

The last investigation of 'Commissioner Carlo'

Alessandro Puglia

A desk sits unattended on the fifth floor of the Syracuse public prosecutor's offices. Stacks of sheets of paper, notes and folders detailing confidential names and secret hideouts of human traffickers have been left behind by Commissioner Carlo Parini, recording when migrants arrived on some remote beach between the natural oasis of Vendicari and Portopalo di Capo Passero, or were sent for interrogations at the port of Augusta.

It was in this port that *Gicic*, Italy's first-ever task force specialised in combatting migrant smuggling in the Mediterranean, began its work. The last arrivals commandeered by the great commissioner of the State Police was on October 3, 2018 in Capo Negro, a small town surrounded by almond trees where a small fishing boat with seven Egyptians aboard had got stranded on the cliffside. One of those countless autonomous arrivals that Commissioner Carlo knew far too well after having dealt with swarms of overloaded wooden boats of refugees who disembarked along the Syracuse Coast before October 3, 2013. This was the very date of the shipwreck off Lampedusa in which 366 people lost their lives, exactly five years before the last disembarkation of Commissioner Carlo.

It was a bitter coincidence. Five years to the day from one of the worst tragedies in the Mediterranean, and Commissioner Parini was told by Syracuse's then-prosecutor, Fabio Scavone, that *Gicic* would have to close its doors "due to a sharp decline in arrivals," as well as a host of other bureaucratic reasons.

Parini returned to the Syracuse police headquarters where he was assigned the role of Divisional Administrative and Social Officer—little more than a symbolic role for issuing passports and small arms licenses, or organising logistics for local concerts. It was more than just a punishment; it was a humiliation.

Parini had led *Gicic* from the start, after the agency was founded in October 2006. It would become a unique task force, combining officers from the State Police, Italian Coast Guard, Italian Navy and Fraud Squad, responding to each sea arrival alongside the Carabinieri (the other branch of Italy's State Police) and 30 specialised cultural mediators.

Between 2006 and 2018, Parini handled the arrival of some 130,000 people—many of them through the port of Augusta, which saw the largest amount of arrivals to Europe at the time of the EU-backed search and rescue operations, Mare Nostrum and Triton.

Parini saw people with traumatic stories pass before his eyes. He knew how to go beyond the general questions expected of investigators interviewing newly arrived migrants: 'Who drove the boat? How many people were onboard?' Instead, Parini thought, it was better to have a humane as well as an investigative approach when dealing with men, women and children who have experienced hell.

In Italian, *Gicic's* name stands for *Gruppo di contrasto all'immigrazione clandestina*. 'Clandestina' translates to 'clandestine' in English—an impolite description of the act of migration. Commissioner Carlo had never liked the word.

During 12 years of operations, *Gicic's* work led to the seizure of 219 boats— including wooden boats, hydrofoils and sailboats—and the arrest of as many as 1,052 "professional smugglers": criminal figures that Commissioner Parini was able to distinguish from the often penniless Sub-Saharan migrants who'd been threatened with weapons by Libyan traffickers and forced to navigate the boats into Italian territorial waters where they were then abandoned. "From their smell I can understand how many months they'd have been locked up

in detention camps in Libya," he said once, during a disembarkation of 400 migrants at the port of Augusta last year.

The last investigation

But Libya was just one of Parini's well-guarded dossiers. By the time Gicic's doors were closed, Parini had been busy uncovering a trafficking ring in a far-off corner of the Mediterranean migration trail, according to investigative records and Gicic records obtained by *Vita*.

Since 2006, photos and testimonials of shipwrecked people had passed many times over Parini's desk, giving the Gicic team a monumental body of evidence about the different ways migrants were smuggled and trafficked across the Mediterranean. That included from as far afield as the Turkish coastlines of Bodrum, Istanbul or Izmir, where smugglers used sailboats driven by Ukrainian skippers to get them to Italy. From 2014 to October 2018, when Gicic was forced to close, boats had been arriving from Turkey to the Siracusano district of Sicily up to two or three times a day, as well as to beaches in Calabria, Puglia and even Basilicata.

Despite the closed port policy pushed by former Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, which left people stranded at sea for entire weeks, and despite Gicic being dubiously closed down for the reason that "there were no more arrivals," spontaneous disembarkations from Turkey haven't stopped. Most recently, on September 21, 2019, the Coast Guard intercepted 41 Iraqi and Iranian migrants aboard a sailboat at Calabria, in Locride. There have been many others, including on September 3 and September 9, on the Calabrian coast.

And Sicily? Is it possible that since *Gicic* closed its doors there have been no more sailboat arrivals from Turkey? No one knows.

And yet, *Gicic* had discovered all the facets of those criminal organisations, and all that work was starting to bear results. On April 28, 2017, for the first time in the history of the fight against the smuggling of migrants, a European arrest warrant issued by the Syracuse public prosecution led to the arrest of three Ukrainian smugglers who were staying on a sailboat at the port of Iraklion on the island of Crete—thanks to intel gathered by the inter-force group headed by Commissioner Parini, in cooperation with the EU's Europol. The three sailors used to ferry migrants from Turkey and then abandon them in rubber dinghies once they entered Italian territorial waters.

That same investigation ultimately led *Gicic* to the Istanbul neighbourhoods of Zeytinburnu and Aksaray, where they uncovered the identities of the trafficking bosses running the route. *Gicic* had identified the hideout where Syrians, Afghans, Iranians and—strangely enough—a group of incredibly rich Somalis waited for the "first-class" journey after paying anywhere between seven and ten thousand dollars for the crossing. Ukrainian or Belarusian boaters steal or rent boats without return for an illicit market that boasts the best brands in the industry—using for example solar panels—such as the German *Bavaria* or the French *Benetau*.

Commissioner Parini used to call them "truck drivers of the sea." They made plans down to the finest details—even changing the vessel's flags from US to Italian when entering territorial waters to draw less attention and arouse less suspicion. Some of those arrested even included a sailboat champion and three former deserters from the Ukrainian army.

Results, traces, clues had perhaps made Commissioner Parini the best-known hunter of traffickers in the world. And while books, university theses and newspaper reports have all gone some way to describing the task force's work over the years—now a thing of history

since the closure. In a May 2, 2017 hearing of the Fourth Defence Commission at the Senate of the Repubblica by then-Syracuse prosecutor Francesco Paolo Giordano expressed his belief until the last moment in the importance of a single task force in Italy like that of *Gicic*. This raises questions about the real reasons behind the closure of the task force.

But there is still another fact that comes to the fore in Giordano's hearing: the alleged collaboration relationship with NGOs.

No criminalisation of NGOs at sea

"In these years, no investigative element has emerged that suggests a direct or indirect involvement of the NGOs individually intended or of individual members of the same with international traffickers," he said.

This document shows that since 2017 the Prosecution led by the former prosecutor of Syracuse Giordano who firmly believed in the work of *Gicic*, had very different views to other Sicilian Prosecutions like Catania or Trapani who supposed that there were links between NGO rescue ships and Libyan traffickers.

This theory has been supported by a part of Italian Politics like Lega Nord or Movimento 5 Stelle. And yet until now, nobody has actually provided evidence for the claim.

NGO ships were nothing more than actors like others in a perfectly functioning reception machine. "Some of the aforementioned ships, especially the Phoenix of *Moas*, often made films and photos, which were delivered to the police authorities, in this case to *Gicic*, then it was sent to Augusta, providing numerous elements of an investigative starting point," Giordano added.

Regina Catambrone, founder of the Maltese NGO *Moas*, explains that they always sought a cooperative relationship with the police in the framework of the law. They would interact with the police on a regular basis, including *Gicic*.

"Closing *Gicic* was a ruinous choice as well as many other things, such as the criminalisation of NGOs," says Catambrone.

"It was not only migrant people who were treated as human beings and not criminals, but also those who took care of them and saved lives. Even when the campaign against NGOs was about to start, [*Gicic*] respected our work," she added, describing an agency that "in working closely with migrants, did not forget the principle of humanity."

Catambrone calls *Gicic* an example of how it is "possible to combine the necessary controls with the utmost respect for human rights."

In his small administrative office, his name no longer on the door, Commissioner Parini reflects on some of the individuals he came to know through his work with *Gicic*. Stories like that of little Hayat, a child of only a few months who floated clinging to a piece of wood during a shipwreck and was then rescued by a Syrian refugee who held her in her arms like a daughter at the port of Augusta. Or the grandfather Abdel Tak Tak, who at 92 years of age and holding a stick, left Egypt with all his family bound for Germany.

Stories like that of Melorin, an Iranian child who arrived on a sailboat and gave no signs of life and was resuscitated on the beach next to Commissioner Carlo by a Milanese doctor who was in those days on holiday in Portopalo di Capo Passero, the southernmost point of Europe where the currents of the Ionian and Mediterranean seas meet.

It's hard to believe there will be no more arrivals of migrants here, but next time it'll be without Commissioner Carlo and his empty desk to oversee the disembarkations at port.

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