The bombing of Italian cities began a little more than 24 hours after Mussolini's declaration of war on France and Britain, and the last bombs of the war in Italy fell at the beginning of May 1945 along the route to the Brenner Pass to obstruct German troops returning home.

During the five years in between almost every Italian city experienced bombing, first by the British and then, after the United States entered the war, by the Americans and, following the Allied invasion in July 1943, also by the Germans. Italy therefore experienced attacks by enemies as well as by ‘friends’, whose bombing also brought with it the promise of liberation.

**Geography and Phases**

Northern Italy was bombed by British-based aircraft; the whole of Italy by (mostly American) aircraft based, first in North Africa, and then in southern Italy.

Southern cities like Naples and Messina were attacked more than 100 times, while industrial centres in the north like Genoa, Milan and Turin were bombed more than 50 times each. Other cities throughout the peninsula were partly destroyed by bombing; Foggia, for example, lost 75% of its inhabited buildings.

Other cities, like Rimini, were repeatedly attacked as they found themselves on the front line for many months.

Between 1940 and 1945, Italian cities experienced phases of intense attack as well as long periods of pause, particularly in the north and in the south. Central Italy was not attacked until the spring of 1943, but became the most bombed part of the country over the subsequent 15 months. By the first half of 1943 all the Italian regions had been subject to attack. Rome was bombed for the first time on 19 July 1943; six days later, the Fascist regime fell, and the king appointed Marshal Pietro Badoglio as Prime Minister.

From September 1943 two regimes effectively coexisted in Italy: the Italian Social Republic (or Salò Republic) in the North, a fascist regime led by Mussolini after his rescue from custody by German special forces and collaborating with the Germans, and a pro-Allied government in the South under Badoglio and then Ivano Bonomi.

During the first phase, from Italy's entry in the war until the autumn of 1942, the RAF targeted the southern regions in particular; while the centre had no experience of bombing in that phase, northern industrial cities received only a limited number of attacks.
During the second phase, from October 1942 up to the armistice, the RAF used area bombing on northern Italy, targeting industrial areas and the morale of civilians. In southern Italy, with the arrival of the USAAF, bombing intensified as part of the preparation for the landing in Sicily and in the peninsula. The bombing campaigns that followed in 1942 and particularly in 1943, were much more intense than those of 1940-1941.

A third phase, which partly overlapped with the second, focused until the end of 1943 on central and southern Italy and was characterised by tactical bombing in support of land operations, damaging communication lines and areas on the front line; at the same time, strategic bombing continued on industrial areas of central-northern Italy.

A fourth phase coincided with the fighting on the Gustav line, up to the liberation of Rome in June 1944 and to the positioning of the armies on the Gothic line as the Germans retreated. Central Italy was during those months the most bombed part of the country, although bombing continued also in northern Italy, focusing in particular on marshalling yards, rails and bridges to obstruct German supplies.

This situation continued in the last phase, from the breaking of the Gothic line until the liberation of northern Italy, when the battlefield moved to the Po Valley. Large city centres were not longer targeted as previously, but the attacks on communication lines continued, hitting many inhabited centres and smaller cities situated along those lines.

Why bomb Italy?

Industrial targets and population's morale

The intention of attacking Italy's home front was discussed by the British from as early as spring 1940, even before Italy entered the war. Enemy industry and the morale of the workers were closely linked according to the RAF, which considered Italy the only European country that was likely to collapse easily under bombing. Among the western European countries that were subject to bombing in the Second World War, Italy was indeed the least prepared to confront enemy attack, in terms both of anti-aircraft defences and of civilian protection; moreover, the British knew that Italians, industrialists of the north included, were not willing to enter the conflict.
The first Italian city to be bombed, on 11 June 1940, was Turin: although the bombs fell on the city killing 17 civilians, the intended target was FIAT Mirafiori. In the following days, objectives were fuel depots at Genoa and Savona ports, the oil refineries of Porto Marghera the Ansaldo and Piaggio works at Genoa. On 15 and 16 June Milan experienced the first raids, when bombs fell on the city having missed the Caproni, Macchi and Savoia Marchetti aeronautic factories.

Northern Italy was thus hit because of its industrial capacity. Although the historic centre of Venice was spared, the surrounding region was not, as it included a sprawling industrial concentration, of oil refineries in particular, at Porto Marghera and Mestre. Genoa and surrounding towns were one long industrial strip-city, containing refineries, shipyards and steel mills. Milan was Italy’s economic and industrial hub, and FIAT Mirafiori and related plants, along with much else in Turin, were other paramount military objectives.

Although Germany was always the primary target, in October 1940 Bomber Command was ordered to continue the offensive against Northern Italy. In a separate directive the following month to Mediterranean forces based in Malta and the Middle East, the Air Ministry added that ‘alternative targets should be in the centres of Italian population.’ In December, a War Cabinet meeting stated that Italy did not require ‘raids of the Coventry type’ as Germany did, since the Italians' emotional temperament meant that smaller attacks would still obtain a great moral effect. Italian ‘psychology' was considered ‘not suited for war', and the British therefore expected that bombs would have
political as well as military consequences – regime change and Italy’s elimination from the war.

TNA AIR20/45153, December 1942 Prime Minister on making Italy priority target during winter, and after the end of the war in Africa.

TNA AIR8/777, Chiefs of Air Staff to Tedder, end of July 1943.

Ports

Genoa and Savona ports contained fuel depots, Porto Marghera oil refineries. Other important ports
were Leghorn and Cagliari, Palermo, Naples and Taranto, and most of Sicilian and southern Italian cities. The bombing of the south in 1941 was also part of a strategy to defeat the Axis in Africa, as southern Italian ports, Naples in particular, sent supplies to Libya. The bombing of Sicilian ports increased in 1942 as the war in Africa progressed in preparation for the following stage of the Mediterranean campaign.

Communications

As in France, in Italy attacks on rail systems served to prepare and support ground campaigns, where success or failure could depend on how quickly the enemy could move reinforcements. Having observed the ‘complete dislocation of communications’ during the invasion of Sicily, the scientific adviser to Tedder and Eisenhower and advocate of railway bombing, Solly Zuckerman, argued that the Sicilian and southern Italian railway systems had become practically paralysed by the end of July 1943 – as a result of attacks on only six railway centres, Naples, Foggia, San Giovanni, Reggio, Messina and Palermo. During Strangle (the operation against Italian communications targets), ‘a whole system of bridges, yards, tunnels, defiles, even open stretches of track’, came under attack and railway targets represented major bombing priorities.

Support for ground operations

A major share of raids on Italy took place in support of Allied ground forces fighting to liberate the country, as ground combat was spread out over nearly two years. The rapid reinforcement of German divisions in Italy made it clear that Allied armies needed help from British and American Air Forces to delay German concentrations. In March 1944, operations in support of the land battle were the top priority for the Tactical Air Forces in Italy and the third priority for the Strategic Air Forces.
Northern and central Italy, having received raids on rail targets from 1943, was bombed most intensively as the Allies sought to break through the Gothic Line: between the summer and winter of 1944, Bologna was hit 94 times at a cost of some 2,500 victims. Both strategic and tactical forces continuously accompanied the Allies' slow progress up the peninsula.

Concern over civilian victims was not an issue in Italy as it was for France, particularly as, until 1943, Italy was an enemy country. By contrast, the Allies were embarrassed by criticism from the Vatican, especially if supported by international concern over attacks on Italy's historic cities. Unease regarding the bombing of these cities was expressed from the time of the first area bombing raids on northern Italy. In December 1942 Eden wrote to Churchill that although he was 'all in favour of widening our range of Italian targets', he hoped 'that we shall not feel it necessary to attack cities of great artistic interest such as Florence and Venice '. The question that provoked most discussion between the two Allies, and between the Allies and the Vatican, concerned the bombing of Rome. Although Churchill had no understanding of what was so special about Rome, the Allies were conscious that, representing the cradle of Christianity and the heart of Western civilisation, it was not like any other city. After the invasion, however, Rome assumed a new strategic importance because of the crucial role of its two marshalling yards, the Littorio and the San Lorenzo, which handled almost all rail traffic between northern and southern Italy. On 19 July the 'thoroughly briefed' USAAF crews had carried out the mission, with more than 500 bombers hitting the Lorenzo and Littorio yards and the Ciampino airfields, dropping around 1,000 tons of bombs.
As the bombing campaign moved to central Italy in 1944, concern over a number of artistically important cities like Florence, Assisi, Loreto, Siena and Arezzo, provoked more exchanges between the Vatican and the Allies, as well as the Allied publication of manuals locating Italy's treasures for the bombers, so they could try to avoid them. Perhaps the most sensitive target, discussed at a British Chiefs of Staff meeting on 1 March 1944, was Florence, a major rail junction Bologna, Pisa and Rome, a key marshalling yard, home to Italy's principal locomotive repair shops, and thus, for the Allies' Mediterranean command, a vital target. Because the yards were only about a mile from the famous Cathedral, it was proposed to employ only the most experienced and accurate bomber squadrons: 'it would therefore be very bad luck if any of the really famous buildings were hit'. The Chiefs of Staff concluded that 'such attacks should be undertaken if they were considered essential from the military point of view', and consequently Florence was bombed. The marshalling yards of Rifredi and Campo Marte stations were hit; historical monuments were indeed avoided, although bombs fell on a peripheral area and on two hospitals, killing 215 people.
PREPARING FOR BOMBING: ITALY 1922-1940

In *The Command of the Air*, first published in Italy in 1921, General Giulio Douhet argued that populations would turn against their own governments and demand surrender if not adequately defended from air attack. Douhet also foresaw that air defence was almost impossible to achieve, and that it was wrong to give civilians the illusion that aerial defences would protect them: in reality, defensive action required greater resources than offensive action. The population had to be prepared for the worst, because a population that was ‘led to believe in the efficacy of aerial defence would be frightened and their morale lowered if they found out that it did not protect in practice’.

That the regime expected an air war, of course, did not mean that it foresaw the precise air war that occurred. For example, it was not expected to be bombed by American aircraft; nor were the vast tonnages dropped by the Allies from 1942 fully anticipated. The threat of chemical war did not materialise; and by May 1940 the threat posed by the French air force on north western industrial cities close to the French border was overestimated.

The regime had to confront 4 options: to rely on active defences (anti-aircraft guns and air forces); black out all inhabited areas; the mass evacuation of civilians from likely urban targets; and the provision of shelters close to civilians’ homes, workplace and public areas.

Laws on preparation for air war had been promulgated from the mid-1920s. However, almost nothing had been done until 1940 for the protection of cities.

In February 1940, four months before Italy’s entry into the war, the Supreme Defence Commission
produced a report for Mussolini stating that less than one third of the necessary weapons were available, and that another third could not be ready before the end of 1942.

**Civil defence and government**

Laws and institutions were created from the mid-1920s, but in particular during the 1930s, to prepare the country to cope with the threat from the air. This involved both national and local levels, from ministries to private citizens:

National: defence from the threat from the air involved in particular the joint work of ministries of war, interior, public works, national education, armed forces (air in particular), fine arts and finance. Local: prefects had to act as link between government and local institutions, making laws on air protection respected. The Fascist party and its network helped managing evacuations, the coordination of National Union for Anti-Aircraft Protection (UNPA) and the centres for the assistance of those who were bombed-out. The podestà (unelected mayor during Fascism) managed institutions at the level of the commune: the communal institutes for assistance, the Fire Brigades, the local branches of the Red Cross. The police and the Carabinieri managed questions of public order. The army was employed, when necessary, to help dealing with the consequences of the raids.

Between 1925 and 1940, laws and decrees concerned issues such as: preparation for war of the Red Cross; establishment of a Committee of Civil Resistance in every commune; statute of the National Union of Anti-Aircraft Protection; organisation in all cities of over 40,000 inhabitants of emergency fire brigades to face air raids; details on the construction of air-raid shelters to protect the population, both new ones and in old buildings, both in public areas and in private dwellings; protection of industrial buildings.

![Civil defence poster on evacuation exercise in Turin.](image)

**Shelters**

Laws and regulations on air-raid shelters provided detailed descriptions of how they had to be built, the materials to be used, and on the safety equipment that was required inside them. For example,
shelters in tunnels in important urban centres had to possess multiple entrances, an air chamber between external and internal entrances, artificial ventilation, and an independent lighting system. They had to contain a first aid area, toilets, a pump to provide drinking water, fire-fighting equipment, and a telephone. As to shelters in private buildings, owners were required to adapt them for shelters.

Istituto Piemontese per la Storia della Resistenza, Turin, early 1940.

However, it was already evident from the first studies of the Central Inter-ministerial Committee for Anti-aircraft Protection (CCIPAA) that it was impossible to create an effective system, mainly due to the lack of resources. In 1939 less than 1% of the Italian population could be hosted in public shelters.

In September 1938, the president of the Turin branch of the National Union of Anti-Aircraft Protection (UNPA) reported that not only were old buildings unsafe, but even the new ones in which shelters had been built were dangerous because they lacked ventilation systems.

Evacuation

From the early 1930s, the CCIPAA began studying schemes for civilian protection against air attack, but soon realised that financial constraints precluded a fully effective system. General Giannuzzi Savelli, President of the CCIPAA, admitted in 1931 that the safest measure would be to reduce the number of people needing protection – by removing as many as possible.

The most efficient system would have been to evacuate the non-necessary population from areas at risk. Nevertheless, no precise plan was in place when Italy entered the war, and new plans were made according to the different phases of the conflict. In general, it was advised that people left dangerous cities to move to the countryside, preferably in the evenings and that evacuees stayed, when possible, with relatives so as not to impinge too severely on state resources.

It became evident in May 1940 that the organisation of evacuations clashed with the needs of mobilisation for war. Trains, trams and other types of public transport were all employed by the military authorities, so evacuations could not start before the end of the mobilisation period. The
War Ministry consequently drew up two lists of cities from which voluntary evacuation could begin. The first list, of 28 localities, included industrial, frontier and port cities, where evacuations could take place after 20 days of mobilisation; the second listed 27 localities considered potential targets of lesser significance, where evacuations could be postponed. No compulsory evacuation was contemplated at this stage.

Archivio Centrale dello Stato, MA, Gabinetto, AG, 1940, b.83, fasc.13, Ministry of War to all Italian prefects, to the PNF, the UNPA, and the Carabinieri, 3 June 1940 - List of cities where evacuation was most urgent.

Gas masks

As was the case in other countries, the regime feared that chemical weapons could be used in case of air attacks. The gas threat was thus discussed in publications for the population and in courses on anti-aircraft protection. Giannuzzi Savelli warned in 1931: ‘the air weapon has now an ally: chemicals.’
The potential of chemical weapons and their likely use was part of scientific study before the war, some of which was reported in school textbooks. While individual defence would come mostly from the use of gas masks, collective defence would be provided by gas shelters, described as requiring a complicated system of air filters and ventilation equipment that would be too expensive to be built in all the major centres.

In 1938 a law extended the compulsory use of the gas mask to all industrial and state workers. Masks had to be acquired progressively, so that within 10 years all workers would possess one, starting in July 1938.
Protection of monuments and artistic cities (by Dr Carlotta Coccoli, University of Brescia)

From the late 1920s, the Ministry of National Education adopted safeguard measures for the protection of monuments in the event of armed conflict through the preparation of a ‘mobilisation plan for works of art in case of war’ which ensured that all movable works of art were transferred to depots selected for their isolation and distance from military objectives. Immovable works of art and monuments were protected against blast or collapse by elaborate brickwork or timber and sandbag frameworks.

In 1938 the War Department issued a pamphlet entitled ‘Air Defence Instructions – the protection of artistic and cultural heritage’. The pamphlet specified that considering ‘the enemy will avoid, where possible, the launching of bombs on works of art’, protective measures for buildings should ‘seek to hide them, but only to equip them to resist the effects of non-targeted bombing’.

In February 1939 the ministry asked the superintendents to inform them of the sum needed for necessary means of anti-aircraft protection and to pack movable works of art. Funds thus began to arrive only at the start of the war, in very limited amounts and for the most urgent cases.

La Guerra contro l’arte (Milan: Editoriale Domus, 1944), protecting The Last Supper. The Last Supper, painted on the wall on the refectory in Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan, was braced with metal rods and sandbags. In the final stage of protection, the fresco was completely boarded up to shield it from bombing and vibration.

Civil Mobilisation

When Italy entered the war, almost nothing of what was discussed in the previous years had been realised. Instead, propaganda efforts had been remarkable: courses in the schools, conferences, publications, posters, films and the organisation of ‘days of anti-aircraft protection’. Italian passive defence propaganda was disseminated by UNPA, in agreement with the Fascist Party, through the radio, newspapers and specific publications. The gap between propaganda and reality was noticed by the civilians, who commented unfavourably on the lack of shelters and did not take seriously the
anti-aircraft exercises (which had to familiarise the public with alarms, evacuations and the black out). Indeed, as Fascist informers reported in detailed descriptions of public responses, with rare exceptions, instead of co-operating people spread negative comments about the country's preparedness for air war – which in turn undermined public mobilisation.

Archivio di Stato di Brescia, photo of female UNPA personnel.

Archivio di Stato di Brescia, photograph of gas mask exercises

Archivio Centrale dello Stato, MI, DGPS, DPP, b.210 Sesto San Giovanni, industrial area of Milan, comments of the population in March 1940.

THE ITALIAN STATE AND BOMBING, 1940-1945

As the war went on the regime continued to promulgate laws and create institutions in order to
cope with the increasing levels of destruction and with growing issues of public order.

The functioning of local institutions varied from city to city according to geographical and financial characteristics, and to the extent of the damage caused by the raids.

Examples of successful coordination between different institutions' local activity can be found in the aftermath of raids which had relatively minor impacts. When raids became heavier, as in southern Italy in autumn 1941, local authorities found it more difficult to provide help, and their only response was to endorse the mass evacuation of terrorised civilians.

**Government and civil defence**

From March 1941, responsibility for Italy's anti-aircraft protection moved from the Ministry of War to the Ministry of the Interior. The Ministry of War retained control over the following duties: the diffusion of the alarm by DICAT to the provincial organs of Air protection; the protection of military buildings, and the removal and detonation of unexploded bombs.

Among local authorities, it was principally the *podestà* who had to make things work in towns and cities. The Fascist Party was mostly involved in the case of evacuation, of children in particular. The evacuation of children 6-14 years old was under the responsibility of the *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio* (GIL). Another institution involved in the case of younger children was the National Institution for the Protection of Maternity and Childhood. The ECA (Communal Institution for Assistance) was established in every commune, to deal with the immediate assistance of the bombed out and to provide families with the means to evacuate. The army was also involved during the heaviest raids, and its role became the subject of controversy, since soldiers were needed at the front. Another institution employed locally was the Red Cross. During the heavy raids of 1942 and 1943, its units moved to the principal public shelters when the alarms sounded. Later reports to prefects listed the organisation's activities during the raids: the transportation of citizens to hospitals, and visits to the injured or ill in the shelters. Another important institution, involved particularly with the removal of debris and reconstruction, was the *Genio Civile* (Civil Engineers).

Examples of the working of institutions from around Italy demonstrate that cities with more money and better housing found it easier to cope than cities where the conditions of buildings were poorer and which had fewer resources. For example, the Red Cross worked more efficiently in Genoa than in Naples, where the lack of ambulances was constantly lamented. Generally, the condition of housing was better in northern cities than in the south (in a comparison, for example, of Milan and Turin with Palermo and Brindisi), which meant that proportionally fewer buildings fell in the north. However, all over the country, it was the intensity of the raids, and their frequent recurrence that made it impossible for all the institutions dedicated to assistance to work effectively.

**Legal system**

Most of the important legislation was enacted in the first two years of the war. As bombing raids became more frequent and intense from 1942, and their consequences more difficult to tackle, decisions were increasingly taken at the local level, or through emergency orders from the ministries or from Mussolini.

On 21 May 1940, Italy’s preparations for war were laid out in a law on the ‘organisation of the nation
for war’. The law defined ‘civil mobilisation’ as the transition from the state of peace to the state of war on the part of public administrations, industries and institutions that were necessary to the resistance and defence of the nation. It was the duty of those citizens not required to serve in the army to take part in the defence and resistance of the nation ‘in the same spirit of devotion and sacrifice as the combatants’; they could be included in the civil mobilisation and were thus subject to military discipline.

Laws addressed in particular: the duties of the capi-fabbricato and of the porters; the constitution of a General Direction for the Services of Anti-Air Protection; the organisation of anti-fire services, which put the Fire Brigades under the control of the ministry of interior, and of a General Direction of Anti-Fire Services. At the end of 1942, a law decree constituted a General Direction for War Services, within the interior ministry, which had to supervise the services for civil mobilisation, evacuations, extraordinary assistance to those who had been damaged by bombing, and discipline of road traffic in time of war.

While no significant laws were proclaimed between then and the fall of the regime, the Kingdom of the South, which was not bombed after the last German raid on Naples in March 1944, promulgated a law in November 1944 to deal with the effects of the previous years of bombing. At this time, the Ministry of Public Works was crucial, given cities’ reconstruction needs.

The German presence

Another aspect the Italian State needed to deal with during the war was the presence of the German ally. This became particularly evident during the Salò Republic in its opposition to the Resistance during the Civil War. However, the German military was present in Italy early on in the conflict – albeit not to the same extent as in France where German occupation had begun much earlier. The German presence in Italy was felt in three major ways: in the provision of anti-aircraft defences, assistance after air-raids, and the requisitioning of buildings which could serve either as shelters or to house evacuees.

Germany’s help with the Italian war effort, and later its presence as an occupying force in part of the peninsula, provoked mixed feelings among the population and had an impact on morale. Germany ensured that Italy received its first radar in southern Italy, at Syracuse, in April 1941. During the same period, and again in the first months of 1942, the Luftwaffe also supplied southern Italy with active anti-aircraft defences to limit RAF attacks from Malta. At the beginning of 1943, to avoid delays and inefficiencies which were also damaging for itself, the German ally decided to invest in more defences in Italy, situating radars along the coastline and bringing anti-aircraft guns into the north of the country. However, between October and December 1944, most German anti-aircraft defences were withdrawn from northern Italy to support the defence of German cities from bombing and to strengthen the attack on the Ardennes.

German forces were also involved in requisitions and the provision of assistance after the raids. In the summer of 1943, before the armistice, the German army increased its presence in Italy, particularly in the north where soldiers often occupied buildings that could have housed evacuees.
During the Salò Republic Germans also worked alongside Italians to alleviate the effects of the raids. They helped to clear rubble, and were often killed alongside Italian soldiers, Red Cross personnel, fire fighters and civilians in the raids. Separate funerals were generally held for the Italian victims and the German soldiers.

**Blackout**

A blackout regulation was issued on 13 June 1940 which stressed that the Ministry of War had ordered the partial blackout of the country from the evening of 10 June. All unnecessary lights were to be suppressed; those that were essential had to be screened or lowered. No lights were allowed to be visible from homes, shops, offices or restaurants and other public premises. It was forbidden to drive cars with white lights. It was forbidden for more than two people to walk side by side on the pavement, they could only carry blue lights pointing down to be able to see the end of the pavement, and never to illuminate other people, cyclists or drivers. Cyclists were ordered never to ride side by side but always in a line, and to tone down their lights, which had to be blue. Cars could only be driven at up to 40 km/hour outside cities and up to 20 km/hour within cities. Anyone contravening these rules was liable to be fined up to 2,000 lire or to face up to three months detention.
Shelters

Regulations on shelters were issued in December 1940. On 5 December, the Ministry of War ordered that a sign be erected at the entrance of every shelter (whether public, collective or domestic) indicating the maximum number of people allowed, on the basis of two people every square metre. Capi-fabbricato were responsible of ensuring that only the requisite number of people occupied the shelters.

In fact, particularly from 1942, overcrowding of shelters provoked serious inconveniences, from insufficient air to tragic cases of people who were trampled over or suffocated while panicking masses sought to find refuge.

The direction of the anti-aircraft protection directorate warned in 1941 that existing shelters had narrow entrances through which only two people at a time could enter: an orderly queue was unlikely to be achieved during an alarm. Shelters were also humid, since they were underground, and there was no proper flooring. Many owners had not removed their possessions, including bottles, from the areas that had been turned into shelters; this could be dangerous if their buildings were hit or there was an air displacement: ‘in three quarters of the shelters the required conditions are not observed’, and public shelters ‘had just the minimum required level of comfort to make it bearable to spend a short amount of time there’. 
While the south began to deal with issues of reconstruction under Allied control, the centre and the north under the Salò Republic continued to cope with heavy raids in 1944 and 1945. Such conditions made the rule that shelters must provide one square metre of space for every two people utterly unrealistic, so the local administration changed the limit to three people sharing every square metre. Despite this, an attached list suggested that shelters were not adequate. In terms of private shelters, which were supposed to be built at the expense of property owners, an emergency plan for the city of Genoa expained in 1944: ‘there is no point talking about them as they are simply shelters created by reinforcing basements with wood’.
Evacuation

Only 20 days from the start of mobilisation, the interior ministry decided to withdraw its directive of 3 June 1940 in relation to volunteer evacuations. On 20 June, it informed all Italian prefects and the commanders of the territorial defence in the north western provinces that volunteer evacuations had reached ‘unjustified proportions’ and must be limited immediately. People who had left their cities were to be persuaded to return home. Prefects were ordered to meet the costs for those with no means of returning; if people refused to return, they were to be warned that they would not receive any form of assistance. Those who still decided to evacuate must be made aware that they could only do so by their own means.

This lack of a precise plan on evacuation characterised the whole period of the war and caused severe difficulties to local authorities when the raids became heavier and more frequent from autumn 1942. Mass evacuation followed the first area-bombing attacks on northern Italy and a speech by Mussolini on 2 December which urged civilians to evacuate, soon extending to southern Italy and Sicily. From then until the liberation (which came at different times in different places on the peninsula), hundreds of thousands of Italians continued to move, leaving industrial and port cities in the hope of finding refuge in nearby provinces. Once these had reached capacity, people began to move on to other regions.
All over the country, prefects were unable to resolve the problem, and wrote to the Ministry of the Interior in the hope that their province would be declared ‘unavailable for the purposes of evacuation, as any receptive capacity had been completely exhausted’. Some prefects even produced circulars warning that they would have to send evacuees back to their place of origin. However, the ministry wrote to all prefects to warn against this so they would exploit to the maximum ‘any receptive capacity’, even, if necessary, by enforced requisitions. It was also important to maintain propaganda among the population, with the collaboration of the Party and the podestà. This was necessary because the question of evacuations was having an impact on the social and political order ‘especially from the point of view of the internal resistance of the country’.

While the Salò Republic authorities were to inherit this difficult situation, the State in liberated southern Italy also had to deal with the problems provoked by evacuations – the return of evacuees in particular. In July 1944, aerial bombing, destruction caused by the retreating German forces, military requisitions and, in Naples, the eruption of Vesuvius, meant there was a desperate need for housing. Evacuees began to return, and the Allied Commission Control had to consider possible solutions.
Protecting monuments and artistic cities (by Carlotta Coccoli, University of Brescia)

Law n. 1041 of 6 July 1940 on the ‘Protection of national property of artistic, historical, bibliographical and cultural importance in case of war’ declared that, in case of war, the Minister for National Education could adopt any appropriate measures for the conservation of items of either artistic or historical interest.

In practice, the systems adopted by the Italian authorities for the safeguarding of monuments were of two types: the first was ‘in solid timber scaffolding supporting sandbags’, and the second ‘in the construction of walls, conveniently spaced from the monument to be protected’, in bricks or concrete structures.

This system obviously could not be employed on a large scale – in part due to lack of funds – and, having to make a choice, the superintendents selected the oldest buildings, and the protection measures concerned only the most significant portions such as portals, altars and decorations. Particularly from 1942, when the bombing of Italian cities became heavier, neither national decisions nor available resources were enough for the protection of invaluable works of art threatened locally, therefore resolutions had to be taken case by case.
Emilio Lavagnino, Cinquanta monumenti italiani danneggiati dalla guerra (Rome Istituto poligrafico di Stato, 1947) Naples, Santa Chiara before the damage.

Emilio Lavagnino, Cinquanta monumenti italiani danneggiati dalla guerra (Rome Istituto poligrafico di Stato, 1947) Naples, Santa Chiara after the raid of 4 August 1943.
Civil mobilisation

Mobilisation took place through the dissemination of instructions and propaganda which attempted to create forms of national solidarity. Instructions were made known directly to citizens via posters on city walls or through the local press, which was instructed by the prefects on what to publish.

Alongside posters, newspapers informed the population of decisions taken by prefects and other local authorities, generally following rules decided in Rome, which needed to be disseminated around the country, for example, instructing families who wanted to evacuate on what they had to do, and highlighting the role of the Party on the side of the people.


The attempt to promote solidarity was also orchestrated at the local level, particularly by the efforts of the Fascist Party. One way was to organise public collections for the families hit by the raids. For example, following the raids of October 1942, the Milan federation of the women's section of the Party established a centre to collect clothes and issued an appeal to all Milanese families through the schools, outside which the collections were to be held. However, solidarity was largely orchestrated from above. Unlike in France, there was no ‘town adoption’ initiative, and the podestà of bombed cities had to beg other podestà to help them by, for example, trying to persuade people to adopt the children of bombing victims. The relatively small number of articles in newspapers reporting the population's response indicates that the attempts were only partially successful.

The press and bombing (by Luigi Petrella, Newcastle University)

The Fascist authorities tightened their grip on the media during wartime. They began to carefully instruct editors, on a daily basis, on how to present news from the battleground and the domestic
front: which words were to be chosen or avoided, which facts were to be publicised or hidden, which people could be quoted or ignored.

The press, radio and newsreels, which in the first weeks of war were mostly engaged in spreading official instructions about the blackout and precautionary measures, soon started to inform the public about the air war. They reported the enemy raids on the Italian cities and the Fascist aviation’s attacks against French and British targets: concise and sometimes reticent reports always depicted the former as ruthless and ineffective, whereas pompous accounts described the latter as successful and heroic. When the Americans entered war and began to bomb Italian cities, they too became the target of reports and comments that insisted sarcastically on the cruelty of the ‘liberators’.

Fascist propaganda exploited every tool in order to frame a fictitious account of war: national and local dailies, illustrated magazines, pamphlets, posters, movies. All of them were largely based on anti-British and anti-American clichés, while the exaltation of Italian aviation built on the futuristic theories of Giulio Douhet, the feats of the ace Francesco Baracca in the Great War and the mythical figure of Italo Balbo who, in June 1940, in the very first days of war, was killed by Italian anti-aircraft weapons while flying on the northern African front.

Discussion of the suffering of ordinary people under the bombing was absent from the Italian media during the war. Those killed and wounded in the air raids were only reported as ever-lengthening lists of casualties in newspapers. Also, their funerals became an opportunity to stir up popular anger against the enemies. During those years, Italians were indistinct entities: censors and journalists vied to exalt their discipline and their Fascist faith, but nobody told their true story.
THE ITALIAN PEOPLE AND BOMBING, 1940-1945

The experience of being bombed was one of the main contributory factors in Italy’s war weariness and the collapse of Italian morale. Indeed, although military defeats and lack of food also contributed to the collapse of popular morale, air raids were the most visible sign of the war and the one that caused the most panic. After almost two decades of dictatorship, Italians began to criticise the regime for having dragged them into a war without having the resources to defend its own cities. Sometimes they did so by staging public protest against local authorities, but more generally by spreading negative comments and rumours that challenged state propaganda.

The Italians’ relationship with the Allies was complex and shifting, depending, for example, on the scale of the bombing or the level of German atrocities that occurred in parts of Italy in the last two years of the war. However, between the period of the first area bombing raids at the end of 1942 and the fall of the regime in July 1943, the expectations of Italians began to correspond with the aims of the bombers, who hoped the raids could force the regime to surrender and bring the war to an end.

The Italians’ response to Allied propaganda

The British (then Allied) hope was that bombing would persuade Italians to withdraw their support for the regime, which in turn might lead to Italy’s elimination from the war. In order to persuade them that bombing was necessary to defeat Fascism and to break Mussolini’s alliance with Hitler, the British began early on in the conflict to communicate with Italians, both by radio and by dropping leaflets from aircraft.

During the dictatorship, the public could only assimilate, not criticise, government propaganda. As Italy faced the first military defeats in 1940-1941, a critical public opinion began to resurface. British messages to Italians increased from the winter of 1941 onwards, and became particularly effective from the autumn of 1942. For many, those messages hastened the shocking realisation of facts already perceived: the coming defeat; the harmful consequences from keeping Fascism in power; and the presence of a tyrannical German ally.

ROME Library of the Senate: illustrated magazine Aerei italiani contro navi inglesi, 1942.
Women were the most important target of the leaflets dropped on cities. Indeed, their content suggests that the British believed women’s anti-war action could contribute to the collapse of morale. Women were told that the horrors of war could come to an end if they withdrew their support for the regime. The bombing of Genoa in October 1941 showed for the first time how close the home front was to collapse in bombed cities. Areas with no shelters saw popular revolts, and protesters, mainly women, forced their way into rich owners’ shelters by throwing stones. At the end of 1942, as the situation continued to worsen such protests became ever more widespread. Hundreds of families were living in tunnels in the city centre. When one flooded, overcrowded after an alarm, scenes of panic soon turned to angry shouting against the war, the Fascist authorities and the government. Women marched to the prefettura and to the Fascio. This was precisely what Anglo-American leaflets were pleading for and, from the autumn of 1942, a relationship began generally to emerge between external (Allied) solicitation and social protest.

Archivio Centrale dello Stato, MI, A5G b.77, British leaflet.
Evacuation, blackout and shelters: people's responses

Lack of shelters and of organised evacuation plans were major problems. Very few proper shelters existed in residential buildings and when they were inspected, they were almost always considered dangerous. This was also because owners of apartment blocks generally refused to spend money on shelters (although by law they were supposed to), which led to protests from tenants who organised committees, gathered support and sent petitions to local authorities. As to public shelters, reports from both UNPA and military officers confirmed that, with few exceptions, they lacked toilets and ventilation, were humid and dangerous to stay in for prolonged periods of time. A confidential report from Naples in October 1941 stated that people of all social classes ran in a chaotic way to public shelters, having realised that the private ones were improvised and unsafe. This caused queues of people and scuffles in the darkness, which sometimes ended in rows. This in turn depressed the morale of the population. What began to worry the regime was the spread of comments: people routinely questioned how it was possible that so many enemy aircraft could pass over Italian cities for hours without being hit. The night-time wait in the shelters was the ideal situation for the spread of rumours and for the formation of what prefects and informers began to call ‘defeatist opinions’. Some of the comments repeated statements that had been broadcast from Radio Londra, the BBC Italian Service.
On 2 December 1942, Mussolini went on Italian radio and declared that it was necessary to organise a nightly evacuation of all civilians in the industrial cities of northern Italy. This increased panic and lowered morale, as Italians realised that evacuation represented the only anti-aircraft ‘solution’. Indeed, Air Marshal Harris was surprised that 300,000 people, half the population of Turin, abandoned the city en masse, and that panic had probably been even greater after the daylight attack on Milan ‘by less than one hundred Lancasters’. The situation worsened with the raids of
spring-summer 1943. After the raid on Palermo of 9 May 1943, which killed at least 373 people and hit almost the entire city, all transport was paralysed, the population had no gas, industrial activities had ground to a halt and very little commercial activity continued at the port; in this situation, most of the city population had left. As the nearby communes were all full and there was no transport to travel further, thousands of citizens lived in huts or tents they made themselves, or in caves and tunnels, 'in dangerous promiscuity' leading to hygiene and social problems.

Archivio Diaristico Nazionale, Pieve Santo Stefano, memoir of Giacomo Guglieminetti.

Another aspect of the raids mentioned in prefects’ reports throughout the entire period of the war was the blackout. From the very first bombing operations in Italy, RAF planes crossing the Alps were welcomed by the sight of Milan and Genoa fully illuminated. Non-compliance with the blackout is evident also from many newspaper articles and from the reports in the files of the interior ministry and the air ministry citing problems of public order. In September 1941, Il Popolo d’Italia complained about the indiscipline of most citizens in Milan in ignoring the blackout. Similar news came from other newspapers; for example, Il Resto del Carlino denounced the fact that in Bologna houses were brightly lit and cars and bicycles drove with full lights. Non-compliance with blackout regulations should not be construed, particularly in the first years of the war, as resisting the war effort, let alone an expression of pacifism or anti-Fascism, but of the difficulties of adapting society to the dynamics of war. However, lack of respect for wartime regulations also undermined support for the war effort. The regime’s attempts to organise solidarity within the home front also fell victim of the incapacity of Italian society to cope with the reality of the bombing war. Solidarity for the bombed out came, initially, from areas which had not been bombed, but once those areas became full of evacuees, or began to be bombed too, solidarity was replaced by apathy, fear, resentment against the regime.
Archivio di Stato di Torino, Prefettura b.513 Collections of money from different parts of Italy to the bombed Torinesi - behind the subscriptions, short letters and messages.

**Responses to Bombing in the Salò Republic**

Although Allied correspondence and reports have confirmed that the majority of the population welcomed them as liberators, the feelings of civilians were often confused. The arrival of the Allies was generally awaited and hoped for because it meant the end of the war, or so it was believed. On the contrary, from August 1943 the raids increased in number and intensity. The two moments of palingenesis, 25 July and 8 September, did not produce the expected miracle because the war and the bombing continued. From the autumn of 1943, following the armistice and the Allied invasion of Italy, the war continued in the northern part of Italy under a new German-controlled fascist regime, the Italian Social Republic (RSI, also known as Salò Republic from the town on Lake Garda which hosted some of the most important ministries), and in the southern part under an Allied-controlled Kingdom of the South officially governed by General Badoglio.

Among those who continued the Fascist journey into the Salò Republic were not only volunteer fighters, but also servants of the State – administrators, prefects, and all those who worked for ministries and local councils. They found themselves caught between their compatriots, who had by then almost unanimously rejected Fascism, and the arrogance of the Germans, which no amount of propaganda, describing the Germans as trustworthy friends, could disguise. This ambiguous situation was particularly difficult in cities where partisan activity was strongest, such as Genoa, Turin and Milan.

The lack of authority of the Republic's administration was all too evident. The interior minister Buffarini Guidi and his province heads (the Republic's prefects) confronted a complex situation, impossible to improve as no institution had any support among the population, who perceived
clearly that the Republic was not able to defend cities from aerial destruction. The Republic reiterated a situation that civilians had faced from the first months of the war. Popular reaction against the regime in 1944, from Bologna and the towns along the Gothic line to the Po Valley, was a desperate expression of the exasperation against the inefficiency of local authorities.

Although the prevailing attitude of the population was still to blame the regime rather than the Allies, the bombing of cities could provoke mixed feelings among the population: during the most tragic events, Salò propaganda on the criminality of the ‘Anglo-Assassins’ could have an impact on a depressed and mourning population. Grazia Alfieri Tarentino, a young woman in Milan from 1941, for example, expressed a painful resentment of the enemy when she saw La Scala theatre on fire: it was ‘all that had remained of the heart of the city’. In October 1944, when a bomb killed 200 school children in the working-class Gorla district of Milan, she witnessed the tragedy of the death of innocent children. The whole city was in mourning on the day of the funerals, the women in black beside the small white graves. ‘Propaganda’, she wrote, ‘insinuated itself alongside the sincere pain’: on the walls posters appeared with images of death to remind that the so-called ‘liberators’ were the enemies. Among the confusion and suffering of events like Gorla, Fascist propaganda did not, however, obtain the results it hoped for; at this final stage of the war in particular, it had no arguments left apart from emphasising the criminality of the enemy.
The Italian Resistance and Bombing

The outcome of the war and its interpretation as a conflict between Fascism and democracy has fixed in popular memory the idea that the Allies ‘had to’ use bombing, and Anglo-American propaganda succeeded in persuading Italians that there was a link between bombs, democracy and liberation. However, the experience of being bombed did not bring straightforward answers. Civilians’ feelings were often divided, even when they had become detached from Fascism.

Allied attempts to provoke an Italian rebellion against the regime found an answer particularly when, after the heavy raids of end 1942-early 1943, industrial workers went on strike in Piedmont and Lombardy in March-April 1943. Allied messages to Italian workers had never mentioned the word ‘strike’ and the British intelligence began to report, from that spring until 1945, worried news about the northern Italian working class, which was no longer fighting the Germans in the name of the Allies but increasingly of the Soviet Union (which had never bombed Italian cities) and of Soviet Communism.

The strikes of March and April 1943 were indeed the first mass strikes in Italy during the war, and probably the most significant up to that point in Europe. Begun at FIAT in Turin, they were the first mass attempt to resist a fascist regime, and sparked a further wave of strikes that continued, particularly in northern Italy, until the end of the war. They were the precursors of the wider strikes of spring-summer 1944, which contributed to the anti-German insurrection in the Salò Republic and became an integral part of the history of the Resistance.
The link between workers’ strikes and the beginning of the Resistance became evident after the devastating raids of summer 1943 (which killed at least 900 people in Milan and 850 in Turin between July and August). The Allies intended to use these raids to persuade Italians to put pressure on Badoglio to surrender. The climax came during the Salò Republic, under German control, amid repression and deportations. At the end of June 1944, when the FIAT was asked to send machinery to Germany, workers tried to oppose resistance, but they lacked enough weapons to succeed. However, wrote the Committee for the Liberation of Northern Italy to the Swiss Headquarters, ‘timely Allied bombing delayed the dispatch’. By the end of spring 1944, Allied bombing and workers’ strikes thus appeared to aim, despite many contradictions and ambiguities, at the same goals.

However, the Resistance only began to establish efficient and regular links with the Allies from the summer of 1944. Although Allies and partisans had the same goal of liberating Italy from the Germans, the partisans did not always welcome the raids on Italian cities and towns. As early as December 1943, the CLN of Milan protested to the Allies at ‘the way in which some of the latest raids on Italy had been carried out’. They listed a number of raids on small towns and cities, in which hundreds of civilians had been killed and no military objectives had been hit. It was suggested that these raids appeared to be in line with the ‘inhuman spirit of the Germans’, and that Fascist propaganda was taking advantage of them. At the beginning of 1945, the partisan and leader of the Socialist Party Pietro Nenni wrote to the Allies asking them to try and avoid hitting historical monuments, after the city centres of Verona, Vicenza, Padova and Treviso had been bombed, and huge damage caused to a ‘friendly population and monuments that are known to every civilised person’. Partisans asked the Allies to ‘keep in mind the tragic situation of the population after a year and a half of real struggle against the Germans’.
THE ANGLO-AMERICAN BOMBING OF ITALY: EFFECTS

The human cost

According to official ISTAT statistic the casualties of bombing in Italy numbered 64,354, of whom 4,558 were military. To these, the figures showed another 6,237 dead provoked by other types of bombing, bringing the total of victims of bombs in Italy in the Second World War to 70,591. There is evidence that these data are underestimated. Both the national and local situations did not always allow, particularly after the armistice, precise registrations by the communes' registry offices. The war indeed compromised the functioning of public administration, which, in many parts of Italy already before 1940 lacked efficiency. Moreover, many evacuees died because of bombing outside their commune of origin, and were only rarely registered; the same was true for commuters who were victim of train station bombing. In many towns, the bombing destroyed the registries, and the reconstruction of data was made too late to be completely reliable; in other cases, there was no time to register the dead, because it was urgent to bury corpses that were already decomposing, as more raids followed and it became difficult to extract all the corpses from the ruins. In Italian archives it is possible to find lists of casualties and damages in many villages of the country’s provinces, but it would need a group of hundreds of researchers to bring together all of them; besides that, local authorities who drew these lists immediately after the raids tended to exaggerate the numbers of victims, influenced as they inevitably were by both immediate emotion and popular reaction. Marco Massobrio and Giulio Gioannini, after a city-by city work of reconstruction (which left out all the rural areas) concluded that the most likely figure should lay somewhere between the 60,000 claimed by ISTAT in 1957 and the 120-130,000 thousands that would probably result if
summing up the local official estimates – the number should probably be set at around 80,000.

**Industrial production**

Inquiries into the damage to Italian industry caused by bombing were made by the Allies in the summer of 1945 in the former area of the Salò Republic as well as by the Italian Institute of Statistics in September 1944 in the liberated areas of central-southern Italy. However, historians who later studied the subject found it often difficult to separate precisely the damage caused by air raids from that caused by ground battles or partisan sabotage. Bombing, sabotage and workers’ strikes in northern Italy between 1943 and 1945 lost around 30% of production hours. However, the damage to industries in northern Italy was by no means irreparable, and there were no particular impediments to the resumption of industrial production in the post-war years. In all, no more than 4-5% of productive capacity had been lost. Correspondence between General Alexander and the Committee for National Liberation in 1944 makes clear that the Allies – aware of the problems that a completely impoverished Italy (and Europe) could have generated during the reconstruction – never implemented a plan to destroy Italy’s industrial capacity. If the whole of Italy is considered, war damage to industry amounted to slightly less than 10%, though this data does not refer to damage caused specifically by bombing.

*Istituto Storico Parri: Bologna train station*
Istituto Storico Parri: Bologna.

Archivio Storico Cittá di Torino: covered corpses.
Archivio Storico Città di Torino: crowd watching a bombed area.

Itri: funeral among the ruins, Gabriella Gribaudi, Guerra totale. Tra bombe alleate e violenze naziste Napoli e il fronte meridionale, 1940-1944 (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2005).
Archivio Cittá di Torino: FIAT bombed.

ASM Archive Brescia: bombing of electric tram line.
Archivio fotografico del comune di Genova: a destroyed building.

Archivio Cittá di Torino: destroyed building with man.