



ISSN: 1353-2944 (Print) 1469-9877 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cmit20>

# Wehrmacht und Waffen-SS im Partisanenkrieg: Italien 1943–1945

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To cite this article: Ben Shepherd (2015) Wehrmacht und Waffen-SS im Partisanenkrieg: Italien 1943–1945, *Modern Italy*, 20:4, 450–451, DOI: [10.1080/13532944.2015.1080957](https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2015.1080957)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2015.1080957>



Published online: 30 Oct 2015.



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If the collection of essays casts a valuable sharper light on the relationships between Italian intellectuals in the twentieth century, still not systematically explored are the relationships with foreign intellectuals, while often mentioned but not further problematised – as the editor himself acknowledges – is the political dimension of the publishing house, particularly with regard to the Italian Communist Party. The dense variety of the book nevertheless makes an interesting contribution, which goes beyond the focus on Einaudi and attempts to provide a fuller understanding of the history of Italian publishing and culture.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2015.1088743>

**Wehrmacht und Waffen-SS im Partisanenkrieg: Italien 1943–1945**, by Carlo Gentile, Paderborn, Ferdinand Schöningh, 2012, 466 pp., €44.90 (hardback), ISBN 978-3-506-76520-8

Since the 1990s, studies by German historians such as Lutz Klinkhammer and Gerhard Schreiber and by Italian historians such as the research group led by Paolo Pezzino have examined the German anti-partisan campaign in Italy between 1943 and 1945. This campaign was fuelled by, among other things, contempt for ‘turncoat’ Italians, ruthless and radicalising competition between Nazi agencies, and brutal methods imported from anti-partisan warfare in the German-occupied Soviet Union. Its most notorious facets were ferocious directives issued by Field Marshal Kesselring, Commander-in-Chief Southwest for the majority of the period, and the killing, through retrospective reprisal or systematic massacre, of ‘pro-partisan’ civilians by Wehrmacht or Waffen-SS forces that enjoyed considerable freedom of action.

Carlo Gentile analyses the conduct and motivation of the full range of Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS anti-partisan units on the ground in Italy with a new degree of both detail and scope. He achieves this through systematic examination of an enormous range of sources including post-war judicial material and official wartime material generated by the German occupiers, particularly Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS personnel files and unit files down to regimental level. He identifies two main groups of factors that had a particularly immediate, decisive effect upon units’ behaviour: the personal disposition of their troops and troop leaders, which was influenced by training, social background, personal experiences and unit culture; and the particular circumstances on the ground that they faced. Gentile thus achieves a new, sophisticated level of nuance in the study of the anti-partisan campaign.

Gentile argues that many units felt unable to distinguish between partisans and the wider civilian population, but were disinclined to try anyway. They were more concerned about vengeance for partisan attacks, or about setting examples. He also argues that units operating at or near the front were prone to respond even more ferociously to any resistance in or near their immediate rear. Yet, rather than brutalising

German troops in a uniform manner, such circumstances intensified brutal dispositions already present. Gentile maintains that proclivity for violence was strongest among units that combined ideological fanaticism and elite self-imagery. For these reasons, units from the 16th SS Panzer Grenadier Division and the Luftwaffe's 'Hermann Göring' Panzer Division perpetrated the very worst acts.

Gentile also argues that a preponderance of perpetrators were youthful, and thus more prone to aggression, risk-taking, and displays of strength. Within the rank and file of the aforementioned divisions, the particularly Nazified 'Hitler Youth' and *Flakhelfer* generations born during the 1920s were highly prominent. Across all the divisions Gentile examines, experience of Nazi Germany's ruthless ideological war against the Soviet Union was not an essential prerequisite for brutality; indeed, many of the troops serving in the harshest units were too young to have served elsewhere before Italy. The 16th SS Panzer Grenadier Division also contained numerous former concentration camp staff among its officers, and many strongly ideologically disposed Balkan Germans within its ranks.

Gentile also demonstrates that the worst German excesses were temporally and geographically specific. The Germans were at their worst nearer the shifting front line. This was especially so when partisans intensified their activity in coordination with Allied conventional offensives, or when Italian civilians tried to resist German troops who were seeking either to press-gang them for labour or to inflict scorched-earth measures on the retreat. Yet as the Allies advanced north from autumn 1944, the Germans to some extent supplanted large-scale operations that devastated civilian communities with smaller-scale, targeted operations against actual partisans.

This is an excellent, groundbreaking study of the mechanics of German anti-partisan warfare in Italy. It provides a differentiated, enriched understanding of the campaign on the ground.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2015.1080957>