

## **The Resistance in Val Sangone**

In Val Sangone the beginning of the armed conflict with the revived fascism and the German occupation coincided with the arrival of the master sergeant of the Alpine troops Luigi Milano in Avigliana. Right after the armistice of the 8<sup>th</sup> of September 1943, together with a few subordinates, Milano found refuge by his ex-comrade Italo Allais who had fixed up his hotel as a support area for anybody who would choose to actively fight against the oppression. So the first stage of the Valsusa Resistance, characterized afterwards by such exponents as don Franco Foglia and Carlo Carli, came to life in the cellars of a hotel full of explosive devices intended to do acts of sabotage. In this milieu Milano planned to establish his own group in Monterossino a hamlet of Giaveno at the entrance of the deep valley of Maddalena. After a short time his choice was shared by other groups of disbanded soldiers and young valley-dwellers. Giulio and Franco Nicoletta, second lieutenant of infantry and non-commissioned officer of Guardia di Finanza respectively, rose to an important rank in the group of Bruino; Nino and Franco Criscuolo, Carlo Asteggiano e Sergio De Vitis, all of them second lieutenants of Infantry, in the group of Prese di Piossasco and Sangano and Eugenio (Genio) Fassino from Avigliana in the group of Colle Braida. Due to the pressing need to get in a supply of weapons, these first partisan groups started military actions in Sangano, Orbassano, Avigliana and Rivalta. These actions very soon allarmed the Nazi-Fascists that, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September, proceeded to search the valley; advancing an excuse of some acts of hostility against the garrison of SS in Giaveno, an armoured unit headed from Coazze to Forno and Indiritto, situated in the high valleys of the torrent Sangone and of the stream Sangonetto respectively. Fassino, too, joined the group led by Milano that up to then numbered about sixty units spread around the small villages Molè, Ciargiur, Palè and Dogheria. The group escaped uninjured from the action but unfortunately there were two victims among the inhabitants. Towards the middle of October, due to the concentration of the groups from Forno and Indiritto as well as to the flood of young people coming from Avigliana, Buttigliera Alta, Reano and Grugliasco, the unit led by Milano could number about two hundred men, able to get into actions finalized, as previously, to lay in supplies of weapons, food and clothing, usually in the territory of Avigliana, Orbassano and Beinasco. However on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, Milano himself was arrested by the Germans, probably informed by a spy, just in the hotel in Avigliana where a meeting between partisans and supporters to the Resistance was due to take place. Even if there were no immediate repercussions on the groups who were led by prominent men such as the Nicolettas, Nino Criscuolo, Asteggiano, De Vitis and Fassino, the arrest of Milano emphasized the lack of a charismatic figure able to coordinate. In the middle of October Torchio (Verde) was expressly sent to the valley by the military Headquarter of Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale (CLN) in Piedmont but he was not able to find a solution to this situation; as a consequence on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October a nazi-fascist combing out occurred, even if it had been thwarted by the alarm given by the valley-dwellers; this action was only able to destroy the fraction Ciarguir, but unfortunately it could not be faced. The partisan forces, although halved in the numbers, were able to reassemble near the small village of Prese Tessa under the pass of Termine only at the beginning of December, and as a consequence they decided to structure better their presence on the territory; the group formed by Criscuolo, Asteggiano and Fassino deployed in the high valley of the torrent Romurolo, between the small villages of Moncalardo and Verna of Giaveno; De Vitis's one settled upriver of Forno di Coazze and the group of the Nicolettas brothers

drew up under the hill Bione between the small villages of Mattonera and Pianiermo di Coazze. In the first months of 1944, these groups were enforced by young men refusing the military service of Repubblica Sociale Italiana, coming from Cumiana, Piovascote, Frossasco, Orbassano, Beinasco, Grugliasco, Volvera, Avigliana, Buttigliera and Reano, as well as university students from Torino, Russian soldiers, Czechoslovakian deserters of SS and officers of the former royal army, such as Cordero di Pamparato (Campana), Federico (Frico) and Antonio Tallarico. Around the middle of April, they could count on about a thousand men and go into action in the urban centres of the plain and the low Val di Susa; these actions earned a considerable quantity of weapons, ammunitions and explosives, besides the capture of several enemies. Since March, the absence of nazi-fascist garrisons had made Val Sangone a “free zone”, and it was up to the Resistance to rule the territory, even if in an elementary way. Acting along with CLN of Giaveno that grouped civilian anti-fascists, and in cooperation with the local parsons, these groups regulated the food supply for the population, guaranteed public order and laid out a first-aid station for the injured people in the local hospital. The scarce cohesion among the partisans was perceived by Nicoletta, who, at the end of March, suggested the creation of a single military command, but no one agreed with him. Unfortunately the failure of this attempt had soon dramatic consequences. On the 30<sup>rd</sup> of March about one hundred Italian SS combed the area of Cumiana and imprisoned about seventy civilians, most of which would have been deported. On the night between the 31<sup>st</sup> of March and the 1<sup>st</sup> of April, about sixty men from of the groups of Criscuolo, Asteggiano, Nicoletta and DeVitis attacked the SS and captured 34 soldiers; but the next morning enemy reinforcements took other 150 civilians hostage, menacing to execute them if the SS prisoners would not have been released. In the afternoon of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April, while the partisan commanders were consulting at Forno of Coazze, 51 inhabitants were executed and only two days later the exchange to free the civilians imprisoned by the Germans could be possible. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of May, more than three thousand German soldiers, Italian SS and fascist soldiers started to comb the val Sangone, with an initiative that had somehow been foreshadowed by similar operations led in the valleys of Cuneo and Val Chisone. The so-called Habicht operation, that caught the partisans off guard, had been conceived as a radial manoeuvre with actions starting from Orbassano to the deep valley of Maddalena, from Avigliana to Giaveno e Coazze, from the low valley of Susa through Col Bione to the deep valley of Sangonetto and from Val Chisone up to the pass La Roussa and the high valley of Sangone. In the deep valley of Maddalena, the band of Criscuolo and Astegiano was forced to make a retreat to the hills of Asino and Bes; in the high valley of Sangone, the groups of De Vitis and Nicoletta were able by chance to elude the encirclements at Palazzina Sertorio and the pasture of Sellery, and to retire to the coast of Pagliaio; in the deep valley of Sangonetto the group of Fassino shared the same destiny, passing through the middle Val di Susa. The combing out had as a result the death of about one hundred partisans, 24 of which were left dying in a common grave at Forno in Coazze for several days; besides 18 civilians were killed and about fifty were deported; in the Coazzease, Forno and the small village of Fera were destroyed by fires as well as the small villages of Pometto, Balangero, Prese Viretto in the Giavenese. The day after the combing, the killing of the German Officers by the men of Fassino, near the hill Braida, started a new series of retaliations. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May, the nazi-fascists held 300 inhabitants of Giaveno hostage and led them to the place of the ambush menacing to kill them, but at the end all of them, except two who were shot, were released. Two days later, an expedition against, the Selvaggio of Coazze caused the execution of a civilian, the arrest of about fifty people and the deportation of some of them, besides a fire of 32 houses.