

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## ‘Lots of red, but also lots of tricolour’: the liberation of Milan and the Liberal Party in the Minoletti–Quarello papers (April 1945)

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### Abstract

This article uses the hitherto partially unpublished diary of Virginia Minoletti Quarello and her husband Bruno Minoletti to shed a light on the Resistance and on the transformation of Italian politics after the war from an original angle. Virginia and Bruno, members of the Italian Liberal Party, played a central role in the Resistance and in consolidating the network of the Liberal partisans led by Edgardo Sogno, first in Genova, where their house hosted the local National Liberation Committee, and then in Milan. Their diary offers new perspectives on events and processes that preceded and followed 25 April 1945: from the arrival of the Allies in Milan to the killing of Mussolini and the display of his body in Piazza Loreto; from the struggle and division within the antifascist front to the marginalisation of the Liberals; from internal conflicts in the Liberal Party on the institutional question to the value of the Resistance.

**Keywords:** death of Mussolini; Italian Liberal Party; Bruno Minoletti; Virginia Minoletti Quarello; National Liberation Committee

### Introduction: a Liberal perspective on the transition

April 1945. In a house on Via Privata Siracusa in Milan, not far from Porta Romana, one married couple observed the tumultuous changes of the last days of the war: the wait for the Allies to arrive, the difficulties of daily life, the insurrection, the Germans fleeing, the rout of the Fascists of the Social Republic.

The couple were Bruno Minoletti<sup>1</sup> and Virginia Quarello,<sup>2</sup> and they were not ordinary people, nor did they find themselves in the city by chance. They were Genoese exponents of the Liberal Party (Partito Liberale Italiano or PLI) – Bruno Minoletti had been a member since the party’s foundation in 1922 – who had been part of the Ligurian Resistance since the period immediately following 8 September 1943. Their house in Nervi became the headquarters of the local National Liberation Committee (Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale or CLN), and they played an essential co-ordination role for the Franchi organisation, the armed partisan group led by Edgardo Sogno, in north-west Italy.

In November 1944, at the beginning of the last winter of the war and in a decisive phase of its development, the Minolettis moved to Milan, where their covert action expanded as the partisan formations made their way throughout northern Italy and the National Liberation

Committee for Northern Italy (Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale Alta Italia or CLNAI) took on an increasingly institutional form, establishing relations with the Allied troops.

The Minolettis recorded from that observation point the unfolding of the war and the Resistance in a detailed diary written by them both, but mainly by Virginia. A small selection from the diary was published immediately after the liberation in 1946 under the title *Via Privata Siracusa* (Minoletti Quarello 2015). However, most of the notes remained in the family archive. In 2012, the diary was donated to the Ligurian Institute for the History of the Resistance and the Contemporary Age (Istituto ligure per la storia della Resistenza e dell'età contemporanea) in Genoa; it remains unpublished.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to providing a first-hand, detailed reconstruction of the evolution of the partisan war in Piedmont, Liguria and Lombardy, and the significant weight within it of the Liberal component in action and in the network of contacts built with the Anglo-Americans, the diary is particularly important for the 'live' description it contains of the liberation days and the period immediately afterwards (the account continues in detail until the time of Edgardo Sogno's release on 8 May 1945).

Through their involvement, in these private pages the Minolettis tell the story, with lucidity and objectivity, of the transition from war to the frenetic, dramatic and euphoric days of the return to peace, 'normality' and the first steps of democratic life. They describe the dialogue and negotiation between the different political groups and with the Allied troops, and highlight the moment of transition, symbolically marked by the killing of Benito Mussolini and the macabre display in Piazzale Loreto, where ideological reasons and party calculations prevailed over the patriotic spirit.

Finally, the pages contain interesting elements for understanding the crisis of liberal culture in the transition to the new phase of politics and civil life: the controversies between republicans and monarchists, radical left and conservative right, which would soon signal, with some important exceptions, the marginalisation of the political class and the Liberal Party in the face of the hegemony of the mass parties.

This article is structured in three sections. The first reconstructs the role of the Liberal Party and its organisation in the struggle for national liberation in northern Italy starting from 1943, based mainly on archival and memorial sources, with particular reference to private archives.<sup>4</sup> The second inserts the role of the Minoletti-Quarello couple into that story, considering their diary and other archival sources. Finally, in the concluding part I focus on the account found in their papers regarding the events of 25 April and the subsequent days in Milan.

The narrative does not reveal previously unknown details about those events, but it is interesting from a historiographical point of view because it directly expresses the particular view of Liberal resistance fighters about the rapid evolution of the political situation at the time of the liberation, the articulation of relationships between the various components of the Resistance, and, above all, the evident emergence of party and ideological oppositions on the threshold of the return to democratic dialectics. In Minoletti and Quarello's story one can immediately and vividly grasp the sense of disappointment and dismay in the face of the rapid marginalisation of the Liberal Party in the new balance of the CLN, and the deep divisions emerging within the party itself.

### Origins of the Liberal resistance network in the north-west

The Liberal Party organisation during the period 1943–5 had all the fundamental characteristics to be classified, like the other parties in the CLN, as an active force in the Resistance (see, in particular, Pavone [2006, 515–585]).

Three fundamental characteristics distinguished the Liberals' contribution to the partisan war: family membership and/or shared sociocultural background; the presence of

an extended, strong and functional network; and the ability to challenge the invader with effective armed opposition.

Family background, as far as the Liberals were concerned, was the propellant fuelling the engine of survival of the autonomous political and cultural network throughout the *ventennio* and was the intermediary through which the first generation of antifascists prepared the second generation, who would openly fight the regime after 8 September 1943. The salons of the upper middle class and the aristocracy were the true protagonists of the first phase in the constitution of the opposition network (Veneruso 1979).

The first Liberal antifascist groups were active in Turin from 1942, together with the monarchist groups linked to Edgardo Sogno, Antonio Baudi di Selve, Rinaldo Casana, Nini Medici, Anton Dante Coda and Franco Antonicelli, and those in Milan who gathered around Tommaso Gallarati Scotti and Giustino Arpesani (Camurani 1970).

In Genoa, Bruno and Virginia Minoletti, Roberto Einaudi, the lawyer Francesco Manzitti and the Savoretti brothers co-ordinated the Ligurian Liberals. The area of Monte Tobio behind the city was the first in Liguria, and perhaps in Italy, to fly the partisan flag (Gimelli 2005).

From 9 September 1943, many demobilised soldiers or those who had escaped from captivity, young people driven by hatred towards the invader, and politically persecuted people freed during the Badoglio period hid in the mountains, in farmhouses, in any possible shelter, joining together in more or less numerous groups, in varyingly organised bands. However, it was the Banda Otto, under the command of Ottorino Balduzzi (Martino 2011), which initially led the entire *rete liberale* (Liberal network) of the CLNAI from Genoa, until it found itself isolated from the centre of activity in its own city in March 1944 (Pace 2020).<sup>5</sup>

This was the reason that Edgardo Sogno was sent to the Ligurian capital. He was supposed to put a member of the Ligurian committee in contact with the Bando Otto. But a German raid, during which many members of the band were killed, made the connection impossible. Through Sogno, the survivors of the Bando Otto managed to reconstruct the group within the increasingly deep-rooted and robust network of the Franchi organisation, which was formed after the tragic events of March 1944.<sup>6</sup>

As far as the relationship with the Allied troops was concerned, the contacts maintained by the Liberals were undoubtedly far superior in frequency, regularity and intensity to those of the other partisan forces operating in the territory. The nature of these relations consisted primarily of communication through couriers – most of whom were women – with the British mission in Bern, which provided continuous assistance and maintained relations with the main organisers.

It was the Franchi group that organised the airdrop section to help the partisans, in connection with the Number One Special Force, the British army unit assigned to this task. Major Oliver Churchill, parachuted into northern Italy with the task of contacting all the partisan and military forces in Italy, found refuge in the Brianza house of Rinaldo and Cristina Casana. A radio transmitter was also installed there. Cristina Casana, whose knowledge of English was excellent, accompanied Churchill to Milan on several occasions for his meetings, including the most important one with General Cadorna (Alloisio and Gadola Beltrami 1981; Pace 2018).

The valuable work carried out by the secretaries of Alfredo Pizzoni, president of the CLNAI since its inception, is evidence of the close relationship between the Liberal partisans of the north-west and the Number One Special Force. One secretary, Graziella Schiavoni, who had grown up abroad, was able to translate the English and French dispatches that arrived and have them distributed throughout the network.

Furthermore, personnel from the Allied missions from the South were inserted in the Franchi organisation, and these contributed to the Liberal network with specific directives

and instructions through contact maintained via numerous radio communications (Sogno 1970; Gnechhi Ruscone 2011).

The network also remained firmly connected to Allied command through the frequent contact and personal communications of many of its members in senior positions. Edgardo Sogno visited the base three times: in November 1943, and in August and November 1944. On these occasions, as is revealed by the study of his personal archive, he ‘had the opportunity to present a complete report on [his] activities and to plan the subsequent development of the operations’.<sup>7</sup> After his arrest on the eve of the liberation, similar operations ensured that his network continued to play a fundamental role. The efficient organisation that had been formed throughout Italy managed to maintain, even during the worst periods of the roundups, connections between the general command and the Allies in Turin, Genoa, Milan and Switzerland.

### The Italian family

One day the memoirs of this opposition that is already passing into the bittersweetness of memory will be collected, and I think back to the friends and young people that I met on trips that I made several times a year to Florence, Milan and Turin, in the Veneto, and that I called the *Italian family*. (Croce 1944)

The definition of the *Italian family* proposed by Benedetto Croce in 1944 aptly contextualises the resistance of the Liberal Party in northern Italy during the period 1943–5.

The *liberal familism* that developed in that context could be defined as ‘moral’ in nature, in contrast with the ‘amoral’ nature described by the sociologist Edward Banfield (1958) in *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, according to which the family nucleus only acted by virtue of maximising its own immediate material advantages, in the certainty that others would act in the same way (see in particular Pizzorno 2001).

The documents of the Minoletti–Quarello couple, active in the Liberal resistance network first in Genoa and then in Milan, give us, among other things, a clear picture of the situation that was taking shape in the aftermath of 25 April and in the days immediately following the liberation of Milan.

The party’s internal discussions – in a Milan where, over the course of these days, ‘the Germans were becoming rare, the fascists very rare ... where the red flags and bandanas were very numerous and the closed fist salute was spreading’ – and the continuous clashes with the other protagonists of the Milanese scene reported in their notes show us how open, divisive and discordant the questions were to which all members of the CLNAI were called upon to find solutions.

These issues ranged from the accreditation of individual parties with the Allies – who were expected in Milan, where they did not arrive until 30 April – to the division of roles among the exponents of the various political groups:

April 25, 1945. Conference with Filippo [Filippo Jacini], Marchetti [Francesco Manzitti], Giorgio [Bergamasco], Rovelli [Eugenio Rosasco], Landi [Paolo Lecaldano]. Filippo [Jacini] firmly refuses to accept the position of deputy mayor. Giorgio Be [Bergamasco] proposes. I have the impression that Pierino [Ugo Borroni] is displeased with this. Gathering in via S. Giustino: Pini [Filippo Jacini], Carpani [Cattaneo Ernesto], Sala [Raimondo Collino Pansa], Cima [Mario Tanci], Fabrizio Ferretti. The newspaper

must be discussed: consolidate the typography in the Corsera, define the editorial setup.

And again:

April 27, 1945. Cesare [Merzagora] has taken up active office as President of the Economic Commission, Rodolfo Morandi as Vice President of the Municipality; Mario Tanci has become a municipal assessor; Paolo Lecaldano [Landi] aspires to become commissioner of Mondadori; Filippo Jacini is, with Giustino Arpesani, the other official member of the CLNAI, Dino Bergamasco and Cesare Guglielmetti are the two members of the regional CLN, etc.<sup>8</sup>

Discussions were more heated regarding the decision on what attitude to take towards Mussolini after the meeting in the archbishop's palace and his subsequent escape to Como.

The former leader appeared at the palace – Bruno Minoletti notes – ‘not to surrender but to hear the conditions’. He was met by the firm decision of the CLNAI ‘that there would be no conditions to negotiate, just surrender pure and simple’.<sup>9</sup>

When Mussolini was captured by the partisans on 28 April, to be put on trial in Milan, the deep disagreements within the CLNAI that arose on this issue would affect the future judgement of the entire Resistance. The Socialist Party, and especially Sandro Pertini, insisted that the trial against Mussolini should be swift, and that it should be conducted in such a way as to obtain all possible documentation on what had been happening behind the scenes of the regime; it was felt that Mussolini's hearing should be associated with Hitler's prospective trial in Germany.<sup>10</sup>

However, as is well known, on 29 April Mussolini and his leaders were killed, their bodies transported to Milan and exposed to public contempt ‘in the same Piazzale Loreto where a year earlier 15 hostages had been massacred by the Fascists. The riotous crowd around the corpses mocked and vilified them, dragged them on the ground and hanged them with their heads down.’<sup>11</sup>

The positions taken by the Liberal and Christian Democrat newspapers were immediate, but careful. Within the CLNAI, however, the Liberal Giustino Arpesani protested forcefully, and the socialists joined in, although cautiously so as not to increase the hatred of an already aggravated public. The committee published a statement that approved of the summary justice against Mussolini and took responsibility for it, but deplored the excesses and invited all partisans to end them. Furthermore, regulations were published to stop activities of the partisan tribunals and the transport of prisoners to jail.

The Minoletti–Quarello papers eloquently testify to the way that Mussolini's execution represented – symbolically and in its political consequences – a point of no return in the deep structural conflict between the political forces active in the Resistance; and to the way the parties were placing a heavy burden on the entire national liberation struggle.

Those who had approached the Resistance from a simply patriotic, ethical, liberal and moderate viewpoint suddenly found themselves in a tiny minority compared with the major parties in the newly forming political framework and in a political dialectic that was becoming increasingly ideologically radicalised. The Liberals, divided among themselves on the question of the future state structure for the country, were entering a political period that would prove much more difficult and complex than the expected return to the principles post-Risorgimento Italy had been founded on.

On the one hand, the situation was changing for the Liberal political class. Although some grand Liberal personalities played a leading role in the constituent phase and were

appointed to positions of responsibility in the institutions and governments, especially during the De Gasperi phase, the party as a whole suffered significant marginalisation, due to the absence of internal consensus compared with other moderate political formations such as Christian Democracy, and due to the objective distance manifesting itself between Liberal culture and that of the developing mass parties, which were more closely linked to the organisation of social classes and the socioeconomic role of the state apparatus.

On the other hand, the difficult events for the party, the political class and Liberal political culture in the republican era can be better understood historically in the context of a political and institutional transition that was much less linear and predictable than the historiographical vulgate and hindsight might suggest – an extremely delicate transition that began with military defeat, institutional chaos following 8 September 1943, and armed conflict in the country between institutional subjects and opposing ideologies.

Moreover, it was a transition taking place at a time when global equilibrium was rapidly evolving towards the total conflict of the Cold War, which corresponded domestically to the divide between pro-Soviet and anticommunist socialist-communists, superimposed on that between Fascists and antifascists. The preservation of national unity and the rebirth and consolidation of democratic institutions were, therefore, difficult undertakings affected by a complex of international relations between what would be called ‘superpowers’. For years, political dialectics were framed in a context of widespread violence and extremely precarious coexistence (Grassi Orsini 2007), where the principles of order and shared symbolic elements had been corroded, there was a chasm between the political class and civil society, and the cultural heritage of Liberalism that had nourished the pre-Fascist political classes was squeezed (Colarizi 2000, 296–325; Craveri 2006, 135–405; Forlenza 2019, 2–14; Chiarini 2021, 91–110).

### After 25 April: the split in the CLNAI and the consequences of Mussolini’s assassination

During the last months before the liberation, as described in the introduction, once the Genoese and Turin offices of the Liberal resistance network had been discovered, they moved to Milan (Pace 2020). One of the safest hiding places was the Minolettis’ apartment on Via Privata Siracusa. Here, the Liberal partisans ‘were discussing positions and the newspaper and its consolidation, when events took over’.

It was during that meeting that they were informed by the industrialist Cella, who was in contact with the prefecture, of the meeting between Mussolini and the CLNAI. They left their base to accompany Giustino Arpesani to the assembly, together with representatives from the other parties.

During the day, following the rapid sequence of events, the presidency of the CLNAI was discussed and seemed destined to go to the Socialist Party’s Leo Valiani or another representative.

According to the Minolettis’ testimony, it was then that the first clear signs appeared of the fragmentation in CLNAI unity:

The CLNAI distributes its passes, 50 party. Little military news, except for the general. Total lack of cars for us: not so for the other parties.

At the same time, the divergence in the interpretation of the Resistance began to emerge; this would later influence its memory and narration and the interpretation given to the events of 25 April:



The right-wing tendency would like to facilitate the surrender of the Fascists, to avoid massacres and civil fighting; the left-wing tendency would like to procrastinate or prolong the discussions to allow the city's insurrection to spread before the surrender. Giustino [Arpesani] maintains that it is wrong to connect local prestige with the insurrection; such prestige will come above all from the entire Resistance.

While Mussolini was fleeing towards Como with his acolytes, on 26 April – the Minolettis note – ‘one already has the feeling that something has radically changed ... Only the group of houses where the “Decima Mas” (a special incursion unit of the Italian Royal Marine) is barricaded is heavily guarded. Except for various centres of this kind, the city is free.’

Life resumed in Milan: the *Popolo d'Italia* and the first issue of *Italia Libera* were printed and published, followed by *L'Unità*, *Avanti!* and *Il Nuovo Corriere*. *La Libertà* also came out in the evening, although the Christian Democrat newspaper did not.

The population gradually takes on a festive aspect. Lots of red, but also lots of tricolour. The pace of activity becomes intense at the PL in the afternoon. Mario Tanci and Ernesto Cattaneo install Morandi as Deputy Mayor on their own initiative since a decision was delayed. Police commissioner [*questore*] Elia installs himself with the support of the auxiliary police, clandestinely dependent on the PL. Giustino [Arpesani] does his utmost but proves too soft to deal with such a rapid situation. The absence of Nino [Anton Dante Coda] is regretted.

In contrast to the apparently more serene and optimistic climate, deep internal conflicts arose within the CLNAI during this time. On 27 April, after meeting Cesare Merzagora at the presidency of the Economic Commission, Bruno Minoletti describes a violent argument involving Pizzoni, which vividly illustrates the increasingly deep animosity and distrust between the various components of the Resistance:

In the prefecture, as I leave Cesare [Merzagora], I witness the end of the scene, not the first, between Longhi [Alfredo Pizzoni] and Cecconi [Gian Luigi Balzarotti]. The latter provocatively wrote ‘collaborator’ on the CLNAI card prepared for Longhi. Furious, Longhi lunges at Cecconi to assault him. Various people intervene, Pertini goes away shouting that it is a disgrace and that he no longer wants to know about these squabbles.

After this episode, the presidency of the CLNAI passed to Rodolfo Morandi; Pizzoni, stripped of the right to be part of it, was appointed president of the committee's central financial commission, and would become the temporary delegate for relations with the Allies.

We can assume from the Minoletti–Quarello papers that the Liberal resistance fighters believed that the change of leadership in the CLNAI was an attempt by the Communist Party, the Socialist Party and the Action Party to give the committee an unambiguously left-wing political line, precisely at the moment when it was preparing to exert its weight on the postwar political scene.

These were structural oppositions that were destined to endure and fester over subsequent years, as the ideological conflict sanctioned by the Cold War matured, resulting in a radical delegitimisation of Liberal, moderate and conservative positions by the left, typified by the fact that for a long time the Liberal Mario Argenton (Pace 2015), who was at the head of the procession of 6 May 1945 alongside Giovan Battista Stucchi, Luigi Longo, Ferruccio Parri, Raffaele Cadorna and Enrico Mattei, would be systematically removed from photos of the parade.<sup>12</sup>

The killing of the former Duce and his disciples on 29 April, while the population awaited the arrival of the Allies, contributed decisively to exacerbating the divisions. The public display of the Fascists' bodies following their deaths is recounted in the Minoletti papers:

That's how I saw them this morning. From a distance it didn't strike me. A little tired and dazed, I thought I was seeing one of those photographs of hanged men, which these cruel times have not skimmed on. As I got closer the spectacle was horrendous. The bodies showed signs of beatings. Mussolini with his torso covered in a bloody white T-shirt (his black shirt had been torn off and burned), his head bloodless and his jaw tense, Petacci next to him, with her skirt gathered around her hips, her elegant legs, her face now cyanotic. The others were unrecognisable to me. Gelormini, provincial commander of the Republican National Guard who two days earlier had turned himself in at Rollié and Borroni who had provided information for the recovery of materials; he had been taken from his home and killed by a socialist gang that did not respect the surrender and was there, hanging with his feet up. A horrendous and disgusting spectacle. The people around seem as if stunned, some sneering, others burning with fury against the dead.

The Allied forces entered Milan in the aftermath of this spectacle and were welcomed by the population:

They arrive one by one. The more genteel and distinguished English meet more people, although the common people were better prepared for the Americans.

Also entering Milan were General Crittenberger and other officers of the Psychological Warfare Branch (PWB), the body responsible for controlling and supervising the mass media – press, radio and cinema – and, as the country was liberated, gradually removing them from the rigid control of censorship and propaganda in place under the Fascist regime.

I know and speak with General Crittenberger, a nice guy, rather flat face, jovial colossus. Other officers of the Psychological Warfare Branch. It seems that Colonel Poletti, destined to be governor of Milan, has come forward a little too lightly. Going around Milan incognito, being hosted by private individuals, then visiting the prefecture and the town hall before the arrival of the Allied commands and has therefore aroused Clark' [Mark Wayne Clark was an American general of the Fifth Army and then all the Allied forces in Italy] is impatience who would have recalled him. In fact, Poletti has disappeared.

The *Times* correspondent Christopher Lumby went to meet the Liberals at their new headquarters on Via Belsana. He was pleased to have found Milan in such good condition and was especially interested in the question of the monarchy, 'asserting that it was not correct to believe that Great Britain was its supporter, but that it would have favoured it, as it would have favoured other forces if they were capable of keeping the country in order'.

After meeting the PWB, Giustino Arpesani received precise instructions and rules for the newspaper from Fromer, head of the information service (installed on the second floor of the *Corriere della Sera* headquarters):

The supply of paper is frozen and provided by assignment, the black market being prohibited (at *Libertà* which in these days is printing 230,000 copies) if it is assigned



for 150,000 copies. The publication of weeklies or illustrated periodicals will not be permitted without special authorisation for limited resources. To continue the publication of current newspapers, an application is required, through the CLNAI. We will denounce all the clandestine ones: *Risorgimento Liberale*, *Libertà*, *Società liberale*, *Quaderni* and those that were about to be published (*Rinascita dei giovani*, *Politica liberale*, *Rivista*), *Costume in Franchi*, *Il Caffè* in Cremona, *L'Indipendente* in Trieste (printed in Milan), *L'Avvenire liberale* printed in Canton Ticino. The PWB will publish at the *Corriere della Sera* the *Corriere degli Alleati*, for which they are looking for editors. News must be taken only from the PWB and the NNU [United Nations News], with a ban on radio sources. They recommend avoiding polemics between parties, relying on our loyalty. These rules will come into force in a few days when the AMG [Allied Military Government] takes office. Meeting for the newspaper. It is decided to invite E. Janni to come and take over the co-editorship of the newspaper. They want to form a sort of staff, the current makeshift editorial staff being insufficient and having already worked miracles in getting the newspaper out like this. There is much discussion about the opportunity of having Montanelli come too.

## Conclusions

The unpublished documents examined so far therefore show us the political and ideological fractures in the Resistance front after the victory. That dramatic and rapid disintegration favoured the 'memory loss' of many Liberal resisters who were disconcerted by the end of what they believed should have been a natural convergence – despite starting from different political positions and parties – around the objective of restoring freedom and independence to the nation and were exhausted by their own party's profound internal contradictions. In many cases, at the end of that period of commitment and personal risk, Liberal resisters preferred to abandon politics and retire to private and professional life.

Therefore, if regarded in the light of the unpublished documents available to us, Virginia Minoletti Quarello's choice to conclude the volume *Via Privata Siracusa* with the blunt phrase '29 April 1945: Piazzale Loreto!' (Minoletti Quarello 2015), leaving aside narration of the subsequent days, appears clearer and profoundly symbolic. Her reticence highlights how that unhappy episode was placed outside the history that Liberal resistance fighters believed they had lived up to that point, and outside political dialectics, entering a zone of pure ferocity in which the Liberal patriotic ideal was almost annihilated.

The first Liberal Party national congress, held on 29 April 1946, exactly one year after Mussolini's death, adds the missing piece to this story. The opposing options regarding the institutional question came to light dramatically at the assembly in the run-up to the referendum that would be held on 2 June of that same year.

Three motions were presented to the congress: the first called for the people to decide the nature of the new order through a referendum; the second proposed a monarchic orientation; and the third was for a clearly republican solution. When the respective documents were put to the vote, the congress recorded the most support for the monarchic motion, whose first signatory was none other than Edgardo Sogno. This provoked strongly negative reactions among the republican-leaning party leaders, including many Resistance veterans, who perceived it as undervaluing their antifascist activity. The first party resignations were recorded at the congress. Among them were the Minolettis, who had supported the left within the PLI and who were defined by Anton Dante Coda as *secessionist*:

The first truly responsible for the current situation are you, the secessionists of the first hour, by leaving you have weakened an organism that is now at the mercy of the latest arrivals.<sup>13</sup>

The complexity of the situation in which the Liberals found themselves during the final months of 1945 and the disappointment they felt towards many of their friends in Milan, Genoa and Turin were described by Virginia Minoletti Quarello in a letter to Luigi Granello:

That Cassandro, Libonati, Cattani, Arpesani, Morelli and so many others were excluded from the Constituent Assembly saddens me (even though I said goodbye to them), because it shows me that Liberalism, in its concrete manifestation as a party, is in agony, even if its abstract ideals always remain those that we loved and for which we suffered for so many years and fought in the exhausting period of the Resistance. I am painfully disappointed by many things, by many people and I really feel that I do not know how to consider my life as a commodity to be bartered for ambition or material conquests.<sup>14</sup>

The PLI was deeply divided on issues such as the choice between monarchy and republic, but also on the relationship between antifascism and democracy. The internal fracture between a left that looked to the activists and antifascist unity and the predominantly anticommunist and monarchist right that imagined an alliance with the ‘common man’ – a fracture its president, Benedetto Croce, endeavoured to heal by placing the centre and the ‘pre-political’ function of Liberalism at the core of his political strength (Pace 2020) – resulted in splits on both sides, as well as in various changes of line by the leadership, until the party settled into the De Gasperi centrist coalition (see in particular Grassi Orsini 2005, 2007; Varvaro 2005).

Virginia Minoletti Quarello, despite being the only woman nominated by the Liberal Party to the national council for patriotic merits, decided not to run in the Constituent Assembly elections that year and to retire to Genoa, dedicating herself to social commitment. Bruno Minoletti, more politically active, was nominated director general of transport of the EEC in Brussels in 1962, a position he held until his health deteriorated.

Both began a life far removed from the war and the commitment to political resistance that had animated them in the period 1943–5, almost as if they had forgotten it.

In conclusion, we can state that there emerge from the diary kept by the Minoletti–Quarello couple in the days before and after 25 April 1945 four interesting historiographical elements, which contribute to encouraging and deepening knowledge on the relevance and complexity of the resistance movement. The first is the continuity, the extent and the efficiency of the Liberal partisan component, between Liguria, Piedmont and Lombardy. The second is the centrality of that component, up to the Liberation and beyond, to the Anglo-American troops and services. The third is the depth of the internal divisions in the CLNAI, which in reality had their roots in previous years, even – and indeed more so – at a time when the political situation was normalising towards the reconstruction of democratic pluralism. These counter-positions corresponded in the early days after the end of the war to the systematic attempt by the left-wing parties to gain positions by marginalising the politically moderate components such as the PLI. The fourth, finally, is the pre-existence and depth of the Liberal Party’s internal conflicts, which contributed to weakening it compared with other political forces, and which would soon translate not only into a less relevant role for the party in the political life of postwar Italy, but also into the splitting of the party from the experience, memory and vindication of its action in the partisan struggle.

## Notes

1. Born in Milan to a family of Piedmontese origin, Bruno Minoletti joined the Liberal Party at a very young age and became its city youth secretary at the age of 19. Already at that time he revealed deep antifascist convictions, through a series of political and cultural articles published in various newspapers and magazines. In 1926 he moved to Genoa, where he continued to carry out political activities thanks to his contacts with Emilio Borzino, Emanuele Sella and the Rensis. At the same time he graduated in law, but in 1928 he was arrested and detained for a short period. Having resumed political activity at the beginning of the 1940s and established contact with Ferruccio Parri, he worked to build a united antifascist front. After 25 July 1943, he collaborated with Mario Albini (Giorgi), Errico Martino (Parini) and Francesco Manzitti (Marchetti), - all the names in brackets refer to the battle names of each character, as they are reported in the diary - in the reconstitution of the PLI in Liguria, representing the party in the Ligurian CLN from the moment of its constitution, carrying out valuable liaison work with the partisan bands in the hinterland, and administering the 'Liberation loan'. Forced to leave his job in April 1944 for refusing to swear allegiance to the Italian Social Republic and wanted by the police, he went into hiding, leaving the Liberal representation in the CLN to Giovanni Savoretti (Lanza). Having moved to Milan in November together with his wife Virginia, he collaborated with the CLNAI, maintaining contacts between the Lombard capital and Genoa. Immediately after the liberation, he became commissioner of the CLNAI and trustee of the Allied military government; his detachment from the PLI dates to the following year, as he did not share the new conservative orientations. A protagonist of the economic and cultural life of Genoa, he was secretary of the chamber of commerce from 1945 to 1962, president of the Historical Institute of the Resistance in the early 1950s, and, in the following decade, director general of transport for the EEC.
2. Virginia Quarello was born in Turin on 14 July 1907. She began her conspiratorial activity in the aftermath of 8 September 1943, collaborating daily with the Ligurian CLN in every form of its activity and also hosting it in her home in Nervi. She was one of the founders of the Comitato femminile di Coordinamento antifascista (Women's Antifascist Co-ordination Committee) in Genoa. She administered, also taking care of its placement, the clandestine money loans to the Ligurian CLN liberation, for the liberation struggle. She kept deposits of clandestine material and organised its transport. She organised the first aid posts for the partisan bands in the Greater Genoa area from Sestri Ponente to Nervi. She also collaborated with the military and political information office of the CLN. In November 1944 she had to move with her husband, Bruno Minoletti, to Milan, where she immediately resumed her conspiratorial activity. She collaborated with the command of the autonomous formations of the Corpo Volontari della Libertà (Volunteer Corps of Freedom), and in particular with the Ippocampo Brigade. She took care of transporting medicines and orders to the formations located in Milan and the province and connecting partisans with their families. She implemented a systematic liaison service with the political prisoners in San Vittore's V wing. She hosted in her home with her husband, up until the liberation, members of the CLNAI and the Franchi organisation, the headquarters of the conspiratorial committees and large archives. She collaborated with clandestine newspapers and the organisation of the clandestine Liberal Congress of Northern Italy, together with Elda Pandini. After the liberation she was an active organiser of the *Fondazione Solidarietà Nazionale* and the only woman from the Liberal Party to be appointed national consultant (*consultrice nazionale*).
3. Istituto Ligure per la Storia della Resistenza e dell'Età Contemporanea (henceforth ILSREC), part of the larger Fondo Bruno Minoletti.
4. The archives and related sources referred to are: ILSREC; Fondo CLN regionale della Liguria; Fondo Raccolta di documenti sull'organizzazione e le attività militari delle formazioni partigiane liguri; Fondo Raccolta di documenti sull'organizzazione e l'attività dei CLN e dei partiti antifascisti liguri; Fondo Raccolta di documenti sul fascismo, l'antifascismo e la Seconda guerra mondiale; Fondo Raccolta di documenti su esponenti e memorie della Resistenza ligure; Archivio Storico della Camera dei Deputati; Fondo Istituto per la Storia del Movimento liberale; Fondo Ercole Camurani (1946–87); Fondo PLI nazionale (1916–82); Fondo Bruno Villabruna (1947–60); Fondo Giovanni Malagodi (1944–82); Istituto Storico Torinese per lo studio della Resistenza e dell'Età Contemporanea, Fondo PLI; Istituto Nazionale Ferruccio Parri, Fondo CLN Alta Italia, Fondo Merzagora Cesare; Fondo CLN regionale Lombardia; Fondo CLN Città di Milano; Fondo CLN rionali di Milano; Fondo Schede del Carcere di San Vittore di Milano; Fondo Camurani Ercole.
5. For the reconstruction of the history of the bands active in Liguria, see ILSREC, Fondo PLI, attività militare.b.12.
6. 'It was at this precise moment,' Virginia Minoletti Quarello wrote in the columns of *Il Secolo Liberale* in 1948, 'that in the streets of an unfamiliar city, on the run, anguished by the death of his friends, Edgardo Sogno wrote in the silence of the night hours the ideal birth certificate for Franchi.'
7. Archivio Privato Edgardo Sogno, Turin, Organizzazione Franchi.
8. All extracts, where not expressly specified, are taken from the Fondo Bruno Minoletti at ILSREC.
9. Fondo Bruno Minoletti, ILSREC.
10. Fondo Bruno Minoletti, ILSREC.

11. Fondo Bruno Minoletti, ILSREC.
12. See <https://www.raicultura.it/iframe/storia/foto/2019/02/Enrico-Mattei-ca2f3fd9-45c9-41a4-94fd421a1fa94c2d.html>, accessed 28 April 2024.
13. Letter from Anton Dante Coda to Bruno Minoletti, 8 January 1948, in the Istituto piemontese per la storia della Resistenza e dell'Età Contemporanea, Turin.
14. Letter from Virginia Minoletti Quarello to Luigi Granello, 23 June 1946, in the Archivio Luigi Granello, Fondazione Museo storico del Trentino, Trento.

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### Italian summary

L'attività cospirativa partigiana di Virginia Minoletti Quarello iniziò dopo l'8 settembre 1943. Il marito Bruno Minoletti era impegnato, anche egli, nel Partito Liberale Italiano fin dalla sua fondazione. La loro casa a Nervi, vicino a Genova, divenne la sede del locale CLN, e la coppia giocò un ruolo di primo piano nel collegare la rete dell'Organizzazione partigiana liberale Franchi, guidata da Edgardo Sogno, nell'Italia nord-occidentale. Nel novembre del 1944 Quarello e Minoletti si trasferirono a Milano, dove stabilirono la loro base operativa in Via Privata Siracusa. Le carte inedite Minoletti-Quarello costituiscono una ricca fonte di informazioni, da un punto di vista peculiare, sui convulsi giorni precedenti e successivi all'insurrezione generale del 25 aprile, gettando ulteriore luce su eventi come l'ingresso degli Alleati in città, l'uccisione di Benito Mussolini e la macabra scena di Piazzale Loreto. Il diario della coppia rappresenta una fonte primaria per una conoscenza storica più approfondita sulle radici e sulla rilevanza della faida scoppiata rapidamente, in quei giorni, tra i diversi partiti del CLNAI, sull'emarginazione della parte liberale, e sulla divisione crescente al suo interno dello stesso PLI sulla questione istituzionale e sul valore della Resistenza.

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