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

Elli Papanikolaou

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Stephen D. Bowd,
*RENAISSANCE MASS MURDER: CIVILIANS AND
SOLDIERS DURING THE ITALIAN WARS*,
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 288 pages

A number of scholars, such as Julian Romane and Adam Augustyn (managing editor at *Encyclopaedia Britannica*), have written on the history of the Italian Wars (1494–1559) with a focus on the most important battles or their causes. *Renaissance Mass Murder*, however, focuses not only on the causes of battles or their consequences, but also on how the civilians perceived and suffered in these wars, in an attempt to explain the real nature of war and violence. Stephen D. Bowd presents the history of the Italian Wars using primary sources, testimonies and other historians' views to explain how the people of that era understood the war and mass murder.

Renaissance Mass Murder is divided into three parts and has seven chapters, as well as an introduction and a conclusion. In the introduction, the author puts forward his question of how wars influenced civilians in society. Bowd explicates that historical studies of the Italian Wars prove that the civilians were, generally, marginalised by the actions of soldiers, bellicose popes and army commanders. Thus, the main purpose of this book is to examine this particular aspect of the wars. Specifically, the author wants to display, firstly, why the generals, lords or bishops decided to use violence

as a tool and, secondly, to reconstruct the experiences of civilians and soldiers in the wars. Using figures and diagrams, he underlines the difficulty in establishing the exact number of victims of these wars and elucidates what he is going to recount in the following chapters by focusing on 1494, a “dreadful turning point in their [Italians'] history, and indeed in the history of Europe” (p. 8).

Chapter 1 describes the four most intense phases of the war (1494–95, 1496–1500, 1580–19 and 1521–29). Bowd begins with an account of the marriages and agreements that took place between the French kings and nobles and the Italian lords, which includes a discussion on the position of the Germans, Spanish, papacy and church, in order to illustrate the main causes of the wars. The author explains the political position of scholars and citizens in these alliances and disagreements and uses the examples of specific protagonists, letters (like one from the son of Niccolò Machiavelli) and testimonies, to render the facts. As a result, he is able to analyse how the personal interests of nobles and politics influenced the economy and the outcome of the battles. What is really interesting in this chapter is that Bowd starts with a reference to a speech of Benito Mussolini. Through this example,

he succeeds in revealing how the Italian Wars generally affected the history of Europe in subsequent centuries.

The second chapter expands on the causes of the mass murder and violence of the Italian Wars by examining how both mass murder and violence affected society and the behaviour of soldiers and civilians. The author indicates that according to some historical assessments, two of the most important causes for the massacres and sacking of towns are national and ethnic identities and “bitterness and anger” (p. 49). Especially the soldiers’ appetites and passions, the anger and bloodlust shaped by the structure of power from the princes and, generally, fury were seen, even by the scholars of that era, as one of the main reasons for the sacking of civilians and, sometimes, even of soldiers, although he stresses that the anger and the massacres are only one part of the story. In this chapter, he manages to show that the massacre and sack of towns were actually strategies of terror. Via this tactic, lords and princes could force the other side into negotiations, while plunder was an important tool for both intimidating civilians and compensating soldiers.

Chapter 3 is an excellent study of how civilians understood the Italian Wars. Bowd illustrates how civilians faced mass murder in the wars in ways that can reveal fundamental and unfamiliar sides of Renaissance Italian society and culture. He underlines that, when their city came under attack, many civilians fled to find shelter in other cities. He also points out that citizens were often held captive for ransom as well as tortured. Furthermore, he explains the process of recovering or reconstructing a city after

a massacre, including the collection and burial of the dead. The most interesting part of this chapter, however, deals with the role of women in these wars and how they participated in them. Through testimonies and examples, the author shows the violence that people experienced and how Renaissance scholars treated women, considering their suicide to be a virtue. Following this line of inquiry, in the following chapter Bowd shows how the conceptual framework of the war was shaped by broader medieval, social, religious and political concerns. He indicates that it is difficult to determine the meaning of the term “citizen”, concluding that citizens – women, children and the elderly – were often called “useless mouths” because they could not participate in battle or were dangerous for rebellions. Thus, even though the concept of military humanism had developed, Bowd successfully explains how the rules of war and people could justify the massacres of innocent civilians.

Chapter 5 discusses Machiavelli’s book *The Prince*. The author exhibits Machiavelli’s theory of the problem of peace, the role of religion in the state and the necessity of war, underlining how Machiavellianism influenced later historians and scholars. Bowd seeks to explicate how a great scholar of that era perceived wars by emphasising their necessity as something natural in society. What is more, the last two chapters provide a brief account of the literature and poems of that time. Referring to specific literary texts, the author indicates that “civilians had a great deal of interest in war and warriors” (p. 173), which is why many poets and historians not only recorded the events of wars, but also

dedicated entire praise to them and tried to analyse the meaning of violence. Using extracts from books and poems, Bowd explains how poets could delight, move and persuade the reader with historical touches and shape historical facts in ways that the historian could not. As a result, in the last chapters the author seeks to assist the reader in better understanding the events of these wars through the eyes of writers and scholars of that era, providing a complex and compelling rendering of the wars. In conclusion, he discusses the overall impact of the wars on Italian society, economy and culture, with a special emphasis on civilians, explaining how the violence and the rules of wars changed in the following centuries.

Renaissance Mass Murder is replete with personal letters, extracts from books, literary texts and first-hand testimonies that allow the reader to better understand how the massacre and sack of towns influenced and were influenced by military officers, soldiers, princes and civilians. The significance of this book lies in the fact that each chapter explores how civilians felt and suffered during these wars and how the wars affected Renaissance art, society and culture. Furthermore, it is important to mention that Bowd frequently indicates the difficulties of historians in recording the events and victims of war and compares the events of the Italian Wars with the wars and political speeches

of subsequent years. Through this comparison, he suggests how the concepts and morals of war changed over time and how the Italian Wars affected subsequent battles. One possible shortcoming of the book is that it generally avoids a linear historical narrative, with the result that the author discusses diverse events from various chronological periods in the same chapter, which may be confusing to a reader with no background knowledge of the Italian Wars. On the other hand, this non-linear narrative makes the book more interesting and recognisable.

All in all, Bowd skilfully outlines the history of the Italian Wars and offers a well-informed historical documentation of the torture, mistreatment and general hardship inflicted on civilians. His main goal is to show not only what civilians experienced, but also how they perceived the course of the wars. Consequently, *Renaissance Mass Murder* successfully manages to narrate why princes, civilians, popes and soldiers justified the massacre and sack of towns, as they considered war crimes to be something normal. In this way, Bowd offers the appropriate historical context to realise when the humanist framework of war, as we know it today, began to emerge and take shape.

Elli Papanikolaou

University of West Bohemia, Pilsen