

BOOK REVIEW

Italia 1943. La guerra continua

by Luca Baldissara, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2023, 469 pp., €32
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As the title suggests, Luca Baldissara's *Italia 1943* focuses on a core year in Italian history and a widely discussed historiographical theme. The author approaches the *quarantatrè* by beginning approximately ten years earlier, taking the Fascist wars of 1935 as a starting point to understand how and to what extent the regime prepared for the war and the complex range of opinions on the dictatorship in its last years. This long-term perspective allows Baldissara to highlight the impact of the war on the political development of the Italian people, which, following 8 September and the dissolution of traditional authorities, meant that they faced a choice between *'l'impegno in prima persona nella guerra di guerriglia e nella "Guerra alla Guerra" nelle sue diverse forme'* (first-hand involvement in guerrilla warfare and the 'War on War' in its various forms, p. 28). The author closely examines the historiography covering these years, comparing it to many archival documents. What sets this work apart is the precise and systematic use of the 'voices' of those times – both protagonists and observers – which Baldissara has collected from diaries, published memoirs and personal correspondence. Although the source base is rich and varied, the perspectives of conscripts and those who lived through the Racial Laws might have added a new layer of analysis to the study.

Italia 1943 is made up of an introduction and five chapters of different lengths, which proceed chronologically. In the introduction, 'Sulla Soglia Incerta del 1943', the author first proposes some considerations about traditional and non-traditional historiography on Fascism and its wars, and then outlines the objectives of his research, the sources and the methodological approach. The first chapter, 'Il Fascismo va alla Guerra', starts from the First World War and focuses initially on how mechanisation of the conflict and the advent of total war were concepts known to the establishment of the dictatorship, which assumed military mobilisation as *'un tratto connaturato alla natura stessa del fascismo'* (a fundamental trait of Fascism's inner nature, p. 36). Then, the author analyses the characteristics of Italy's military mobilisation plans in the mid-1930s to show how fragilities and deficits resulted in a general worsening of living conditions. At this point, the book stresses Italy's entry into the Second World War and the disastrous *'guerra parallela'* – the term given to Italy's plan to fight against the British Empire in Africa and Greece without Germany's help – and analyses occupation of conquered territories, the relationship between the military and the regime, and how Italy's efforts in the conflict evolved after the declaration of war on the Soviet Union.

The second chapter, 'Guerra e Crisi Sociale', continues some of these themes, focusing first on the disastrous losses of Italian–German armies in Russia and North Africa between 1942 and 1943, before carefully analysing the economic and social status of Italians at home, many of whom were forced to live with inadequate food supplies, extremely low salaries and unbearable workloads. The author also considers the effects of the Allied bombing offensive on undefended Italian cities, which played a part in igniting workers' strikes in the spring of 1943. These strikes are seen as proof of the development of a young and dynamic antifascist society, born as a reaction to the poor living conditions sparked by the war.

The third chapter, 'Un Sistema di Potere al Collasso', is the strongest. Using diaries and memoirs, the author reconstructs the build-up to Mussolini's removal from office, examining the psychology of the masses and of those who were personally involved in this political moment. Then, Baldissara analyses the 45 days in which Badoglio was prime minister before the armistice, viewing his government as a tool of the political, economic and military establishment that outlived Mussolini's regime, proof of a '*miope ma cocciuta volontà di preservare i rapporti di potere interni*' (shortsighted and stubborn willingness to preserve the internal balance of power, p. 232). This chapter ends with valuable attempts to clarify the actions of Badoglio's government regarding the alliance with the Germans and the armistice signed with the Anglo-Americans.

The fourth chapter, 'Italiani di Settembre', and the fifth, 'Poteri Senza', examine the military and political consequences of Badoglio's management of the armistice for Italian conscripts and civilians. Here, the author considers the disastrous situations created by the decision of the government and the king to flee (a decision that had been planned for some time), the destruction of any institutional points of reference following the occupation of Italy by the Wehrmacht, the disorganised attempts to counter German forces by some units of the Italian military and the beginning of the civil war. Baldissara's analysis carefully considers the three different powers vying for influence here: the Repubblica Sociale Italiana, backed by the Germans; the Regno del Sud, supported by the Allies; and the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale, a political and military force across the country. The author describes this latter group as '*dei tre quello che esplicitamente si propone in linea di discontinuità con gli assetti di potere preesistenti*' (of the three, the one that presents itself in discontinuity with the traditional balance of powers, p. 392).

Baldissara's book is 469 pages long – footnotes included – and remains coherent in its structure and method from start to finish. An innovative piece of work, it will be of interest to those interested in Fascism and Italy's social history. The book sets itself apart from existing works thanks to its long-term framework for analysis, which shows that the war was an innate trait of Fascism and a precise political choice of the Italian establishment. Other strong points of the book are its thorough examination of the political, economic and military powers that survived the defenestration of *il duce*, and the careful description of the context in which Italians developed their political consciousness, in order to try to understand the different choices that people faced after the armistice. The book's greatest strength is its effort to allow the protagonists and observers of those tumultuous times to speak for themselves through memoirs and diaries, and the comparisons drawn between these sources and the existing historiography. This work ensures that Baldissara transmits to the reader the daily uncertainty of those living through these years and the plurality of trajectories and cultures of both protagonists and observers.