



REVEALED

Scots historian ensures 800 who died in WW2 tragedy will always be remembered

By David Leask

HIGH in the north of Tuscany there is a hillside hamlet called Bratto, home to a dozen or so permanent residents.

On the wall of its church there is a grey marble plaque bearing five names.

These were men lost, the memorial says, in the sinking of the "Andorstar" in July 1940.

Except they were not, not exactly. Pietro and Giacobe Cattini, Pietro Orsi and Anselmo and Raffaele Beschizza died right enough, but on a torpedoed British ship called the Arandora Star.

Eight hundred or so souls went down with the once-glamorous liner, more than half of them Italian internees who had been rounded up after fascist dictator Benito Mussolini declared war on Britain a few weeks earlier and were now being taken to Canada.

Their remains – or some of them – eventually washed up on the shores of Scotland and Ireland.

For decades this tragedy was all but forgotten. Deliberately so, both in the UK and in Italy. So much so that when villagers of Bratto put up their memorial in 1975 they got the name of the lost vessel wrong. A fog of war had descended on the tragedy.

Now, on the contrary, the sinking of the Arandora Star is very much remembered, even as other events fade into history. After at least half a century of what Italians called "oblivion", in recent years the story of the ship and its passengers and crew has become a popular culture phenomenon.

There are plays – not least Ann Marie Di Mambro's 1990 work *Tully's Blood*, now a staple of the Scottish National 5 curriculum – novels, biographies, websites, TV documentaries and endless newspaper articles.

Yet there are still myths, conspiracy theories and confusion over what exactly

happened, about why a liner carrying internees and prisoners was steaming alone in U-boat-infested waters.

Remembrance

LAST week, a first major conference was held on the sinking, on its causes and consequences, and, above all, its remembrance. And sometimes, thanks to the earlier silence around the event, misremembering.

Historian Terri Colpi, a research fellow at St Andrews University, helped organise the event at the Italian Cultural Institute in London.

She understands how Bratto villagers got the name wrong. Growing up in Glasgow's Italian community she remembers talk of the "Andorra Star".

"It was all to do with muteness within the community caused by trauma and pain and not being able to talk about it because they were in Britain and 'the enemy'," she said. "There was a total and utter lack of information, no facts made available to the Italian community."

"This, in combination with the void of materiality, with the lack of bodies, encouraged a mythologised narrative."

Indeed, it was only from the 1990s onwards that historians began to piece together the whole story. Colpi herself published the first list of those lost, after it was released under the 50-year rule.

Until then, the Arandora Star was largely only discussed within the Italian community in Britain – and in the towns and villages in the old country from

where migrant families had come. These were what Colpi calls "pockets of affect". The patterns of chain migration – when friends and family gravitated from a community in Italy to one in the UK – meant pain was focused very locally. One town, Bardi, lost 48.

'Awkward' act

SO, why was the sinking forgotten? Well, in Italy, the episode was awkward. It was the first major loss of Italian life in the war. And victims died at the hands of their German allies.

Then, after the fall of the fascist regime in 1943, remembering was difficult for the new government too. The internees had been rounded up by their new allies, the British, after Winston Churchill's widely reported demands that police "collar the lot".

It was only as the Cold War ended and Italy started to feel more comfortable digging in what was effectively its civil

war within the Second World War that interest in the Arandora Star was revived.

In Britain, too, there were sensitivities that made forgetting easier than remembering. This was embarrassing – the mass deaths of internees, many of whom were not fascists who posed a threat, in the care of the state. The bereaved were left in the dark.

Things have changed. Colpi has catalogued the re-remembering, the rediscovery of the tragedy, and the way, especially in Scotland, it has become a story of the wider community, or reconciliation and peace, and not just for those of Italian descent.

A memorial garden was opened next to Glasgow's St Andrew's Cathedral in 2011 for the about 100 Scots-Italians who lost their lives. The tragedy, moreover, has also helped keep established diaspora communities linked to Italy through shared remembrance.

Injustice

COLPI talks of what is now a "memory of memory". Why has remembrance grown, not faded? "It resonates politically," said Colpi. "Many parallels have been drawn between the Arandora Star and Windrush, the injustice, the cover-ups, the way we never quite looked at it properly."

After at least half a century of what Italians called 'oblivion of memory' on a mysterious wartime sinking, a major conference has been held recalling the fate of the Arandora Star and its passengers



Above, the mayor of Bollengo and author Maura Maffei with the memorial commissioned and designed by Edoardo Ceresa of Stepps, Lanarkshire

London conference settled some of those. Why, for example, had the Arandora Star been unescorted? The former cruise liner was too fast to go with slower convoys of merchant ships, explained Robert Rumble of the Imperial War Museum.

"The Arandora Star was wholly unsuitable for internees," he nevertheless concluded, adding: "It was sailing alone through dangerous waters where U-boat captains had no qualms about sinking ships."

Last torpedo

THE commander who decided to use his last torpedo on the Arandora Star, which was painted battleship grey, was Gunther Prien, a committed young Nazi who had earlier downed the Royal Oak in Scapa Flow.

The conference also heard from survivors of the sinking. Not in person, of course. They are all gone. But through recordings. One was Luigi Beschizza, who, in a voice that was as London as could be, described bobbing in an Atlantic swell full of the dead.

He had been captured on tape by the Imperial War Museum. Where was he from, they had asked. Shepherd's Bush, he explained. Where was he born? Bratto.



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Now, on the contrary, the sinking of the Arandora Star is very remembered, even as other events fade in to history. After at least half a century of what Italians called “oblivion”, in recent years the story of the ship and its passengers and crew has become a popular culture phenomenon. There are plays - not least Ann Marie Di Mambro’s 1990 work Tally’s Blood, now a staple of the Scottish National 5 curriculum - novels, biographies, websites, **TV** docs and endless newspaper articles. Yet still, too, myths, conspiracy theories and confusion over what exactly happened, about why a liner carrying internees and prisoners was steaming alone in U-boat-infested waters. Last week a first major conference was held at the on the sinking, on its causes and consequences, and, above all, its remembrance. And even, sometimes, thanks to the earlier silence around the event, misremembering.

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"It resonates politically," said Colpi. "Many parallels have been drawn between the Arandora Star and Windrush, the injustice, the cover-ups, the way we never quite looked at it properly."

The story, Colpi added, touches on "civil rights issues and internment which was pretty horrific and shocking even for 1940". These are live issues today, she said, with the way refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants are treated.

And so the Arandora Star becomes a way to talk about hot topics, not least the death of migrants at sea.

For some, there remain questions about the ship. The London conference settled some of those. Why, for example, had Arandora Star been unescorted? The former cruise liner was too fast to go with slower convoys of merchant ships, explained Robert Rumble of the Imperial War Museum.

"The Arandora Star was wholly unsuitable for internees," he nevertheless concluded. He added: "It was sailing alone through dangerous waters where u-boat captains had no qualms about sinking ships."

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