

BOOK REVIEW

The Italian Literature of the Axis War: Memories of Self-Absolution and the Quest for Responsibility

by Guido Bartolini, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, xii + 263 pp., £74.99 (hardback), ISBN 9783030631802

Fabio Simonetti

Brunel University London, UK

Email: fabio.simonetti@brunel.ac.uk

Does it make sense to study the Italian literature of the Axis War – the military campaigns fascist Italy fought between 1940 and 1943 – and its influence on Italy's self-absolving discourses almost 80 years after the end of the conflict and the fall of the regime? What may seem a rhetorical question in fact reflects a current debate in Italy following the new far-right government's attempt to set aside the Resistance component from the 2023 annual 25 April Liberation Day commemoration in the name of a 'restored national harmony', or the fact that the largest European conflict since the Second World War is currently being fought in Ukraine in the name of – according to the official Russian rhetoric – the 'denazification' of a country led by a 'Jewish president'. In view of this new wave of historical revisionism and attempts to rewrite (or abuse) history, Guido Bartolini's book is a timely and analytical attempt to explore and understand the role played by postwar Italian literature in the startling marginalisation of the memory of Italy's participation in the Axis War and its crimes.

The first two chapters introduce the research questions and lay the theoretical foundations and objectives of the book, 'the first in-depth study of the literature of the Axis War', which aims 'to examine the ways in which the Fascist wars of aggression entered the literary imagery of postwar Italy' (p. 4). It is immediately clear that this is a well-thought-out, well-researched, and well-structured interdisciplinary analysis at the intersection of memory studies, literary criticism, and historiography. Bartolini explains how the book focuses on a heterogeneous, strictly selected corpus of 34 texts of Italian Second World War literature comprising both novels and memoirs. The analysis takes into consideration a wide variety of books published between the end of the war and the 1970s that met with different degrees of success across the decades.

BOOK REVIEW

In the following three chapters, Bartolini shows his mastery of the tools of literary criticism by analysing a series of figures of repetition – topoi, themes, and master plots – that recur across his chosen corpus. Chapter 3 focuses on topoi of innocence and concentrates predominantly on the stereotype of the *italiani brava gente* and its manifestations in the Italian literature of the Axis War. By regularly referencing his corpus of literary works and engaging with the most up-to-date scholarly works on the issue, Bartolini discusses the idea – still recurrent in some public debates and cultural representations of the Italian wartime experience – that good-hearted Italian soldiers were somewhat different from their blood-thirsty German allies, and that Italians in general could not be equated with vicious and cowardly Italian fascists. The natural conclusion is that in many circumstances the Italian invasion and military occupation of enemy countries had little to do with the brutality of war and more to do with the ‘motif of the holiday’ (p. 68). This image is embodied in the successful topos of the so-called *Sagapó Army*, or the ‘Army of love’, particularly evident in Greece.

Chapter 4 deals with powerful recurrent themes connected to Italy's humiliating defeat in the war: innocence, defeat, victimhood, suffering, horror, pacifism, and heroism. According to Bartolini, the recurrence of such themes influenced ‘the Italian interpretative community’ and its memory of participation in the war in the postwar years, illustrating ‘the memory-reflective capacity of literature’ (p. 152).

In Chapter 5, the book explores how, in many cases, the two most recurrent master plots in the narrativisation of the Axis War – sacrifice and conversion – tend to marginalise representations of violence and dismiss the concept of guilt. In so doing, the predominant representations provided by the corpus of texts analysed here are those of the Italians’ innocence and redemption through their sacrifice and conversion to antifascism.

The final chapter – ‘The quest for responsibility’ – is remarkable for Bartolini's commitment not to shy away from analysing texts that complicate his theoretical structure. In this section, he engages with works that, although to a limited extent, take into consideration the Italians in the guise of perpetrators in the context of the Axis War, concluding that such examples, rather than completely altering the theoretical framework previously discussed, foreshadowed a significant evolution of a genre yet to exist at the time when they were written.

BOOK REVIEW

Ultimately, Bartolini reaches the conclusion that 'with a few notable exceptions, the literature of the Axis War failed to transmit knowledge about the crimes committed by members of the Italian national community, and, therefore, it did not constitute an adequate platform to reflect on the past' (p. 253). Such reflections induce the author to acknowledge that this trait was true of postwar Italian society more broadly, which was intent on presenting the war as a calamity rather than an irresponsible chain of events ascribable to members of the Italian national community.

Alongside the elements discussed, *The Italian Literature of the Axis War* is admirable not only for its analysis of well-known literary works such as Mario Rigoni Stern's *Ritorno sul Don* (1973) and Elsa Morante's *La storia* (1974) from new angles and in relation to other works, but also for bringing back to light long-forgotten (often deliberately) texts, such as Raul Lunardi's *Diario di un soldato semplice* (1952) and Giuliano Palladino's *Pace a El Alamein* (1960). In this turbulent decade of the twenty-first century, this book offers us a tool to understand the ways in which literature can be complicit in the construction of self-absolving memories of past events that are particularly difficult to deal with. While this is certainly not an exclusively Italian issue, it is important to remember that Italy, the cradle of fascism, may have been particularly attracted by such self-absolving practices in the postwar years.