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A Civil War, by Claudio Pavone

Review by Mark Mazower



Partisans parade in Milan, 1945

A *Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance*, by Claudio Pavone, Verso, RRP£35/\$55, 864 pages

It is a strange kind of fighting force whose soldiers have names like Ajax, Bill, D'Artagnan and Ivan; Scipio and Electric Beard, Napoleon and Machinegun, Tom, Euclid and Hangman. Because they are volunteers, not conscripts, they make up their own oaths of allegiance – for how else to make sure that they stay together? Although they have officers, they dislike their airs and graces. They discuss history and their country's future, but they mistrust those who talk politics and try to get them to toe the party line.

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Across the world in the early 1940s, such groups sprang up in the wake of national defeat and enemy occupation. In Italy, they were known as the partisans, though the Germans called them bandits. To the military mind, the partisan represents a kind of pathology, a deviation into irregularity and a force of disorder and unlawful violence. But he (or she) can also be seen as the proud embodiment of self-assertion in the midst of social and institutional collapse. From this angle, the partisan incarnates crisis in the original sense as it was known to the ancient Greeks, which is to say, that all-important moment of personal decision in which the free man is distinguished from the slave.

“One morning I awoke/ And I found the invader”, runs the first stanza of perhaps the most famous of all the partisan songs, “*Bella ciao*”. In the late summer of 1943 the state of Italy disappeared into the vortex of war as the Fascist regime collapsed. Anglo American forces pushed up from the south, and the Germans marched swiftly down from the north. The British backed King Victor Emmanuel III in

Brindisi, the Germans helped Mussolini re-establish himself in Salo. As all claimed to speak for Italy, where did legitimacy lie?

Many Italians loathed both the King and the Fascists and some chose to fight for a new Italy by joining the resistance: Claudio Pavone's *A Civil War* explores their predicament. Far from a conventional history, it is, rather, a study of moral reasoning in those highly charged 18 months between Mussolini's overthrow and the end of the war. Although it preponderantly treats those who resisted, some of its most remarkable pages are devoted to the attitudes and beliefs of those who were faithful to fascism to the bitter end.

Its fair-mindedness is only one of its virtues. On publication in Italian in 1991, it was immediately recognised as one of those rare works of history that speaks to the present in new and urgent tones. For such an important work, it has taken a surprisingly long time to appear in English but we must be glad it has, for it has lost none of its pertinence; indeed, the current crisis in the eurozone has given its underlying message about the fragility of the democratic achievement a new importance.

The postwar Italian republic was founded on the values of the anti-fascist resistance: its 1947 constitution outlawed fascism, and its main parties had emerged out of the resistance struggle. The idea that fascism itself might have been a mass phenomenon was taboo; antifascism constituted what one scholar terms an official morality. Only the extreme right said that a “civil war” had taken place in Italy between 1943 and 1945: to everyone else, that sounded too much like putting Good (the resistance) and Evil (Mussolini’s last-hour Fascists) on the same plane. It thus came as a shock to Italian public opinion that an eminent historian, himself a former resister, could use this very phrase.

Civil war there was, however: as this book amply demonstrates, Italians had fought Italians with ferocity and passion. A civil war, remarked one, is the only kind of war worth fighting – meaning that what is at stake is the soul and honour of one’s own country. Others were simply overwhelmed, like the young heavily armed Fascist in March 1944 who marched along the street firing his machinegun before entering a tavern, staring at the terrified and contemptuous women gazing at him, and bursting into tears, exclaiming: “If you knew how I too am feeling! I’ve had it! That we have to do this kind of thing between Italians!”

The idea of civil war motivated the Fascists in particular, who felt incredulous that their long-despised enemies were now fighting back. The partisans, on the other hand, saw fascism’s revival in late 1943 as a kind of bad dream, a rewinding of history. For many of them Mussolini was yesterday’s man and they were as likely to see the war as a patriotic struggle against the invader, or as the opening gambit in a class struggle against the rich.

The invader meant above all the Germans, of course. But the Anglo American forces came in for their share of criticism and dislike too, and their aerial bombing of Italian cities provoked anger and a desire for reprisal. “I know this sounds malicious,” wrote a resident of Como, “but, I swear I’d be cruelly gleeful to hear news of the destruction of some American cities and I’m only sorry it isn’t possible.” For the socialist newspaper *Avanti!*, the Anglo American advance up the peninsula threatened a future in which Italy would be turned into a colony “whose lot it will be to grow old on the crumbs of the decomposing capitalistic economy”. Here, ridding the country of the invader meant much more than merely seeing Nazism defeated.

There are two quite distinct ways of writing about the second world war. To those who have never known what it is to be occupied, and never lived through the complete breakdown of institutions and authority, it is tempting to tell the conflict as a story of geopolitical ambitions, battlefields and resources. From such an Olympian, Great Power perspective, partisans are a sideshow, of debatable military utility. But this misses the fact that in many countries defeat in war created an existential crisis of national sovereignty, revealing the deep fractures that lay beneath the surface of unity; these fractures were simultaneously murderous and pregnant with future political possibility.

The memory of internecine struggle was what drove the consolidation of democracy in Italy after 1945 as well as the dream of closer union between states across the European continent. Guiding us through this dimension of the conflict, Pavone’s great work is among the few indisputable masterpieces of contemporary history. But more than this, it is a unique meditation on the passions and tensions that continue to swirl beneath the surface of modern politics.

Mark Mazower is professor of history at Columbia University and author of ‘Governing the World: The History of an Idea’ (Penguin)

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