

BOOK REVIEW

## **The Bad German and the Good Italian: Removing the Guilt of the Second World War**

**by Filippo Focardi (translated by Paul Barnaby), Manchester (UK), Manchester University Press, 2023, ix + 336 pp., £85.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-5261-5713-3**

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'*Italiani brava gente*' ('Italians, the good people') encapsulates the view that Italian soldiers behaved more humanely than Germans during the Second World War. Originating from the 1964 film *Attack and Retreat* (whose original title was *Italiani brava gente*), this perception suggests that Italians were kind to occupied populations and minimally involved in Axis war crimes, even protecting Jewish people from persecution.

Focardi's 2016 book, now translated into English, critically examines the origins and endurance of this myth and its interrelation with the image of the 'bad German'. Focardi's analysis traces its emergence early in the Second World War and analyses why it continues to resist critical revision.

The book is organised in seven chapters following a chronological order but with strong thematic emphasis. The author opens with the origins of the myth in Allied wartime propaganda. Britain, perceiving Italy as the Axis's weak link, sought to undermine the Fascist regime by depicting Italians as reluctant participants in a German-driven war. Focardi then examines how Italy's post-armistice monarchy and anti-Fascist groups adopted and promoted this narrative. The Savoy monarchy, seeking legitimacy and favourable postwar terms, positioned Italians as victims of Fascism; when Mussolini's Salò regime accused the monarchy of betrayal, they responded by depicting Germans and Fascists as the true traitors. This narrative framed Italians as pawns in Mussolini's misguided alliance with Germany and as innocent people finally free to ally with the West. Anti-Fascist groups, hoping to broaden support for the Resistance, similarly adopted this perspective, blaming Mussolini while portraying Italians as his reluctant supporters or victims. This convergence of interests between the Southern government and anti-Fascist factions sidestepped the complex reality that Fascism had enjoyed wider public support than admitted.

Focardi, then, illustrates how these narratives shaped postwar Italian identity. Italians' efforts to be recognised as allies by the United Nations were largely unsuccessful, limited by the stark divide between this myth and reality. Nonetheless, leaders had invoked patriotic themes from the Risorgimento and the First World War to bolster morale against Germany. Even Communist-led Resistance factions employed nationalist rhetoric and contributed to another postwar myth: the inflated support for the Resistance. Focardi

points out that the partisans' ranks swelled after 8 September 1943, more from disillusionment with Fascism than genuine anti-Fascist sentiment. Additionally, tensions over territorial claims, particularly with Yugoslavia, complicated the narrative of national unity and integrity.

Postwar Italian leaders retroactively distanced the country from the Axis, creating a collective 'gaslighting' that minimised Italy's Axis role and pinned the blame on a few individuals acting against the nation's will. Memoirs from figures like former foreign minister Dino Grandi and the edited diaries of Galeazzo Ciano contributed to this narrative.

In the sixth chapter, 'Good Italians and Bad Germans', Focardi outlines how memoirs and early historiography contrasted Italian *humanity* with German *brutality*. Accounts of Italian soldiers aiding Jews and Serbians in occupied Yugoslavia and showing restraint in the Russian campaign fostered this dichotomy. Although there is some truth to these accounts, Focardi shows that early historiography and journalism selectively emphasised Italian compassion while obscuring Italian war crimes, fostering the dominant image of Italian soldiers as victims of Mussolini's ambition and German cruelty.

After the war, this narrative played a critical role in preventing the extradition of Italian war criminals and forestalling domestic trials. The Cold War context helped sustain this myth, as neither government nor opposition forces were sufficiently willing or interested to fully challenge it. The downplaying of Italian crimes and of their alliance with the Germans, and the inflation of the Resistance myth seemed to play a *coordinated* role in the building of postwar Italian identity.

Finally, Focardi discusses how the dehumanisation of Germans in Italian narratives has perpetuated stereotypes and portrayed German soldiers as mindless brutes. Diaries and postwar memoirs have depicted Germans as inherently ruthless, while Italians, by contrast, are cast as morally superior. Again, while these contain an element of truth and crimes committed by Nazi Germany maintain their appropriate significance, what Focardi emphasises is the use of these crimes to minimise Italians' role in them.

In his conclusion, Focardi highlights the lasting impact of this myth in Italian and international cinema, as seen in films like *Mediterraneo* (1991) and *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (1994). Fictionalised representation reflected the persistence of those myths in collective memory and public discourse, contributing to the extreme reluctance to approach any process of critical engagement with the past. He references the hostile reaction in Italy to BBC TV's documentary mini-series *Fascist Legacy* (1989), demonstrating the enduring reluctance to confront Italian war crimes, in contrast to Germany's more engaged – albeit not unproblematic – confrontation of its Nazi past.

Overall, Focardi offers a compelling, well-researched examination of how the 'good Italian' myth was constructed, sustained, and incorporated into Italy's national identity. He illustrates how absolving narratives about the Second World War have shaped Italian public discourse and memory while complicating the pursuit of accountability. Using Germans as scapegoats assumes particular importance as it provides a *convenient* enemy on whom to shift blame. This raises uncomfortable questions about our global approach to Second World War memory. Focusing on Nazi Germany has long served, for example, to avoid discussing collaboration in formerly occupied countries.

The book's structure is effective: it emphasises the growing complexity of these narratives and the escalation of their political and social consequences. As Focardi dives deeper into these narratives, the picture becomes increasingly nuanced; to distinguish *exaggerated* German brutality from the reality of the crimes of Nazi Germany, for example, is a challenging task that Focardi manages effectively.

While Focardi's work is an excellent case study for Italy, it provides a framework to broadly engage with the issue of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – the process of coming to terms with the past. This is suggested by Philip Cooke's closing note in his preface

to the book, inviting readers of the English translation to ‘ponder the extent to which their own nation has yet to “settle its accounts” with Germany’ (p. ix).

In echoing this invitation, I can wholeheartedly recommend this book, as it reveals the complexities and challenges faced by public history emphasising the essential work of deconstructing simplistic representations.