

Review – War Through Italian Eyes

Written by Richard Bosworth

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RICHARD BOSWORTH, DEC 30 2022

War Through Italian Eyes: Fighting for Mussolini, 1940-1943

By Alexander Henry

Routledge, 2021

Alexander Henry has written a sound monograph, based on solid (and novel) research. He has worked carefully through the material collected by the Combined Service Detailed Investigation Centre (UK), overtly and covertly, from Italian POWs between 1940 and 1943. At the beginning there were only 82 of such men. But, by September 1943, and the (botched) effort by King Victor Emmanuel III and Marshal Pietro Badoglio to decamp from the war, the number had grown to 1100. 'The thoughts of Generals and Field Marshals are found alongside those of private soldiers and ordinary seamen' (p.3), Henry assures us through 563 case studies; in his view, they compose rich evidence.

How, Henry wants to know, do Italian reflections fit with those from other combatant states? In particular, he promises, he will probe the stereotypes held in many countries and, to a degree, in Italy itself about Italians, whether as '*brava gente*' (nice people who, in every circumstance, retain their humanity), as '*furbi*' (smarties, always looking for a deal), or as men who cannot and do not fight. He will also ask how Fascist were these Fascist warriors, from across the army, navy, or air force. Were they, as reading Daniel Goldhagen (1996) might prompt us to ask, Mussolini's 'willing executioners'?

Henry's first two chapters competently review the existing historiography and examine the strength and weakness of his chief source. In that regard, he admits that the existing transcriptions are couched in orthodox Italian and not in the dialects, which linguistic historians might think of prime usage among most Italians in ordinary conversation back in the 1940s. Perhaps a certain formality therefore needs to be acknowledged in the texts. As for the interrogators, Henry concludes, mostly, the British kept to the Geneva Convention in their practice of incarceration but neither torture nor shootings were completely unknown.

After such introduction, the book moves steadily through five chapters reporting the servicemen's words under different categories. Henry begins by separating their comments on their various foes and on their dominant and dominating ally, Nazi Germany. Here, he says, their war was 'above all against the old European empires of Britain and France. Plutocratic imperialism, not Stalinist communism or New-World capitalism, was Italy's true enemy' (p.62). Equally, the Germans were not loved but may have been admired. Although always careful to include qualifications and differences, Henry does decide that 'The world view of Italian servicemen was not defined by fraternity and sympathy towards their fellow men as the *Italiani Brava Gente* myth would have us believe, but by a harshness and hardness towards both "friend" and "foe"' (p.82).

In the next chapter we learn that there were few recorded admissions about participation in atrocities in Greece and other Balkan states or much regret for them. 'A vein of antisemitism' can be detected but it 'lacked the murderous intent of Nazism' (p.99). Similarly, when they acted as occupiers, Italians were neither especially vicious nor especially kind. Sailors in and around Bordeaux, for example, squabbled with the male locals over access to women and could, on occasion, treat the Germans as their best friends.

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Henry moves next to contemplate whether there were significant differences between the behaviour and attitudes of men from the three branches of the services. Submariners, for example, had no doubt that their sector of the war was 'hard and pitiless' (p.117). There were cases when it was easier to shoot enemy from sinking vessels rather than trying to salvage them. All the men complained about the reliability of the weaponry with which their country armed them, given the deep and continuing 'structural problems in Italian military procurement', Henry tells us (p.126). Men and officers were not forged into iron-hard Fascist unity. Ordinary soldiers in North Africa found that they could not rely on water or firewood being provided for them, while their officers fed and slept in comfort. Henry also recounts tales of Catch 22-Italian style officers who were seeking special deals in one part or other of the front to enhance their fortunes; here indeed some *furbi* went into operation. Perhaps Henry could comment further on how devotion to their families played out among the soldiery. But he does end a description of the failure of air defences on the home front and of recurrent bad domestic news by recording one naval NCO's lament: 'I want to get back to Italy, no matter who wins. It's all very fine fighting for one's country, but one's got to think of one's family as well' (p.198). But, as Henry muses, which serving men from whatever country did not feel that way?

Naturally, Henry asks how did the men view their 'Italian dictatorship', as I have long argued it should be defined? In answer, we get a few glimpses of Emilio Gentile's (1996) totalitarian 'political religious' beliefs in a 'new' Italy but much more old-fashioned grumbling against high-ups. Complaint grows with military failure and has reached a maximum by summer 1943. Galeazzo Ciano – his father-in-law and Foreign Minister during the government of Mussolini – is the most common candidate for contempt, while his wife, Edda Mussolini, can always prompt scabrous stories about her sex life and their 'open marriage'. But Mussolini, too, is 'not immune to the distrust, disillusionment and dislike of Italy's political leadership'. 'What do we care about an Empire?' one man asks. (pp.162-4). 'Italian Fascism may have been socially omnipresent', Henry sensibly concludes, 'but it was not omniscient or omnipotent' (p.149).

With my own longstanding emphasis on the gaps between the theory and practice of Fascism (Italian-style), I am scarcely surprised by this observation. I might regret the meanness of the publishers, Routledge, in their word allowance for a book based on a doctoral thesis, despite selling the hardback version (presumably desired by academic libraries) for £120. It would have been nice if Henry could have had more space to enlarge on the stories that the POWs told each other and to record such a significant sub-theme as the men's Catholicism, which he regretfully omitted. But such is the way of the world, I suppose. In any case, readers, whether intrigued by the Italian past, the meaning of F/fascism, or by that of what Henry rightly calls 'the most catastrophic conflict in world history' (p.195), will find much human reality to ponder in Alexander Henry's relatively brief pages.

References

Gentile Emilio. 1996. *The sacralization of politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press)

Goldhagen Daniel. 1996. *Hitler's willing executioners: ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (NY: Little, Brown and Co.)

About the author:

Richard Bosworth is an Emeritus Fellow of Jesus College, Oxford. His next (and last) book, *Politics, murder and love in an Italian family: the Amendolas in the age of totalitarianisms*, will be published later this year by Cambridge University Press.