

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

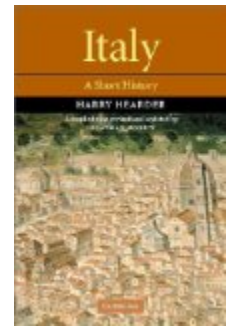


Harry Hearder Morris, with contributions by Jonathan. *Italy: A Short History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 294 pp. \$24.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-00072-7; \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-80613-8.

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Commissioned by Stanislao G. Pugliese



When *Italy: A Short History* first appeared a dozen years ago it received little attention.[1] Perhaps it was thought that given the strong standing of Hearder's other books,[2] his scholarly reputation, and the fair showing of an earlier publication with Daniel P. Waley, not much needed to be said about a similar, yet entirely new, general survey.[3] Perhaps if it had been reviewed then, this new edition would not be before us now in the same form. Unfortunately, the book does not match the level of his other works.

In all respects but two, the initial edition of 1990 and the 2001 revision are the same book. The latter is not a revision, however, but a reprint of the original text with a fine new epilogue by Jonathan Morris, "From the First to the Second Republic: Italy, 1980-2001," and with several newer titles added to the bibliography. These improvements should have been noted simply as the welcome additions they are. Instead, Cambridge has registered the book on the verso as a "second edition," and on the front cover it is called a "second edition revised and updated by Jonathan Morris," when it is clearly not.

In his preface, the late Professor Hearder (who died in 1996) admits that he has been "idiosyncratic" in his selection of material, his argument and narrative, and even in his interpretation of Italian history, which he also calls "traditional" and "positive" (pp. xi-xii). Actually the book is an attempt at political history, with social and cultural matter sprinkled here and there, but without any real theme. In short, it recounts the periods of the Italian past as follows: Roman glory, Medieval darkness, Renaissance light, Baroque haze, Risorgimento rise, Liberal crisis, Fascist nightmare, and Republican modernity.

There is a tendency to juxtapose one period against another in a cyclical view of Italian history, of strict rise and decline, of action and reaction. Moreover, little effort has been made to synthesize more recent scholarship, which shows some continuity and friction throughout the Italian past. Instead, the rigid dividing lines between periods have been deepened, as evident from statements such as that the popes of the Renaissance were open-minded but those of the Counter-Reformation were closed-minded (p. 121), or that nineteenth-century nationalism was a romantic reaction against eighteenth-century Enlightenment (p. 165).

Intended, in both editions, for the "student of Italian history and culture and [for] the general reader, whether tourist, business-person or traveler, with an interest in Italian affairs" (back cover), *Italy: A Short History* may not do any more harm to the general reader or tourist than a docudrama on the History Channel. Teachers and professors, however, should be wary of assigning it to their students. The book is not a very useful guide, less a result of its dated approach than because of its uneven writing, questionable assertions, and errors of historical fact.

The narrative itself does not read well. For instance, there is no consistent practice for the introduction of historical figures who frequently are first mentioned or quoted without any identification. It is short-sighted both to quote from Gibbon (p. 28) without describing who he was, and to provide a footnote reference to his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* that has a publication date of 1983. One cannot assume that the uninitiated reader knows that Gibbon was an eighteenth-century

historian, and that 1983 is a reprint date. Many times historical characters or time periods are discussed without reference to dates, hindering easy comprehension by the general reader. No dates for the Babylonian Captivity of the Church (p. 85) nor for the Great Schism are provided (p. 88). Periodization is even more confused when the 1430s (p. 113) and the fifteenth century are referred to as the early Renaissance (p. 100). Similarly, where dates are provided they are not always accurate. For instance, it is incorrect that in Florence the “Medici were restored briefly from 1521 to 1527” (p. 118) when it was actually from 1512 to 1527. Even allowing for a typographical error, 1512-1527 is hardly brief when viewed within the context of the Medici return to power in 1529 and their continuous rule until the eighteenth century.

In an effort, it is assumed, to make the story more lively, dramatic characterizations and odd interpretations are made all too often. Some are just reductive in nature, indicative of a half-hearted method of explanation that gives false impressions. For instance, there is some truth to all of the following statements: St. Francis preached “fundamentalist Christian communism” (p. 71), Gramsci was “a hunchback from Sardinia” (p. 220), and Mussolini was “obsessed with demography” (p. 233), but they need to be qualified to be historically accurate and understood. Others are more misleading. It is less than precise to state that “a small death camp was constructed at Trieste—the only one ever to exist on Italian soil” (p. 245). The concentration camp of La Risiera di San Sabba near Trieste was equipped with a crematorium to dispose of the bodies of prisoners who had died from maltreatment or had been executed, similar to other concentration camps in the greater German Reich. It was not a death camp, however, because that term of ignominy is usually reserved for the six extermination camps in Poland: Treblinka, Chelmno, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek, Sobibor, and Belzec.

The factual errors in the book, though, are the most regrettable. Four taken from the modern period will suffice as examples. The Squadristi were the “Fascist thugs” who terrorized town and country during the rise of Fascism, not “the Arditi” (p. 224). The latter were elite soldiers during the First World War, many of whom were disaffected during the unstable post-war period, and became followers of Mussolini, and hence Squadristi. But surely there is a difference between the two. The anti-Fascist Rosselli brothers, Carlo and Nello, were murdered in France in 1937 but by French fascists, the Cagouards, not by “Italian Fascists” (p. 236). Galeazzo Ciano did not go to Munich because he was invited to a Mussolini fam-

ily reunion (p. 245). He fled there in August 1943 with his wife Edda and their children in the hope of arranging asylum in a neutral country, but was confined by the Nazis instead. They later returned Ciano to the Italian Fascists for imprisonment in Verona, and in January 1944 he was executed with the consent of Mussolini. Aldo Moro, the unfortunate Christian Democratic politician, was not “kidnapped in 1979” (p. 261). The Red Brigades kidnapped him on March 16, 1978, and then murdered him on May 9, 1978.

On a minor note, the bibliography was perhaps intended to be brief, but three or four titles listed for each chapter may be a bit too brief. Now that the Longman *History of Italy* is complete in eight volumes, it would have been an aid to the reader to list the final two volumes to appear since 1990, if for no other reason than consistency, because all of the others are present in the bibliography.[4]

Those interested in reading about Italy in English, from antiquity through modernity, will profit more from the essay collection that makes up the one-volume *Oxford History of Italy*, as well as from the new multi-volume *Short Oxford History of Italy*. [5] Readers more interested in a short account of the modern period would do well to consult two strong efforts that center around the formation of the Italian nation, and mainly cover from the revolutionary period onward, Christopher Duggan’s *Concise History of Italy*, and Nicholas Doumanis’s *Italy*. [6]

Due to the extensiveness of contemporary scholarship, it may be an impossible task today for any one person to summarize competently over two thousand years of history in a single short volume. Given the difficulty, perhaps, this approach is one that should be reconsidered by authors and publishers alike.

#### Notes

[1]. Harry Hearder, *Italy: A Short History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Reprinted eight times. Two short mentions of its appearance were located in the *Catholic Historical Review* 77 (July 1991): p. 579, and in *History Today* 41 (March 1991): p. 49.

[2]. *Europe in the Nineteenth Century, 1830-1880* (London: Longmans, 1966, 2nd ed. 1988); and *Italy in the Age of the Risorgimento* (London: Longman, 1983).

[3]. Harry Hearder and Daniel P. Waley. ed., *A Short History of Italy: From Classical Times to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), first paperback ed. 1966, reprinted seven times to 1986. Reviews

were generally positive but with marked criticism: Salvatore Saladino, *The Historian* 25, no. 3 (May 1963): pp. 365-66; John M. Roberts, *History* 49, no. 165 (February 1964): pp. 132-33; Harrison Smith, *Catholic Historical Review* 50, no. 1 (April 1964): p. 106; Edward F. Perry, *Modern Language Journal* 48, no. 6 (October 1964): p. 388; Malcolm Anderson, *Political Studies* 11, no. 3 (October 1963): p. 353; and *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 3196 (31 May 1963): p. 386.

[4]. T. S. Brown, *Early Medieval Italy, 600-1200* (London: Longman, 1997); and Domenico Sella, *Italy in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Longman, 1997).

[5]. George Holmes, ed., *The Oxford History of Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); three of the projected seven volumes have appeared so far: John A. Davis, ed., *Italy in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Adrian Lyttelton, ed., *Liberal and Fascist Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Patrick McCarthy, ed., *Italy since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[6]. Christopher Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Nicholas Doumanis, *Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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