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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/rga/7272>

DOI: 10.4000/rga.7272

ISSN: 1760-7426

Translation(s):

Verso una storia dei fuggitivi in montagna.

“Migranti” e genealogie del soccorso alpino

e delle lotte - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/rga/7302> [it]

Publisher:

UGA Éditions/Université Grenoble Alpes, Association pour la diffusion de la recherche alpine

Electronic reference

Martina Tazzioli, “Towards a History of Mountain Runaways
“Migrants” and the Genealogies of Mountain Rescue and Struggles”, *Journal of Alpine Research | Revue
de géographie alpine* [Online], 108-2 | 2020, Online since 13 October 2020, connection on 06 March
2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/rga/7272> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/rga.7272>

This text was automatically generated on March 6, 2024.



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Towards a History of Mountain Runaways “Migrants” and the Genealogies of Mountain Rescue and Struggles

Martina Tazzioli

- 1 In 1947, Egisto Corradi a journalist from the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, joined a group of people who were trying to cross to France “illegally”, by hiking on the Alps. The first of the four articles he published was entitled “I leave on foot towards St. Bernard mountain together with clandestine emigrants” (*Corriere della Sera*, 1947). The “clandestine emigrants” he talked about were Italian workers without documents valid to expatriate: the four episodes published in *Il Corriere della Sera* focused on migrants’ passages, on their arrival in France and on their decisions to return to Italy and aimed at showing the conditions of the Italian “migrants”¹ who crossed to France hiking mountains. Today, French authorities patrol the borders to spot and push-back non-European citizens who, due to states’ laws and policies, had been turned into illegalised migrants (Anafe, 2019). This is particularly the case since France’s decision to suspend Schengen in May 2015 and the enforcement of the anti-terrorism law in 2017². The Alpine passage, as a crossing point that connects many European countries, has turned out to be a dangerous and risky border for the migrants in transit: the Swiss-Italian, Austrian-Italian and French-Italian borders are by now part of the geographical imagination of those migrants who land in Italy and who want to make it to the other side of the Alps. The exponential increase of border enforcement and the daily men-hunt (Bachelier, 2019; Chamayou, 2012) carried on by the police, have rendered the Alpine passage a risky route and a violent frontier (Del Biaggio, Heller, 2017). The Alpine migrant route being characterised by uneven spaces and is regulated by heterogeneous policing measures, it is more appropriate to speak of Alpine borders and passages at plural. In order to cross to France from Italy, since the late 2016 many migrants have rerouted their journeys to the Alps, in particular in the provinces of Turin and, to a lesser extent, of Cuneo, due to the increasing of systematic push-back

operations, police patrolling and violence along the French-Italian coast –between Ventimiglia and Menton.

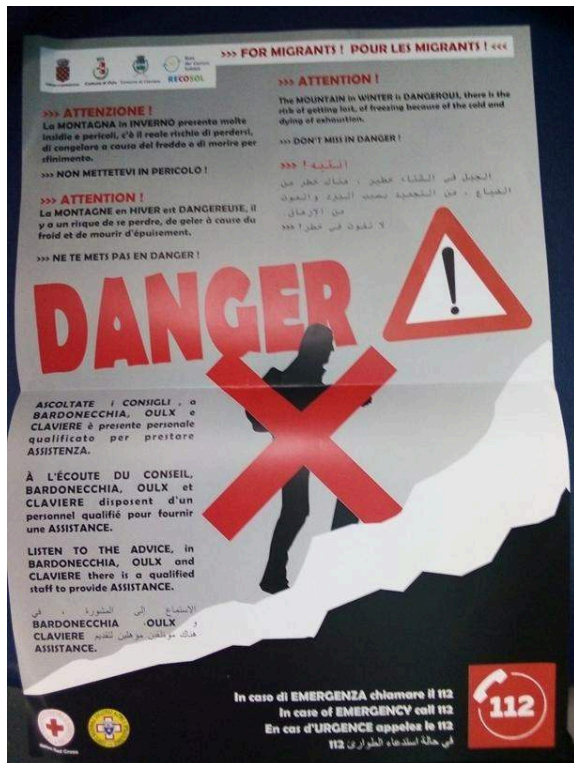
- 2 This paper analyses the Alpine migrant passages through a “global history of runaways” (Rediker *et al.* 2019) and deals with the fleeting migrant presence at the border from the standpoint of mountain rescue and solidarity practices enacted there. It does not take solidarity practices for granted; rather, as Mezzadra suggested, “as a stake, as an outcome of a struggle that involves heterogenous subjects, histories, imaginaries and experiences” (Mezzadra, 2020). The analytical lens of a global history of runaways chosen enables us reading the present migrant passages and the widespread mobilisations in support of the migrants in light of the political legacy and memory of struggles and rescue operations towards foreigners that shaped those Valleys. I use the term “runaway” here to encompass different practices of mobility overall “linked to ideas of improving one’s life by regaining some measures of control over the body, labour and subsistence” (Lucassen, Heerma van Voss, 2019: 5)³.
- 3 By retracing a “global history of runaways”, Rediker and colleagues have highlighted the centrality of struggles over mobility and, at once, of mobility as tactics of flight and resistance against modes of coercions and exploitation (Rediker *et al.* 2019; Rediker, 2020). Although the fugitives they refer to in the book were slaved workers, sailors and convicted labourers that absconded or escaped from plantations and, more broadly, coerced labour, a history of runaways can be mobilised, I suggest, as a heuristic lens for reading migrant crossing on the Alps.
- 4 In fact, the transformation of Alpine passages into a border for migrants is not a recent history. The fleeting presence on the Alps of illegalised migrants who try to cross from Italy to northern Europe should be rather situated within a longstanding history of “illegalised” passages, labour migration and cross-border mobility. The rugged mountain environment has never been a deterrence factor for runaways; on the contrary, the Alpine crossing points have always been much less regimented with respect to other frontiers. In this regard, Hanus argues that “before the enforcement of the Schengen treaty”, the French Alpine city of Modane “was a main fulcrum of migration movements” and the French-Italian border-zone was a crucial territory of migrant crossing, going from the Alps to the coast (Hanus, 2012). The Alpine border-zone has been characterised by a series of devices of control, bilateral police agreements, smuggling activities, and tactics of flight. These “illegal” passages have been partially recorded and archived by local French and Italian authorities.
- 5 A genealogy of mountain rescue and an account of the past struggles for movement enables de-exceptionalising the presence and passage of migrants today at the Alpine border and, relatedly, it allows tracing a continuity between solidarity practices over history that remains partially hidden due either to their precarious and temporary existence, or because there are no official archives of these struggles. To what extent is the sedimented memory of struggles and solidarity practices reactivated in the current *mobile infrastructures of migrant solidarity*? Mobile infrastructures of solidarity are not limited to temporary shelters: counter-mapping activities⁴, for warning migrants about dangers and unsafe passages or for explaining how to send SOS and being located by rescuers. Indeed, mountain rescue practices are broader than saving injured or lost migrants: they might also involve sharing geographical and topographical knowledge with the migrants as well as equipping them with adequate clothes (Nunatak, 2018).

- 6 The paper starts with a section on mobile infrastructures of solidarity deployed at the French-Italian Alpine border, retracing briefly its history as well as the one of the sedimented memory of the struggles in the Susa Valley. It moves on with a section on the history of mountain rescue at the French-Alpine border, showing how foreigners and also Italian “clandestine emigrants” were rescued. It concludes by advancing a history of mountain runaways as an analytical framework to politicise migrants’ passages on the Alps.
- 7 Methodologically this research builds on semi-structured interviews I conducted at the Northern Alpine French-Italian border between 2017 and 2020 with local activists, NGOs and state authorities. As part of this research I also got access to the archive of Soccorso Alpino in Bardonecchia and I have collected testimonies from both French citizens and from Italians who in the past volunteered in Soccorso Alpino in the Susa Valley and rescued migrants⁵.

Struggles and migrants’ passages shape the valleys

- 8 The presence and passage of the migrants at the Alpine frontier is fleeting and, in comparison with other frontiers –such as the coastal crossing point in Ventimiglia– it remains partially invisible. In fact, the “border spectacle” (De Genova, 2013) has not been staged along the French-Italian frontier, and the spotlight of the media was switched on only when migrants were found dead in the snow or when the far-right group *Génération identitaire* symbolically closed the border in April 2018. This partial obfuscation of migrants’ presence ultimately contributes, together with the uneven modes of control and the geography of the territory, to render the border relatively porous (Tazzioli, 2020). (Tazzioli, 2020).
- 9 Rail station of Bardonecchia, October 22, 2019: There is still no snow and the small rail station is extremely quiet in the period in between the summer and winter touristic seasons. All material traces of migrants’ passages have been taken off: the signposts that in winter alert migrants about the dangers they might face are no longer there. Local volunteers will put these on again as soon as the snow will fall and temperatures considerably go down.

Picture 1 : A signpost that in winter alert migrants about the dangers they might face



- 10 Unlike other crossing point across Europe where there might significant changes from one year to another, at the Alpine passages there are relevant seasonal differences. The coordinator of the Italian Red Cross in the city of Susa confirmed to me for the French-Italian border:
- “Seasonal changes make a considerable difference: in summer we barely spot migrants, as they just transit and do not need hospitality; while in winter crossing might be very risky, so we need to activate infrastructures of support.”⁶
- 11 Thus, on the Alps struggles for movement and the governing of migration is shaped by seasonal variations. In fact, both border controls and migrants’ strategies of crossing adapt to the changing mountain environmental conditions in winter and summer. In the Susa Valley, “migrants’ passages and the way in which we enact border control is very much attuned to the weather conditions”, as a police officer succinctly put it⁷. On the Italian side of the border, the visibility of migrants’ presence also depends on the local “viapolitics of migration” (Walters, 2015): the arrival and departures of the regional trains from the rail stations of Oulx and Bardonecchia, the buses to Clavière and the mobile logistics of humanitarianism determine to a large extent when the “migrant scene” is repeatedly staged during the day, for few minutes –in Bardonecchia, Oulx and Clavière. Every day, in late afternoon or with the last train from Turin which arrives at 10.38 pm, in Bardonecchia where migrants stop for a while in front of the small rail station, which closes at night to prevent migrants from sleeping inside. As I observed, some of the migrants who catch the train stop few kilometers before Bardonecchia, in the city of Oulx, and from there they reach by bus the Italian village of Clavière (1850 meters above the sea level) situated only 2 km from France.
- 12 However, migrants did not suddenly show up in the Alps in 2017, nor did the infrastructures of solidarity deployed to support them. Actually, migrant passages have

shaped the political geography of the territory: both French and Italian authorities have progressively transformed it into a “hostile environment” (Fekete, 2020) where border controls have been enforced and readapted over time in response to migration movements. The French-Italian Alpine border has been a site of struggles for social justice that have *de facto* historically shaped the territory and that have sedimented as a shared collective memory. This is particularly the case in the Susa Valley: during the World War II, it had been a space of refuge for anti-fascists and a crossing point to flee to France; in the 1970s it became a site of resistance against the building of highway infrastructures (Camanni, 2016), and since the 1990s it has been the epicentre of the “NoTAV movement”, which fights against the construction of the high speed railway connecting Italy and France (Chiarelli, 2015; Pellegrini, 2014; Tazzioli, Walters, 2019). Thus, as volunteers who support migrants in transit in the Susa Valley stress “one of the main drives of the present mobilisations in support of migrants have been definitively our current and previous engagement in struggles for social justice”⁸. That is, the transmission of the political memory of struggles in the valley has informed in part the present unfolding of mobile infrastructures of solidarity.

- 13 In fact, the passage and temporary presence of migrants along the Alpine route has notably a longstanding history that, as citizens from Bardonecchia and Oulx stressed, is part of the collective heritage of the Susa valley. As shown by Germa in the movie *The Path of Hope (Il Cammino della speranza, 1950)* many Italians were trying to cross “illegally”, as long as they did not have a passport nor a job contract in France (Rinauro, 2009; see also Acher, 1955). Indeed, multiple restrictions to Italian emigrations were enforced by the Italian government under Mussolini, in particular since 1926 and then with the 1930 law which aimed at hampering the flight of anti-fascists (Rinauro, 2009). During World War II, these restrictions further increased on both sides: in the aftermath of the war Italy and France signed few agreements between 1945 and 1948 to regulate labour mobility in France through the National Office of Immigration (see for instance Atti Parlamentari, 1947).
- 14 And yet, given the small numbers of work-based permits for Italian citizens that the French government approved, many Italian workers crossed “illegally”, from Bardonecchia to Modane with the help of locals who knew the path mountain guides, in many cases after buying jobs contracts from French employers who came to Italy and sold them outside the established quota and the official channels. Many of them were miners employed on the sly by French entrepreneurs in the Ventimiglia in Italy (Rinauro, 2009). As reported by Rinauro in his seminal book on the history of Italian emigration, the illegalisation of many Italian workers meant that many were pushed back at the border⁹. Despite the multiple push-backs, “illegal emigration” was not only partly tolerated, since France was in need of cheap labour force; actually, French entrepreneurs preferred to hire “illegal migrants” in order to select in person the most skilled or suitable people instead of employing workers through the official French-Italian agreements (Rinauro, 2009: 274-275).
- 15 Therefore, the mountain crossing has a longstanding history of “clandestine passages” –of workers and political refugees– and also of activities to facilitate the crossing and, as revealed by the archive in Bardonecchia, of rescue practices¹⁰.

Rescuing “migrants” and runaways on the Alps

- 16 Mountain rescue practices have recently gained the spotlight, due to the many episodes in some Alpine valleys of locals and volunteers who saved migrants who got lost in the snow or who were about to die of hypothermia. Between 2018 and 2019 five migrants had been found dead at the Northern French-Italian Alpine border¹¹. On the Italian side, people who get lost or injured on the mountains are rescued either by the *Guardia di Finanza* police corps or by volunteers from *Soccorso Alpino*. This was the case also in the past.
- 17 The archive of the Alpine Rescue (*Soccorso Alpino*) of Bardonecchia shows that, in the aftermath of WWII, some Italians were turned into migrants due to restrictive laws that “migrantised” some citizens (Anderson, 2019)¹². Second, they highlight that, in particular since the 1970s, among the persons rescued there were quite few foreigners⁹. This means that, as I briefly explained in the previous section, Bardonecchia and the Susa Valley have been key crossing points to France over the centuries.
- 18 Doing research in the archive of *Soccorso Alpino* in Bardonecchia I could retrace foreigners and Italians who, after WWII, had been rescued on those mountains¹³:
- June 29, 1956: “In the attempt to expatriate to France the people we rescued, of Italian nationality, ended up in danger”;
 - September 2 and September 12, 1956: “We rescued an Italian citizen who was trying to reach the French city of Modane”;
 - March 24, 1974: “A person of foreign nationality has been rescued today - he is without documents, and he is likely to be a Moroccan citizen”;
 - February 2, 1982, “Three persons of Yugoslavian nationality, who were not well equipped, had been rescued while they were trying to expatriate in a clandestine way”;
 - March 8, 2003: “Search and rescue intervention was conducted to find non-European citizens who got lost while they were trying to cross in a clandestine way”;
 - June 6, 2003: “Four Rumanian citizens have been saved while they were trying to enter France illegally and they found themselves in danger”;
 - April 1, 2009: “A Moroccan national, without regular documents, was found in danger and rescued in the attempt to cross to France”.
- 19 Most recently, interventions to rescue migrants had been quite rife due to the increased migrants’ crossing in the region. Actually, the archive of *Soccorso Alpino* in Bardonecchia does not provide an overwhelming picture of the rescue operations which took place in the Susa Valley. In fact, as I realised during my research fieldwork, in other sections of *Soccorso Alpino* (Susa and Cesana) there are no records of rescue operations taking place between the Fifties and the Nineties. It is therefore rather a partial history of migrants being rescued or found dead. More precisely, no trace is left of many migrants who might have died or had been injured on the Alps but that nobody spotted. The constitutive “piecemeal partiality” (Stoler, 2010: 43) depends on migrants’ elusive and sometimes invisible presences, and at the same time in the partial disregard from the state’s gaze to monitor and record those passages. Ultimately, “migrants” from the past are part of *Soccorso Alpino*’s archives only as injured runaways in danger. Those lives remain unknown “until the blank gaze of power come to rest” (Foucault, 2000: 169) on them; or better, in this case it is only

through the encounter between rescuers and the injured runaways that the presence of the latter could have been recorded.

- 20 *Soccorso Alpino* and *Guardia di Finanza* have two distinct archives and use to store or not information about people rescued on the mountains. As a marshal from *Guardia di Finanza* who coordinates rescue operations in Bardonecchia told me: “We did not keep any specific record of the foreigners that we rescued before 2016,”¹⁴ since before that year the transit of migrants was much less relevant in numbers. That is, they do not have any record from the post-war until 2016 about migrants rescued on the mountains. From January 2017 to September 2019, *Guardia di Finanza* registered 32 migrants rescue operations conducted on the Italian side of the border, between Bardonecchia and Clavière¹⁵. The Italian police did not keep records about migrants’ passages which took place decades ago: “We might have some scattered information, about specific cases, when also drug trafficking activity was involved, but in the past, we did not keep track of the migrants we spotted at the border”¹⁶. Today, the Italian police keeps record (only) of migrants¹⁷ pushed back by the French. The Red Cross based in Susa also monitors and keeps record both of the number of migrants pushed back to Italy and of those who are spotted in the city of Oulx and Bardonecchia by local NGOs (Croce Rossa, 2020). Thus, unlike the police, the Red Cross counts numbers of passages, and not persons¹⁸.
- 21 Thus, archival research needs to be complemented with oral history; with testimonies of people who, in the past, rescued migrants on the Alps. M., who volunteered as a doctor in *Soccorso Alpino* in the Susa Valley reported to me:
- “I remember that, as a rescue team, we ended up in saving many foreigners : in the 1980s and in the 1990s they were almost all from Eastern Europe and from former Yugoslavia, while in the early 2000s we started seeing people from the Maghreb region. In particular, I remember a rescue intervention we did in January 1994 in the Rochemolles Valley –close to Bardonecchia– where many migrants tried to cross at that time : we found and saved a Polish man who was entrapped in the snow, close to Refuge Scarfiotti ; he was dressed with Clarks shoes and he was totally unequipped to cross the Alps in winter time. Later in the year we also saved three Albanians, in the same area ; they were a bit dodgy, probably drug smugglers, who knows”.
- 22 P., coordinator of *Soccorso Alpino* in Bardonecchia in the 1970s recalls the few Turkish and citizens of former Yugoslavia they rescued in the snow in the mid 1970s:
- “Probably many more crossed to France in summer, but we do not have trace of those who just passed and were not found dead or in danger by us”.
- 23 This selection of archival records and oral testimonies shows that the practice of mountain rescue is characterised by a quite longstanding history of interventions for saving foreigners and, before that, illegalised Italians. This helps, first, to rethink practices of rescue beyond the space of the sea, situating them within a broader geography of rescue and solidarity that goes beyond state-led search and rescue operations. In fact, sea rescue has gained centre stage in migration studies scholarship as well as in the media, and rescue practices are associated, at the level of images and discourses, to migrant drowning in the Mediterranean. Instead, I suggest, it is important to trace connections between rescue practices that have historically taken place in highly different environment, that is between migrants rescued on the mountains and migrants rescued at sea.

- 24 How are the migrants who are rescued on the mountains labelled? As noticed above, *Guardia di Finanza* uses the generic term “migrant” for all undocumented foreigners rescued, while *Soccorso Alpino* recorded them as “foreigners” or by mentioning their nationality. Actually, it is noteworthy that the expressions “clandestine flight” or “clandestine expatriation” had been used for different people by the rescuers over time and also to refer to Italian citizens who in the aftermath of WWII crossed to France without authorisation.
- 25 In France, until 1958 mountain rescue was conducted by the volunteers of the French Alpine Club (CAF); after that date, it became a state activity --done by the specialised police corps of CRS, Gendarmerie and by the Firefighters. However, nowadays like in the past, citizens rescue migrants in distress on the Alps, since, as S., a volunteer of the NGO *Tous Migrants* in Briançon, explains, “we cannot accept that people die on the mountain; even one single death is too much”¹⁹. Therefore, when people from Briançon and from the close villages of Névache, La Vachette and Le Roisier encountered extenuated or injured migrants coming from Col de l’Échelle or from Clavière in winter 2017, they decided to mobilise.
- 26 As the sociologist René Siestrunck retraced:
- “In 1989 I met three Romanians who crossed from Italy on the sly and got lost in the snow near the village of Névache. I took them to my place for the night, they wanted to reach Lyon. Migrants who crossed at that time, were white, so in many cases nobody noticed them. Instead, in winter 2017 we started to see people from Western African countries ; few of them knocked at the door of some houses in Briançon and in Névache, some families hosted them, but then the number started to increase, and therefore in summer 2017 the municipality of Briançon allowed volunteers to use a building close to the rail station, that became the *Refuge Solidaire* where migrants who made it to France can stay, spend the night or few days, and get some legal advice”²⁰.
- 27 In fact, since 2017 groups of citizens called “*maraudeurs*” roam close to the border, mainly in winter time but also in summer, to find migrants in distress (Del Biaggio, Campi, 2019). Some of these mobilisations are quite discrete as the goal is to help migrants in transit. Instead, some others are explicitly organised with the twofold purpose of shedding light on the reality of migrants in danger due to border patrolling, and of foregrounding the presence of hundreds of people acting in solidarity with them²¹.
- 28 As a response to such a widespread solidarity, over the last three years state authorities have increasingly criminalised the people who mobilised in support of migrants in transit (Anafé, 2019; Tazzioli, 2018). Within such a context, mountain rescue appears both as a humanitarian intervention - saving lives in danger –and, at once, as a kind of mobile infrastructure to support migrants in transit. Mountain rescue has become a contested practice, in line with the criminalisation of migrant rescue at sea (Moreno-Lax, 2018; Pezzani, Heller, 2017).
- 29 Without retracing the full history of the criminalisation of mountain rescues, I report here some of the most salient ones. In November 2019, the mountain guide (“*accompagnateur*”) Pierre Mumber was acquitted by the appeal court of Grenoble after being accused of “facilitating migrants’ irregular entry” as in January 2016 he rescued and took to the hospital an injured Nigerian woman who was trying to cross to France in the snow. Pierre Mumber also gave warm clothes and tea to the group of four migrants he found on that occasion²². Benoit Duclos, a mountain guide

(“*accompagnateur*”), who is member of the NGO “Tous Migrants”, was also accused in 2018 of facilitating “illegal immigration” after he saved a pregnant migrant woman who was injured at 1900 meters above the sea level in the attempt to reach France. On the Italian side of the border, as activists from Bardonecchia and Oulx reported to me, the police do not directly chase those who support migrants in transit as they have no interest in keeping migrants in Italy. Actually, the municipality of Bardonecchia *de facto* allows only the volunteers of the organisation Rainbow for Africa and Caritas to bring medical help and clothes to the migrants in a room next to the rail station²³. In other words, the local authorities have hampered the activities of locals who organised themselves autonomously. Similarly, sometimes –although in a quite uneven way– *carabinieri* patrol the rail station in Oulx to disrupt activists who give maps of the mountain paths to migrants who take the bus from there to reach Clavière and then start hiking towards the borderline. Therefore, more than criminalising or stopping volunteers, Italian authorities obstruct and blame groups and individuals that act independently, and not in established NGOs, and do that with a deliberate political goal –fighting border controls.

- 30 A genealogy of mountain rescue and mountain migration sheds light on the Alpine passages as historical crossing points for runways, refugees, and workers, but also as a space of solidarity practices and mobilisations in support of illegalised crossers.

Towards a history of mountain runways?

- 31 As explained above, the Alpine passages has constituted over the centuries a crossing point and, at the same time, the site of “clandestine” journeys and criminalised activities –e.g. smuggling. Together with that, the fleeting presence of “migrants” across the Alps is part of a collective memory of passages in those mountain valleys. Such a sedimented memory pertains to the locals, that is to the inhabitants of the Susa valley as well as of the Clarée valley, as long as the passage of migrants is alive first through oral history and through the testimonies brought by locals who saved migrants in the past. And yet, far from being a consolidated and well-known shared legacy, it is quite contested and dispersed between local archives and individual recollections. Simultaneously geographical and social knowledges that are transmitted from runaway to runaway, and that form a sort of “mobile commons” (Trimikliniotis *et al.*, 2014) which are constantly readapted and updated on the basis of the changed conditions and dynamics at the border.
- 32 Indeed, the practical knowledge sedimented over the years by runaways appears as a crucial element for recursive struggles to happen. More specifically, Dator has drawn attention to the “geographical knowledge” of the runaways on the one hand, and the “topography of power” on the other as important stakes of many struggles over mobility (Dator, 2019:60): the knowledge of the territory and the sharing over time and across different networks of information, made possible for runaways to move, escape and cross without being detected. At the same time, the Alpine French-Italian border-zone has been transformed into a weaponised terrain by state authorities (Elden, 2017; Pezzani, 2020). If on the one hand the Alpine environment partly contributes to render that border a risky or even deadly passage for migrants, on the other hand it should be stressed that migrants are forced to expose themselves to risks precisely because they are not allowed to cross safely. Hence, it is important to de-naturalise the

dangerousness of borders: similarly to the Mediterranean Sea that over the last thirty years has increasingly become a deadly frontier for migrants, the Alpine borders turn out to be highly risky crossing points for illegalised migrants. This is the result of the global visa regime, of national laws, as well as of an increasing criminalisation of unauthorised migration. For this reason, “the naturalization of the Alps as an arduous terrain for migrants’ crossings (and fatalities) demands critical attention exactly in relation to the politics of mobility it underpins” (Garelli, Tazzioli, 2020).

- 33 To use the words of the activists who support migrants across the French-Italian border “the snow is not an emergency, nor a problem; the problem are the frontiers”²⁴ and, “our mountains won’t become borders”²⁵. Migrants are *de facto* pushed to undertake the most dangerous mountain paths in order not to be detected and to try crossing at night or when the it snows or is very cold, as they hope that the police does less border patrolling (Bachelier, 2019)²⁶. In this respect, Heller, Pezzani and Walters have highlighted the “anti-logistics” of border controls which “exists in constant tension with migrants’ attempts to create and re-create a set of connections” (Heller et al. 2020: 14). Such a perspective enables questioning the lines of tension that border enforcement generates: state authorities constantly need to put into place counter-logistics and measures to disrupt the precarious infrastructures of migrant solidarity, to spy on migrants’ shared knowledge of crossing and to neutralise their crossing organisation.
- 34 In fact, the history of mountain rescue at the French-Italian border sheds light on the longstanding encounters in the Susa Valley between Alpine rescuers and people who, at different times, had been racialised as “clandestine” or “migrants” by laws and policies: that is, this research into the archive of *Soccorso Alpino* has shown that even some Italian citizens, until the late 1950s, were illegalised and labelled as “migrants”. Nevertheless, political genealogy of mountain rescue and solidarity practices does not involve making visible the fleeting presence of migrants at the French-Italian Alpine border, since partial invisibility might turn into a tactical weapon for migrants to make it to France. Rather, such a political genealogy engages in foregrounding the sedimentation of practices, struggles and knowledge, and thus the historical density, that lie behind migrants’ passages and the ephemeral traces they left. Indeed, as Siestrunck observed, “the current collective actions of solidarity draw on an old cultural ground, which consists of the main mountain instinct: rescuing”; indeed, on the Alps those who mobilise in different capacities to save migrants “build on the instincts of the wardens of refuges and hospices in the Nineteenth century” (Siestrunck, 2019: 6-7).
- 35 “Police practices”, as Claudia Aradau observed “do not simply speak to an undoing of the very conditions of liveability, but of the destruction of conditions of collectivity” (Aradau, 2017: 7). Similarly, we can look at the current “migrant hunt” (Siestrunck, 2019) and criminalisation of solidarity on the Alps not only as a way for preventing individual migrants from crossing to France but also as recursive attempts to dismantle mobile infrastructures of solidarity that have been put into place across the Alpine border. A genealogy of mountain rescue foregrounds how the memory of struggle is reactivated in the current unfolding of mobile infrastructures of solidarity. Indeed, rescue and solidarity practices are strictly related to each other, and the very meaning of “rescue” is expanded beyond the act of saving people who are in danger, as it also consists in giving refuge and providing a safe space to migrants on the move.

- 36 In order to account for the political legacies of migrants’ passages and solidarity practices, a geographical and a genealogical approach need to be productively intertwined. While scholars have largely mobilised a spatial gaze on migrants’ struggles, pointing to the connections and circulations of solidarity practices across borders (Hardt, Negri 2017; Mezzadra, Neilson, 2013), little has been said about the transmission of the memory of struggles over time. Which kind of impact do migrants have on mountains? And what do they bring there, through their fleeting presence? Far from providing an answer that might be valid in all mountain contexts, this paper has focused on the French-Italian Alpine border situating the current migrants’ passages on the Alps within a longer history of runaways, but also of rescue and solidarity. Taking a history of runaways as an analytical lens enables retracing a genealogy of heterogeneous struggles for movement, highlighting some continuities over time between people who ran away from employers, from coercion, or for finding a better life. Importantly, “every individual runaways depends on collective networks” (Lucassen, Herman van Voss, 2019: 7)²⁷ and, in fact, a history of mountain runaways needs to be linked up with a genealogy of rescue and solidarity practices in support of the migrants in transit.
- 37 By gesturing towards a history of mountain runaways, this paper invites to look at current migrants’ passages across the Alps beyond their volatile and often invisible presence. The traces of the struggles over mobility and the sedimented memory of solidarity practices across the Alps are constantly reactivated by “migrants” in transit.

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NOTES

1. Throughout the paper, I put "migrants" in inverted commas all the times where I want to underline how, in specific years and historical periods, some individuals, due to changes in laws or policies, have turned into migrants. This is the case of the "illegal" expatriation of many Italian citizens in the aftermath of the War World II.

2. It is noteworthy that border checks, identification and refoulements at the French-Italian border are officially done by the French police on the basis of the anti-terrorism law. In addition to that, it is important to stress that push-back operations are made by the French police as well as across Europe also outside of any legal context.
3. The authors define the political act of running away as “flight as a fight”. More broadly, their understanding of runaway as an individual who escapes *from* and engages in acts of desertion but also strives *for (better life)* is akin to Sandro Mezzadra’s formulation of migration and the right to escape (Mezzadra, 2006).
4. I speak of counter-maps (Casas-Cortes et al. 2017; Tazzioli 2015) as these are made with the purpose of supporting migrants in transit by showing them the safe routes. In fact, beyond the maps made by the Red Cross, activists also made their own detailed maps that they give to the migrants in Oulx or in Clavière. I saw the maps inside the occupied shelter “Chez Jésus”, in the church of Clavière, in June 2018.
5. I conducted fieldwork in the cities of Oulx, Bardonecchia and Clavière, and as part of that I interviewed activists that were supporting migrants along their route in Clavière and in Bardonecchia, local NGOs (Rainbow for Africa and Talita Kum), the Red Cross in Susa, as well as with the Guardia di Finanza in Bardonecchia, the *carabinieri* in Oulx, with the Border Police in Bardonecchia and with Prefecture of Turin. I interviewed the mayors of Bardonecchia and Oulx.
6. Interview with the coordinator of the Red Cross in Susa, October 23, 2019.
7. Interview with a police officer in Bardonecchia, November 22, 2018.
8. Interview with S., a volunteer based in Bardonecchia, 22 October 2020.
9. In 1947 about 46,220 Italian workers migrated to France, and about 12,321 were repatriated, that is 26,6% in total (Rinauro, 2009: 266). About 50% of the Italian miners who worked in France in the aftermath of World War II, crossed “illegally”.
10. Italian citizens who entered only with the passport but without job contract in France were allowed to stay only three months, but many then became “overstayers” and were eventually then regularised by their employers.
11. And one has been recorded as lost since November 2018.
12. In critical migration studies the expression “migrantisation” sheds light on the legal and political mechanisms through which some individuals are turned into migrants (Anderson, 2019; New Keywords Collective, 2016).
13. I focus here exclusively on rescue operations that took place after WWII, Yet, Italian migrants had been saved on the Alps also much earlier in time. Siestrunk (2019) has retraced the history of the refuges opened on the French Alps during the Napoleonic age and later on, to provide a safe space to the travellers in transit.
14. Interview with *Guardia di Finanza*, Bardonecchia, October 24, 2019.
15. According to the records of *Guardia di Finanza* in Bardonecchia, October 24, 2019.
16. Interview with the *Police aux frontières* (police of borders) in Bardonecchia, October 24, 2019.
17. The Italian police does not count the number of crossing but the persons. As in fact, they do not monitor the border all the time: they are called by the French police when migrants are pushed back, and they proceed with the identification procedure (although they take the fingerprints only of those migrants who are not in the national database, yet).
18. As migrants might be pushed back more than once, and try to cross multiple times. However, even the numbers of crossings they count is far from being accurate, as it depends on NGOs and the Red Cross itself spotting migrants. On the differences between statistics that indicate border crossings and that those refer to how many migrants actually crossed, see Del Biaggio, 2016.
19. Interview with S., a volunteer of *Tous Migrants*, Briançon, July 16, 2020.
20. Interview with René Siestrunk, Le Roisier, July 15, 2019.
21. See for instance <https://www.lacite.info/hublot/cordee-solidaire-vs-frontiere>

22. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/11/france-man-who-gave-tea-to-migrants-acquitted-of-baseless-charges/>

23. It was opened in 2017 as a temporary safe space to host at night the migrants in transit, provide them with food and medical help, and equip them with warm clothes.

24. This statement was written by the activists that used to run the shelter "Chez Jésus" inside the church of Clavière, on the Italian side of the border. They occupied a room inside the church in March 2016 in order to host the migrants in transit. "Chez Jésus" was violently evicted by the Italian police in September 2016.

25. Slogan of the association *Tous Migrants* of Briançon.

26. Although this is often not the case, as I have been told by local volunteers in Oulx and in Bardonecchia.

27. In their introduction to a *Global history of Runaways* (2019) Lucassen and Heerma van Voss argue that "the history of desertion must be connected to the blossoming field of migration history [...] migration and mobility as forms of resistance linked to forced labour, however, has a long history [...] running away as a form of migration" (Lucassen, Herman van Voss, 2019: 15) and they invite us to find "commonalities in the actions of runaways around the world" (17).

ABSTRACTS

This paper looks at current migrant crossing on the Alps from the standpoint of a history of runaways. It interrogates the traces left by the recent migrants' fleeting presence at the Northern French-Italian Alpine border situating these in connection with both the memory of past migrants' passages and with mountain rescue practices and solidarity networks that have shaped those Alpine valleys. It starts with a section on mobile infrastructures of solidarity deployed at the French-Italian Alpine border, retracing its brief history as well as of the sedimented memory of the struggles in the Susa Valley. The paper moves on with a section about the history of mountain rescue at the French-Alpine border, showing how foreigners and also Italian "clandestine emigrants" were rescued there in the past. It concludes by advancing a history of mountain runaways as an analytical framework to politicise migrants' passages on the Alps.

INDEX

Keywords: runaways, migrants, solidarity, mountain rescue, genealogy

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