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# The Regio Esercito's Fatalities, 1940-1943

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## ABSTRACT

*The Italian Royal Army (Regio Esercito) fought no less than seven conventional campaigns against five opponents on two continents between 10 June 1940 and 8 September 1943, and in which around 133,667 servicemen died or went missing. Compared to the death toll of Italy's First World War, from May 1915 to November 1918, this is a surprisingly low figure. It is also a misleading and superficial figure as each campaign had its own lethal dynamic. Based on the few Italian sources available, this note compares the fatality rates for the campaigns and highlights downplayed facts and unknowns; and advocates for further and innovative research in the Albo d'Oro della Seconda Guerra Mondiale.*

Few armies experienced the Second World War as did the Italian Royal Army, the *Regio Esercito*. From 10 June 1940 to 8 September 1943, in a period of almost thirty-nine months, it fought no less than seven conventional campaigns against five opponents on two continents.<sup>1</sup> These were non-sequential military efforts with different objectives, scopes, magnitudes, and endings. The *Regio Esercito* fought Mussolini's 'parallel war' before defeats forced the organisation to join Hitler's war in a subsidiary role. The ordeal ended in the army's quasi-disintegration after Italy's unconditional surrender on 8 September 1943, forty-five days after the fall of Mussolini; the man the army (and the other services) had served obediently since his rise to power in 1922.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Against France in the Alps from 21 to 24 June 1940, Great Britain in East and North Africa respectively from June 1940 to November 1941, and June 1940 to May 1943), Greece and Yugoslavia from October 1940 to April 1941), and the Soviet Union from August 1941 to March 1943), and finally, the Allied forces in Sicily from July to August 1943. That list does not mention occupation duties in France from June 1940 to October 1943, in the Balkans, and the Aegean from April 1941 to September 1943.

<sup>2</sup>The *Regio Esercito* became a co-belligerent force with the Allied armies. See Richard Carrier, 'The Regio Esercito in Co-Belligerency, October 1943-April 1945', in [www.bjmh.org.uk](http://www.bjmh.org.uk)

## THE REGIO ESERCITO'S FATALITIES, 1940-1943

Over the last decade or so, our understanding of Mussolini's campaigns has notably improved, especially for the English readership. Insightful articles on the North African campaign brought new perspectives.<sup>3</sup> Two recent collections of essays explored neglected aspects of the Fascist wars.<sup>4</sup> In 2019, Scianna published the first comprehensive monograph on the army's involvement on the Eastern Front.<sup>5</sup> A study of the *Regio Esercito's* performance in the war against Greece came two years later.<sup>6</sup> In the meantime, Gooch's monograph on the dictator's wars, a well-documented work, was published in 2020.<sup>7</sup> Finally, an accurate handbook on the Italian army based on primary sources is now available.<sup>8</sup>

However, one aspect of these campaigns is often neglected and underplayed – the human cost. Most Italian and non-Italian scholars have not undertaken the hard and unappealing work of compiling data, comparing losses, and putting the casualty numbers into perspective. Yet, the demographic cost of a war, or a campaign, is often revealing of its nature and intensity. Thanks to Giorgio Rochat and Antonio Rossi, the human cost of the *Duce's* ambitions is no longer an enigma. Both have dissected the 1957 official survey as no other scholars have and their knowledge of the relevant sources is indispensable.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, despite some limitations and inaccuracies, their

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Emanuele Sica and Richard Carrier (eds.), *Italy and the Second World War: Alternative Perspectives*, (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2018), pp. 95-125.

<sup>3</sup>Richard Carrier, 'Some Reflections on the Fighting Power of the Italian Army in North Africa, 1940-1943', *War in History*, 22, 4 (2015), pp. 503-528; Bastian Matteo Scianna, 'Rommel Almighty? Italian Assessments of the 'Desert Fox' During and After the Second World War', *The Journal of Military History*, 82, 1 (2018), pp. 125-146.

<sup>4</sup>Sica and Carrier (eds.), *Italy and the Second World War*; Mario Maria Aterrano and Karine Varley (eds.), *A Fascist Decade of War: 1935-1945 in International Perspective*, (London: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>5</sup>Bastian Matteo Scianna, *The Italian War on the Eastern Front, 1941-1943: Operations, Myths and Memories*, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). In Italian, see Maria Teresa Giusti, *La campagna di Russia, 1941-1943*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2016).

<sup>6</sup>Richard Carrier, *Mussolini's Army against Greece, October 1940-April 1941*, (London: Routledge, 2021); also Pier Paolo Battistelli, *The Balkans 1940-41: Mussolini's Fatal Blunder in the Greco-Italian War* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2021).

<sup>7</sup>John Gooch, *Mussolini's War: Fascist Italy from Triumph to Collapse, 1935-1943* (London: Allen Lane, 2020).

<sup>8</sup>Pier Paolo Battistelli, *Mussolini's Army at War: Regio Esercito, Commands and Divisions*, (Milan: Agrafe Books, 2021). This note was prepared before the publication of James J. Sadkovich, *Fascist Italy at War: Men and Materiel*, (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2025).

<sup>9</sup>Istituto Centrale di Statistica, *Morti e dispersi per cause belliche negli anni 1940-45*, (Rome: Repubblica Italiana, Istituto Centrale di Statistica, 1957). Rochat noted that the

work remains the most reliable and accessible analysis with their work the starting point for further research.<sup>10</sup>

This research note briefly presents and compares the *Regio Esercito's* fatalities, dead and missing in action, in the seven conventional campaigns fought between June 1940 and August 1943.<sup>11</sup> The author's analysis is based on: the referenced works; the 1957 survey; and Italian secondary sources including the campaign official histories published by the *Ufficio storico, Stato Maggiore Esercito* (USSME). Over the years the author has learned that the army archives provide partial figures, while the journals of army divisions (*diari storici*) often contain fragmentary information. As those sources are incomplete and contradictory, this research note provides estimates that are seen to be reasonable, but nevertheless debatable. Margins of error in both the numbers and the percentages are inevitable.

By way of introduction, it is important to expose Italy's losses during the Second World War. Between 1940 and 1945, almost 450,000 Italians, military and civilians, lost their lives – see Table 1.<sup>12</sup> Considering that the *Albo d'Oro della Seconda Guerra Mondiale* contains the names of 319,207 military, it can be assumed that roughly 130,000 civilians also died during the war.<sup>13</sup>

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abundance of data makes the work difficult to use. Moreover, if the figures on civilian deaths are dependable, those on military fatalities are not and caution is necessary.

<sup>10</sup>Giorgio Rochat, 'Una ricerca impossibile: Le perdite italiane nella Seconda Guerra Mondiale', *Italia Contemporanea*, no. 201, December 1995, pp. 687-700; also Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943. Dall'impero d'Etiopia alla disfatta*, (Turin: Einaudi, 2008), pp. 439-444; and Antonio Rossi, 'Guerra 1940-1945, gli Italiani caduti: breve storia del conflitto in cifre', *Quaderno Autonomi*, no. 19, 1996, pp. 5-48. Rossi's analysis rests upon the careful use of many different sources, including the *Albo d'Oro della Seconda Guerra Mondiale*.

<sup>11</sup>In some cases, aviators and sailors are included in the figures. The body counts of Italian occupations and counterinsurgency operations prior to September 1943 are not included in the author's analysis.

<sup>12</sup>Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, p. 440 and Rossi, 'Guerra 1940-1945,' p. 11.

<sup>13</sup>See Massimo Multari, <https://www.campagnadirussia.info/i-caduti-del-fronte-orientale/>. Accessed 11 Aug 2025. p. 4. The *Albo d'Oro* is the national register of the names of the military who died in the Second World War. It includes the service members of the armed forces, the partisans, but also those who fought for the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana*. In 2019 the Italian Ministry of Defence made the *Albo d'Oro* as a database available to the public.

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	10 June 1940 to 8 September 1943	9 September 1943 to 31 December 1945	Total
<b>From Rochat</b>	226,532	210,149	444,523 (including 7,842 deaths of undetermined date)
<b>From Rossi</b>	225,274	218,963	444,242

**Table 1: Italy's Death Toll: 1940 to 1945, (military and civilian, men and women, all locations, all causes of death).<sup>14</sup>**

Italian military personnel died from combat related actions in different locations, although mostly in Europe and in Africa, and from their injuries and disease in hospitals abroad or in Italy, and in prison camps. In contrast, the human cost of the First World War was somewhere around the commonly held figure of 650,000 service members.<sup>15</sup> Most men died in the bloody campaign against Austria-Hungary that was fought between May 1915 and October 1918.<sup>16</sup> The figures speak for themselves: and that less Italians died in the Second World War than in the First World War is a blessing. However, the context was very different, and it is possible to talk about two different wars in succession: the first from 1940 to 1943; and the second from 1943 to 1945. The first period coincided with Mussolini's campaigns where most deaths were combat related. The second period transformed the Italian peninsula into a battlefield where there was a clash between the Allied and German forces; Allied bombing, German atrocities, and a civil war between Italians partisans and those loyal to Mussolini also contributed to the death toll.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, p. 440 and Rossi, 'Guerra 1940-1945,' p. 11.

<sup>15</sup>Mario Isnenghi and Giorgio Rochat, *La Grande Guerra, 1914-1918*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008), pp. 470-471. For a new perspective based on an innovative approach, Alessio Fornasin, 'The Italian Army's Losses in the First World War', *Population*, vol. 72, no. 1, 2017, pp. 39-62. Using the *Albo d'Oro* of the First World War, Fornasin arrived at 558,000 military deaths.

<sup>16</sup>Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, p. 440. War related deaths after 1918 and 1945 are not included.

<sup>17</sup>For the details, see Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, p. 443.

Between June 1940 and September 1943, the Fascist regime mobilised 4,500,000 men. According to Rossi, the total of military fatalities is 197,066 of whom 160,466 served in the army, 11,940 in the air force, and 24,660 in the navy.<sup>18</sup> Using Rossi's data, the author estimates that 133,667 of these deaths occurred in the seven conventional campaigns studied here, and this is a low figure in the context of a war waged over three years – see Table 2. Yet each campaign had its own lethal dynamic, an expression the author uses to describe the multiple variations in which fatalities occurred. It refers to geography, duration, intensity of fighting, and the causes of death among other things.

Location and date	Number of fatalities	Percentage of total death count
France (June 1940)	1,251	0,9%
East Africa (June 1940-November 1941)	5,511	4,0%
North Africa (June 1940-May 1943)	19,882	14,8%
Greece/Albania (October 1940-April 1941)	23,684	17,7%
Soviet Union (August 1941-March 1943)	79,789	59,6%
Sicily (July-August 1943)	3,550	2,6%

Table 2: The Regio Esercito's Fatalities: 10 June 1940 to 8 September 1943.<sup>19</sup>

The four-day Alpine campaign against France from 21 to 24 June 1940 took 1,251 Italian lives and represents a mere 0.9% of the aggregate Italian figure of 133,667; but this was still a fatality rate of 313 deaths per day.<sup>20</sup> This fighting took place in very difficult terrain, against a skilled enemy having the advantage of sound defensive positions. The French request for an armistice saved many Italian soldiers. The unwinnable campaign in Ethiopia and Somalia cost 5,511 men, Italian nationals, or 4.1%

<sup>18</sup>Rossi, 'Guerra 1940-1945', pp. 7-8. For slightly different figures, see Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, pp. 441-442. Both authors included in their figures the civilians mobilized by the three services (*civili militarizzati*).

<sup>19</sup>Source Rossi.

<sup>20</sup>The author calculates the percentages and the ratios using the data of either Rochat or Rossi, and has excluded the injured and prisoners of war.

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of the total.<sup>21</sup> Except for some episodes, such as Battle of Keren in early February 1941, the campaign was characterised by low intensity fighting over a prolonged period of time from June 1940 to November 1941; the date the last Italian stronghold surrendered. Unsurprisingly, the campaigns in North Africa, in Greece/Albania, and in the Soviet Union belong to a different category.

The North African campaign from 10 June 1940 to 13 May 1943 took the lives of 19,882 men, Italian nationals, or 14,8% of the total.<sup>22</sup> Rossi calculated that 4,845 men died in Egypt, 11,310 in Libya, and 3,727 in Tunisia. These figures roughly coincide with the sequential unfolding of operations between the summer of 1940 and the spring of 1943. In Libya, the many violent encounters of 1941-1942 took their toll, during Operations Compass and Crusader for example, while the battles of El Alamein in Egypt, and the Mareth line and Enfidaville in Tunisia probably account for the majority of the deaths in each country. However, as exact body counts for the battles in North Africa are unknown, estimates prevail.<sup>23</sup> *Africa settentrionale* was the *Regio Esercito's* longest and most important campaign at thirty-five months, but was not its deadliest as the monthly ratio amounted to some 570 dead or missing. Besides losses in battle captivity in North Africa *did not result in the high fatality rates faced by the men of the Armata italiana* in Russia (ARMIR).

The death toll of the campaign against the Greek army, 28 October 1940 to 23 April 1941 has for a long time been a source of confusion and discrepancies. In his seminal work, Mario Montanari reported 13,755 dead and 25,067 missing in action, and 'most of them dead on the battlefield.'<sup>24</sup> For years, respected scholars have repeated these figures with confidence.<sup>25</sup> Actually, we now know from the *Archivio of the Ufficio storico* that most *dispersi* were indeed prisoners, some 21,153, who were released after the armistice while probably 3,914 died on the battlefield.<sup>26</sup> Considering that Montanari had unlimited access to the army archives, his assumption about the *dispersi* is surprising. Moreover, the fact that he did not use at all, or even mention, the 1957 official survey is puzzling. Statisticians of the *Istituto* arrived at a death toll of 16,584.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Rossi, 'Guerra 1940-1945', p. 12.

<sup>22</sup>Rossi, 'Guerra 1940-1945', p. 12; Rochat gave 20,000 as an indicative figure.

<sup>23</sup>For instance on El Alamein, Pier Paolo Battistelli, *La guerra dell'Asse: Strategie e collaborazione militare di Italia e Germania*, vol. 2, 1942-1943, (Milan : Agrafe, 2020), p. 394.

<sup>24</sup>Montanari, *L'esercito italiano nella campagna di Grecia*, (Rome: SMEUS, 1991), p. 805.

<sup>25</sup>For instance, see Gooch, *Mussolini's War*, p. 185.

<sup>26</sup>Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, pp. 280-281. I The author has learned that teams of the field hospital in Berat found 3,395 bodies after the armistice. See Carrier, *Mussolini's Army*, p. 151.

<sup>27</sup>Istituto Centrale di Statistica, *Morti e dispersi*, p. 12, 14.

In his 1995 article, Rochat estimated that the fatality total in Greece for the three services could be as high as 30,000.<sup>28</sup> In *Le guerre italiane*, Rochat gave 'well over 20,000,' while Rossi came to the precise figure of 23,684.<sup>29</sup> It is likely that both Rochat and Rossi assumed that thousands of the 50,874 injured men died in hospitals in Albania and Italy after April 1941. Rossi's 23,684 dead represented 17.7% of the total, but the monthly ratio of 3,947 fatalities during a period of 176 days, indicates the intensity of the fighting. The forgotten campaign against Greece was a short, but painful and bloody experience that only ended when Germany invaded Greece.

Mussolini's desire to join the Nazi crusade in the East stands alone in terms of fatalities. In Ukraine and in Russia, the *Regio Esercito* faced its deadliest enemy. The death toll, 79,789 men, meant that 59.6% of all Italian army combatants died in the Soviet Union, and at a monthly ratio of 4,693 deaths.<sup>30</sup> However, this last figure is misleading as the soldiers of the *Corpo di spedizione italiano in Russia* (CSIR) and the ARMIR experienced different destinies. The CSIR's operations started in August 1941 and coincided with the German victories of 1941-1942, when General Messe's 62,000 men supported Italy's Axis ally in small-scale engagements. Accordingly, from August 1941 to July 1942, fatalities were fewer at 1,792 dead, a rate of about 150 men dead per month.<sup>31</sup> Conversely, the ARMIR experienced costly fighting from the beginning. Between 20 August and 1 September 1942, the First Defensive Battle on the Don, no less than 2,704 men died.<sup>32</sup> Then, a disaster happened: between 11 December and 20 March 1943, in just over three months, the ARMIR lost 74,800 men.<sup>33</sup> Men died in combat, in retreats, in marches, on trains in transit to captivity, and in camps.<sup>34</sup> Rochat argued that most prisoners died in the summer of 1943, while Rossi underlined that only

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<sup>28</sup>Rochat, 'Una ricerca impossibile', p. 689.

<sup>29</sup>Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, p. 280, 442; Rossi, 'Guerra 1940-1945', p. 12. In both cases, the figures included men of the three services, and those who died in the operations against Yugoslavia. Rossi also included army personnel who died at sea. For a detailed analysis, see Carrier, *Mussolini's Army*, pp. 149-152.

<sup>30</sup>Rossi, 'Guerra 1940-1945', p. 12. Rochat agreed that 80,000 dead is a 'reliable' figure, although not a definitive one. Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, p. 442. In an article posted in August 2023 on the website *Progetto storia e memoria della campagna di Russia 1941-1954*, Colonel Massimo Multari gave 88,548 as the total body count of the Eastern front. See Multari, 'I caduti del fronte orientale', p. 4.

<sup>31</sup>Rossi, 'Guerra 1940-1945', p. 14. In addition, the 3<sup>rd</sup> *Celere* lost 251 men between 30 July to 13 August during the battle of Serafimovich. See Scianna, *The Italian War on the Eastern Front*, pp. 132-133.

<sup>32</sup>Rossi, 'Guerra 1940-1945', p. 14. Then the Soviet paused and only 242 Italians died between 2 September and 10 December.

<sup>33</sup>Rossi, 'Guerra 1940-1945', p. 14.

<sup>34</sup>An unknown number of men died in field hospitals to the rear of the ARMIR.



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10,030 of them ever came back to Italy.<sup>35</sup> The *Regio Esercito's* fatalities fighting the Soviet Union were roughly four times that incurred in the longer North African campaign. It should not therefore be a surprise that the campaign in the east figures so highly in the collective memory of Italians after 1945.

Finally, the Sicilian campaign from 10 July to 17 August 1943 offers figures with great discrepancies. Rossi estimated that 3,550 men died in the fighting, while Santoni wrote that 4,678 men had proper burials on the island.<sup>36</sup> The men of the *Livorno* and *Napoli* divisions probably accounted for a good part of these deaths as both infantry divisions were involved in failed counterattacks in the days immediately after the Allied landings. Furthermore, Santoni added that 36,072 men went missing, that an unknown amount of them ended up in mass graves, and others were left on the battlefield.<sup>37</sup> For the sake of consistency, the author has used, even if it might be too low, Rossi's figure for the death toll of the five-week Sicilian campaign against the Allies, 2.6% of the total of the period. For many soldiers, dying in a lost cause and for a hated dictator was not an option; hence many chose captivity or deserted en masse.<sup>38</sup>

In conclusion, the author reiterates that all of the above figures are, at best, plausible estimates with inherent margins of error. They indicate how each campaign took its toll and how context mattered. The fact that the French Army gave up fighting in June 1940 resulted in a low total casualty rate; and there can be no doubt that the German intervention against Greece in April 1941 also saved many Italian lives. By comparison the long North African campaign, which was characterised by intense but relatively short battles, killed a limited number of Italian, German, and Allied soldiers, a fact rarely noticed in the historiography. Furthermore, only 7,077 Italian prisoners died in British and American prisoner of war camps.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, the *Regio Esercito's* operations against the Red Army were part of the deadliest campaign of the European war. Only the withdrawal of the ARMIR from the Don and its repatriation could have saved tens of thousands of men. That decision never came. Finally, the Sicilian campaign

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<sup>35</sup>Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, p. 442; Rossi, 'Guerra 1940-1945', p. 14.

<sup>36</sup>Rossi, 'Guerra 1940-1945', p. 14; also Santoni, *Le operazioni in Sicilia e in Calabria, luglio-settembre 1943*, (Rome: SMEUS, 1989) p. 401.

<sup>37</sup>Santoni, *Le operazioni in Sicilia e in Calabria*, p. 401. Santoni did not give any sources to back up these figures.

<sup>38</sup>The author believes that most *dispersi* deserted, while 116,681 became prisoners. See Santoni, *Le operazioni in Sicilia e in Calabria*, p. 401.

<sup>39</sup>Rossi, 'Guerra 1940-1945', p. 15. However, a number of prisoners ended up in French hands in North Africa and experienced particularly harsh conditions of detention, 3,000 died. See Anna Maria Isastia (ed.), *I prigionieri di guerra nella storia d'Italia* (Rome: Edizioni ANRP, 2003), pp. 109-151; on the fate of Italian prisoners, see Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, pp. 445-451.

marked the end of the army as the *Duce's* fighting force and offered it the opportunity and its thousands of men to exit the war alive.

The late Giorgio Rochat once wrote that any attempt to analyse the Italian losses in the Second World War is an impossible task, *una ricerca impossibile*.<sup>40</sup> That was thirty years ago, and things might change. For instance, by using the *Albo d'Oro della Seconda Guerra Mondiale*, Massimo Multari has shed new light on the fatalities of the campaign against the Soviet Union (see Fn 30). He systematically compared the data in the *Albo d'Oro* with that campaign's official history. The archives of the *Albo d'Oro* are located in Rome, and according to Multari, are open for research by appointment.<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately, Multari did not explain how he used the archives, and how they are organised. Yet, his work proved that a determined scholar, willing to overcome the usual red tape, could achieve similar results for Italy's other campaigns. If so, our understanding of the fate of the *caduti* who lost their lives between June 1940 and September 1943 could be improved.

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<sup>40</sup>Rochat, 'Una ricerca impossibile', p. 700.

<sup>41</sup>The author believes that there is more to learn from the Italian military archives. While the army archives are currently closed (with no known date for reopening), the air force and navy *archivi* are open to the public by appointment.