

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The making of a dominant narrative: the translation(s) of Churchill's *The Second World War* in Italy

Daniele Pipitone 

University of Turin, Italy

Email: daniele.pipitone@unito.it

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Abstract

This article examines the Italian translations and reception of Winston S. Churchill's *The Second World War*, using British and Italian archival materials and press sources. It shows how the Italian editions and serialisations introduced constant modifications – abridgements, omissions, textual cuts, and paratextual framing – in order to adapt the memoirs for a national audience. These interventions softened Churchill's judgments on Italy, emphasised the ideological character of the war, and strengthened anti-Soviet themes, thus aligning the text with dominant cultural and political discourses of the postwar years. Analysis of contemporary reviews and newspaper debates highlights a polarised reception: critical distance or silence in intellectual journals contrasted with enthusiastic praise in mainstream dailies, where the memoirs were hailed as both literary achievement and democratic statement. The article argues that these editorial and translational strategies played a crucial role in integrating Churchill's narrative into Italian collective memory, supporting a symbolic redefinition of Italy's place from defeated nation to one of the victors.

Keywords: history; collective memory; translation and reception; Second World War

Introduction

On 19 July 1948, Arnaldo Mondadori, owner and chief executive of the eponymous publishing house, held a press conference in Milan¹ to announce the publication of the first volume of Churchill's long-awaited memoirs of the Second World War (Churchill 1948b). The fact that the most prominent Italian publisher² made the announcement in person underlined the importance of the event. But there was much more. In his speech, Mondadori chose three elements to show the relevance of the enterprise: it being 'by far the most astonishing editorial transaction in the short [sic] history of Italian publishing'; the relevance that Churchill's work would have in Italy, for which it would be 'a necessary precondition for democratic life', for continuing along the 'path to freedom, democracy and peace'; and the impressive figure of 50,000 copies projected for the first edition.³

Mondadori was, to some extent, exaggerating: in fact, the print run of the first edition amounted to 20,935 copies, less than half of what he declared.⁴ Nevertheless, it was still a remarkably high figure for a war memoir and, more generally, for a non-fiction book – virtually unparalleled at the time. To make a comparison, the print run of Eisenhower's *Cruciata in Europa* (*Crusade in Europe*) (1949) was less than 5,000, and that of Richard Hillary's *L'ultimo avversario* (*The Last Enemy*) (1946) 8,000.⁵ Moreover, *La seconda guerra mondiale* was

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reprinted several times between 1948 and the 1970s, including paperback editions that sold tens of thousands of copies.⁶ Thus, the book was not only a bestseller upon its release, but also a long-seller for more than 30 years. An abridged version – not the first one – was published just a few years ago (Churchill 2022).

Such a long-lasting success makes *The Second World War* a particularly relevant case study for investigating the translation and reception of foreign memories of the Second World War in postwar Italy. Interlingual translation has in fact been recently recognised as an important element in the transnational circulation of memories and is the object of a growing scholarship (Brownlie 2016, Jünke and Schyns 2023). Such intersection has been made possible by an important development in the field of memory studies: following the seminal suggestions by Aleida Assmann about the strict connection between ‘memory and the global’ (Assmann and Conrad 2010, 2), memory scholars have been paying increasing attention to the transcultural dimension of collective memory, to what have been defined as ‘transcultural memories’ (De Cesari and Rigney 2014) or ‘travelling memories’ (Erll 2011). It is important to underline that the relationship between collective memory and literary translation is a multilayered one: from an empirical point of view, translations are an essential way to mediate (more precisely, to remediate) collective memory, as Claudia Jünke has clearly shown (Jünke 2023). From a more theoretical perspective, remembering and translating are to a large extent phenomenologically homologous, as they ‘both are premised on a return to and a reworking of a source’ and ‘both initiate a transmission beyond the boundaries of the initiating agent’ (Deane-Cox and Spiessens 2022).

The Italian translation of *The Second World War* is a particularly meaningful case study for this transcultural and transdisciplinary approach: as I shall explain later, the work was not only translated into many languages, but also originally conceived, at least partially, for a transnational audience; its translation was part of a wider phenomenon of importation of foreign memories of the war; and it interacted with Italian narratives on the conflict, which played a major role in postwar years. Nevertheless, to fully contextualise the translation it is important to start from an earlier period and to investigate Churchill’s reputation in Italy before the date of its first publication.

Churchill’s fame in Italy before 1948

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the name Churchill began to be known in Italy – not as a politician, nor as a soldier, but as a journalist and author.⁷ The story of his adventurous escape from Pretoria in 1899 during the Boer War, was told by Italian newspapers drawing heavily from his own account published in *The Morning Post* and soon turned into a book (Churchill 1900).⁸ Adopting a broad (and widely used) definition of translation as a process of transfer between two languages involving at least a source text, a target text, and intermediaries (Pym 2022, 87; Kershaw 2019, 8), this can be labeled as a first, though limited, Italian translation: from the very beginning of Churchill’s career, he was writing his own story, in Italy as in the UK. It is not an isolated case: Churchill’s fame in Italy would always be at least as much derived from his literary activities as from his political or military actions.

A full reconstruction of Churchill’s presence in the Italian press over the following four decades would fall beyond the scope of this article: I will thus focus on the Fascist years, when Churchill’s image was obviously closely related to his attitude toward the regime. In most cases, this meant praise and appreciation, especially for his notorious celebration of Mussolini’s role in saving the country from Bolshevism⁹ (Pombeni 1995), as well as his criticism of the economic sanctions against Italy in 1935–1936.¹⁰ This was to radically change with the beginning of the war. But meanwhile, the appreciation for the politician fostered the reception of the author: Churchill’s literary fame in Italy progressed during the Fascist years, both as a book author and as a journalist.

In 1927 the Fascist regime's official newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, published many excerpts from the third volume of *The World Crisis* (Churchill 1927)¹¹ and also, through a connected publishing house (Piazzoni 2021, 76), a shortened version (Churchill 1929). The newspaper, however, eventually surrendered the rights. They were acquired by the Italian Ministry of the Navy, which published the integral translation of the text (Churchill 1929–1931).¹² There are no sales data, but probably the book was not a great success, as it had no reprints until 1968; however, it enjoyed positive reviews¹³ and helped establish Churchill as a known historical and political author in the country – along with the first translation of *My Early Life* in 1935 (as *Memorie 1874–1903*) (Churchill 1935).

Even in the late 1930s, when his opinions had already provoked controversy in Italy, Churchill was not banned from the Italian press: in August 1936 *La Stampa* published one of his articles, dedicated to Rockefeller on his 98th birthday.¹⁴

Thus, when in 1940 he became the main enemy – especially before Italy's declarations of war on the USSR and the USA – Churchill was already not only a prominent political figure but also a well-known author. War polemics and propaganda¹⁵ only strengthened this profile: Italian newspapers often reported his speeches and statements, albeit always with a negative and distorted interpretation (Siennicka 2015). However, from a marketing (and a literary) point of view, being the most hated is much better than being ignored: a basic truth that Arnaldo Mondadori, the prospective publisher of *The Second World War*, knew well.

In the spring of 1944, on the eve of the Liberation of Rome and of the Normandy landings, Mondadori, who had escaped to Switzerland and established a publishing house there (Decleva 1998), made an offer of £350 to Churchill's solicitors for the outright purchase of the Italian rights of three of his works,¹⁶ *Step by Step*, *Thoughts and Adventures*, and *Great Contemporaries*. Like many, Mondadori clearly had little doubt about the outcome of the conflict, was already preparing his return to Italy, and was well aware of how valuable every word by the British premier would be in the postwar age – and there were many. The offer was accepted, but the transaction was blocked by Britain's Trading with the Enemy Department until the end of the war.¹⁷ Ultimately, only *Step by Step* was published in Italy in 1947, with 9,984 copies printed¹⁸ (Churchill 1947) – a hint that Mondadori's goals probably reached beyond the three books, and that he aimed at establishing himself as a known, reliable and even generous trading partner. In fact, despite Mondadori's initial offer being judged by Macmillan, the copyright holder (Reynolds 2004, 17) as 'adequate, indeed good'¹⁹, he also agreed to change the terms at Churchill's request (due to fiscal issues²⁰) and to switch to outright purchase, which represented a heavier initial burden for him.

By acting as a generous and helpful business partner, Mondadori positioned himself at the forefront of the imminent race for Churchill's translation rights in the postwar years. He was not alone: other publishers entered the race and published Churchill's speeches or memoirs (Churchill 1946a, 1946b, 1948a). It was Mondadori, however, who won the competition for the new major work by the former British Prime Minister – and current national hero.

The dynamics of cultural mediation

In fact, rumours about Churchill's intention of writing his war memoirs started spreading in Italy in early 1946.²¹ In February 1947, Mondadori urged his contacts in London to get more detailed information, specifying that many Italian publishers were interested in the work.²² In May he was contacted by Emery Reves, the literary agent who owned the rights for Churchill's work in countries other than the US and the British Empire, who was coming to Italy to negotiate the Italian translation: in the same letter, Reves described the ongoing operation as 'the biggest literary transaction of all time', a definition that Mondadori kept in mind.²³ The Italian publisher's strategy had worked well: we do not know how

many of his competitors were contacted by Reves, but he had made sure he was among the potential buyers. The victory, however, was granted by Mondadori's financial capacities: he was already one of the biggest national publishers, had been able to preserve his activity and contacts throughout his Swiss exile and, last but not least, his main printing facilities in Verona had survived the war without major damage (Decleva 1998). Thus, he was sure that 'no Italian publisher [could] afford the conditions [he] offered':²⁴ 15 per cent royalties for the first 20,000 guaranteed copies (to be paid in advance, for a total amount of approximately 40,000 dollars), and 18 per cent thereafter.²⁵

It is impossible here to analyse in detail the complex negotiations that took place in the following months, and that involved another publisher, Valentino Bompiani, the main Italian newspapers, the *Corriere della Sera*, and the Italian Ministry for Foreign Trade. The final deal, which was completed by the end of June 1947,²⁶ was even more favourable to the author: Mondadori and the *Corriere*, which had acquired the exclusive rights on serialisation, each owed to Reves an advance of 60,000 dollars.²⁷ It was quite an unparalleled sum at the time, but it was proved justified by the sales and by the resonance that the work had in Italy. A resonance that was part of a much wider, almost global phenomenon.

The publication of *The Second World War* was, in fact, a truly global event, not only because of the unprecedented advertising campaign that supported it but also because it was conceived from the outset as an international publication. This was mainly the result of the intervention of Emery Reves, who helped Churchill to make his work fit for foreign audiences, and strove to coordinate the publication schedule in Britain and abroad. He was not always successful: while he was able to eliminate some material mistakes, he failed to reduce the number of documents included, which made the text harder for readers (Churchill and Reves 1997). Similarly, he could not prevent Churchill from continuing to amend the text even after the publication of the American version, which was always the first one to appear, and had no power over the American and British copyright holders and their policies. However, despite such limits, Reves was able to coordinate the publication of the books and the serialisation of the excerpts worldwide, so that the foreign language translations in many cases preceded the British edition (Reynolds 2004).

Moreover, Reves's intervention was not limited to such organisational tasks, but extended to many other aspects. At least, this is what can be inferred from the Italian case.

Reves not only oversaw the transmission of the drafts²⁸ and the publication schedule,²⁹ but also provided Mondadori with pictures and tables that were not used in the English edition.³⁰ He made suggestions about the possibility of dividing the first volume into two books, informing Mondadori of the choices made by other foreign publishers,³¹ or about the changes that would make the book easier to understand for the Italian audience: for instance, he suggested cutting the references to Churchill's untranslated works, that would be obscure to Italian readers.³² Above all, he made several suggestions about the advertising campaign: he asked Mondadori not to stress the economic aspect of the operation, which he considered in poor taste,³³ and emphasised the importance of the publication, describing it as 'terrific' and stating that 'there is nothing like it in world literature'.³⁴

The marketing campaign – for such it was, to a large extent – was quite unprecedented, for many reasons. It was internationally supervised by Emery Reves. It involved two main Italian subjects, Mondadori and *Corriere della Sera*, whose aims did not always coincide – disputes over advertising arose in 1950³⁵ and, again, in 1953.³⁶ It had to sell a translated book almost simultaneously with the original publication, which meant that there were no English reviews, sales data or other sources on which to build the advertising. Above all, it could capitalise on the author's celebrity, which proved to be by far the most important element. The press eagerly published all kinds of news concerning

Churchill, from the Fulton speech to the rumours about his alleged (and false) correspondence with Mussolini (Franzinelli 2015): leaks and gossip about him writing his memoirs³⁷ or about his astonishing income³⁸ (which raised Reves's protests) were just parts of the whole phenomenon.

However, the best advertisement was the serialisation in the *Corriere*, which started on 16 April, 1948. And this was also the first act of translation of *The Second World War*.

Multiple acts of translation

The Second World War is generally considered a single work by a single author – as is apparent in the widespread habit of calling it ‘Churchill’s memoirs’. Although basically true, this is nevertheless inaccurate. In fact, there are many versions of the book; and many authors too – as David Reynolds has clearly shown (2004). The first American edition was quite different from the British one, because Churchill kept on amending the text almost until the very day of the British publication, which he considered the definitive one. Serialisation in periodicals cut the text, and condensed and illustrated editions followed the first one.

Such a complex writing and publishing history becomes even more intricate when we turn to the Italian editions, to the point that we cannot speak of a simple act of translation, but of multiple acts that can sometimes be described as rewriting. In André Lefevere’s definition, rewriting refers to all the editorial operations (including but not limited to translation) that modify and adapt a text, thus making it suitable and accessible to a new and wider public (Lefevere 2017). Although Lefevere’s main focus was on the afterlife of a literary classic, his concept perfectly applies to the dissemination of *The Second World War* in the Italian context: in order of publication, we can find, in fact, the newspaper serialisation, the official translation by Mondadori, and the abridged version, not to mention TV series and radio readings.³⁹ In this paper, I will focus on the first two translations, which were also, arguably, the most important ones: the serialisation in the *Corriere della Sera*⁴⁰ and the first integral translation by Arnoldo Mondadori Editore.

As elsewhere in the world, the newspaper serialisation was the first version of the memoirs to be read in the country. It preceded by some months the publication of each volume of the book, and was very different from both the source text and the complete Italian translation, in many respects and for many reasons.

First of all, there were technical issues, linked to the delay in Churchill’s finalisation of the text and the rush for publication imposed by the need to keep pace with the international schedule, set by the American publishers and transmitted by Reves to the others (Reynolds 2004). These conditions often forced the (anonymous) translators of the *Corriere* to work on drafts and proofs, always under great pressure, producing mistakes that were sometimes their fault and sometimes not. An interesting example of the latter is the statement that ‘the Baltic states ... wanted to keep themselves on a social-democratic front’.⁴¹ That was the original version by the author, who knew or cared very little about the subject: it was Reves, a Mitteleuropean émigré and much more acquainted with the political situation of the area, who explained to Churchill that the Baltic states were far from being social-democratic – or democratic at all (Churchill and Reves 1997, 286). Apparently, the *Corriere* did not receive the amended version or had no time to change the translation, and stuck to the old one.

As for translation errors, sometimes they were just that – errors – such as translating ‘island’ as ‘Islanda’ (‘Iceland’) instead of ‘isola’.⁴² In other cases, however, this explanation is at least doubtful, as the changes of meaning have relevant consequences. For instance, in describing the surrender of the Italian ships after the Armistice, the English text reads: ‘...they were met at sea by British forces, including the *Warspite* and *Valiant*, which had so often sought them before under different circumstances...’ (SWW V, 1, 150); the *Corriere*

translates as ‘...the *Warspite* and *Valiant*, which they had frequently sought...’ (‘la *Warspite* e la *Valiant* – a cui esse sovente avevano dato la caccia’)⁴³, thus exchanging the roles between hunter and prey and, likely, preserving national pride.

Such purported errors were not uncommon in the serialisation; however, they were only a minor aspect of a wider phenomenon – the most significant change made by the *Corriere* to the source text.

Serialisation implied, of course, selection. In many cases, cuts seem to have been based on the readers’ interest, or more precisely on what the editors (who were likely to be different from the translators) deemed was the readers’ interest. Thus, paragraphs and even entire chapters devoted to British domestic politics were eliminated, as well as most of the documents inserted in the text – a choice that confirms Reves’s doubts about such a massive use of telegrams, letters and minutes. Such cuts were not politically or ideologically motivated, yet they give us some hints about the audience’s interests – or, again, about what the editors thought such interests were – and about what were the main elements of interest in the memoirs. In fact, the *Corriere* clearly privileged some aspects, on the basis of three main criteria: the presence of great personalities, such as political leaders, the royal family or the pope; the revelation of secrets and behind-the-scenes events; and descriptions of battles and military operations. This is not a surprising choice, but it clearly shows a key element of the book’s success: in many cases, Churchill’s work was the only or the most authoritative first-hand account of great events – like summit conferences – that had resonated widely.

The selection of excerpts is, however, more interesting for what it eliminates. Not so much for the frequent and unsurprising elision of the Asian and Pacific theatres, but rather for the almost complete expunging of the Russian war and for the recurring cuts to the chapters involving Italy. As for the former, the English text already dealt very sparsely with the Eastern front, which was strongly under-represented (Reynolds 2004). The Italian editors completed Churchill’s work, cutting for instance the description of the battle of Stalingrad – which was already very brief and thus, paradoxically, particularly adapted to serialisation. Given the importance of the event, and taken along with many other similar deletions, the choice can hardly be considered fortuitous and clearly shows the newspaper’s desire to (further) downplay and even hide the Soviet role in the conflict.

As for the material on Italy, the situation was more complex. The Anglo-Italian war played a major role in Churchill’s narrative – in fact, the titles of three out of 12 books directly refer to it – but he often wrote with a strong emphasis on the Italians’ poor fighting qualities. Translators and editors (it is impossible, given the lack of sources, to establish which) therefore had to satisfy two diverging needs: to preserve the relevant presence of the Italian war – which meant to translate and publish the chapters devoted to it – and to eliminate as many negative aspects as possible. Whenever possible, they resorted to cuts, sometimes with surgical precision. For instance, the English phrase ‘In the air the enemy proved greatly superior. The Italian Air Force still counted for little, but there were about a hundred German fighters...’ (SWW III, 1, 202) was translated as ‘Nel settore aereo il nemico si dimostrò molto superiore. I Tedeschi disponevano di circa cento aerei da caccia...’⁴⁴ (‘In the air the enemy proved greatly superior. There were about a hundred German fighters...’). In other cases, whole phrases,⁴⁵ or even whole paragraphs,⁴⁶ were eliminated. When it was impossible to conceal the poor performance of Italian forces, and the injurious comments on them, the *Corriere* resorted to the erasure of entire chapters: for example, chapter 7 of the second book of *Their Finest Hour*, devoted to the Mediterranean campaign, and chapters 4 and 5 of the first book of *The Grand Alliance*, dealing with the Italian defeat in Egypt and Ethiopia.

Selection, cuts and deliberate mistranslation were not the only tools used by the *Corriere* to make the memoirs better suited, as they judged, for Italian readers. Serialisation allowed

for another important form of intervention, not on the textual but on the paratextual elements: the choice of the instalments' titles was entirely in the hands of the editors and was repeatedly used to attain different goals. The most apparent ones were to present the Italians in a better light and the Russians in a worse one: thus, an instalment summarising a chapter devoted to 'Egypt and Middle East' was entitled 'Trasfusione di sangue per parare la minaccia italiana'⁴⁷ ('Blood transfusion to parry the Italian threat'); conversely, the fight at the Teheran Conference over Stalin's proposal to shoot 50,000 German officers gave the title to an entire instalment – and the subtitle significantly doubted that it was 'only a joke'.⁴⁸

However, these were not the only criteria that inspired the headlines; others were less obvious but, seemingly, more pervasive. First of all, the editors tried to make the instalments interesting and appealing; thus, the neutral title 'The pilotless bombardment' (SWW VI, 1) becomes 'L'incubo delle bombe volanti' ('The flying bombs nightmare').⁴⁹ Secondly, they frequently used the name of the war leaders, in dramatic or sometimes funny episodes: the title of the instalment describing the Cairo conference in November 1943 reads 'Roosevelt rischia di restare senza la sua porzione di tacchino'⁵⁰ ('Roosevelt risks being left without his portion of turkey').

Finally, they selected from Churchill's narrative those elements that were already present in the Italian collective memory or public discourse. A good example is the headline of the instalment translating the second chapter of *The Tide of Victory*, that read 'Keitel: "Che cosa dobbiamo fare?" Rundstedt: "Fate la pace, idioti"'.⁵¹ The dialogue, which in the book was relegated to a footnote (SWW, VI, 1, 20), was not new to the readers: in 1946, it had been reported in the *Corriere* itself, although in a different form, in an article by Basil Liddel Hart.⁵² It was, in fact, an episode of the serialisation of Liddel Hart's famous collection of postwar interviews with German generals, *The Other Side of the Hill*, published in Italy in 1949. It is possible that Churchill himself, who did not quote the source, had taken the quotation from the book, but in any case in 1953, when it was used as a headline, it had already become a *topos* among experts on and enthusiasts of Second World War military history: for instance, it had been also reported by the Australian war correspondent and historian Chester Wilmot (1953, 328). By resorting to such an intertextual stratagem, the editor(s) connected Churchill's account to a wider corpus of translated texts, which strengthened the impact and comprehension of his memoirs.

Obviously, many of these changes directly depended on the dynamics of serialisation, which made cuts and selections compulsory and thus gave the editors much more freedom. Moreover, it is possible that the translators who worked for the newspapers were allowed, and allowed themselves, a much greater freedom than the official Mondadori translators: the numerous changes or mistranslations that characterised the serialisation all disappeared in the book, which was much more adherent to the source text.

However, some significant changes can be detected even in the full-text translation, especially in the paratextual elements – on which the publisher had much more freedom of intervention and manipulation. By way of example, the books (within the volumes) entitled 'Africa Redeemed' (SWW IV, 2) and 'Italy Won' (SWW V, 1) were respectively translated as 'La battaglia d'Africa' ('The Battle of Africa') (Churchill 1951a) and 'La campagna d'Italia' ('The Italian Campaign') (Churchill 1951b) which sounded much more neutral and descriptive and did not stress Italy being a defeated enemy.

The most evident way of adapting the source text to the Italian audience was, however, the inclusion of pictures. The American and British edition did not use them, and Reves had explicitly given foreign publishers the freedom of adding images to the text.⁵³ He also provided them with many pictures of the author, to be used both for advertising and publishing.⁵⁴ Mondadori made wide use of such iconographic materials and, especially in the first volumes, added many from Italian sources (which remain unknown). Such pictures, which were often quite unrelated to the text, slightly changed the image of Italy and the

Italians conveyed by the books. By showing Italian places, people and authorities that the author had barely considered⁵⁵ – or even not considered at all – the editors attained an iconographic over-representation of the Italian role in the economy of the narrative. The main goal was probably just one of marketing: to make a foreign text more familiar and appealing to the reader. Nevertheless, in many cases a cautious and often misleading use of captions modified the image of Italy and Italians offered by the text, as two examples will clearly show.

The first is a picture showing General Rodolfo Graziani next to his tent, in an almost bucolic setting, allegedly in North Africa. The caption explains that Graziani ‘often disagreed with Mussolini’s military plans, especially those concerning an offensive against Yugoslavia’ (Churchill 1949, I, 225). The statement echoed what Churchill himself wrote (SWW II, 1, 227), on the basis of Graziani’s own memoirs (1947); however, it omitted, and thus concealed, the strict loyalty to the regime always showed by the general, who in 1949 was tried for collaborationism (Witkowski 2025). This does not mean that Mondadori was a nostalgic, pro-Fascist publisher – it was not; but it clearly shows the will to avoid internal polemics against the army, whose image was strongly defended by right-wing and moderate forces, and to limit the responsibility for the Italian war to the Fascist leadership.

The second example is a picture showing Greek soldiers retiring after ‘having blown roads and bridges in front of the Italian army’ (Churchill 1949, II, 160). Again, the caption cannot be considered thoroughly false – as there are no credits for the picture, it is very hard to investigate where and when it was taken – but it conceals that the Greeks had successfully fought the Italian aggression until German intervention. Again, the army’s role and honour – this time that of the lower ranks – was clearly something that Mondadori had no intention of questioning. Again, when it came to the role of the Italians in the narrative the publisher and its editors, like those of the *Corriere*, tended to edulcorate the negative image of the memoirs

Reception and impact in Italy

It is always rather difficult to assess the reception and impact of a cultural product, not only because of the lack of data but also because reception itself is a diverse, multi-layered phenomenon, which involves a ‘complex process of meaning-making’ (Törnquist-Plewa, Sindbæk Andersen and Erll 2017, 9). As Stuart Hall’s ‘encoding/decoding’ model has pointed out, this process implies an active participation not only of the producer, but also of the receivers of the product – the readers, in this case (Hall 1980). Moreover, not only translators and editors, but also reviewers and journalists, act as filters between the author and the reader and have been defined by Angela Kershaw as opinion-formers (Kershaw 2019).

Sales figures can be a good starting point, and in this case they are quite meaningful: as we have seen, Churchill’s memoirs were both a bestseller and a long seller. However, quantitative data are, indeed, only quantitative: they tell very little about the books’ impact on the readers’ conscience and imagination; about their influence on the public sphere; and about how they shaped the collective memory of the war. To investigate such issues, scholars have to turn to qualitative data, which are not only more difficult and less univocal to read, but also quite scarce and fragmentary.

Reviews are, of course, the starting point, even though they imply a top-down approach that tends to overrepresent the perspective of the dominant groups (not necessarily the cultural elite), and perhaps also to overrate their influence. However, precisely because of their position within the cultural field, reviewers contribute significantly to shaping common taste, fostering the success of a book, and establishing the way it is read and interpreted: in a word, they help shape the pre-understanding of a text. This is also the case with *The Second World War*, whose reception strongly depended on ideological and aesthetic assumptions.

As for the latter, the work does not seem to have raised the interest of the literary and intellectual community: as far as I have been able to check (but arguments *ex absentia* are always dangerous), no literary magazine or historical journal reviewed it. It is not easy to identify a reason for such a dismissal, which could have aesthetic or political roots, or both. However, an analysis of *Il Ponte*, a cultural and political left-wing review, could provide some hints. From 1948 to 1954, *Il Ponte* never reviewed *The Second World War* (or any other work by Churchill), surely not out of lack of interest in foreign narratives on the war: in fact, it reviewed many similar books, from Liddel Hart's work⁵⁶ to Rougier's *Mission secrète à Londres* (1947),⁵⁷ and even Schacht's *Abrechnung mit Hitler* (*Reckoning with Hitler*).⁵⁸ Moreover, it did take the memoirs into consideration, but only indirectly and quite negatively. Gaetano Salvemini, a prominent anti-Fascist intellectual, cited them to strongly criticise Churchill's attitude towards the Mussolini regime in the interwar years, and to charge him – along with the USA and the USSR – with having imposed on Italy 'a fascism without Mussolini' after 1943.⁵⁹ Another article went even further, accusing Churchill of having favoured the division of Europe by making the famous deal on percentages with Stalin (an episode told by Churchill himself in the memoirs).⁶⁰ Such a charge was connected with the strong support that the review gave at the time (the early 1950s) to the idea of a United Europe acting as a neutral 'third force' between the USA and the USSR (Polese Remaggi 2001): from this perspective Churchill, the cold warrior and the champion of the West, was considered a main enemy – and his own pro-European commitment was hastily dismissed. What is interesting, however, is that the idea of Churchill favouring Stalin's control over Eastern Europe was diametrically opposed to the main image of the British statesman at the time; an image that, as we will see, was dominant in the daily press.

To sum up, to antifascist intellectuals (who were the majority, be they communist, fellow-traveller or simply left-wing) Churchill was the one who had praised Mussolini, had supported the pro-Fascist monarchy and, above all, was indirectly supporting the moderate, pro-Western Italian government – which they strongly opposed. However, such a hostility had to overcome the opposite image of Churchill as the saviour of freedom and democracy, which also had strong roots in the anti-Fascist memory: the same article, in fact, stated that a correct judgement of Churchill must 'overlook the admiration and sympathy' for 'the tenacity and courage with which he directed the magnificent resistance of the English people'.⁶¹ Again, this was precisely the image that dominated the reception of the memoirs in the daily press – or more precisely in most of it.

In fact, while cultural reviews seemed quite unanimous in ignoring *The Second World War*, the daily press offered a more varied view. On the one hand, the pro-Communist newspapers also ignored it – which was the best attitude one can expect, given their strong hostility towards the author (who was called 'the bison of reaction').⁶² On the other, the so-called 'independent press', which was the most widely read and had a pro-government and pro-Western stance, greatly appreciated the work. The *Corriere* – which had an obvious economic interest in promoting the memoirs – entrusted the review to an exceptional reader, the poet Eugenio Montale;⁶³ *Il Messaggero*, a Roman newspaper, talked of 'The man of destiny';⁶⁴ *La Stampa*, from Turin, devoted to the book two different articles.⁶⁵ All these reviews celebrated both the book and the author, recognising the former as a literary masterpiece and the latter as the champion of (Western) freedom.

Generally speaking, the moderate press tended to accept almost integrally Churchill's narrative, ignoring or downplaying his early appreciation of Fascism and his support for the monarchy in 1943–1945, probably because both attitudes echoed the feelings of many of its readers (and likely of many journalists too) at the time. A common hostility towards communism and the USSR, instead of the ideological divide of wartime and the immediate postwar years, paved the way for a wide acceptance of the memoirs.

This happened also in right-wing sectors, even though in a more limited and contradictory way. The conservative newspaper *Il Tempo* is a good example of this. Its review of *The Second World War* echoed the longstanding hostility toward ‘perfidious Albion’ and its champion, charged with hegemonic and imperialist designs.⁶⁶ However, in the following years Churchill’s image progressively improved, until the point where he was defined as a ‘national monument’.⁶⁷ Such an appreciation was due more to the Cold war atmosphere than to wartime remembrances: Churchill was increasingly credited with having foreseen, before any other leader, the Soviet threat, and of having struggled, mainly in vain, to forestall it.⁶⁸ An interpretation that *Il Tempo* shared with the moderate press, but which was not entirely in line with Churchill’s self-representation.

In fact, the interpretation of the memoirs by Italian readers (or more precisely, by opinion-formers like journalists and reviewers, whose voices, with very few exceptions, are the only ones historians have access to) depended on many factors and changed profoundly over time (as an easy example, Churchill’s image became more and more uncontroversial as he progressively retired from active politics, and resulted in a real apotheosis at this death).⁶⁹ It is impossible here to analyse all of them, and to investigate the pervasive presence of *The Second World War* in Italian culture. I will consider only two opposite cases, which make good examples because they both concern the interaction between the memoirs and other representations of the Second World War. It must be remembered that *The Second World War* did not enter an empty cultural space: national memories of the conflict obviously had a wide and strong diffusion in the country;⁷⁰ and US cultural influence, which was probably at its height in the first postwar decades, also played a key role in shaping the image of the war.⁷¹

When Churchill’s account was in concurrence or in direct contrast with other powerful narratives, its relevance tended to decrease, its influence to fade and it was more subject to a process of adaptation and change. When dealing with the Normandy landings, for example, Italian opinion-formers – such as journalists, intellectuals or TV producers – had many other sources to rely on, mainly of American origin: from Eisenhower’s own memoirs (1949) to Cornelius Ryan’s best-seller, *The Longest Day* (1961), and many other earlier publications (Pipitone 2023). TV programmes on the subject tended to draw from American sources much more than from British ones.⁷² Thus, despite Churchill’s own effort to convince the reader that he had supported the project of a cross-Channel operation from the earliest moment, the general opinion in Italy was that he had been at least cool about the idea, if not openly hostile – which was a recurring theme in American narratives.⁷³ Paradoxically, this view met with wide approval in Italy, because it was connected with two elements which found fertile ground in the country: the denunciation of the Soviet threat and the discussion about the Italian campaign. According to many Italian authors, Churchill’s plans for a push through northern Italy towards the Balkans would have spared the country many months of war and, at the same time, limited the imposition of Soviet rule on Eastern Europe.⁷⁴ Therefore, they accepted the American version of Churchill’s attitude about D-Day, but inverted its meaning, considering it a proof of foresight for reasons largely rooted in the domestic context, profoundly altering the intentions of the author.

Something similar happened when the memoirs interacted with powerful Italian memories. When the two narratives were in open contrast, the foreign one tended to be obscured or modified. This is the case, for instance, with the African war or with the image of Italy as a fighter, topics on which both the newspaper serialisation and Mondadori’s translation widely intervened: when needed, the Italian editors did not hesitate to modify the original narrative, in order to adapt it to their own perspective, or to what they thought was the feeling of the readers.

On the other hand, when Churchill’s own perspective did not directly confront the Italian one – or more precisely, one of the competing Italian narratives – or even strengthened it,

it was widely accepted. In this case, *The Second World War*'s effectiveness in spreading the author's point of view was at its maximum. There are many aspects of the memoirs that enjoyed success with the Italian audience – or, more precisely, in Italian public discourse: the Battle of Britain was, of course, one; hostility toward the USSR another; the definitive condemnation of appeasement a third.⁷⁵

However, the most important one by far was the idea of the 'just war', of the war of good against evil, which was pivotal in Churchill's narrative and was widely and deeply appreciated in Italy. Obviously, it was not present only in Churchill's work. It was, in fact, the same idea that dominated the memory of the Resistance; and it was the official representation of the conflict, fostered by both governmental authorities and the left-wing opposition. But *The Second World War* contributed to shaping it in many relevant ways. It powerfully strengthened the myth of the Western Allies, who were also Italy's new Cold War allies.. At the core of such an ideological representation of the war were the values of freedom and democracy. Although highly rhetorical and often selective, such values were precisely what many Italian parties and citizens sought in the new Republican system – all the more so when they were embodied by the winner of the war.

Above all, the memoirs were a great epic account, of mythopoetic strength.⁷⁶ The work was often perceived as such in Italy. Somehow, it provided the kind of heroic, just, and victorious narrative of the war that Italy could not produce on its own. Naturally, there was a major obstacle in the adoption of such a narrative by the Italians: in principle, they should play the role of the villain. But the author, the translators and those who made use of the work cooperated to overcome such a risk. Churchill clearly downplayed the Italian role in the war, focusing on the Germans and especially on their Nazi leaders – a tactic that to some extent echoed the widespread distinction between the 'good Italian' and the 'evil German' (Focardi 2103). Translators and editors hid his worst criticisms from the Italians – where possible – and operated on the paratext to make the text itself less painful to their national pride: journalists and writers often treated the memoirs not as a foreign narrative, but as a national one. It is interesting to note that the headlines of the instalments in the *Corriere* used the first person plural to identify the Italians when they were directly involved,⁷⁷ but when they were not, the pronoun 'us' often referred to the British, adopting the author's perspective.⁷⁸ This could create a sense of confusion and alienation in the reader, but also an unconscious identification: 'we' were waging a good war, 'we' were fighting for freedom, 'we' were, above all, the winners. Thus, the collective subject of the book, the British people, implicitly changed and became all the anti-Nazis, or all the non-Germans, or Germany's victims. A remarkable rhetorical transformation was thus achieved: Italy – not Fascist Italy, but the new democratic one – 'switched sides' in the recent conflict, and ended up being if not a victor, at least one of the rescued countries.

Notes

1. *Corriere della Sera* (from now on CdS), 20 July 1948 'Le "Memorie" di Churchill pubblicate in volume'.
2. On the Italian publishing sector after the war, and on Mondadori's position within it, see Cadioli 1981, Piazzoni 2021, Pischedda 2022, Turi 1997.
3. Archivio storico Arnoldo Mondadori Editore (from now on AME), Series 'Arnoldo Mondadori [from now on AM]', b. 'Churchill', 19 July 1948, text of Mondadori's speech.
4. AME, Series 'Dati tirature', printing figures of W.S. Churchill, *La Seconda guerra mondiale*.
5. AME, Series 'Dati tirature', printing figures of D.D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* and of R. Hillary, *The Last Enemy*.
6. AME, Series 'Dati tirature', printing figures of W.S. Churchill, *La Seconda Guerra mondiale*.
7. Churchill's biography is the subject of a wide literature, which cannot be summarised here. A good introductory bibliography can be found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bibliography_of_Winston_Churchill (last visited August 2025). In this paper, if not otherwise stated, I mainly rely on Gilbert 1992 and Roberts 2018.

8. *La Stampa* (from now on LS), 31 December 1899, 'La romantica fuga di Churchill da Pretoria narrata da lui stesso'; CdS, 28–29 January 1900, 'Il romanzo di un giornalista'.
9. CdS, 21 January 1927, 'Churchill parla dell'Italia e del fascismo a un'adunata di giornalisti a Roma'. LS, 21 February 1933, 'Il fascismo orientamento di civiltà e la crisi demoliberale inglese'.
10. See CdS, 2 May 1936, 'Churchill alla testa di una campagna antisanzionista'; LS, 2 May 1936, 'Bruschi mutamenti di fronte tra i sanzionisti di Londra'.
11. The first one was *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 12 February 1927, W. Churchill, 'La prova del sangue'; the last was *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 1 May 1927, W. Churchill, 'La vittoria'.
12. See Churchill Archives, (accessible at <https://www.churchillarchive.com>) CHUR 4.1, s.d. List of foreign contracts for 'The World Crisis'.
13. See CdS, 30 August 1929, Carlo Grenet, 'Pagine imperiali'; LS, 7 August 1929, 'Un'importante opera di W. Churchill pubblicata dall'Ufficio storico della Marina'.
14. LS, 1 August 1948, W. Churchill, 'John D. Rockefeller verso i 98 anni'.
15. On Fascist war propaganda see Cavallo 1997; on the image of the UK see Gallerano 1994.
16. Churchill Archives, CHUR 4.1, 4 October 1944, Mrs R.E.K. Hill (Churchill's secretary) to Lovat Dickson of the Macmillan Publishing House.
17. Churchill Archives, CHUR 4.1, 9 November 1945, Hill to Dickson.
18. AME, Series 'Dati tirature', printing figures of W.S. Churchill, *Passo a passo*.
19. Churchill Archives, CHUR 4.1, 24 June 1944, Hill to Churchill.
20. See Churchill Archives, CHUR 4.1, 7 July 1944, WSC to Hill.
21. See CdS, 23–24 February 1946, I.N.S. 'Churchill riposa al sole ma non rinuncia alla lotta politica'.
22. AME, Series 'Segreteria editoriale estero', b. 15, fasc. 75 'Churchill', 24 February 1947, Mondadori to 'Caro dr. Van Loewen'.
23. AME, Series 'Arnoldo Mondadori', b. 'Churchill', 13 May 1947, Reves to Mondadori.
24. AME, Series 'Arnoldo Mondadori', b. 'Churchill', 4 June 1947, Mondadori to Albedit, London.
25. AME, Series 'Arnoldo Mondadori', b. 'Churchill', 29 May 1947, Mondadori's secretary to Holroyd Reece, Albedit, London.
26. At least, this is what can be inferred from the sending by Mondadori to Reves of a first advance of 100.000 Lire. See AME, Series 'Arnoldo Mondadori', b. 'Churchill', 26 June 1947, Mondadori to Reves.
27. See AME, Series 'Arnoldo Mondadori', b. 'Churchill', 5 August 1947, Mondadori to the Italian Minister for Foreign Trade.
28. See AME, Series 'Arnoldo Mondadori', b. 'Churchill', 16 December 1949, Reves to Mondadori; 27 August 1951, Reves to Mondadori.
29. See AME, Series 'Arnoldo Mondadori', b. 'Churchill', 16 November 1948, Reves to Mondadori.
30. See AME, Series 'Arnoldo Mondadori', b. 'Churchill', 20 May 1948, Ann Foote (Reves's assistant) to Mondadori; 18 September 1951, Reves to Mondadori.
31. AME, Series 'Arnoldo Mondadori', b. 'Churchill', s.d. (but Spring 1948), Reves 'To the publishers of Mr Churchill's Work'.
32. AME, Series 'Arnoldo Mondadori', b. 'Churchill', 20 April 1948, Reves to Mondadori.
33. AME, Series 'Arnoldo Mondadori', b. 'Churchill', 14 January 1948, Reves to Mondadori.
34. AME, Series 'Arnoldo Mondadori', b. 'Churchill', 11 February 1948, Reves to Mondadori.
35. See AME, Series 'Arnoldo Mondadori', b. 'Churchill', 9 October 1950, Mondadori to Guglielmo Emanuel, director of *Corriere della Sera*.
36. See AME, Segreteria editoriale estero, b. 15, fasc. 75 'Churchill', 19 October 1953, Reves to Missirotti.
37. See for instance CdS, 15 April 1948, 'Le memorie di Churchill'; LS, 20 October 1948, C.M. Franzero, 'Come Churchill scrisse le sue memorie'.
38. CdS, 9 November 1947, 'Storia della II guerra mondiale nelle memorie inedite di Churchill'.
39. *The Second World War* was turned into an American TV series in the 1960s, and it was almost immediately dubbed and transmitted by Italian TV. See on this *Radiocorriere*, 28 July 1963. A three-episode radio transmission was also devoted to the book in the same years (see *Radiocorriere*, 17 September 1962).
40. A first analysis of this serialisation, albeit focused on a specific episode, has been carried out by Emanuela Scarpellini (2006).
41. CdS, 22 May 1948, 'Tre sottomarini tedeschi affondati durante un pranzo'.
42. CdS, 15 May 1948, 'Mandatemi lettere sigillate che passeranno dalla vostra alla mia tasca'.
43. CdS, 13 October 1951, 'L'arrivo delle nostre navi a Malta disimpegna la flotta britannica'.
44. CdS, 5 February 1950, 'Al primo colpo di Rommel crolla il fronte inglese nel deserto'.
45. See for instance CdS, 21 November 1950, 'Per il miraggio del Cairo l'"asse" rinuncia a conquistare Malta', where the following sentence is eliminated: 'Hitler himself had not been confident of success against

Malta, as he mistrusted the ability of the Italian troops who would have formed the major part of the expedition.'

46. See for example CdS, 16 February 1949, 'Capii che era inutile fare offerte a Mussolini', where all the paragraphs describing Italy's attack on France, and Roosevelt's stern condemnation of it, disappear.

47. CdS, 13 March 1949.

48. CdS, 30 October 1951, 'Un cinico scherzo di Stalin provoca un incidente a tavola'.

49. CdS, 27 October 1953.

50. CdS, 25 October 1951.

51. CdS, 23 October 1953 'Keitel: "What should we do?" Rundstedt: "Make peace, you idiots!"'

52. CdS, 5 October 1946, B. Liddel Hart, 'In preda alla disperazione Rundstedt chiamò Hitler in Francia'.

53. See AME, AM, s.d. (but Spring 1948), Reves 'To the publishers of Mr Churchill's Work'.

54. See for instance AME, AM, 15 December 1950, Reves to Mondadori; 18 September 1951, Reves to Mondadori.

55. For instance, in the first volume there appeared an image of Dino Grandi commemorating Gabriele D'Annunzio, and a picture of Italian-Albanian soldiers, which had very little to do with the content of the text (Churchill 1948b, 256).

56. *Il Ponte*, May 1950, A. Predieri, review of Liddel Hart 1949.

57. *Il Ponte*, February 1948, A. Predieri, review of Rougier 1947. Do you mean A. Predieri?

58. *Il Ponte*, May 1950, P. Barile, review of Schacht 1949.

59. *Il Ponte*, January 1952, 'Ritrovo', G.S. [Gaetano Salvemini], 'Churchill e Mussolini'.

60. *Il Ponte*, March 1953, F. Ravà, review of L. Broad (1952), 'Winston Churchill', Bari, Da Vinci.

61. Ibidem.

62. *L'Unità*, 27 October 1949, G. De Rosa, 'Perché Churchill nel '43 scelse "l'amicizia" di Tito'.

63. CdS, 22 August 1948, E. Montale, 'Il libro dei "se" di un grande uomo semplice'.

64. *Il Messaggero*, 17 October 1948, Angelo Crespi, 'L'uomo del destino'.

65. LS, 11 July 1948, D. Bartoli, 'La guerra non era necessaria'; 28 July 1948, C.M. Franzero, 'L'uomo Churchill'.

66. *Il Tempo*, 4 September 1948, U. D'Andrea, 'Da secoli l'Inghilterra sceglie sempre la via più difficile'.

67. *Il Tempo*, 29 November 1962, C.M., Franzero, 'A ottant'anni Churchill è ormai un monumento nazionale'.

68. See for instance *Il Tempo*, 6 September 1949, 'Il grave pericolo russo preoccupava Churchill fin dal '42'.

69. See for instance *Il Tempo*, 25 January 1965, A. Perrini, 'Scompare con Churchill l'ultimo dei Grandi'; LS, 31 January 1965, M. Ciriello, 'L'addio di Churchill'; *Radiocorriere*, 31 January 1965, 'Churchill un capitano della libertà'; CdS, 25 January 1965, P. Ottone, 'Churchill l'inglese più grande'; *Avanti!*, 26 January 1965, P. Nenni, 'Un uomo eccezionale di un'epoca eccezionale'.

70. On the Italian memory of the war and the Resistance, see Carrattieri and Flores 2018, Cooke 2011, Focardi 2005 and Gribaudi 2020.

71. On American cultural influence in Italy in the postwar years, see Cassamagnaghi 2007, De Grazia 2005, Forgacs and Gundle 2007; on US propaganda see Belmonte 2008, Tobia 2008; on the importation of Hollywood movies, see Ellwood and Brunetta 1991 and, more specifically on war movies, Pipitone 2018.

72. See the TV programme '6 giugno 1944 Eisenhower racconta', shown on RAI TV on 6 June 1964; or 23 July 1969, 'Lo sbarco in Normandia', both in RaiTeche (RAI audiovisual archive).

73. See for instance, among the texts that were published in Italy in the same years as Churchill's memoirs, Roosevelt 1947, Hull 1949. On the American memory of the Normandy landings see Dolski, Edwards and Bickley 2014.

74. See for instance CdS, 14 August 1964, 'Fu un regalo a Stalin lo sbarco in Provenza'; LS, 6 June 1954, L. Salvatorelli, 'Dieci anni'.

75. See LS, 11 July 1948, D. Bartoli, 'La guerra non era necessaria'; CdS, 28 August 1948, A. Guerriero, 'Era poi Chamberlain così ingenuo come si crede?'

76. I use the term 'epic' in a non-specialised sense, to refer to a heroic account of challenges, battles and final victory. It is beyond my competence to investigate the literary aspects of the text. In fact Jonathan Rose, in his perspicuous study on Churchill's literary style, has identified his main source of inspiration as Victorian drama, and explicitly defined *The Second World War* as a 'work of theatre' (Rose 2014, 545).

77. See for instance CdS, 13 October 1951, 'L'arrivo delle nostre navi a Malta disimpegna la flotta britannica'.

78. See for instance CdS, 1 March 1949, 'Eravamo diventati un "nido di vespe"', with reference to the defence of the British Isles in 1940.

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Daniele Pipitone is assistant professor at the University of Turin, Department of Historical Studies. He completed a PhD in Contemporary History at the University of Turin in 2009: the thesis, converted into a monograph in 2013, dealt with the political cultures of Italian Social Democrats (1945–1953). He continued his study of the political and cultural history of twentieth-century Italy as a post-doctoral fellow as well as a member of research teams. He published several articles on many related topics: the history of Fascism, the history of journalism in postwar years, and the history of Italy at war. In 2017, he published a second monograph on the life of Aldo Garosci, a well-known antifascist scholar, politician and journalist. From September 2019 to March 2021, he worked as a researcher at the Istituto Piemontese per la storia della Resistenza e della società contemporanea. His latest research interests focus on transnational cultural history, as he is studying the reception of American myth and narratives of the Second World War in postwar Italy.

Italian summary

L'articolo esamina le traduzioni italiane e la ricezione de *La Seconda guerra mondiale* di Winston S. Churchill, avvalendosi di materiali d'archivio britannici e italiani e di fonti a stampa. Esso mostra come le edizioni e le pubblicazioni a puntate in Italia abbiano introdotto modifiche sistematiche – riduzioni, omissioni, tagli testuali e dispositivi paratestuali – allo scopo di adattare le memorie a un pubblico interno. Tali interventi contribuirono ad attenuare i giudizi di Churchill sull'Italia, a enfatizzare il carattere ideologico del conflitto e a rafforzare i temi antisovietici, allineando così il testo ai discorsi culturali e politici dominanti del secondo dopoguerra.

L'analisi delle recensioni contemporanee e dei dibattiti sulla stampa mette in luce una ricezione polarizzata: alla distanza critica o al silenzio delle riviste intellettuali si contrappose l'entusiastico apprezzamento dei quotidiani generalisti, nei quali i memoriali furono celebrati tanto come impresa letteraria quanto come affermazione dei valori democratici. L'articolo sostiene che tali strategie editoriali e traduttive svolsero un ruolo cruciale nell'integrazione del racconto churchilliano nella memoria collettiva italiana, favorendo una ridefinizione simbolica della posizione dell'Italia da nazione sconfitta a membro del campo dei vincitori.