Nazi Massacres and Divided Memory
Stories, Causes, Scapegoats, Memoryscapes

Unfortunately, the Resistance was not entirely made up of well organised, well studied, well carried out actions. That attack was a mistake.
—Edoardo Succhielli, partisan leader, Civitella in Val di Chiana

The Search for a Scapegoat

On thousands of occasions between 1943 and 1945, Italian villages and cities were forced to mourn their victims, after massacres carried out by the German army. The *modus operandi* was often the same. German soldiers would arrive early in the morning, round up all the men they could find, and shoot them. The bodies were often burnt. Massacres took different forms—some were clearly reprisals for partisan attack (with the choice of a specific number of victims), others were intimidatory massacres of entire populations (and not just men, but also women and children), while there were also brutal round-ups of partisans followed by summary executions. Some massacres had straightforward military objectives—partisans. Others—the majority—looked to intimidate and terrify the entire population, and were part of a war against civilians. Italy’s decision to break the alliance with Germany in September 1943 also had an impact, as the idea that the Italians were traitors held sway in the German army.

In many cases, the immediate cause of the massacre was not always clear, and in almost every case, psychologically, a scapegoat was needed—in order for those who had survived the horror to understand what had taken place. As Contini has written, after massacres, “a process began
which is well known to medieval historians... the search for, or rather the construction of, a scapegoat.”

As anthropologists and historians have shown, this scapegoat or scapegoats—the person or group who took the blame—were usually local or “internal” figures. One of the most important conclusions from the series of studies of the memories of wartime massacres lies precisely here. In the vast majority of cases, the immediate blame, and the way in which this story was carried down through time, was not linked to the perpetrators, the Germans, the Nazis. No. The scapegoat was often identified in local partisans. The precise nature of this mechanism, however, varied from place to place and has changed radically over time. Nonetheless, the “discovery” of these divided local memories in the 1990s by a group of historians was a central moment for postwar Italian historiography, and for the left “born from the resistance.” These memories were a jarring note for one of the key features of the resistance myth. They could not coexist with the widespread idea of harmony, solidarity, and alliances between local populations and the partisans. Moreover, these divisions were also written in stone. Public memory reflected these diverse narratives over time, creating complicated local memoryscapes. Partisans were well-suited to the role of scapegoat; “they are from within the local community, but also outside of it, they are on the edges, but well defined and visible, known to all by name.”

The study of these divided memories blew resistance myths apart. In many different areas, right across Italy, local fissures had opened up between those who had lost their families in Nazi massacres, and the protagonists of the antifascist resistance. These tensions divided families, villages, and neighborhoods, and in some cases these arguments lasted for decades. For these historians—nearly all of whom came from the left—it was a delicate experience. These memories were “shocking” and scandalous. They undermined the basis of the resistance itself, for what kind of resistance failed even to gain the support of those who had seen their own fathers, husbands, wives, and children massacred by the Nazis and the Fascists? The massacres—and the way they were interpreted—also revealed a division between forms of civil resistance and the organized, armed Resistance.

These narratives forced historians to touch deep wounds and look into the dark corners of the resistance, areas that could no longer be avoided, just as it is impossible now to avoid the voices from Civitella, Gubbio, Guardistallo, of both the partisans and the families of the victims. Thus, the resistance legacy began to be analyzed for the first time, warts and all—with its errors (that were not without consequence), its internal divisions, and its creation of myths and legends. These were also debates over the question of responsibility, over ideology and over politics.