

Book Review: Matteo Pretelli and Francesco Fusi, *Soldati e patrie. I combattenti alleati di origine italiana nella Seconda guerra mondiale*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2023

By Gianluca Cinelli

The Allied armies fighting in the Second World War were an international and transcultural aggregation of Western, African, Southern American, and Asian soldiers. The main reason for the intercultural diversity in the French and British armies consisted of the extensive deployment of colonial troops on several fronts, from Europe to the Pacific, in the air and on the sea. Unlike their European Allies, the United States did not rely on a colonial empire and had only American troops to deploy in the war. However, the American armed forces were the mirror of American society, which included a variety of ethnic and cultural communities. The book *Soldati e patrie* (*Soldiers and Fatherlands*) offers remarkable insight into one particular aspect of this phenomenon, namely the presence of the Italians in the Allied armies, with a focus on the US Army.

The book is ponderous and well-documented and includes a variety of sources ranging from archival materials to historiographical literature, from personal narrative to oral interviews, without neglecting fiction and cinema. Its 11 chapters investigate, firstly, the role of the Italian immigrants in the Entente's armies during the Great War and the role of the Italian veterans in America and the British Empire after the war. Chapters 1 and 2 (p. 23-84) interestingly inform the readers about the relationship between the Italian veterans and fascism over the 1920s and 1930s. Chapters 2 and 3 (p. 51-114) explore the modalities and ideological issues related to the recruitment of Italian-Americans in the armed forces, while chapters 4-7 (p. 115-266) focus on the cultural aspects of the participation of the Italian-Americans in the war, with particular attention paid to the Italian front. Chapter 8 (p. 267-306) explains how the Italians were also employed in Italy as a valuable asset for military intelligence. Chapter 9 (p. 307-334) is devoted to the role of the Catholic chaplaincy in mediating the cultural integration of the Italian-American soldiers and their community at home in the war effort. Chapter 10 (335-372) explores the contribution of cinema to representing the cultural and ethnic minorities in the US and allied armed forces (first of all, the Italians, p. 336 and 360-361). And finally, chapter 11 (p.

373-412) considers the memories of such participation, i.e. how the various cultural communities shaped their narratives and self-representation over the years in America.

From the beginning, the readers get acquainted with the idea that being Italian in America in the 1910s was not always easy. The Italian immigrants and their families were racially discriminated not unlike other groups such as the Chinese, the Irish, and the Afro-Americans. The authors write, “the idea was widespread – particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries – that the Italians were by nature violent and prone to crime, as well as poorly able to adapt to the precepts of democracy” (p. 25 and 346). Therefore, joining the US expeditionary force in 1917 offered the Italians an opportunity to show their allegiance to the United States and to obtain citizenship (p. 26), which is the reason why an estimated 12% of the American troops deployed in Europe between 1917 and 1918 were Italians (p. 26). As the authors point out, the Italian participation in the Great War as American soldiers lay the first brick of a “transnational memory” to come (p. 28). Also interesting is the exploration of the relationship between the Italian-American veterans and fascism, which exalted their Italian identity accordingly to Mussolini's propaganda (p. 35). However, despite the early sympathy expressed by a conspicuous part of the Italian communities in America for fascism, by 1941 the Federation of Italian World War Veterans (which supported fascism) had de facto ceased to be active (p. 37).

Despite the suspiciousness towards the Italians that often led the Allied governments to intern them in camps as “enemy aliens” since 1940, many Italian-born citizens in the UK, Australia, Canada, Brazil, and the United States enlisted to fight as “ethnics”. According to the authors, who base their figures on the existing literature, the Italians who fought under the Stars and Stripes banner between 1941 and 1945 were between 750.000 and 850.000 (p. 60). However, the authors point out that this second wave of ethnic recruitment was profoundly different from that of 1917:

The suspension of immigration and the consolidation of the ethnic communities, combined with an attempt to “Americanise” immigrants and to instil in their children the precepts of American patriotism, contributed to considerably reducing those linguistic differences and cultural issues that had engaged the American military authorities dealing with foreign conscripts during the Great War. This time in the vast majority of cases young people enlisted who were culturally “American” as they were born, raised, and educated in the States. In the few cases of Italians who were not yet naturalized, serving in the military often was aimed at obtaining US citizenship, which a law of 1943

granted to those who enlisted in the American armed forces even though they had been born in enemy countries (p. 65).

A most interesting aspect of this book is, in my opinion, the reflection on the cultural identity of the Italian-American soldiers. They were mostly born in America in the 1920s to Italian immigrants, therefore, they were English native-speakers American citizens – due to the law of the *ius soli* –, and felt proud of their American identity (p. 85-86). For them, as the authors comment, Italy was a distant and mythical country about which they only knew what their parents told them in the dialect they spoke at home (p. 86-87). Thus, the military service permitted them to get to know greater America beyond the boundaries of their “Little Italy” neighbourhood (p. 89). The authors, in chapter 3, portray the “greatest (Italian American) generation”, including tables and figures about instruction level, professional employment, and military career of a sample of 1573 Italian-American soldiers who were either killed or captured during the war. These soldiers embraced the allied cause without refraining (p. 124), even without being fanatically patriotic (p. 126). The most striking aspect of the elaboration of their cultural and ethnic identity consists in the encounter with Italy and the Italian people during the Italian campaign 1943-1945. This encounter was encouraged by the American military authorities, which believed that it would facilitate the reconciliation between the two countries (p. 142). American soldiers were told that the Italian people were not the same as fascism and that the Italians were unfit for war and strict discipline, therefore, easy to re-educate (p. 141-142). Thus, the encounter between the Italian-American soldiers and the Italian population contributed to consolidating the myth of the “good Italian” among the Italian communities in the States (p. 147). This sympathy matched with the tendency of the Italians to see in the Americans the “good” and “friendly” liberators, more human and easy-going than their British comrades (p. 157-158).

The authors acutely observe that this negotiation of identity was marked by the conflict between the “origin” or ethnic legacy and the willingness to establish real contact with the ancestral culture (p. 159-160). Italy, in fact, “represented an immaterial realm of affections and distant recollection inherited by their parents” (p. 173). This also contributed to transforming, in many cases, the war in Italy into an experience of “tourism” as a way of negotiating personal and ethnic identity (p. 179). Such tourism was encouraged by the authorities not only as a way of normalising the military occupation of Italy but also as a plan to make Italy palatable as a destination for the post-war

tourism industry (p. 180). After all, as the authors claim, such tourism occurred under the exceptional circumstances of military occupation, which characterised that experience as a strongly asymmetrical encounter with a culture that was negatively feminised (Italy-as-whore) as a prey to conquer and dominate (p. 183 and 252-253). In the eyes of the Americans, the Italian population deserved to be redeemed, although the persistence of cultural prejudices about its nature and character made it not entirely redeemable” (p. 246).

The encounter between the Italian-American soldiers and their ancestral country and culture of origin was, therefore, conflicted and not ever smooth. Many Italian-American soldiers enlisted in the Marines to fight the Japanese in the Pacific and avoid deployment in Italy. In conclusion, the authors claim the Second World War constituted a watershed in the history of many Italian communities abroad, whose members could demonstrate their trustworthiness and obtain full political and cultural recognition as citizens. Thus, the Italian-American veterans could fully integrate into the American community without renouncing their ethnic and cultural identity (p. 413-414).

*Soldati e patrie*, in conclusion, is an inspiring book worth reading and should be translated into English. The American public would certainly benefit from knowing more about this aspect of American history and culture. That the book also encompasses an intrinsic desire to encourage direct encounter and dialogue between cultures is demonstrated by its origin as an exhibition of photographic materials called *Voci di libertà*, displayed in Florence, Rome, and Naples in 2022.