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Fabio Simonetti
University of Reading and Imperial War Museum

Researching Testimonial Objects: The Postmemory of the Allied Occupation of Italy through the Imperial War Museum's Collections

Abstract

This article examines from different angles the memory and postmemory of the Allied liberation and consequent occupation of Italy in the years 1943-1947 by selecting and "reading" a series of objects among the Imperial War Museum holding. The relevance of the museum's collection and display lies in its capacity to narrate history through highly significant objects, linking past and present, memory and postmemory, individual and collective remembrance. Taking my cue from Aleida Assmann's parallel between remembering and forgetting, and the museum's two faces of the display and the store, I intend to consider IWM's role as a bridge between the generation who first retained, used and donated their own cherished testimonial objects, and the new generations who experienced the war only by interacting with those items.

1. The Imperial War Museum's collection and its testimonial objects

Since the end of the Second World War, the elaboration of both the cultural memory and the postmemory of the conflict in Italy – in the forms of official memorialisation and individual transmission of past experiences from generation to generation – involved the years of the Allied occupation only marginally.[1] The main reason behind this flaw is the close proximity of the occupation period to landmark events, such as the German occupation and the civil war, that dominated the traumatic memory of the people and the communities who lived in post-war Italy. As Maurice Halbwachs demonstrated in his seminal work, memory is largely framed and formed in the present rather than the past (1992,

[1] According to Aleida Assmann the term "cultural memory" defines the dynamics in which human relationships to the past are interpreted by social institutions "with the aid of memorial signs such as symbols, texts, images, rites, ceremonies, places, and monuments" (2004, 26). Marianne Hirsch defined "postmemory" the "relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (2012, 5).

34). As a result, especially in central-northern Italy, where the occupation had been longer and harder to endure, it was inevitably the memory of the bombings, atrocities, and deportations that dominated eyewitnesses' recollections of the Second World War, and that tended to be subject to public recognition and commemoration.

In this perspective, the role attributed to the Allied liberation was primarily that of providing a logical conclusion to this narrative. However, when post-war communities interpreted their own liberation exclusively as the "end" of a traumatic historical experience – the German occupation and the havoc created by the civil war –, they neglected to see the event as the "beginning" of a new, crucial, transitory period: that of the Allied occupation and the slow reconstruction. Consequently, anything that happened after this fundamental turning point was largely left out of most eyewitnesses' discourse, or at least strongly marginalised. At the same time, the public recognition of relevant events linked to the arrival of the Allied armies in Italy and the memory of their presence was equally problematic. This is the case, for instance, of the protracted, gruelling four-year-long campaign carried out by British veteran Harry Shindler, that culminated only in 2006 with the erection in Rome of a monument to the liberators.[2]

The difficulty in critically approaching the immediate post-war scenario – a period still marked by great hardship and characterized by the prolonged presence of the liberators in the new guise of occupiers – has made problematic an open confrontation with the Allied occupation of Italy individually as well as collectively. After all, memory is a highly selective instrument, and, as German theorist Aleida Assmann argued, sometimes "in order to remember some things, other things must be forgotten" (2008, 97). In describing the dynamics of cultural memory, Assmann analysed the interactions between remembering and forgetting in both their active and passive modes. In so doing, she argued that these two modes of cultural memory may be illustrated by two museum rooms: the gallery and the store. Museums can display only a small selection of the objects they hold, making them accessible to the public through the mediation of the curator. However, their stores contain a large variety of artefacts which are not

[2] Harry Shindler fought in the Italian Campaign from Anzio to Trieste and subsequently married an Italian woman he met during the war. He currently lives in Italy. He recalled the wide scepticism he encountered during his campaign to erect a monument to the liberators in a book he published in 2008 and in an interview recorded by the author on 23 January 2019. Today the monument is the location where the annual ceremony for the liberation of Rome takes place, on 4 June.

publicly presented but are archived "halfway between the canon and forgetting," waiting for their turn to be brought back to light (2008, 102). This distinction means that while "some memories are preserved but not really kept alive," others are publicly displayed and commemorated, with the result that certain past events come to acquire greater significance than others or have the potential to affect a wider audience (Arnold-de Simine 2013, 22).

The Imperial War Museum (London, UK), a leading resource for the study of contemporary conflicts, has recently celebrated its centenary. The IWM was founded in 1917, while the First World War battlefields were still claiming countless lives, to provide UK with a national war museum to record the events of what was then known as the Great War. According to its founders' vision, the museum would have a twofold role as a place for both commemoration and research. At the beginning of its history, the museum, originally founded to commemorate the "war to end all wars," was confronted with the issue of facing the outbreak of new conflicts – first of all, the Second World War. This circumstance put into question its own existence and rationale, while stimulating the development of new approaches to its subject matter.

Today IWM's unique role is to address and interpret the history and the memory of 20th- and 21st-century conflicts by showing how these events have affected people's lives and shaped today's world. Furthermore, a recent and crucial transformation in the definition of the museum's own identity as a centre of research and education has favoured a more social-cultural approach to the interpretation of modern conflicts (Cundy 2015, 25). With its vast, heterogeneous collection of objects, artworks, photos, films, and documents, its sound archive as well as its specialist library, the museum is committed to maintaining its leading role in promoting innovative research on its subject matters. An indication of IWM's current efforts is the reinterpretation and complete renovation of the Second World War and Holocaust galleries, due to open in 2021.

Marianne Hirsch defined "testimonial objects" those items that, due to the particular significance they have for their owner, are able to carry memory traces from the past and represent the process of its transmission from one generation to another (Hirsch and Spitzer 2006, 355 and Hirsch 2012, 178). Taking my cue from this definition, as well as from Assmann's previously quoted reflection, I aim to examine a series of objects from the IWM collection not currently on display, in order to "read" them as witnesses of different aspects of the postmemory of the British presence in Italy and of the soldiers' encounter with Italian civilians. In so doing, it will be necessary to cross the cultural and geographic borders of what I called the "Italian contact zone," a definition

inspired by the term Mary Louise Pratt coined to indicate specific areas of conflictual cultural encounters involving peoples geographically and historically separated (1991, 34).

What is so special about museum objects? Even when an accessioned item is not exhibited in a display but placed out of sight in a dark store, the fact that it has been "singled out" and preserved makes it different from other objects, charging it with a completely new connotation. It is, in fact, "in the space between the person and the object that new connections and meanings are articulated" (Poulter 2014, 26). In this context, the IWM plays the role of the mediator, bridging the generation who first retained, used, and donated its own cherished possession, and the people who experienced war only by interacting with those items at the museum. In so doing, the museum itself becomes a significant place of encounters: between visitors and objects, between new generations and history.[3]

In this analysis, I also intend to highlight the role oral history sources – not necessarily linked to the specific objects discussed – can play in the transmission of these items' meanings to new generations. As oral historian Alessandro Portelli argued, the greatest value of oral history lies in what these sources can tell us about the meaning of an event for the speaker, rather than in the event itself (1981, 99). The same applies to objects, since their relevance can be better understood when their context is filled out with the memories of those who originally created or interacted with them. It is to some of the artefacts and places I came across while studying the encounter between British soldiers and Italian civilians that I now turn my attention.[4]

2. An English-Italian dictionary: a bridge between two cultures

Without a doubt, the object that in most cases made possible the wartime interaction between British soldiers and Italian civilians was the bilingual dictionary. From the beginning of the Allied campaign in Italy, in July 1943, both

[3] On material culture and the study of artefacts as they are perceived in relation to specific cultural and historic contexts and communities, see Asa Berger 2014 and the essays in Buchli 2002. On museum objects in relation to material culture see Fritsch 2011.

[4] I recorded all the interviews used in this article during my ongoing PhD research on "British Military Encounters with Italian Civilians, 1943-1946" (provisional title). This is an AHRC funded project in collaboration with the University of Reading and the Imperial War Museums. Interviews will be acquisitioned by the IWM's Sound Archive at the end of the current research.

the British and American armies produced special soldiers' English-Italian dictionaries and guidebooks designed to aid servicemen in their daily interactions with locals. However, the British could also benefit from Italian language lessons published by army newspapers,[5] and from local publishers who saw their opportunity and produced numerous sought-after phrasebooks that predictably focused on less licit interactions with women and other kinds of daily street encounters. An example of the competition created by this brand-new market was a dictionary printed in Naples in 1943 that claimed: "all other pamphlets you see around are useless for you" [figure 1].[6]

During the two days I spent interviewing British veteran Roy Quinton, present Chairman of the Italy Star Association, he shared with me his recollections of his fight with the Royal Artillery from Taranto to Rimini. In the course of our discussion, it became clear that the dictionary was one of the key factors influencing not only his wartime experience but also the rest of his whole life. Once in Italy, Roy Quinton's initiative and commitment helped him gain fluency in the language while his interest in the Italian culture persuaded him to learn more about the country: "If I survive the war – he said – I want to learn to speak Italian! And so [my parents] sent me dictionaries and small grammar-books, and from then on every spare minute I had I was studying. Even when we were under bombardment, we had holes in the ground, and I would get these books out 'cause it took my mind out of the war."[7]

For Roy Quinton learning Italian was not only a "therapy" against the horror of war: thanks to his mastery of the Italian language, at the end of 1944 he was withdrawn from the frontline, avoiding the last bloody battles of the Italian Campaign. Later on, working as an interpreter, Roy spent time in Italian cities behind the Allied lines and had the chance to meet Irene, the young woman from Perugia he would marry immediately after the war. Roy described the first time he knocked at her door, after having heard piano music coming out of a home, as the best thing he ever did: "My life has changed when I met my wife, Irene." Significantly, Roy Quinton has kept his own dictionary ever since. If for Roy this wartime souvenir is an object able to authenticate his own past and trigger memories of places and faces belonging to that particular time of his life, for the readers of the IWM's phrasebook it represents the bridge between two cultures,

[5] See, for example: Union Jack: The Newspaper for the British Fighting Forces (Italy ed.) and Eight Army News (Sicily and Italy ed.).
[6] IWM, LBY K. 16/2896: "English – Italian (Figured Pronunciation): The Essential of Italian Grammar Dictionary and Pronunciation."
[7] Interview with Roy Quinton recorded by Fabio Simonetti on 9 January 2018.

a testimony of the multicultural wartime encounter he, and many others like him, experienced in Italy.

Figure 1. *IWM, LBY K. 16/2896: English-Italian dictionary printed in Naples during the war. In the top right, a photo from Roy Quinton and Irene's wedding day in Perugia (from Roy Quinton's private collection).*

3. A San Carlo poster: a new kind of occupation

An English-Italian poster advertising the play *Otello* at the prestigious Real Teatro di San Carlo in Naples, one of the oldest opera houses in the world, provides the chance to discuss the Allied authorities' attitude towards the occupation of Italy [figure 2].[8] After the Anglo-American forces established their presence in the city, in October 1943, the strategical importance of its harbour, as

[8] IWM, LBY 83/726: "Collection of ephemera relating to the San Carlo Opera House, Naples, during the Second World War".

well as the transit of soldiers on leave or convalescent, made Naples the city with the highest concentration of troops in Italy. With 480,000 soldiers attending its performances only in the first year since its reopening, the San Carlo Opera House soon became one of the troops' favourite authorised sources of entertainment.[9] For occupiers and occupied, the theatre was also an important site for encounters as both could work on the productions together as well as sit next to each other in the audience.

It was on 4 November 1943, just over a month after the first Allied soldiers entered war-torn Naples, that Lt Peter Francis of the Royal Artillery made his first acquaintance with the ruins of the San Carlo. The theatre had been closed in 1942 and it was now in a terrible state: bomb damage had blasted the foyer, debris and layers of dust covered the internal surface, there was no electricity or water and a German machine gun nest was still installed on its roof. However, the British requisitioned the building and, under Peter Francis's authority, on 15 November 1943, with the frontline just 30 miles away, the venue officially re-opened its doors to soldiers and civilians. While the original purpose of this initiative was just to "give troops something to do," it soon became clear that soldiers found much more in this experience; by the end of the war, 4 million servicemen had enjoyed opera throughout the country.

When the news that the theatre was about to reopen and in need of workers spread, Neapolitans hastened to the venue, and 260 of them started working under British authorities. The first production of San Carlo's new course was an improvised revue significantly titled *So this is Naples*. After an initial series of technical issues, the decidedly diverse production offered the crowded auditorium "dancers wearing brassieres and 'G' strings," a band playing "the latest popular successes in swing time," and a tenor singing *Torna a Surriento*. Regardless of the mixed success of this first performance, Francis's ambitious plan to open a proper opera season eventually materialised on Boxing Day, with a performance of Puccini's *La Bohème*. From then on, the San Carlo offered opera performances and symphony concerts on an almost daily basis. Italian artists, managed by the British Central Mediterranean Force Opera Company, proved so successful that in 1946 they toured London with eight productions and were the first to reintroduce Italian operas to Covent Garden after the war. The poster advertising San Carlo's opera season represents the Allied propaganda efforts to mark their occupation as very different from that of the recently departed

[9] All information regarding the British authorities "resurrection" of the San Carlo come from IWM, LBY 83/726-1: "San Carlo Souvenir: Personal Impressions of a Season of Opera at the San Carlo Opera House, Naples – 1943/1946, by F. Fesel."

Germans. In their strategy, the Naples theatre epitomised a new kind of occupation, one characterized not by round-ups and imprisonments, but by concerts, clubs, and exhibitions – an explicit manifestation of Allied countries' democratic values over totalitarianism.

The memory of the resurrection of the San Carlo by the British authorities allows considering the story of Cpl Frank Capey, stationed in Naples between 1944 and 1946. When I interviewed his widow, Doris, I was surprised to hear that the only wartime experiences he shared with his family were his countless visits to the San Carlo. However, when I researched deeper into Frank's army career, it appeared that he fought, and was wounded, at the 1944 battle on the Cassino front. Subsequently, his withdrawal from the frontline and the following posting to Naples with military police duties was only the consequence of his ear injury. Thinking of her husband's passion for opera, Doris kept saying: "they couldn't send him to a better place."[10] Not surprisingly, his only wartime souvenirs were five San Carlo opera programmes that he carefully kept. Perhaps Frank Capey's focus on his wartime encounter with the Italian opera betrays his deliberate effort to forget what must have been the horrific sight of the Cassino battlefield and the painful memory of the starving people of Naples: a deliberate attempt to divert and rewrite the postmemory of his wartime experience that left his family with a more acceptable account of his past.

[10] Interview with Doris Capey (neè Smith) recorded by Fabio Simonetti on 28 October 2017.

Figure 2. *IWM, LBY 83 / 726: Collection of ephemera relating to the San Carlo Opera House, Naples, during the Second World War. In the top right, a photo of Cpl Frank Capey (from Doris Capey's private collection).*

4. A *Luftwaffe* fur coat: on pleasant wartime encounters

The next item – a fur coat from a collection of objects recently acquired by the IWM – provides an insight into more pleasant encounters between British soldiers and Italian civilians. The object is linked to the story of Cpl Walter Franklin, a RAF Fitter who worked on Spitfire engines in Italy between 1945 and 1947, and Tina, a young Italian chambermaid at the RAF Sorrento Rest & Leave Camp [figure 3].[11] The couple met thanks to a football match organised by the British Army between soldiers on leave and locals in which both he and Tina's brothers took part. The new Anglo-Italian couple married in 1946 in Pompeii,

[11] IWM, UNI 16101: "Coat, fur: woman's, civilian." The collection of objects held at the IWM also contains a muff made out of a Luftwaffe flying jacket (UNI 16102), a scratch-built Lancaster model made from Spitfire windscreen glass (MOD 2551), and a few photographs and documents relating to Walter Franklin and his wife dating back to the period of their wedding (Documents.26444).

but their decision to move to the UK proved more difficult than they initially thought. In fact, being an Italian civilian, Tina was not allowed to travel with British soldiers, and she had to wait for the Army to organise an official transport for Italian war brides. When her steam train finally arrived in London at Waterloo Station, her sister-in-law was the only member of the Franklin family who could make for the station, but she had only a small black and white photograph to identify her among all the other brides. However, once reunited, Frank and Tina lived together for thirty-one years and their shared passion for dancing bonded their union until she died in 1977.

When she arrived in London, Tina was wearing a fur coat Walter had previously gifted her. This object also has its own, troubled story. Its wartime journey began in the hands of its German producers as a *Luftwaffe* flying jacket. When the Nazis were driven off Naples, the coat was left in a warehouse in nearby Pomigliano d'Arco, where Cpl Franklin found it and saw in it a perfect gift for his young Italian bride-to-be. Only at this point, when a tailor from Sorrento adapted it to its new use, did this military garment begin its new life as the fur coat that Tina brought with her to the UK – an object that crossed both the frontline and the borders of the multifaceted Italian contact zone before to arrive at the IWM.

Figure 3. *IWM, UNI 16101: Single-breasted, three-quarter length coat of brown fur, constructed of pelts originally used to line Luftwaffe flying jackets. In the bottom, two photographs from IWM, Documents 26444: Private papers of Cpl. W.J.E. Franklin.*

Now that both Walter and Tina have died, the task of telling the story of their wartime encounter falls to their eldest daughter, whose name bears the marks of the Italian contact zone: Denise Filomena. She still remembers her mother "wearing [the fur] in England in the early sixties but never after as it was rather stiff and heavy, and modern wool coats were more wearable and practical."[12] Despite this, she has kept the coat and wore it on occasions. Regrettably, as it often happens, she did not ask her parents about their past when she was younger, and they did not use to talk about it. However, her decision to donate her cherished heirloom to the IWM ensured that Tina and Walter's story would not fade. In so doing, she gave her parents' object the chance to become a testimony of the pleasant encounters that also characterized the Allied presence in Italy, an

[12] Email to the author, 20 January 2018.

experience that was inevitably shaped by the frictions emerging from the forced cohabitation of Allied soldiers and Italian civilians in a war-torn country.

5. Silk undergarments: on the interpretation of controversial objects

The last objects considered are a French-style bra and knickers made for Patricia Knatchbull, 2nd Countess Mountbatten of Burma and first daughter of Louis Mountbatten [figure 4].[13] What is striking about the undergarments is that they are made from silk escape maps of Italy of the kind issued to RAF personnel for emergency use in enemy territory. The fact that the cities of Trieste and Milan are shown right on the front of the bra might not be a coincidence, but it could be related to the personal story of the wartime owner of the map. However, as the museum's archive does not hold enough information about this collection, the observer's mind is left without the curator's guidance and domestication function. Is the object's transformation in undergarments to be connected to the dimension of a colonialist attitude towards a defeated country? Or is it an expression of their original owner's character and masculinity? Or rather a personal symbol of pride, a brave memento of a wartime experience that was gifted to a loved one?

This group of objects invites to consider the diverse interpretations that may fill the gap between different observers and a controversial object. The risk of "contaminating" a balanced judgment due to the lack of background information and the anachronistic influence of present-day political or social ideas needs to be taken into consideration. Such a discourse becomes particularly relevant when we think that Second World War artefacts are still subjected to high public sensitivity and therefore "carry an extraordinary burden of responsibility" (Crane 1997, 328). The famous controversy aroused in 1993-1995 around the aborted Enola Gay exhibit at the National Air and Space Museum (USA) demonstrated how memories of this period are still emotionally and politically charged, and how the point of view of the curator could diverge from that of the veteran/eyewitness. Would the aircraft that dropped the first atomic bomb represent the use of new technologies for mass destruction or democracy's triumph over tyranny?[14]

As Assmann argued, "objects and places do not themselves carry qualities of past lives, they do hold whatever we ourselves project onto them or invest them

[13] IWM, EPH 10930: "Underwear."
[14] On the Enola Gay controversy see Linenthal and Englehardt 1996 and Crane 1997.

with" (2006, 211). Even when there is little documentation associated with it, a museum object does still communicate with the observer. However, the possibility to establish a careful dialogue with its physicality might produce alternative interpretations of its history. What is certain is that when they enter a museum collection objects lose their original purpose – or their "place in life," as Assmann called it – and are given the chance of a second life that prolongs their existence (2008, 103). Thanks to the new exclusive status they acquire, museum objects carry and transmit different meanings, and prompt a dialogue with visitors interacting with the rest of the collection, thus acting as contact zones themselves (Poulter 2014, 27).

***Figure 4**. IWM, EPH 10930: Ladies bra and knickers set made from silk escape maps of Italy.*

6. Conclusions

Today IWM holds more than twelve million objects, but, inevitably, only a very small percentage of these items are on display at any one time. Consequentially, display choices provide museums – and especially war museums – with a crucial responsibility while highlighting their role in building a society's memory and

identity. History museums are important places of public memory: by bringing some memories alive while "excluding" others (Keene 2005, 98), they have the possibility to direct the attention of the community and foster particular interpretations of crucial historical events, thus 'rationalizing' and sometimes 'institutionalizing' the past (Walsh 1992, 2). In the case of the IWM, it is evident how the current display dedicates only a narrow space to the Italian Campaign. This choice is echoed in the long-standing national view that since the end of the war strongly privileges the events that brought Allied troops from France to Germany at the expense of the alleged "D-Day dodgers" who fought in Italy.

Today, seventy-five years after the end of the Second World War, the gradual passing away of eyewitnesses challenges the museum in new ways: can objects that were meaningful to some people evoke meaning in others and help later generations to interpret the past? The feeling that objects "have soaked up the events in which [they have] played a role" is an impression that can be helped and shaped by the mediation and interpretation of the museum's curator (Arnold-de Simine 2013, 84). With the disappearance of the unmediated first-hand experience of the war, the IWM's urge to pass on the memory from generation to generation is reflected by the increasing importance drawn on personal stories. By displaying its collection of objects and linking them to accounts from diaries, letters and interviews, the display acquires a new meaning that is supposed to give the visitor the possibility to identify with a specific experience in order to stimulate reflection. People often feel that the testimonial objects they donated to the museum, as well as their recollection of past events, are too insignificant to be of general interest. However, once their stories are accessioned into the museum's collection, they become a meaningful part of a larger, collective body of experiences, while remaining nonetheless valuable individual testimonies (Keene 2005, 96).

Silke Arnold-de Simine stated that contemporary memorial museums provide "a controlled and safe environment in which all members of society can potentially expose themselves to past events that are difficult to remember because they are painful and/or controversial and inspire guilt rather than pride" (2013, 119). The IWM's collection of objects and its use of personal recollections gives visitors the possibility to become "secondary witnesses," by empathising with the experience of individual soldiers and civilians in wartime. In this process, the IWM's role is to mediate the transmission of experiences that the traumatised eyewitness of the events could not articulate in a coherent form. It is thanks to the curator's selection of significant objects and personal recollections from the museum's collection, and to its historically accurate interpretation of their stories

in the display, that a specific experience passes on to the museum's visitors and to new generations. This mediated process would encourage such "secondary witnesses" to emphatically re-live and partially re-experience the emotions aroused by the display, finding in testimonial objects a meaning that was often denied even to their original owners.

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Fabio Simonetti is Sessional Lecturer at the University of Reading, where he currently teaches History of Modern Italy. He is a Ph.D. student at the University of Reading and the Imperial War Museums as part of an AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Partnership (CDP), and he is researching on the encounter between British soldiers and Italian civilians during the Second World War. He is the author of a monography entitled *Via Tasso. Quartier generale e carcere tedesco durante l'occupazione di Roma* (Odradek, 2016), and he has published articles on different aspects of Italy's involvement in the Second World War: *Shaping Each Other: British and Italian Depictions of the Enemy (1935-1943)* (Pacini Editore, 2020), and *From the Alps to the American Air Museum: Pont-Saint-Martin and the Memory of the Bombing Raid of 23 August 1944* (IWM Despatches, 2016).