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Mark Thompson, *The White War: Life and Death on the Italian Front, 1915–1919*. New York: Basic Books, 2009. Pp. x, 454. ISBN 978-0-465-01329-6.

Review by Jonathan Marwil, The University of Michigan (jmarwil@umich.edu)

Midway through *The White War*, Mark Thompson's incisively written narrative of the Italian campaign against Austria in World War I, is a chapter devoted to Giuseppe Ungaretti. Is there another history of the Alpine campaign of World War I, or of any other theater of the war, in which a poet has been so noticed? Perhaps, but those who write military history usually do not think a poet's response to his war experiences merits such attention. Thompson does. He also has no qualms about employing the historical present to give the reader a greater sense of immediacy. "The water is fast but not very deep; Baruzzi uses the flagpole as a staff to steady himself. Other men are swept downstream ..." (175). In brief, this is no ordinary work of military history. Nor is its author a conventional historian. While holding a Ph.D. (Cambridge), he has spent much of his working life as a journalist in the former Yugoslavia, writing extensively about the role of the media in the breakup of the country in the 1990s.¹ Though Thompson does not explain why he wrote *The White War*, we may suppose that watching a war tragedy play itself out in territory fought over in an earlier, even more tragic war, was a sufficient prompt.

The Alpine theater was regarded as a "sideshow" (157) by the major World War I belligerents and has been treated as such by historians ever since. Most allow it barely a chapter and dwell on Caporetto, the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo (24 Oct–19 Nov 1917). The previous eleven battles might never have been fought for all the impact they had on the war's progress or outcome. And, despite its often picturesque settings, the campaign has gained none of the romance attached to Gallipoli or the Arab revolt. One might imagine that Ungaretti's poems would have drawn a certain attention to the fighting, but the verse is difficult and "hardly counts as war poetry at all" (180). Nor has Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* inspired much interest in this region of the war. The book's hero, Frederic Henry, is not even a soldier, and his growing determination to quit the war with Catherine Barkley makes for a tragic love story rather than a war story. While unquestionably the "only world-famous book about the Italian front" (319), the novel is arguably too indifferent to the war itself to cause readers to care about what happened in it.

When the war broke out in August 1914, Italy adopted a policy of neutrality. Had she stayed neutral, neither her interests nor her security would have been endangered. But in a series of machinations amounting to a "conspiracy," a word historians have used to describe what went on in Italian government circles in late 1914 and early 1915, the Prime Minister (Antonio Salandra) and Foreign Minister (Sidney Sonnino), together with the "weak-willed" (18) Victor Emanuel II, took the country into war. In doing so, they drove a hard bargain. By the terms of the secret treaty signed in London on 26 April 1915, the allies promised Italy the South Tyrol, Trieste, Gorizia, Istria, and parts of Dalmatia, lands that some Italians thought were part of the nation's territorial destiny. Wars of choice are at least as common as wars of necessity, especially when the imagined gains seem both readily obtainable and just.

For Salandra and Sonnino it was of little importance that many in the Italian parliament and a significant portion of the country opposed entering the conflict. Or that many Italian soldiers, besides being ill-equipped and ill-trained, had little idea why they were fighting. "I did not know why there was a war at all, for that matter they didn't let the troops in on anything" (391). Nor were Salandra and Sonnino worried by what had happened in 1866, the last time Italy had joined in a war with a more powerful ally—in this instance Prussia—in pursuit of territorial gain. Quite the contrary, for, despite suffering humiliating defeats on land (Custoza) and sea (Lissa), Italy had been given the prize it sought, Venetia. Forgotten was Austria's offer to cede Venetia if Italy had remained neutral. All that was remembered in 1915 was that Italian blood had been

¹ See his *Forging War: The Media in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina* (1994; rev. ed. Luton, UK: U Luton Pr, 1999).

shed in the winning of Venetia. And since blood is the mortar of nation-building, it would need to be shed again.

Eager to teach that lesson were those who aroused and sustained public support for the war. Chief among this group, which included Benito Mussolini, was the writer Gabriele D'Annunzio, contemptuously described by Thompson as "a spectacular case of arrested development" (40). With a commission that authorized him to move about as he wished and a retainer from the editor of *Corriere della Sera*, Luigi Albertini, D'Annunzio was able to live his own fantasy war.

He became a freelance warrior-reporter, quartered privately in Venice, dipping in and out of battle as he chose, dosing himself with enough danger to pique his appetite, and writing up his adventures and exhortations, as well as penning inspirational odes. Styling himself "a poet of slaughter," he became the nation's foremost propaganda asset. War was his extreme sport, or extreme therapy. Sometimes the stunts came off; often they led to the death of his associates; and at least once, as we shall see, they led to a fiasco that cost many Italian lives (47).

The average Italian soldier had a very different war, marked by a futility and horror that rivaled the fighting on the western front. In France and Flanders armies crossed flat or rolling terrain to reach the enemy. In the Alpine theater, Italians were usually moving uphill against Austrian forces dug in behind stone barricades and barbed wire. The disparity in casualty statistics reveals the murderous consequences: 689,000 Italian soldiers were killed in the war, another million were seriously wounded. Total Austrian losses amounted to 650,000 dead, wounded, and missing. Seldom has a sideshow been so murderous. More poignant indicators of the slaughterous fighting are reports of Austrian forces shouting "Italians! Go back! We don't want to massacre you!" (2)

To some Italian soldiers, it may have seemed as if the enemy had more pity for them than their own leaders. The discipline they were subject to could border on the savage. In no other army during the war were whole units routinely punished by having soldiers chosen by lot executed for the mutinous acts of their comrades. While the practice was occasionally employed in other armies, notably by the French in putting down the 1917 mutinies, it became "the dreadful emblem of Italian military justice" (263). Urging its use was General Luigi Cadorna, whose arrogance, incompetence, and sadism, Thompson would have us believe, was unequalled among commanders in the war. Only slightly less odious was the policy—instituted by no other army in the war—prohibiting Italian prisoners from receiving packages of food from home lest the men be inclined to surrender; the result was a death rate among Italian prisoners—whom D'Annunzio labeled "sinners against the Fatherland, the Spirit, and Heaven" (352)—nine times higher than among Austrian POWs.

Thompson does not intend to revise our understanding of the Italian campaign or its significance in the larger story of the war. Indeed, while the plans and progress of individual battles are clearly laid out, if sometimes a little too sketchily, they are not Thompson's greatest interest. This is a book about men in war, how they lived and how so many of them died. Thus the book's subtitle, and its strategy of focusing the reader's attention on one or two individuals in most chapters. In the early chapters these are the politicians and propagandists who made the war possible. The penultimate chapter features Prime Minister Vittorio Orlando, who represented Italy at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 but might as well have stayed home for all the respect and attention paid him by the big three. Clemenceau derided him as being "all things to all men, very Italian" (371).

Most of the chapters belong to individual soldiers. The majority are Italian, but one who was not became more famous than any Italian or Austrian soldier of World War I. In 1917, Erwin Rommel was a twenty-five-year-old "avid for glory" (305), and at Caporetto he succeeded in winning it. The Italian soldiers we meet, like Ungaretti, are usually those who wrote about their experiences during or after the war. In a few cases, they are men interviewed at a very advanced age by either earlier historians or Thompson himself. One of the latter is Carlo Orelli, the last living veteran of the first Isonzo battle, whom Thompson interviewed in a suburb of Rome in early 2005. Though frail in body, Orelli's memory was still good, and his understanding perhaps even better. Questioned about the lack of training he and his comrades got, he responded, "War is not something you teach, you do it and that's all. Attack, fire, take cover when you have to. That's it. And then bring in the dead" (92).

Thompson's narrative strategies make for an engaging, powerful book. The focus on individuals recalls Correlli Barnett's *The Swordbearers*.² But Barnett chooses just four of the war's principal commanders to understand why the fighting took the shape it did. By concentrating on dozens of individuals in one regional campaign, Thompson provides a richly textured account of a people and its army at war. One may question his cursory examination of support for the war among the Italian public or object to his unremittingly harsh characterizations of D'Annunzio and Cadorna. Nevertheless, the book will persuade most readers that Italians should never have fought or died in World War I. *The White War* is a fitting memorial to their sacrifice.

² 1975; rpt. NY: Sterling, 2000.