Experiencing war as the ‘enemy other’
Cultural History of Modern War

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Experiencing war as the ‘enemy other’

Italian Scottish experience in World War II

WENDY UGOLINI

Manchester University Press
Manchester
In memory of
John Herbertson
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<td>ATS</td>
<td>Auxiliary Territorial Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>CID</td>
<td>Criminal Investigation Department</td>
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<td>CO</td>
<td>Conscientious Objector</td>
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<td>CWGC</td>
<td>Commonwealth War Graves Commission</td>
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<td>ECAC</td>
<td>Executive Committee of the Army Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>HLI</td>
<td>Highland Light Infantry</td>
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<td>KOSB</td>
<td>King’s Own Scottish Borderers</td>
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<tr>
<td>LDV</td>
<td>Local Defence Volunteers</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCO</td>
<td>Non Commissioned Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>PNF</td>
<td><em>Partito Nazionale Fascista</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>POW</td>
<td>Prisoner of War</td>
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<tr>
<td>RA</td>
<td>Royal Artillery</td>
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<td>RAF</td>
<td>Royal Air Force</td>
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<td>RAMC</td>
<td>Royal Army Medical Corps</td>
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<td>RASC</td>
<td>Royal Army Service Corps</td>
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<td>WAAF</td>
<td>Women’s Auxiliary Air Force</td>
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On a more personal note, this book is dedicated to my late grandfather, John Herbertson, who encouraged my love of history from an early age. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my parents, Val and Mike, for a lifetime of support and for their generosity of heart and spirit. Last but not least, I would like to thank my children, Alex and Holly and my husband, Paul, for pretty much everything.
Introduction

In the neglected 1953 play, Gentle Like a Dove, set in Edinburgh on the night Italy declares war on Britain, local people ferociously attack the shop of their neighbour, Italian ice cream maker, Luigi Campanelli. Offstage, his son Domenico, a British-born soldier home on leave, confronts the angry mob but fails to quell the onslaught. He re-enters the scene from the tenement stair, ‘bruised, dishevelled. There is blood on his brow and hand and his tunic sleeve is torn from the shoulder’. A symbolic representation of the fragility of his status in Britain, Campanelli’s ‘British battledress’ is in tatters. Earlier on, his childhood sweetheart had admonished their neighbours: ‘Ye should think black burnin’ shame o’ yersel’. A foreigner! But he’s in the British Army.’ Even though Campanelli has demonstrated his loyalty to Britain by joining up in 1939, his attempts to belong are doomed to failure: he will always be an ‘Italiano’; a ‘fancy ice cream man’.¹ When Italy declared war on Britain and France in June 1940, the estimated Italian population in Britain stood at around 35,000, including 10-15,000 children born and raised in Britain.² Most second-generation Italians were dual nationals, deriving Italian citizenship from their father on the grounds of *jus sanguinis* (nationality acquired by descent or blood) and British citizenship from *jus soli* (nationality derived from birth).³ In the most dramatic fashion, the outbreak of war between the two countries illustrated the existence of competing or overlapping ‘communities of allegiance’ amongst this second generation.⁴ Indeed, the experiences of the Italian population in Britain during World War Two illuminate the complex and diverse ways in which ethnicity interacts with a sense of belonging to a nation at a time of conflict and how notions of who is
entitled to be part of a ‘national’ community can shift and evolve over time.5

The outbreak of World War Two necessitated powerful definitions within the national imaginary of ‘we’ and ‘them’ with the articulation of a unitary British identity inevitably raising questions of ‘who was included and who was excluded’.6 At the same time, as Sonya Rose has shown, the wartime pull to unity was ‘haunted by the spectre of division and difference’ and the ‘meanings of citizenship’ remained subject to contestation.7 By recovering the personal testimonies of men and women of Italian origin who lived in Scotland during the war, many of whom served in the British forces, this monograph aims to contribute to the debate on how we examine and document ‘the phenomenon of hybrid identity’ amongst second-generation immigrants at a time of national conflict.8 The government’s construction of Italian, German and Austrian immigrants as the ‘enemy within’ during the invasion scare of 1940 was reflected in its policy of internment, deportation and relocation and meant that Italian families were, both literally and metaphorically, excluded from the wartime rhetoric of national unity. In the run-up to the war, MI5 had compiled a list of 1500 Italians, categorised as ‘desperate characters’, based largely on the membership lists of the Italian Fascist clubs which had formed across the United Kingdom. When Italy declared war on Britain on 10 June 1940 there was increasing press hysteria about a potential ‘fifth column’ within Britain following Germany’s sweeping invasion of the Low Countries, and Churchill ordered that all male Italians between the ages of sixteen and seventy who had been resident in Britain for less than twenty years and all those listed on MI5’s list should be interned. Under Defence Regulation 18B, 600 British subjects of Italian origin, including some women, were also detained; around one-third were from Scotland.9 Internees were deported either to the Isle of Man or the Dominions, and in July one ship transporting internees to Canada, the Arandora Star, was torpedoed killing over 400 Italians. Italian nationals not affected by internment but living in ‘protected areas’ on the east or south-east coast of Britain were ordered to leave their homes and relocate twenty miles inland. At the same time as the government pursued its policies, anti-Italian feeling erupted onto the landscape, with riots breaking out across the United Kingdom, in London, Liverpool, Belfast and other cities.10 It is generally agreed that the attacks were at their most vociferous in Scottish cities; the mass looting which broke out in Edinburgh was described by the local paper as ‘an orgy of destruction’.11
The publication of three White Papers from July to October 1940 cumulatively provided internees with the opportunity to leave internment camps. Most Italians were released under Category 22, which dealt with those who had been living in Britain ‘since early childhood, or for at least twenty years’, and were friendly towards their adopted country. Concurrently, women were able to apply to move back to ‘protected areas’ and thus 1941 witnessed the beginning of a return movement by Italian immigrants back to their homes and businesses. Some second-generation detainees remained interned until Italy’s surrender in 1943 whilst an even smaller cohort chose to remain interned until the end of the conflict in 1945, as an expression of loyalty to Italy. Throughout this period, thousands of second-generation Italians, as British subjects, were subject to military conscription and had enlisted in the British forces. The wartime experiences of Italians in Britain during World War Two were, therefore, far more variegated, contested and complex than traditional accounts have acknowledged. By analysing the personal testimonies of second-generation Italians in south-east Scotland in conjunction with archival records, this book aims to show how, in contrast to the usual narrative motifs associated with domestic wartime Britain such as evacuation, air raids and rationing, remembrance within the Italian community revolves around varying manifestations of anti-Italian hostility ranging from state-sponsored policies through to localised incidences of verbal and physical abuse. Like second-generation Irish immigrants in Britain studied by Bronwen Walter and her colleagues, men and women of Italian descent who lived through World War Two offer ‘hybrid constructions’ of personal identity which emerge in oppositional ways to the traditional meta-narrative of Britain at war. One of the leading authorities on the Italian presence in Britain, Terri Colpi has argued that second-generation Italians who grew up during the war ‘linked Italianness with “negative enemy status” ’ and have since tried to ‘camouflage their true identity’ by assimilating into British society. She defines assimilation as second-generation Italians who have Anglicised their names, ‘refused to speak or learn Italian’ and married ‘out’ of the community. The findings contained within this monograph challenge this hypothesis by demonstrating the extent to which ethnicity is one of the key ‘imaginative categories’ through which experience is organised, recalled and passed on. Far from suppressing a sense of Italian identity, as Colpi asserts, the war often instilled a deep self-identification amongst the second generation of themselves as ‘Italian’. Yet, in a present-day culture which celebrates and
romanticises the Italian presence in Scotland, the traumatic experience of enduring the war years as the ‘enemy other’ has been largely overlooked and its long-term psychic scars ignored.

In recent decades, as part of a wider trend towards ‘rememoration’ of World War Two, Italianos in Scotland, and elsewhere in Britain, have begun to claim their own sites of memory, reflected in the growing literature surrounding the experience of internment and increasing memorialisation surrounding the Arandora Star disaster. This monograph addresses the relative invisibility of second-generation Italian experience both within popular memory of World War Two in Britain and within the Italian community itself. It outlines the construction of powerful myths and stories about the war amongst the Italian population in Scotland and looks at how the dominance of a singular elite narrative, focusing on the first-generation male experience of internment, has silenced the memories of different groups within the community. Indeed, major aspects of Italian Scottish experience - service in the British forces, life on the home front for women and children, essentially the memories of non-internees — have been largely concealed. The work of Colpi and Lucio Sponza, for example, totally fails to address the experiences of second-generation Italians who enlisted in the British forces. Indeed the silence surrounding those who fought in British uniform reflects the durability of the concept of the ‘good Italian’ which prevailed in the inter-war period when Mussolini’s Fascist regime aimed to encourage members of the Italian diaspora to retain allegiance to Italy. Colpi acknowledges that when war broke out between Italy and Britain, ‘the community became deeply split into the so-called “good Italians” (the Fascists) and “bad Italians” (the others), creating a great deal of factionalism and bitterness. Yet, to a quite remarkable degree, it is the memories and experiences of the former group which are consistently foregrounded in communal representations. In the post-war period, it has perhaps been in the interest of the more successful, commercially based members of the Italian community to reconstruct the past to suit the needs of the present, to emphasise the bonds of friendship and ignore the ‘tangled’ histories of the past. There is a tendency to use a singular elite narrative to make generalisations about the experiences of the Italian community which in turn denies class, gender, generational and political difference amongst the Italians in Scotland. The sheer human tragedy of internment and the Arandora Star disaster means that the meaning of these events has been amplified ‘into a symbolic and narrative formalisation of a culture’s shared self-representations’ marginalising the narratives of those who were not interned. The central internment
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narrative has been utilised to create the ‘story’ of the war and has come to represent what it meant to ‘be Italian’, or to be a ‘good Italian’, during the war. By analysing the personal testimonies of second-generation Italians, this monograph aims, to deconstruct the myths surrounding Italian Scottish wartime experience and question who remembers on behalf of the Italian community in Scotland. It endorses Nancy Wood’s assertion that historical analysis ‘must embrace not only memories that achieve public articulation, but those that are denied expression or recognition, as well as those memories that are displaced or merely alluded to’.24

Research methodology

As well as accessing national government records, local government documents, newspaper articles, MI5 intelligence reports, personal diaries and sound recordings held at the Imperial War Museum and the British Library, I interviewed forty-four respondents of Italian origin, twenty-five women and nineteen men, born primarily in Edinburgh. The respondents were born between 1906 and 1940, with the bulk born in the decade 1920-29. The average age of male interviewees in 1940 was eighteen, the women slightly younger at thirteen. As a result of patterns of immigration, Colpi points out that ‘the Scottish Italian community is not only historically old, but it is also sociologically old in type and form’.25 Generally, ‘old’ Italians in Scotland are the children of Italian immigrants who arrived at the beginning of the twentieth century. Born and raised in Scotland, these ‘old Italians’ in their eighties are already second generation.26 Of the respondents within my research sample, thirty-eight were second-generation Italians, five were third generation and one was first generation.27 Nearly all respondents were British-born with English as their first language and although around half of the interviewees said that they did not speak ‘Italian’ most retained a basic understanding of their parents’ regional dialect. All those born in the inter-war period would have had dual nationality, unless their fathers had opted for naturalised British status (for biographies, see Appendix). The relatively young age of my research sample reflects my frustrated attempts to reach the oldest surviving members of the community and, in particular, the difficulties I encountered during my fieldwork trying to find people willing to be interviewed. The wartime demarcation of Italian immigrants, and by extension their families, as ‘enemy aliens’ was hugely painful and distressing and there are many Italian Scots who
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I. Geraldo Cozzi, born in 1906, was the oldest person interviewed. He served in the Royal Army Service Corps during World War Two.
are still unwilling to talk about or revisit this period in their lives. Colpi writes that Italians who lived through the distress of the war have ‘tried to put the war behind them and to forget about it’. In his work on British citizens detained under Defence Regulation 18B, Brian Simpson concurs that second-generation Italians ‘seem to have wished to forget the whole awful affair’. At the start of my fieldwork, I received a negligible response from adverts placed in national and local media and many people simply refused to talk to me. As the American historian Stephen Fox found when seeking informants on the wartime internment and relocation of Italians in the United States, ‘for every door that opened, three were politely shut’. In an attempt to locate female respondents, I placed gender-specific adverts in the widely circulated national publications *The Scots Magazine* and *People’s Friend* asking to hear from women of Italian origin who had been called up for war work. These magazines were selected on the criteria of having a wide popular readership, a tradition of publishing ‘nostalgic’ appeals for interviewees and having the potential to reach women who might not primarily identify themselves as Italian. Surprisingly, even with this level of national exposure, I received only two responses. Thus, whilst I was keen to interview ‘low identifiers’, those who have drifted away from the Italian community through marriage or deliberate choice, ultimately those who responded to my adverts or agreed via intermediaries to be interviewed had already self-identified as ‘Italian’ to some degree. I carried out in-depth, semi-structured interviews but following Luisa Passerini’s maxim that ‘To respect memory also means letting it organise the story according to the subject’s order of priorities’, respondents were encouraged to relate their story and place emphasis on those areas which were important to them. The very process of finding interviewees outlined above meant that many were aware of my specific interest in World War Two and responded to that. Yet, ultimately, the tendency of most respondents to accelerate to and dwell on the wartime period when being interviewed serves to underline the profound impact of the war on the narratives of Italian Scots and, most significantly, the extent to which they share a ‘knowledge of a different national past’ rooted in their wartime identities as Italians, the ‘enemy other’. To a remarkable degree, when asked about ‘the outbreak of the war’ the majority of respondents would refer to the events of June 1940, as opposed to September 1939, reinforcing the concept of a distinct set of memories held amongst this ethnic group. The period in which the interviews were undertaken, 1996-2001, is also significant. When my fieldwork began in the late 1990s, memories
of the Bosnian conflict, in which neighbours were perceived as having violently turned against each other, were commonly drawn on. The international crisis of Kosovo and the related ‘ethnic cleansing’ of Albanians occurred whilst I was undertaking interviews and also influenced the ways in which interviewees articulated their own wartime experiences: those who were relocated during the war, for example, identified with the sense of forced expulsion and displacement from their homes. My final interview occurred four weeks before terrorist planes crashed into the Twin Towers in New York in September 2001 and four years in advance of the London terrorist bombings of 7 July by British-born Muslims, events which both reactivated racialised attacks on migrant communities and dramatically reconfigured the debate about the meanings of second-generation allegiance within the popular media. It is now widely recognised that identity is not something that is fixed and static but, rather, is continually evolving and changing. Furthermore, as the research of David McCrone and his colleagues demonstrates, a person’s national identity, as presented to others, is not only socially constructed but sensitive to context: ‘individuals make identity claims, be they explicit or very tentative, in differing contexts over time, and these claims are received in different ways and in turn modified according to their reception’. Whilst recalling their childhood or adolescent selves, respondents often referred to themselves as ‘Italian’, ‘British’ or ‘Scottish’; their tendency to use the terms ‘British’ and ‘Scottish’ interchangeably reflecting the cultural pre-eminence of the concept of ‘Britishness’ during the wartime period. However, in present day interviews, they foregrounded their Italianness within the context of a Scottish, rather than British, identity, often describing themselves as ‘Scottish-Italian’. To some extent, this self-ascription mirrors the adopting traits of the indigenous population: most people living nowadays in Scotland give primacy to being Scottish rather than British, a trend which began in the final decades of the twentieth century in the wake of Thatcherism, increasingly confident assertions of Scottish national identity and contested notions of Britishness. However, it could also reflect the specificity of Italian experience, most notably the memories of growing up as part of a Catholic minority in Presbyterian Scotland or, more simply, a desire to access and subscribe to the hugely positive discourse which now surrounds the Italian Scottish presence. Overall, the use of a ‘bi-cultural’ self-definition underlines the centrality of Italianness to the construction of personal identity amongst those who lived through the war in Scotland, as
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underlined by one interviewee’s summation: ‘We all like the name “Scottish-Italian” but we’re Italian, just the same.’

Although I am not of Italian origin myself, my perceived ethnicity was a significant factor in my fieldwork; my links to the Italian Scottish community through marriage undoubtedly influenced the way that I was viewed by respondents and had methodological implications for my research. The question of ‘passing’ as an Italian, first raised by Anne-Marie Fortier in her study of institutional representations of London Italian identity, was also relevant. Numerous interviewees commented on how with my physical characteristics of dark hair and dark eyes, I appeared to ‘be Italian’, as in the following exchange with respondent Angelo Valente:

AV: Backhanders - that’s how they do it over there [Italy]. I’m sorry, you belong to the Italian origin yourself.
WU: I don’t actually.
AV: You don’t? Well, that’s a funny name you’ve got.
WU: It’s my husband’s.
AV: You look Italian.

Being viewed as a representative of my husband’s family undoubtedly conferred upon me some degree of ‘Italian affiliation’. Furthermore, although I would be explicit at the outset of interviews that it was my husband who had the Italian ‘connection’, in interviews this distinction would often become blurred. Respondents would ask after my family or seek reassurance that I had had similar experiences. At the close of one interview, one respondent commented, ‘I don’t know how you feel in your heart about what you are,’ before going on to re-state her identification with Italy. This sense of a shared familial past, however tenuous, validated me in the eyes of many respondents. It also enabled me to build up a relationship of trust with those I interviewed, which was crucial as many were recalling traumatic and upsetting memories. This sense of being entrusted with people’s memories has, in turn, fundamentally influenced the ways in which I have approached writing this book.

Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird define oral history as ‘occupying a position at the interface of memory and social and cultural change’. The process of remembering is now recognised as the key to exploring the subjective meanings of lived experience and the nature of individual and collective memory. This ‘cultural-memory approach’ focuses attention on the complex and multiple ways in which people recall their personal histories and how meaning is conveyed through the structure of personal narratives. Defining subjectivity as
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‘that area of symbolic activity “which includes cognitive, cultural and psychological aspects’, the Italian historian Luisa Passerini stresses the need to pay particular attention to the cultural and symbolic import of people’s stories as well as their factual content.46 Another key dimension is the way in which narrators draw on public discourses in constructing accounts of their pasts for their audiences, commonly referred to as the ‘cultural circuit’.47 Building upon Summerfield’s magisterial work on war and memory,48 this monograph addresses the interaction between wartime discourses and individual subjectivity and, in particular, ‘the relationship to personal narratives of cultural silences’ relating to Italian experience in wartime Britain.49 One of the most significant features of the personal narratives contained within this study is the extent to which they reveal the long-lasting psychological impact of traumatic wartime events, particularly on women who were adolescents during the war. The fact that so many people refused to be interviewed for my research project is also highly significant and even those who did agree often appeared reluctant to dwell on certain aspects of their wartime lives. A significant factor could, of course, be the fact that there is no readily identifiable framework available through which those of Italian origin can articulate their memories; what Summerfield defines as the struggle to achieve composure ‘in the face of lost histories’.50 Certainly, the ethnic diversity and plurality of memory of Britain’s ‘multi-stranded population’ during wartime remains largely unacknowledged.51 As Paul Ward emphasises, the predominant discourse of World War Two, foregrounding community and togetherness, ‘constructed the “people” as socially and ethnically homogenous, not just in the 1940s but across the decades since’.52 Furthermore, the increasingly stereotypical depiction of World War Two in Britain, with the ritualistic nature of commemoration centring around key calendar events such as Dunkirk, D-Day and VE Day, tends to foreclose ‘possible differences in experience, interpretation and meaning’.53 However, Michael Roper cautions against the tendency to focus exclusively on dominant collective meanings and functions when addressing personal narratives, arguing that the individual memory of war is not only produced through the ‘overlay’ of social codes on experience but also has an ‘underlay’. The latter is structured through the nature of the war experience itself so that the remembering of war needs to be recognised as ‘a psychically-orientated process, and one which operates forward from the event as well as backwards through the impact of public representations’.54 The personal narratives of second-generation Italians testify to the profound psychological impact of the
war on many of those who lived through it and support Roper’s hypothesis that ‘Some silences originate from the very beginning.’

There is a growing realisation that wartime experiences may have longterm psychological effects on civilian populations. Clinical psychologist Steve Davies acknowledges that ‘people who have experienced significant war trauma are likely to meet these events again in old age in some way.’ One elderly woman I met at an Italian Scottish social event said memories of the war had started to ‘penetrate’ in recent years. Another interviewee remarked that at the end of the war, petrified of looking for work and afraid of meeting animosity, she ‘felt like an alien’ at times. When asked how long it took for that feeling to go away, she replied, ‘I don’t think it ever does.’ Indeed, concerns raised by some respondents when I returned interview transcripts to them and the occasional request for anonymity reflect anxieties and fears which stem directly from their wartime identification as the enemy ‘other’. Amongst those I interviewed some had suffered trauma through the loss of others, whilst others had witnessed traumatic events. Six of the women interviewed were daughters of Arandora Star victims, one lost her grandfather and two women had lost their uncles in the disaster. Another woman’s father had survived the Arandora Star only to drown on his return from internment in Australia later in the war. It may be that this particular cohort of women came forward to ‘bear witness’ on behalf of their families. Whereas in the immediate post-war period ‘discussion of war experiences was discouraged both socially and officially’, respondents were recalling hardships, and in many cases personal tragedy, in a modern-day culture where there is a general consensus that it is necessary and desirable to articulate grief. Mourning for those who lost relatives on the Arandora Star was certainly not allowed full expression in the wartime period and, afterwards, many second-generation Italians would have remained silent ‘out of shame, for fear of not being heard, or because of self-imposed censorship’. In some of the interviews, taking place after an interval of six decades, a sense of loss, devastation and occasional bitterness was still tangible. As Selma Leydesdorff and her colleagues acknowledge, it ‘takes a particular form of courage, and a painful effort, to call to mind those phases of life in which excessive stress, sadness and violence have been experienced’ and at times during my fieldwork I encountered interviewees for whom the act of remembering was clearly problematic.

As I have been writing up my research, and campaigns for an apology for internment have started to emerge, I have wondered whether those women who agreed to talk to me who had lost relatives
did so because they believed I would raise awareness about the *Arandora Star* tragedy. By providing a critical analysis of the ways in which Italian internment has been represented, I worry that I may offend some of those I interviewed. Indeed, sensitivity to the feelings of some respondents has threatened to overshadow the writing-up process and, at times, I have had to resist the urge to ‘censor’ aspects of my academic interpretation. This particular dilemma, arising from the intersubjective nature of oral history research, highlights the limitations of what Ballinger identifies as the ‘solidarity-rapport model’ of ethnography. The assumption underlying much of the literature on oral history methodology is still the ideal of empowering cultural minorities - recovering the life stories of those who have been ‘hidden from history’ has traditionally been presented as largely unproblematic and there is far less discussion about what happens when a researcher ultimately offers a more challenging interpretation of a community’s history. However, as Joanna Herbert indicates in her oral history research with South Asian communities in Leicester, it is also important to recognise that respondents are not simply powerless individuals but are fully able to ‘communicate their message’. By showing a willingness to be interviewed by me in the first instance, by approving the interview transcripts and granting permission for extracts to be cited in this book, respondents were indicating that they are ready for some form of public acknowledgement of their wartime experiences.

As Steve Gamer emphasises, ‘understandings of who fits where in the social hierarchies can change’. Most of my interviewees voluntarily raised the idea of being part of a less ‘visible’ community, contrasting their experiences with those of the post-war arrival of immigrants from the colonies and the ‘New Commonwealth’ in Scotland and the rest of Britain. Although some felt that the Italians had faced a ‘bigger struggle’, most shared the opinion expressed by Joe Pieri: ‘we were the Pakistani immigrants of our day, tolerated but not quite accepted by our neighbours.’ In her work on European Volunteer Workers in Britain, Wendy Webster suggests that in the post-war era, ‘The idea of British society as homogenous was invoked to cast all “immigrants” as outside the boundaries of nation, but the notion of “suitability” also signalled the idea of a hierarchy of belonging.’ She highlights how hostility towards post-war Eastern European immigrants could be tempered by some measure of agreement between official and popular discourses about a hierarchy of belonging in Britain, noting how the new influx of black and Asian immigrants enabled earlier groups to be forgotten. It is perhaps only now, with domestic hostility focusing on more ‘visible’
immigrant groups and with Italian culture universally celebrated, that Italianness can be more safely articulated and foregrounded in the construction of personal identity. Since World War Two, with the transition into the politics of the Cold War era, Italians have been increasingly constructed and embraced within the wider notion of a shared European identity. Webster notes how official discussions about the recruitment of Poles and other refugees to the British labour market in the immediate postwar era defined these groups in terms of the white ethnicity they shared with Britons as ‘fellow-Europeans’. Although Webster does not mention Italians specifically, they would have been subject to this wider discourse, with ‘new’ Italian immigrants entering Britain from 1949 onwards to work in textiles and foundries as part of inter-governmental ‘bulk recruitment schemes’. Subsequently, as Fortier notes, the integration of Britain in the European Union in 1973 ‘cleared a space for Italians to claim some form of equal status in relation to Britons, on the grounds of their European identity’.

This monograph suggests that both the traumatic events of the war, including internment, relocation and the anti-Italian riots and the parallel complexity of opportunities for dual identification within the British forces, served to reinforce a sense of ‘otherness’ amongst second-generation Italians. The personal testimonies introduced throughout the text support the notion of hybridity amongst second-generation immigrants discussed by Walter and colleagues ‘in which both placed and displaced identities are held in tension, their expression varying contextually in time and space’. This conceptualisation of the carving out of ‘new forms of identities’ is particularly relevant when addressing World War Two and its impact on identity construction amongst second-generation Italians. This monograph argues that the traumatic events of 1940-45, by reinforcing a sense of ‘difference’ actually contributed to a heightened sense of Italianness amongst the children of Italian immigrants. Indeed, as Fortier insightfully points out, the alienation of the wartime period, in conjunction with the fact that Italian families have been settled in Britain for over a hundred years with little return migration, has produced ‘a distinctly Italian form of belonging in Britain’.

Outline of the book

David Cesarani and Mary Fulbrook highlight how notions of citizenship are inextricably tied up with questions of nationality, national identity and immigration, especially since, with the rise of nation states in the
late eighteenth to late twentieth centuries, new definitions of national identities began to emerge within Europe. Primarily, ‘notions of citizenship’ defined by common ideals and the right to reside in the country of birth rather than of ancestry began to overlay the primacy of kinship. In the case of Britain, the creation of the United Kingdom and the British Empire ‘necessitated a flexible category of belonging’, which was supplied by the perpetuation of allegiance to the Crown by British subjects throughout the Empire. However, as Cesarani and Fulbrook argue, Britain’s status as an imperial power, the emergence of the dominions and the entrenchment of racial thinking led to a bifurcation of white and nonwhite British subjects: ‘the racialisation of belonging’. Chapter one traces the ways in which Italian immigrants who began to arrive in Britain in the late nineteenth century were subject to racialising discourses which laid the groundwork for the overt and aggressive manifestations of hostility endured when war was declared between Italy and Britain in 1940. By analysing inter-war narratives of childhood ethnicity, this chapter illustrates the extent to which the alienation of the war years, a period of intense Italophobia, built upon a pre-existent sense of not ‘belonging’ amongst second-generation Italians.

The work of Pamela Ballinger notes how both the exigencies of Cold War politics and the post-Cold War re-evaluation of those politics have facilitated the emergence of ‘moral narratives’ about World War Two which are particularly contentious in relation to countries such as France, Yugoslavia and Italy, where the legacy of Nazi occupation and antifascist resistance has left ‘a fractured collective memory of the war’. Chapter two looks at how historiographical debates surrounding the ‘divided memory’ of Italy’s war have functioned in the post-war period and, in particular, how the notion of Italiani, brava gente serves to obscure Italy’s Fascist and wartime record and suppress narratives of complicity, culpability and responsibility. This chapter looks at the role of the Fasci all’estero, clubs set up by Mussolini’s regime in order to ‘fascistise’ Italian diasporic communities in the inter-war period and examines how, in Scotland, elite-led memory promotes the idea of the Fasci as social clubs, denying their political and propagandistic dimension. Using the Edinburgh Fascio as a case study, this chapter shows how involvement in blackshirted Fascist ceremonial by a very small number of Fasci members contributed to their external identification as political actors in the lead-up to the war. Chapter three looks at the internment of civilian populations during World War Two, providing a comparative account of Italian internment in English-speaking countries and analysing the ways in which different countries
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racialised ‘enemy’ ethnic groups. Focusing on Italian internment, it addresses different experiences on the grounds of generation and gender as well as examining complex questions of loyalties and allegiances amongst second-generation internees born in Britain. Chapter four illuminates the readiness of British society to identify and target the internal ‘other’ at times of national crisis by looking at the cumulative impact of alien restrictions, the anti-Italian riots of June 1940 and the policy of relocation. During the war, the national discourse of defending Britain’s freedom was fundamentally undermined by Britain’s heavy-handed actions against Italian citizens in its midst; it was a time when, in Fortier’s words, ‘Italians encountered the violences of the British state’.80 However, the supremacy of the ‘Blitz spirit’ discourse in British popular culture, with its reliance on the motifs of fortitude and unity, has marginalised those with more discordant wartime memories of anti-Italian aggression. By investigating the impact of the government’s policy of forced relocation on Italian women and their children, this chapter also highlights the long-lasting emotional impact of these traumatic events on second-generation Italians, particularly women.

Chapters five and six examine, for the first time, the experiences of men of Italian parentage who served in the British forces. It would appear that the act of British-born Italians serving in the British Army, raising difficult questions of loyalties and allegiances, has resulted in them being excluded from representations of the community’s past. For second-generation Italians facing call-up, the act of joining the British armed forces was powerfully symbolic. They were placed in the paradoxical position of being called up by the very state which had, in many cases, labelled their parents as the ‘enemy’. The knowledge that they could potentially end up fighting Italian cousins overseas further amplified a sense of divided loyalties. Salvatore J. LaGumina defines the similar challenge of ‘straddling two cultures’ faced by second-generation Italians in America, as a ‘two-ness dilemma’.81 These two chapters explore how military service in the army for British-born Italians was complicated by their ‘enemy’ alien origin and examine the ways in which these men negotiated and constructed their identities both during the war and since. Chapter five focuses on narratives of resistance and negotiation amongst second-generation Italian men by looking at declarations of alienage, conscientious objection and service in 270 (Italian) Company of the Pioneer Corps. This latter unit, by incorporating Italian internees and Italian dual nationals, served as a wartime site of ethnic identification for second-generation men who were unwilling to serve overseas and potentially fight Italian troops.