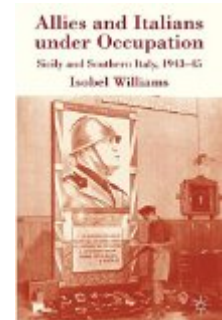


**Isobel Williams.** *Allies and Italians under Occupation: Sicily and Southern Italy, 1943-45.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. xiv + 308 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-230-57259-1.



**Reviewed by** Philip Morgan

**Published on** H-Italy (April, 2015)

**Commissioned by** Niamh Cullen (University of Southampton)

This is, almost despite itself, a really interesting account of the performance of the joint British and American military occupation and administration of liberated Sicily and southern Italy between 1943 and 1945. It is written in a straightforward, clear-sighted, and slightly ironic way. Even when dealing with the bizarre and the extraordinary, or with wartime atrocities, the level-headed, low-key approach persists. The style matches the modesty of the book's aims. As a self-declared "traditional and descriptive work" (p. 9), the book sticks closely to its documentary sources, does not speculate or jump to conclusions, and where conjecture is evident, it is plausibly handled. For the publisher's and readers' sake, the author has excluded a raft or two of statistical tables. There are, however, certainly enough sets of figures to be going on with. Their compilation and the author's reliance on them indicate once again the dedicated scholarly approach of the book, which at every point wants to measure and quantify if at all possible, the impacts of the Allied occupation. The

outcome is, oddly, but perhaps inevitably, a dilution of the sense of these impacts for the reader.

The book starts by defining the aim of the Allied military administration as the realization and preservation of civilian law and order, in the hope that the military conquest of the country could proceed without distraction. It then calibrates the levels of different kinds of criminality perpetrated by both liberating Allied troops and liberated Italians, from drunkenness, theft, armed robbery, to rape, pimping, prostitution, black marketeering, and back. Some really careful and scrupulous cross-referencing of sources goes into evaluating the relative prevalence of rape and violent crime committed by Allied soldiers. On other occasions, the gaps in the documentation make redundant the author's reliance on statistically based analysis, which means no conclusion can be reached at all. Perhaps the gaps can be filled, albeit more speculatively, with the more anecdotal and individual "evidence" of personal memories and testimonies. But these are sources which, given the approach and the desire to avoid the

picturesque, the banal, and the melodramatic, the author appears reluctant to use, or overuse, as she would see it.

The infamous behavior of the French-officered North African troops, who raped and pillaged their way up the peninsula, is sometimes left out of accounts of the war in Italy. The full-on, low-profile treatment works here, and we get an honest and plausible explanation of the way these colonial native troops chose to fight their war. But I would have appreciated the author tackling the whole issue of race in the conduct and reception of what was a cobbled-together multinational and multi-ethnic invading Allied force, despite, or rather, because of the point made in the book that only Italian records of crimes committed by Allied soldiers included any reference to “colour.” I feel the same way about the impression formed from this book and my own reading, about the apparently disproportionate violent behavior of Canadians and Poles among Allied troops. Why were they so disorderly? Was it just the drink?

The overall conclusions of the book are as cautious and contained as its aims and approach. It is almost as if a narrative account is sufficient in itself. So, was the military invasion able to continue, despite the civilian distractions? Yes. Did the Allied administration maintain law and order? No; there was increasing crime and unrest, and some of it was down to the occupation. Did the Allied occupation “succeed” or “fail”? I cannot quite believe that this question is being asked; but the answer is yes, and no. Practically the only reference to historiography comes in the repetitious concluding chapter, with a mention of the Italians’ propensity to portray themselves as the victims rather than the perpetrators of the war, first at the hands of the Fascist regime and then at the hands of the invading Allies and Germans. We needed more of this, and at the beginning as well as the end, because it would have enabled the author to broaden out her descriptive analysis, and

given more of an edge and point to her narrative, as well done as this is.

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