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## Eyewitness to Fascism

### BOOK REVIEW

#### **A Chill in the Air: An Italian War Diary, 1939-1940**

By Iris Origo. 192 pp. New York Review Books. Paper, \$15.95.

BY ALEXANDER STILLE

Iris Origo's early life sounds like something out of a Henry James novel. Her father, Bayard Cutting, who came from an extremely wealthy American family, traveled the globe in search of relief from the symptoms of the tuberculosis that would kill him at age 29. Before he died in 1910, he wrote to his wife, Sibyl, a British aristocrat, that he wanted their young daughter, Iris, to grow up in Italy, "free from all this national feeling which makes people so unhappy. Bring her up somewhere where she does not belong."

Origo's father was to prove remarkably prescient, given that Europe would soon be consumed by World War I, followed by the rise of fascism — the apotheosis of nationalism — whose fever broke only with its catastrophic defeat in 1945. Raised among the British expatriate community in Florence and married to an Italian, Origo was in a perfect position to observe the unfolding events of World War II. Her journal of those years, "War in Val d'Orcia: An Italian War Diary, 1943-1944," became an instant success when it was published in 1947. It described the unusual war experiences of Origo and her husband, Antonio Origo, observing the denouement

of the war from the vantage point of southern Tuscany, which became a major theater of operations with the Germans occupying Italy in September 1943 and the Allied armies inching their way up the Italian peninsula. Shortly after their marriage in 1924 (when Iris was 22), the Origos bought a large, rundown estate of some 7,000 acres in the Val d'Orcia; it included numerous old ruined buildings and some 57 farms. As the fighting approached their area, the plucky Marchesa Origo took in war orphans, hid fleeing Italian partisans and Allied paratroopers, and negotiated with the German military units that patrolled the area.

Origo's diary offered an image of wartime Italy that the world was eager to embrace: a country that was fundamentally anti-Fascist, that welcomed the Anglo-American troops and that, through its partisan resistance, helped defeat the Nazis. Now we are fortunate to have an earlier diary, "A Chill in the Air," that Origo kept but never published, recounting her experiences from mid-1939 to the summer of 1940, after Italy had entered the war on the side of Nazi Germany. Here she demonstrates the same keen eye for telling detail: paunchy middle-aged Fascists squeezed into their old black-shirt uniforms for an anniversary celebration that has the air of a college reunion; a young expectant mother who prays to have a girl so the child will not be dragged off to war; the blank expressionless look of the local peasants, men who have mastered the art of hiding their feelings, as they listen to



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALINARI ARCHIVES, FLORENCE/ALINARI VIA GETTY IMAGES

Italy, 1940: "Vincere!" ("Win!") was a Fascist Party slogan.

Mussolini's declaration of war.

"War in Val d'Orcia" was written during a time of moral clarity, when the tide had turned in favor of the Allies. As a result, it tends to offer a somewhat simplified portrait of good (anti-Fascist) Italians and bad Germans. One of the great values of this brief but highly readable earlier diary is that it was written when the direction of history — whether there would be a war and how it would turn out — was far less clear. As a result, it more accurately represents the moral and political complexity of Italian life under Fascism. The people Origo encounters represent a much broader range of views: from convinced anti-Fascists to

unquestioning Fascists who repeat phrases like "A good Italian's duty now is to have no opinions." Most occupy a swampy middle ground: They are uneasy about the slide into war but accept the regime's argument that Italy has little choice but to fight.

A journal kept in the middle of tumultuous events makes us realize how wrong most people, including many intelligent and well-informed people, can be about the import of events that, with the benefit of hindsight, now seems obvious. "It is curious — the unanimity with which everyone here refuses to believe in the possibility of war," Origo writes in mid-July 1939, six weeks before Hitler's invasion of Po-

land. Only days before the fighting begins, Origo is in Florence listening to comments from ordinary Italians.

"Don't you worry, nothing's going to happen!" says the hairdresser, as he sees me reading the papers. 'You'll see, the Duce will stop the war at the last moment,' says the taxi driver."

Observing the strange calm of the Italian public amid the growing international tension, a young Italian officer tells Origo: "Look what Fascism has done for our people! ... Compare their calm with the feverish tension in France and England!" But it isn't exactly calm. It is a mixture of passive fatalism, and of a genuine faith in their leader: the fruits of 15 years of being taught not to think. It is certainly not a readiness for war, but merely a blind belief that, 'somehow,' it won't happen."

A few days later, Origo describes the scene at a dinner in Rome as the wealthy, well-connected guests await the arrival of Mussolini's son-in-law, Italy's foreign minister Galeazzo Ciano, while Mussolini is trying to broker a peace plan. "When at last he arrived," Origo writes, "he was beaming. 'You can set your minds at rest,' he said. 'France and England have accepted the Duce's proposals. ... So go to bed tonight with your minds at rest!' The guests followed his advice, and woke the next morning to the news of the invasion of Poland! Neither the Duce nor his son-in-law were told of it until two hours before the event."

Much of Origo's mental energy is spent trying to make sense of what's happening, by hunting down foreign newspapers, piecing together accounts

of events from different sources, trying to read between the lines of official statements. "Last night," she writes, "there was no attempt to interrupt the foreign radio transmissions. Is one to conclude that Italy has definitely decided to be neutral?" In the absence of reliable news, Italians place a great deal of faith in rumor.

The radio, which the Fascist regime used with great skill, plays a large role in Origo's account, and it is hard not to see some parallels with the current situation in the United States, with its constant claims of "fake news." "The ultimate result of unceasing propaganda has now been to cancel out the effect of all news alike," Origo writes. "One man said to me, 'The radio has made fools of us all.'"

Origo notes that as the Fascist regime nudges Italy toward war, there is careful psychological preparation: Supposedly scientific articles on the negative effects of coffee and meat appear weeks before the government will ration the sale of those items. In one very powerful passage, the day before Mussolini's official declaration of war, Origo poses a question that seems deeply important in this time of resurgent nationalism: "Is it possible to move a country to war, against its historical traditions, against the natural instincts and character of the majority of its inhabitants, and very possibly against its own interests? Apparently it is possible."

Alexander Stille's most recent book is "The Force of Things: A Marriage in War and Peace."