

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Caramelle, caramelle! American food and Italians in the Second World War: propaganda, othering, and food exchange

Patrizia Sambuco 

GBS/Oxford Brookes University, UK
Email: psambuco@globalbanking.ac.uk

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Abstract

This article considers the function of American food and its exchange at the time of the Allied occupation of Italy to revisit the complexity of the encounter with the local population. Through unpublished diaries and confidential reports of the Psychological Warfare Branch, as well as video materials, published interviews and published diaries, the article makes the issues around food central to the understanding of the dynamics of the Italian occupation. While contributing to the growing literature on food availability in the Second World War, the article expands in particular on the historic function of American comfort food and rations, to explore the experience of the Italian occupation through the interactions of gifting, bartering and black market trade. It illuminates the complexity of mutual perceptions shaped by hope, nostalgia, supremacy, and fairness. It concludes with a reading of John Hersey's *A Bell for Adano*, which, as a cultural product, brings together and makes valid for future generations, the contrasting image of a benign and a damaging occupation explored in the article.

Keywords: C and K rations; comfort food; *A Bell for Adano*; wartime diaries; black market; Allied landing

Introduction

Enlisted in the American army in his first year of college, Robert Ellis was stationed in Italy at the beginning of 1945, where he took part in the fierce battles along the Gothic line, the Nazi fortified defensive line running from northern Tuscany to Pesaro. His memoir intertwines memories with transcriptions of his correspondence to his family, and extracts of his wartime diary. In the latter, he recorded his thoughts on the day-to-day events he experienced in those months. The US Army's combat food provisions, the K and C rations, were soon mentioned: 'K and C rations. Unbelievable. Wonder if family could guess'" (Ellis, 1996, 99). A few weeks later, his division was involved in the atrocious Monte Belvedere-Della Torracchia battle. To reassure his mum after that dramatic event, Ellis mentions the supply of coffee and doughnuts he can access at the Red Cross rest camp:

We are in the rest camp and everyone is treating us like kings and heroes, which is true of many of the men. The bravest men I have ever seen.

The Red Cross girls are here and we get wonderful food – hot coffee, doughnuts, etc. I'm fine so try not to worry. (Ellis, 1996, 144)

Ellis's impression of the heartening and consoling function of coffee and doughnuts was shared by the US military organisation, which invested much effort in delivering to American troops food which was not nutritious but superfluous and charged with emotional values – that is, comfort food. Such provisions were appreciated by the GIs, who loathed the scientifically devised C and K rations and preferred the less nutritious comfort food.

Coffee and doughnuts, American ice cream, and Coke were not only simple alimentary preferences. Comfort food had the power to bring back memories of home, of the food the GIs shared with their families and friends. At a cultural level, it was also a metonym of their country, a reminder of American cultural identity. As Massimo Montanari puts it, food is always culture, hence, a crucial element in the expression of human identity (Montanari 2006, xii). In this context, comfort food was a mark of belonging: it bonded American troops to their culture and simultaneously shared that closeness with their families in America. For Ellis and his family, coffee and doughnuts represented the care and values of America, rather than mere food.

Historians have long highlighted the relevance of the study of food within war study. For Lizzie Collingham, military strategies in the Second World War were strictly interconnected with food availability and policies (Collingham 2013). Carol Helstosky has highlighted how the Italian Fascist government constructed nationalism around some foods – only to then lead the population to one of the poorest food rations and living conditions in Europe (2004). Sambuco and Pine have underlined how the rhetoric of women's moral duty and dignified poverty was devised to disguise the evidently deteriorating alimentary conditions of the middle classes (2023). Yet, the study of food dynamics at the crucial time of the Allied landing is an important topic that still needs to be further explored to unpack the many meanings food acquired at that time. If coffee and doughnuts symbolised for Ellis and his family the care and values of America, that opulence signified, for the locals who witnessed the landing, a representation of the wealthy country America. In fact, food played an essential role in the interaction between Americans and the local communities. American food, from candy to rations, was gifted, bartered, or entered the black market through the actions of both Italian civilians and American soldiers. Each of these forms of exchange and interaction contributed to the creation of new mutual perceptions.

In wartime, when searching for food is a daily activity that occupies most of the population and often requires ingenuity and initiative, food stories encapsulate people's life experience, their daily struggles, as well as their perceptions of others in food exchanges. If considered from the point of view of both Italians and American soldiers, food becomes a symbol for how the country of abundance, America, brought dreams of a prosperous future. Yet, it also embodies how the occupiers exploited the hunger suffered by the local population, especially when food was used in exchange for sexual relations, highlighting the worst aspects of military occupation. Food and food exchange are, therefore, useful lenses for understanding the complexity of the encounter between Americans and Italians.

This analysis of this underexplored topic contributes to the growing literature on food availability and dynamics in the Second World War (Helstosky 2006; Collingham 2013; Goldman and Filtzer 2015; Gerhard 2015; Evans 2022). Different types of sources have been used to address each aspect of the analysis. The first section provides an overview of the value attributed to American comfort food in supporting the GIs overseas. It will do so by analysing the rhetoric around American food in an American Red Cross newsreel of the time of the landing. Drawing on unpublished diaries and Allied confidential reports of the

Psychological Warfare Branch, as well as published interviews, the article will then consider the experience of food and food exchange for Italian soldiers and civilians and for American military personnel. These personal accounts are key to understanding the morale of the population and soldiers, as well as their contrasting experiences of the American presence as liberation or as occupation. In the last section, the article will examine John Hersey's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Bell for Adano*, which brings the concepts of occupation and liberation together. The novel has been previously considered for the ideological message it projects about a good American occupation. In my reading, I show how the representations of food gifting and the black market are portrayed through humorous or dramatic tones that underline the negative effects of the American occupation. While the article expands on the historic function of comfort food in European countries (Gregory and Wayne 2020) to explore the experience of the Italian occupation through the interactions of gifting, exchange and illegal trade, it illuminates the complexity of mutual perceptions shaped by hope, nostalgia, supremacy, and fairness. Most importantly, it helps render the day-to-day mutual experience of the occupation more comprehensible.

American comfort food, 'doughnut dollies', and the all-American experience propaganda

Our understanding of the impact and role of 'comfort food' owes much to studies carried out in the last few decades. Scholars have established that the first use of the term 'comfort food' dates back to a 1966 *Washington Post* article discussing obesity (Spence, 2017, 105). Since then, the study of 'comfort food' has flourished, allowing a better understanding of consumption practices in contemporary consumer-oriented societies. Today, we know that some foods are consumed primarily because of their power to stimulate nostalgic emotions (Goldstein 2009; Sutton 2001), or their ability to offer coping mechanisms in moments of stress (Shen and Liu 2024), or because we derive physical and psychological well-being from the memory of convivial events (Locher et al. 2005, 275). Today we are, therefore, better equipped to analyse the function of comfort food.

During the Second World War, food research in America was strictly focused on the nutritional value of military rations. But the provision of comfort food was part of the wider effort of the US government to organise entertainment and relaxation for American troops abroad, to ease the pressure of their military tasks. Tourism, for example, was one form of respite and entertainment for US personnel (Buchanan, 2016). All military personnel, including the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), worked according to a schedule that included time off alongside the possibility of taking day trips, and also holidays, in the occupied countries. The US Army had recognised the importance of morale long before the Second World War. Already in 1895, US soldiers posted abroad could access dedicated stores and facilities, including the Post Exchanges (PX), where a variety of goods were available to them at lower prices (Cooke 2009, 12). During the Second World War, General George C. Marshall, Army chief of staff, expanded facilities for soldiers by creating the Army Exchange Service and the Special Services Divisions. These were responsible for setting up an extensive network of PX stores and Service Clubs – where American soldiers could rest, read newspapers, eat, drink, and dance. US President Franklin D. Roosevelt brought together charitable organisations such as the YMCA and the Salvation Army, which provided service to the troops, and created a wider umbrella group, the United Service Organisations (USO) (Cooke 2009, 4). In addition, the American Red Cross offered help and comfort food. It is no surprise, then, that the American troops were very well equipped in terms of consumer goods such as cigarettes, chewing gum, and all types of comfort food that could appeal to the American palate.

Such a significant investment in material comforts was part of Marshall's plan to motivate soldiers who were fighting overseas for reasons that they could not directly connect to the safety of their own homes and families (Ellwood 2012, 278). The widespread availability of comfort products was ultimately meant to bind the military personnel to the material culture of the United States. As we have seen in Ellis's case, comfort food also projected a reassuring image to soldiers' families at home, who found solace in knowing that men and women overseas had access to the same consumer goods they were accustomed to at home. One of the newsreels produced by the American Red Cross, reporting on the Fifth Army in Sicily and aimed at their American audience, at home and overseas, is a useful tool to grasp the rhetoric around American comfort food.¹

The film repeatedly features Red Cross volunteers distributing coffee and doughnuts and narrates about an all-American environment for the American troops overseas. The doughnuts are tastier, the voiceover emphasises, because they are served by young American women, who are shown handing out and eating doughnuts at a Service Club (2.39 mark). During the First World War, serving coffee and doughnuts to the soldiers was a regular activity of charitable organisations to boost soldiers' morale. In the Second World War, their effort was more structured. The Red Cross sent overseas mobile service clubs, the Clubmobiles, equipped with coffee and a doughnut machine. At the 6.53 mark, Red Cross women are seen travelling to the front by a Clubmobile loaded with coffee and doughnuts, but the real treat – the voiceover insists – is that the treats are handed out by 'a couple of young girls from the USA'. The restoring comfort of coffee and doughnuts is also shared with returning pilots in airfields in bombed-out towns and remote locations (8.37 mark; 8.57 mark). Even more bravely, the male Red Cross field director is shown in the act of delivering doughnuts to an artillery battery in action (11.28 mark). Images of coffee and doughnuts dot the remaining part of the documentary, but they are not the only comfort foods shown: American ice cream, candies and cigarettes bring smiles, relief and joy among the soldiers.

The Red Cross women volunteers overseas, commonly referred to as 'doughnut dolies', worked intensively on making and distributing doughnuts. As a Red Cross volunteer reported in a letter from Scotland, they prepared the refreshments within the Clubmobiles where, every day, they produced a great quantity of doughnuts using a machine that would make seven a minute: 'We make about 3 mixes in a morning which is quite a few doughnuts' (Barrett Litoff and Smith, 1994, 153).

The availability of all-American food in an environment that was symbolically fashioned as all-American contributed to forming a psychologically safe space for the GIs, but constructed, at the same time, boundaries separating the American experience from the lives of the local communities. The separation of the American experience from that of the locals was ingrained in the GIs' training. For example, an official guidebook, *Soldier's Guide to Italy*, was made available to soldiers on their way to Italy: it emphasised the beauty of the country and illustrated places to visit during their time off. It also reiterated that it was home to 'warm-looking' women whose sexual customs would guarantee venereal diseases (Buchanan 2016, 601): essentially a dangerous place, or 'polluted Other', using a term by anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966), that indicates what is not considered accepted and indeed pure and holy within a given society. Yet, servicewomen's and servicemen's personal accounts of their time in Italy show how such recommendations were rarely followed on the ground. Through the analysis of the intense food exchange, gifting, or black-market trading that arose at that time, I am going to consider the many interactions between American military staff and Italian civilians and soldiers, to show how the Italians' perceptions of the Allies as liberators or occupiers was rooted in the interactions around food, at a time when this became the one single most important element of their daily life.

Food exchanges, black market and Allied troops

Lorena Estelle Hermance was stationed in Italy, at the Caserta Royal Palace, where she worked as a Wires Traffic Officer in the WAAC Signal Corps. She managed a group of young American women, Italian civilians and British staff, a role of responsibility and an important job given that it was the first time in American military history that women were allowed to do that delicate work. In her unpublished diary, *As You Were*, Hermance detailed her experiences and her impressions of the world around her. Owing to her position of responsibility, she travelled all around Italy to oversee a total of 52 switchboards. Like American soldiers, she was allowed to find some respite from her demanding post through day trips to Pompeii, evenings at the theatre, and longer vacations in Egypt, Jerusalem, and Greece. Also for her, a taste of American food and an all-American environment provided a moment of relief from a demanding job. In a diary entry in March 1945, she rejoiced at her first taste in 19 months of fresh milk; it was indeed special milk as it was delivered to her from America by a pilot (Hermance 1942–1945, 196). Similarly, in Cairo, she could not resist the indulgence of an ice cream soda, to be soon criticised by her colleagues because of the danger of local food: ‘the ingredients in local edibles are not pure enough for us to consume’ (196).

Lorena Hermance’s wartime experience reflected in some respects the type of practice illustrated in the American Red Cross newsreel. She was fully focused on her duty as a servicewoman contributing to the bigger cause of liberation, and mainly worked within the American and Allied environment, with few opportunities to interact with the local population. Yet she perceived the persistent hostility against Americans of many Italian women working under her supervision. As she reports, they wanted to be liberated from the Nazis, but resented the Americans for their bombing of their cities (142). In her pragmatic approach, cities’ devastation was to be accepted as a consequence of the war: ‘C’est la guerre!’ she argued (142). Unlike her, the Allied Force Headquarters paid much attention to the morale of the population thanks to the work of their Psychological Warfare Branch (PWB).

In the Second World War, the newly formed PWB promoted propaganda aimed at undermining the German troops and controlling information and news in occupied and liberated territories. One of its tasks was to conduct detailed observations of the population’s living conditions to assess civilians’ morale. They were aware of Italy’s food shortages and the dynamics these conditions set in motion. Reports from the PWB reveal a perceptive analysis of the tension between social classes in relation to food provisions, as well as knowledge of food exchanges between American soldiers and civilians. In October 1944, a report from central Italy stated: ‘There is no doubt that the main problem confronting Italy at the moment is that of food’ (PWB n. 36, 2/10/44). The two main causes, the report stressed, were the impossibility of distribution because of the Nazis’ destruction of bridges and roads, and the unequal access to food for different social classes, where the ‘wealthy Italians can and do live as if the war were of no concern to them’ (PWB n. 36, 2/10/44). Likewise, in July of the same year, reports from Rome emphasised that the ‘poorer classes are suffering acutely from the high prices of food’ (PWB n. 25, 8/7/44). These classes, the report comments, were the ones most active against the Nazis, and further evidence of their dissatisfaction was provided by graffiti noticed on a wall in the city centre: ‘How long will the rich stamp on our empty stomachs?’ (PWB n. 25, 8/7/44). These observations, collected after the liberation of Rome, confirm the gravity of the situation, and people’s perception that the availability of food such as meat, eggs, salt and sugar was ‘much worse’ in the Allied-occupied city (PWB n. 25, 8/7/44). Similar reports on people’s concern and dissatisfaction were compiled from other areas of liberated Italy, with the impression that the food situation worried people more than any other issue (PWB n. 25, 8/7/44). Another report detailing the views of an Italian professor stated his impressions of a general sense of disillusionment with the slow improvements brought by the Allies (PWB n. 29, 5/8/44). To echo that, an

Italian source reported to the PWB graffiti stating: 'Down with the American [sic]. We are hungry, hungry' (PWB n. 29, 5/8/44). Reports would detail prices and availability of food locally; they also considered the issues of the black market and the exchange of military rations.

Contrary to the enclosed all-American environment promoted by the American Red Cross video, food exchanges were very common. Robert Ellis, for example, recounts how he and his fellow soldiers would give 'food, candy, cigarettes, and leftover food' (Ellis, 1996, 103) to Italian children who picked up the soldiers' laundry to be done by their mothers. Philip Rutherford similarly reports how GIs bartered C and K rations to obtain much-desired and difficult-to-find eggs (Rutherford, 2017, 131). Lorena Estelle Hermance indulges in a lobster dinner, made possible by the exchange of American food with local fishermen – an arrangement one of her colleagues organised, albeit only after duly notifying their superiors (Hermance 1942–1945, 158). In fact, confidential reports of the PWB testify that the economic situation in Caserta, where Hermance was based, was not unsatisfactory, thanks to the new employment opportunities created by the Allies, and because 'particularly the Americans, give lots of their rations, unofficially of course, to the population' (PWB n. 19, 2/5/44). In a similar vein, war artist George Biddle predicted that, because of the local children's great demand for *caramelle* (candies), the GIs would go down in history with the nickname '*Caramelli* soldiers' (Biddle quoted in Rutherford 2017, 131).

American food frequently appeared on the black market. In liberated Rome, renowned journalist Miriam Mafai documented this phenomenon. Italian-born American radio journalist Natalia Danesi, who resided at the Hotel Excelsior, then the headquarters of the US Army, recounted that military regulations mandated the destruction of leftovers for fear of contamination, despite the widespread poverty clearly visible outside (Mafai 1987, 184). Yet army food could be found for sale on the black market, showing that it travelled through gifting or other means. In the nearby black market of Tor di Nona, the largest wartime black market site in the city, it was possible to buy 'zucchero e sigarette, margarina e scatole da un chilo di meat and vegetables ... cioccolato' (Mafai 1987, 184; 'sugar and cigarettes, margarine and kilo tins of American meat and vegetables ... chocolate'). It was not only Italians who supplied the black market with American army food. In her diary, 13-year-old Gloria Chilanti noted that in liberated Rome, American soldiers sold chocolate, cigarettes, and coffee in Piazza Colonna, which she likened to Tor di Nona (Chilanti 1998, 79).

For Italian civilians, black market trades were a widespread phenomenon practised by all social classes. The causes of such widespread illegal trade can be traced back to Fascist policies and the poor food distribution organised by the government, which took place in a fragmented society where the wealthier classes, traditionally facilitated by Fascism, were able to afford higher prices for the products they needed (Sambuco 2024). The Allied forces were aware that American soldiers contributed to the development and worsening of the black market. In a report on the dramatic living conditions around Leghorn, the observers of the Psychological Warfare Branch noted that the only possibility for the civilians 'to live at all' was 'to carry on a very extensive black market which has as its basic supply the Anglo-American rations and tinned food' (PWB n. 45, 7/12/44).

Apart from the individual initiatives of soldiers and civilians to sell army food products in the black market, there was a sustained exploitation of American goods by local gangs. They were behind the recurring theft of US Army supplies, which relied on the assistance provided by American soldiers (Williams 2013). In the port of Naples, where the largest quantities of stock arrived, sometimes the American goods would go directly from the ships to the black market: Allied trucks waited at the docks and were driven either by Italians or American soldiers involved in the illegal trade (Hill quoted in Williams 2013, 180). While the large-scale and organised black market was a financial enterprise to make material profits,

the more widespread illegal trade involving a large part of the local population cannot be explained only by greed. There was simply a significant need to exchange food. A need felt not only by the starving Italian population, but by the Allied soldiers who were craving fresh food.

The American cartoonist Bill Mauldin, who was in the 45th Division and produced well-received cartoons for the military newspaper *Stars and Stripes*, in recounting his experience noticed that the frequent bartering for both civilians and soldiers was triggered by the novelty of each other's food:

While the rule books probably frown on it, there are few soldiers who haven't traded army rations for civilian food when it was available. It's funny to watch a civilian, sick of his potato soup, brown bread, and red wine, wolf one of those horrible K rations as eagerly as the soldier tears into the soup and bread and wine. (Mauldin in *Reporting World War II* 1995, 423)

For soldiers at the front, the desire for fresh and hot food drove bartering, purchasing, and even theft. In rural Sicily, this became a serious issue, especially after the Allied Proclamation disarmed civilians, leaving farmers unable to protect their livestock (Williams 2013, 114). For American troops far from a rest base, meat and poultry were the most coveted food. Mauldin's cartoons capture this reality, depicting GIs' eagerness to seize local food: a memorable example is a soldier returning with a chicken and a cow while claiming he also spotted German artillery.

The persistent food shortages, the Americans' involvement in the black market, or the theft of cattle, likely shaped civilians' perception of the Allied occupation: yet even the act of gifting food, at times, transformed into an assertion of power. For example, in an account by the renowned war journalist Ernie Pyle, the American troops' food generosity comes closer to an uncomfortable display of belittling superiority. While in Salerno, waiting to sail for Anzio, Pyle described a group of about 200 children and old women on the dock trying to catch the cookies and chocolates the soldiers would throw at them. The whole scene is depicted like a spectacle: children screaming; soldiers having fun looking at the little ones catching the goods; an elderly lady managing to catch something, only to be assaulted by children and adults and be left with an empty box without crackers. What was for some the fun of a performance, probably comparable to a dog catching a stick, turned into a more bitter scene for Pyle: 'It was a lot of fun watching this foreign riot of childish emotions and adult greed that day. But some of it was too real – greed born out of too great a necessity – and I was glad when word came that we would sail that night' (Pyle in Hynes et al. 1995, 39). The soldiers dispensed food with smugness rather than generosity, displaying a clear self-perception of superiority. Pyle initially shared in the soldiers' amusement, but soon gained a deeper understanding of the suffering of the locals, who were objectified for the soldiers' entertainment.

Canned food and army rations were exchanged for sex. Historian Maria Porzio has noted how many American representations of the Allied arrival in Naples and the South of Italy invariably depicted local women as prostitutes or as easily seducible. She reports a conversation between Allied soldiers in which one vows to save his C rations for his arrival in Italy, where women would do anything just to eat (quoted in Porzio 2011, 202). British writer Norman Lewis writes of a queue of local women next to an area of food distribution, all of whom had a stack of tins next to them, a sign that each of them was selling herself just for a tin, there, in the open (quoted in Porzio, 2011, 202). Porzio has counteracted this narrative that blamed the presumed low moral qualities of Italian women by dissecting a long list of rapes, attacks, and robberies that characterised the Allied troops' stay, particularly in and

around Naples. Reports of the PWB from Siena show that they were aware of rapes committed by the French troops in the suburban areas but downplayed the issue, and preferred to stress the Allied ability to contain these crimes within the city area (PWB n. 29, 5/8/44). For the communities affected by such violence, the Allied intervention was not a liberation, but an occupation marked by oppression. Despite this, the first experience of encountering Allied troops was often characterised by happiness and indeed eagerness, thanks to the expectations of a better life projected by the images of abundance, of which food was part.

The Italian experience of 'American abundance'

Gemma Cecchi, a primary school teacher living not far from Florence, asks in her diary 'Perché tutti con feste accogliamo questi che arrivano come liberatori?' (Cecchi 1944, 18–19: 'Why are we all welcoming these foreigners who are coming like liberators?'). Hatred for the Germans, for the violence and destruction they left behind, is her answer. In a similar vein, Licia Bartali, a young woman living in southern Tuscany who had just escaped a rape attempt by a German soldier, remembers her tears of joy at the arrival of the Americans in her town (Bartali 1950, 3). Yet Gemma Cecchi also mentions the locals' amazement at the American soldiers' advanced equipment, their kind and self-assured manners, and their sense of humour, which was already familiar to the local population through films and books (Cecchi 1944, 19). As David W. Ellwood has argued in his monumental *The Shock of America*, the dreams and expectations that the American armed forces conveyed to the local population represented a form of revolutionary social change. The American promise was that 'domestic prosperity, calm, and freedom itself depended not on politics, but on the commodities the film stars used' (quoted in Ellwood, 2012, 275). Food abundance was also part of that form of persuasion.

This is well represented in the diary of Prospero De Pietro, a young Italian soldier captured in Sicily and then transported to a prison camp in Algeria. Chosen to help around the American base camp, De Pietro started a collaboration with the Americans that led him to join the Fifth Army and travel to Italy, France and Germany. During his first meal in the American base camp, he considered with astonishment both the rich menu and the American soldiers' calm way of living: 'Mi sono trovato davanti a questo menu per me da grandi ricevimenti, sono rimasto stupefatto, senza sapere cosa mettere nella scodella e come comportarmi, presi un mestolo di minestra a caso, due fette di pane bianco, un pezzetto di formaggio e marmellata, una bevanda scura, era cioccolato ... un menù eccezionale e tanto ricco, persone che parlavano una lingua diversa, presentavano uno stile di vita tranquillo, senza problemi, diversa in tutto dal nostro modo di fare e comportare' (De Pietro, 41: 'I found myself in front of a menu typical of big celebrations, I was astonished, without knowing what to put on my plate and how to behave. I fetched some soup at random, two slices of white bread, a piece of cheese and jam, a dark drink, it was chocolate ... an exceptional and very rich menu, people talking a different language, they seemed to be leading a quiet way of life, without problems, completely different from our way of behaving'). Not only were they able to enjoy exceptional meals, but candy, cigarettes, chocolate, chewing gum, biscuits, and more were also provided to them, every ten days (De Pietro, 48). De Pietro had been in the Italian army and could therefore compare military food provisions: six rusks, three tins, and a flask of water, which was supposed to be sufficient for three days, was all he used to receive (De Pietro, 43).

Edmondo Volpiani, an Italian soldier from Romagna, gave a humorous account of the inadequate food provision of the Italian army in Sicily. For example, for their trip from Romagna to Sicily, Edmondo and his comrades were given two small loaves and two tins, but in Naples they received their 'comfort food' – an apple and a photo of Mussolini (Volpiani 1942–1943, 6)! Likewise, the meals in Messina were horrifying, not only bland and

unappetising, but often inedible due to the presence of maggots and mice. In his poem 'Il rancio di Messina', Volpiani once more recounted with humour the deplorable quality of the food and the resignation of the soldiers.

In Sicily, at the time of the Allied landing, the soldiers' living conditions were often worse than those of the civilians. Teresa Fiore has compiled a series of video interviews with eye-witnesses to the landing, focusing specifically on the topic of food, hunger, and migration and specifically linking decades of migration from the island to the image of American abundance.² The interviews confirm that Sicilians who worked for the Fascist government or those who had moved to the countryside could rely on adequate food provisions (Fiore 2024, 323–324). The Sicilians interviewed describe their curiosity, suspicion and ignorance of the American food rather than hunger. In his video interview, Arturo Cambiano remembers the fun he and his mates had when opening American cans. Cookies, chocolates, and chewing gum were delicacies and novelties to them, and seem today his fondest memories. At the time of the landing, witnesses like Arturo were children or adolescents and were, therefore, the main recipients of the American soldiers' candy distribution. Perhaps for this reason, their memories today are still shaped by the sense of amazement they experienced then.

Another recurrent memory is the novelty of American food packaging. Arturo, like other witnesses, recalls their impressions of the seemingly unusual shape and content of the tins. They were surprised to discover that cans had metallic openers, and even more amazed to find cooked pasta, meat, scrambled eggs, and beans inside. More than eating what was inside the cans, it was the very act of opening them and uncovering the surprising content that defined their experience and memory. Many perceived the landing as the end of the war, rationing, and dark bread; American food represented the metonymic expression of that imagined resolution. For them, the arrival of the Allied troops meant liberation. In this sense, sweets, just like the extraordinary American tins, fed the emotions of the liberation, providing excitement, hope, curiosity, and seemed to have created more lasting memories than the actual feeding of the body.

Confirmation of the relevance of tinned food as an expression of American culture rather than food to fill up the stomach also comes from the people who did not see the American troops as liberators, nor thought of American goods as part of an imagined future of affluence and mass consumption. Umberto Guidotti was a member of the X^a MAS, the Fascist troops of the Italian Social Republic. He was in Genoa at the time of the Allies' arrival and was taken prisoner together with local Fascists and Nazis. Taken to the American camps around Pisa, he remembers in his diary the prisoners' curiosity about the 'famosi viveri, made in USA' ('famous made-in-USA food'), the C rations (Guidotti 1945, 30 April).

This crucial item in the army food provisions included canned pork and beans, meat and vegetable hash, meat and vegetable stew, crackers, and soluble coffee. Developed in 1937 as nutritional rations to be consumed by troops whenever a kitchen could not be set up, the C rations were produced on a large scale from 1941, and subsequently improved. In 1940, new research on a type of ration that could be used in the assault phase of an action led to the creation of the K ration, which also went through several stages of improvement. Each ration included three units: breakfast, dinner and supper, all devised as nutritious meals. At a later stage, candy, chocolate, chewing gum, and cigarettes were also included in the units. In 1944, the US army acquired K rations that amounted to more than 105 million (Fisher and Fisher 2011, 151). Guidotti details the content of the tins, which at first seemed to them appetising, but he is quick to report the same disappointment common among the GIs: the rations were nutritious and scientifically devised to be so, but did not provide a sense of satiety. As Guidotti ironically summarises, 'passato il primo entusiasmo, ci siamo trovati un po' cocux, quella gru che aveva ingoiato un pezzo di ghiaccio' (Guidotti 1945, 30

April: 'After the first enthusiastic reaction, we found ourselves a bit like "cocux", that crane that had swallowed a piece of ice'). Like all the novelty food brought by the Americans, they represented, for some, a moment of relief, but more generally, their relevance lay not so much in their alimentary function but in the curiosity they inspired, and for the taste of a future world they conveyed to some.

John Hersey's *A Bell for Adano* and the food of a 'good' occupation

A representation of the centrality of food supplies and exchanges in the Allied occupation is depicted by American war reporter John Hersey in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Bell for Adano* (1944), inspired by his wartime experience in Italy. The novel provided an idealised model for a benign American occupation of a foreign country, promising happiness and freedom (Gordon 2018). As such, in the following decades, some even regarded the story as a sort of manual on how to run an ideal occupation (Gordon 2018, 22). Susan Carruthers comments that the extraordinary success of the novel at its publication 'says a good deal about wartime America's craving for confirmation that the war was indeed good and that, under benign American leadership, it would yield a future that was even better' (Carruthers 2016, 38).

In a series of evocative vignettes, Hersey portrays the negotiations with the local population under the jurisdiction of the Italian-American Major Victor Joppolo, a character inspired by the actual US military governor of Licata, Frank Toscani. As Joppolo tries to establish what the town needs most, he faces two divergent requests: food or a new town bell. The previous historic bell had been confiscated by the Fascists and turned into war materials. As Gordon explains, the choice presented by Hersey is between material and moral values, where the bell that Joppolo will finally deliver symbolises the freedom and culture that America will help bring (Gordon 2018, 17). Hersey's depiction of the material needs of the town is, however, equally interesting. Through ironic and dramatic overtones, he shows that a bad occupation overuses or mismanages food supply and food exchanges. In the novel, the food interactions between American soldiers and Italians are drastically reshaped and boundaries established, not to promote an all-American ideal, but rather to suppress the negative aspects of the occupation.

At the beginning of the novel, an intervention of one of the minor characters sets the scene for ironic discussion of food provisions. He explains to Joppolo his choice to prioritise food over the bell by telling his experience of the Allied landing:

We were on the beach in spite of the shooting, to greet the Americans. But what did my children shout? They did not shout: 'We miss the tinkling of the bell.' They shouted: 'Caramelle! Caramelle!' They were hungry. They wanted candy. I myself, who had had enough to eat as it happens, shouted for cigarets [sic!], not for the pealing of a bell (Hersey 1944, 20).

Hersey's character is keen to appear as an anti-Fascist and as a longstanding supporter of the Americans. American key comfort products, candy and cigarettes, are his talking points to persuade the Major of the town's need for food and of his commitment to American culture. The episode is humorous for its contradictions. Real hunger could hardly be satisfied by candy; moreover, the man's demand for cigarettes, when being well-fed, makes the American intervention in terms of food aid appear unnecessary. The remark rather alludes to the widespread phenomenon of the black market, with gifted American goods often illegally traded for profit.

Joppolo takes measures to improve food availability in the town, including allowing fishing to resume. A significant aspect of his efforts involves regulating food exchanges between

Americans and Italians. He is particularly concerned with tackling the black market, which he sees as a byproduct of American soldiers' generosity. Their excessive gifting of cigarettes and candy and inflated payment for Italian products or services, owing to the confusion about the exchange rate between dollars and *lire*, were, for Joppolo, the causes of the black market. The local farmers tried to sell their produce to the American soldiers at higher prices, taking advantage of the soldiers' disproportionate purchasing power. An example of this dynamic is illustrated in the novel when the GIs' obsession with eggs is exploited by a local farmer who 'had sold three dozen eggs to American soldiers at fourteen times the proper price' (Hersey 1944, 49). The higher prices meant that some foods would not be readily available but would circulate only at higher prices for the few who could afford them through the illegal trade (Hersey 1944, 140–142). To tackle the black market in food-stuffs, Joppolo prohibits the entrance of the GIs to the town if not on official business and applies heavy sanctions to the locals found selling overpriced and underweight food.

In her study of crimes during the Allied occupation of Southern Italy, Isobel Williams supports Hersey's interpretation of the inflationary effect of the American soldiers' purchasing power and their generosity in gifts and goods (Williams 2013, 172). Moreover, the American army sourced fresh food locally for its bases; in the period February–June 1943, the American army bought 30 per cent of its vegetables locally (Ross and Romanus cited in Fisher and Fisher 2011, 161), affecting the availability of produce for residents.

Hersey once again employs irony to hint at the American troops' food procurement, or theft, in Sicily. A tipsy Captain Purvis jokes: 'Hey, speaking of chickens, I heard one the other day. You remember when Hoover said once that he was going to fix it so that there would be a chicken in every pot? Well, I heard the other day, that after the US Army was around these Italian towns for a while there was going to be a pot on every chicken' (Hersey 1944, 95–96). The joke was horrifying for Major Joppolo, who aimed to establish a respectful relationship between the Americans and the local communities. In his pursuit of fair treatment for the Italians, he also recasts the legendary candy gifting, following a dramatic event in the village.

At the conclusion of the novel, on the last day of Joppolo's work as major, he deals with the tragedy of a child's death, killed by an American truck while trying, together with a group of children, to pick up the candy being thrown at them. The iconic American generous gifter turned into a bearer of death. In his just manner, Joppolo establishes a roster to collect the candy from the soldiers and distribute it equally to all the children. In this way, the distribution is guaranteed, while the negative effects of the gifting are eliminated. With this conclusive story of death over the *caramelle* distribution, Hersey comments on the American candy distribution and food interactions between Americans and Italians. He distances the GIs from the children for the children's sake, as well as distancing the American soldiers from the locals, to end the black market. Effectively, he reshapes the food exchanges between Americans and Italians.

Joppolo takes measures in relation to food that confirm him as a model of fairness and as the 'good American occupier', and implicitly criticise the dynamics of the day-to-day interactions between Americans and Italians. The novel highlights the contrasting aspects of food exchanges, from the joy of candy distribution to the Americans' role in fuelling the black market. While *A Bell* offers an image of the freedom America will help bring (Gordon 2018), and shows the general desire of that time to believe in a good war for a better future (Carruthers 2016), it also demonstrates that a 'good' occupation could not be such without addressing the crucial issue of food, in particular in the interactions between occupiers and locals.

Conclusion

At the time of the Allied occupation, food encapsulated many meanings, from the propagandistic efforts of the American Allies to the misery suffered by many locals; the hopes for the future; and the contradictions emerging from the encounter between locals and Allies. Its analysis is key to the understanding of the complexity of the experience of the occupation. The image of coffee and doughnuts was a trademark of the American Red Cross, a symbol of the homely care the country was committed to delivering to its soldiers overseas. The Red Cross newsreel also examined, however, the distance visible, at that historical time, between local and American culture. It made evident the effort to separate what was safe – an all-American environment – from what was considered ‘polluted’ – the unknown local experience. Yet, despite the propaganda, interactions were inevitable and continuous, often stimulated by the needs of both parties, or by greed and criminal activities. Diaries of Italian soldiers show how miserable their army food provision was and their amazement at the American provision at the base camps. Other testimonies, however, mainly perceived it as a novelty and not as satisfactory meals. Gifting of comfort food, with which the American troops were very well provided, was one of the most persuasive images of the American dream of prosperity. The *Caramelli* soldiers appeared as the benign face of the occupation – in fact they represented liberation – but evidence shows that this was not always the case. Military rations were often seen as currency in exchange for sex in poverty-stricken Southern Italy, while all sorts of American food were also sold in the black market. Reports of the Psychological Warfare Branch document the disappointment and disillusionment of the locals in liberated areas, who continued to suffer from hunger. Through testimonies and reports on locals’ daily living, it emerges that food exchange was necessary and inevitable, and marks both the benign and the hateful forms of occupation.

Hersey’s *A Bell for Adano* confirms that food is never only a ‘material’ good but a trigger of personal interactions in the dynamics of giving, receiving or buying. Through dramatic fictional scenes, irony and humour, he shows that food exchanges in the occupied territories needed to be administered with fairness to lead both Americans and Italians towards an illuminated form of occupation, possibly liberation. This was his hope at the time when America was entering Europe. Indirectly, he implies that the majority of Americans were not Joppolo. While with his protagonist’s just manners he promotes the values of freedom and fairness, he also shows that food is key to understanding the Italians’ intertwined experience of liberation and occupation.

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Notes

1. The newsreel can be viewed online at: <https://youtu.be/7GJTWrDY00?feature=shared>.
2. All interviews recorded by Teresa Fiore in this article are part of her digital project: see Fiore 2018–2019.

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Patrizia Sambuco's current research interests focus on food history and food imagery in literature. Her recent monograph *Food and Emotions in Italian Women's Writing. A Reassessment* (University of Toronto Press, 2024) was awarded the International Flaiano Prize for Italian Studies Luca Attanasio 2025. She is the editor of the *Journal of Romance Studies* Special Issue (2024) 'The Taste of War', and of the two collected volumes *Transmissions of Memory* (2018) and *Italian Women's Writing 1800–2000* (2015). Her first monograph *Corporeal Bonds* (UTP, 2012) was translated into Italian as *Corpi e linguaggi* (Il Poligrafo, 2015). She has taught at universities in England, Scotland and Australia, and is currently a Study Skills Lecturer at GBS/Oxford Brookes University.

Italian summary

L'articolo analizza la funzione del cibo americano e del suo baratto, acquisto o scambio al momento dell'occupazione alleata dell'Italia, per rivisitare, per mezzo di questo punto di vista, la complessità dell'incontro con la popolazione locale. Attraverso la disamina di diari manoscritti e rapporti segreti dello Psychological Warfare Branch, l'articolo rende il problema alimentare centrale per la comprensione della dinamica dell'occupazione italiana. La ricerca si inserisce nel crescente interesse sulla disponibilità alimentare durante la seconda guerra mondiale, in particolare ampliando l'analisi sulla funzione storica sia delle razioni militari che del cibo di conforto americano, per esplorare l'esperienza dell'occupazione attraverso le varie interazioni del baratto, del dono e del commercio illegale. L'articolo mette in luce la complessità delle mutue percezioni intrinseche da speranza, nostalgia, senso di superiorità, e giustizia. In conclusione, l'analisi del romanzo di John Hersey, *A Bell for Adano*, raccoglie e, in quanto prodotto culturale, porta avanti per le future generazioni, le immagini contrastanti di una occupazione benigna e dannosa esplorate nell'articolo.

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