



Italy's Sorrow: A Year of War, 1944-1945

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During the Second World War, the campaign in Italy was the most destructive fought in Europe – a long, bitter and highly attritional conflict that raged up the country’s mountainous leg. For frontline troops, casualty rates at Cassino and along the notorious Gothic Line were as high as they had been on the Western Front in the First World War. There were further similarities too: blasted landscapes, rain and mud, and months on end with the front line barely moving.

And while the Allies and Germans were fighting it out through the mountains, the Italians were engaging in bitter battles too. Partisans were carrying out a crippling resistance campaign against the German troops but also battling the Fascists forces as well in what soon became a bloody civil war. Around them, innocent civilians tried to live through the carnage, terror and anarchy, while in the wake of the Allied advance, horrific numbers of impoverished and starving people were left to pick their way through the ruins of their homes and country. In the German-occupied north, there were more than 700 civilian massacres by German and Fascist troops in retaliation for Partisan activities, while in the south, many found themselves forced into making terrible and heart-rending decisions in order to survive.

Although known as a land of beauty and for the richness of its culture, Italy’s suffering in 1944-1945 is now largely forgotten. This is the first account of the conflict there to tell the story from all sides and to include the experiences of soldiers and civilians alike. Offering extensive original research, it weaves together the drama and tragedy of that terrible year, including new perspectives and material on some of the most debated episodes to have emerged from the Second World War.

Italy's Sorrow: A Year of War, 1944-1945 Details

Date : Published April 1st 2008 by St. Martin's Press (first published January 1st 2008)

ISBN : 9780312373962

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Format : Hardcover 656 pages

Genre : History, War, World War II, Cultural, Italy, Nonfiction

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Cropredy says

This is a book that has generally been missing from most popular accounts of World War II - the detailed coverage of the campaign in Italy after the battles of Monte Cassino and Anzio. Overshadowed by D-Day and the campaign in the West, the Italian campaign post June 1944 has been generally neglected - especially as told from the multiple viewpoints in Holland's book.

So, what made this interesting? Many first person accounts from all sides and participants:

US Army
Royal Army
Canadians
Poles
South Africans
New Zealanders
Desert Air Force
Wehrmacht
Luftwaffe
Italian partisans
Italian counter-partisans (fascists)
Civilians

It is the story of the ground and tactical air war with considerable attention spent on the battles once Rome had fallen and before winter set in on the Gothic Line. I found the tales of the partisans and partisan suppression efforts 'new' to me and a welcome rounding out of the military history. There is also a reasonable introduction to Allied Military Occupation and its control over the reconstruction and relief effort.

Well-written, with recurring snippets from the first hand accounts of soldiers who survived large portions of the campaign. Good accounts of generals who get little attention like Oliver Leese.

I found this book to be much better than Holland's history of the siege of Malta and on a par with his story of the Dambuster Squadron.

I had the paperback edition and the maps are hence small and sometimes hard to read as they spanned the book's spine. But, much better maps than in some books.

How could this book have been better?

* First hand accounts from those providing logistics would have been interesting as logistics played a huge role (we do get accounts from an American bridge-building engineer).

* Almost nothing was written about any naval activity

* There could have been more accounts from the German side, especially from some of the infantry divisions - but perhaps these don't exist.

Recommended for readers who enjoy Ambrose, Beevor, or Atkinson and are looking for something on this campaign.

Christopher says

Too many books on the Dubya Dubya Two ignore the Italian front after the fall of Rome. This book, being focused on the final year, largely covers that more neglected phase in between Rome and Mussolini's upside-down pirouette. It follows a diverse selection of people from high ranking commanders to peasants in the crossfire and everyone in between. And, most importantly for my curiosity, contains some detail on life under the Salo Republic.

Danny Byrne says

Super Detailed!!

Anthony says

It's hard for me to review books like this one. My parents met as refugees in Italy during the war and told me countless stories of their suffering. So in every WWII book that I read I am searching for my parents, knowing full well that I won't find specific mention of them. I knew them in life of course, but I still find it thrilling whenever a book is able to give me detailed accounts of what life was really like on the ground for civilians, whether they were refugees or not. This book and "War in Val d'Orcia" have probably been the most thrilling so far in terms of making me feel like I could actually see my teenage parents walking by on muddy paths, pushing carts filled with their meager belongings on the way to their next refugee camp. What makes this book so special, in my biased view, is that it's more than just a review of the facts of the war and who dropped how many bombs on what towns. This book brings the personal stories of both soldiers and civilians to life. I wish there were more like it. It's a hefty one, and dense at times. So it took me a bit of time to read through this, but it was well worth it.

Matthew says

A brilliant account of the last year of World War Two set in Italy.
This book covers the angles and perspectives from a variety of different combatants and individuals, from Allied and Axis commanders to the ordinary front line soldier, Italian civilian to the partisan.

Excellent stuff.

Jorel says

This book was freaking terrific. The prose is great, and the attention to details too. The way James Holland goes from that macro view on the topic but then lowers to the personal account of those involved is awesome, its like you are reading a dozen memoirs as well as a strategic overview, and he connects them both amazingly. Gotta say James Holland is now my favorite author, and i cant wait to grab Fortress Malta, Together we Stand 1942-43 and Burma '44. (already read Battle of Britain, another outstanding book)

This book was quite large, but it was a real page turner, and shed a new light to me on this campaign. Italy's Sorrow coudnt have a more appropriate title, the partisans, the massacre, the rapes, the heavy casualties....

As a brazilian, the only thing i missed on Italy's Sorrow was some more detail on the Brazilian Expeditionary Force when they got to the front. But i understand, there were more than 20 divisions on each sides. If he went on about every division this book would have more than a thousand pages.

Joseph says

Breathtakingly detailed. An important and gripping revisit of an atrocious war; we shall never want again.

Kenneth Barber says

This book details the war in Italy from the invasion in 1944 until the war was over in May, 1945. This conflict was a bitterly fought and complicated conflict. The Germans under the command of Field Marshal Kesselring, fought a tenacious defense giving up territory grudgingly and exacting a high price from the Allies.

The Allies consisted of troops from 17 different countries under the command of General Alexander, an Englishman. The American Fifth Army was commanded by General Clark. Trying to meld all these forces into a effective fighting force took skill and diplomacy

The last component of the conflict were the various partisan forces. These were often based on party allegiances, with the Communists being a strong contingent.

This bitter conflict is told using writings and memoirs of participants of all the various forces involved including civilians. A nice feature of the book was in the conclusion , the author writes of what happened to many of the participants whose stories he used in the book.

Nishant Pappireddi says

Excellent account of the Italian Campaign from the final battle of Cassino to the German surrender a year later.

Diana Kullman says

Heart wrenching, but educational. The author tells the positive and negative of all countries-militarily and personally.

Mac says

This is a remarkable book, so well researched, full of facts yet not at all boring because of the personal histories they are wound through the narrative - and by the end of the book, it seemed I knew them, the partisans, pilots, infantrymen, generals, the civilians and even the politicians - Mussolini! The only downside crammed into 580 pages by use of tiny font.

Ryan Wulfsohn says

While Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham's *Tug of War* is I would say stronger on Allied and German strategy and tactics, Holland has written an excellent narrative history covering almost all facets of the Italian campaign, including the (to many) little known but very important stories of Italian civilians, partisans and Mussolini loyalists. He is also perhaps more fair (some would say softer) on Alexander and Clark than Bidwell and Graham. I would say the two books complement each other nicely.

Lynx says

A great narrative account of the war in Italy from the breaking of the Gothic Line at Monte Cassino to the end of the war in the Po valley.

It really shines when it comes to the thoughts, feelings and motivations of the people involved. The chapter "The Reason Why" about the motivations behind the terrible anti-partisan reprisals is a particularly vivid example: it felt somehow chilling how, in the light that Holland shed on them, the rationale behind these atrocities becomes graspable.

Holland is, however, much less proficient on military matters. His description of a Priest as a self-propelled 3" naval gun (which left me wondering if the vehicle in question in this text passage really was a Priest or rather some other vehicle) or the mention of a German 2cm anti-tank gun unit (there's no such thing as a German 2cm anti-tank gun, so I think it might have been an anti-aircraft unit instead) are very revealing in this respect - especially since there are hardly any other mentions of particular military equipment at all in 500 pages about a war. The author seems to have avoided to go too much into these things, and it seems there was a reason for this.

Nonetheless, since this is my only complaint about an otherwise brilliant book, that's a 4 star rating from me.

Calzean says

A well researched, balanced and easy to read narrative of the Italian campaign during WWII. It has a focus on the people involved using the voices of a sample of the participating American, English, Polish, South African, New Zealand officers and men, Germans, Italian fascists, partisans and soldiers. In addition there were Indian forces, the only Black US Division, French, Moroccans, Brazilians, Russians fighting for the

Germans and Italians fighting on both sides.

This was a complex war which is rarely told. The Allied forces were extremely diverse in terms of forces, training and capability. They suffered more casualties than the Western front where popular history has all the focus. The Italian people suffered enormous casualties from reprisals, allied bombings and just having the bad luck of living in the battlefields. Also complex was the political landscape of royalists, fascists, communists and the normal people who just wanted to live their lives in peace.

Atrocities on both sides are covered and a lesson still not learnt was covered - the US was unprepared for the responsibilities of returning the country to stability after the battles had been won. An unsettling chapter in recent history where all participants were wondering why.

Anna says

Prior to about two years ago, I was under the impression that the Italian front in World War II was a cakewalk compared to Normandy, North Africa, and the Pacific which we all learn so much about in school - that once Sicily was won, the rest just fell into place. As it turns out, this is not the case. On the contrary, the Italian front was one of the ugliest fronts in the war - ugly for the Allies forces, for Axis forces, and particularly ugly for the citizens themselves, who for years lived under occupation as a result of a war that they had never wanted. James Holland eloquently recounts the Allied forces' slow and bloody struggle up the peninsula, from Anzio to Monte Cassino all the way up the Gothic front to the hills of Bologna, where local starving peasants suffered relentless bombardments from the Americans on the one hand and, on a few notable occasions, enormous civilian massacres by SS troops on the other.

The linear historical account is interspersed with first-hand accounts from soldiers and officers of all nations (American and British, but also German, Indian, Polish, and Maori) as well as Italian partisans and civilians, which grant a narrative and personal quality.

It's a shame that the Italian front is so commonly ignored in the teaching and study of World War II. James Holland performs an admirable job in remedying this error of omission.
