

BOOK REVIEWS

The Italian War on the Eastern Front, 1941–1943: Operations, Myths and Memories, by BASTIAN MATTEO SCIANNA, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, xvi + 365 pp., £69.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-3-030-26523-6

With this, his first book, Bastian Matteo Scianna aims to make a significant contribution to our knowledge of the Italian campaign in the Soviet Union in 1941–43 and to our understanding of how that particular experience was presented and received after the war. Despite recent contributions by Thomas Schlemmer and Maria Teresa Giusti, this topic remains one of the most neglected in the corpus of research on Italy's Second World War. Building upon the author's doctoral dissertation, the book is based on Italian, German, and British primary sources, and on a rich bibliography in four languages.

The first half of the text examines doctrinal, operational, and strategic aspects of the Italian involvement on the Eastern Front, contextualising the campaign within the history of the *Regio Esercito* (Royal Army) and the broader war effort. The author examines the conduct of various levels of command, Italo-German relations, as well as German and Soviet opinions of the Italians as soldiers. Scianna offers detailed commentary on the military operations of the *Corpo di Spedizione Italiano* (Italian Expeditionary Corps) in Russia in 1941–2 and the *Armata Italiana* in Russia in 1942–3, with ample discussion of such topics as anti-tank warfare (pp. 201–9).

The second part of the book is more original, adopting a cultural approach. It turns to the 'narrative' of the campaign in the Soviet Union and the 'myths' that issued from it, along with their social, political, and cultural implications during and after the war. Chapter 10 recounts the development of some of these 'myths' and illustrates the role played by the Army General Staff as a virtual 'censor' after 1945. The analysis of the postwar political debate reveals the close connection between the military narrative of the campaign and the socio-political situation of Italy (pp. 312–27). This section covers the controversies around Italian prisoners-of-war in the Soviet Union and the political struggles of 1946–8 between factions who adopted opposing interpretations of the 'campaign in Russia'.

The author makes several noteworthy points. We learn, for example, that the postwar 'narrative' of heroism against the odds had its birth in the field, probably when it became clear that the high command in Rome would never be able to improve Italian armament and equipment on the Eastern Front (p. 121). Similarly, Scianna reminds us that the Alpine troops managed better than the infantry divisions, in part because the Red Army largely refrained from attacking them before the retreat of January 1943 (pp. 179–80). The author also confronts the question of how Italian soldiers received and interpreted ideological propaganda (pp. 238–44). He could give more consideration to the 'extra-Fascist' values – such as monarchism, Catholicism, or institutional identities – that surely also influenced how Italians behaved in the Soviet Union, how they viewed the Soviet people and Red Army, and how or why they fought.

Scianna must be commended for providing a serviceable narrative replete with useful correctives for English-language readers. However, the research suffers from some significant omissions. First, the book offers little discussion of the Italian Army's occupation policies in the Soviet Union.

Scianna's focus on the conduct of the political-military high command and the experiences of the front-line troops neglects the fact that a large part of the Italian contingent operated in the rear. The Regio Esercito occupied and administered sizeable parts of eastern Ukraine with a great deal of autonomy, despite being subordinated to the Wehrmacht. Italians ran cities and villages, exploited local resources, lived off the land, influenced local groups, modified the landscape, and tried with little success to set up a Fascist outlook and way of life.

Second, the author makes little use of the Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito (AUSSME), which houses dozens of boxes containing the official war diaries of the units that fought in the Soviet Union. Scianna rightly underlines that the archive is difficult to access and he laments 'the loss of many Italian primary sources' (p. 329). In any case, to dismiss in such a way the principal source for anyone working on the Italian Army gives the misleading impression that no further research is possible, whereas military papers housed at the AUSSME still have much to offer.

Third, Scianna likewise dismisses Italian memoirs on the 'Russian Front' as formulaic distortions of the facts (pp. 267–8). But the massive body of memoir literature produced since the war offers researchers a mine of potentially infinite data. Scianna neglects the variety within this literature and, above all, the fact that many memoirs were not written to make readers believe a certain idea or truth about the campaign. Italian memoirs from the Eastern Front – produced by soldiers of every rank, social extraction, and political leaning – also provide technical and apolitical facts that can corroborate, explain, enrich, or even contradict what the archival documents tell us. In any case the claim that Italian-based researchers have used these memoirs uncritically, without considering their political implications, should be rejected (p. 292).

Scianna thus attributes to Italian historiography the characteristics and above all the defects of the public image of the campaign since 1945 (pp. 284–5). This does a disservice to the likes of Giorgio Rochat or Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi, whose scholarship has often challenged 'official truths' about Italy's wartime experience and highlighted the basic victim complex marking many accounts of the conflict on the Eastern Front, especially the horrific retreat of winter 1942–3.

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Italians and Food, edited by ROBERTA SASSATELLI, Cham (Switzerland), Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, v + 279 pp., £79.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-3-030-15680-0

Italians and Food comprises nine chapters on the relevance of Italian food culture within national borders and in the global context. In her introduction, the editor provides an excellent theoretical framework to the understanding of 'Italianness', Italian food practices and culture, in the global and national food contexts. All the chapters in the volume deal with particular aspects of this central topic.

The book opens with a very topical chapter by Fabio Parasecoli that addresses the reasons for the international popularity of Italian food in the contemporary world. Parasecoli looks at how