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Emanuele Sica, *Mussolini's Army in the Riviera: Italy's Occupation of France*. Urbana, Chicago, Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2016. viii + 275 pp. Chronology, maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-252-03985-0.

Review by Karine Varley, University of Strathclyde.

In the past seven decades, so many books and articles have been written about the occupation of France in the Second World War that it might seem that there is little new that could be said. Yet the subject continues to fascinate scholars and the wider public and, indeed, historians continue to develop fresh approaches and to ask new questions. Research remains, however, overwhelmingly focused on the German occupation, with the Italian occupation often glossed over or neglected altogether. Scholarship on the subject is still somewhat fragmentary, with greater advances having been made in research engaging with Italian archival sources than French sources. The most comprehensive study to date is that by Jean-Louis Panicacci, which synthesises local studies, unpublished doctoral dissertations and French and Italian archival research to produce a wide-ranging examination of the Italian occupation of southeast France and Corsica.<sup>[1]</sup> Emanuele Sica's book exploring the Italian occupation in the French Riviera is therefore a welcome and much-needed addition to what remains a relatively small field.

The Italian declaration of war against France on 10 June 1940 was widely perceived as a "stab in the back" for a nation already on the verge of defeat by Germany. The sense of betrayal and the poor performance of Italian forces against the French army in the Alps meant that neither the French government nor the vast majority of the French people considered Mussolini's government to have any legitimate claim to victory over France. In the armistice terms agreed between France and Italy on 24 June 1940, Italy was therefore granted only a small occupation zone encompassing a total surface area of 83,217 square kilometres and a population of 28,523. It was only after the Allied landings in North Africa on 11 November 1942 that the Italian occupation zone expanded as Axis forces took over the unoccupied southern zone. Around 150,000 Italian soldiers entered eleven departments in southeast France as well as Corsica. Between November 1942 and September 1943, four million people lived under the Italian occupation in France, in an area covering 61,500 square kilometres.<sup>[2]</sup>

In the years that followed the end of the war, the Italian occupation has been popularly regarded as having been less violent than the German occupation because of the essentially humane character of the Italian army. The fact that the Italian occupiers effectively shielded the Jews from persecution by both the Vichy and Nazi regimes only reinforced views of the Italian soldiers as fundamentally good-natured, shaped by strong family values and incapable of atrocities.

These myths and popular perceptions are the principal starting-point for Sica's book. Highlighting recent research into the Italian occupations in the Balkans, the author rejects notions of the "*Italiani brava gente*." Tensions between Italian officials and military commanders and the ethnic conflicts in Yugoslavia led Italian forces to commit acts of violence and war crimes in the Balkans against people they deemed to be racially inferior. This was not, however, the case in France. Perceiving the French

people to be culturally and racially similar to the Italian people, Sica argues, the Italian occupying forces eschewed wanton violence and sought instead to win over the local population.

A second critical factor in shaping the distinct character of the Italian occupation of the French Riviera was, Sica suggests, the circumstances in which it occurred. When Italian forces moved into the Balkans in 1941, they were in a relatively strong position: the Axis controlled much of Europe and the US had not yet entered the war. When they moved in to the French Free Zone in November 1942, however, the Axis Powers were in a much weaker position, having suffered setbacks on the eastern front, US entry to the war and Allied landings in North Africa. The post-November 1942 occupation in France placed considerable strain on Italian resources at a time when morale was already low. Italian forces were therefore instructed to act with moderation to avoid stirring up discontent within local populations.

The book adopts a comparative approach towards the occupation, exploring the tensions between competing authorities and seeking to focus upon the “grassroots” (p. 9). Sica draws a “triangular” comparison between the Italian occupation of France after November 1942, the German occupation of France after September 1943 and the Italian occupation of the Balkans (p. 9). He also examines the often difficult relations between French officials, Italian military authorities and Italian officials charged with implementing the terms of the armistice. Emphasising the agency of the occupied, Sica aims to explore not merely the experience and impact of the occupation upon the local population, but the two-way relations between the occupied and the occupiers as well.

At the heart of the book’s analysis is the notion of accommodation. Drawing upon Philippe Burrin’s work, Sica argues that all military occupations require a certain *modus vivendi* with the population.[3] However, whereas Burrin’s work sheds light on French accommodation with the German occupiers, Sica’s approach centres upon the accommodations made by the Italian occupiers which, he argues, “had a positive effect on the mood of the occupation” (p. 157). In this sense, the book might be compared to Thomas Laub’s work on the German occupation, which argues that France was spared the violence experienced in eastern Europe in part because of the “relative [German] moderation” brought about by Franco-German accommodation.[4]

The reasons for adopting an accommodating approach were varied, Sica suggests. On the one hand, the Italian occupiers, already overstretched, had to avoid acts of provocation because they had insufficient forces to deal with French opposition. On the other hand, they did not want to seem too lenient for fear of losing prestige in their attempts to challenge French sovereignty in the region. At the same time, however, Sica also suggests that accommodation was a natural consequence of the shared culture between the occupied and the occupiers. There were many close social, linguistic and familial ties between those living on either side of the French-Italian border and, indeed, over one quarter of the population of the departments neighbouring Italy were Italian or of Italian heritage.

The book compares the Italian occupation of Menton with the German occupation of Alsace-Lorraine. Like Alsace-Lorraine, Menton was treated as a *de facto* annexation, subjected to very different terms to anywhere else under Italian occupation. As the most significant gain from the June 1940 armistice terms, the town acquired great importance for the Fascist regime, serving as a model of Italianisation. For Sica, the attempts to transform the town were part of a process of colonisation similar to the policies implemented in Africa, Albania and the Balkans and which would be extended to all the lands claimed by Italian Fascists.

The comparison that Sica draws between the German occupation of the French Riviera after September 1943 and the Italian occupation that preceded it is the most striking. The German occupiers killed three times as many people in the Alpes-Maritimes than the Italians did in their whole occupation zone. While the German occupation of the French Riviera came at a time of growing violence, descending into civil war between the *milice* and a more organised Resistance, Sica points to a qualitative difference in the

violence of the German and Italian occupations. Whereas the Germans sought to eliminate those who posed a threat and those who simply did not fit the Nazis' ideological beliefs, the Italians sought to balance security with the desire to avoid antagonising the local population.

The chapter exploring Italian policy towards the Jews draws heavily upon previous scholarship, the subject having attracted greater attention from historians than any other aspect of the Italian occupation of France. Historians remain divided over the reasons for the Italian occupiers' opposition to German and French attempts to arrest and deport the Jews, while postwar public opinion has often subsumed Italian conduct into myths of the "*Italiani brava gente*." Sica takes the view that, while their approach was pragmatic, behind the Italian occupiers actively assisting the Jews who had taken refuge in their occupation zone lay the soldiers' cultural background and the ethos within the army. While German officers were trapped in a tradition of "blind obedience," Italian soldiers were shaped by a culture of "Catholic piety and the enlightened values of the *civiltà italiana*" (p. 171). The Fascist regime's anti-Semitic propaganda failed to have any significant impact upon soldiers or civilian authorities and the policy of shielding the Jews was one of the few areas on which the army and armistice officials agreed.

Overall, the book makes a useful contribution towards our understanding of Italian occupations in the Second World War. Sica presents a different argument to that advanced by Jean-Louis Panicacci. In contrast with Sica, Panicacci finds that the Italian occupation was far from benign, drawing attention to its violent character, including the concentration camps and torture camps, anti-Italian sentiment among local French populations and the threat of annexation. Sica's argument is somewhat closer to that advanced by Davide Rodogno, who has also sought to dismiss myths of the "*Italiani brava gente*," suggesting that Italian actions were not the consequence of greater human compassion but rather the limited fascisation of the army. [5]

The book's contribution towards the historiography of France in the Second World War is more limited, however. The book does not fully address why the Italian occupation matters, or how it helps us to acquire a more complex understanding of the occupation as a whole. Sica's research in the French archives is limited to the Archives Départementales des Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, the Archives Départementales des Alpes-Maritimes and the Archives Municipales de la Ville de Nice. Without having consulted the extensive archives relating to the Italian Armistice Commission for France or the Direction des Services de l'Armistice held at the Archives Nationales, Sica is unable to present a wider picture of the French response to the Italian occupation.

The Italian occupation of the Riviera was distinct and should not be taken as representative of the Italian occupation of France more broadly. It was different from the Italian occupation in Savoie and still more different from the occupation in Corsica. While Sica acknowledges that Corsica saw greater violence, most notoriously with the brutal torture and deaths of resistance leaders Fred Scamaroni and Jean Nicoli in 1943, this raises questions about the validity of some of the conclusions that he has drawn. The conditions in Corsica were different owing to the presence of eight battalions of blackshirts, the high density of the occupation and the activities of the Resistance. However, the two key factors that Sica argues shaped the distinctive character of the occupation in the French Riviera, namely the context of the wider war and the cultural and ethnic proximity of the occupiers with the occupied were also present in Corsica. Despite this, the island was subjected to greater levels of hostage-taking, torture and executions than anywhere under Italian occupation in mainland France.

While it is clearly Sica's intention to present a complex picture of the period, it is difficult to reconcile his depiction of an occupying army culturally connected with the areas in which it was based and enjoying comparatively benign relations with the local population with the claim that the occupation was also experienced as a "trauma" (p. 10). Indeed, Sica acknowledges that with severe restrictions, arbitrary arrests and roundups, the Italian occupation brought great fear and anxiety. It is also difficult

to reconcile the image of relative calm with Sica's depiction of the nervousness and sensitivity of Italian soldiers who overreacted to French insults or the frequent clashes between soldiers and local people. Sica tends to understate the bitterness within many communities over the Italian "treachery" in declaring war and the attempts by some Italian immigrants to exploit the changed balance of power. The social, cultural and familial closeness of communities across the French-Italian border often served to aggravate the sense of "betrayal."

While endeavouring to present the occupied population as having been far from "passive spectators," Sica's approach and chosen sources serve rather to obscure their voices (p.10). In the chapter exploring "collaboration and accommodation," Sica focuses primarily upon the Italian immigrant community using the records of the post-liberation collaboration trials. Elsewhere, Sica uses police and prefects' reports on public opinion and on incidents between the local French and Italian communities and the Italian occupiers. As a consequence, we gain only a limited sense of French responses to the Italian occupation. While police and prefects' reports provide important indications on public opinion and were the product of extensive monitoring and surveillance, as Pierre Laborie and many other historians have observed, as sources they are not without limitations, being shaped by political, administrative, social and other influences.[6]

The author's comparative approach helps us to gain a greater understanding of the distinctive characteristics of the Italian occupation in the French Riviera, but is not without difficulties. While there might be a case for comparing the occupation of Menton to the German occupation of Alsace-Lorraine, Sica's decision to compare the post-November 1942 Italian occupation of the Riviera with the post-September 1943 German occupation is problematic. Given that the author contends that the wider context of the war was critical in shaping the character of the occupation, it might have been more useful to compare the post-November 1942 Italian occupation with the post-November 1942 German occupation.

Despite the problematic nature of some of the arguments and approaches, the book is engagingly written, clear and undoubtedly helps to fill an important gap in the English-language scholarship on the occupation of France. If historians have now moved away from viewing the occupation in Franco-German terms, highlighting the role of non-French actors, Sica's analysis of the Italian role will help nuance our understanding still further.

## NOTES

[1] Jean-Louis Panicacci, *L'occupation italienne: Sud-est de la France, juin 1940-septembre 1943* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010). See also: Domenico Schipsi, *L'occupazione italiana dei territori metropolitan francesi (1940-1943)* (Rome: Stato maggiore dell'esercito, Ufficio storico, 2007); Romain Rainero, *La commission italienne d'armistice avec la France: Les rapports entre la France de Vichy et l'Italie de Mussolini (10 juin 1940-8 septembre 1943)* (Paris: Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, 1995); Daniel Carpi, *Between Mussolini and Hitler: The Jews and the Italian Authorities in France and Tunisia* (Hanover N.H. and London: Brandeis University Press, 1994).

[2] Panicacci, *L'occupation italienne*, p. 325.

[3] Philippe Burrin, *La France à l'heure allemande, 1940-1944* (Paris: Seuil, 1997).

[4] Thomas Laub, *After the Fall: German Policy in Occupied France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 9.

[5] Davide Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War*, trans. Adrian Belton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 403.

[6] Pierre Laborie, *L'opinion française sous Vichy* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), pp. 34-54.

Karine Varley  
University of Strathclyde  
[Karine.Varley@strath.ac.uk](mailto:Karine.Varley@strath.ac.uk)

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