

Societal bonding and institutional “un-bonding”: a determinant of primary group cohesion? The Italian Alpini (1872-2013)

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1. Introduction

The debate about the components of military cohesion have been the object of a lively debate from several different disciplinary approaches.¹ The standard model has identified four many components of military cohesion: two horizontal, peer (either social or task) and leader cohesion; and two vertical, organizational and institutional cohesion. These components interact and are related.² Yet, existing scholars have so far been unclear on how they interact, sustain and reinforce each other. This paper focuses on particular effects of vertical cohesion on horizontal cohesion and

¹ Anthony King, “The Word Command”, *Armed Forces and Society*, 32, 4, 2006: 493-512; Guy L. Siebold, “The essence of military group cohesion”, *Armed Forces and Society*, 2007, 33, 2 : 286-295.

² Guy L. Siebold, “The essence of military group cohesion”, *Armed Forces and Society*, 2007, 33, 2 : 287; Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, *Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II*, in *Military Conflict*, ed. M. Janowitz (London: Sage, 1975); Charles Moskos, “The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam”, *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 31, 4, 1975: 25-37.

it makes two interrelated arguments. First, low levels of institutional bonding-understood as the level of integration of soldiers- within the larger institutions may trigger high levels of horizontal bonding, primary group cohesion in particular.³ I refer to low levels of institutional bonding as “un-bonding”. Second, horizontal cohesion can be sustained by high levels of what I will call “societal bonding”- high support from society- bypassing institutional bonding. The literature has so far assumed that institutional bonding was providing “a sense of purpose and meaningfulness that is linked to the larger (usually national) society and culture”.⁴ Yet, this link between institutions and society are not unproblematic and in this paper, I show how an army may find a source of cohesion NOT in its institutions (the army) but in the partial critique of these institutions (institutional “un-bonding”) and in its society (“societal” bonding).

The issues has been neglected so far because the debate on cohesion has mainly focused on Anglo-Saxon armies, which have relatively consistent levels horizontal and institutional bonding. In Anglo-Saxon armies, vertical (organizational or institutional) bonding may or may not be a factor enhancing cohesion in general but it does not seem to have a clear enhancing or disruptive effect on primary group cohesion. Yet, in other armies (at varying levels of analysis), like the Italian or the German, also because of their histories, there may be a disconnect horizontal and vertical bonding. This is worth investigating both because these armies have played in recent years an important role in international operations but also because theoretically it may indicate new under-explored causal pathways.

In this paper, I focus on a specialty of the Italian army and I describe how it has displayed exceptionally high levels of horizontal cohesion and low levels of institutional cohesion: the Alpini specialty. Furthermore, I show that these high levels of primary group cohesion were supported and

³ I leave organizational bonding out of this research because in this paper my level of analysis is a specialty of the Italian army, constituted since its inception by a varying number of brigades.

⁴ Guy L. Siebold, “The essence of military group cohesion”, *Armed Forces and Society*, 2007, 33, 2 : 290

fueled by exceptionally low levels of trust and bonding towards their secondary groups, the ‘institutions’ but very high levels of quest for societal support. This paper concentrates on how cohesion is created and how it is sustained over time as a result of the interaction between horizontal and vertical bonding.⁵

This paper contributes to the existing literature in two ways. First, it contrasts classical works on cohesion that has traditionally dismissed the role of domestic politics in enhancing military cohesion at war: “for the soldier concerned with his own day-to-day survival, the decision of state that brought him into combat becomes irrelevant”.⁶ Yet, understanding how negative experiences between a group and its home institution may affect horizontal cohesion is a plausible explanation. One can isolate how different determinants of cohesion may interact to reproduce specific patterns of cohesion in combat and levels of military performance. The second contribution of this paper is to show how specific elements of cohesion can be sustained at the unit level over time without major interference at the army level or the increasing internationalization of the military.

Thus, this piece focuses on the Alpini [literally Alpine/Mountaineer] that is an infantry specialty of the Italian army. These mountaineering units were created in 1872 to support and sustain a new kind of concept of defense of the newly unified Italian state. Since their creation, their recruitment was based on the concept of territorial defense and the idea that soldiers had to build the support of “their people” more than of those institutions that directly commanded them. In the operational experience of World War I and II, the Alpini were at times openly critical towards constituted authority, such as the rest of the army and the government, and they constantly worked for increasing consensus among the Italian civil society, as exemplified by the creation of a strong associationist network (the so-called ANA- Alpini National Association). With the disbandment of

⁵ Anthony King, “The Word Command”, *Armed Forces and Society*, 32, 4, 2006: 493-512

⁶ Charles Moskos, “The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam”, *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 31, 4, 1975: 28

the Italian army after the events of 1943 and unlike the rest of the army, most of the Alpini units joined the resistance in Italy against the Fascist and Nazi dictators.

At the end of World War II, even if the Alpini partly shared the same delegitimization process occurred to the rest of the Italian armed forces, they partly distinguished themselves because of their role in the resistance, partly they were more quickly rehabilitated in operational roles and they also worked hard to regain the lost legitimacy in front of society. Throughout their entire history, on the one hand, they maintained and reproduced a certain dismissive posture towards the rest of the army and the armed forces in general; on the other, they looked for improving societal bonding and this was possible notwithstanding the fact that the Italian public has become strongly pacifist after World War II. The profound need for societal bonding is also mirrored by the military performance of the Alpini in Afghanistan, that worked for being appreciated by the locals, much more than any other units of the Italian army.⁷

As such, studying the Alpini is an interesting case to focus on, when exploring the interaction effects between different components of cohesion. In addition to this, regiments of the Alpini are the most often deployed Italian contingents in multinational operations. Nowadays, they also constitute a consistent share of the Italian army: Alpini are more than 10,000 soldiers; two brigades and a training centre. In addition to this, the Italian military is relatively under studied and yet it is an important contributor of NATO as middle power. Therefore, it is important to understand the underlying dynamics of a group displaying high levels of horizontal cohesion and high distrust towards the institutions it belongs to.

This paper mixes a political science and a sociological approach and it relies on an eclectic strategy of data collection. Participant observation with the 9th Alpini battallion deployed in the Regional Command Capital in Afghanistan (2009 and 2012) is complemented with ten in-depth qualitative interviews with Alpini officers, NCOs and NCSs. Two conversations and interviews

⁷ Chiara Ruffa, "Imagining War and Keeping Peace? Military Cultures and Forces Employment in International Operations", 2012, paper under review.

were held with former Alpini officers and members of the resistance (1943-45) still alive. Data gathering was complemented with a careful reading of diaries, memories of Alpini during the Alpini involvement in Russia, during the resistance war and during the ongoing operations in Afghanistan.

The paper proceeds in three steps. First, it analyses the institutional “un-bonding” between the Alpini and the army. Second, it shows how high levels of primary cohesion can be seen as the result of the institutional “unbonding” effect at the secondary group level and how it was sustained overtime. Third, it draws some concluding remarks.

2. Institutional (un)bonding and societal bonding

Institutional bonding refers to “the social integration of service members with the larger military institution to which the primary and organizational-level groupings belong”.⁸ The institution, usually the army or the armed forces, usually refers to “a relatively stable structure of specialized positions, roles, groups, organizations, and social operations that carry out the major social function of national defense” and these provide “a sense of purpose and meaningfulness that is linked to the larger (usually national) society and culture”.⁹ In the case of the Alpini specialty, institutional bonding was exceptionally low, while societal bonding (bypassing the army and armed forces level) was very high and a source of high primary group cohesion throughout the entire history of the unit.

2.1 Born to be different

When the Alpini specialty was created, they were meant to be different. Until the mid-XIX century, the dominant defense concept in Italy had been that the potential aggressor had to be stopped in the

⁸ Guy L. Siebold, “The essence of military group cohesion”, *Armed Forces and Society*, 2007, 33, 2 290

⁹ *Ibidem*: 290

flats (the so-called Po valley) after the enemy had crossed the Alps. But, in 1871, in a pamphlet, a captain of the Italian Royal Army, Perrucchetti, proposed to create a brand new military specialty that could defend the Italian territory directly in the Alps. This new concept of territorial defense needed soldiers with unique characteristics. Ideally, the defense of the Alpine borders could be done best with the support of the people coming from these regions and with this in mind, Perrucchetti proposed to use territorial recruitment. The newly formed Italian army (based on the Piedmontese model) was a hybrid of the two mainstream models at the time, notably the French and the Prussian. It was thus based on conscription for recruitment (following the Prussian model) done throughout the entire national territory (as in France) in order to minimize the risk of rebellion of some units and social tensions. National recruitment was very cumbersome particularly when it had to mobilize units in case of crisis. But with the standard national recruitment, the population from alpine regions would have been training in the flat land before then going back to the mountain for fighting. Also, only a small section of the alpine population would have been active in every unit fighting in the Alpine areas as the units would have been complemented by people coming from all over Italy. Perrucchetti's proposal was instead to divide the Alpine territory into many defensive units, each managed by a military district. His ideas emerged from observing these mountainous areas: "whoever has wandered around for long through the mountains shall have realized how among these, that remarkable book called terrain is extremely difficult to read; for reading it correctly it is necessary to get used to it: the practical knowledge of the terrain that has to be defended can be acquired only by maneuvering over it considering all the foreseeable hypothesis." Thus, the type of units had to have a profound knowledge of the territory much more than military skills, and they had to be able to orient themselves and face the difficulties of mountain life much more than they had to be good soldiers.

While the reaction to the new defense concept had been positive, political elites were skeptical towards the ideas of territorial recruitment as it posed, according to them, concerns of

public order. Perrucchetti and the Minister of War managed to overcome this skepticism because they showed that the risk in the specific case of the Alpine population was minimal: “the Alpine valleys were all profoundly conservative, catholic and monarchic, absolutely incapable to rebel” as also shown by the extremely low scores of people who failed to report for military service.¹⁰ Also, the Italian army Chief of Staff was convinced that this model had to be introduced fully: at the same time the new concept of defense and territorial recruitment for the specific specialty. “Their military superiority derives directly from the regional recruitment system, which was the decisive element to create a strong cohesion where the links among men were authentic because pre-existing and the fracture with external world much less clear.”¹¹ In 1872 the Italian parliament finally approved the creation of the Alpini specialty, based on territorial recruitment and with mainly defensive purpose. The cohesiveness of the units, the closeness to the local population and the mainly defensive role were deemed to be the founding principles on which the culture of the Alpini was constructed and around which it then evolved.¹² In sum, since its origins the Alpini were meant to have close societal bonding. But since its creation until the early XX century, the allegiance and trust towards the institution, which we call institutional bonding- is still largely unproblematic. Things were deemed to change with the first colonial operations.

2.2 The disconnect between the Alpini and institutions widens

Once the Alpini specialty was created, it started to function according to the principles outlined above. When Italy started to get involved in colonial warfare towards the end of the XIX

¹⁰ Giovanni Massobrio and Giorgio Rochat, *Breve Storia Dell'esercito Italiano Dal 1861 Al 1943* (Torino: Einaudi, 1978), p.95

¹¹ *Ibidem*

¹² For an interesting perspective on why military culture matters for military cohesion see: Charles Kirke, “Group Cohesion, Culture, and Practice”, *Armed Forces and Society*, 35, 4, 2009: 745-753

century, it was discussed whether the Alpini were to be used in colonial campaigns but they were mainly used to reinforce defensive fortification across the Alps. In 1911, things changed: the Alpini were used when the colonial campaign in Lybia was launched. “They wanted to use them because they could adapt more easily to difficult terrain”¹³

In World War I and II, Alpini regiments were also widely used in defense functions but also in conventional combat roles in out-of-area operations, including the Lybia campaign, the operations on the Italian northeastern front in World War I and the northwestern in World War II together with contributions to the military campaigns in the Balkans, North Africa and Ukraine during World War II. Overall, Italian military has been assessed as very ineffective throughout World War I and II and the Alpini did not differ. But it is during World War I and II that the process of institutional “un-bonding” takes place, when the Alpini tried to differentiate themselves from the rest of the army. In the diary of an Alpino that joined the resistance, the situation was described as follows: “only Italian institutions could damage the Alpini but definitely not the Italians”.¹⁴

Among the many reasons historians have listed to explain the disastrous military performance during World War II, there is also a high degree of tactical ineffectiveness, exemplified mainly by rigidity, faulty leadership style, ill-quality training and national recruitment.¹⁵ While sharing many of the drawbacks of the Italian army, the Alpini were exempt from the bad consequences of territorial recruitment, they were slightly better trained and had less hierarchical relations between the officers and the troops.¹⁶ In the conduct of war, the Alpini shared the same sorts of the rest of the army: usually ineffective. This became salient when the events of the second half of 1943 left the military without orders: on 25th July 1943, Mussolini lost power and got

¹³ Author interview with former partisan and Alpini officer-1, 98 years old, January 2013

¹⁴ Giulio Bedeschi, *Il Segreto degli Alpini* (Mursia: Milano 2004).

¹⁵ MacGregor Knox, “The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3” in Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray *Military Effectiveness* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988): 162

¹⁶ *Ibidem*: 163

arrested; then the army was almost disbanded and when the armistice is declared on September 8, 1943, the army is left without orders. Some units of the army keeps fighting alongside the Germans; others surrendered to either the Germans or the Allies; while other units switch side and start fighting alongside the Allies and for the resistance. The units of the Alpini specialty share most of the same destiny of the rest of the army with a non-negligible distinction: that they overwhelmingly joined the resistance. The way in which troops joined the resistance did not have much of the heroic behaviour but it is exemplified rather as a casual. During the resistance many people had just got up to the mountains “to do something” they were not very aware of what was asked of them.¹⁷ But they knew they were opposed to the Fascist dictatorship. In the account of an Alpino who joined the resistance, this became quite clear:

“There is nothing heroic in what we did. We did what we had to do. We are Alpini. On September 8, I realised quickly that something was wrong. I gathered my Alpini, told them to prepare their backpack. Over night we left the town and we hide in forests close to the Alps. It was 50 of us. I told them they could go home if they wished to do. None left me.

After a while we contacted the resistance groups and we joined the resistance movement”.¹⁸

Even the resistance movements traditionally more critical towards the military welcomed the Alpini, who were willing to join the resistance and they allowed them to maintain their uniform and military status. “A lot of the partisans were officers from the Alpini specialty. They immediately gave us command responsibility: they knew they could trust us and they knew we loved our people”.¹⁹ During the resistance war, many partisans, of which many Alpini, walked down from the

¹⁷ Nazzareno Peano, “Salimmo in montagna per fare qualcosa”, *Rivista dell’Istituto Storico della Resistenza e della Societa’ Contemporanea*, 81, 2012: 207-221.

¹⁸ Author interview with former partisan and Alpini officer-2, 94 years old, January 2013

¹⁹ Author interview with former partisan and Alpini officer-2, 94 years old, January 2013

mountains and helped the local populations to harvest and do other things: “it was the most obvious thing to do”.

2.3 The Alpini post World War II

Because of the events in 1943, the Italian army has until very recently had a legitimacy problem. Historians are unanimous on this. “After the Second World War, the role of the armed forces in Italy was drastically reduced. A number of factors contributed to this reduction, including the prior involvement of the armed forces with Fascism, the total collapse of the Royal Army after the fall of Mussolini, the legacy of a lost war, the hostility of the main political parties towards nationalism and militarism, and above all the rejection of war as means of settling international disputes explicitly written into the constitution of 1948.”²⁰ The events of September 8, 1943 created a disconnect between the armed forces and the society because the public felt betrayed by its own army.²¹ After World War II, the Alpini underwent dramatic changes partly shared with the rest of the armed forces. According to many historians, “in the immediate aftermath of the war and for at least the next four decades the image of fascism as a parenthesis in Italian history (...) sustained and legitimized public amnesia.”²² All this applies to the armed forces even to a larger extent. However, despite the presence of some training programs conducted by the US, there was never a true

²⁰ Paola Barrera, “Crisis in the Military: Rethinking Conscription and the Military Code”, in *Italian Politics: A Review*, ed. R. Y. Leonardi, R. Nanetti and R. Corbetta, (London: Pinter, 1988); Stefano Battilossi, “Armed Forces” in *Encyclopedia of Italian Political Culture*, ed. G. Moliterno (New York: Routledge, 2000).
p.29

²¹ Leopoldo Nuti, *L'esercito italiano nel secondo dopo guerra, 1945-1950: La sua ricostruzione e l'assistenza militare alleata* (Roma: Ufficio Storico, Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito):15 And also for similar arguments: Chiara Ruffa, *Imagining War and Keeping Peace? Military cultures and peace operation effectiveness*, Florence, EUI doctoral dissertation, 2010
Piero Ignazi, Giampiero Giacomello and Fabrizio Cotichia, *Italian Military Operations Abroad- Just Don't Call It War* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

²² Leopoldo Nuti, *L'esercito italiano nel secondo dopo guerra, 1945-1950: La sua ricostruzione e l'assistenza militare alleata* (Roma: Ufficio Storico, Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito):15

rebuilding program of the armed forces, as in Germany for example.²³ Memory was dealt with in a completely different way. Even if most of the population had accepted the fascist rule and the regime had adopted and actively implemented the racial laws, right after September 1943 there are testified statements of the difficulty encountered by Allies officers in finding one single fascist.²⁴ The collective responsibility of the Italians in respect to the fascist totalitarianism was never brought up. The fascist period “was marginalized in the memory of those who lived under the regime and virtually obliterated from the official history of the Italian post-war republic”.²⁵ While the Alpini shared part of the delegitimization, the population acknowledged and was grateful for the contribution that was paid by the Alpini during the resistance war. The Alpini were often seen as a separate group, that shared lesser responsibility and they were much more present in the postwar period.

The sorts of the Alpini and the rest of the armed forces partially diverged. They remained under the jurisdiction of a separate military judiciary, the Ministry of Defense enjoys relative autonomy from both governments and the Parliament; even the military budget has traditionally been drafted under a regime of partial secrecy. At the same time, the armed forces did not gain any legitimacy, neither by the political elite nor by the public. The political elites with the marginalization of the extreme right wing parties and in the post-War anti-fascist political climate were keeping the army on the side until very recently with the increasing importance of the army in multinational peace operations. “Only 27.7% of the Italian public opinion thinks that the armed forces are an indispensable instrument of foreign policy.”²⁶ In addition to this, several events during

²³ Ibidem, p.25

²⁴ Wulf Kansteiner, “Italiani Brava Gente: The Legacy of Fascist Historical Culture on Italian Politics of Memory” in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, and Claudio Fogu, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006):142

²⁵ Ibid.:142

²⁶ Giovanni Massobrio and Giorgio Rochat, *Breve Storia Dell'esercito Italiano Dal 1861 Al 1943* (Torino: Einaudi, 1978): 273

the '60s and '70s eroded the already limited trust towards the armed forces. High-ranking military personnel were more or less directly involved in a series of subversive plots put forward by rightwing groups and intelligence units. In addition to this, the armed forces became involved in the Masonic Lodge P2 in 1981 and the Gladio affair in 1990, which had subversive objectives too. Also in the Ustica affairs- in which an Italian commercial airplane was hit and destroyed by a mysterious object- the Italian Air Force refused to release information to clarify the event. All these events were strengthening an overall general distrust originated with the disbandment of the Italian army and the commitment to Fascism. Before the beginning of the peacekeeping era, the army tried to increase its legitimacy by intervening on occasion of natural disasters, such as the flash flood in Polesine (1976) or the earthquake in Friuli (1976) and the guarantee of a military presence in Southern Italian cities with an extensive Mafia activity. The other source of legitimacy of the Italian army during the Cold War has come from international institutions, namely NATO. After Italy's accession to NATO (1949), the army was allowed to rearm and to station contingents for the defence of the European soil. In this climate of widespread distrust against the military, the Alpini were still more present in society.

The Alpini brigades were reconstituted shortly after the end of the war. The Alpini were since the early '50s the only specialty of the Italian army that was again visible in a domestic context where the military was highly frowned upon. For instance, the *Brigata Alpina Taurinense* was reconstituted in 1952. The day after the ceremony, the *Corriere della Sera*, the main Italian newspaper published in the front page an image of Italian Alpini climbing a high Alpine summit, the Matterhorn. No other reconstituted brigade of the Italian army received any media coverage. Similarly, Alpini were invited to take part to celebrations, official ceremonies and were the most requested specialty for enrollment in the conscription era. In a highly anti-militaristic society, their role in society is thus quite striking. Even today, it is common to see at weddings in rural areas, if the groom has done its military service in the Alpini, there will be at least a group picture with the

Alpini wide-brimmed hat, including the bride. With the beginning of the peacekeeping era, the Alpini regiments were used more than others in out of area operations. For instance, the Alpini Taurinense brigade unit took part to Nibbio and it was the first time Italian soldiers took part to a combat operation since World War II. Yet, the Alpini always portrayed their interventions as peacekeeping and humanitarian operations.²⁷

In sum, after the Fascist era, the Italian army was widely left on the side. Italians felt betrayed by an army that was widely colluded with the Fascist dictatorship. The Alpini specialty was an exception and only partly went through the same ‘shaming’ process. The Alpini worked to reconquer “hearts and minds” of the populations and their role in society, through their widespread presence in the territory and their role in the resistance. They did so bypassing institutional bonding and by making clear how they were different from the rest of the armed forces.

3. Primary group of cohesion

Classical works on horizontal cohesion have pointed at four central factors to explain battlefield performance: the primary group, ideology, discipline and training. These works do not seem to attribute great relevance to domestic factors. Yet, some elements of those pointed above affect horizontal cohesion and it that might be worth exploring how they incorporate into a military culture. In this section, I discuss the main component of horizontal cohesion for the Alpini specialty and show how societal bonding and institutional “unbonding” reinforced the core elements of primary group cohesion.

²⁷ Chiara Ruffa, “Imagining War and Keeping Peace? Military Cultures and Forces Employment in International Operations” (Uppsala: Uppsala University Archives, 2012), paper under review. For an analysis on the impact of the Alpini approach on the level of violence: Chiara Ruffa, *Imagining War and Keeping Peace? Military cultures and peace operation effectiveness*, Florence, EUI doctoral dissertation, 2010

Since the beginning, the Alpini displays high level of horizontal cohesion enhancing their military performance, relatively to other units of the Italian army. A core feature is to resist to the enemy to the most extreme end, as exemplified by several diaries and memoirs.²⁸ So the Alpini had fight in difficult situation, to the extreme, carrying other Alpini for example. At the same time, they never developed a strong warrior ethos. In a diary, an Alpini who fought in Russia during World War II call the link among Alpini as a “sacred human pact”.²⁹

Horizontal cohesion is cultivated around symbols and hymns, that are at the core of their daily routine. In comparison with other specialties of the Italian army, they cultivate their rituals much more. For instance, even today they are much more visible in local communities, organize marches and provide security on ski slopes and their daily routine are structured around devotions to symbols: during each of my days of observation in the Alpini military bases in Italy and in Afghanistan, all my interviews were interrupted by rituals around the flags. Alpini perpetuate and magnify symbols that were purely militaristic and yet mix them in ways that are considered as largely unproblematic: for instance the black flag- a clearly warrior symbol- is usually shown in association with traditionally defensive systems. These symbols shall be presented more in detail as they present continuities with societal bonding and vertical “unbonding”. The cohesiveness was translated into a profound attachment to symbols: the black feather hat, the green uniform and the flag in particular. Shortly after the creation of the various Alpini regiments, a specific uniform was created: it had to be green ideally like the green “landscape of the mountain valleys.”³⁰ The symbol of the Alpini would have become the black feather on a wide-brimmed hat of the same colour (sic Cappello alla calabrese). The hat is completely different from any other specialty of the army, which

²⁸ Giulio Bedeschi, *Il Segreto degli Alpini* (Mursia: Milano 2004). Nuto Revelli, *Mai Tardi. Diario di un Alpino in Russia*, (Cuneo: Panfilo Editore, 1943); Nuto Revelli, *Mai Tardi. Diario di un Alpino in Russia*, (Cuneo: Panfilo Editore, 1943)

²⁹ Giulio Bedeschi, *Il Segreto degli Alpini* (Mursia: Milano 2004). Nuto Revelli, *Mai Tardi. Diario di un Alpino in Russia*, (Cuneo: Panfilo Editore, 1943): 13

³⁰ Gianni Oliva, *Storia degli Alpini dal 1872 a oggi* (Milano: Mondadori, 2001): 35

they called dismissively *'buffa'*, referring to the fact that they wear a basque. The feather is black (from a rook) for NCSs, NCOs and up to Major. From the Major rank up, the feather is white (from a goose). It is curious that initially neither the commander of the detachments, then called battalions, nor soldiers did wear a hat, as if to signify that everyone had to work hard and train hard enough to deserve such an honor, no matter which rank he belonged to. When they were given permission to wear a hat, a ceremony decorated this special hat with a feather. It was the transformation from a soldier to an Alpino. Finally, they chose as symbol and *mascotte* a mule. They made use of mules during training and in operation until 1992. The mule is still used as a *mascotte*, they bring one at least with them when they involved in operations. "The mule shared so much with us all and sacrificed so much. And it is such a powerful symbol of the Alpini: so humble yet so powerful".³¹

Also command and discipline play an important role. Compared to other specialties of the Italian military, they are less hierarchical. Originally, the Alpini were traditionally regarded as well-disciplined even if not particularly respectful toward the authority. On the Military Review, "apart from being sturdy, they are mainly also disciplined, it is not very difficult to instill in their souls some discipline as they tend already to do this by nature and education."³² Yet, they also have some drawbacks depicted by the public as well as by themselves. "There are some downsides which are quite common, such as drinking excessively, delaying the evening visit, behaving without much deference towards lance corporals".³³ For instance, every soldier up to major rank wears the same hat with a feather of the same color. In terms of leadership styles, the Alpini were famously referred to in World War II for being the most undisciplined specialty of the army. Even today, "It is important to talk and not give orders and at the same time give good indications"³⁴ Even their

³¹ Giulio Bedeschi, *Il Segreto degli Alpini* (Mursia: Milano 2004).

³² Francesco Somale, "Le Compagnie Alpine" in *Rivista Militare*, 1878, 4: 193

³³ *Ibidem*

³⁴ Author interview with Alpini colonel, Taurinense Brigade, January 2013

protecting saint is a symbol of relatively low respect to the authority. Saint Maurice is the protecting saint of the Alpini. The cult of this saint is particularly widespread in Northern Italy. He was killed because he refused to obey to an order asking him to persecute Christians and because he refused together with his men to sacrifice and pray to idols. He is usually represented with armor as a soldier.³⁵ His symbols are the sword and the palm limb. As such, he does not wear any aggressive sign. Saint Maurice is their protecting saint, who was killed because he refused to obey to an order asking him to persecute Christians and because he refused together with his men to sacrifice and pray to idols. He is usually represented with armor as a soldier. His symbols are the sword and the palm limb.³⁶ As such, he does not wear any aggressive sign.

Another important feature is that the Alpini are traditionally highly regarded as a defensive unit aimed at protecting borders from potential enemies. Even after World War II and the events in the aftermath of September 8, 1945 with the disbandment of the Italian army, the “Alpini” remained more popular than other units and are today strongly attached to the cult of the flag and of symbols, such as the traditional black feather. This has been the case from the very beginning, with several newspaper articles and figurative images (due to the widespread illiteracy) magnifying their symbols (the feather and the green uniform) and the character of the units: “you could see them coming forward, hundreds of long straight feathers, which grew taller than the public: they were the Alpine troops, the defenders of Italy’s doors; all tall, rosy and strong with wide-brimmed hat and bright green uniform, the same color of the grass of their mountain”.³⁷ One of the reasons for their popularity has been that they represented a defensive myth. As such, in the discourse they were always represented in a defensive posture. The recurring images were Alpini on a rock, a hand on the side and the other holding up the rifle, the face looking at the horizon. Also the motto “from

³⁵ Rosa Giorgi, *I Santi* (Milano: Electa, 2002): 270

³⁶ Rosa Giorgi, *I Santi* (Milano: Electa, 2002): 270

³⁷ Edmondo De Amicis, *Cuore*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1974), p.341

here you do not pass”, “vigilantes” and “lookout of the summit” refer to a defensive function, rather than an attacking one.³⁸ Oliva, the only historian specifically studying the Italian Alpine troops highlights another recurring element: they were often represented on the mountains. “The Alpine soldier was always standing on the highest summit of the mountain.”³⁹ In the images, another recurring element is the natural environment, which is still largely unexplored by a significant portion of the population. Also the prayer underlines the defensive role of the unit and the attachment to the motherland. “On the bare rock, on the perennial glaciers, on every crag of the Alps where providence has put as bulwark of our districts, we, purified by the duty dangerously implemented we elevate to you, Oh Lord, who protects our mothers, our spouses, our children our distant brothers (...) God all powerful make our foot stand safe on the vertiginous peaks, on the steep face, beyond the insidious crevasse, make strong our weapons against whomever menaces our Homeland, our Flag our thousand-year Christian civilization.”⁴⁰ This suggests again the importance of the defensive function of the Alpini fueled by societal cohesion.

In terms of fighting ethos, the Alpini do not define themselves in warrior-like terms. “We like to have our feet well anchored to the ground, we are a bit less exaggerated, a bit humbler than other specialties within the military”.⁴¹ In the past ten years, with the end of conscription and the broader revolution of military affairs, much has changed for the Alpini. First, there has been a change in their demographic with most soldiers coming from the South. Symbols have evolved but have remained largely consistent. For instance, while the motto for the annual reunion once was “From one side to the other of the mountains: Alpini!”, it has now been modified into a more inclusive “from the flatland to the mountains: Alpini!”.

³⁸ Oliva, *Storia Degli Alpini Dal 1872 a Oggi* ., p.50

³⁹ *Ibidem*

⁴⁰ Somale, 1889: 193

⁴¹ Author interview with Alpini colonel, Taurinense Brigade, January 2013

There is a still a strong feel that the role of the mountains can bring them together notwithstanding their different background. “Once you were born as an Alpino, now you become one of them”.⁴² With the professional military, “now we also have sicilian Alpini, Alpini from Lazio and other regions in Italy”.⁴³ The head of the Alpine artillery puts it plainly: “We are lucky: we have the mountains, mountains are our big big fortune, the mountains is what makes us invincible some time”.⁴⁴ Every Alpine soldier has to cultivate “the value of being an Alpino [dell’alpinita’] because Mountains do not forgive, it unites us and it is wonderful to live together, those who do not like the mountains cannot understand we all love something that even if imposes big sacrifices on us it makes us strong and cohesive”.⁴⁵

The Alpini specialty displayed high levels of cohesion throughout its history and the idea of ‘fighting against all odds’ altogether became strongly intertwined to the importance of being accepted and legitimate. There is a remarkable consistency across time of the importance of the mountains, the defensive concept and territorial recruitment. The Alpini profound eradication in the territory is based on the territorial recruitment and the defensive posture. The Alpini seems to need support at the societal level and this dimension is what sustained the specialty for so long, what gave them the strength to resist in dramatic moments of their history. For instance, during Word War II, there were letters from home that were more important for the Alpini than for any other unit of the army. Today, in missions like Afghanistan, the Alpini have devoted themselves much more than other units of the Italian army to understand what the needs of the populations were. They do not describe themselves as having much to do with combat “no soldier is voted to combat, our most important role is what we can give to our community both Afghanistan, national and

⁴² Conversation with Mario Renna, January 2013 See also, Mario Renna, *Ring Road. Sei mesi con gli Alpini in Afghanistan* (Milano: Mursia, 2011)

⁴³ Author interview with Alpini colonel, Taurinense Brigade, January 2013

⁴⁴ Author interview with Alpini colonel, Taurinense Brigade, January 2013

⁴⁵ Author interview with Alpini colonel, Taurinense Brigade, January 2013

international”⁴⁶ Indeed, what happened in the case of the Alpini was a bypassing of institutional bonding for an extremely strong societal bonding, an interesting dynamics on the literature on cohesion.

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