

Sisters in Resistance. By Tilar J. Mazzeo (2022). 310 p. Melbourne, London: Scribe. ISBN: 978-1-922585-63-4.

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Italy's role in World War II was complicated, confused and even today remains confusing. Italy had been the birthplace of fascism, a political, administrative and ideological system where one individual, Benito Mussolini, held supreme authority from 1922 to 1945. Italian Fascism provided the template for the Nazi version, as developed in Germany, in which Adolf Hitler held absolute power from 1933 to 1945.

Under Mussolini, Italy invaded Ethiopia, and expanded its influence in Libya, Albania, and Yugoslavia, and played a part in the Spanish Civil War (1936 – 1939), on the side of Francisco Franco against the Republicans. (Against the urgings of Hitler and Mussolini, Franco declined to join them in World War II, preferring to remain neutral). In 1929, Mussolini made peace with the Catholic Church, signing the Lateran Pact which created the Vatican State. He also brought about far-reaching administrative reform, and greatly reduced the power of the Mafia, while at the same time distancing himself from Hitler's profound antisemitism, though later he did yield to pressure to introduce such measures.

In the opening stages of World War II, Italy under Mussolini, was gripped with doubt and reluctance to join in, but in 1940 Mussolini decided that Italy would join Nazi Germany, and declared war on Britain and France. In so doing, Mussolini incurred the opposition of his senior military, administrative, legal and regal advisors, chief of whom being Galeazzo Ciano, his Foreign Minister who also happened to be his son-in-law.

By 1943, it had become clear that Italy's takeover of parts of North Africa had failed, an Allied invasion of Sicily was under way and the Italian economy was at a standstill because of shortages.

Moreover, German forces at Stalingrad had surrendered, and it had become apparent to many observers that World War II was going to be lost by the Axis powers of Italy, Germany and Japan. With the help of other senior figures, Ciano organised a coup, and Mussolini was removed from office and held in captivity. Hitler mounted a rescue mission and had Mussolini reinstated as Fascist leader or Duce, in the small town of Salò. There a puppet government known as the Salò Republic held office under Mussolini until his capture and murder by partisans in 1945.

During the war years, Ciano, as Italy's Foreign Minister, had kept a detailed and perceptive diary, recording in great detail the thoughts, conversations and activities of the leading players with whom he had contact, which would be of extreme value to the soon-to-be victorious Allies. Sisters in Resistance by Tilar J. Mazzeo, is an account of how three very different but very courageous women fought to save the diaries from falling into German hands. Ciano himself was dead, having been executed on the orders of his father-in-law, acting on the insistent urging of Hitler, and over and above the pleading of his daughter Edda Ciano. While they were not particularly close and their marriage was an open one, Edda Ciano's vain efforts to save her husband make compelling and moving reading. In her ultimately futile efforts to save him, Edda Ciano attempts to bargain with Mussolini and Hitler, using the threat to supply the diaries to the Allies. This action puts her life in extreme danger and causes her to flee to neutral Switzerland disguised as a peasant woman, finding refuge in a convent. Her deep depression, grief and acute mental anguish are clearly revealed, only assuaged a little by the visits of her lover Emilio Pucci.

One of the women who greatly helped Edda Ciano in her struggle to survive, and to deliver to the Allies was Hildegard Burkhardt Beetz, code name

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Felicitas. Hilde Beetz was a German who was also a Nazi spy who, while working as a translator of the Diaries, made copies which she delivered to the Allies, at extreme risk of certain death had she been caught. Her highly secret meetings with Edda Ciano were an area of extreme risk, but were motivated by desire to help the Allies and her personal experience as a former lover of Galeazzo Ciano.

The third of the women brought together by the desire to help achieve the preservation of the Ciano diaries was an American, Frances de Chollet, the wife of French banker and aristocrat Louis de Chollet. Frances de Chollet provided a meeting ground at her home in neutral Switzerland for spies, refugees, foreign

agents and diplomatic personnel, in particular, Allen Dulles, head of the Swiss branch of the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Frances de Chollet provided, at great risk to herself the link between Edda Ciano, Hilde Beetz and Allen Dulles. After World War II, the diaries played a major role in the prosecution in the Nuremburg Trials, and later in the writing of its history, particularly through the writings of William L. Shirer.

In conclusion, one could say that Tilar J. Mazzeo has provided an intriguing account of the complicated interaction of three extraordinary women united by their effort to preserve and bring to the world a document of enormous historical importance.