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Bowd, Stephen D. Renaissance Mass Murder: Civilians and Soldiers during the Italian Wars

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Bowd, Stephen D.

Renaissance Mass Murder: Civilians and Soldiers during the Italian Wars.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. 304 + 16 ill. ISBN 978-0-1988-3261-4 (hardcover) US\$85.

As Stephen Bowd points out in the introduction to what will surely become an important work, many histories of the Italian wars focus on battles and outcomes, weapons and technology, strategies and alliances, casualties and the composition of armies. In many of these histories, one hears about sacks and sieges and the billeting of troops but it is difficult to piece together the lived experience of those most impacted: the peasants who were forced to provide food, the townswomen who threw boiling water on besiegers, the hapless who found themselves in the way of armies. Very few focus on civilians and their lived experience despite the fact that many of the sources for sixteenth-century Italy provide historians with detailed data on what it was like for the people who didn't start these wars but had to live with them.

Bowd tackles this problem deftly using a truly impressive range of sources. These include the under-utilized yet abundant chronicles for this period, diplomatic dispatches, and other material from no fewer than thirteen different archives and hundreds of printed primary sources (the bibliography for these sources alone is well worth the price of the book). He divides the book into three sections—Introduction and Overview, Practices, and Theories of War—a division that makes the book useful for both the general reader interested in an overview and the specialist wishing to dive deep into accounts of sacks, for example.

The first section gives an important and concise survey of the Italian Wars and introduces the book's novel approach. Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of the Italian Wars with the added benefit of rich detail from chroniclers lamentably not quoted as often as Machiavelli, Guicciardini, or ambassadorial dispatches. This personalizes a political and military history that often comes across as dry. The second chapter outlines the circumstances that could lead to massacres, including the strategic use of terror. As Bowd points out, while Italians claimed that they fought ritualistic, civil battles (unlike the Gascons and *landsknechts* they disparaged as barbaric and cruel) they were just as likely to use the threat of massacre and sacking to force enemy towns into submission—a terrorist strategy that proved to be successful again and again. The political

“dance” of politics and powers only exacerbated these risks as did internal factionalism. There are many instances of one faction opening the gate to the enemy in order to get revenge on the other, the 1509 sack of Brescia being a notable example.

Bowd then moves on to a less-studied aspect of the Italian wars—the experience of civilians (also the title of chapter 3). This chapter provides some of the most interesting and under-utilized material and gives a perspective one does not often see: what it was like being sacked. Studies of violence can often fall into the trap of abstracting the lives of both the people who suffered it—the women of Mordano and Colle di Val d’Elsa who spent all night in a church praying, the constable who escaped plundering soldiers across a field, as well as the men, women, and children who suffered unspeakable torture—and of the people who perpetrated it. While some of these passages are difficult to read, they provide necessary insight into the experiences of those who found themselves caught between armies. A particularly welcome section in this chapter explores the experience of women—an area particularly deserving of research but vastly underrepresented in the literature.

Section 2 examines the theoretical basis for the treatment of civilians, including just war theories, chivalry, and military humanism. Bowd concisely outlines the theories on the culpability of civilians and the extent to which force could be used against non-combatants, particularly women, children, and religious. Chapter 5 focuses specifically on the most famous theoretician of war during this period: Machiavelli. Bowd stresses the pragmatism of Machiavelli and his belief that war was a natural state for man. As a result, cruelty is an unfortunate but necessary by-product of war, which could either be strategic or undermine the foundations of conquest. What emerges is a picture of the debates on the appropriate use of force, the limits of cruelty, and what should be the aims of besiegers.

Section 3 examines the representations of violence, including the rhetoric used, and the hyperbole of accounts that highlighted the trauma and suffering of those who experienced war, particularly as it was represented in poetry. Chapter 6 looks at the abundance of sources that depict suffering—including chronicles, supplications, and art—and the rhetoric they used. The Swiss mercenary Urs Graf’s *Armless Woman with a Wooden Leg* is one of the more poignant examples of the rhetoric highlighting the miseries of war discussed in this chapter. The dispatches of ambassadors were more emotionally strained

yet still employed this rhetoric. At the same time, some sources—like Marin Sanudo’s diary—dispassionately recount the sack of Padua by giving a list of houses instead of victims. The seventh and last chapter, on poetry, is perhaps one of the most interesting of the book. Here Bowd examines how justifications for war filtered into poetry and civilian suffering was immortalized in epics. Poets both major and minor participated in a literary culture of war that reflected on themes of barbarian atrocity and Italian glory (or lack of it).

With this book, Bowd deftly achieves his goal of “bringing the modern reader closer to the forms of consciousness and experiences of civilians and soldiers during the Italian Wars without, at the same time, wrenching them out of their time or rendering them merely pitiable” (226). Only one small quibble: in the introduction and conclusion, Bowd references the arguments for a civilizing process that led to the decline of homicide rates, but in this reviewer’s opinion he does not address these as thoroughly as he could have throughout the book. Overall, however, this is a laudable, impressive contribution to the thriving field of violence in early modern Italy.

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Brundin, Abigail, Deborah Howard, and Mary Laven.

The Sacred Home in Renaissance Italy.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xxxii, 366 + 203 ill. ISBN 978-0-1988-1655-3 (hardcover) US\$49.95.

This book shows the splendid possibilities of collaboration. As the outcome of a four-year project funded by the European Research Council, the authors of this study represent the fields of Italian literature, history, and the history of art and architecture. Together, they examine domestic and personal religious devotion from 1450 to 1600 with an eye to showing rather than merely asserting. This approach is especially welcome given the abundance of material from this period that remains unexamined or undervalued. In an effort to direct the scholarly gaze towards less explored areas, this project investigates the Venetian *terraferma*, the Marche, and the city of Naples and its surroundings. These areas seem to offer a tremendous amount of evidence—archival, printed, and