

DISPLACEMENT DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

6.1 | Displacement and bombing

During the Second World War, the Republic of San Marino, while maintaining a position of **neutrality**, became a destination for large number of people seeking refuge (**displacement**) from air raids and advancing armies.

The conflict forced many Italians **to leave the cities** and relocate to **suburban or rural areas**, and in this context displaced persons also began to arrive in San Marino.

The influx of people in need of shelter, food and other basic necessities generated a **wartime economy** that contributed to the **subsistence** of San Marino's population, which was almost entirely deprived of the possibility of continuing its usual economic activities, largely agricultural.

Italy's entry into the war in 1940 prompted **the return** of Sammarinese emigrants from the Italian peninsula. Their number increased after **October 1942**, when intense bombing raids began to strike the northern Italian cities that had been the main destinations of Sammarinese migration – Milan, Genoa, Turin, and Bologna.

Young Sammarinese **women** – often with small **children** – married to Italian citizens enlisted in the army also returned to their families. They were registered as **foreign citizens**, since at that time Sammarinese legislation stipulated that women who **married Italians**

Displacement and war economy

LEXICON

Displacement refers to the act of removing or evacuating people from a given location as a preventive safety measure.

The return of emigrants

> Chapter 9, *Emigration between the 19th and 20th centuries*



Fig. 1
Families of refugees
arriving in San Marino
by horse-drawn wagons.

or other foreigners lost their original citizenship and acquired that of their husbands. Other emigrants were compelled to return **from France** after its occupation by German forces in May 1940.

The arrival of Italian refugees

Requests for the relocation of **Italian civilians** to San Marino intensified after **October 1942**. Sammarinese authorities sought to provide adequate **housing**, and in October 1943 the government allocated funds to restore dwellings designated for displaced persons.

> Fig. 1

On **1 November 1943** the **bombing of Rimini** began, prompting many to seek refuge in the inland municipalities of Valmarecchia and in San Marino. Displacement affected both **Rimini's inhabitants** and the **thousands already evacuated there from other bombed Italian regions** and housed in hotels and facilities along the Adriatic coast. The flow into San Marino increased further when **Pesaro** was bombed and repeated German orders forced the evacuation of large stretches of the Adriatic near the Gothic Line.

The protection agreement

Italian displaced persons were guaranteed food distribution through an **agreement between the Sammarinese government and authorities of neighboring provinces**. The population of San Marino was called upon to provide “houses, apartments, rooms and spaces in

general,” at a price set by the government “to give the displaced the **protection** they are due” and to prevent “unjust and selfish claims by anyone, in open contrast with the Republic’s **tradition of hospitality**.” Sammarinese and refugees shared the hardships of war – exposure to military operations, anxiety from air raids, precarious shelters, and shortages of food and clothing.

By **January 1944**, as the Consul of Italy in San Marino wrote to the Italian Ministry of the Interior, “thousands and thousands of displaced people” had arrived in the Republic, “whose population has now **grown beyond all measure**”.

The numbers continued to grow throughout **1944**, reaching their peak in **the summer**, when combat intensified along the sector of the **Gothic Line** crossing the provinces of **Pesaro-Urbino** and **Forlì**. Thousands of refugees crossed the borders of San Marino, hoping to find shelter, however precarious.

During these months San Marino itself became a battlefield between the opposing armies and suffered several **bombings**. The first and most devastating occurred on **26 June 1944**, striking part of the *Castello di Città* – particularly the railway station and the historic centre – and Borgo Maggiore, causing more than sixty deaths among both Sammarinese citizens and Italian displaced persons.

The **newspaper** *La Stampa*, on 28 June 1944, reported: “Anglo-American aircraft have heavily bombed the small Republic of San Marino, causing numerous casualties among the civilian population and significant damage to buildings. The raid on the very ancient Republic – 1643 years old – which has repeatedly reaffirmed its neutrality in the present conflict, is without justification, since the turreted summit of the capital can be easily identified even in severe weather. The indiscriminate bombing of San Marino is all the more serious as women and children who had fled from **half-destroyed Rimini** to the hills of the Republic were struck, and buildings sheltering the sick and wounded were badly damaged and razed to the ground.”

A report dated 30 **September 1944** described the **emergency situation** in these terms: “On 4 September, thousands of Italian citizens began flowing into our territory, particularly from the valleys

The high point:
summer 1944

An extreme
emergency situation

of Conca and Marecchia. **Bread production** was immediately increased to the limit of capacity and, in close cooperation with the Transport Commissioner, food was distributed to fugitives in every part of the Republic. **New offices** and **stores** for distributing bread and other foodstuffs were opened. Some **mills** powered by electricity were fitted with **internal combustion engines** in order to compensate for the lack of electrical power and continue grinding at all costs. While about 9,000 daily rations of bread were distributed in the Republic up to 3 September, from the 4th the quantity – uniformly reduced for everyone, Sammarinese and displaced persons – to 100 grams, rose dramatically, reaching 70,000 between 11 and 21 September. Between 18 and 20 September the ration was reduced to 50 grams.” The displaced population vastly exceeded that of San Marino itself, which counted around 10,000 inhabitants. > Fig. 2

6.2 | A haven in the Republic

Tunnels:
places of refuge

> Chapter 3, *The 20th century and the present time*

The tunnels of the **Rimini-San Marino railway**, whose service had been interrupted by bombing, became the most suitable places to shelter displaced civilians. Francesco Balsimelli (1894-1974), a politician appointed to the Council of State following the dissolution of the Fascist Council and *Capitano reggente* from 1 April to 30 September 1944, described the reception the Republic of San Marino offered to those fleeing the violence of war: “Thousands and thousands of people had settled in tragic tunnels. At night they slept on makeshift **beds lined along the rails** as if in an endless corridor; by day they went out to the **exits** where, especially in the tunnels of Borgo, Santa Maria and Serravalle, farmers had gathered their animals. The Tunnel Commissioner had set up **provisional kitchens** with huge stoves, where the poor turned up, as in a prisoner-of-war camp, with bowls, tins, containers of every kind, to receive their ration of soup after purchasing a voucher costing six lire; however, the soup was never denied even to those who did not have six lire.”

Reports on crowding

Balsimelli cited several **reports** quantifying the extreme overcrowding inside the tunnels: “**Gallery 1 (Città)** housed around 500 displaced persons from outside the Republic, entire families with many

**Fig. 2**

A woman prepares food outdoors near a precarious shelter.

women and children. On 14 September a report from the Commissioner of the **Valdragone tunnel** stated that over a length of 850 metres 3,000 people had been admitted, two-thirds of them foreigners, and noted a serious lack of air circulation. In **Serravalle** the tunnels had become an impossible accommodation due to overcrowding, water infiltration and an unexpected seasonal heatwave. A crowd of thousands gathered at the entrances to breathe, surging back in terrifying waves after each near shell explosion. Two children were killed during the **rush on 6 September**. [...] At 10 a.m. on 12 September a retreating German command blew up the power plant. [...] Meanwhile, to increase the hardship, more refugees from the most devastated areas knocked at our doors [...] piled together in the most harrowing ways along with livestock and pets. They were the last-minute refugees, in the rain and mud.”

The tunnels proved insufficient to contain all those seeking protection, and **emergency shelters** were established under the porticoes of public squares, in churches, in the cemetery of Montalbo, within the towers of the city walls, in convents, in the courthouse, in the bishop’s apartment located in the monastery of the Poor Clares,

Emergency shelters

and at the Belluzzi Boarding School. Many were forced to remain in the open, in **makeshift tents**, without shelter from cold and rain.

> **Fig. 3**

Refugees from Rimini

Among the many refugees from Rimini were the journalist and writer **Sergio Zavoli** (1923-2020), the parents and sister of film director Federico Fellini, and the engineer **Alberto Marvelli** (1918-1946), who collaborated with the Sammarinese authorities to respond to the needs of displaced persons and the wider population.

Relocation of institutions

Several institutions also found refuge in the Republic. The **Municipality of Rimini** established temporary headquarters in Borgo Maggiore with an office dedicated to displaced persons. Doctors and residents of **the Hospital of San Fortunato** in Covignano di Rimini were evacuated to San Marino and transferred to the Hospital of Mercy and the women's orphanage.

Two banks transferred their activities to San Marino: **Credito Italiano**, which relocated to Dogana, and the **Bank of Italy**, which

Fig. 3

Settlement of refugees along the Marano river.



from 2 March to 19 November 1944 operated from temporary premises in the historic centre.

During the period of racial persecution in Europe, San Marino provided protection to many **Jewish citizens** coming from Rimini, Milan, Modena, Ancona and other Italian cities, as well as from Austria and elsewhere on the continent. They were sheltered in private homes, convents and at the Belluzzi Boarding School. No episodes of anti-Semitism occurred, nor were there denunciations of their presence to the Italian Fascist authorities, despite numerous raids into Sammarinese territory.

Racial persecution

After the liberation of Rimini on 21 September 1944, **displaced people gradually began to return to Italian territory**, although it was not until the end of the war in 1945 that most refugees left the Republic.

Return to normality