944*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 157-159.

³⁸Jackson, *Dark Years*, pp.182, 423.

³⁹Soo, 'Ambiguities at Work', pp. 470-471.

Several Italians under CSDIC (UK) observation remarked upon the brutality of German reprisals following such acts of resistance. The Italians in Bordeaux appear divided in their reactions, with some disconcerted by the level of German violence, and others joining such repression.⁴⁰ Chief Boatswain Pontone recalled an incident when a tram refused to stop for him and a waiting German. In response, 'the German pulled out a pistol and started firing at the tram; he broke all the windows and wounded two people.' When the tram stopped, the German climbed on board, 'pointed his pistol at the driver and ordered all the passengers to get out [...] The German told me to get in [...] All the other passengers were left standing in the street.'⁴¹ Petty Officer Gruppiso described how even minor infractions by the civil population could be punished by withholding meat for two weeks and that eleven Frenchmen were publicly executed by firing squad when accused of signalling to Allied bombers.⁴² While both seem to be uncomfortable witnesses, neither Pontone nor Gruppiso condemned these actions.

Petty Officer Spinelli cited an even bloodier response to the shooting of a German major in the city, whereby dozens were shot and a substantial fine levied.⁴³ Yet there is evidence that some Italian troops joined in with such practices. Seaman Stefanni reported that, 'when the air raid sirens went, both German and Italian patrols would go round firing at lighted windows,' without warning and with no consideration of who was inside.⁴⁴ Italian marines apparently 'used to set off in parties of six or seven in the evening as if they were going on a binge.'⁴⁵ German troops – especially those returning from service on the Eastern Front – had a well-documented habit of shooting up the French towns where they were billeted if 'provoked' by shut cafes and brothels.⁴⁶ Italian troops, however, do not. Even accounting for the fact that the *San Marco* battalion

⁴⁰The views of the Italian POWs to their wartime allies are no less diverse in the main body of CSDIC transcripts. Though brutish and brutal German behaviour was often remarked upon. See: Henry, 'The *Brava Gente* Caught on Tape', pp. 89-95. The complexity of this relationship is further expanded upon in, Lutz Klinkhammer, Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi and Thomas Schlemmer, eds., *Die Achse im Krieg: Politik, Ideologie und Kriegführung, 1939-1945*, (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2010), pp. 108-146.

⁴¹TNA WO 208/4191, I/SRN 956, 8 February 1943.

⁴²TNA WO 208/4192, I/SRN 1105, 14 February 1943.

⁴³TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 280, 26 November 1941. This is possibly a reference to the reprisals taken in the wake of the lethal shooting of the German officer on 21 October 1941. See above.

⁴⁴TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 180, 19 October 1941.

⁴⁵TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 180, 19 October 1941.

⁴⁶Robert Gildea, *Marianne in Chains: Daily Life in the Heart of France during the German Occupation*, (London: Pan, 2003), p. 78.

ITALIAN NAVAL PERSONNEL AND THE AXIS OCCUPATION OF BORDEAUX

was a particularly 'radical' unit, the trigger-happy nature of Italian marines in Bordeaux, and the readiness of some to condone German repressive measures, is remarkable.

Occupied Bordeaux thronged with young men on the hunt for sex and alcohol to escape the realities of war and, for submarine crews, the probability of death. In such an atmosphere it is scarcely surprising that instances of violence between Italian sailors and French civilians created serious issues of public order. The situation was aggravated by tensions generated by sexual relations with local women, where the sometimes sexually predatory nature of the occupying forces and the bonds forged between occupier and occupied from genuine affection, attraction, or meretricious calculation created tensions. The Loire ports of Nantes and St. Nazaire have been described as a 'partying mecca,' where the 'freewheeling atmosphere could easily slip into drunken brawls.'⁴⁷ When, in September 1941, two German soldiers were injured in such an altercation in Nantes, the investigating French police commissioner wrote: 'incidents often happen in these places because of the mingling of males and females and the abuse of alcohol.'⁴⁸ As the CSDIC (UK) accounts demonstrate, Bordeaux was little different. Whether the violence came from idealistic *résistants*, inebriated Frenchmen riled by an Italian marine chatting up his girlfriend or the Italian servicemen themselves, Bordeaux – and many French cities like it – was a dangerous and violent place during the Occupation. This is a bleak view – the Italian naval personnel here did not view their French neighbours as *les soeurs latines* but with animosity and aggression.

Petty Officer Marchiol described how much he 'loathed' the French workmen he came across in Bordeaux stating, 'they stood about doing nothing. If it was a question of smuggling, then they were ready enough [...] but for honest work they were useless.'⁴⁹ As Chief Boatswain Pontone told in January 1943, tensions between French civilians and Italian naval personnel worsened in the aftermath of air raids by the RAF.⁵⁰ As Italian sailors passed through the town in their uniforms, 'the French pelted us with tomatoes and rotten eggs and spat at us [...] the first evening the sailors just let things happen but on the second evening they jumped off the trams and there was a free fight.'⁵¹ Sartre and Knapp have written of the anger among French civilians in the wake

⁴⁷Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation Under Arms, 1939-1945*, (London: Vintage, 2015), pp. 127-128.

⁴⁸Stargardt, *German*, p. 127.

⁴⁹TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 351, 2 August 1942.

⁵⁰See: Denis Richards, *RAF Bomber Command in the Second World War: The Hardest Victory*, (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 82; Claudia Baldoli and Andrew Knapp, *Forgotten Blitzes: France and Italy Under Allied Air Attack, 1940-1945*, (London: Continuum, 2012), pp. 4, 26.

⁵¹TNA WO 208/4191, I/SRN 865, 6 January 1943.

of Allied bombing raids.⁵² Often this was directed at the bombers themselves, but it holds that their ire also be aimed at the occupying forces who were the raid's primary target.

When one considers why this level of aggression developed there are several possible political explanations. In addition to simply being an occupying force, the Italians' belated entry into the war and their poor military performance along the *Ligne Alpine* in June 1940 resulted in a French tendency to deny Italy's legitimacy as conqueror.⁵³ The Germans had at least comprehensively defeated the forces of the Third Republic on the battlefield. This bred a contempt towards the Italian presence, compounded by an irritating Italian self-satisfaction at finally being in control of long-desired French territory.⁵⁴ From the Italian perspective, the Fascist Government and its propaganda had identified France as one of Italy's foremost rivals during the interwar era.⁵⁵ Count Galeazzo Ciano's famous *Diario* abounds with references to efforts to stoke Francophobia among the Italian populace.⁵⁶

Such Fascist propaganda rested on a long-standing historical foundation. Antagonism between Italy and France pre-dated even the unification of Italy. It was French troops that had crushed Mazzini's fledgling Roman Republic in 1849 and French military protection of the Papal States that had prevented Rome's absorption into the Italian state until 1870.⁵⁷ In the mid-1930s, French political and public opinion was outraged

⁵²Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Paris Under Occupation', *Sartre Studies International*, 4/2 (1998), pp. 9-10; Andrew Knapp, 'The Destruction and Liberation of Le Havre in Modern Memory', *War In History*, 14/4 (2007), p. 489.

⁵³Italian assaults against fortified positions on the French frontier would cost an already defeated French army fewer than 200 casualties, while the Italians lost 631 killed, 2,631 wounded and 616 missing, with 2,151 succumbing to frostbite. See: Douglas Porch, *The Path to Victory: The Mediterranean Theatre in World War II*, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004), p. 43.

⁵⁴Robert Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 82; Philippe Burrin, *France under the Germans: Collaboration and Compromise*, (New York: The New Press, 1996), p. 166; Varley, 'Complexities', pp. 319-321; Varley, 'Redefining Identity', p. 507.

⁵⁵MacGregor Knox, 'The Fascist Regime, its Foreign Policy and its Wars: An Anti-Anti-Fascist Orthodoxy?', *Contemporary European History*, 4/3 (1995), pp. 347-365; Arturo Marzano, 'La <<guerra delle onde>> La risposta inglese e francese alla propaganda di Radio Bari nel mondo arabo (1938-1939)', *Contemporanea*, 1 (2012), pp. 3-24.

⁵⁶Galeazzo Ciano, *The War Diaries of Count Galeazzo Ciano, 1939-1943*, (London: Fonthill Media, 2015), pp. 37, 38, 40, 51.

⁵⁷Christopher Duggan, *Francesco Crispi, 1818-1901: From Nation to Nationalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 334-336, pp. 407-409 & pp. 610-611. See

ITALIAN NAVAL PERSONNEL AND THE AXIS OCCUPATION OF BORDEAUX

by the Italian invasion of Abyssinia and intervention in the Spanish Civil War. From November 1936 to October 1938, France had even withdrawn its Ambassador from Rome in protest.⁵⁸ While it is unlikely that many French civilians would have pulled a knife on an Italian sailor exclusively to right the wrongs of the Second Italo-Abyssinian War, or that Italian submariners would go on violent benders as revenge for the *Risorgimento* era, it seems probable that mutual antipathy between Italians and French men was underpinned both by personal tensions, sexual jealousies and political factors that pre-dated the outbreak of hostilities in the summer of 1940.

Sex

The shame of defeat and occupation precipitated a wartime crisis in French masculinity. This would dramatically influence post-Liberation French society through the 'massive demonstration of sexual violence' against women accused of collaboration, who had their heads publicly shaved as punishment.⁵⁹ That the violence directed at Italian forces in Bordeaux also stemmed in part from this crisis in French masculinity seems likely, not least because, as the transcripts reveal, sexual relations between local women and Italian sailors were rife. As the commander of the submarine *Glauco* said, 'at Bordeaux all my crew managed to find girlfriends. They got on well with the French girls.'⁶⁰ This highly sexualised environment is reflected in the great many sexually explicit cartoons and jokes found among the pages of the *Vedetta Atlantica*, the BETASOM base newspaper made by submariners for submariners.⁶¹

Seaman Stefanni reminisced that 'every Italian in Bordeaux had a mistress, from the ordinary seaman to the admiral.'⁶² A radio-telegraphy Warrant Officer described how there were 'plenty of women in Bordeaux ready for a bit of fun.' His own mistress was the wife of a captured French pilot.⁶³ So numerous were these relationships that the military authorities established a dedicated office to examine 'all letter[s], photographs etc. (belonging to missing submarine men)' and destroyed them. This was because, according to Sub-Lieutenant Villa, 'married men, especially, may have

also: Michael Broers, 'Cultural Imperialism in a European Context? Political Culture and Cultural Politics in Napoleonic Italy', *Past and Present*, 170 (2001), pp. 152-180.

⁵⁸Jackson, *The Fall of France*, pp. 65, 70-71.

⁵⁹Fabrice Virgili, *Shorn Women: Gender and Punishment in Liberation France*, (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2002), p. 240.

⁶⁰TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 83, 15 August 1941.

⁶¹Like a more reverent *Wipers Times*, *Vedetta Atlantica* was published in 37 editions between 6 November 1941 and 1 December 1942. See: Mascellani, *Vedetta Atlantica*, pp. 53-380.

⁶²TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 231, 28 October 1941.

⁶³TNA, WO 208/4189, I/SRN 94, 22 August 1941.

compromising letters and photographs.⁶⁴ In this case the Navy placed the protection of these men's marital betrayal over transparency for families in Italy.

It is clear there was genuine affection and even a level of innocence in some of these relationships. Relations between Italian men and French women were not exclusively sexual. For example, Torpedo Rating Diddi spoke of an evening he shared with some comrades and women at a 'lock-in' at a restaurant, *Giuliella's*. 'We made [the proprietor] shut the doors at eleven o'clock. We had brought a kilogram of Gorgonzola cheese with us [...]. We spent the whole night eating [...] we had a wonderful time.'⁶⁵ Petty Officer Paoli said that some of the women 'got genuinely fond of us,' and that 'one or two of the older men lost their heads' when it came to their French girlfriends. He knew of one man who had refused to go back to his wife and family in Italy on leave because he wished to spend it with his mistress instead.⁶⁶ For all the complications of occupation it is not a surprise that some individuals sought company and escape from the war in this way.

A similar dynamic was observed between German prisoners of war and American women during the Second World War where 'the authorities had trouble keeping local girls away from the prisoners.' Searches of POW bunks would often uncover stashes of contraceptives.⁶⁷ A further example from this time were the forbidden sexual relationships between German women and the 1.5 million French POWs used as labourers throughout the Reich.⁶⁸ Whilst sexual fraternisation with the occupiers could be motivated by a range of factors – financial, political, self-preservation – many French women did so for comparatively innocent reasons. As Madame Sandrine from Toulouse remembered,

We had lived through a dismal period: women wanted to enjoy themselves, to push away all this dreariness, all the problems, especially in the towns. Who had the money to have a good time? The Occupying forces, the black-market racketeers, those who were making the big money.⁶⁹

⁶⁴TNA WO 208/4190, I/SRN 557, 11 September 1942.

⁶⁵TNA WO 208/4191, I/SRN 464 B, 18 August 1942.

⁶⁶TNA WO 208/4190, I/SRN 571, 12 September 1942.

⁶⁷Matthias Reiss, 'Bronzed Bodies behind Barbed Wire: Masculinity and the Treatment of German Prisoners of War in the United States during World War II', *The Journal of Military History*, 69/2 (2005), pp. 492-497.

⁶⁸Raffael Scheck, 'Collaboration of the Heart: The Forbidden Love Affairs of French Prisoners of War and German Women in Nazi Germany', *The Journal of Modern History*, 90/2 (2018), pp. 351-382.

⁶⁹Hanna Diamond, *Women and the Second World War in France, 1939-1948: Choices and Constraints*, (Harlow: Routledge, 1999), p. 71 & p. 84.

ITALIAN NAVAL PERSONNEL AND THE AXIS OCCUPATION OF BORDEAUX

The Italian sailors stationed in Bordeaux, after all, found themselves in a country which had been abruptly stripped of some 1.5 million young Frenchmen with the 1940 capitulation.⁷⁰

To argue that *all* such relations discussed in the CSDIC (UK) transcripts were defined by affection would be misleading. Petty Officer Marghetta said, ‘there’s not a decent woman in Bordeaux – they’re all prostitutes.’⁷¹ There was a sinister side to many encounters between Italian men and French women. As Petty Officer Paoli mentioned, some Italian sailors would exploit the genuine feelings felt towards them to cynically borrow money from their admirers.⁷² That the level of sexual exploitation could descend to the grooming and rape of underaged girls is made clear by Ordinary Seaman Stefanni. He recalled that there reached a point when some Italians became ‘fed up with going with women, so they [began] to run after young girls.’⁷³ Shortages of luxuries, money and even food in Bordeaux meant that all it could take to attract such girls were gifts of make-up or perfume.⁷⁴

Some girls they were, I can tell you! Bit by bit, they all went the same way! There was a shortage of food you see; they had no money, and stuff like a bottle of scent, for which they used to pay next to nothing, now costs a heap of money. [...] I bought six or seven litres and made a lot of little friends! [...] So I got to know a girl, and the second day I used to bring her a lip-stick or a little bottle of scented water; then to win her over completely you went to the cinema, and when you went in you made a sign to the proprietor, and he at once gave you a dark box [...] The girl would ask “why in here?” but she didn’t go away. Then the fun began.⁷⁵

Evidence of this darker side to Franco-Italian sexual relations gives valuable context as to why ‘feelings against Italians were particularly strong after the Liberation.’⁷⁶ Stefanni’s example of evident sexual exploitation involved the cooperation and

⁷⁰Stargardt, *German*, pp. 127-128.

⁷¹TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 334, 30 July 1942.

⁷²TNA, WO 208/4190, I/SRN 571, 12 September 1942.

⁷³TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 149, 15 October 1941. Other instances of Italian soldiers sexually harassing French children can be found in Sica, *French Riviera*, pp. 103-104.

⁷⁴For more on economic shortages in the city see: Lormier, *Bordeaux*, pp. 80-83. TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 334, 30 July 42 and TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 223, 28 October 1941, both describe the massive increases in the cost of consumer goods during the occupation period.

⁷⁵TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 149, 15 October 1941.

⁷⁶Virgili, *Shorn*, pp. 14-15.

collusion of French and Italian men. French women and girls in this context were caught between foreign occupation and wider patriarchal oppression. They stood to be liberated from more than just Axis subjugation at the end of the war.

For other Italian sailors, sex was directly purchased and prostitution became a booming industry in Bordeaux. One prisoner recalled a sex worker who had amassed savings of 40,000 francs.⁷⁷ But it was evidently not without its risks. Petty Officer Villoisio reported that the availability of opiates in some Bordeaux brothels could turn their customers ‘half crazy’.⁷⁸ Contracting sexually transmitted diseases was, of course, another danger and it is clear from the transcripts that they were rife amongst Italian personnel in Bordeaux. Seaman Stefanni estimated that ‘seventy percent of the Italians at Bordeaux had some form of venereal disease, and I can’t tell you how many have been sent home suffering from syphilis.’⁷⁹ Sub-Lieutenant Villa reported that, ‘there were two hundred cases of syphilis among officers and petty officers in Bordeaux [...] and as for gonorrhoea! It’s got to the point that a man who hasn’t caught gonorrhoea is looked upon as a fool.’⁸⁰ This was a state of affairs bluntly corroborated by Petty Officer Di Cesare who claimed that, ‘at Bordeaux everybody has gonorrhoea.’⁸¹ Petty Officer Della Barbera was nostalgic for the days when one did not have to worry about such things. He blamed the Germans for the rise in sexually transmitted infections, saying ‘there wasn’t nearly so much venereal disease before they arrived in the port.’⁸²

Prostitution was an ongoing concern for the authorities in occupied France and, given what is revealed in the transcripts, this seems only prudent. There was a well-developed system of regulated prostitution across the occupied zone, including Bordeaux. Yet so called ‘covert’ – unregulated – prostitution remained common and the target of many official clamp-downs. For instance, French police in Angers uncovered 41 covert prostitutes of whom 12 had sexually transmitted infections.⁸³

⁷⁷TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 166, 17 October 1941.

⁷⁸TNA WO 208/4190, I/SRN 434, 14 August 1942.

⁷⁹TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 247, 16 November 1941.

⁸⁰TNA WO 208/4190, I/SRN 588, 11 September 1942.

⁸¹TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 330, 29 July 1942.

⁸²TNA WO 208/4190, I/SRN 322, 27 July 1942. Similar charges would be levelled the Allies in Southern Italy. See: Julie Le Gac, “‘*Le mal napolitain*’: les alliés et la prostitution à Naples (1943–1944)”, *Genre et Histoire*, 15 (2014/2015).

⁸³Gildea, *Marianne*, pp. 76-77.

ITALIAN NAVAL PERSONNEL AND THE AXIS OCCUPATION OF BORDEAUX

Outside France, Italian health reports from Greece also expressed concern over high rates of venereal diseases among Italian garrisons, particularly in urban areas.⁸⁴

Seaman Grosso of the submarine *Glauco* – a vessel which operated across the Mediterranean and Atlantic – said that ‘we all paid visits to the brothels before leaving’ on a submarine patrol.⁸⁵ But as the following excerpts make clear, the submarine crews that operated out of Bordeaux were far from the only units in the Italian Navy to pay a physical cost for habitually visiting brothels. Midshipman Gianni described the situation at Cagliari where there was ‘a lot of gonorrhoea. [...] a friend of mine caught it and I went with the same girl a few days later.’ He suffered from a similar fate in La Spezia where he said, ‘once I went to a brothel with two friends and we all three got gonorrhoea.’⁸⁶ Gianni’s candid admission underlines the absolute normality of venereal disease among Italian naval personnel, a cause neither of surprise nor of shame.

As Midshipman Manisco of the 10 Flotilla MAS made clear, it was a trend that could have an impact on the operational effectiveness of Italian vessels. He described how a submarine carrying Italian *Maiale* human torpedoes was compromised when one of the torpedo’s crew contracted gonorrhoea while ashore. It took him out of action and meant that a reserve crew had to be used.⁸⁷ The Italian military were not alone in facing manpower problems as a result of hospitalization due to venereal disease in the Second World War, it was a phenomenon shared by almost every other European army at the time. In France in 1939, General Montgomery issued a memorandum to his 3 Division on the ‘Prevention of Venereal Disease’ following 44 cases admitted to the divisional Field Ambulances in just one month.⁸⁸ Among the US Army in Italy in April 1944 the ‘VD rate’ was approximately 163 per 1,000 men, a rate five times the ‘acceptable standard’ calculated by the War Department and a level Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force medical officers thought could compromise Allied success.⁸⁹ This demonstrates a grubbier side to traditional ideas of the Allied

⁸⁴Paolo Fonzi, ‘The Italian Occupation of Crete during the Second World War’, in Emmanuele Sica and Richard Carrier, eds., *Italy and the Second World War: Alternative Perspectives*, (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 69.

⁸⁵TNA WO 208/4189, I/SRN 84, 14 August 1941.

⁸⁶TNA WO 208/4190, I/SRN 768, 21 December 1942.

⁸⁷TNA WO 208/4191, I/SRN 802, 30 December 1942.

⁸⁸Hugh Sebag-Montefiore, *Dunkirk: Fight to the Last Man*, (London: Viking, 2007), p. lxiii.

⁸⁹Mary Lou Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 163. For further comparison see: Mary Lou Roberts, ‘The Price of Discretion: Prostitution, Venereal Disease, and the American Military in France, 1944–1946’, *The American Historical Review*, 115/4 (2010), pp. 1002–1030; Le Gac, “‘Le mal napolitain’”.

and Italian war, which conveniently overlook the contracting of and passing on of sexually transmitted diseases to the sexual partners of servicemen.

Conclusion

Even seventy-five years after its liberation, Bordeaux remains physically marked by the German occupation. The huge concrete U-boat pens – built to protect *Kriegsmarine* vessels from Allied bombing – dominate the maritime district.⁹⁰ They serve as an imposing reminder of a painful period in the city's history, one marked by the pressures of collaboration, resistance and the everyday fight for survival. While such architectural monuments keep the memory of the German occupation alive, the Italian military presence in the city has been overlooked. This article goes some way to correcting this imbalance through the words of Italian servicemen themselves. It also fills a gap in the historiography to consider those Italian CSDIC (UK) transcripts which feature the voice of lower-ranking naval personnel. The conversations offer a very rare glimpse into the way Italian servicemen in this period spoke of their experiences and interacted with one another, and they provide an opportunity for Anglophone audiences to hear authentic voices of the Italian experience of the Second World War. This is a significant perspective in national contexts where this conflict is still so culturally, politically and socially influential, and yet wider understanding of the 'Italian War' remains limited.

Even though the words in this article come from the occupiers themselves – the perpetrators of repression – this perspective has not obscured the grimness and brutishness of the Italian presence in the city. It is the issue of how Italian servicemen acted in their role as occupiers that stands as one of the most arresting topics. A site of widespread exploitation and violence, Bordeaux – as throughout so much of the Italian wartime empire – suffered greatly under the Italian presence between 1940 and 1943. Frequent bloody clashes with local men meant that personal protection was ensured by carrying sidearms and daggers. Perceived slights to Italian honour were met with officially sanctioned brute force and many Italian marines demonstrated little reluctance to join their German colleagues in terrorising the local populace.

Meanwhile, Bordeaux's women faced sexual exploitation on an almost systematic scale. The high rates of sexually transmitted infections and references to violent drug use make it clear that such encounters could be incredibly risky. That some Italian personnel pursued young girls removes any gloss provided by those French women

⁹⁰For more on the wartime and peacetime uses of the vast German-built submarine pens at Bordeaux see: Mathieu Marsan, 'La Base sous-marine de Bordeaux, sous le béton la culture', *In Situ*, 16 (2012), pp. 1-21. Similar structures remain on the waterfronts of the other major German bases in western France – Brest, Lorient, St-Nazaire and La Rochelle.

ITALIAN NAVAL PERSONNEL AND THE AXIS OCCUPATION OF BORDEAUX

and Italian men who were genuinely fond of each other. While lacking the concentration camps, massacres and wanton reprisals of Italian occupation policy in the Balkans,⁹¹ there is nonetheless a distinct grubbiness and bloodiness to the Italian military presence in Bordeaux, much of which had support from official channels. The CSDIC (UK) transcripts reveal a side to the Italian experience of the Second World War that fundamentally contradicts the image of the *Italiani brava gente*.

⁹¹In Yugoslavia, Italy's military and political administrators ruled with an iron fist and rightly earned the title 'pioneers of repression'. Policies rooted in anti-Slav racism and Italian colonial practices would cost the lives of thousands of Yugoslavs. See: Lidia Santarelli, 'Muted violence: Italian war crimes in occupied Greece', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 9/3 (2004), pp. 280–299; James Burgwyn, 'General Roatta's war against the partisans in Yugoslavia, 1942', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 9/3 (2004), pp. 314–329; Rodogno, *Empire*, pp. 332–334; Elena Aga Rossi and Maria Teresa Giusti, *Una guerra a parte: I militari italiani nei Balcani, 1940-1945*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), pp. 23–126.