

La necessità, il caso, l'utopia. Saggi sulla guerra partigiana e dintorni

by Santo Peli, Pisa, BFS edizioni, 2022, 238 pp., €16.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-88-944471-9-4.

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La necessità, il caso, l'utopia is a collection of nine essays on the Italian partisan struggle and its legacy, originally written by Santo Peli between 2010 and 2021. As the author, who has written many influential books on the Italian Resistance,¹ states in the preface, these essays had previously been published in collective volumes or academic journals and, therefore, they were fated to circulate only among the experts in the field. Re-publishing the results of his latest research, with additions and amendments, makes his work more accessible to a wider audience and helps to '*sottrarli all'invisibilità*' ('save it from invisibility', p. 7).

Peli is well aware of the difficulty in challenging the public use/misuse of history, in particular regarding a foundational event such as the Italian Resistance. This publication alone cannot solve the problem of the current lack of influence of historical research on the public debate. Nevertheless, circulating the results of years of study and research of a leading expert of the Italian Resistance outside the academic world is a praiseworthy initiative that will benefit history enthusiasts and university students, as well as young researchers and well-established historians.

The distinguishing trait that unites all the essays included in this volume is the emphasis on the historical context. According to Peli, an idealistic and decontextualised depiction of the Italian Resistance does not allow us to understand its complexity, its difficult journey, its internal rifts and contradictions. Furthermore, he believes that appreciating, and also sharing, the values of the Resistance should not prevent historians from describing the partisans as they were, putting aside any patriotic rhetoric.

In this book, Peli discusses many different topics, investigating key aspects and questions regarding the partisan struggle as well as exploring the influence the Resistance had on Italian society, its complex memory and legacy. The first essay published in this collection is also one of the most interesting and innovative. It examines the '*tormentate vicende*' ('troubled vicissitudes', p. 13) of the 'free partisan territories', investigating the reasons that led to their establishment as well as the problematic aspects and the questionable results that characterised this experience.

As Peli remarks, from a military point of view, the permanent occupation of villages and valleys was a great hazard because it made it impossible for the partisan formations to use guerrilla warfare techniques, which were their only option against a better equipped enemy. Therefore, to understand why the partisan institutions took such a decision it is important to consider the context in which this choice was made. The context was that of the 'great illusion' of summer 1944.

During that summer, the favourable progress of the war led the partisans to believe that the conflict was almost over. Consequently, several partisan formations, mainly Communists, decided to take advantage of the situation and tried to free villages and valleys. They also aimed to promote a social and political change in the liberated areas and to involve the local people in the establishment of new democratic institutions. However,

according to Peli, this ambitious political project was ‘*una scommessa densa d’incognite*’ (‘a highly risky gamble’, p. 20).

Even if there was concern for a possible return in force of the Nazi-Fascists, this threat and its consequences were tragically underestimated. Unsurprisingly, the reprisals which followed the re-occupation by the Nazi-Fascists had a negative impact on the local people’s attitude towards the partisans, and can also explain the presence of persisting anti-partisan memories in those areas. According to Peli, discussing features and expectations of the free partisan territories as well as the limitations and contradictory aspects is essential to understand the Resistance’s difficult journey and its complex legacy.

A second valuable piece of research included in this collection deals with the question of the use of violence by the partisans. As Peli remarks, the failed integration of the partisans into the regular army left them in an ambiguous position. Consequently, the legitimacy of their actions was often questioned and, in the postwar period, many of them were brought to trial as common criminals. However, for many years professional historians avoided dealing with the features, limitations and consequences of the use of violence by the partisans. This essay examines in depth the reasons why this crucial question was neglected by the historiography for a long time.

Another intriguing study is devoted to the question of the political prisoners, held as hostages by the Nazi-Fascists. It discusses lesser known aspects of this dimension of the conflict, analysing in detail features and implications of the daring, and often successful, attempts the partisans made to free their comrades. Interestingly, several essays published in this collection concentrate on the impact the Resistance had on postwar Italian society and discuss its complex legacy and memory.

Partito nuovo e aspettative antiche: comunisti e Resistenza is a remarkable piece of research which investigates the reasons why the Italian Communist Party (PCI) greatly increased its numbers during the Resistance and in the immediate post-war years. According to Peli, the efficiency, the pugnacity and the discipline showed by the Communist formations during the Resistance had a crucial importance in determining the growing success of the PCI, although its new national policy did not please many rank and file Communists. The next essay is a fascinating study which explores the different paths taken by the partisans after the Resistance, between disappointments and indignation about the failed purge, political commitments and trade-union struggles.

Among its many strengths, this thought-provoking book has the merit of reminding us that the Resistance was a complex, unexpected, and inevitably divisive event, and it was also a civil war in the sense outlined by Claudio Pavone. Even though the self-comforting picture of ‘*un popolo alla macchia*’ (‘a popular Resistance’, p. 8) is constantly re-emerging, Peli resolutely challenges this rhetorical approach. Underlining the limitations and faults of the partisans, as the cultivated intellectual and partisan Emanuele Artom did, should remind us that men are men, but also that ‘*bisogna cercare di renderli migliori*’ (‘we must try to make them better’, p. 9).

Note

1. Peli, S. 2014. *Storie di Gap. Terrorismo urbano e Resistenza*. Turin: Einaudi.
Peli, S. 2015. *Storia della Resistenza in Italia*. Turin: Einaudi.
Peli, S. 2018. *La Resistenza difficile*. Pisa: BFS edizioni.