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# London calling Italy: La propaganda di Radio Londra nel 1943

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**London calling Italy: La propaganda di Radio Londra nel 1943**, by Ester Lo Biundo, Milan, Unicopli, 2014, 145 pp., €15.00, ISBN 978-88-400-1781-5

Arguably, one of the most successful features of British propaganda during the Second World War was its propaganda on the Italian front. Leaflets dropped from aircraft and radio programmes in Italian were able to build on the regime's military defeats, its failure to organise the defence of cities from air attack, and a largely unpopular alliance with Nazi Germany. More so than in the case of Germany, British (and American) propaganda was capable of connecting with many Italian soldiers and civilians, addressing them as unnatural enemies drawn into war by 'one man alone' (as Churchill famously defined Mussolini) and by a mistaken alliance. Italians who had believed in Fascism had been led astray and were now understandably shocked by that realisation; however, the Allies – often rather patronisingly – provided them with the chance to regain their freedom and dignity, by withdrawing their support from the regime and the Fascist war. Based mostly on an examination of texts of radio programmes and comparing them with other sources, this book analyses the variety of forms that this core message took, including the specific role of *Radio Londra* (the BBC services for Italy) in conveying it, while at the same time providing some revealing reflections on the reaction of at least a section of the Italian population.

In order to enter into the daily life, expectations and feelings of Italian civilians, it was necessary for the British to know as much as possible about them. A mix of intelligence, local newspapers and bulletins, informal contacts, and the contribution of Italian anti-Fascist exiles all helped to uncover the things women were saying at markets, what peasants or shopkeepers thought about the government, what workers discussed in the factories, or how the ordinary civilian reacted to air raids. While Britain had never been a major destination for Italian anti-Fascists, some key figures emigrated there after the racial laws of 1938 or at the start of the Second World War, and the BBC recruited others from among Italian prisoners of war. In this way, they acquired the chance of contributing to their own country's liberation from Fascism. Although their political views were not necessarily in line with those of the British government, writings analysed by the author show how they were prone to downplay the differences and to praise the freedom that the BBC gave them in preparing their speeches. This was often emphasised in radio programmes as one of the features of British war propaganda, which was presented as impartial because it focused on providing information rather than interpretations – a major distinction from the politicised views that were reported by its Italian counterpart, EIAR. Especially after the Axis defeat at El Alamein and with the increased air raids on Italian cities between the end of 1942 and the spring of 1943, it became easy for the BBC to expose to Italians the contradictory messages broadcast by EIAR. One of the themes widely exploited by the BBC was that Italians had been deprived of their freedom of expression, which was denoted as a symbol of a superior – democratic – political system.

Following a reconstruction of the two opposed radio systems and of the *Radio Londra* speakers and contributors, the book moves on to consider the impact of the BBC broadcasts. Building on research carried out by historians of public opinion, Lo Biundo argues that the law against listening to foreign radio stations was widely disregarded, and that the very existence of such a law increased suspicion among the citizens. The incredible popularity of Colonel Stevens, a broadcaster of Italian origin with a clear British accent, gives an indication of at least a section of public opinion. Many Italians, mainly from the middle classes, regularly listened to his programmes; some went as far as to write to him either to express admiration or even in search of advice. Some of the letters are interesting examples of the complex relationship between civilians and the Allies even before the period of 'liberation' turned into one of 'occupation'. The ambiguous perception of an enemy that presented itself as the liberator while raining destruction on Italian cities is also explored in a chapter of the book that focuses more closely on the content of the *Radio Londra* speeches. Recent historiography on the myth of the 'good-hearted Italian' gains an interesting added perspective here, because this research suggests that this widespread belief was strongly encouraged by the Allies themselves. This can be shown through the example of radio speeches that distinguished Italians from Germans, depicting Italians as victims of a long-hated Teutonic traitor who, for example, had not helped in the defence of Italian cities, and had abandoned the Italian army at El Alamein. Italians were also victims of Mussolini's dictatorship, which did not organise their protection from bombing: the many dead in Italian cities in 1943 were not due to Anglo-American bombs, which were bearers of liberation, but to the dictator's criminal decision to enter war against Britain and his incapacity to organise both civil and anti-aircraft defences.

With the landing on Sicilian soil, *Radio Londra* began to summon Italians to take part in their own liberation – while always careful to avoid hurting the Italians' sense of guilt or honour: in this case, Italian soldiers who had surrendered to the Allies were described not as cowards but as courageous, as their refusal to fight showed that they were brave enough to reject the dictatorship. The final act in which Italians could regain their dignity was the anti-German Resistance after the armistice of 8 September. During the war of liberation from the German occupiers the interest in *Radio Londra* grew, as the Allies became increasingly perceived, in areas that waited for the end of the war, as liberators rather than former enemies. This work ends with the armistice, suggesting that there is certainly room for further investigation on the relationship between *Radio Londra* and the Italian Resistance.

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