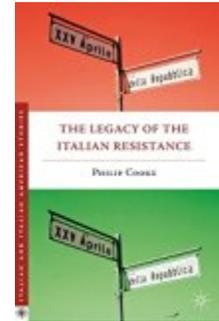


Philip Cooke. *The Legacy of the Italian Resistance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 276 S. ISBN 978-0-230-11410-4.

Reviewed by Filippo Focardi
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P. Cooke: The Legacy of the Italian Resistance

In his most recent book Philip Cooke aims “to investigate the various ways that the Resistance movement in Italy has impacted Italian politics, society, and culture over the period from 1945 to the present day” (p. 3). The research focuses in particular on the relationship between Italian politics and the culture of the Italian Resistance, seen as two interwoven strands that contributed to the formation “the DNA of modern Italy” (p. 3). Regarding his methodology, the author claims to use “a holistic approach that bridges the gap between historical and cultural analysis” (p. 3). The resulting work is an examination of various “vectors of memory” – partisan associations, political parties, key individuals, historiography, literary texts, memoirs, films, monuments, songs, and so on – that have been used to transmit the Resistance legacy. The volume follows a chronological order and is subdivided into eight chapters reflecting the major junctures of Italian post-war history.

The first chapter is devoted to the crucial period between 1945 and 1948. The legacy of the struggle against the Nazis and Mussolini’s Social Republic is marked from the outset by various strengths and weaknesses. Neorealist cinema, most notably “Roma, Città Aperta” by Roberto Rossellini, is a powerful medium through which the Resistance is painted as the redemption of the entire Italian people thanks to a collaboration between Catholics and Communists. The Resistance is described as a unified national liberation movement, while the reality of a civil war between Italians is overshadowed. This same interpretation is found in the press and in the country’s collective memory which advances a rhetorical and inter-

pretive paradigm, still in vogue today, of the Resistance as a sort of second Risorgimento. However Italian literature, unlike that of the French, fails to create a national epic out of the Resistance. Rather what dominates the published works during this time are “short stories” (p. 33), which mirror the strong regional differences characteristic of the Italian Resistance.

In the political sphere signs of crisis are quickly seen: the early fall of the government led by Italian Resistance leader Ferruccio Parri in November 1945; the disappearance the following year of the Action Party (PDA) that had inspired the liberation movement; the arrest of hundreds of former partisans, in particular Communists, at the start of the Cold War which placed the Resistance itself on trial; the splitting off of Catholics and actionists from the predominantly Communist National Association of Partisans of Italy (ANPI); and the ouster of the Communist Party (PCI) from the government in 1947 with the accusation they were plotting an armed revolution (“Plan K”). While the author lays to rest the idea that there ever was “a secret army of communist partisans” (p. 26) ready to take power, he does recognize the strong tensions within the PCI that resulted from friction between the strategy of party leader Palmiro Togliatti who sought official recognition of the party by collaborating with the other antifascist forces and the persistence of revolutionary ideas among the partisan base. This latter tendency continues even after the end of the war, as evidenced by the killing of “class enemies” that occurred mainly in the region of Emilia.

The next two chapters are dedicated to the periods running from 1948 to 1955 and from 1955 to 1960. It is an era which continues to be characterized in the prevailing historiography as dominated by “anti-antifascism” and the crisis of the Resistance in the context of the political hegemony of the Christian Democrat Party (DC). See for example Giovanni De Luna / Marco Revelli, *Fascismo/Antifascismo. Le Idee, le identità*, Firenze 1995. The author highlights the vigor shown by the anti-fascist culture and he rightly draws attention to two aspects: the effective mobilization of the actionist culture, under the leadership of Piero Calamandrei, in defense of the Resistance and the rediscovery of the Resistance on the part of the Catholic Church thanks to political figures and ex-Partisans such as Paolo Emilio Taviani, Enrico Mattei and Giovanni Gronchi, who was elected President of the Republic in 1955. Among those who have supported a similar view as the author see: Cristina Cenci, *Rituale e memoria. Le celebrazioni del 25 aprile in Le memorie della Repubblica*, in: Leonardo Paggi (ed.), *Le memorie della Repubblica*, Firenze 1999, p. 325–378; Filippo Focardi, *La guerra della memoria. La Resistenza nel dibattito politico italiano dal 1945 a oggi*, Rome-Bari 2005. This also allows him to burst the myth of a Communist monopoly of the Resistance.

In the 1950s “the process of erasure of the Resistance legacy” (p. 39) is halted, however the Resistance is not yet “released from the customhouse” (p. 81). For this we must wait until the 1960s, the era analyzed in the fourth chapter. Here the author does not differ in opinion from collected works on the period. The turning point here is the so-called “Tambroni Affair,” sparked by the decision of Prime Minister Fernando Tambroni, a Christian Democrat, to allow the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI) to hold its national conference in Genoa, a stronghold of the Resistance movement. The choice led to massive demonstrations in the summer of 1960 against Tambroni. The subsequent fall of his government paved the way for the Socialist Party (PSI) to enter the ruling majority and solidified the hegemonic assertion of the Resistance culture as a second *Risorgimento* and heroic war of liberation. The Resistance thus enters the Pantheon of the nation. Proof of this are the celebrations of the twentieth anniversary of the Liberation in 1965, organized by a committee that included representatives of the PCI and transmitted on TV for the first time.

To challenge the official canon of the Resistance, broadly reflected in cinema and historiography, are literary works such as “I Piccoli Maestri” by Luigi Meneghello. Luigi Meneghello, *I Piccoli Maestri*, Milano 1964. , with

its ironic tone, and “Il Partigiano Johnny” by Beppe Fenoglio. Beppe Fenoglio, *Il Partigiano Johnny*, Torino 1968. In the second half of the Sixties, with the rise of the student movement, it is primarily the Italian youth who begin to condemn the patriotic recasting of the Resistance in official ceremonies and instead rediscover the movement’s revolutionary and class origins.

The years 1970–1978, subject of the fifth chapter, represent the period in which the anti-fascist culture had its greatest influence on society, as evidenced by a peak in construction of monuments dedicated to the Resistance and in the diffusion of partisan songs. At the same time, this era is marked by heightened political competition played out around the claim of a monopoly on the memory of the Resistance: On the one hand there are the political parties, from DC to PCI, which used the Resistance to defend government institutions threatened by terrorist challenges from both the right and the left and on the other hand is the “militant anti-fascism” that promoted the idea of a “betrayed Resistance” (given their revolutionary aspirations were blocked) to radically challenge these institutions. The author offers an effective analysis of the attempt to appropriate the memory of the Resistance by the young extra-parliamentary left, some of whom then opted to continue the armed struggle in the image of the partisans.

The sixth chapter, covering the years 1978–1989, traces the period between the election as President of the Republic of the Socialist leader Sandro Petri – a prominent figure of the old anti-fascists; charismatic and pugnacious, in the front lines of the defense of the Resistance – and the transformation of the PCI into the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS) as result of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The author links this transformation to repudiation of the past and the abandonment of the Resistance by the party that had been its most tenacious guardian – a conclusion I find much too drastic. More convincing is the assertion that the weakening of the Resistance legacy in the 1980s is a result of the anti-communist campaign of the Socialist Party led by Bettino Craxi set in a cultural context that is marked by the rediscovery of the theme of civil war and the memory of Salò. This is demonstrated by the success of Carlo Mazzantini’s book, “A Cercar La Bella Morte” Carlo Mazzantini, *A cercar la bella morte*, Venezia 1986. , with its humanization of young fascists who went to fight for Mussolini thinking they were preserving the “honor” of the nation.

The last two chapters deal with the period from the end of the First Republic to today. Anti-communist crit-

icism of the Resistance gains acceleration, driven by the desire for political legitimacy of the New Right which rose to power in 1994 under the aegis of Silvio Berlusconi. Above all the National Alliance (AN) – Gianfranco Fini’s party formed from MSI in 1995 – called for “reconciliation” between the old rivals, placing both fascists and anti-fascists on equal footing characterizing both as acting with patriotic intentions. It is during this time that on television, in newspapers and in book stores rampant revisionist history finds inspiration in the works of Renzo De Felice (although Cooke discusses De Felice only in passing) and the extraordinary success of the journalist Giampaolo Pansa, the “Dan Brown of Italian history” (p. 181). The anti-fascist front manifests two contradictory positions: one faction of the PDS, with Massimo D’Alema and Luciano Violante at the helm, accepts the demands of reconciliation and the revision of memory while another faction is instead mobilized to defend the Resistance. The

latter reaction is demonstrated by the “both antifascist and anti-Berlusconi” protest (p. 156) organized in Milan on Liberation Day, April 25, 1994, and in the revival of Resistance songs, starting with “Bella Ciao,” covered by bands like the Modena City Ramblers.

The last part of the book is marred by some shortcomings on the part of the author, who doesn’t take into consideration the politics of memory developed over the last decade resulted in new days commemorating World War II. Particularly surprising is the lack of any reference to the fundamental work of Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, President of the Republic, to revive the memory of the Resistance. On the whole, however, the work is very valuable, and its final appeal to Italian historians to make the fruits of their labor more accessible to the general public should be embraced. Philip Cooke certainly proves that it can be done in quite an excellent manner.

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