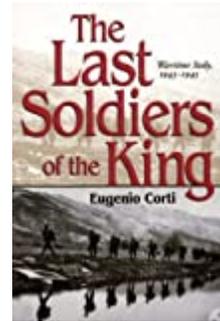




Eugenio Corti. *The Last Soldiers of the King: Wartime Italy, 1943-1945.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003. x + 329 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8262-1491-1.



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Published on H-War (March, 2005)

A Philosophical Soldier

The Italian Theater is one of the most neglected aspects of World War II, and the contribution of Italian soldiers who fought on the Allied side is even less well known. Eugenio Corti's *The Last Soldiers of the King: Wartime Italy, 1943-1945* is one of the few Italian soldier memoirs translated into English. It is an informative, highly personal work that provides a wealth of detail and insight into wartime Italy, as well as a soldier's perspective on war.

Corti may already be familiar to many readers. His 1947 book *Few Returned* recounts his experiences as a young lieutenant fighting in Mussolini's fascist army on the Russian front. Corti was one of just a handful of Italian soldiers to escape encirclement and make it back to Italy. After the war, Corti became a noted novelist. *The Last Soldiers of the King* begins in 1943, when the author was based at Nettuno, Italy, as King Victor Emmanuel forced Mussolini from power. The new Italian government then broke its alliance with Germany and signed an armistice with the Allies, who were invading from the south. German troops in Italy quickly became an occupation force, and subjected their former allies to the brutal

treatment that they had exacted on other conquered people. Corti fled Nettuno and headed south to Allied lines. There he joined the *Corpo Italiano di Liberazione*, the new government's military, to fight against the Nazis. Serving in artillery and anti-aircraft units, Corti fought his way northward along the Adriatic Coast, reaching Bologna by war's end in May 1945.

Like many war reminiscences, Corti describes the eternal horrors of war. As a professional author, he does so better than most. Note, for example, his description of a dead German soldier he encountered on a roadside: "Death had stiffened an expression of indescribable terror on his face—his mouth was wide open (as though he had tried to keep death at a distance with a scream). His arms were desperately raised to protect his head" (p. 198). His descriptions of battle are gripping and dramatic, and yet seem tasteful and restrained. He also describes the toll of war on the soldier's psyche. "We continued to fight because we were called soldiers," he wrote, "but we increasingly found ourselves fighting with our hearts to prevail over our nerves' rebellion. We saw the signs in each other, but we didn't say a word" (p. 209).

However, the work's greatest strengths lie in its descriptions of military life outside of combat. Corti tries to place the war within a larger philosophical and political context in order to give meaning to his sacrifices. He was a deeply religious young man, and his faith gave him great comfort during the war. "I went to sit on a stump," recalled Corti, when "I strangely seemed to feel my [guardian] angel by my side as a human would be" (p. 195). Amidst the madness of war, Corti nevertheless saw the hand of God. One day in an observation post, a butterfly landed nearby. "My attention was drawn to the loveliness of its colors," he wrote, "which, I realized were not arranged randomly: indeed, even a great painter would have been able to compose them with so much art only in a moment of special grace." Such beauty, he claimed, "would be enough to show the existence of God" (p. 211). In a discussion with other soldiers, Corti argued that Christianity served to humanize and limit warfare. Only as man moved farther away from God, he claimed, did wars become more destructive.

Corti's religious views made him an opponent of fascism, but he was especially disturbed by the growth of communism. He describes communists in uniformly dark terms. The frequency with which he saw Italian communist partisans fighting the fascists made him fearful that his nation might devolve into civil war once the Germans had been defeated. Communism was the result of "Jewish Messianism," in his view. His feelings toward Jews were conflicted. "Of course it was cruel to think of Jews, that slaughtered nation, in terms other than compassion," he wrote. But the social theories of Marx and other "anti-Christian" Jewish intellectuals in an increasingly secular world were—in Corti's view—"producing frightening fruits" (p. 215). Nazism, he claimed, grew out of the socialist world view. "Incited to deify a given social class," wrote Corti, the Nazis "decided to deify a race instead." Rather than repressing other social classes, the Nazis "had chosen to crush non-German races, starting with the Jewish one" (p. 216).

Religion was also at the root of his self-described "struggle with sex" (p. 216). Soldiers are notorious for bending society's rules of sexual propriety, and the men of the *Corpo di Liberazione* were no exception. How-

ever, Corti remained sexually chaste. "I felt my blood then like a river, and I felt violently shaken by its force," he wrote of one encounter with a woman. "She looked at me with anxious expectation without fighting what was within her; in me the angel was fighting the demon. Finally the angel won, and I won" (pp. 223-224). He was dismayed with the increase in prostitution across wartime Italy, lamenting "Rome has become a huge house of prostitution" (p. 240).

Corti writes passionately about his patriotic feelings for Italy. Without question, World War II was a low point in Italian history. Defeated, Italy had become a battleground for foreign armies, and foreigners in the country often treated Italians disrespectfully. Corti was proud to be fighting for his country, but was angered by the defeatism of many countrymen. He and his men were particularly chagrined to find that most Italians were not even aware that Italian forces were fighting against the Germans. "It is disgusting to be Italian," some of his men said bitterly (p. 240). Yet fighting his way through his country only heightened his feelings of love for it. For every Italian defeatist, prostitute, or communist, Corti found others who filled him with hope and inspiration. "Don't be among those who say 'by now it's over for us Italians,'" an Abruzzese peasant told Corti, "Throughout time our people have been tested in every way and have always passed the test" (p. 58). In his meetings with ordinary Italians, Corti claims that he was "beginning to make one of the most wonderful discoveries of my life" (p. 59).

As a chronicle of war, *The Last Soldiers of the King* is an unusually intimate and philosophical look at the world of the soldier. Those interested in matters of faith at the front will find this book especially rewarding. The book will also be of great use to students of Italian history interested in gauging social and political conditions in wartime Italy. For whatever reason one picks up this book, readers will be impressed with Corti's descriptive writing style. His portraits of the Italian landscape and its people are often beautiful. *The Last Soldiers of the King* is a remarkable memoir of World War II that will appeal to a wide range of readers.

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Citation: Mark D. Van Ells. Review of Corti, Eugenio, *The Last Soldiers of the King: Wartime Italy, 1943-1945*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. March, 2005.

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