

"BAD PRESS": ITALIAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN NORTHERN NSW, 1943-1945

by John Hall

John Hall is a PhD student at the University of New England (UNE), Armidale. His thesis will examine the experiences of Italian prisoners of war in the north and northwest of New South Wales from 1943 to 1945/6, as well as examining the post-war experience of ex-prisoners who returned to Australia. This extract from the thesis, covers press reports on anti-Italian sentiment of the period.

An editorial in the *Armidale Express* on 29 September 1943 asked rhetorically,

'Does it say that prisoners of war must be handed a menu for the selection of food, while Australian servicemen and servicewomen and civilians who have given their sons and brothers and husbands and sweethearts to their country, struggle in a scrum-like fashion to get a pie and tin pannikin of tea?'

A Urella grazier said,

*'These prisoners of war were trained in Italy by all ruling powers to destroy the British people and Empire. We cannot blame our people if they refuse to work with them now or in the future.'*²

From 1943 until the months immediately following the end of the Second World War, small country towns Australia-wide experienced unique encounters with enemy soldiers - Italian prisoners of war (POWs), whose labour was utilized by thousands of farmers and property owners desperate for rural workers when labour was scarce or nonexistent. Yet, as the comments above suggest, there was a hard-core element of opposition to the presence of Italians in these country towns, often from union organizations and the Returned Sailors, Soldiers and Airmen's Imperial League (RSSAIL), the organization representing former Australian service personnel. In this article I will attempt to document some of this opposition as reported in the north of New South Wales, through the region's two largest newspapers: Tamworth's *Northern Daily Leader* and the *Armidale Express*. Historian Gianfranco Cresciani has labelled hostility from Australians towards Italian POWs as originating from 'xenophobic hysteria'³ and the response from those in Tamworth, Armidale, Inverell and other

regional towns appears to support this reasoning. Nevertheless, there were fears that POW labour in rural industries was a means of circumventing union awards, outraging many workers.

When the Minister for Labour and National Service, Senator William Ashley, rose to speak in the Senate in February 1944, he declared Italian POW labour would not 'displace existing Australian labour [and would] not be placed on farms if suitable Australian labour is available.' Previously, other politicians had espoused the use of POW labour. For example, in the Lower House, Rowland James, M.H.R., (Hunter, NSW) declared that 'instead of being allowed to spend their time digging tunnels', prisoners should be doing 'useful work, such as clearing land so that our fighting men, when they return, may have farms ready for them.'⁴ However, politicians' opinions and promises meant little to those living in the towns where the prisoners were to be located. Rather, resentment and antipathy followed the Italians, prompted by erroneous fears, rumours or trivial incidents.

On 14 July 1943, a small article in the *Armidale Express* announced Armidale was to follow Coonabarabran and Parkes in establishing a Prisoner of War Control Centre (PWCC) in the town. Residents had read two weeks previously that Italian prisoners of war would 'alleviate the acute manpower shortage in rural industries' by being placed in country centres.⁵ The actual announcement that Italian prisoners had arrived in Armidale (buried on page eight of the 13 August 1943 *Express*) saw the officer in charge of the prisoners announce the men 'were anxious to get started in agricultural work, and... were of a good, clean type.'⁶



The arrival of Italian prisoners of war in Australia sparked a negative reaction in the press.

This relaxed atmosphere was rudely shattered a month later with the headline: 'Italian Prisoners Fed While Australians "Scrounge" For A Meal!' A local man had witnessed Italian prisoners at the Tamworth railway station eat a meal 'at a lavishly-spread table... with the refinements associated with one's own home', while 'Australian fighting men and civilians who were working day and night for the war effort were obliged to drink from tin mugs, and to take whatever they could get.' While the anger was directed at the army and railway authorities, (the journalist called it 'an instance of... official stupidity'), it highlighted that enemy soldiers were amid Australian society, and this presence was objectionable.⁷

Matters were not helped by an article in late September 1943 reporting that some

farm employees on an Armidale property had walked off when Italian prisoners arrived to work.⁸ Then, an *Express* editorial on 29 September titled 'Why Not a Military Band for P.O.W.?' (concerning the railway incident), reasoned that while prisoners were entitled to be treated as human beings, their country 'as an Axis partner [had] played a major role in setting the world ablaze.'⁹ The following week, the newspaper did argue in another edition for the use of POWs in food production. While firing broadsides at those who objected to their labour (calling them 'mentally deficient'), it still pronounced the righteousness of using 'these aliens who fought against our men.'¹⁰ Press releases favourable to the Italians, most likely written by manpower authorities, were published but failed to quell any opposition. One quoted a 'well-known and progressive farmer' (not named!) who said: 'they are the answer to the farmer's prayer.'¹¹ In the interim, other centres in northern NSW were also experiencing protests against the prisoners.

While the *Northern Daily Leader* published an editorial in mid 1943 in favour of using Italian prisoners, rumblings around the district were given prominent coverage, despite the fact that all PWCCs in northern NSW had gained acceptance by many rural employers.¹² The Glen Innes branch of the Graziers' Association declared in November 1943 that the district's farmers would be better without prisoner labour. Patriotism fired one member to declare that 'he would not expect a decent Australian to work for him if he employed a prisoner.' The meeting decided such labour should be used in military camps, 'where they [prisoners] would be under proper control', despite attempts by another member to explain the merits of the scheme.¹³ Discontent was now spreading, especially in the pages of the *Leader*.

In March 1944 a PWCC was announced for Quirindi, and was quickly denounced by the town's Australian Worker's Union (AWU) branch, which decided no member would 'accept employment in any capacity where a prisoner of war was employed.' While some suggested there should be no objection to prisoners growing vegetables or other mis-

cellaneous tasks, it was decided the scheme was 'for no other purpose than an attempt to break down existing awards and conditions.' Any transgressors of the AWU decision would find their property being declared 'black'.¹⁴ Meantime in Guyra, 38 kilometres from Armidale and covered by the Armidale PWCC, the *Guyra Argus* reported in April 1944 the 'grave concern' of the town's RSSAIL subbranch regarding apparent freedoms enjoyed by Italian prisoners of war. The list of 'freedoms' was extensive - the prisoners had 'access to the homes of those by whom they were engaged, they listened to broadcasts... had the use of the telephone, [were] allowed to come to town and roam the streets at will, [had conversed] with their fellow countrymen, [were] allowed to travel the country without any escort, and trespassed on other people's property.' Perhaps the complaints were no accident, since they came the day after Anzac Day.¹⁵

Another calming press release came from Government authorities in the *Leader* in late April, regarding the establishment of PWCCs at Tamworth, Gunnedah and Quirindi, assuring all that once Australian

soldiers were released from service, 'the prisoners will be withdrawn and disappear from the field.'¹⁶ However, the Inverell subbranch of the RSSAIL drew more bad press when it came to the defence of their Guyra counterparts' suggestion for tighter controls on the Italians. One Inverell member was emphatic in his reasoning: 'We were never allowed to run around Italy or Germany in the last war', he lamented, 'and I don't see why they should be here.' The reply from the branch president seemed to placate matters: 'If you were in Germany you would go the full length of the chain. You can't blame the prisoners.' The meeting decided to leave the responsibility for prisoners' freedom in the hands of the individual farmers.¹⁷ Yet as one issue appeared to be resolved, another presented itself.

In June 1944, an Italian prisoner working on a property near Armidale had five fingers cut off while chaff cutting, and was admitted to the Armidale hospital. The *Express* reported on 9 June that the Armidale RSSAIL sub-branch was lodging 'a strong protest' that Italians were being treated at the local hospital. To add to this situation, one Armidale ex-serviceman



Italian prisoners of war disembarking at Circular Key, Sydney.

expressed further indignation, declaring 'that on his many visits to the hospital various patients had complained to him that P.O.W. patients were getting preferential treatment' by receiving any extra food if available. The hospital responded twice by denying privileges were extended to anyone. The newspaper did conclude the article by stating the hospital had only one POW patient, and no more as intimated by the accuser.¹⁸ Despite the rumours which prompted the RSSAIL protest, the accuser maintained his stance a few days later, not by substantiating his claims, but by the vague reference: 'where there is smoke there is fire.'¹⁹ The next month witnessed more press reports outlining the supposed unctuous nature of the Italians.

In July 1944, the Inverell PWCC officer in charge informed the town's RSSAIL sub-branch that Italians would not be discharged and allowed to settle in the district. 'When the time comes', he declared, 'they will be whipped out.' Agreeing with this, one branch member indicated he had overheard prisoners on a train talk about cultivating settled land after the war. The branch president concluded by saying 'all were agreed that they did not want them [Italians] in Australia after the war', although this very same question received a very different response in the RSL publication *Mufti* around the same time.²⁰ A week later the *Leader* reported on a district RSSAIL conference held in Tamworth where more damning evidence was aired on the duplicity of the Italians. One delegate had seen prisoners 'mingling in batches of 20 or more... and some had been seen attending the pictures.' It was not explained what these activities meant, but they were obviously not going to be ignored by the RSSAIL. These nefarious activities were overshadowed by the next piece of information. The same delegate

*had spoken to a woman who had prisoners employed at her property and she had stated that they were doing their work well, and that one was even riding a pony owned by her son, who was a prisoner of war in Japan. She had informed her son of this in a letter.*²¹

How this related to the concern of lack of



An official party of Australians inspects an irrigation canal built by prisoners of war in New South Wales.

supervision was not explained, but the inference was clear - Italians were enjoying freedoms which Australian soldiers were defending in order for Australians, not foreigners, to enjoy. Then, in August 1944, Armidale residents learned of an incident which appeared to justify past concerns and protests at the Italian presence in Australia.

On 21 August, Armidale residents learned of an assault by an Italian prisoner on the wife of the property owner where he was billeted. Few specific details were given, and the incident was labelled an 'attack'. However, the *Express* gave the case extensive exposure in November when details of the prisoner's trial were recorded. Virtually a full page was devoted to the case, the headline leaving no doubt as to the story's content: "Italian P.O.W. on Indecent Assault Charge". The paper's coverage of this incident appears out of proportion to coverage of similar cases. Criminal cases were only given minimal coverage, yet this proceeding proved to be the exception, describing specific details of the events leading up to, and including, the assault. Not surprisingly, Tamworth's newspaper also carried a lengthy report on the trial.²² Meantime, negative reports concerning the Italians continued into 1945.

At the annual general meeting of the Uralla Graziers' Association in February 1945, members wanted all Italians withdrawn from civil employment 'for the reason that many strikes and much confusion had already occurred and a total breakdown of industry in country districts is forecasted',



Italian prisoners of war Giuseppe Magnavacca, Grassini and Antonio Dall'Oglio with their Australian friend and fellow worker, Bob, in a banana plantation at Billinudgell, NSW where they worked from 1944 to 1946. During this time, Bob taught them English.

though it was not reported exactly how this anarchy would manifest. Further, one member informed the gathering that 'he had made a request to the National Service Officer for one good Australian, and they could take away his three P.O.W.', the obvious hypocrisy lost on this individual who was willing to use Italians yet condemn their labour at the same time.²³ A further condemnation of the prisoners occurred in March, by the Glen Innes RSSAIL branch, proposing prisoners be used in gangs on national projects rather than by individual farmers. This meeting did highlight some of the attitudes at the time. One member, who had fought in Italy in the Great War, stated he 'had found the Italians a lot whiter than some people gave them credit for being', while another 'thought it much better that the Italians... be treated as human beings, so that when they returned home they would be able to tell their countrymen there was no vindictiveness in the Australian character.'²⁴ However, the vindictiveness in some Australians was soon made clear.

In March 1945, local representatives of var-

ious unions in Gunnedah declared the products of one farm 'black' after the farmer had written positive comments regarding his Italian labourers. Despite the farmer retracting some of his comments, the unions refused to accept this and took exception to these comments from the farmer:

*The Italians I have employed are hard-working, cheerful men, who learn quickly and do not worry about hours, but the average Australian farm worker, nowadays, works for a few days a week for 25 or 30 shillings or more a day and then knocks off. Italian war prisoners in my district and other country districts have saved the day for the farmers.'*²⁵

Two days later the *Leader* editorial strongly condemned the actions of the unions without actually defending the Italians. The publication defended the farmer's right of free speech, asking why the unions 'did not go to the root of the matter' and take action against the Federal Labor government who approved the POW scheme, rather than against an individual who 'had the temerity to express views unpalatable to the unions.'²⁶ Of those opposed to POW labour,



To alleviate the longing for their families, Italian prisoners of war very often became very attached to the children of the Australian farmers for whom they worked during their internment. In this photograph, the children of Mr and Mrs Bartlett play with a group of Italian POWs in the banana plantation where they worked for a number of years.

the various AWU branches throughout northern NSW were the most vocal. Besides Gunnedah, AWU members in Uralla, Tamworth, Quirindi and Inverell defied their state body throughout 1944 and 1945 in declaring any union member or employer who worked with or employed POWs would be 'black'.²⁷ Nevertheless, all of this negative press was rarely countered by contrary opinions from the general public, and the few examples of readers' opinions are noteworthy.

The *Leader* experienced an unusual flurry of letters defending POW labour in February 1945 after the Uralla Graziers' Association meeting. Only one writer chose to defend the Italians themselves, the remainder inferred the scheme was a means to an end. As 'One Whose Only Son is Away' wrote, 'no one who has tried P.O.W. labour considers them to be the equal of Australian bush workers', and condemned the disunity among graziers for failing to recognize that Australians were not available to take the Italians' places if they were withdrawn.²⁸ The next letter did demonstrate some reasoning towards the Italians, whose labour he said had virtually saved the fruit crop near Uralla. Both employers and POWs 'get

on very well and all here have no wish to part with them.' Regarding their status as enemy prisoners, the writer argued the Italians were allies in the last war 'and when forced to fight against us in this war surrendered at the first opportunity they got, thus saving many good Australian lives.'²⁹ The next writer (who was not a farmer), speculated 'that most farmers who have employed POWs have done so because of their sons' enlistments.' She argued that if Allied soldiers can fight side by side with Italian allies in Italy, 'Australian civilians can work side with them [Italian prisoners]'.³⁰ Earlier, in March 1944, in response to the Quirindi AWU demands, two *Leader* readers condemned that branch's threats and defended the use of Italians because, as one believed, 'there is no accessible rural labour available.' Like the *Leader* editorial regarding the unions' actions against the Gunnedah farmer, these letters were decidedly anti-union rather than pro-POWs.³¹

This review of all northern NSW newspaper records in the period between 1943 and 1945 is far from complete. However, the results of examining the *Leader* and *Express* does suggest a pattern of virulent anti-Italian feelings within these communi-

ties, primarily from union officials, returned servicemen and some graziers. The disputed status of the Italians after Italy's capitulation in 1943 was not a consideration to these people - the Italians had chosen to ally themselves with Nazi Germany, and for four years fought against the Allies. Little regard was given for the Italians as individuals, whether they were conscripted or not, Fascists or Royalists. However, can newspaper articles be taken as an indicator of community feelings and attitudes?

Philippa Watt and Elizabeth Brooks in their study of Italian POWs in Gippsland, believe newspapers in that region did reflect approval of the prisoners.³² Meantime, while there have been few other studies devoted to Italian prisoners in Australia, they do suggest widespread approval among those who employed the men, although community attitudes are generally not explored. Once the prisoners were seen as individuals with a name, personality, and anti-Fascist opinions, those with the closest contact with them - farmers and their families - came to see the Italians as humans. Moreover, Italian POWs worked hard, often became part of the farmer's family, and generally gave no trouble to their employers.³³ This is the impression this author is receiving with preliminary contacts with those who employed POWs in northern NSW. Anecdotal evidence suggests the POWs in this area were well liked, hard working, and respected by their employers. Newspaper reports do not reflect these sentiments, and this human dimension is necessary to document rural communities where Italian POWs were present. While most studies on Italian POWs have been broad overviews, their presence in northern NSW has yet to be fully studied, but it appears they were welcome on many farms, despite the unsympathetic reporting they received.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ *Armidale Express*, Editorial, 29 September 1943, p.4.
- ² Northern Daily Leader (hereafter NDL), 24 February 1945, p.2.
- ³ Gianfranco Cresciani 'Captivity in Australia: the case of the Italian prisoners of war, 1940-1947', *Studi Emigrazione / Etudes Migration*, Vol. 26, No. 34, June 1989, p.218.
- ⁴ *Commonwealth Government, Parliamentary Debates. Senate and House of Representatives*, Commonwealth Government Printer, Canberra, 1944, Vol. 177, p.188, (Ashley); Vol. 173, p.889, 1943 (James).
- ⁵ *Armidale Express*, 5 July 1943, p.2..14 July 1943, p.2.

- ⁶ *ibid.*, 13 August 1943, p.8.
- ⁷ *ibid.*, 20 September 1943, p.4.
- ⁸ *ibid.*, 24 September 1943, p.6.
- ⁹ *ibid.*, 29 September 1943, p.4. The editorial acknowledged Australian authorities were abiding by the Geneva Convention regarding the treatment of POWs but believed their treatment, especially to the detriment of Australian citizens, exceeded these guidelines, especially when it led to 'the flaunting of prisoners in public dining halls.'
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*, 4 October 1943, p.4.
- ¹¹ *ibid.*, 3 November 1943, p.4.
- ¹² NDL, 7 July 1943, p.2.
- ¹³ *ibid.*, 27 November 1943, p.2.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*, 1 March 1944, p.2.
- ¹⁵ *Guyra Argus*, 27 April 1944, p.2.
- ¹⁶ NDL, 27 April 1944, p.2.
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*, 10 May 1944, p.2.; *Armidale Express*, 10 May 1944, p.1.
- ¹⁸ NDL, 19 June 1944, p.6.; *Armidale Express*, 9 June 1944, p.6.
- ¹⁹ *Armidale Express*, 16 June 1944, p.6; 21 June 1944, p.7.
- ²⁰ NDL, 12 July 1944, p.2; 'Clericus', 'Italian P.O.W.s after the war. Should they be sent home?', *Mufti*, Vol.9, No.8, 1 August, 1944, p.18. The conclusion of 'Clericus' (the anonymous author) would have shocked the folk at Inverell - he suggested any hindering of the war effort by Italian POWs would be 'a qualification rather than otherwise for residence in this country after the war,' since this was expected of every 'Britisher' in enemy hands (p.18).
- ²¹ NDL, 21 July 1944, p.5. It is not recorded how the meeting reacted to these revelations, especially in light of fierce anti-POW feelings regarding their work capabilities.
- ²² *Armidale Express*, 13 November 1944, p.6.i NDL, 13 November 1944, p.2. The prisoner was found guilty by the military tribunal and sentenced to 18 months imprisonment with hard labour.
- ²³ *Armidale Express*, 9 February 1945, p.13.
- ²⁴ *ibid.*, 26 March 1945, p.2.
- ²⁵ NDL, 17 March 1945, p.3.
- ²⁶ *ibid.*, 19 March 1945, p.2.
- ²⁷ *ibid.*, 30 March 1944, p.2; 29 July 1944, p.4; 1 November 1944, p.5; 16 January 1945, p.5; 26 January 1945, p.2.
- ²⁸ *ibid.*, 12 February 1945, p.5.
- ²⁹ *ibid.*, 15 February 1945, p.2.
- ³⁰ *ibid.*, 17 February 1945, p.2.
- ³¹ *ibid.*, 3 March 1944, p.2.; 8 March 1944, p.2.
- ³² Philippa Watt & Elizabeth Brooks. 'Italian prisoners of war in Gippsland', *Italian Historical Society Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, July/August 1993, p.7.
- ³³ See, for example, Bill Bunbury. *Rabbits and Spaghetti. Captives and Comrades. Australians, Italians and the War. 1939-1945*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1995; Alan Fitzgerald. *The Italian Farming Soldiers. Prisoners of War in Australia 1941-1947*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1981; Ann Jackson-Nakano. 'The reluctant immigrants', *Migration*, Dept of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs, November/December 1990, No.81, pp. 21-25; Kay Saunders. 'Down on the farm: Italian POWs in Australia 1941-47', *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol.46, September 1995, pp.20-33-, Pat Studdy-Clift. *Only Our Gloves On*, Courier Publications, Narrabri, 1981. Dot Vickery. 'Italian Prisoners of War', in *Guyra Remembers*, comp. G.Hammond, N.Hill & C.Lockyer. Guyra and District Historical Society, *Journal* No.8, 15 Aug. 1995, p.67; Watt & Brooks, *op.cit.*, pp.7-8.