

RESEARCH ARTICLE

From migrants to legionnaires: diplomatic and political tensions surrounding Italians in the French Foreign Legion, 1945–54

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Abstract

Since its inception in 1831, the French Foreign Legion, a specialised unit within the ranks of the French military, has played a prominent role in the wars of both colonisation and decolonisation. This article seeks to trace the origins, development and eventual decline of an Italian and international ‘Legionary issue’ regarding the recruitment and employment of Italian volunteers in a foreign military force deployed in the French decolonisation war in Indochina. Through the examination of archival sources as well as autobiographical narratives by Italian legionnaires, this study offers a novel perspective on the interplay between Italy’s political, economic and sociocultural trends, the enlistment of Italian volunteers into the French Foreign Legion, and the evolution of Italo-French relations in the postwar period.

Keywords: French Foreign Legion; decolonisation; transnational volunteers; Indochina War; Cold War

Introduction

Prisoners of war, soldiers of the royal army, fascists, antifascists, partisans and the unemployed, as well as both regular and irregular migrants, are among the diverse Italian volunteers who joined the French Foreign Legion. This influx occurred from the mid-1930s onward, with a significant increase in enlistment following the end of the Second World War.

The Legion, a military force of the French army established in 1831 by King Louis Philippe I, reflects the multifaceted connections between individual experiences and broader global events. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and throughout the first decade of the Cold War, the Legion’s ranks were augmented in particular by individuals from the nations that had been defeated. Initially, these new arrivals mainly comprised Germans and Italians but also subsequently encompassed French, Belgian, Spanish and Eastern European volunteers. More precisely, from 1946 to 1954, Italians were the third largest group within the French Foreign Legion, comprising 9 per cent of its ranks, only preceded by German-speaking soldiers (48 per cent) and French speakers (10 per cent).¹ Slightly more than 74 per cent of Italians who enlisted during

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this period participated in the Indochina War, the first conflict of the French wars of decolonisation. But who were these Italian volunteers? Why did they choose to join the French Foreign Legion? And how did their presence in a foreign military eventually come to be a contentious issue, especially in the context of Italo-French diplomacy?

The aim of the article is to examine Italo-French history during the second postwar era through the individual and collective stories of Italian legionnaires, focusing on their enlistment into the French Foreign Legion and participation in the Indochina War. It analyses the emergence, development and eventual decline of an Italian and international 'Legionary issue'. This issue was linked to a significant postwar wave of recruitment, particularly among Italian migrants. By contextualising this phenomenon within Italy's political and socioeconomic trends and the broader evolution of Italo-French relations, the article explores how the involvement of Italian legionnaires shaped certain aspects of bilateral relations. It highlights the dual role of the legionnaires both as a source of crisis, coinciding with heightened latent tensions, and as a diplomatic instrument for advancing Italy's international interests, as the Indochina conflict increasingly became a proxy for ideological confrontation.

The existing historiography has largely neglected the role of Italians in the French Foreign Legion in the post-Second World War period. The seminal work in this area by Sandro Rinauro (2009) provides valuable insight into the recruitment of Italian migrants into the Legion, illuminating patterns of Italian migration and enlistment. Based on the pioneering studies by Rinauro and on my own research on the subject, it appears that the phenomenon of Italian enlistment between the end of the Second World War and the mid-1950s became a contentious issue within the context of Italo-French relations. Political and diplomatic dynamics were also influenced by the individual and collective paths of Italian legionnaires, through both their presence in a foreign army and their involvement in the decolonisation conflict in Indochina.²

Given the limited studies on this subject, the historiography on Italo-French relations during this period and on Italian emigration to France has provided the framework in which to situate, analyse and elucidate this significant period of 'Italianness' that characterised French military and colonial history. In the context of the intricate evolution of Italo-French relations throughout the immediate postwar period, most studies have focused on the reconciliation of complex wartime relations and the establishment of new collaborations within the Western bloc (Duroselle and Serra 1988). Only in recent years have contributions from new perspectives expanded our understanding of the history of these two nations after the Second World War (Bagnato 2012; Bertrand et al. 2016). The main subject of this article is closely related to the linked phenomenon of Italian emigration to France after the Second World War, due to the deep-rooted connection between enlistment and migration. Recent studies on the topic have analysed the broader dynamics of Italian migration (Bevilacqua et al. 2001; Audenino and Tirabassi 2008; Ventresca 2017), while others have focused more specifically on postwar Italian migration to France; the latter group aims to explore this significant stage of Italian migration, both regular and irregular (Blanc-Chaléard 2003; Rinauro 2009; Mourlane 2016). Nevertheless, many of these studies do not analyse enlistment in the French Foreign Legion as a phenomenon of Italian migration. As the following pages will demonstrate, a military career in the Legion emerged as an additional employment opportunity for the unemployed or those dissatisfied with their current working situations. Therefore, from the French Foreign Legion's perspective, illegal migrants and unsatisfied workers represented a stable source from which to recruit new soldiers.

This '*jeu d'échelle*' approach is achieved by the adoption of a transnational perspective that contributes to showing how Italian legionnaires became one of the 'nodes in the networks' (Altena and Bantman 2015) that extended from Italy into French territories.

The presence of Italians in the Legion thus offers a micro-historical perspective through which to study transnational dynamics, such as Cold War politics and European migration, by examining the experiences of the actors directly involved. In this article, this individual perspective, captured in the analysis of specific cases, is subsequently contextualised within a macro framework, and reconstructed through the examination of interactions between public authorities and broader social, political, economic and diplomatic dynamics. As part of this approach, the study examines sources from the Italian and French ministries of the interior and foreign affairs, such as telegrams and reports, alongside individual files of Italian legionnaires from the French Foreign Legion archives.³

1945–8: Italian volunteers during the immediate postwar period

The wave of Italian migration during the postwar period began as early as 1945.⁴ At the end of the Second World War, the resumption of migratory flows from Italy represented a solution to the severe economic situation in Italy and the disparity between intense population growth and a scarcity of capital (Romero 2001). Simultaneously, postwar France faced significant demographic losses and the urgent need to initiate a process of national reconstruction (Tapinos 1975). The first agreements between Italy and France regarding migration were established between February 1946 and March 1948. This was a significant success for Italy for several reasons, as it provided a solution to the surplus of labour and unemployment, as well as being an achievement in regard to the equal treatment of Italian and French workers and the remittances sent back to Italy (Strangio 2018). In this spirit of renewed communion of purpose, relations between the two countries continually improved to the point of making emigration a topic of common interest – a bridge between Italy and France (Serra 1994, 17). However, the initial outcome turned out to be different from what was expected, due to bureaucratic delays and opposition from French labour unions and the Italian industrial sector. Therefore, illegal migration did not stop. The parallel irregular migratory corridor led to a complicated situation that was difficult to control and an overlapping of apparently distinct phenomena, such as clandestine emigration flanked by assisted emigration. The scourge of illegitimate migration soon proved impossible to eradicate. Both regular and irregular migrants headed towards the industrial areas of the north-east, the Seine, the Alpes-Maritimes, the Moselle, the Bouches-du-Rhône, the Parisian zone, and the industrial area of Lorraine (Corti 2003).

Within the broader context of renewed migration towards France, the recruitment of Italians for the Foreign Legion also increased from 1945 onwards, and it continued to increase for almost a decade.⁵ Especially from the winter of 1945, the Gendarmerie bolstered its presence at checkpoints along the Italo-French border, enabling them to engage in targeted recruitment efforts for the Legion, during which unsuspecting volunteers were carefully vetted. The majority of recruits for the Legion were illegal immigrants from various Italian regions. Border authorities frequently detained Italians for illegal entry and offered them a choice between harsh working and living conditions in France or enlistment in the Foreign Legion, which was praised for its treatment of volunteers. The French authorities guaranteed that this alternative would allow them to avoid the legal consequences of illegal immigration. The Italian government was therefore required to intervene in order to stem a ‘detrimental’ activity both for internal security and for the country’s reconstruction efforts.⁶

The recruitment of clandestine migrants into the Foreign Legion notably captured the attention of Italian newspapers, such as *Il Momento* (1946). At the beginning of September, it was reported that 27 Italians had been detained by French authorities at the state border between Ventimiglia and Menton for illegal emigration, ten of whom chose to enlist in the Legion. This route was poised to become one of the most common in the stories of

many Italian legionnaires. Additionally, in several cases, the aspiration to enlist across the border became one of the causes of irregular migration.⁷ Archival documents reveal the image of a corps reorganising its recruitment methods and locations. Border agents and the Gendarmerie thus also assumed the role of recruitment agents for the Foreign Legion, enticing clandestine migrants into enlistment through skilled deception.

If economic factors emerged as a driving force behind the resurgence of transnational migrations and enlistments in the Legion from 1945 onwards, among the unemployed were individuals who were also suffering the consequences of their ideological stances during the Fascist regime.⁸ For instance, G.G., born in 1928 and unemployed, had enlisted in the *Decima Flottiglia MAS*⁹ in 1944. Following the Liberation, he was known as a Fascist and was suffering hardship, and so he emigrated illegally and found employment as a waiter. After being discovered and arrested, he learned of the existence of the Foreign Legion, which attracted many young unemployed individuals. Consequently, after several adventures, he enlisted and participated in the Indochina War, where he sustained severe injuries. Upon returning to Algeria, he deserted and reached Spanish Morocco.¹⁰

Simultaneously, the enrolment activities were also directed at Italian workers already in the French territory.¹¹ In the mines of northern Lorraine, Pas-de-Calais and Belgium, Italians, although regular workers, were also quickly recruited with the promise of escaping the threat of illness and the frequent fatal accidents.¹² Therefore, the Legion also attracted those who had emigrated through legal channels but found themselves dissatisfied with working conditions in France. For instance, O.A., a former partisan with the Val Taro division, moved to Belgium in 1946 to work as a miner but chose to enlist in the Legion after becoming discontented with his employment situation. The harsh working conditions led him to Lille, where he joined the Legion.¹³

In the spring of 1947, despite efforts to curb the irregular entry of migrants over the previous two years, illegal immigration persisted. Unauthorised migrants began to arrive in large numbers once again, leading to the formal reinstatement of border access. In addition, until 1947 Italy tried to keep the most skilled workers within the country for the national reconstruction effort while allowing the emigration of those without qualifications (Rinauro 2012, 16). Moreover, at the dawn of 1947, the material damage suffered during the war still influenced the Italian economic situation. As proof of these difficulties, Marcello de Franceschi asked the French ambassador in Rome about the procedures for enrolment into the Legion: 'Above all, what compels me to write to you is hunger ... I am nothing more than a good citizen who, having returned a year ago from captivity, has been unable to find work or bread for his family.'¹⁴

Simultaneously, in France, the new government was confronted with a multiplicity of shortages in different sectors (Asselain 2018). Also in 1947, Italian enlistment in the French Foreign Legion saw its first postwar peak, with Italians accounting for approximately 11 per cent of total recruits.¹⁵ The data suggests that, during France's first significant postwar economic crisis, the French Foreign Legion emerged as a stable employment option, unaffected by the market's economic fluctuations. Observing the backgrounds, geographical origins and sociocultural contexts of the new Italian recruits, the legionnaire Giuseppe Bottai – a former prominent member of the Fascist Party and former minister of education during the Fascist regime – reflected on the social and political shifts that had occurred in postwar Italy. He noted:

Italians ... mostly from cities, primarily from Rome and further north. Certainly not the elite: black-market outcasts, driven into clandestine emigration to avoid prison, then pushed into the Legion. Harsh and sombre, they bore the echoes of the Homeland's moral collapse. (Bottai 1992, 540, my translation)

Given this context, an official dispute emerged in April 1947 when the Italian embassy in Paris lodged a complaint with the Quai d'Orsay, alleging that French gendarmes had coerced some illegal immigrants who had been apprehended at the Italy–France border into joining the French Foreign Legion. The embassy requested that the French authorities cease these practices. However, in November, the embassy had to renew its request, citing additional instances of illegal migrants being ‘solicited’ to enlist by French border authorities.¹⁶

In summary, the recruitment of Italian volunteers between 1945 and 1948 was characterised by the fragmentation of enlistment locations and the varied backgrounds of the volunteers. The typical age range for legionnaires was approximately 25–30 years, an age group not dissimilar to the migrants of that period. An interesting analysis concerns the professions declared at the time of enlistment: the majority came from the tertiary and secondary sectors, with a significant portion of mechanics, followed by the primary sector, largely comprising farmers and miners from across Italy.

Furthermore, an examination of the volunteers’ regions of origin reveals the significant link between emigration and enlistment into the French Foreign Legion, although some regions stood out from this pattern. Lombardy and Veneto were the primary sources of migrants to France, but they were not the sole regions from which legionnaires originated. Between 1945 and 1948, other regions, such as Sicily and Piedmont, also contributed a significant number of recruits. This pattern reflects changes in the regions from which migrants moved to France in the early 1950s (Blanc-Chaléard 2003). These men were primarily driven by the demand for labour in the mines and in the iron and steel industries, but then discouraged by the harsh working conditions, severe climate and inadequate housing.¹⁷ The variety of paths and motivations of Italians who joined the Foreign Legion between 1945 and 1948 is sometimes documented in the interrogation records conducted in Sidi Bel Abbès upon the arrival of candidates at the Legion’s headquarters. From these documents emerges an image that the Legion served as a common denominator for a multitude of individual experiences, providing a way of fulfilling various personal and practical needs. These elements reflected the complexity and diversity of Italy’s postwar society.¹⁸

1949–52: Italian volunteers in the evolving dynamics of the Cold War

In July 1949, the inspector of the French Foreign Legion endorsed the recruitment of foreign workers in France into the Legion’s ranks. He suggested obtaining permission from the ministry of labour to enlist among those who violated the terms of their employment contracts and among those who, dissatisfied with their current work, sought modifications to their contracts. He justified this by stating: ‘Five years in the Legion, with two deployments to Indochina, would be preferable for France than expulsion.’¹⁹ The proposal, driven first by the objective of augmenting the personnel of units stationed in Indochina, also led to increased pressure on illegal immigrants, yielding significant results in terms of enlistment, as evidenced by the case of the Italians.

The onset of the severe economic recession that hit France between 1949 and 1950 led to one of the longest official closures of the borders to illegal immigrants.²⁰ Both legal and illegal migration decreased temporarily. The experiences of individuals intersected with broader economic, social and political dynamics. In Italy, between 1946 and 1951, on the threshold of the economic miracle, the gross domestic product grew at an annual rate of approximately 7 per cent. This remarkable growth, however, was accompanied by significant challenges, including a sharp rise in inflation driven by excess demand and the substantial volume of currency created both during and after the war. These inflationary pressures strained the balance of payments and threatened social stability. In response, the Italian government adopted a restrictive monetary policy to stabilise the lira and curb inflation. The government intersected these domestic efforts with international frameworks

such as the European Recovery Program and the Bretton Woods agreement, as well as Italy's entry into NATO and its participation in the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC) (Cohen and Federico 2001, 109–112). In addition, Italy's engagement with the OEEC marked its first institutional platform for addressing economic challenges, including the utilisation of labour migration to mitigate unemployment and stimulate recovery – a strategy that eventually failed (Milward 1984; Ventresca 2017). Similarly, other initiatives, such as Italy's early adherence to the Schuman Plan and the 1950 Italo-French attempt to establish an economic and customs union, also failed to yield the desired outcomes (Battilossi 1996). These setbacks highlighted persistent structural weaknesses in Italy's economy, as high unemployment levels remained above European averages and regional income disparities between the industrialised North and the agrarian South persisted throughout the economic boom (Cohen and Federico 2001, 108).²¹ To address these challenges, Italy also pursued an international economic strategy centred on sustained emigration programmes. These initiatives, implemented through bilateral and multilateral agreements with European and extra-European countries, aimed to alleviate domestic unemployment while indirectly curbing the potential growth of political opposition to the government.

Despite these measures, recruitment into the French Foreign Legion saw a second peak between 1949 and 1951. This data similarly indicates that the Legion provided an alternative source of employment during the economic downturn of 1949 and offered job opportunities in a market that could not absorb all job seekers. Furthermore, the rise in enlistments was also facilitated by the heightened propaganda for the French Foreign Legion during 1950–1, pivotal years of the Indochina conflict, during which the transition from a war of decolonisation to a crucial conflict of the Cold War took shape. This campaign, mainly driven by the need for personnel to be deployed in Indochina, also utilised films and the press to encourage recruitment.²²

In 1950, the colonel of the 1st Foreign Regiment expressed deep concern about this new generation of volunteers. The new volunteers differed markedly from those recruited from 1945 to 1946, as 'they were predominantly adolescents or young men who had not previously served as soldiers. They lacked professional qualifications ... Morally, they frequently exhibited the shortcomings or defects typical of the postwar period.' In just a few succinct lines, the profiles of the new legionnaires were briefly outlined, noting that they would receive intensive training before being deployed to Indochina.²³

The increasing enlistment of Italians in the Legion influenced the trajectory of bilateral relations. Also in 1950, the Italian consul in Algiers underscored the strong correlation between clandestine migration and enlistment in the Legion. The consul conveyed to the ministry of foreign affairs that the issue of enlistment was 'naturally connected with the broader problem of Italian migration to metropolitan France and North Africa', where it often emerged as a dependent and resulting phenomenon, driven by material difficulties in the destination areas, a lack of employment opportunities, inadequate documentation or criminal convictions associated with clandestine emigration.²⁴

As the French minister of defence noted in 1950, 'the prestige of the Legion is its best propaganda in foreign countries, especially during times of economic and political crisis'.²⁵ The story of A.F. provides insight into the employment situation in his home town in the province of Campobasso, which had remained largely unchanged since the end of the Second World War. Due to 'a lack of work', he enlisted in the French Foreign Legion in 1950 after his attempts to clandestinely migrate to the USA and to find work in Turin and the Asti area failed. He subsequently went to France, arriving in Nice, where a woman suggested that he join the Legion. His account offers a view into barracks filled with Italians, illustrating a slice of postwar Italian society:

Most of the people here are Italian ... There are former Salò republicans, ex-partisans, and people without jobs or prospects who refuse to stay idle. In short, there are many stories similar to mine ... It is a broad spectrum, where various motivations intermingle.²⁶ (Aceto 2006, 31-32)

Following the Italo-French meetings in Santa Margherita, despite France's support in March 1951 for increasing Italian emigration in order to foster permanent and systematic collaboration, there was a notable rise in irregular entries. This led to a corresponding intensification of recruitment activities in the border regions. In the same year, measures were adopted by the minister of the interior to 'facilitate as much as possible the action of military personnel responsible for recruiting legionnaires'.²⁷ With the resurgence of migration at the end of 1951, military authorities were prompted to step up their recruitment efforts, particularly targeting 'foreigners crossing our borders irregularly'.²⁸

Analysis of individual records of recruits who joined the Legion between 1949 and 1951 reveals differences and similarities compared with volunteers from 1945 to 1948. Again, a key observation is the link between emigration and enlistment, most apparent in this latter period in the regions of origin of those who enlisted in the Legion; these regions included Lombardy, Veneto, Sicily and Campania. Unemployment was cited as the primary reason for enlistment, but some volunteers also joined to fight in Indochina for ideological reasons (such as opposing the spread of communism), among other factors. Others, particularly former officers of the Italian army, faced significant difficulties reintegrating into civilian life. Recruitment hotspots such as Marseille, Nice and Lyon reflect a deliberate focus on border areas by French authorities. In terms of their occupations declared upon enlistment, most recruits were identified as miners or bricklayers. This pattern mirrors the overarching labour dynamics characteristic of the postwar era and, more precisely, aligns with the occupational composition of foreign individuals who were sought after in the French labour market during that period.²⁹

While the French Foreign Legion occasionally served as a release valve for migratory pressures, it sometimes acted as a source of such flows as well, leading to recurrent diplomatic tensions. These tensions were primarily due to the recruitment of minors, defined as individuals under the age of 21 or 18.³⁰ At the beginning of 1952, the surge in enlistments also reignited protests from Italian politicians. The Italian government requested from the French embassy in Rome a halt to the recruitment of minors. In August of the same year, the Italian embassy in Paris informed the Quai d'Orsay – in dramatic terms – about the frequent and easy recruitment of very young individuals by the French Foreign Legion.³¹ Later that year, in September, Senator Umberto Terracini, an influential representative of the Italian Communist Party, appealed to the president of the council of ministers, suggesting the need for possible diplomatic action with the French government to put an end to the 'criminal and despicable exploitation of misery and deceit that lures so many young Italians into often fatal conflicts under a foreign flag'.³² Terracini's new dispute stemmed from opposition to the political and military actions undertaken by the French in Indochina. It was also driven by his increasingly explicit support for the Vietminh cause and, more generally, for the Eastern bloc. Following the transition of the Indochina War from a conflict of decolonisation to a crucial conflict of the Cold War, Terracini's protest also evolved to convey a clear and strong message of solidarity with his Vietnamese comrades.

Nevertheless, between the end of 1952 and the beginning of 1953, the demands of the Cold War led to a shift in Italy's official stance on enlistment in the French Foreign Legion. In January 1953, during a formal meeting in Rome between the secretary of state of the Eisenhower administration, John Foster Dulles, the director of the Mutual Security Agency,

Harold Stassen, and prime minister Alcide De Gasperi, the latter described Italian legionnaires as an important asset within the new geopolitical context, a 'contribution to the common defence against communism'. Apart from rationales attributable to Cold War imperatives, the primary motivation behind De Gasperi's statements was to incentivise France towards ratifying the European Defence Community, envisioned as a mechanism for accelerating the process of European political consolidation.³³ During this biennium, even more markedly than in the preceding period, the orientations of international policy had a significant impact on the Italian government's position regarding the recruitment of Italians into the Foreign Legion. This orientation intersected with – and was ultimately subordinated to – broader geopolitical interests, compelling the Italian government to slightly modify the position it had previously upheld.

1952–4: a new generation of Italian volunteers

Following the second French recession from May 1952, enlistments in the Legion and the level of general emigration both experienced a slight decline. Overall migration to France began to rise again in 1953 but dropped in 1954, while enlistment in the Legion continued its steady decline.³⁴

The story of Antonio Cocco aligns with this broader context, providing a glimpse into a cross-section of postwar Italian society, situated within the broader framework of economic and political reconstruction. Antonio was born in Padua and grew up in Venice. Following poor school performance, he ran away to avoid disappointing his parents. This escape, conceived as a form of personal liberation, was driven not by economic hardship but by personal challenges. After crossing the border illegally at Modane, he was arrested by the Gendarmerie and given an ultimatum: 'prison or the Legion'. Antonio signed his enlistment contract in June 1952 and subsequently participated in military operations in Indochina. He died in Diên Biên Phu in 1954 (Cocco 2018). His story exemplifies the human drama experienced by many Italian families during this period. In fact, 'if there is a phenomenon that the police authorities are still unable to control, it is the enrolment of young men in the Foreign Legion', stated an article published in the newspaper *Il Tempo* at the beginning of November 1952 (*Il Tempo* 1952).

In addition, the case of S.F. is among the most noteworthy examples in this later cohort of Italian legionnaires. His journey began in Sicily, where he worked as a farmer from his teenage years until 1951, when he was drafted for military service. After completing two years of service, he faced the daunting challenge of unemployment. He chose to emigrate illegally to France with a group of friends. Starting from Bardonecchia, they reached Carcassonne, where they joined the French Foreign Legion after connecting with an Italian recruiter. Although they had little understanding of what the Legion entailed, they all enlisted as a means of employment. After six months of instruction and medical assessments, S.F. arrived in Saigon in February 1954.³⁵

Given the frequency of cases like those of Antonio Cocco and S.F., as well as those from previous years, it became evident to the Italian ministry of the interior that recruitment to the French Foreign Legion was occurring due to illegal emigration or to the activities of recruiters operating within Italian territory, especially near borders and ports. This development increasingly raised concerning social and moral issues, highlighting the need for more effective surveillance and control measures.³⁶ Furthermore, the ministry suspected that, during the summer of 1953, organisations existed in the areas of Modane and Ventimiglia that facilitated the clandestine crossing of the border by Italians seeking to enlist in the Legion, which needed personnel.³⁷ Indeed, to address the personnel shortages caused by the Indochina War and the limited arrival of German volunteers,³⁸ the Legion intensified its propaganda efforts and increased the enlistment bonus. 'Every opportunity

was exploited to highlight the legionnaires' lives in favourable terms and to extol their acts of valour.' The corps' image was still attractively promoted through flyers and brochures.³⁹

Indeed, the Legion's recruitment records attest to a slight decrease in the enlistment of Italians in 1953–4 and in the following year.⁴⁰ This is corroborated by an analysis of legionnaire records. Interestingly, the reasons cited for joining the Legion slightly changed as well. While unemployment remained the primary motivation, personal reasons – such as romantic disappointments and family conflicts, including disagreements with siblings or parents – emerged with greater frequency. These motivations reflected a Legion that, by the mid-1950s, had undergone a transformation in line with the changing profiles of its recruits. This shift mirrored an Italian society in transition, marked by growing economic development, increased access to education, and a broader spectrum of individual aspirations. As a result, enlistments no longer revealed solely the dramatic landscape of an Italy struggling with economic and social challenges and difficulties in professional integration. Instead, they increasingly represented personal choices among youth driven by introspective needs and not exclusively by material hardship. This shift in focus underscored the broader societal shifts occurring in Italy during this period.

In 1955, after the conclusion of the Indochina War and amid the ongoing Algerian War, Paris observed that the Italian government had adopted a more discreet approach regarding the involvement of its citizens in the Legion compared with previous practices. This was then reflected in a decline in public statements by Italian political leaders, as well as in a reduced level of engagement by diplomatic authorities. Furthermore, although propaganda continued within the Italian territory and criticism towards enlistments persisted in leftist newspapers,⁴¹ recruitment of clandestine migrants gradually decreased. This was attributable mainly to the stricter level of control exercised by the authorities, particularly at border controls, as well as to increased awareness of the actual living conditions in the Legion and, above all, to an improvement in the Italian economic situation.⁴²

Conclusion

During the Second World War, and especially after its conclusion, the notable and long-standing recruitment of Italians in France resumed in border areas or regions that typically welcomed foreign workers. This recruitment of both legal and illegal migrants intensified in these border regions, particularly from the winter of 1945 onwards. In the face of rising unemployment and the hope of integration into France, recruitment for the Legion also increased among Italian workers already on French soil. This led to the first peak in the enlistment of Italians in 1947, driven by the increased flow of mainly irregular migration and France's first significant postwar economic crisis. The data indicates that the Legion served as a consistent employment option, relatively unaffected by market fluctuations. This period clearly demonstrates the connection between emigration and enlistment into the French Foreign Legion.

Similarly, the significant economic recession that hit France between 1949 and 1950 led to a second peak in recruitment. This trend further supports the idea that the Legion became an appealing alternative during periods of economic downturn, that there was heightened propaganda in border areas, and that employment opportunities were limited. During this time, the overlap between migrant routes and recruitment into the Legion became even more apparent, with regions of origin and personal stories reflecting this link. Diplomatic exchanges and tensions between Italy and France also increased during this period with regard to the recruitment and presence of Italians within the French Foreign Legion. Additionally, in part due to Cold War dynamics, various Italian political factions protested against the presence of Italians in the Foreign Legion. From 1950, as the number of enlisted Italians grew, a new wave of political protests targeted the Quai d'Orsay.

The Italian legionnaires subsequently began to play a more strategic role in Italo-French relations, within the wider context of Western bloc dynamics.

In the following years, between 1953 and 1954, a slight decrease in the enlistment of Italians occurred. From 1955, after the conclusion of the Indochina War and amid the ongoing Algerian War, the Italian government adopted a more discreet approach regarding the involvement of its citizens in the Legion compared with previous practices. This was principally attributable to more stringent supervision by Italian authorities, increased awareness of living conditions within the Legion, and, most importantly, an improvement in Italy's economic situation.

In general, the complex mosaic of paths and motivations among Italians demonstrates a mix of pull and push factors that led individuals to join a military corps willing to accept them if they met the requirements. Given the significant impact of their enlistments and the diplomatic tensions they caused, Italian legionnaires represented one of the recurrent concerns and subjects of debate between Italy and France from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s.

Adopting an approach in this article that integrates micro, macro and transnational historical perspectives has enabled a comprehensive examination of the various components of a phenomenon that extended along both established and emerging routes, from Italy to France and Indochina, and back. More specifically, it has facilitated the observation and reconstruction of the economic, political, military and social conditions across different geographical regions through a unique analytical lens, that of the Italian legionnaires. This approach has revealed its potential to 'illuminate and integrate the history of European countries whose historians traditionally have inclined to look inwards to define and facilitate their nation's emergence from the shadow of others' (Clavin 2010).

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Competing interests. The author declares none.

Notes

1. *Fiche sur la Légion Etrangère*, Cabinet du ministre et organismes rattachés, post 1945, secrétariat d'État, 2 R 45, Service Historique de la Défense (SHD), Vincennes.
2. The article does not deal with this aspect.
3. Out of respect for individual histories and to protect people's identities, only the initials of the first and last names appear in certain cases.
4. Between 1946 and 1976, 7,447,370 individuals left Italy. The density of emigration was markedly diverse across the country's regions. Initially, the northern regions experienced the highest outflows: the Triveneto area ranked first, followed by Lombardy. In the South, Campania led the emigration figures, followed by Calabria and Sicily (De Clementi 2003, 11–12).
5. From the late 1930s, Italians who were subsequently deployed to the Indochina War were primarily enlisted in French territories, including the North African colonies (as was the case after the conclusion of the Second World War). During the war, recruitment efforts also intensified in prison camps in France and North Africa as well as on the Italian peninsula, an exceptional phenomenon attributable to wartime proximity. Between 1944 and 1946, recruitment activities were predominantly conducted by French occupation forces stationed in Rome and Naples.
6. Servizio Informazioni Militari, 1^a Divisione, b. 231, Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito (AUSSME), Rome; Ministero dell'interno, Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza, Ufficio ordine pubblico (1944–88), categorie permanenti, G-associazioni (1944–86), G-79, Legione straniera (1945–68), b. 130, Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Rome.
7. Ministero dell'interno, Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza, Ufficio ordine pubblico (1944–88), categorie permanenti, G-associazioni (1944–86), G-79, Legione straniera (1945–68), b. 130, ACS.
8. 'Fascist' was one of the various profiles of volunteers who enlisted during the period analysed in this article. Despite the absence of exact figures, the sources do not indicate any sustained exodus of fascists to the

French Foreign Legion. In 1945, for example, during a period of diligent recruitment on Italian territory, the political affiliations of new recruits were not a dominant factor. The recruitment process included both fascists and partisans indiscriminately, with a particular appreciation for their expertise with weapons. This approach was primarily motivated by the necessity to replenish the corps following the conclusion of the Second World War. In 1946, however, according to the Italian military intelligence service (SIM), numerous unemployed people were being recruited daily in Rome, many of whom were former fascists seeking to flee abroad due to concerns over the potential political developments in Italy. Report, 11 June 1946, Servizio Informazioni Militari, Rgpt. Centri/12^A Divisione, b. 308, AUSSME.

9. The Decima Flottiglia Mas was a naval unit of the Royal Italian Navy (Regia Marina). After the 1943 Armistice, part of the unit remained loyal to the Kingdom while another faction sided with the Germans.

10. Pavia, Police Headquarters, 18 March 1953. Affari Politici, 1951–7, Francia, b. 239, Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASDMAE), Rome.

11. Servizio Informazioni Militari, 1^A Divisione, b. 420, AUSSME.

12. Affari Politici, 1951–7, Francia, b. 239, ASDMAE.

13. Individual dossier, Archives du Bureau des anciens de la Légion étrangère (ABALE), Aubagne.

14. Author's translation. Letter dated 9 December 1947. Archives rapatriées du consulat général de France à Naples: affaires militaires (1950–65), Légion étrangère, dossiers nominatifs, b. 27, Centre des Archives diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Nantes.

15. This data emerged from my PhD research, which focused on Italians in the French Foreign Legion during the Indochina War (1946–56).

16. Rinauro 2009, 386. The cited information is contained in Ministère de l'Intérieur, Direction de la Réglementation, bureau des étrangers, dossiers par pays (1933–83), Italie, 19880312/8 (liasse 2), 19880312/9 (liasse 2), Archives Nationales (AN), Paris.

17. This data emerged from my PhD research, which focused on Italians in the French Foreign Legion during the Indochina War (1946–56).

18. Individual dossiers, ABALE.

19. Rinauro 2009, 386. The cited information is contained in État-major de l'armée de Terre et organismes rattachés post 1945, direction des personnels militaires de l'Armée, 19 T 186, SHD.

20. The year 1950 also saw a coal industry crisis due to a contraction in demand, excessive imports of foreign fuel, rising prices, and rationalisation measures implemented since the late 1940s. This phenomenon, combined with the rush to the mines by unemployed workers from other sectors and the loss of 80,000 personnel, left little room for foreign workers. Consequently, many Italian labourers were redirected towards agricultural jobs (De Clementi 2003, 22).

21. For further information on Italian economy after 1945 see Battilani and Fauri (2014) 2019.

22. This data emerged from my PhD research, which focused on Italians in the French Foreign Legion during the Indochina War (1946–56); Ministero dell'interno, Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza, Ufficio ordine pubblico (1944–88), categorie permanenti, G-associazioni (1944–86), G-79, Legione straniera (1945–68), b. 130, ACS.

23. Report of Colonel Olié, commander of the 1st Foreign Regiment, 1 March–31 August 1950. Uninventoried box, Centre de documentation et de recherches historiques de la Légion étrangère (CDRHLE), Aubagne.

24. Consul of Italy in Algiers to the ministry of foreign affairs, 6 December 1950. Ministero dell'interno, Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza, Ufficio ordine pubblico (1944–88), categorie permanenti, G-associazioni (1944–86), G-79, Legione straniera (1945–68), b. 130, ACS.

25. Letter to the ministry of foreign affairs, 17 April 1950. Archives rapatriées de l'Ambassade de France à Rome, b. 162, CADN.

26. Author's translation.

27. Ministère de la Justice, Direction des affaires criminelles et des grâces, Sous-direction de la législation criminelle (1791–1982), 19950317/69, d. 6854, AN.

28. Ministère de l'Intérieur, Direction des libertés publiques et des affaires juridiques, Sous-direction des étrangers et de la circulation transfrontière, bureau des étrangers (1948–81), 19900353/4 (liasse 2), AN.

29. Summary of the contents of individual dossiers kept in ABALE.

30. Europe, sous série administrative 1949–55, b. 78, Italie (octobre 1949–septembre 1955), Archives diplomatiques du Ministère des Affaires étrangères (AMAE), Paris.

31. Europe, sous série administrative 1949–55, b. 78, Italie (octobre 1949–septembre 1955), AMAE.

32. Parliament acts, Senate of the Republic, debates, 30 September 1952. Senator Umberto Terracini, p. 35548, accessed 4 February 2024, <http://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/487780.pdf>.

33. See Glennon and Petersen (1982, 320ff.); Bernbaum et al. (1983, 1548ff.); Affari Politici 1951–7, Francia, b. 239, ASDMAE; Rinauro 2009, 406–407.

34. This data emerged from my PhD research, which focused on Italians in the French Foreign Legion during the Indochina War (1946–56).

35. Individual dossier, ABALE. His journal is preserved at the Archivio diaristico nazionale, Pieve Santo Stefano, MP/15, S.F.
36. Telegram to border authorities, 13 January 1953. Ministero dell'interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, Ufficio ordine pubblico (1944–1988), Categorie permanenti, G-associazioni (1944–1986), G-79, Legione straniera (1945–1968), b. 130, ACS.
37. Ministry of the interior to the *questore* of Turin and Imperia, 4 August 1953. Ministero dell'interno, Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza, Ufficio ordine pubblico (1944–88), categorie permanenti, G-associazioni (1944–86), G-79, Legione straniera (1945–68), b. 130, ACS.
38. This was due to the promulgation of an amendment to the German penal code aimed at prosecuting the recruitment of Germans into the Foreign Legion.
39. Ministry of the interior, 25 August 1954. Ministero dell'interno, Direzione generale pubblica sicurezza, Ufficio ordine pubblico (1944–88), categorie permanenti, G-associazioni (1944–86), G-79, Legione straniera (1945–68), b. 130, ACS.
40. Recruitment records, ABALE.
41. Summary of the content of individual dossiers kept in ABALE.
42. Rinauro 2009, 408.

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Dr Mariella Terzoli earned her binational PhD in contemporary history in 2023 at the University of Milan with the Écoles des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. Her research was focused on the Italians who fought in Indochina with the French Foreign Legion (1946–56), from enlistment to the end of their contracts. She subsequently began a one-year postdoc at the University of Rome 'La Sapienza' on the production and circulation of trade guns from Europe to Central Africa in the nineteenth century. She has recently begun a postdoctoral fellowship at the Institut d'Études Avancées in Paris.

Italian summary

La Legione straniera, un corpo dell'esercito francese, sin dalla sua istituzione nel 1831 fu adoperata in prima linea nelle guerre di colonizzazione e decolonizzazione. Il presente contributo ripercorre le origini, lo sviluppo e l'eventuale declino di un dibattito politico italiano nonché di un confronto internazionale relativi al reclutamento e all'impiego di volontari italiani in una forza militare straniera impegnata nella guerra di decolonizzazione francese in Indocina. Attraverso l'analisi di documenti d'archivio e di fonti autobiografiche dei legionari italiani, si intende offrire una nuova prospettiva sull'interazione tra le dinamiche politiche, economiche e socioculturali italiane, l'arruolamento di volontari italiani nella Legione straniera e l'evoluzione delle relazioni italo-francesi nel periodo postbellico.

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