

Gaetano Salvemini Colloquium in Italian History and Culture
Harvard University

Alessandro Portelli

WAR, VIOLENCE AND THE ETHICS
OF RESISTANCE

GUERRA, VIOLENZA ED ETICA
DELLA RESISTENZA

VIELLA

GAETANO SALVEMINI COLLOQUIUM
HARVARD UNIVERSITY
edited by / a cura di
Renato Camurri e Charles S. Maier

Gaetano Salvemini Colloquium in Italian History and Culture
Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard University

The name of Gaetano Salvemini is intimately linked to Harvard. Salvemini first came to Cambridge in 1933 and taught here until 1948 thanks to a special fund made available by an American actress Ruth Draper, who was the partner of Lauro De Bosis – the young antifascist who died in 1931 as he was returning from a flight over the city of Rome where he had dropped antifascist leaflets – but thanks also to the direct influence of a number of people in and around Harvard, including the Supreme Court judge Felix Frankfurter, the historian Arthur Schelinger senior and the then President of Harvard, James Conant.

With the intent of commending and renewing the moral and intellectual legacy Salvemini left at Harvard, in 2012 the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies and the Italian Consulate in Boston took the decision to inaugurate the *Gaetano Salvemini Colloquium in Italian History and Culture*, an annual lecture to be delivered each October.

The main aim of the *Colloquium* is to offer a series of high level scholarly reflections on questions that have left a mark on Italian political, intellectual and cultural history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The central pillar of the *Colloquium* is an annual lecture delivered by a scholar of world renown followed by brief comments by some respondents.

Il nome di Gaetano Salvemini è intimamente legato a quello di Harvard. Lo storico italiano arrivò a Cambridge nel 1933 e vi insegnò fino al 1948 grazie ad uno speciale fondo messo a disposizione dall'attrice americana Ruth Draper, compagna di Lauro De Bosis – il giovane antifascista morto nel 1931 al ritorno da un volo aereo dimostrativo compiuto sopra Roma dove aveva lanciato dei manifesti contro il regime – e al diretto interessamento di alcune personalità dell'ambiente harvardiano tra cui il giudice della Corte Suprema Felix Frankfurter, lo storico Arthur Schelinger senior e l'allora presidente di Harvard James Conant.

Volendo valorizzare e rinnovare l'eredità morale e intellettuale lasciata dallo storico italiano ad Harvard, nel 2012 il Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies e il Consolato Italiano di Boston hanno deciso di dare vita al *Gaetano Salvemini Colloquium in Italian History and Culture* che con cadenza annuale si terrà nel mese di ottobre.

L'obiettivo principale del *Colloquium* è quello di presentare una serie di riflessioni di alto valore scientifico attorno a questioni che hanno segnato la storia politica, intellettuale e culturale italiana tra otto e novecento. La struttura del *Colloquium* ruota attorno ad una *Lecture* affidata ad uno studioso di chiara fama e agli interventi di alcuni *discussants*.

Alessandro Portelli

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viella

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Foreword

On October 22, 2015, the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard University hosted the fourth *Gaetano Salvemini Colloquium in Italian History and Culture*. We are pleased to present the proceedings of the event, which helps to disseminate the reflections presented at Harvard to a wider audience and allows the memory of Gaetano Salvemini to be kept alive.

We are very grateful to Professor Charles Maier for coordinating this event and to Professor Alessandro Portelli for his keynote address on one of the most complex and dramatic events in 20th century Italian history.

Thanks are also due to the chairs of the Salvemini Colloquium Committee, Charles Maier, Daniel Ziblatt and Renato Camurri, for choosing this important topic to which the fourth Salvemini Colloquium has been dedicated.

It is, moreover, a pleasure to recall here the efforts made at the time by Consul General of Italy Nicola De Santis, in coordinating this event.

Finally, we would like to thank the Elena and Beniamino Finocchiaro Association for its contribution to the publication of the proceedings of the *Colloquium* and the Department of Cultures and Civilizations of the University of Verona for its cooperation in the production of this volume.

David Ward

*Introduction. Ethical Dilemmas
and the Resistance Struggle*

The young partisans in Luigi Meneghello's novel *I piccoli maestri* are brilliant, the very best. And they know it: "Eravamo la crema d'Italia [...] L'élite di un'élite," highly educated products of the humanistic education the Italian school system gave them.¹ They are ambitious and above all patriotic. They aim to be the protagonists in a remaking of post-World War II Italy, the enlightened, dynamic, competent ruling class post-unification Italy had never had and perhaps never got: "Studiavamo letteralmente per l'Italia, per l'inesistente grande classe dirigente italiana che doveva emergere dopo la guerra. Doveva" (p. 270). Even in their early twenties, still university students, as the war comes to an end, they consider themselves the future leaders of their nation. Indeed, with fascism still in power, it was as members of Italy's future ruling class that they enlisted in the crack Alpini regiment as trainee officers. Their allegiance, though, was to the king – and country – rather than to the regime.

They are ironic, witty, accomplished orators, masters of language. They were better, as Meneghello's narrative voice tells us, at inventing slogans than at carrying out military

1. Luigi Meneghello, *I piccoli maestri* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1976²), p. 24 (first edition, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1964). Translated into English as *The Outlaws* by Ralph Trevelyan (London: Michael Joseph, 1967).

actions: “I sabotaggi erano modesti, quasi invisibili; le scritte erano cubitali. La nostra propensione generale alle lettere veniva sempre fuori; i testi delle scritte erano ingegnosi, quasi troppo” (p. 55).

And, in fact, when the Resistance struggle moved from the intellectual plain to that of action, of violence, shooting and killing, “i piccoli maestri” were soon out of their depth. The descriptions we find in the novel of the acts of violence they carry out are either eschewed, dismissed, glossed over as quickly as possible or censored. Even for such loquacious young men unafraid of writing and speaking at every possible moment, a veil of silence is drawn over the violence of the partisan struggle. When the young men discuss settling accounts with local fascists they make it perfectly clear that they would prefer to eliminate them rhetorically – “basta fucilarli con l’inchiostro” (p. 273) – rather than physically.

The novel recounts two killings carried out by the young partisans, on both occasions obliquely and in a muted fashion. The first occasion is when they decide to punish a local fascist called Maggiore, a man who had been the teacher of some members of the group in the fascist youth movements. As Maggiore cycles toward the area where Luigi, who has the task of shooting him, lies in waiting, the narrative shuts down before the trigger is pulled: “Quando fummo al punto giusto mi fermai ad aspettarlo, e in un momento lo vidi entrare nel mio mirino, coi suoi tristi pensieri; e lì in questo cerchietto di ferro lo voglio lasciare” (p. 250), as if the act of violence is unconscionable. The second occasion, the killing of a German prisoner who has turned out to be a spy, is the cause of a great ethical dilemma: “Si chiede a questo biondino se vuol lasciare detto qualcosa, per qualcuno a casa sua in Germania, se saremo ancora al mondo alla fine della guerra. Esita, poi dice di no. Gli si domanda chi

vuol che resti con lui, e lui sceglie. Gli altri vanno via. Si è in piedi, quasi ci si tocca. In una specie di scossa perdi quella radice che chiami te stesso, pare di morire insieme” (p. 241). Daniele Lucchetti’s film adaptation of *I piccoli maestri* doesn’t do justice to either of these scenes and the oblique way the actual death of the enemy at the hands of “*I piccoli maestri*” is handled in the novel, making of both of them great dramatic moments in the film that they are far from being in the novel.

Both these themes – reticence about performing acts of violence; the silence that those acts impose on language – are illustrated by Alessandro Portelli in his lecture through the oral testimonies he has collected over the years. There is, though, one major difference between what Meneghello tells us in his novel and what Portelli’s partisans tell us in their testimonies. For Meneghello and his companions, killing another human being was an affront to everything their humanistic education had taught them about the intrinsic dignity of the individual. Importantly, Portelli shows us that the reluctance to kill does not spring only from high levels of education, but from a basic human dignity shared by the partisans who operated at all levels of the military struggle and who came from all social classes, lines of work, and levels of education. You do not need, these testimonies remind us, a humanistic education to hold high ethical views; you do not need a degree or a high school diploma to feel revulsion about killing a fellow human being, no matter if that enemy has committed acts of terror. Indeed, Portelli’s representation of resistance fighters as thoughtful, reflective, concerned about the moral quagmire the war had forced on them, genuinely conflicted about the actions they were called on to perform stands as a reinscription – and a welcome one – of the irresponsible, ideologically-guided, gun-toting partisan that was proffered by historical revisionists in

the 1990, particularly in reference to the events of the so-called Triangle of Death in the Castelfranco Emilia area.² Not only does the representation Portelli gives us of the partisans not square with the revisionist image, neither does it square with, first, the hagiographic image of the heroic partisan that emerged in the immediate postwar years, the “virile myth” of which Portelli writes; and second, neither does it square with the image of partisans propagated by the Red Brigades, who saw themselves as the heirs to the revolutionary violence of the Resistance. In such representations there was little or no space for the kind of self-questioning life stories that Portelli’s partisans narrate. For the antifascists in the post war years, for the left-wing terrorists of the 1970s and for the revisionists of the 1990s, all guilty of simplistic representations of the Resistance, it was almost as if the stakes were too high. The Resistance movement had to be either praised or denigrated, to the point that one could not admit that there had been a grey area where questions of right/wrong, just/unjust, legal/illegal, innocence/guilt subtended the partisans’ decision making processes.

If killing the enemy in a national war of liberation is already complicated enough, killing a compatriot in a civil war is even more so. Between 1943 and 1945, Italy fought both types of war, the national war of liberation against the occupying German Nazi-fascists; a civil war against the Nazis’ Italian accomplices in the puppet *Repubblica sociale italiana*. Yet, the partisans did kill, and as Portelli quite courageously points out, we should be grateful that they did. But given the reticence about taking another life, what was it that drove the partisans to pull the trigger?

2. See Giorgio & Paolo Pisanò, *Il Triangolo della Morte. La politica della strage in Emilia durante e dopo la guerra civile* (Milan: Mursia, 1992).

It turns out that the answer to that question is akin to what has been suggested by some of the writers who have given us the most sophisticated cultural representations of the Resistance experience, such as Italo Calvino's *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, Cesare Pavese's *La casa in collina*, and Beppe Fenoglio's *Una questione privata*: namely, that the decision to take drastic action is always spurred on by extreme personal experience. Walkiria Terradura, for example, tells Portelli that it was only when a German Jew who was a member of her partisan group told her of the extermination in the death camps at the hands of the Nazis of his father, mother and 10- and 12-year old sisters that her group reversed its decision to spare the life of a Hungarian spy. For Marisa Musu, the turning point came when she heard Giulia Spizzichino speak of the extermination of the entire Di Consiglio family in Auschwitz. It was such experiences, she goes on to say in her testimony, that made her see Nazis as torturers, persecutors of Jews and as camp guards and not as sons, husbands and fathers.

Both Musu's and Terradura's testimonies recall a scene from Paolo and Vittorio Taviani's film *La notte di san Lorenzo*, made in 1982 and one of the earliest cultural representations, if not the first, of the Resistance struggle as civil war. In a deliberately brutal scene, two repubblicini are trapped in an orchard after carrying out a military engagement with a local partisan group. They are father and son, in every sense a team, as the fifteen year old son's constant repetition of the phrase "È vero, babbo?," which he repeats incessantly, reminds us. Previously, in a battle scene, we had seen the boy remove his black shirt during the fighting in order to trick a partisan and bring about his death. When he hears that the two are trapped, Corrado – a partisan who has lost his pregnant wife in a bomb that exploded in the local cathedral where the inhabitants of the village had sought refuge, after believing Nazi assurances

that they would be safe there – rushes to the orchard. He finds the terrified young boy hiding in a tree screaming for mercy. His father is nearby and pleads for his son's life asking Corrado to kill him rather than the son. Corrado, though, decides to kill the boy, after a few seconds of reflection, caught in a close-up, as if he is asking himself on whom to take revenge for the killing of his wife and unborn child. Why does Corrado choose the fifteen year old boy, a minor by the law, who would never have been found guilty by any court?

Revenge, of course, is one answer, but only a partial one. But wouldn't his father, a committed fascist, be more complicit than his son, who can have had no active role in the massacre in the cathedral? Corrado, though, takes the drastic path. What he sees in the young boy, the fascist son of a fascist father, is fascism as a generational phenomenon, rooted in Italy and passed on through time. Corrado's killing of the young boy, after the thought he gave as to whether to spare him or not, is a political gesture. Corrado sees the greatest danger that fascism poses in its deep inter-generational presence in Italian political culture. As such, fascism has its roots in Italian society, in the society of the Taviani's and the fascist father and son's Tuscany. And to defeat it, the Taviani brothers suggest, one has to pull it up by the roots, no matter how painful that may be, eradicate it from the body politic, even if that means, symbolically, killing off its young. And only those who have been victims of fascism, who, like Corrado, see the fifteen year old boy not as a whimpering child begging for mercy, but as the future of fascism, those who have been deeply hurt by it are willing to take such drastic action.

In her testimony, Marisa Musu states that she wished the partisans had killed more Nazis, that the Resistance had been more ruthless, more willing to cross the line, less concerned about the ethical dilemmas Portelli describes in the opening

pages of his lecture, and more able to see their enemies as representatives of odious nation states and ideologies. Given that for many partisans the Italy that emerged in the post-fascist, post-World War Two years bore little resemblance to the Italy they had imagined and fought and made sacrifices for, there is little wonder that they should look back on the choices made in those years, and perhaps in hyperbolic mode, assume a radically critical stance, as Marisa Musu does. Behind her comments are several implicit questions: But what would or could have happened if that more radical strategy had actually been employed? If, that is, more robust anti-fascist actions had been taken as the war came to an end and in the months that followed to thwart the continuity of the apparatus of the state, even in the form, say, of a purge of fascist administrators that banned them from holding public office or working for the state? Had such a course of action been followed would we have seen a more anti-fascist post-war Italy; would the resurgence of neo-fascism we have seen in Italy, Europe and the US over the last ten years also have been thwarted? These, of course, are questions that can only be answered speculatively. Their importance, though, lies not in the answers we may choose to give, but in what spurred those questions to be asked in the first place. Marisa Musu's call for the killing of more Nazis stems from not only her belief that the Resistance did not go far enough, but also – and more controversially – from her lingering suspicion that what is considered the Resistance's greatest ethical asset – its humanistic belief in the dignity and sanctity of human life – may well have turned out to be its greatest political liability.

Alessandro Portelli

*War, Violence and the Ethics of Resistance**

How are you going to be nonviolent in Mississippi, as violent as you were in Korea? How can you justify being nonviolent in Mississippi and Alabama, when your *churches* are being bombed, and *your* little girls are being murdered, and at the same time you're going to violent with Hitler, and Tojo, and somebody else that you don't even know?

Malcolm X

They applauded us in the sit-in movement when we non-violently decided to sit in at lunch counters. They applauded us on the freedom rides when we accepted blows without retaliation... praise us when I would say, "Be nonviolent toward Bull Connor... Be nonviolent toward Jim Clark". There is something strangely inconsistent about a nation and a press that would praise you when you say "Be nonviolent toward Jim Clark" but will curse you and damn you when you say "Be nonviolent toward little brown Vietnamese children."

Martin Luther King

I would like to start with a passage from an interview with Dante Bartolini. Dante was a partisan leader, a steel

* Much of this essay is based on material included in two earlier books: *Biografia di una città. Storia e racconto: Terni 1830-1985* (Turin: Einaudi, 1985) (later included in *La città dell'acciaio. Due secoli di storia operaia*, Rome: Donzelli, 2017, and *Biography of an Industrial*

worker, hog killer, herb doctor, epic singer and poet of the Resistance, from Castel di Lago, near Terni, in Umbria. In a 1971 interview he recalled:

We created the [Antonio] Gramsci partisan brigade [...] And we continued throughout the glorious deeds of the Resistance. We attacked the Germans and their fascist lackeys on the roads, from Vindoli to Leonessa and the villages around Leonessa. We fought, we carried out many actions that I have no time to describe now, good or bad, and our sufferings were great. Along the roads, with gasoline and fire bottles. We burned their trucks, we burned their armored cars, people died. Those poor people inside who couldn't get out. We carried flasks, filled with gasoline, we hurled the fire flask at them, and then we fought the Germans hand to hand.¹

This is a proud and epic narrative of the glorious deeds of the war of Resistance, of which Dante was somehow the delegated storyteller and folk singer. I recorded this interview in 1972, transcribed it, published in my book on the oral history of the working class in Terni. Until I listened to it again many years later, in preparation for a new edition of the book, I had never noticed a small but significant semantic shift: the reference to “the poor people inside who couldn't get out” of the burning trucks and armored cars. Dante Bartolini is rightly proud of these military actions – “good or bad”, he says – in a war of liberation. Yet, through the cracks of his epic narrative seeps a feeling of pity for

Town. Terni, Italy, 1831-2014, New York: Palgrave, 2017); see Alessandro Portelli, *L'ordine è stato eseguito. Roma, le Fosse Ardeatine, la memoria* (Rome: Donzelli, 1999); *The Order Has Been Carried Out. History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

1. Dante Bartolini (1909, Castiglioni, Terni), int. at Castel di Lago (Terni), April 8, 1972. Unless otherwise indicated, all interviews were recorded by the author. Dante Bartolini was a farmworker and steelworker, fired in 1952 for political reasons.

those “poor people”, the enemies that he and his comrades killed in action.

This paper is dedicated to Lucia Ottobriani, a wonderful woman and a fighting partisan from Rome’s underground resistance, who passed away less in August, 2017, at the age of 92. In a 1999 interview, Lucia mused:

War is war, there’s nothing you can do about it. I remember on via Empolitana, the trucks filled with young boys going home [singing] ‘in die heimat, in the heimat, es vird besser gehen’, at home all will be better. These are things that never leave you, I remember them always, all my life. For instance, the three hundred and forty they killed, they’re always with me [io ce li ho sempre un po’ qua – I can’t swallow them!]. Because I don’t like to even hear about it, it’s not cowardice, it’s an awful, terrible, frightful thing, I assure you. Some people write about it freely and easily. Not I, not for me: the enemy is a human being, too. And I’m very, infinitely sorry. These are very bitter things and I think it left a mark on me. For one thing, it made me more mature; I don’t feel innocent, no one is innocent, and no one can call himself guilty.²

“The enemy, too, was human” – poor people, indeed. In a 1941 diary entry, Franco Calamandrei, a writer and also a member of the fighting partisan underground, wrote: “So I told myself – there isn’t a war, but individuals facing the war; always individuals, always and only individuals.”³ In a 2014 interview, former Rome partisan Paolo Morettini, recalled: “The first German [we killed], we buried him around

2. Lucia Ottobriani (1924, Mulhouse, France), int. in Rome, July 15 and 27, 1997. Lucia Ottobriani was a member of GAP (Gruppi Azine Patriottica, Patriotic Action Groups), a Communist underground organization that fought against the Nazi-Fascist occupation in Rome.

3. Franco Calamandrei, *La vita indivisibile. Diario 1941-47* (Florence: Giunti, 1998), p. 21. Born in Florence in 1917, Franco Calamandrei was a writer, translator, journalist. During the war, he was a member of GAP in Rome.