

In December of 2008, the Barga newspaper had an article about the many soldiers from Barga who were lost in the Russian campaign in WW II. Most were with the Alpini divisions which were sent to Russia to fight in the Caucasus Mountains, but the military operations on the Russian front changed during the course of the battle forcing them to the Don River. They were not equipped to fight on the Russian plains against tanks or the harsh Russian winter. 69 soldiers were killed or lost in the fighting which occurred in January 1943. This is a high number of losses for a town of Barga size (10,000 people). Some of these young men would be relatives of our members. Below is list of their names and some of their pictures. I have also included several articles from which Wikipedia give some additional background of the fighting (click on the blue words to get more information)

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Last</u>	<u>First</u>	<u>Father</u>	<u>Div</u>	<u>Regiment</u>	<u>Status</u>	<u>Date</u>
Soldier	Arrighi	Gino	di Ermete	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Serg.M.	Bacci	Giovanni	di Angiolo	4°	Rgt. Art. Alpina	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Bargiacchi	Adamo	di Alfredo	4°Rgt.	Art. Alpina	- Missing	al 3/1/43
Soldier	Bechelli	Giovanni	di Antonio	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Bertoncini	Lino	di Francesco	37°	Rgt. Fanteria	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Biagi	Giannino	di Adolfo	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Biagi	Leo	di Adolfo	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Bilia	Raffaello	di Sabino	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Bonaccorsi	Umberto	di Celestino	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 15/1/43
Soldier	Bonini	Lido	di Luigi	4°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Cacchiata	Mario	di Celestino	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Castelli	Marino	di Silvio	4°	Rgt. Art. Alpina	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Cecchi	Giuliano	di Egidio	3°	Rgt. Savoia Cavalleria	- Missing	al 29/1/43
Soldier	Cheloni	Leonetto	di Beniamino	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Chiappa	Ottavio	di Augusto	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Killed	al 20/1/43
Soldier	Chiavaccini	Pietro	di Emilio	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Da Mocogno	Alberto	di Pietro	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Da Mocogno	Rino	di Giuseppe	54°	Rgt. Fanteria	- Missing	al 25/1/43
Soldier	Da Prato	Rino	di Antonio	4°	Rgt. Art. Alpina	- Killed	al 4/1/43
Soldier	Dante	Alighieri	di Serafino	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Serg.	Fabbri	Achille	di Petronio	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Killed	al 30/4/43
Soldier	Ferrari	Primo	di Rocco	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Serg.M.	Funai	Guido	di Fioravante	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Gasperetti	Francesco	di Natale	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Ghiloni	Bruno	di Adolfo	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Cap.M.	Ghiloni	Felice	di Adolfo	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Giannasi	Bruno	di Cesare	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Giovannini	Antonio	di Pellegrino	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Cap. M	Giovannoli	Luigi	di Giovanni	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Giuliani	Giovanni	di Giocondo	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Gonnella	Pietro	di Angelo	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Griffi	Carlo	di Giulio	4°	Rgt. Art. Alpina	- Missing	al 31/1/43
S. Ten	Lombardini	Franco (Leo)	di Carlo	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Lorenzetti	Amos	di Giovanni	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Killed	al 31/1/43

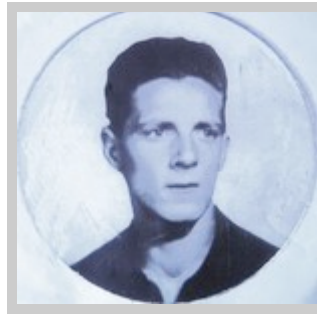
Soldier	Lucchesi	Michele	di Giuseppe	4°	Rgt. Art. Alpina	- Killed	al 31/3/43
Soldier	Lunardi	Amedeo Bruno	di Pietro	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Lunardi	Osvaldo	di Pietro	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Marchetti	Ernesto	di Pietro	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Marchi	Giovanni Giocondo	di Adelmo	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Marchi	Pietro	di Celestino	4°	Rgt. Art. Alpina	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Serg.	Masini	Giordano	di Dino	80°	Rgt. Fanteria	- Missing	al 16/12/42
Soldier	Medici	Pietro	di Orlando	4°	Btg. Misto Genio	- Missing	al 25/1/43
Soldier	Motroni	Marino	di Luigi	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Mazzolini	Dante	di Alfredo	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Morganti	Giovanni	di Antonio	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Morganti	Giuseppe	di Francesco	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Morganti	Pietro	di Francesco	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Nardini	Giorgio	di Umberto	4°	Rgt. Art. Alpina	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Nesi	Settimo	di Pietro	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Nutini	Franco	di Pietro	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Peccioli	Gino	di Carlo	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Pellegrini	Giovanni	di Giuseppe	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Perpoli	Antonio	di Francesco	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Cap.M.	Pellicci	Alfredo	di Nicodemo	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Piacenza	Giovanni	di Battista	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Killed	al 14/12/42
Soldier	Pighini	Michele	di Francesco	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Rinaldi	Renato	di Santino	4°	Rgt. Art. Alpina	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Rinaldi	Venanzio	di Francesco	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Killed	al 31/5/43
Serg.M.	Romagnoli	Sabatino	di Giuseppe	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Cap.M.	Rosticci	Trento	di Giuseppe	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Saltieri	Renato	di Carlo	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Santi	Amerino	di Ezio	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Sichi	Giorgio	di Giovanni	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Stefani	Umberto	di Archimede	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Cap.M.	Terigi	Aladino	di Giuseppe	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Turri	Luigi	di Pietro	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Valdrighi	Emilio	di Francesco	4°	Rgt. Art. Alpina	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Venturelli	Emilio	di Giovanni	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Missing	al 31/1/43
Soldier	Venturelli	Silvio	di Giovanni	2°	Rgt. Alpini	- Killed	al 23/3/43

Photogallery



Giovanni Piacenza





Giuliano Cecchi



Leo Lombardini

Background

In September 1942, the [Alpini](#) divisions [Cuneense](#), [Julia](#) and [Tridentina](#) and other Italian units to the [Soviet Union](#) to form the Mountain Corps of the [Italian Army in Russia](#) (*Armata Italiana in Russia*, or ARMIR) and fight alongside the Germans against the [Red Army](#). Taking up positions along the [Don](#) river the Italian units covered part of the left flank of the [German Sixth Army](#), which spearheaded the German [summer offensive of 1942](#) into the city of [Stalingrad](#).

After the Red Army successfully encircled the German Sixth Army in Stalingrad during [Operation Uranus](#), Soviet attention turned to the Italian and Hungarian units along the Don. On 13 January 1943 the Soviet offensive [Operation Little Saturn](#) began and the three Alpini divisions found themselves quickly encircled by the rapidly advancing armoured forces of Soviet General [Filipp Golikov's Voronezh Front](#).

Prelude

On December 16, 1942, Soviet forces launched [Operation Little Saturn](#) aimed at the Italian 8th Army. The Soviet plan was to force the River [Don](#), encircle and destroy the Italian 8th Army along the Don, then push towards [Rostov on Don](#) and thus cut the [line of communication](#) of [Army Group A](#) fighting in the [Caucasus](#) and the line of communication of [4th Panzer Army](#), which was in the midst of [Operation Wintergewitter](#)—the attempt to relieve [6th Army](#) from encirclement in the city of Stalingrad. on December 16 General [Fyodor Isidorovich Kuznetsov's 1st Guards Army](#) and General [Dmitri Danilovich Lelyushenko's 3rd Guards Army](#) attacked the units of the Italian 8th Army, which were quickly overcome, encircled and crushed—in three days the Soviets had opened a gap in the Axis front 45 km (28 mi) deep and 150 km (93 mi) wide and destroyed two of the Italian Army's Corps (2nd and 35th). The Soviet armored columns now rapidly advanced south towards the [Black Sea](#). Thus 4th Panzer Army was forced to abandon its relief attempt of the 6th Army and fall back to halt the advancing Soviets.

The battle

The Italian 8th Army's [Alpini](#) Corps, consisting of Alpine Divisions [3rd Julia](#), [2nd Tridentina](#) and [4th Cuneense](#) and the 156th *Vicenza* Infantry Division to their rear, were at this point largely unaffected by the Soviet offensive on their right flank. But on January 13, 1943, the Soviets launched the second stage of Operation Saturn. In this stage four armies of Soviet General [Filipp Golikov](#)'s [Voronezh Front](#) attacked, encircled, and destroyed the [Hungarian Second Army](#) near [Svoboda](#) on the Don to the northwest of the Italians, they attacked and pushed back the remaining units of the German 24th Army Corps on the Alpini left flank and then attacked the Alpini themselves. The Alpini held the front, but within three days the Soviets advanced 200 kilometers (120 mi) to the left and right of the Alpini, who were thus encircled.

Although the Alpini corps was ordered to hold the front at all costs, preparations for a general retreat began on January 15. On the evening of January 17, the commanding officer of the corps General [Gabriele Nasci](#) finally ordered the full retreat. At this point the Julia and Cuneense divisions were already heavily decimated and only the Tridentina division was still capable of conducting effective combat operations.

The 40,000-strong mass of stragglers—Alpini and Italians from other commands, plus various Germans and Hungarians—formed two columns that followed the Tridentina division which, supported by a handful of German armoured vehicles, led the way westwards to the new Axis front. The Soviets had already occupied every village and bitter battles were fought by the soldiers of the Tridentina to clear the way. In fifteen days the soldiers covered 200 km on foot, fought twenty-two battles and spent fourteen nights camped in the middle of the Russian [Steppe](#). Temperatures during the night fell between $-30\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ ($-20\text{ }^{\circ}\text{F}$) and $-40\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ ($-40\text{ }^{\circ}\text{F}$).

On the morning of January 26, the spearheads of the Tridentina reached the little hamlet of Nikolayevka, now part of the village of Livenka. A Soviet division occupied it and the surrounding area. The Alpini immediately began their attack as they knew that this was the last Soviet position blocking their way to safety. But the Soviet forces held their ground, and after hours of fighting the Italian units became desperate as each hour increased the risk that Soviet reinforcements could arrive. Although the chief-of-staff of the corps, Brigadier General [Giulio Martinat](#), had already been killed earlier that day while leading an assault of the Edolo battalion, General [Luigi Reverberi](#), commander of the Tridentina division, stepped onto one of the last three [Panzers](#) as the sun began to set and, yelling "Tridentina Forward", led his men personally on the final assault. As the Alpini advanced, all remaining soldiers of the columns fell

A tenacious [urban legend](#) often heard in Italy quotes an alleged Soviet war bulletin as stating that "the only force that can regard itself as undefeated on Russian soil is the Italian Alpini Corps". Unfortunately, nothing similar to this report ever happened.^[1]

Regardless of the urban legend, the Alpini did pay a high price in Russia. The [4 Alpine Division Cuneense](#) was annihilated. Only about one tenth of the [3 Alpine](#) in and the Soviets, facing a [human wave attack](#) by 40,000 men, relented and abandoned the village. The retreat of the Alpini was no longer contested by Soviet forces and on February 1 the remnants of the Corps reached Axis lines.

Division Julia survived (approximately 1200 survivors of 15000 troops deployed) and only about one third of the [2 Alpine Division Tridentina](#) survived (approximately 4250 survivors of 15000 troops deployed).

On 11 February 1943 the count of the survivors gave the following result:

- 1st Alpini Regiment out of 5,206 men: 722 survivors; none of the soldiers of the battalions *Ceva*, *Pieve di Teco* and *Mondovì* survived.
- 2nd Alpini Regiment out of 5,206 men: 208 survivors; none of the soldiers of the battalions *Borgo San Dalmazzo* and *Saluzzo* survived.
- 4th Alpine Artillery Regiment out of 3,897 men: 379 survivors; none of the soldiers of the Artillery Group *Mondovì* survived.
- 4th Mixed Engineer Battalion out of 1240 men: 139 survivors
- Support units out of 1313 men: 159 survivors

In total 1,607 men of the division's total of 17,460 survived Operation Little Saturn.

Overall, about 130,000 Italians had been surrounded by the Soviet offensive. According to Italian sources, about 20,800 soldiers died in the fighting, 64,000 were captured, and 45,000 were able to withdraw.^[4] When the surviving Italian troops were eventually evacuated to Italy, the Fascist regime tried to hide them from the populace, so appalling was their appearance after surviving the "Russian Front."

Aftermath

Since the beginning of the Italian campaign in Russia, about 30,000 Italians had been killed and another 54,000 would [die in captivity](#). By the end of February 1943, the rout of the ARMIR was complete. Mussolini then withdrew what remained of his 8th Army from Russian soil. The Italian forces in Russia had been reduced to less than 150,000 men, and 34,000 of these were wounded. The disaster in Russia was a fierce blow to the power and popularity of the dictator. Both sank as the gloomy news soon reached the public in Italy. Survivors blamed the [Fascist](#) political elite and the army generals. The survivors said they both had acted irresponsibly by sending a poorly prepared, ill-equipped, and inadequately armed military force to the Russian Front. The German commanders were accused of sacrificing the Italian divisions, whose withdrawal was supposedly delayed after the Soviet breakthrough, in order to rescue their own troops.^[5]

Over 60,000 **Italian prisoners of war** were taken captive by the [Red Army](#) in the [Second World War](#). Almost all were captured during the decisive Soviet "[Operation Little Saturn](#)" offensive in December 1942 which annihilated the Italian Army in Russia ([Armata Italiana in Russia \(ARMIR\)](#)). At its height, the ARMIR was about 235,000 strong, and operated between December 1942 and February 1943 in support of the German forces engaged in and around [Stalingrad](#). In

this period the total figure of missing Italian soldiers amounted to 84,830 (Italian Ministry of Defence, 1977a 1977b). According to the Soviet archives, 54,400 Italian [prisoners of war](#) reached the Soviet prisoner camps alive; 44,315 prisoners died in captivity inside the camps, most of them in the winter of 1943. A list of the soldiers' names, in [Cyrillic](#), including date and place of death was yielded by the Russian authorities after 1989 (Italian Ministry of Defence, 1996). 10,085 prisoners were repatriated between 1945 and 1954. The individual fate of 30,430 soldiers, who died during the fighting and the withdrawal or after capture, is less well known. It may be roughly estimated that about 20,000 men lost their lives due to the fighting and 10,000 men died between the moment they became prisoners to that of their registration inside the camps. Hence, it may be concluded that at least 54,000 Italian POWs died in Russia, with a [mortality rate](#) of 84.5% - very high even if compared with the mortality of Russian POWs captured by the Germans during [World War II](#) (1,938,000 survivors from 5,160,000 captured)(Werth, 1964).

The way to the POW camps

Travel to the destination camps in captivity covered hundreds of kilometres and was done mainly on foot. They were reported by survivors as the “davai” marches, (“davai!” is a [Russian](#) expression of urging, in this context meaning “keep moving!”), who were escorted by [Red Army](#) soldiers, and often, [partisans](#) with little mercy for those who fell down frozen or exhausted (Revelli, 1966). The transfer was completed by using goods trains, where many prisoners died as a consequence of the extremely cold temperatures and lack of food.

Camps, treatment of the POWs and causes of death

[Suzdal 160](#), [Tambov](#), [Oranki](#), [Krinovoje](#), [Michurinsk](#), sited in Eastern [European Russia](#), were the camps where most Italian POWs were detained in dismal conditions. Others were known just by their reference numbers, as Lager 58/c and Lager 171 (Italian Ministry of Defence, 1996). [Typhus](#) and starvation related diseases, worsened by the extreme Russian winter climate, were the major causes of mortality inside the camps (Giusti, 2003). Brutality from the Soviet troops and partisans to unarmed prisoners was reported, but survivors testified also to episodes of comradeship among soldiers of the two opposing nations, especially on the front line (Rigoni Stern, 1965) and, compassion from the Russian civilians (Vio, 2004).

Italian prisoners of war in the Soviet Union were subject to plenty of [propaganda](#), which was carried out by Communist cadres of their own nationality, who had fled to the Soviet Union due to fascism (known in Italy as *fuoriusciti*, (“people who left home”)(Zilli, 1950). Despite allurements and threats, most of the prisoners, particularly if not previously compromised by [fascism](#), resisted the propaganda (Giusti, 2000). Prisoners' conditions improved greatly with the spring of 1943, because of Soviet Government concern and enhanced camp administration, sharply decreased numbers of surviving soldiers to care for and increased food availability (mainly provided by the US).

War criminals

Most of the survivors were allowed to return to Italy in 1945-1946. In the same years, a group of Italian officers under detention were accused of [war crimes](#) and sentenced to many years of [forced labour](#). After the death of [Stalin](#) the accusations proved to be false and they were released in 1954 (Reginato, 1965).

The Italians in the Soviet Union had not acted as [occupation troops](#), and atrocities against partisans and civilians were therefore unlikely. Soviets captured by the Italian Expeditionary Corps in Russia (*Corpo di Spedizione Italiano in Russia*, CSIR), which operated from from July 1941 to June 1942, were delivered to the Germans and endured cruel treatment by the Nazis. After the establishment of the ARMIR, Soviet prisoners were kept in Italian custody in reasonable conditions. For instance, Russian POWs were fed with standard [Italian Army](#) rations (Ricchezza, 1978).

Reasons for a forgotten tragedy

The issue of Italian prisoners of war in the Soviet Union remained a hot political topic in post-war [Italy](#). It was never seriously investigated because of the Soviet authorities' unwillingness to yield information about the destiny of the tens of thousands of missing soldiers. Their case was used in an instrumental way by the centre-right parties which accused the Soviet Union of not returning its prisoners of war ([Democrazia Cristiana](#) manifesto, 1948), and denied as anti-communist propaganda by the left (Robotti) during the first democratic elections in Italy (1948). Unbiased information underpinning the size of the tragedy and an objective historical reconstruction came only after the fall of the Soviet Union (Giusti, 2003) when most public interest in Italy had already faded away.