



Of Miracles and Men

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Spike Lee's controversial movie "The Miracle at St. Anna"

A media controversy has exploded in Italy and the United States over Spike Lee's recently-released film, "The Miracle at St. Anna," based on a novel by the same name written by James McBride. As screenings opened in Italy, veteran partisans and their organization the ANPI, as well as survivors from the notorious Nazi massacre at Sant'Anna da Stazzema (August 12, 1944), have protested what they see as an insulting and historically inaccurate portrait of the armed Resistance. Giorgio Bocca, the dean of Italian Resistance historians opened an attack in the pages of "La Repubblica;" Lee has responded that he did not intend to denigrate the partisans but that he stands by his film. As an historian of the Resistenza and one of the few people who have both read the book and seen the film, I would like to comment on the interpretation of book, film and historical fact.

"The Miracle at St. Anna", Trailer

The story concerns four black American soldiers, part of the segregated Buffalo Soldiers of the American Army, caught behind German lines in Tuscany in 1944. One soldier, the sympathetic Sam Train, rescues an Italian child after a bombing. The child, whom Train takes to be an angel (and is actually named Angelo), thinks his savior to be a "chocolate giant." For their part, the black American soldiers come to realize that the Italian peasants see them as men, soldiers and Americans; the color of their skin is a curiosity, not a condemnation. The "miracle" of Sant'Anna is not only the rescue of Angelo, but that black men come to be seen as men, and not black.

The current controversy concerns the depiction and interpretation of the massacre at Sant'Anna and the portrayal of the partigiani. There is a traitor among the partigiani and it seems that they are responsible for massacre. Some partigiani might find Spike Lee's movie and James McBride's book "insulting;" I cannot speak in their name. But no serious student of the Resistenza subscribes to a whitewashed history of 1943-1945. While there is quite a bit of talk (and complaint) of the "mythology" of the Resistenza, including the present Prime Minister of Italy who wishes history books to be re-written with a more critical (read: revisionist) eye, those who participated in the armed Resistance against Italian fascism and the Nazi occupation were always conscious of the deep moral ambiguity of the conflict. One need only to read Italo Calvino's "Path to the Nest of Spiders" (Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno) of 1947 to see that the Left was fully aware of what Primo Levi, in another context, called the Grey Zone.

I did not find the portrait of the partigiani offensive. Yes, there is a traitor in their midst; but this was all-too-common. (I will leave it to others to critique a crucial scene in the film where the black soldiers are denied service in a 1943 Louisiana ice cream parlor; the same parlor where captured German soldiers are enjoying themselves immensely. In the novel, the soldiers are sent away



humiliated; in the film, they return in vengeful triumph.) And no Hollywood film on World War II is complete without the stereotype of the “good Nazi.” Spike Lee gives us not one, but two (where only one exists in the book). They are responsible for saving the lives of the two main protagonists, Angelo and Hector Negron. I find it curious that those who demand a more critical (and negative) portrayal of the left-wing partigiani never complain about positive portrayals of Nazis. (Not that there were not examples of German officers and even Nazi officials displaying a moral conscience).

Some contend that the film depicts partisans fleeing to the mountains and leaving defenseless civilians to fend off the Germans. This, I think, is not the intention of either the writer or the director. During the so-called Republic of Salo’, men were to be drafted in a last-ditch effort to win the war. It was at this point that many men (and women) chose to fight against the fascists (a civil war) and the Nazi occupation. They were often considered traitors. We now know that some prominent post-war politicians and intellectuals supported Salo’ out of some sense of misplaced nationalism. Most have admitted their mistake; others have not.

More important is that this mistaken interpretation fosters the perpetuation of a right-wing, fascist myth: that the partigiani were unscrupulous cowards in placing civilians in harm’s way. The myth here begins with a partisan attack on a German police battalion on via Rassella on March 23, 1943. With 33 Germans dead, the SS and Gestapo command in Rome were ordered to execute 10 Italians for each dead German and accordingly rounded up 335 (not 330) men and boys (aged 17-77 with 73 Jews), none of whom had anything to do with the attack.

And here is where memory and history play tricks on us. To this day, there are Romans who insist that they saw posters immediately after the attack, posted by the German command, demanding the partisans present themselves for punishment, or civilians would pay the price. In fact, some of these “eyewitnesses” can still claim what these posters looked like. When the partigiani failed to appear, the Germans executed the 335 the next day, March 24, 1943, in the Fosse Ardeatine. From the beginning, this myth circulated around Rome and Italy. Just one problem: the Germans never placed those posters; the order to execute was secret and was to be carried out within 24 hours. All this was confirmed by Herbert Kappler, the SS Captain in charge of Rome in his post-war trial. And yet, as Alessandro Portelli’s magisterial book, “L’ordine e’ gia’ stato eseguito” (The Order Has Been Carried Out, Palgrave, 2003) so eloquently and tragically shows, there are still Romans who insist that the partigiani were to blame.

Those blaming the partigiani for Nazi massacres are repeating, almost word-for-word, what the SS officer responsible for the massacre at Sant’Anna di Stazzema says in the film. In what is perhaps a fictitious scene, he berates the “partisan” traitor for the massacre; it was THEIR fault! In shifting moral responsibility for this massacre (and effect others as well) he effectively absolves himself, the German Wehrmacht, the SS, Italian fascism and National Socialism and conveniently places the blame on the partisans. This is a cynical re-writing of history. James McBride should be commended for rescuing the story of the Buffalo Soldiers from the dustbin of history; Spike Lee should be congratulated on a strong, but flawed film; readers and viewers should run to bookstores and the cinema and judge for themselves. Last night, Spike Lee and President Giorgio Napolitano were to have screened the film together; no word yet of their conversation.

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