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Hope Hamilton, *Sacrifice on the Steppe: The Italian Alpine Corps in the Stalingrad Campaign, 1942-1943*. Philadelphia: Casemate, 2011. Pp. xiii, 366. ISBN 978-1-61200-002-2.

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The role of Italy and its armed forces has been neglected in English-language studies of the Second World War. Moreover, the fate of Italian combatants on all fronts has been clouded by the predominant role of German combatants. In *Sacrifice on the Steppe*, Hope Hamilton—inspired by the military experience of her two uncles who served as *alpini* (Italian mountain troops)—tells “from the bottom up” the story of the sixty thousand men of the Alpine Corps on the Eastern Front, a story barely known outside Italy.

Hamilton, a retired teacher, organizes her narrative into four parts totaling twenty-one chapters. In Part I, “Italian Troops Are Sent to Russia,” eight chapters explore mainly the German invasion of the Soviet Union, Mussolini’s desire to be involved in the campaign in 1941, and the deployment of the Alpine Corps on the Don in fall 1942 as part of the 227,000-man *Armata italiana* in Russia (ARMIR) or Italian Army in Russia, also called 8th Army.¹ Chapter 8, “Encirclement of the Alpine Corps,” explains how the army’s three alpine divisions—Cuneense, Tridentina, and Julia—were surrounded during the Soviets’ siege and capture of Rossosh (13–27 January 1943), the headquarters of the Alpine Corps. Since the corps received authorization to withdraw from its positions on the Don only on the morning of 17 January, the *alpini* had to fight their way out of a pocket being gradually sealed by the enemy.

The four chapters of Part II (the heart of the book), “*La ritirata*: Withdrawal of the Alpine Corps from the Don,” tells the story of the corps’s journey to either salvation or capture. In their desperate attempt to escape encirclement, the forty thousand *alpini* were joined by thousands of Italians from different services and units, as well as seven thousand Germans, seven thousand Romanians, and “30,000 unarmed Hungarians” (117). “Although commanders of the alpine units in Popovka possessed no accurate information about the exact location of the Axis lines to the west, or precise information about where they might encounter Russian resistance, it was decided that the three alpine divisions, as well as the Vicenza division, would march west, parallel to one another, separated by several kilometers” (118).

As expected, the Italians had to fight, and the *alpini* (lacking any heavy weapons) clashed with Soviet and partisan forces twenty times during the retreat. The toll taken by combat, disease, hunger, and cold was terrible. In chapters 13 and 14, the author concludes with the story of the *alpini* who made it “out of the bag” and reached the Axis lines. These fortunate survivors of indescribable suffering were integrated in a chaotic and gradual repatriation to Italy in late winter and early spring 1943.

In Part III, “Prisoners of War,” Hamilton depicts the horrendous ordeal of some seventy thousand *alpini* and other combatants captured by the Soviets in December 1942 and January 1943. The Italian prisoners were forced into the *davai* marches.² In the extreme cold, starvation and exhaustion took their toll on the men. When the column finally reached Kalach, as one of Hamilton’s sources, Carlo Vicentini, writes, “The marches were over. If I am not mistaken with my counting, that day was February 2. I had walked for eighteen days, four during the withdrawal and fourteen toward a new destiny. When I returned to Italy, I could look at a map of Russia, and discovered I had walked for about four hundred kilometers” (207).

1. In the official history of the Historical Bureau of the Army General Staff, the 8th Army order of battle totaled 229,005 men. See Costantino de Franceschini, Giorgio de Vecchi, and Fabio Mantovani, *Le operazioni delle unità italiane al fronte russo (1941-1943)*, 3rd ed. (Rome: SMEUS, 2000) 187; on details of the ARMIR’s equipment and weaponry, see 187–95.

2. From the Russian “*davai*” (keep moving). The word became known in Italy when Nuto Revelli, an *alpino* who served in Russia, published *La strada del davai* (Turin: Einaudi, 1966), recently issued in English: *Mussolini’s Death March: Eyewitness Accounts of Italian Soldiers on the Eastern Front*, tr. John Penuel (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2013).

The end of the marches did not bring relief, as Vicentini, Gino Beraudi, and Hamilton's uncle, Veniero Marsan, soon discovered. In the last two chapters of Part III, the author recreates the terrible picture of life in the camps drawn by her protagonists. After a journey by train of ten to fifteen excruciating days, some prisoners arrived at "sorting camps" before being sent on to another camp; others were sent directly to permanent labor camps, where conditions were grossly inhumane. At Khrinovoje alone, twenty-seven thousand prisoners died, including twenty thousand Italians. The first months in the camps were the deadliest. Although conditions improved with time—especially after the armistice of 8 September 1943 and again after V-E Day—their Soviet captors gave the prisoners no idea of what lay ahead for them.

Part IV, "*Il ritorno: Returning Home*," contains only two chapters. The first concerns the survivors' journey home. The author details intricacies of the repatriation at length. The ARMIR prisoners were released at various times, and their trip home was a long, ill-organized, and frustrating trek that Soviet authorities did nothing to alleviate. After three years of emotional distress and the loss of so many comrades and friends, the survivors finally experienced the anguish and relief of reunion with their loved ones.

The last chapter analyzes the Italian losses on the Eastern Front; Hamilton rightly notes that the Alpine Corps comprised only about a quarter of the men of the 8th Army. She relies heavily on the work of Carlo Vicentini, who, after the war, undertook a serious investigation of the fate of Italian POWs. Since only about 125,000 men returned to Italy from the Soviet Union in spring 1943, approximately ninety-five thousand were missing. Of these, only ten thousand came back from the camps in 1945–46. Thus, eighty-five thousand died during the campaign. The opening of Russian archives in 1991 allowed Vicentini to determine that about twenty-five thousand men had died (of all causes) during the withdrawal, thirty-eight thousand in the camps, and twenty-two thousand "during the marches of the *davai* and on train transports" (304).

Hamilton certainly tells the story of the *alpini*, as promised, "from the bottom up."³ She is quite conversant with the relevant sources and scholarly literature in both English and, more importantly, Italian. The memoirs of survivors, some of them famous, like Nuto Revelli⁴ and Mario Rigoni Stern,⁵ enrich her account.

The book is not intended as a military history of the Alpine Corps. Moreover, its subtitle is misleading, for two reasons.⁶ In the first place, as part of the 8th Army, the Alpine Corps was only indirectly involved in the battle for Stalingrad: the first units hit by the Soviet Little Saturn offensive of 16 December were the Cosseria and Ravenna infantry divisions of the II Italian Corps. Although the Julia division was dispatched (18 December) to the Mitrofanovka sector to strengthen the Axis line, the involvement of the other alpine divisions was gradual and culminated with the mid-January Soviet offensive, when the fate of the German 6th Army had already been decided. Secondly, Parts III and IV of the book do not deal at all with the "Stalingrad Campaign, 1942–1943"; rather, they move away from the battle in both time and place.

The book has some flaws and serious omissions.⁷ There is no proper introduction. Mussolini's decision to deploy the *Corpo Spedizione Italiano in Russia*, or Italian Expeditionary Corps in Russia, in summer 1941 and the delicate question of relations between Italian and German forces and the Russian population are too superficially touched on in chapter 1 to be useful or convincing.⁸ In addition, the chapters are too uneven in length. The four-page chapter 11 should have been subsumed in the previous chapter. And Hamilton needlessly attempts to detail the stories of too many survivors in the bloated thirty-five-page chapter 19.

3. Since she uses the testimony of men of other 8th Army units, her story is not solely about the Alpine Corps.

4. See note 2 above.

5. *The Sergeant in the Snow*, tr. Archibald Colquhoun (Evanston, IL: Northwestern U Pr, 1998; orig. 1953).

6. The subtitle of the Italian edition—*La tragedia degli Alpini italiani in Russia* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2012)—more accurately reflects the view of Italian historians, who describe the 8th Army as fighting in Russia or on the Don, rarely referring to Stalingrad.

7. There are some unfortunate typos and other minor mistakes. To cite a couple examples: the spelling Mario Rigone (read Rigoni) Stern appears twice. On 295–97, "disbursed" is printed three times for "dispersed." And, in the bibliography, the title of Giorgio Rochat's book is wrong: for *Le due guerre italiane 1935–1943*, read *Le guerre italiane 1935–1943*.

8. Relations between German and Italian combatants—in North Africa as well as in the Soviet Union—were complicated and dependent on the situation of the moment. On relations of local populations with Italian soldiers, recent scholarly works have revisited the idea of the Italians as "good people"—see Thomas Schlemmer, *Invasori, non vittime: La campagna italiana di Russia* (Rome: Laterza, 2009).

More importantly, the author's clarification of historical context is inadequate. Her presentation of the order of battle and equipment of the ARMIR is perfunctory: the disasters suffered by Italian combatants in the Soviet Union were not primarily due to their obsolete equipment. The shortcomings of Italian commanders on the Eastern Front⁹—a more critical issue—are not seriously discussed. Hamilton cites, but does not fully exploit Giorgio Rochat's authoritative analysis;¹⁰ and it is odd that, given her fluency in Italian, she neglects to use the Italian official history of the Russian campaign.¹¹ A better use of the scholarly literature would have saved the author from factual errors and given her narrative greater depth and precision.¹² Finally, the book's plentiful maps are very useful, especially those showing the withdrawal of the Italian units, but exact locations of the many encounters with Soviet forces are not indicated.

Although it is not a scholarly work, *Sacrifice on the Steppe* makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the Italian involvement in the war against the USSR. Hope Hamilton's highlighting of the combatants' own experiences and memories, previously common only in Italian histories, is most welcome in this work meant for Anglophone readers. Her book nicely complements those of Mario Rigoni Stern and Eugenio Corti,¹³ but does not surpass Nuto Revelli's masterpiece on the subject.¹⁴

9. Viz., Gen. Italo Gariboldi, of the ARMIR, and Gen. Gabriele Nasci, of the Alpine Corps.

10. *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943: dall'Impero d'Etiopia alla disfatta* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005).

11. See note 1 above. For a concise but comprehensive survey of Italian involvement in the Soviet campaign, see Mario Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerra*, vol. 3: *Il periodo fascista*, tome 2: *La seconda guerra mondiale* (Rome: SMEUS, 2007) 665-713.

12. To say that the Italian M-13 tank was not a good combat vehicle is accurate, but none had been sent to the Soviet Union (8). The lack of MAB 38 submachine guns handicapped the Italian combatants, but to imply that all the Soviet infantrymen had "automatic rifles" or submachine guns is misleading (7). Ugo Cavallero is incorrectly called "Chief of Staff" (28); he was the head of Comando Supremo, the Italian Armed Forces High Command.

13. *Few Returned: Twenty-eight Days on the Russian Front, Winter 1942-1943*, tr. Peter E. Levy (Columbia: U Missouri Pr, 1997; orig. 1947).

14. Note 2 above.