The Historical Journal, 40, 1 (1997), pp. 273–280
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EXISTING IN HISTORY: ITALY'S DEVIOUS PATH FROM DEFEAT TO RECOVERY

Italy in the Cold War. Politics, culture & society, 1948–1958. Edited by Christopher Duggan and Christopher Wagstaff. Oxford/Washington DC: Berg. 1995. Pp. xi + 228, index. £34.95

War in Italy 1943–1945. A brutal story. By Richard Lamb. London: Penguin Books. 1995 (1993). Pp. viii + 335, maps and index. £7.99

Italy and the wider world, 1860–1960. By R. J. B. Bosworth. London and New York: Routledge. 1996. Pp. x + 252, index. £40.00

> 'America is the strongest and most prosperous nation on earth,' Nately informed him with lofty fervor and dignity. 'And the American fighting man is second to none.'
> 'Exactly,' agreed the old man pleasantly, with a hint of taunting amusement. 'Italy, on the other hand, is one of the least prosperous nations on earth. And the Italian fighting man is probably second to all. And that's exactly why my country is doing so well in this war while your country is doing so poorly […] You see, Italy is really a very poor and weak country, and that's what makes us so strong'.[1]

The Italian nation state has been 'remade' politically at least five times since Napoleon's conquest, and is perhaps about to be refashioned yet again. But, in another sense, little seems to have changed. Deeply ingrained habits of mind and patterns of behaviour centred upon the interests of the individual, the family and the 'clan', still dominate Italian civil society.[2] There is a basic paradox here. While the Italian people apparently prefer to deal with the stresses and strains of modern life without reference to a wider collectivity, and consider the burden of their institutions and leaders as expensive and uncongenial, an unjust imposition upon them from without and from above which they would gladly throw off, at the same time, undaunted by the endless repetition of disappointment, and worse, visited upon them by those they elect, they display an undiminished appetite for the democratic process, consistently voting in larger numbers than any other West European electorate.[3]

Historians tend naturally to assume that this riddle is best read in the light cast by their discipline, even though the history of post-risorgimento Italy remains a fiercely-contested area of radically divergent interpretations.[4] Nevertheless, if Sergio Romano is correct in his gloomily ambiguous assertion that 'Italians only exist because they have existed in history', it is likely that it is only by examination of the entrails of its

[1] Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (London, 1994 [1961]), pp. 308–9.

[2] Cf. Paul Ginsborg, 'Italian political culture in historical perspective', in *Modern Italy*, 1, 1 (1995), 3–17 for a recent helpful introduction to this problematic. His *A history of contemporary Italy: society and politics 1943–1988* (Harmondsworth, 1990) brilliantly incorporates the theme.

[3] Almost ninety per cent of the electorate cast their votes in the April 1996 political elections, including an astonishing one-quarter of the northern voters who supported a party, the Northern League, dedicated to unmaking Italy.

[4] For a useful survey of the battlefield, see R. J. B. Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz and Hiroshima. History writing and the Second World War, 1945–1990* (London & New York, 1993), pp. 118–41.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X96006954 Published online by Cambridge University Press

history that some understanding may be gained of where this most mysterious of modern nation-states is heading at the second millennium.[5]

Historiographically, the defining moment in the brief course of Italy's history as a modern state was undoubtedly the experience of its people in the second world war, an experience that was the opportunity for both a 'revelation' and a 'revolution', the former of the ways in which the liberal making and the fascist remaking of the Italian nation-state had predisposed it to defeat and disintegration; the latter when, briefly, a majority of the peninsula's inhabitants believed a new dispensation was about to be created by and for themselves. These three books, despite their highly differentiated perspectives and objectives, valuably illuminate critical aspects of this moment and its antecedents in terms of military, political and social history, providing an occasion for bringing together, in one tapestry of failure, suffering and subordination, threads normally dealt with singly.

Joseph Heller's obliquely cynical words cited by way of epigraph should, however, remind us that, if Italy did not have 'a good war' in the conventional sense, the outcome may have been far from negative in the long term, and that the historians and pundits who have interpreted and commented on it have often found difficulty in avoiding the subjectivity and speculation which are a function of any attempt to read the Italian case in the light of conceptualizations commonly used by historians and social scientists to seize the essence of the nation-state. Italians themselves, to judge by the current inflamed debate about how to deal with the secessionist demands of the Northern League, are still far from sure about the relation between state and nation, or even whether one exists at all. What seems certain, however, is that the Italian nation-state is wholly *sui generis* and still in the process of definition.

A good starting point for a reflection on the historiography of Italian paradoxical 'national' identity may be found in the observation that 'the practice of the Italian state and [...] the processes of Italian society seem to work in circles closed to one another'.[6] The observation can be applied as readily to non-Italian historians of modern Italy as to their native counterparts. Though often brilliant, usually subtle in their analysis of the field chosen, on occasion entertaining, contemporary historians of modern Italy, of whatever nationality, almost all nevertheless leave an impression of incomplete contextualization. Moreover they too rarely find ways of linking the contrasting insights appropriate to the multi-layeredness of the historical experience of the inhabitants of the peninsula.

In this perspective Italy's chequered history during the second world war, particularly during the critical period July 1943–May 1945, could reasonably be taken as the touchstone of the viability of the nation-state created by the risorgimento and developed under the liberal and fascist regimes. Yet the Italian experience of the multi-faceted reversal of alliances in September 1943, the horrors of Cassino and Anzio, the botched drives on Rome and the North, the 'civil war' period of 'two occupations and three governments', the rebuilding of the royal armed forces under the direction of the Allied Commission, and Allied responses to and support for the Italian resistance (both real and mythical), have been largely neglected by English-language historiography. Although excellent, if isolated, work has been done on the puppet governments created in the North and the South of the country and treated by their respective masters with

[5] Sergio Romano, 'Gli storici e la politica', in G. Arnaldi et al., *Incontro con gli storici* (Bari, 1986), p. 191 (cited in R. J. B. Bosworth, *Italy and the wider world, 1860–1960* (London and New York, 1996)).

[6] Bosworth, *Italy and the wider world, 1860–1960*, p. 5.

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the distrust and contempt proper to administrations of convenience, very little attention has been given to the Italian armed forces operating in support, respectively, of the Wehrmacht and the Allied Armies in Italy. They comprised, however, the only substantial manifestation of 'Italy' as a continuing national entity.[7] A fresh interpretation of the part played by them is, therefore, timely. It ought, certainly, to throw light not only upon their battlefield capability and performance, but also upon the structures and culture which had been sedimented, in both professional and popular consciousness, by the experience of the Italian military since unification and which were uniquely tested in those critical twenty-one months. Richard Lamb's *War in Italy 1943–1945. A brutal story* is valuable for its contribution to the first of these objectives, but disappointing in relation to the second.

Lamb's book has two evident merits. It adds significantly to the factual record regarding key aspects of the military operations involving Italian forces, both official and unofficial, in the battle for Italy and the Mediterranean theatre generally. Of particular importance is the additional detail Lamb provides from hitherto unavailable or unexploited sources and records on the operations mounted in the immediate aftermath of the armistice of 8 September 1943. The sometimes heroic efforts of the royal army were wildly mismanaged in the Aegean, relatively more successful in Sardinia and Corsica, and hopelessly inadequate in relation to the almost 80,000 Allied prisoners-of-war stranded in Italian camps. The account of the deceitful bungling (or worse) of their opportunities by the Italian political and military authorities, when the US parachute division was already emplaned to seize Rome before the Germans took it over, adds considerably to what was already known or surmised. Also unfamiliar to most English-speaking readers will be the fate of the 600,000 Italian prisoners shipped to Germany, the not entirely unsuccessful attempts to recruit them to Mussolini's neo-fascist army and the Duce's pathetic efforts to alleviate the desperate conditions even of those (the majority) who were unwilling to join it.

In these and many other aspects Lamb fills important gaps in our knowledge of the post-armistice mess, and its price in, mainly Italian, blood. Similarly, the human price of the civil war in the north and centre of the country is starkly revealed in the accounts of atrocities on both sides, not excluding the mass execution of improperly tried 'collaborators' after the end of hostilities in May 1945. Little-known aspects of Allied policy and behaviour in Italy, from looting and requisitioning (often scarcely distinguishable) to the pursuit, trial and execution of a number of Italian war criminals, are also valuably highlighted.

The book's second and equally important merit is that it rattles the bars of a number of the conceptual cages inside which the historiography of this watershed in Italy's history has for too long been trapped. Petrified assumptions are energetically challenged: on the Allied side of the conflict, about the respective military roles of the resistance movement and of the substantial forces owing allegiance to the monarchist-dominated military caste, and on the Axis side about the motives of the few influential figures, such as Graziani and Mazzolini, who rallied to the *Repubblica di Salò*. Those who have treated the Italian campaign as a free-standing exercise in military history, a strategic and tactical chess game between dominant and generally chivalrous commanders, may and should be disturbed by the revelations about Kesselring's systematic barbarism against civilians, while those who see the war as little more than

[7] The classic English-language text on Mussolini's Social Republic is F. W. Deakin, *The brutal friendship* (London, 1962); on the Allied administration of Italy see David W. Ellwood, *Italy, 1943–1945* (Leicester, 1985).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X96006954 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the backdrop to Holocaust will find no comfort here for the demonization of Pius XII that still prevails in some quarters.

Equally controversially Lamb brings forward evidence of widespread collaboration, and even friendly relations, between the civilian population and some of the German and Axis satellite forces engaged in anti-partisan warfare. He rightly removes rose-coloured spectacles in his account of the overall military effectiveness of the armed resistance and its tens of thousands of partisans. He fails, however, to explain the idealism which often inspired individuals and groups among them to self-sacrificial heroism and, even more significantly, underpinned their political symbolism after the war, thus evading the crucial problematic of the role of the 'resistance' in the post-war communist hegemony of the Italian left.

Other well-established stereotypes are also energetically challenged. Those who might warm to evidence of *Italiani brava gente* in the continuing tradition of affectionate friendship towards escaped British prisoners-of-war maintained by the children and grandchildren of those who risked their lives to help them stay free, may feel less sure about how to respond to the equally heart-warming reception accorded by descendants of the victims of Vlassov's army to old Cossacks who survived their return to Stalin's clutches and in recent years revisited the area of Friuli which the Nazis ordained should become the homeland of their ex-Soviet auxiliaries and where frightful devastation and carnage had been wrought by the latter in pursuit of their attempted colonization.

The major problems of interpretation raised in the extensive literature which exists in Italian, particularly those clustering about the question of how far both Fascism and anti-fascism can and should be related to the origins and character of the Italian nation-state, are not confronted. Underlying Lamb's treatment is an untested assumption of the latter's intrinsic viability and moral validity, and of its comparability with other older-established nation states in Western Europe, particularly in relation to the forms taken by national sentiment. He fails to examine the latter's absence or eccentric character in wide sectors of the population, probably constituting a majority at the time. He makes no reference to the ample evidence of war crimes perpetrated not long before the armistice by the very Italian military to whom he dedicates his book.

The communist threat looms throughout, but the explosive attraction of Stalinist communism to both the masses and the elites in post-armistice Italy is neither explored nor explained. To attribute this phenomenon simply to the propaganda and coercion conducted by the *garibaldini*, however necessary it may be to draw attention also to those factors, does not suffice. The weakness of Lamb's approach is precisely the lack of a conceptual framework for making sense of such vital and fundamental paradoxes, whose reappearance in differing guises throughout the course of recent Italian history constantly reminds us of the yearning for a messianic deliverance which is deeply embedded in Italian popular culture, both political and pre-political, and to which the 'progressive' intellectual elites have too often been tempted to pander.

As Lamb usefully reminds the reader, Allied political and military evaluations of the Italian situation and the potential contribution that a co-belligerent ex-fascist enemy might make to the prosecution of the war were shot through with scepticism and puzzlement in almost equal quantities, often expressed through denigratory stereotypes, but their persistent common feature, the unpredictability of Italian military or administrative performance, can today clearly be seen as an intuitive awareness of precisely this basic irrationality. Such a response to post-armistice Italy was, in Lamb's view, unfair, niggardly and strategically inept, given the desperate courage shown by some units in the aftermath of the armistice: the monarchist officers in command of its

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remaining armed forces should have been given a better chance to show what they could do. Perhaps so, but what other initiatives requiring the limited resources available would then have had to be postponed or cancelled?

As for Lamb's suggestion of greater political modulation of Allied support to the Italian partisans, it would have been virtually impossible to make clear and effective distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' ones on the basis of their supposed political affiliations: in the fog of civil war as it was being waged in German-occupied territory the vast majority of confused deserters and draft-dodgers who made up the bands simply accepted the label offered by whatever formation seemed best to promise survival. It is certainly arguable that Allied attempts to 'manage' resistance movements during the second world war were conspicuous by their lack of effect, and that consequently the only practical way to exploit their military potential was indifferently to arm as many potential nuisances to the enemy as possible in the hope that they would inflict damage upon him in the process of defending themselves. This, in the end (and at the sharp end), was precisely what, at operational level, the Allied military did, ignoring or ignorant of more refined policy discriminations which the politicians and diplomats sought to impose.

Unfortunately, despite the important contribution to a better knowledge of the factual record of the Italian role in the closing stages of the war made by this very necessary history of the bloody muddle of Italy, too much of the interpretation is pervaded by the spirit of cold war anti-communism and the opportunity for reaching a cool and balanced revision of previous interpretations has not been fully exploited. Lamb's commendable commitment to justice for the royal army with which he served as a liaison officer is accompanied by a worrying lack of due scepticism about the reliability of the records not only of the Salò regime but also those of the Italian military commands both before and after the armistice. And apart from his justified strictures on General 'Jumbo' Wilson's lack of strategic imagination and Anthony Eden's visceral hostility to Italians, his attitude to official Allied military and diplomatic documents, particularly SOE and AFHQ sources relating to the resistance, seems somewhat uncritical, while resistance archives are largely ignored.

Lamb's book is very unlikely to be challenged by any rival in the foreseeable future and at last provides a substantial English-language corpus of information on Italy's war as a co-belligerent. For the debate on interpretation, however, we shall still need to look elsewhere.

This point is underlined by the collection of conference papers, *Italy in the cold war. Politics, culture & society 1948–1958*, edited by Christopher Duggan and Christopher Wagstaff. These are mainly specialist studies linked only loosely by the common period and theme, and range from diplomatic and economic history (Italian and Vatican policies towards European construction and integration in the shadow of US global military-political hegemony) to the fortunes and misfortunes of the Italian cinema industry in a Hollywood-dominated world marketplace, from a political science analysis of christian democracy to the cultural sociology of the Italian family as a highly differentiated institution and practice, from American influence on industrial design and linguistic usage to the use and misuse of Gramsci's prison writings and of the popular cult of Soviet Russia. It is left to the reader to find more than impressionistic links between most of them, although those by Ellwood, Varsori and Zamagni on diplomatic and economic subjects have a greater intrinsic convergence than the others, and all three valuably illuminate the crablike, but ultimately successful, progress Italy's first post-war generation of statesmen made towards living comfortably with the results

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of defeat and limited sovereignty and making the best use possible of the leverage, on the frontier of US 'containment' of the USSR, afforded them after 1948 by the country's very weakness. Hebblethwaite's balanced reflection on the justice of nominating Pius XII as 'the chaplain of NATO' should, in particular, be the last word on the complexities of post-war Vatican policy towards Italy and the world.

No attempt is made, however, to draw together the various threads of interpretation: Duggan's introductory essay on the cold war and the legacy of Fascism, despite a number of well-taken points on the continued use of fascist legislation and the manipulation of the judicial process by a largely unpurged judiciary to repress political and industrial militancy, is not substantial enough to do more than whet the appetite for a wider and deeper multi-disciplinary overview. He has no space, for example, for serious consideration of critical socio-economic aspects of the period concerned, most evidently in the case of the multiple processes of mobilization and demobilization of the peasantry, of the preconditions for the rise of micro-capitalism in the 'third Italy', or even of the restoration of the connubium between political power and *mafia* (a term which does not even figure in the index!). Nor is there systematic coverage of the regional tensions and demands for autonomy (from Val d'Aosta, to Südtirol, Sardinia and Sicily) whose pragmatic solution by the far-sighted De Gasperi (significantly a member of the diet in Vienna long before he became a leader of Italian catholic parties) was also a by-product of cold war priorities. Contributions on these aspects of post-war rebuilding of the nation-state would have had evident relevance to the current hysterical debate prompted by the Northern League's electoral success and its inflammatory rhetoric of secession.

Although for these reasons of coherence, coverage and perspective, *Italy in the cold war* is less than the sum of its parts, some of the individual papers are of high quality and reflect the best recent research in their respective fields. Allum's analysis of the protean development of Christian Democracy, from parliamentary wing of organized catholicism to faction-dominated catch-all party based on clientelism and dedicated to the permanent occupation of political power, is a masterly example of the genre. Equally trenchant is Varsori's elegant demonstration that Italy's 'European vocation' was always declarative rather than operative, always from weakness and always Italocentric. The editors are not to blame, moreover, for the scarcity in the current historiography of Italy in the period of specialized studies relating to certain fields, notably the evolution of national and local bureaucracies, and internal and external migration. Fortunately, in the latter case, a recent examination of the Italian diaspora and its links with metropolitan Italy now casts valuable new light on this crucial aspect of national being.

In the century after the making of the modern state, Italy was among the western world's greatest exporters of surplus labour power, with some eight million emigrants settling permanently elsewhere in the world while claiming still a meaningful identification with 'the old country' It is precisely from this focus on the ambiguities of the '*paese reale*' (understood both in political and in social terms) that Richard Bosworth launches his observation satellite to map the complexities of 'Italy' (thus apostrophized) and the Italies, measuring and testing the strength of the links between the threads of this web of forms of identification and self-identification, ranging over the Italian nation-state's efforts to overcome its late-comer status in the international polity through the practices of great- and little-power diplomacies and duplicities, its recourse to militarism as a national cement, its ill-starred attempts at colonial expansion and empire-building, the diaspora brought about by emigration of a quarter of the

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population between 1860 and 1960, and the character of the *rayonnement* of Italian high and popular culture, particularly through the mechanisms and circuits of an increasing democratization of tourism.

In each of these areas Bosworth's account of the overlapping and often contradictory destinies of 'Italy', from political unification down to the cessation of mass emigration in 1960, and his analysis of the forms which the *paese*'s possible futures may take, have constant reference to the issue at the heart of 'nationhood', that mysterious sense of belonging to an 'imagined community'[8]. The problem of how to define, for oneself and for others, an identity which takes account of pre-emigration historical experiences (whether in order to retain or to invent such an identity), while being located within a cultural universe attempting, until recently, to impose assimilation to alienating norms of self and of sociality – may persist in popular memory for several more generations after an initial implantation, whatever official efforts may be made to eradicate popular stereotypes.

For Italo-Australians in particular, upon whose experience Bosworth is able to cast original light, the great/little-power career of 'Italy in Europe' brought almost as great a disruption in their lives as their original uprooting from the *paese*. The Italian war of 1940–1943 led to thousands of those already established in the sub-continent, whether pro- or anti-fascist, being indiscriminately rounded-up and interned. Almost twenty thousand Italians captured in North Africa and elsewhere were also shipped to Australia, most of them opting to become 'farming soldiers' after the Italian capitulation in 1943, an existence many liked and were reluctant to relinquish at war's end.

It also led to thousands of their non-Italo compatriots, made prisoners in Africa and Crete, being sent to moulder in prisoner-of-war camps in Italy from which, in September 1943, most escaped to form 'strange alliances' with Italian peasant helpers, prefiguring the post-war capacity of Australian popular culture for acceptance and appreciation of the contribution to the Australian-ness of the Italo component of the population. Such experiences could not fail to be traumatic at the time, and yet, it appears, they did not seriously disrupt the patterns and modes of adaptation to life in Australia of those who experienced them, whether they sprang from the 'mates' tradition of Anglo immigrants, or from the solidity and outreach of Italo familism. Each immigrant population resumed the process of becoming 'Australian' in its own way, largely without reference to any official framework of ideas about what constituted their nationality of origin.

Within Bosworth's exploration of the 'wider world' of the Italian diaspora the attention he pays to the role of the family is a particular strength. The emigrant family ('not a thing but a happening'), largely through the agency of its women, was a conduit for the vital past, for the transmission of 'a certain sort of "Italian" "culture"', which 'mingles materialism, generosity and hospitality, good or abundant cooking, a willingness to touch and to sing, to argue and to talk, a fierce determination, a truthfulness, a narrowness, a literalness, a loyalty, a power, a love and, above all, a sense of [one's own] human value'.

Parts of this reservoir of values are, however, far darker: the family, especially the southern 'Italian' version, has also mutated, through the emigration experience, from being the arena for the transactional 'gifts and poisons' of village life (with emigration as the escape hatch), to being a training ground for a ruthless adaptation to aggressive

[8] Cf. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London, 1983).

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competitiveness and even criminality, in the pursuit of economic and social promotion. Nevertheless, Bosworth concludes, the overall outcome is positive: 'the banality of the evil was, on balance, outweighed by the banality of the good'.

Italy and the wider world ambitiously seeks to locate the experience of 'Italians' in a multiplicity of real contexts, demonstrating incidentally both the fundamental value of *italianità* and the inadequacy of 'official' nationalism. The protean *paesani* from 'Italy' discovered, not only in Australia, original and robust modes of survival and assertion under pressure. Within these the official 'Nation' played a part, but rarely in the terms it sought to propagate, whether those of risorgimental exemplars of the *primato*, of resurrected Roman legionaries, or of catholics with a mission.

Although a disenchanted observer of the recent evolution of the political scene in metropolitan 'Italy' might be tempted to conclude that *trasformismo* is alive and well and living on the left, and that the part-new and part-used elite led by Romano Prodi will fare no better than its predecessors in harnessing to higher purposes the intractable (but creative) individualism of 'Italians', wherever they may be, the unofficial nation has, fortunately, been more successful in creating positive and valued images of *italianità*: the 'banality of good' enshrined in *italiani brava gente*, and *Made in Italy*. It is a comforting conclusion to reach, especially in view of the discomforting precedents of Italian history.

A last word is necessary on the vexed topic of apparatus. Bosworth's footnotes contain a wealth of bibliographical references which will vivify the work of any student. The index here, as in Duggan and Wagstaff's volume, is thorough, although not really analytical. Lamb's *War in Italy*, despite the inclusion of an interesting photographic insert, has an index of relatively little value: many significant references are omitted, while the strangely selective bibliography, also marred by dubious Italian orthography, omits many of the most important Italian contributors to the pertinent literature. This is particularly regrettable, given that the book is likely to have far the greatest number of non-specialist readers. Penguin ought to know, and do, better than this.

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