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REVIEW OF MATTHEW EVANGELISTA, *ALLIED AIR ATTACKS AND CIVILIAN HARM IN ITALY, 1943-1945. BOMBING AMONG FRIENDS*, ABINGDON: ROUTLEDGE, 2023

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In Romagna's floods of May 2023, when the water washed away vast tracts of land around the town of Ravenna, six unexploded bombs were revealed. They were to be expected. Experts have suggested that up to around 10% of the thousands of bombs dropped by the Allies on Italian territory from June 1940 onwards failed to explode and are still in the ground.

None of this will have come as a surprise to Matthew Evangelista of Cornell. His unusual book combines an extensive survey of certain key aspects and places of the war in Italy, with a militant denunciation of the evil men do when they bomb, indiscriminately, unarmed civilians. Over recent years a substantial bibliography has emerged in Italy concerning the extraordinary bombing campaign to which Italian cities, villages and peoples were exposed from the first day of Italy's entry into the war in 1940, until 2 days after the German armies had surrendered in May 1945. Gabriella Gribaudi's monumental tome of 2005, *Guerra Totale. Tra bombe alleate e violenze naziste. Napoli e il fronte meridionale 1940-44* opened the way to a series of studies that made clear how much lasting damage – physical, psychological, social – the Allied bombing campaign did, over a much longer time-period compared to the Nazi invasion post-September 1943.

Evangelista now introduces this perspective to an English-reading audience, but supplies it through a series of prisms which partly explain what happened, but also serve to feed his personal anti-war agenda. These view-points constitute the five chapters which make up the substance of the book: diplomacy, strategy, the resistance, humanity and memory. These

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the author identifies with a series of particular individuals, who are not the usual high-profile protagonists. But because the facts have to be fitted into the author's particular perspectives, none of them quite matches up the promise of their titles.

The basic facts of the air war on Italy – and the grotesque contradiction at the heart of them – are well worth repeating, as the author does in his Introduction: 'Throughout WWII, US and British air forces bombed Italy, killing over 60,000 civilians, destroying the homes of hundreds of thousands more and sending many fleeing into the countryside where they died of hunger and disease… [Yet] two-thirds of Italian civilian victims of bombing were killed *after* [*sic*] the Armistice [the unconditional surrender of Fascist Italy], when Italy was no longer an enemy country, as the Allies sought to defeat the German occupiers'. How had this unique fate of misery fallen upon the Italian people? Why? These were the key questions behind the author's research project.

A very wide range of sources, including almost all the important Italian ones, are used. They include primary and secondary sources, but also novels, and a whole chapter is dedicated to one famous American film of the ground war. But there are some strange gaps, whatever the category of source, as there are in the underlying narrative. At the end the author provides his personal reflections on some contemporary experiences of the bombing of civilians: easy to share but hard to imagine in a conventional historical account. So the book is part presentation of this terrible Italian experience, as lived by Italians then and remembered now, part contribution to the on-going debate in the West about the morality of bombing civilians.

In Ch. 2 the author supplies an update on the conventional story of the messy surrender of Italy. He does not explain how 'co-belligerency' came about or its implications for the bombing campaign. The fact that it suspended Italian sovereignty of any sort in effect legitimised an 'anything goes' attitude to the treatment of the Italians and their country, who ended up as 'hostages' to the Allied military campaign in the author's analysis.

Evangelista's evidence confirms that the bombing of cities in the summer of 1943 did contribute to the fall of Fascism, and he lists other factors. It was deliberately meant to provoke popular uprisings against the régime, especially in the northern industrial cities. So why so little mention of the vast strikes in northern factories in the previous spring which corresponded perfectly to Allied strategy, one of the very rare cases anywhere where massive bombing might – perhaps – be said to have produced a specific political response?

Instead this chapter concentrates on the relationship between Roosevelt's personal emissary to the Vatican, a businessman, and the Pope, the point being to avoid the bombing of Rome.He shows how the

project failed totally. Although Italian historians have gone into this, there is new material here but it's a side-show compared to the grand diplomatic manuevers which produced two separate surrender documents and then co-belligerency. Some indication was needed of how the British took over control of the campaign militarily and politically from January 1944, and what the consequences were.

Chapter 3 – 'Strategy' – goes into the details of the plans to bomb Italy wherever Germans could be found, largely in the hope of destroying their logistics. Here the author finds a British Dr Strangelove figure whose mind was apparently able to impose itself on much that subsequently happened in the bombing campaign. When it became clear that this man's method was not working, the military commanders reacted by insisting that railway bridges and viaducts should be the preferred targets, not marshalling yards. But no-one doubted that rail transport was the key to German military effectivness, and the harder the rails were hit, the more likely the Germans would stop. But even when the Allied military finally recognised that that was not the case at all, this didn't halt the bombing, which went on even after the final surrender. Evangelista suggests plausibly that this was the US Army Airforce's way of demonstrating its indispensability to the other arms, and hence the right to independent existence, alongside but not in the Army.

Although the text covers well the overall bombing scene, it is by no means a complete survey, and the major cities are simply left to the local authors who have covered them, indicated in the notes. There is no mention of the relationship between all the bombing, and the failure of the Allies to break through the Gothic line in summer/autumn 1944, forcing them to move east, to go round the Appenines by way of the Adriatic coast, and prolonging the war way beyond its intended end. This had political consequences, heightening the potential danger seen by many Allied commanders, and the British Foreign Office, in the Communist-dominated Resistance movement.

In Chapter 4 – 'Resistance' – the author focuses on one district of a particular region – western Piemonte – and one specific Resistance commander. He chooses to ignores the fact that the Resistance movement was co-ordinated, organised into a network with a central direction, and dominated militarily by the Communist Garibaldi briagdes. Among its legacy is a network of Resistance history institutes which still exist, whose most distinguished example is in fact in Turin, capital of Piemonte. It has substantial archives and library collections, and decades of experience. Not to have gone there is an incomprehensible choice by the author, given that among other vital resources it houses an original underground bomb shelter, a deep, narrow, concrete-lined space, very scary. Present is also a

digital guide to the bombing of Turin, which as the author makes clear at the end of his book, was very intense (though he leaves out the controversy surrounding what was bombed and what was not bombed in the vast FIAT factories of the time.)

In Chapter 5 – 'Humanity' – the author suddenly switches to London and one particular lady, a militant pacifist, whose lonely campaign against the bombing of civilians in general now looks to have been very far-sighted (though not related in any way to what was happening in Italy). But it's the *inhumanity* of most of those running the Allied campaign which he documents most effectively. The text offers a rare demonstration of how a generalised, essentially, racist outlook of contempt towards the Italians as nation and people, could be found from the top – Churchill in particular – to the bottom of the Allied political and military hierarchy. Fighting men of course are not paid to think, and bomber crews soon became legendary for their indifference to those below their planes. As Evangelista points out, only Joseph Heller's bitter satire, *Catch-22* (1961), based on long personal experience of the Italian bombing campaign, came close to questioning this mentality.

Chapter 6 is dedicated to a forensic dissection of one specific film, John Huston's *The Battle of San Pietro* (May 1945), which although an American product, is called upon by the author to express the Italian memory of the war. This is a particularly weird choice, not least because this is the story of an infantry battle, not of aerial bombing, and is well-known by film specialists to be a reconstruction, and not what it would appear to be: imagery straight from front-line fighting.

As for evoking the experience ordinary Italians caught up in battle, there are a number of Italian films and novels which do the job more effectively. The classic expression is *Paisà*, 1946, Rossellini's second neo-realist classic after *Roma Città Aperta*, which takes us through the experience of the liberation/occupation process in a series of wrenching episodes ranging from Sicily to the Po Valley. The classic novel is Curzio Malaparte's part-memoir *La Pelle*, only very briefly cited here, but which is un-surpassed in its ability to express the extreme trauma suffered by the Italians of being liberated and bombed at the same time.

The concluding chapter is a mish-mash of evidence and reflection. The first part concerns the impact and legacy of bombing on two very different sites – the famous Monastery of Monte Cassino in the south – and the little-known small city of Alba, in western Piemonte, in the north (in fact it's well-known to Italians thanks to the record supplied in novel form by the Resistance's best-known novelist, Beppe Fenoglio, as the author points out).

The second part evokes the impact of the war on the very odd collection of individuals who feature in each chapter. Finally there are thoughts about

how this war experience has conditioned Italian attitudes ever since to war in general, pointing out that these are not pacifist in the traditional moral sense, but just express a total revulsion at the prospect of any sort of war, no matter what the declared cause. This is well worth saying, and unusual in a history book, but the author might have mentioned that part of this refusal is based also on the conviction among anti-war Italians that the proponents of war will always betray their so-called principles sooner or later: look at Vietnam, Iraq, Libya… Had the so-called 'democracies' not got into bed with Stalin to promote their 'war for liberty and freedom'?

Evangelista might well have reflected on how extraordinarily little resentment the Italians ever expressed in the years after the war against the Anglo-Americans, for all the sufferings they caused with their bombs. But nowhere are there to be seen statues in honour of the Allies either, or, as in France, urban squares named after whichever Allied General liberated a particular town.

There must be a reason why the annual liberation ceremonies of the 25th April, celebrated formally up and down the country, never mention the Allies, much less the 43,000 Allied soldiers who lost their lives up to the liberation of Rome alone. 'Stunned indifference', was the reaction of the locals to the 'liberation' of the ruined towns on the road to Naples according to a British observer, as recalled here. Perhaps it was the bombings which ensured that this attitude would persist down to the present day.

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