

To Explore the Sites Associated with the Italian Resistance: A Historical Guide for Visiting Italy Along the Liberation Routes



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Abstract

Going to the places of the Resistance, the latest book by Prof. Paolo Pezzino, offers readers a compelling journey through memory, tracing the historical sites tied to Italy's partisan struggle. The volume highlights not only the actions of the Resistance fighters but also the crucial-yet often overlooked-roles played by women, whether as couriers or combatants, and by ordinary citizens. It brings to light emblematic locations of battles and massacres, both renowned and lesser known, allowing readers to appreciate the full complexity of the Italian Resistance. In this way, the book proposes a renewed way of travelling across Italy-its islands, mountains, cities, plains, and small villages-by following in the footsteps of the partisans and rediscovering the history, landscapes, and culture of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Italy; Contemporary history; Tourism; Resistance; Routes

Introduction

For about a decade, the series "Rediscovering Italy", published by il Mulino, publishing house, has offered works of high-quality popular scholarship in which experts from diverse disciplines guide readers through Italian territory along thematic itineraries of all kinds: the Risorgimento, the Great War, Jewish quarters and ghettos, parks and hermitages, fortresses and royal residences, and even vineyards. A journey through the sites of the Resistance was still missing. On the eightieth anniversary of Liberation, the historian Paolo Pezzino has filled this gap writing *Going to the places of the Resistance*, a sort of brief but truthful history of the Italian Resistance, constructing an itinerary that connects the already widely commemorated symbolic sites of the partisan struggle and lesser-known locations.

The cover image of the book, depicting a woman on a bicycle, is thus particularly fitting. The stylized silhouette of the young woman recalls the central role of women in the struggle for Liberation. In a felicitous visual synergy, the woman mounting her bicycle-an unmistakable symbol of women's freedom for twentieth-century girls - is an exemplary icon of the Resistance. During the war, fuel shortages heightened the population's reliance on bicycles even for long distances. For Resistance

fighters - women and men alike -the bicycle was not only an indispensable vehicle, enabling them to strike and flee rapidly, but also "an essential weapon of organizational activity," upon which "the entire system of the information network depended".

The verb to go ("to go") in the title proves particularly apt for the Italian Resistance, for it literally embodies a passage from a well-known 1955 speech by Piero Calamandrei - jurist, politician, and anti-fascist, who contributed to the drafting of the Italian Constitution, in which he urged young people to undertake a "pilgrimage" in order to understand fully that our Constitution was not born "in the palaces of power, but in the mountains, in the prisons, in the fields", that is, in the very places where the Resistance unfolded and "where those who wished to redeem freedom and dignity died" (<https://www.umanitaria.it/storia-umanitaria/le-iniziativa/educazione/1955-quel-discorso-di-calamandrei>).

The whole book is articulated into a prelude and nine chapters. Structured precisely as a journey through the sites evoked by Calamandrei, the book begins symbolically on the island of Ventotene in 1941-a Blackground of the Resistance-when, at the darkest moment of the European continent, with Hitler's armies victorious

on every front, a handful of tenacious anti-fascist prisoners (Ernesto Rossi, Altiero Spinelli, Eugenio Colorni, Ada Rossi, Ursula Hirschmann) conceived, in their Manifesto, of a “free and united” Europe capable of transcending nation-states once Calam Andrei, and for all [1]. Therefore, the first destination of the journey is the small island of Ventotene, part of the Pontine archipelago, a site of memory and political heritage. Ventotene constitutes a unique place: a locus of culture, ethics, and anti-fascist resistance. The aim is to explore the nature of political confinement through “the internee’s walks” and to recount the experiences of the anti-fascist prisoners held on the nearby island of Santo Stefano, among them Sandro Pertini, who will be a President of the Italian Republic. Between 20% and 30% of about the 20,000 people per year who visit the island, do that for its historical and cultural value, linked above all to the period of political confinement and the figure of Altiero Spinelli and European history (<https://www.agenzianova.com/news/ventotene-da-terra-di-confino-a-meta-per-le-vacanze>) and, in particular, the Santo Stefano prison receives about 7.200 visitors per year, including tourists, students, and scholars, operating at full capacity as a cultural attraction (<https://commissariocissantostefano.governo.it/media/1699/presentazione-santo-stefano-ventotene.pdf>).

The following chapters of Go to places of the Resistance traverse the occupied territories of Italy during the crucial biennium 1943-1945: from the mountain ridges of Piedmont to Naples, from the slopes of the Maiella near the Gustav Line to the plains around Ravenna [2]. After the prelude in Ventotene, the book evokes places of armed and civil resistance after the Italian armistice (8th September 1943). One of the darkest and most tragic events, in terms of loss of life, that followed the Italian armistice is the massacre of the Italian 33rd Infantry Division Acqui on the Greek island of Kefalonia. The Italians resisted to the German Army, but had to surrender: 1.315 Italians were killed in the battle and 5.155 were executed and furthermore, 3.000 Italian POW (Prisoners of War) that had survived the battle and were being transported to concentration camps on German ships, drowned when the ships were sunk by the Allies. On this island is erected a monument to commemorate the 9250 Italian soldiers who died during battles with the Germans, were executed or have died during transport to detention camps [3].

Three sites represent the three political forces that, immediately after the armistice on 8th September, sought to claim leadership of Italy: Campo Imperatore on the Gran Sasso, where the German liberation of Mussolini led to the founding of the collaborationist Italian Social Republic (now that place is a well-known ski resort: <https://www.ilgransasso.it/>); the home of the Sardinian Action Party member - Stefano Siglienti - in Via Poma in Rome, where the National Liberation Committee was created and the armed Resistance began; and finally Salerno, capital of the Kingdom of the South, which embodied the continuity of the monarchic and conservative state. The final step is Paraloup in the Stura Valley (Cuneo), where between 19 and 20 September

1943 the first Justice e Libertà partisan formation, led by Duccio Galimberti and Dante Livio Bianco, was established, launching the Resistance in Piedmont. This is an emblematic choice, representative of many other partisan bands that went up into the mountains to fight Nazi-fascism throughout occupied Italy [4].

Nowadays, the Resistance itineraries in Piedmont - particularly in the Alpine valleys - offer walking routes through alpine pastures and mountain villages that commemorate partisan events and sites, linking historic trails with monuments and museums. Among these, the Paths of the Resistance (217km across 14 stages), promoted by the Metropolitan City of Turin, connect areas including the Langhe (the “Fenoglio landscapes”), the Canavese, and specific routes ideally suited for excursions from early summer to autumn (<http://www.sentieriresistenti.org/>). In those seasons, the trails can see a total of 35-40,000 hikers (https://www.regione.piemonte.it/web/sites/default/files/media/documenti/201901/la_valorizzazione_del_patrimonio_escursionistico_regionale_ires.pdf).

The National Italian Partisans Association (ANPI), in 2024, created MEMO - acronymous of Memory in Motion-, the memory project dedicated to the War of Liberation, constructing four itineraries linking 6.068 monuments, paths of memory and the trails of the partisans (<https://memo.anpi.it/>). MEMO currently includes 439 routes of all kinds, urban or mountainous, walks and treks, connecting places that still resonate with history of Resistance. The routes cover a total of 8.511km, which can be traversed on foot, by bicycle, by mountain bike, on horseback, by car and through various other means. The collection also encompasses selected bridle paths and routes accessible to wheelchair users. A map and altitude profiles are provided for each route giving general information on difficulty, time and distance.

Armed Resistance is presented through its major events, unfolding spatially from one location to another, but also temporally, in a diachronic chronological order: the beginnings of the mass mobilization of partisan bands in the summer of 1944, which also saw the brief existence - until the autumn of 1944 of around twenty “free zones”, that is territories temporarily liberated from Nazi-fascist control, the terrible winter months, marked by a ferocious Nazi-fascist offensive against the partisans, to the spring of 1945 when the cities in the North upraised and German surrendered.

Pezzino’s spatial-temporal itinerary leads the readers: more than thirty episodes are recounted, each accompanied by a photograph of places, monuments, markers, and plaques-traces of a durable and widespread memory. The text frequently incorporates the voices of men and women who played leading roles in the Resistance - Paola Del Din, Francesca Rola, Laura Seghettini, Giorgio Bocca, Nazario Sauro Onofri, Roberto Battaglia, Dante Livio Bianco-lending it vividness. Equally valuable are the precise references to leading historiography.

In every other chapter, Pezzino proceeds similarly, outlining a geography of the Resistance grounded in tightly woven thematic relationships. The “itinerant” structure of the book proves extraordinarily faithful to the “thousand local specificities that reflect the composite nature of the partisan forces”. It aptly highlights the heterogeneous, fragmentary and localistic character of the Italian Resistance, which took shape in close relation to the geographical, social, political, and even anthropological particularities of the territories where the bands emerged.

This book invites the readers to follow the itineraries across Italy compellingly restore the depth and richness of our heterogeneous Resistance. The aim is connected to Liberation Route Europe Trails in Italy (a Council of Europe certified cultural route connecting people, places and events in order to remember the Liberation of Europe from Nazi-Fascist occupation). This project works towards creating an Italian system of memorial trails from North to South and connecting the regions affected by the Liberation of Italy. A number of thematic routes have been established, each with a varying length ranging from 51 to 180km, offering travelers diverse opportunities to explore historical sites and landscapes connected to the Italian Resistance. You can discover and visit museums, monuments and landmarks and to reflect on the long-term consequences of the war through a scientific and pluralistic approach (<https://www.liberationroute.com/it/partners/29/italy>). The most recent route was inaugurated in 2024, highlighting mountain landscapes, villages, and historical memory: a trail of approximately 180 kilometers, crossing 14 municipalities and linking, in 11 stages between Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna, two iconic sites of the Italian Resistance: Sant’Anna di Stazzema and Monte Sole (<https://www.regione.emilia-romagna.it/notizie/2024/settembre/cammino-memoria>). Between late August and the beginning of October 1944, here, the Nazi-Fascists carried out massacres of civilians, especially the elderly, women, and children. The victims at Monte Sole (Marzabotto) numbered 775, while at Sant’Anna approximately 560, of which 394 have been identified.

The final chapter of the book takes the readers to Dongo, a charming village on Lake Maggiore, where Mussolini was captured, while escaping, and killed, and then Milan, where the corpse was shown at Piazzale Loreto, in the same place where, 10th August 1944, 15 partisans were shot by soldiers of the Italian

Social Republic, on the orders of the Nazi security command, and their bodies were desecrated and displayed in public. But Milan is also the city where the great partisan parade with the leaders of the Resistance at its head and where now the National Museum of Resistance is under construction. This museum is a project of the Ministry of Culture and the Municipality of Milan, with the support of the Ferruccio Parri National Institute and the network of Italian Institutes for the History of the Resistance and Contemporary Age. It will be housed in a building designed by Herzog & de Meuron, an international architectural practice based in Basel, Switzerland (<https://museonazionaleeresistenza.it/>). The facility, 3,800 square meters, will be articulated across three exhibition levels, including a dedicated room housing the documentation center, while the fifth floor will be reserved for temporary exhibitions. “This approach reflects our view that providing a long-term perspective on the structural roots of the crisis that culminated in Mussolini’s regime - and thus on the historical evolution of anti-fascism - was indispensable. The second floor will engage directly with the theme Resistance and Liberation. Finally, the third floor, entitled Republic and Constitution, will present the highest outcomes of the Resistance as embodied in the Constitution and its founding principles”, the President of Ferruccio Parri National Institutes says (<https://ilmanifesto.it/aspettando-il-museo-della-resistenza-che-verra-a-milano>). The inauguration is scheduled for 2nd June 2006, marking the 80th anniversary of the referendum that established the Italian Republic. The annual visitor forecast is estimated at approximately 120,000 per year.

In conclusion, go to the places of the Resistenza constitutes an outstanding historical, cultural and tourist guide for examining, across both space and time, the struggle against fascism and the emergence of democracy in Italy.

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