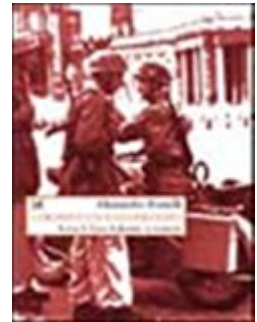


Alessandro Portelli. *L'ordine Ö" giÖ stato eseguito: Roma, le Fosse Ardeatine, la memoria.* Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2001. vii + 448 pp. Â??25.00,, cloth, ISBN 978-88-7989-616-0.



Reviewed by Stanislao G. Pugliese

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Alessandro Portelli's superb study begins with two terse press releases, one from the official fascist news agency, Stefani, the other from the Vatican's official newspaper, the *Osservatore Romano*.

On 25 March 1944, Italian newspapers printed the following from Stefani:

=Nel pomeriggio del 23 marzo 1944, elementi criminali hanno eseguito un attentato con lancio di bomba contro una colonna tedesca di Polizia in transito per via Rasella.... La vile imboscata fu eseguita da comunisti badogliani.... Il Comando tedesco = deciso a stroncare l'attivit= di questi banditi scellerati. Nessuno dovr= sabotare impunemente la cooperazione italo-tedesco nuovamente affermata. Il Comando tedesco, perci=, ha ordinato che per ogni tedesco ammazzato dieci criminali comunisti-badogliani sarrano fucilati. Quest'ordine = gi= stato eseguito.

(On the afternoon of 23 March 1944, criminal elements carried out a bomb attack against a German police column marching through via Rasella.... The cowardly ambush was carried out by communist-badoglians [followers of Field Marshal

Pietro Badoglio, the King's choice to replace Mussolini].... The German Command has decided to crush the work of these wicked bandits. No one can be permitted to sabotage the newly affirmed Italo-German cooperation with impunity. The German Command, therefore, has ordered that for every German killed ten communist-badoglian criminals will be shot. This order has already been carried out.)

A day later, the *Osservatore Romano*, commenting on the German communique, suggested that the German soldiers and those massacred at the Fosse Ardeatine were victims on the same moral plane; that the 335 were "sacrificed for the guilty who escaped arrest"; that those who carried out the attack in via Rasella were "irresponsible" and that they should respect human life which they (the partisans) had no right to sacrifice; and that "responsible elements" (that is, the Germans) were called upon to protect "history and civilization." These two official documents serve as framing devices for Portelli's reconstruction of the events through oral history. In the midst of the Erich Priebke trial, Portelli decided to start an in-

vestigation of how via Rasella and the Fosse Ardeatine continue to reverberate in the memory of the Romans. After interviewing more than 200 people, from participants in the via Rasella attack to Roman citizens to his own students at the University of Rome where he teaches classes on American literature, Portelli has crafted an impressive work of oral history and a priceless contribution to the historiography of the Resistance.

For nearly sixty years, historians, the people of Rome, and all Italians have debated the moral and political significance of what happened on via Rasella and at the Fosse Ardeatine in March 1944. The facts as acknowledged by everyone: on 23 March 1944, as the city of Rome was celebrating the anniversary of the "Marcia su Roma," a GAP (Gruppi di azione patriottica) squad of the PCI led by Rosario Bentivenga and Carla Capponi attacked the Third Bolzen Battalion as it marched up via Rasella. When the smoke cleared, thirty-two soldiers lay dead (another was to die the next day). Hitler was furious, demanding the entire neighborhood be destroyed and the population sent to labor camps. After some negotiations, Field Marshal Kesselring ordered that ten Italians be killed for each German. The process of drawing up a list of "death's candidates" fell to the SS chief in Rome, Lieutenant Colonel Herbert Kappler. During the night of 23-24 March, 1944, Kappler, assisted by Roman police chief Pietro Caruso, placed the names of 335 men on the list of death (five more than what the order demanded). The victims were already incarcerated at the SS headquarters on via Tasso and at the notorious Regina Coeli prison; none had participated in the via Rasella attack. On the afternoon of 24 March 1944, trucks drove the men to the Fosse Ardeatine, a network of tufa caves off the Appia Antica, where the victims were shot in the back of the head. The youngest, Duilio Cibeï, a carpenter's apprentice, was 15; the oldest, Mosè Di Consiglio, 74, was one of six men of the Di Consiglio family massacred. The list of victims was held and checked by Erich Priebke who executed two men himself. At the

end of the task, the entrance to the caves was dynamited, but rumors were already flying around Rome. When the city was liberated in June, the Allies were conducted to the site and the gruesome process of recovering and identifying the bodies was undertaken by Professor Attilio Ascarelli of the University of Rome.

Although the story seems an almost straightforward tale of partisan action and German reprisal against civilians, almost every aspect of the story has been challenged by conservative historians, politicians, and ordinary citizens of Rome. For example, it has almost universally been believed that the Germans issued an ultimatum: the partisans responsible were to turn themselves in; if not, the hostages would be shot. Many people today in Rome are adamant on this detail: they claim to have seen the posters ordering the partisans to surrender or else the hostages would be killed. In fact, as Kappler and Priebke both revealed at their respective trials in the 1960s and the 1990s, there was no such demand made on the part of the Germans. In fact, the whole operation was to be carried out with the utmost secrecy and speed to prevent an uprising in Rome.

The battle for the memory and significance of via Rasella and the Fosse Ardeatine continues to this day. When Gianfranco Fini visits the Fosse Ardeatine as the vice premier and leader of the "post-fascist" Alleanza Nazionale, what significance does this have? When the families of the victims sue the partisans, what does this mean about the Resistance as the founding myth of the Italian Republic? What does it mean when a court rules that the partisan attack on via Rasella was a criminal act but the ruling is overturned by the Corte di Cassazione? How was it that the fate of seventy-five Jews (scheduled to be deported to Auschwitz) ended at the Fosse Ardeatine with their Christian neighbors? Why is it that so much time and ink has been spent arguing about the "criminality" of the partisan attack on via Rasella while the Nazi massacre resulted in Kappler flee-

ing prison and Priebke being absolved, then re-tried and finally placed under house arrest after fifty years?

Winner of the Premio Viareggio, one of Italy's most prestigious literary awards, Portelli's book has now been published in a second edition with a "postfazione" and will soon be translated into English. As Portelli so well points out, the battle over the meaning of via Rasella and the Fosse Ardeatine concerns not only professional historians, it is also a struggle on the terrain where the very identity of Italy and the Italians is constructed and deconstructed.

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