

The Partisan Justice

by Alya Aglan

From a “minor event”, the execution of two traitors from the Aosta Valley in 1943, Sergio Luzzatto offers us an extensive depiction of history and memory of the Resistance against a backdrop of Jew hunts, denunciations, and civil war.

Reviewed: Sergio Luzzatto, *Partigia. Primo Levi, la Résistance et la mémoire*, Paris, Gallimard, NRF Essays, 2016, 457 pages, 26 €.

History is an investigation and a narrative in which various personas cross paths in a tangle of events and destinies whose visible and invisible traces shape the memories of beings, places and societies, just as in works of fiction. The historian becomes the narrator, perhaps even the stage director, with a certain degree of acknowledged subjectivity.

It is in that same spirit that Sergio Luzzatto, professor of Modern History at the university of Turin, famous for his numerous essays about the French Terror and Italian fascism, undertakes the untangling of human and political threads of a historical intrigue. He starts off from an enigmatic passage taken out of Primo Levi’s most autobiographical book – *The Periodic Table (Il Sistema Periodico)*–: it mentions the condemnation of Zabaldano and Oppezzo, two partisans from the Aosta Valley, executed in accordance with the practices of the partisan justice, which aims to have its laws respected against all possible outbursts that may threaten the group.

An execution

A fragment of a testimony structures initial questions:

We found ourselves obliged to enforce the sentence and we did it but we ended up demolished, disheartened and willing to see everything end and be finished ourselves.
(page 97)

The traitor's execution constitutes one of the Resistance's matrix scenes, notably in *L'Armée des ombres*, a novel by Joseph Kessel from 1943, made into a film by Jean-Pierre Melville in 1969. In the aftermath of the war, iconic figures of the French Resistance such as Georges Guingouin, also known as "the prefect of the maquis" in the Limousin region, were severely condemned, accused of expeditious justice and stealing money. Clarifying this "ugly secret" – a haunting secret–, becomes the starting point, or rather, the pretext for a large-scale and thorough investigation at the heart of the partisan world, an investigation almost archaeological in its manner, which starts in the summer of 1943 and lasts until the post-war military tribunals and commemorations a decade later, in a sequence relevant for the understanding of the phenomenon as a whole.

From the study of several archives and the browsing of testimonies emerges a sensitive and meticulous reconstruction of the underlying motives of the Italian civil war, in which the shifting divides take a particular significance when they are connected to the life and death of very young people, such as the members of "Joux mountain pass band", who were mountain refugees rather than maquis warriors fighting in the name of disembodied ideals.

This small event, examined on a zero scale, concentrates the main constituent elements of the Resistance's general history in the context of the Jew hunts, denunciations, and sweep operations conducted in rebel and civil war zones – the Germans being practically absent – via a unique approach that the historian describes as "as close as possible". Departing from the controversies and demystification attempts that characterise national narratives about resistance as it was presented after the war, not only in Italy or in France but in the majority of occupied European countries, this work restores its intelligence and complexity to partisan combat. Considering partisans by taking their courage, their weaknesses and even their poverty into account does not lead to a desecration of their combat; it is rather a way to address this phenomenon as close as possible, in all its nuances, contradictions and suffering.

Resistance and civil war

Sergio Luzzatto reminds us that the Resistance is an invention as well as a need for people who, under the pressure from particular events, became involuntary actors of history. Thanks to a healthy distancing from any notion of heroism, he endeavours to define the limits of this phenomenon: it is a matter of "a Resistance comprised of great promiscuity, improvised and insidious, between men and women, the young and the elderly, soldiers and civilians, the rebels and the resistance fighters, Italians and foreigners, anti-fascists and opportunists" (p. 81-82) situated between "banditry and picaresque adventures" (p. 89).

Far from transmitting a static vision of this phenomenon, the historian underlines the slow transformation of spontaneous movements into organisations. Experience was painfully forged in the harshness of the 1943-1944 winter by substituting solitary provocations, for which a high price was paid in the early days, for more targeted actions. The partisan combat could not be identified outside its environment, earthly anchoring and the support of the local populations.

For the Valdôtains, the world war and the civil war were all about milk, butter and cheese. (p. 44)

The objective of the various combined fascist and Nazi forces during the repression was to separate the partisans from their protective sphere. "Sweeping after sweeping, local communities experienced the presence of bands in the valleys with a mistrust bordering on hostility" (p. 159). The guerrilla movement's maximal extension occurred during the summer of 1944, nourished by a slow but continuous flux of desertions in the Saló Republic's National Gard. Liberation brought the time for the bloody settlement of scores and vengeance against the accomplices and auxiliaries of fascism, a time during which "we can charge the defeated with everything that the victors have done" (p. 186) in the reversal of accusations of an equally expeditious justice. The civil war was therefore prolonged through trials and periods of mourning.

The historian highlights the period during the autumn of 1945 as a change in the way Italy closed the books of the civil war (Claudio Pavone). Although the extraordinary criminal courts continued to operate rigorously until the Togliatti amnesty on the 22nd of June 1946, technique outweighed politics and "traditional lawfulness ended up taking the upper hand on revolutionary lawfulness" (p. 205). Divides between partisans and Nazi-fascists of the Aosta valley became more complicated at that period because of "new passions which originated from the conflict between the antifascists favourable to autonomism and those who were inclined to separatism" (p. 216).

One of the civil war's characteristics is precisely the fact that it was a war that had no name and no end to it. In addition, the enemy or its representation changed constantly according to events. The 1946 summer amnesty caused a revival of the civil war among former partisans where "the profiteers of the partisan spirit", perpetrators of all sorts of trafficking, were denounced. This new rift triggered a reshaping of alliances causing the switch of former infiltrated agents in partisan movements and the first culprits of the bands' demise, such as the collaborator Edilio Cagni, 'agent provocateur' and informer gone to serve the Allies, and who was called a «complete spy» by Primo Levi.

At the time when the cold war operated a reclassification of political priorities, their retraining for the American secret services to participate in the manhunt of former fascists and in the search for fascist gold contributed to softening the conditions of their own judgement for the crimes they committed during the war.

An original approach

In the wake of wartime, the post-war period and the commemorations for “partisans fallen in the struggle for Liberation”, Sergio Luzzatto looks beyond the events themselves, thanks to a field study carried out among the last witnesses and descendants, so that the transmitted speech completes – or contradicts – the information provided in the archives, giving a presence to the Resistance that no political defeat could ever overshadow.

The reasons and depth of these actions make sense, beyond the struggle of circumstances. This book has reached a large public in Italy despite some harsh criticism calling it «revisionist», accusing it of undermining the national identity’s bedrock, rebuilt on a consensual post-war antifascism, as much as Primo Levi’s figure, deported to Auschwitz a few days after the above mentioned execution of two young partisans who were shot in the neck. It is likely that the book’s reception in France will bring justice to the originality of this approach, which depicts a vast saga of history and remembrance in addressing a “minor event”. One must note the heuristic value of this approach, whose historiographical contributions turn out to be transposable to the study of other partisan movements in the rest of occupied Europe. Contrarily to what the English title might imply, Primo Levi is not the book’s focal point. It is entirely focused on the question of the civil war and its reshaping in an enlarged chronological sequence comprising the war and the aftermath of the war.

The value of Sergio Luzzatto’s work is not only found in its creativity but also in the honesty of its questionings and in the unravelling of its narrative, where can be found all the layers of sources from the most contemporary traces of the event to the most present-day proliferation of memories and their transmission. Its innovative strength appears as much in its freedom of tone as in its absence of prejudices concerning the Resistance’s history, which, in Italy and in France, is glorified and, therefore, inhibits questionings.

The transmission of knowledge between the different generations of historians allows progress in the understanding of this fascinating phenomenon. The author of *The Body of Il Duce* happily carries out this task, without naivety and without avoiding any question.

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