

cogently written, *Italian Women Writers: Gender and Everyday Life in Fiction and Journalism 1870-1910* provides great critical insights on the works of Neera, Marchesa Colombi, and Matilde Serao, and helps us reconnect with literary representations that for the first time both described and criticized for female readers the world they lived in.

Silvia Valisa  
Florida State University  
svalisa@fsu.edu

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**Il mio diario di guerra (1915–1917)** by Benito Mussolini, edited by Mario Isnenghi, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2016, pp. 225, €18, ISBN 978-88-15-26050-5

From September 1915 to February 1917 Benito Mussolini fought in the war as a member of a rifle regiment. A simple soldier, he was at the same time the well-known director of the interventionist newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia*, and formerly of the national newspaper of the Italian Socialist Party *Avanti!*. He kept a journal of his war experience, which was serialized in *Il Popolo d'Italia*. Both as a public and a private document – given Mussolini's role in Italian politics of that time – the journal provides us, in Isnenghi's words, with the rhetoric of a palingenesis that is both personal and collective. Given its public dimension, and also because of its later publication during the Regime, some historians have dismissed the journal as an example of Il Duce's 'transformism'. However, in his thoroughly documented introduction, Isnenghi argues that had the author not become Italy's dictator, this text would have nonetheless attracted the interest of historians as the wartime testimony of both a simple soldier, and an interventionist primary school teacher who was closer to the working class than to the intellectual bourgeoisie. It is also a telling document of the path that led Italy to war and overwhelmed the working classes in the political context of 1914–15. For Mussolini the concept of class had become meaningless, as officers and soldiers allegedly perceived each other like brothers in a war that was made by 'peoples and not by armies' (19 September 1915, 64). In this sense, Mussolini's language was not entirely new, drawing considerably from the rhetoric of the Risorgimento volunteers. Still claiming to be a socialist, but venomously opposing the Socialist party that had expelled him on the eve of his interventionist turn, *Il Popolo d'Italia* echoed Mazzini's pairing of people and nation by reversing the premises of Risorgimento nationalism: the 'People of Italy', Isnenghi notes, was no longer the 'Italy of the people' (13).

Ignoring the fact that the majority of the soldiers had unwillingly entered the conflict in 1915, Mussolini claimed that the war was fought by 'the people'; defeatism was a bourgeois, not a proletarian trait. In 1919, at the foundation of the *Fasci* in Milan, the newspaper published another crucial historical document, the Programme of San Sepolcro, which harked back to these very pages of the journal: it was time for 'the people' – those who had given their blood in the front line, those who had wanted the war, a classless 'people' – to replace the old dominant class. In this sense, Mussolini's journal constitutes what Isnenghi called in a previous book the 'public diary of a rising Duce' (Mario Isnenghi, *Diario in pubblico del Duce nascente* (1985) now in

*L'Italia del fascio* (Florence: Giunti, 1996), 95–104). It was the war that provided Mussolini with the chance to influence those apolitical soldiers – the majority – who had not taken part in the conflict between neutralists and interventionists in 1914–15; it was the war in the trenches, with its jargon full of neologisms that Mussolini learnt and noted down, that created the unity of Italy, breaking regional barriers where the Risorgimento had failed.

In military terms, the journal conveys very little epic tone: there are no glaring actions or massive assaults, and even when Mussolini was wounded it occurred simply during a practice exercise – even though the event was added to a later publication of the journal as part of the cult of the Duce. If the want of heroic actions and the relatively short experience of Mussolini at the front fuelled personal attacks in the Socialist press, with allegations of opportunism and cowardice, this element constituted the strength of Mussolini's narration. His self-portrayal was intentionally sketched within the normality of military life, as it was that very normality that was to become glorified. The lack of engagement with his political opponents was equally an asset of Mussolini's war correspondence: while his newspaper, like the greater part of the interventionist press, continuously delved into acrimonious polemics, his journal praised the patriotism of soldiers rather than attacking the 'defeatists'. Even Austrian soldiers are largely portrayed with detachment. The journal is a eulogy of mass devotion to the 'Motherland', and in this sense is also a testimony of Mussolini's nationalist years before the foundation of Fascism.

Perhaps one of the most evident aspects in its pages is the break with Socialist internationalism and class conflict; at the same time, the reader will find much futurist rhetoric as a means for expressing Mussolini's fascination with war, with very little time for feelings of pity or fear, as well as his contempt for women. For example, in the entry of 13 September 1915 Mussolini terms 'pathetic' the open manifestation of anxiety of a woman at the departure of her husband for the front (53). The 'new Italian' of the future regime was forged in the trenches: the Italian soldier was 'joyful, especially when it does not rain. But even when it does, he accepts getting wet with much philosophy' (14 October 1915, 88). He is humble and stoic, never complains when injured, showing the sturdiness of the Italian breed particularly in the most arduous times: examples of this kind appear throughout the whole journal, with soldiers who never give up even when horrifically wounded. At the same time, the journal provides interesting examples of what recent historiography has termed the 'myth of the good-hearted Italian': soldiers, while maintaining their morale intact even in the most adverse circumstances, never love the war, which they simply accept as a duty (see for example the entry for 2 November 1915, 107). The diary is also a tribute to the beauty of the Italian landscape at its Alpine borders, which 'exalts the soul' (4 April 1916, 142). As Mussolini notes on 1 December 1916 (165), the landscape and the very essence of Italian soil defines the character of the war and the nature of national greatness:

'As I write, our cannons roar without truce. On the mountain peaks I can see rays and projectors shine. I do not know how to recall the tumultuous impressions of this first day in the trenches on the Carso Mountain. They are profound and complex. Here war presents itself in its grandiose aspect as human cataclysm. It is here that we have the certainty that Italy shall prevail'.

Anticipating a major theme of the post-war political struggle, he concludes: 'It will arrive at Trieste and beyond!'

Claudia Baldoli

Newcastle University

*claudia.baldoli@ncl.ac.uk*

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