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N. 5
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Fascicolo 20. Ottobre 2024
Storia Militare Contemporanea



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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The banner, shown courtesy of the Schwind Collection to Pēteris Cedrinš, is the personal banner of prince Avalov, commander of the West Volunteer Army (Западная добровольческая армия), a White Russian anti-Bolshevik and pro-German force created by Germany Gen. von der Goltz in August 1919 merging the rest of German Freikorps in the Baltic States and some Russian POWs with the Special Russian Corps raised in November 1918 by Gen. Graf Fëdor Arturovič Keller and by Cossack Gen. Pavel Bermond, later Prince Avalov, both Knights of the Russian Branch of the Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem (SOSJJ). The Corps lent allegiance to Kolchak's white government and later to a Latvian puppet government supported by Berlin, and fought against both the Bolshevik and the Latvian democratic government supported by the Entente, being disbanded in December 1919. The Banner front shows the imperial coat of arms. On the reverse, the Black Maltese Cross with Crown of Thorns memorializes General Graf Keller, murdered by the Bolsheviks

<http://www.theknightsofsaintjohn.com/History-After-Malta.htm>;

<http://www.vexilloграфия.ru/russia/beloe.htm>;

<http://lettonica.blogspot.com/2007/11/bear-slayers-day.html> (Pēteris Cedrinš, *Bear Slayer's Day*, 11 November 2007). Cedrinš posted the image of the Flag's recto on wikipedia commons.

MARIO CORTI,

L'Ucraina e la vetrina delle distorsioni

Diario di guerra in poltrona 2022-2023

Gaspari editore, Udine, 2023, pp. 195, ISBN



This book is dedicated ‘to the indomitable Ukrainian people for teaching us not to surrender even in the face of the worst calamities, and to their army, which also fights for our freedom’ and bears in exergue a quote from Vladimir Solov’ëv: ‘the victim must be helped at all costs and in all cases, if possible with exhortations, otherwise with force.’¹ The book is in fact the diary of an Italian who knows and deeply loves the contradictions and fascination of Russian history and culture, who has sincerely fought for the liberal transforma-

¹ Vladimir Solov’ëv, *Three Dialogues on War, Progress and the End of History*, 1899.

tion of Russian society and politics, and who therefore feels doubly and personally hurt by the Putin regime's aggression against Ukraine. And who therefore feels, before and above all other considerations, the personal duty of taking the side of the aggressed.²

The extremely rich Russian library collected by the author, in which the sections dedicated to music and to his and his wife Elena Gori's precious translations stand out, testifies to Corti's assiduous commitment to the study of Russian history and culture and its cross-fertilisation with Italian culture, even in very specialised fields, such as the history of medicine³ and military history⁴. I owe to him and to Elena the roughing up and advice that allowed me to engage in some Russian and Russian-Italian military history research necessary to or stimulated by my studies on the Italy's involvement in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars.

In the early Seventies, as a rank and file employee of the Italian embassy in Moscow, he had the opportunity to meet with various dissidents and deliver to the West a great number of samizdat documents, and in 1977 he promoted the Sakharov Hearings to denounce Soviet repression. Later, Mario Corti worked in the American broadcaster Radio Free Europe - Radio Liberty (where he had the unaware opportunity to meet the then KGB officer Vladimir Putin) in Munich, and later in Prague, with frequent trips to Russia. Since 1995 to his retirement, he worked in and then directed the Russian Service of RFE-RL and his first assignment was as reporter on the negotiation which ended the First Chechen War (1994-96). An experience that he recently succinctly recounted in an interview⁵

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- 2 Claudia PALAZZO, "La guerra di Caino, Intervista a Mario Corti", *L'Ora*, 7 marzo 2022. Mario CORTI, "Самый большой удар по русской культуре нанес Путин". Взгляд из Италии ("The Biggest Blow to Russian Culture Was Dealt by Putin." View from Italy), *Radio Svoboda*, 7 May 2022.
 - 3 Mario CORTI, *Gli "altri" italiani: medici al servizio della Russia*, Carocci, 2011. The project of a 2nd enlarged edition was unfortunately postponed by the Russian aggression, which absorbed all the author's attention (see Corti, pp. 12,).
 - 4 Mario CORTI, *Italiani d'arme in Russia. Artigiani, ingegneri, ufficiali in un esercito straniero (1400-1800)*, Carocci, 2016 (*Итальянские военные на русской службе*, М., Indrik, 2020). *Итальянский Поход Суворова взгляд из Италии*, SP, Alethija, 2021. "Il maggior generale Giorgio Giovanni Zucato (1761-1810), un parentino al servizio russo", Collana SISM online, 2013. "Capitan Malina. Un veneziano dall'Adriatico al Mar Baltico", in *Naval History*, Quaderno SISM 2014, pp. 341-370. "Razmysl, Ivan the Terrible's mysterious "engineer", *Nuova Antologia Militare*, II, 2021, No. 7, pp. 63-82.
 - 5 Stefano LORENZETTO, "Confessioni", *Corriere della Sera*, 7 settembre 2023, p. 27.

and later in this book⁶.

In the preface, Anna Zafesova recalls the dismay that pervaded the Moscow editorial office of Radio Free Europe in Staropimenovskij lane on the night of December 19, 1999, when they learned that in the Duma elections the ‘patriotic’ and pro-government party created two months earlier by the FSB⁷, had taken 23 percent of the votes, one point less than the Communists. A result that signaled the progressive affirmation of “a resentment” that later “had become ‘the national ideology’, as the exiled poet Vera Polozkova says, and was also shared by that apparently liberal intelligentsia that had been the main interlocutor and great hope of the dissidents and the West”. A latent phenomenon also in Europe, which emerged precisely because of the war in Ukraine, as the European Parliamentary elections of 2024 seems to indicate, with the same illiberal percentages as the Russian vote in December 1999. The *La Stampa* and *Il Foglio* journalist emphasises and shares the ‘anger bordering on desperation in the face of superficiality and cynicism with respect to the Ukrainian tragedy’ that runs through Mario Corti’s ‘armchair war diary’. A diary that, according to Zafesova, ‘should be taught in fact-checker and debunker courses’, for its professional meticulousness in denouncing the ‘media offensive that the Kremlin has launched against the West, taking the use of Soviet memory lies to an unprecedented level’. But also a ‘merciless portrait of the Italian media’, which has become a tribune ‘of opinion-makers who ignore history and geography, of intellectuals who seek visibility by riding on “geopolitical” grudges, and a sounding board for Putinist propaganda.

Corti recounts various examples of distortions and fake news, such as the Ukrainian responsibility in the killing of an Italian journalist (later excluded by the Bologna Court) and the story of his consultancy for a never made Netflix documentary about the siege of the Azovstal factory in Mariupol, which he believed reflected the manipulations of Italian war correspondents denounced by a Ukrainian colleague. The diary is peppered with criticism of the pope and politicians, intellectuals, diplomats and generals (defeatists and capitulators), and

6 CORTI, Foreword, p. 13 (“always carrying a very heavy suitcase with broadcasting equipment in it, including a folding satellite dish”).

7 Its name (Yedinstvo, Unity) referred to the patriotic and “defencist” split in the Social Democratic Party led by Plekhanov who in 1914 decided to support the government for the duration of the war.

above all, journalists who challenge the arms to Ukraine and call for negotiations. In January 2023, Corti notes the denunciation, on the Reuters, of ‘pro-Putin agents in Germany working to turn Germany against Ukraine’ and observes that in Italy everyone would cry out against ‘proscription lists’.

But above all, the book contains the daily annotations elicited by listening to or reading the way the war was recounted and explained in Italy. In the early months, when the war was still in the news, I remember seeing entire sections of Feltrinelli bookshops full of instant books with a few rare reprints of more thoughtful books. Most of them were decidedly anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian: yet Corti remembers only one estimable⁸. In fact, my friend Mario felt alone, or in a small minority, silent and impotent in the face of a mainstream irremediably pervaded by falsehoods and distortions due in part to the ignorance and carelessness of information operators, but above all to the systematic campaigning of the Kremlin and its supporting wings in Europe and especially in Italy, the most Russophile Western country, even more so than France and Germany. However, what outrages the author the most are the arguments aimed in whole or in part at supporting Western and Ukrainian co-responsibility in the outbreak of war, justifying or at least relativizing Russian aggression and the patent violation of international law.

‘Reality reversal’, writes Corti about an article by jurist Gaetano Azzariti in the Manifesto (p. 163). This position perfectly mirrors that of the adversaries, who, presumably with equal passion and good conscience, perceive themselves to be alone or in a small minority, silenced and powerless against a mainstream of ignorant, naive or sold out to a different foreigner. War, like revolution, is not a gala dinner. Nor is it a political or historiographical quèrelle, like the questions of the guilt of 1914 (*Kriegschuldfrage*) and the Holocaust (*Historikerstreit*). War closes our eyes and hearts to the reasons, to the good faith of the other. ‘Yet we know: hatred against baseness also turns the face. Even anger at injustice makes the voice hoarse.’⁹.

VIRGILIO ILARI

8 Marta Federica Ottaviani, *Brigate russe. La guerra occulta del Cremlino contro l’Occidente*, Milano, Bompiani, 2023)

9 Bertolt BRECHT, ‘An die Nachgeborenen’, in *Svendborger Gedichte*, Malik Verlag, London, 1939.

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