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Benjamin Wood, *Defying Evil: How the Italian Army Saved Croatian Jews during the Holocaust*. Palisades, NY: History Publishing Co., 2012. Pp. 230. ISBN 978-1-933909-27-1.

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World War II continues to hold the interest of broad audiences and the results of new research quickly find their way into books for non-scholarly readers as well as professional historians. Unfortunately, this is not true of *Defying Evil*, another volume in the growing literature on the Italian role in the Holocaust.

Historian Benjamin Wood organizes his story into five more or less chronological chapters. The first, “War Comes to Croatia,” sets the stage by describing the living conditions of Jews in the “Independent State of Croatia,” founded by the Axis in 1941, with German forces occupying its northeastern half and Italians the southwestern. After the fascist Ustasha (Croatian Revolutionary Movement) came to power in April 1941, it almost immediately began persecuting minorities. Wood describes how the Jews, stripped of their civil rights, had to wear a yellow badge, move to special areas, and perform forced labor. This was only a prelude of things to come. By summer 1941, the killings had begun. Jews died in raids against their villages, as hostages executed for attacks against Croatian authorities, and in the newly established concentration camps.¹

The second chapter, “Refuge in the Italian Zone of Occupation,” deals with the period from spring/summer 1941, when Jews started escaping into Italian-occupied territory, until their imprisonment by the Italian army in autumn 1942. Wood describes how Italian soldiers helped the refugees flee to the Italian zone and how Italian diplomats and military authorities “conspired” to avoid handing over Jews to the Croats and Germans. By summer 1942, the Germans had extended their “Endlösung der Judenfrage” (final solution of the Jewish Question) into Croatia, agreeing with the local government to deport remaining Jews to the death camps in eastern Europe. This arrangement was to apply to both the German and the Italian sectors of the “Independent State.” Wood shows that, when Mussolini gave in to German pressure and approved the deportations, Italian officials and military commanders resorted to delaying tactics: for example, they investigated whether every single Jew had the right to Italian citizenship. To placate the Germans, the Italian army placed the Jewish refugees in concentration camps in autumn 1942.

The author clarifies the broader context of the events of late 1942, which reduced the fate of some 3,500 people to a mere nuisance for Mussolini, who

of course was far more concerned with larger military issues than the fate of a few thousand Jews. The Allied landings in North Africa had deeply shaken his confidence.... On January 22, 1943 Tripoli fell to the British. The Axis partners were keenly aware that once North Africa was controlled by the Allies, it could be used as a springboard from which to launch an invasion of mainland Europe.... In the same month, in the far off Soviet Union, the colossal battle of Stalingrad was coming to conclusion.... On February 2, 1943, General Field Marshal Friedrich von Paulus surrendered his army along with what remained of the city to the Soviets. (90)

Chapter 3, “Mussolini’s Treatment of the Jews at Home and Abroad,” delineates the situation in other parts of Europe occupied by the Italian army, specifically Greece and France. The picture differed little from that of Yugoslavia: Italian diplomatic and military officials provided security for Jews living in their zones until the armistice of 8 September 1943. Wood also looks at the circumstances of Jews in Italy proper, discussing the camp system and Il Duce’s attitude toward the Jews and the Nazis.

1. The persecution followed the same three-phase model installed in other countries—economic liquidation, psychological demoralization, and physical annihilation. See Jaša Romano and Lavoslav Kadelburg, “The Third Reich: Initiator, Organizer and Executant of Anti-Jewish Measures and Genocide in Yugoslavia,” in *The Third Reich and Yugoslavia 1933-1945* (Belgrade: Inst for Contemporary Hist, 1977) 670-90.

Only five and a half pages concern the third chapter's main subject: the concentration of Jews in a single camp on the island of Rab (Italian "Arbe") during the next phase of Italian involvement in Croatia. In his haste, Wood misses the opportunity to describe in detail the living conditions in the camp by using more systematically the available interviews with Holocaust survivors,² a resource given too little attention by historians writing about this special topic.

In chapter 4, "The Italian Withdrawal," Wood reverts to covering wider military and political actions, specifically of 1943 and (in part) 1944, from the lead-up to the landing in Sicily, to the establishment of the Republic of Salò, the fall of Mussolini, and the disintegration of the Italian army. Only three of thirty pages here concern the Croatian Jews. We learn that the Italian army abandoned the Jewish refugees under their care in the difficult situation of the armistice, just as the supreme command abandoned Italian soldiers stationed outside Italy.³ Yugoslav partisans rescued most of the Jews after the Italian withdrawal. The children, the sick, and the aged stayed in the Dalmatian hinterland, while the rest joined the partisans.

The fifth and final chapter, "Fighting with the Partisans," explains in particular the crucial role of Jewish doctors, nurses, and pharmacists on behalf of the partisans. In the rest of the chapter, Wood turns again to the big picture: the Allied landing in Normandy and the end of the war in Europe, Tito's politics, and the faith of major Nazi criminals in the Balkans as well as the Ustasha after 1945. He traces the destinies of the latter up to 1999, when Dinko Šakić, former commander of the Jasenovac concentration camp, went on trial in Croatia.

Scholarly standards cannot, of course, be applied in a review of a non-scholarly book, but certain criteria should be met even in works intended for a general readership. That Wood's main story occupies only about half of his book is problematic. He has made other, more questionable decisions as well. He builds his thesis on the work of Menachem Shelah⁴ and Jonathan Steinberg,⁵ who stress the Italian sense of humanity in their treatment of the Jews.⁶ He omits facts that may not show the Italian army in the best possible light; he states, for example, that Mussolini did not consider Jews as particular enemies and that, despite the anti-Jewish laws enacted in 1938, "one could live a relatively normal life as an Italian Jew provided one professed loyalty to the state" (64). Recent studies of the racial laws show that this is false.⁷ Nor does Wood mention the Italian army's expulsion of some Jews who sought refuge in Italian-occupied territories.⁸ In short, the situation was less black-and-white than the author implies. Troubling, too, is Wood's seeming unawareness of work that has successfully challenged the image of the "bravo italiano."⁹

2. E.g., in the Steven Spielberg Film and Video Archive of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

3. On the armistice and its effects upon Italian troops, see Elena Agarossi, *A Nation Collapses: The Italian Surrender of September 1943*, trans. H. Ferguson II (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2000 [orig. 1993]).

4. *Un debito di gratitudine: storia dei rapporti tra l'Esercito italiano e gli Ebrei in Dalmazia (1941-1943)* (Rome: Stato maggiore dell'esercito, Ufficio storico, 1991), "The Italian Rescue of Yugoslav Jews, 1941-1943," in *The Italian Refuge: Rescue of Jews during the Holocaust*, ed. Ivo Herzer et al. (Washington: Catholic U of Amer Pr, 1989) 205-17, and "Croatia," in *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, ed. Israel Gutman (NY: Macmillan, 1990) 323-29.

5. *All or Nothing: The Axis and the Holocaust 1941-43*, 2nd ed. (NY: Routledge, 2002).

6. As does Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (NY: Viking Pr, 1963).

7. See, e.g., Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: From Equality to Persecution*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Madison: U Wisconsin Pr, 2006 [orig. 2000]); Joshua D. Zimmerman, ed., *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule: 1922-1945* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2005).

8. Even in 1943 an order was issued to expel Jews fleeing from Croatia: National Archives Washington, T-821, roll 294, no. 513, Comando superiore 2ª Armata, Internamento nuovi ebrei, 27.4.1943. Although some units did not comply, often enough they did. See also Klaus Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf: Exil in Italien 1933-1945*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1993).

9. See, esp., Davide Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation during the Second World War*, trans. A. Belton (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2006 [orig. 2003]), and Sanela Hodzic, "Italiani brava gente? Storiografia recente dell'occupazione italiana in Croazia durante la seconda guerra mondiale," *Ventesimo Secolo: Rivista di Studi sulle Transizioni* 7 (2008) 31-55.

Given these serious shortcomings and the frequency of factual errors in the book,¹⁰ I cannot recommend *Defying Evil*. Both specialists and interested lay readers will do better to consult the works of Steinberg¹¹ and—for a different opinion—Rodogno.¹²

10. To cite a few: the concentration camp on Rab was installed in July 1942, not December; the situation of Jewish refugees in Kraljevica (Italian “Porto Re”) did not improve with their transfer to Rab (142); the 3C directive on guerrilla warfare was not limited specifically to Slovenia (96), but applied to the whole territory held by the Italian Second Army; partisans did not regularly shoot or mutilate their prisoners (98), rather, they often tried to win over the ordinary soldiers—see Walter Manoschek, “Partisanenkrieg und Genozid: Die Wehrmacht in Serbien 1941,” in *Die Wehrmacht im Rassenkrieg: Der Vernichtungskrieg hinter der Front*, ed. W. Manoschek (Vienna: Picus, 1996) 142–67, esp. 157n34; in Serbia, Jewish women and children were not shot (30, 59), but gassed in a special van in 1942. Mistakes in the spelling of foreign-language words and phrases are annoyingly plentiful.

11. Note 5 above.

12. Note 9 above, esp. chapter 11, “Policy towards Refugees and Jews.”