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Via Fabio Severo 40, Trieste

SEMINAR

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War on Civilians: Second World War, total war and the Italian experience (1940-45)

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This talk examines the Second World War as a global turning point in the practice of warfare—one in which the distinction between battlefield and civilian space was increasingly eroded by strategy, technology, and systems of rule. Across multiple theatres, military advantage came to depend not only on defeating enemy forces but on controlling societies: striking cities and infrastructures from the air, regulating movement through evacuation and displacement, extracting labour, weaponising scarcity, and governing populations through occupation, policing, and coercion. In this sense, civilians were not simply “collateral”: they became integral to how the war was fought.

Rather than offering a single national story, the lecture traces recurring wartime logics that connected different contexts while producing sharply uneven experiences. Italy provides a guiding thread as one revealing case within broader patterns. Similar dynamics can be observed in occupied and contested territories elsewhere: the fusion of military and police powers, reprisals and counter-insurgency practices, deportations and forced labour, as well as the centrality of urban space, supply systems, and infrastructure to the conduct of war.

The war’s trajectory culminated in forms of destruction that made the civilian city not just vulnerable but decisive: the area bombing of urban centres and, in 1945, the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which condensed into a single moment the long wartime drift toward treating civilian space as a strategic object. The talk concludes by reflecting on what this transformation left behind after 1945: contested accountability, uneven recognition, and enduring debates over rights, responsibility, and the protection of civilians in the modern world.