

NOT A MOMENT TOO SOON: IRIS ORIGO'S WAR DIARY

By Cynthia Zarin August 1, 2018



One of the vital interests of Origo's "little war diary" is watching the alert, perspicacious mind of a supremely intelligent person coming alive to the situation around her.

Photograph Courtesy La Foce

It's almost impossible to imagine a better time to read "A Chill in the Air: An Italian War Diary, 1939–1940," by Iris Origo, which is being published this week by New York Review Books. And, if there ever is a better time, it won't be one we want to live in. Trenchant, intelligent, and written with a cool head, the book records the months before Italy's descent into the Second World War, when Mussolini's relationship with Hitler was being presented to the Italian public via a campaign of misinformation, what we would now call fake news. As the title indicates, it's a chilling read. The diary was published for the first time last year, although its existence was known to Origo's family

and to her biographer, Caroline Moorehead (“Iris Origo: Marchesa of Val d’Orcia”). Origo—whose extraordinary life was defined by elegant restraint, a matter-of-fact allegiance to reason, and the idea that one has a duty to others—would, I think, be pleased that her book (which she referred to, with her customary understatement, as her “little war diary”) would appear now, nearly eighty years later, when it can be read not only as a historical document but as an urgent message, a stealth paper airplane sent to us from a shadowed past.

Origo is best known for “War in Val d’Orcia,” first published in 1947, which is a day-to-day account of life from 1943 to 1945, during which she and her husband, Antonio Origo, housed and cared for refugee children and, at great risk, harbored escaped P.O.W.s, Italian Jews, and anti-Fascists on their extensive estate in Tuscany; they once famously walked a group of seventy children and injured refugees to safety over enemy lines. This newly published diary reads, in part, as a preface to that book, and as a cautionary guide to our own perilous time.

Iris Origo was born in London, in 1902. Her life had the trappings of a fairy tale. Her mother, Lady Sybil Cuffe, was the daughter of an English peer, Baron Desart of Kilkenny. Iris’s father, William Bayard Cutting, an American, was the scion of New York’s wealthy merchant class. Her grandfather was a close friend of Edith Wharton’s. Iris adored her father. He was serving as the American vice-consul in Milan at the time of the great Messina earthquake, in Sicily, in 1908, which left approximately ninety thousand people dead, and he assumed the position of the head of the Red Cross in Messina, an act of public service his daughter would later emulate. Bayard died in 1909, of tuberculosis, when Iris was seven years old. In his will, he stipulated that she be brought up neither in England nor in America: an anti-nationalist, he wanted her to live in a country to which she did not belong, and requested that it be Italy, where he had been happiest. In a final letter to Sybil, he wrote, “Papa and Mama would never let my widow be in difficulty. They are *really* rich, you know.”

Iris’s mother, a hypochondriac and a dilettante, complied with his wishes. Iris grew up in the Villa Medici, in Fiesole, above Florence. At eighteen, Iris fell in

love with Antonio Origo, an Italian ten years her senior, who was the illegitimate son of the Marchese Clemente and a cavalry officer in the First World War. He had worked as a banker and for Mumm champagne. Her mother resisted the marriage: he was too old and too handsome.

And they had a mad plan. Both Iris and Antonio had been born into lives of extreme privilege, but Antonio was interested in farming, and Iris, who wrote to a friend that she wanted to do something useful with her life, was learning how to treat ailments at the local first-aid dispensary, which served people who could not afford the local doctor. In the fall of 1923, the couple found what they were looking for: a large, remote farm south of Pienza, called La Foce. Origo's description of the land—"the dust colored clay hillocks, the *crete sensi*—as bare and colorless as elephants' backs, as the mountains of the moon"—is reminiscent of Isak Dinesen's description of her farm in "Out of Africa." The terrain was harsh and barely supported a *fattore*, or farm manager, and a score of derelict farms, which housed impoverished families. They would go on to transform the arid landscape into a working, self-sustaining enterprise, rebuilding the houses and starting a school for the children who lived on the property.

In 1933, their son, Gianni, died of meningitis, at age seven, and was buried at La Foce. Origo, devastated, threw herself into a writing career: her biography of the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi was published in 1935; a biography of Cola di Rienzo, a fourteenth-century politician and megalomaniac, was published three years later. (One of her books was an eloquent, if evasive, autobiography, "Images and Shadows," published in 1970.) She spent time in England; Virginia Woolf, whom she met in London before the war, described her as "tremulous, nervous—very—stammers a bit, but honest eyed; very blue eyed. She's very clean and picks her feet up." As always, Origo was exceedingly well dressed. Woolf said, "I like her Bird of Paradise flight through the gay world, a long feather in her green hat." At the time, Origo was deep into an affair with the novelist Leo Myers; Antonio, too, was occupied elsewhere. But by the late nineteen-thirties, with the shadow of war looming, she was back at Val d'Orcia full time, with Antonio, and had committed herself to her adopted country.

In the early spring of 1939, as Origo found herself deeply troubled by the conflict between England and Italy, she decided “that, for the time being, all that was required of me was to try to keep as steady as possible.” She wrote, “Perhaps it might be useful to try to clear my mind by setting down, as truthfully and simply as I can, the tiny facet of the world’s event which I myself, in the months ahead, shall encounter at first hand.” This diary was the result. Origo was thirty-seven. As Lucy Hughes-Hallett points out in her lively introduction, Origo was exceptionally well connected—her godfather, William Phillips, was the American Ambassador to Rome. She had access to the highest levels of government and society, and was well placed to record, as a British citizen of enormous privilege residing in Italy, a particular, multifaceted view of a country skidding toward disaster.

The diary opens in March of 1939. Origo is on a packed train to Rome filled with *squadristi*, who belonged to the first Fascist squads of 1919, on their way to hear a speech by Mussolini, in which, as she records the next day, he announces that “perpetual peace would be a catastrophe for human civilization” and stresses the importance of arming the nation “at whatever cost, by whatever means, even it should mean a tabula rasa of all that is meant by civilized life.” The scene is undercut by a description that will become familiar to the reader of the cold, wet weather, a chill in the air. The atmosphere is heightened by a feeling that all is not as it seems: “the part of the speech that receives the least applause is that which reaffirms the solidity of the Axis,” she notes, “the universal distaste for Germany as an ally.” The next day, the streets of Florence are festooned to celebrate the fall of Madrid. During the following week, she notes the Italian press’s virulent attacks on Neville Chamberlain, and the misreporting of news from England, which she follows on BBC Radio.

Later that month, she writes:

It is now clear what form
propaganda, in case of war, will
take. The whole problem will be
presented as an economic one. The
“democratic countries,” i.e. the

“Haves,” will be presented as permanently blocking the way of the “have nots” to economic expansion Fascists are thus enabled to see the impending war as a struggle between the poor man and the rich—a genuine revolutionary movement.

A man in the street says to her, “The radio has made fools of us all.” That night, at La Foce, she listens as the Italian radio denounces all the reports from anti-Fascist countries of the Italian invasion of Albania—an operation conducted by Mussolini, in 1939, in order to assert Italy’s independent power on the world stage, and to refute the idea that he was becoming Hitler’s lackey. In July, she notes that one of the most alarming symptoms of the current situation is the tendency to deny any sincerity or good faith to the opposition—it is, she thinks, a sign of naïveté, and a dangerous underestimation of the enemy’s resources. When William Phillips arrives for a summer weekend, he believes that war will be avoided, but, Origo records, he admits a “danger point”—Hitler’s belief that England is a “defeatist” nation. He recalls a statement from “Mein Kampf”: “in dealing with a people that has grown defeatist he (the victor-dictator) can then rely on the fact that no single one of these further acts of oppression will seem a sufficient reason to take up arms.”

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By August, 1939, the grapes are ripening at La Foce. The sale of tea and coffee is now prohibited. On September 1st, when the Germans invade Poland, the Origos try in vain to listen to the BBC, but hear only that children are being evacuated from London to the countryside. The Italian radio blames the invasion on Polish obstinacy, and reports that the Führer by “reasonable and logical proposals” had done all he could to preserve peace in Europe. That evening, when the BBC finally comes through on the radio, it is clear that no proposals were sent to Poland, to be either accepted or rejected. Origo writes, “To hear these clear, calm statements . . . after twenty-four hours of attacks on ‘the inexplicable reception given by the democracies to Germany’s equitable terms’ was a relief that cannot be described.”

And so it goes on. In October, she notes an unpleasant increase in bullying; in Florence, every shop window is covered with notices that read “*Il Duce ha sempre ragione*” (“The Duce is always right”). An acquaintance who has escaped from Poland tells her that the Polish people knew that the national radio had been taken over by the Germans because the broadcast’s keynote was a popular Polish song, and the Germans got a note of the song wrong. By April, 1940, she writes that the Italian press’s descriptions of events are now directly opposed to the versions that are described on the English and French

radio, and remarks, succinctly, after the invasion of Norway, “the cult of violence flourishes on success.” In May, on the same day that Holland falls to the Germans, she reports that a German company wrote to a grocer in Florence to offer good prices on Dutch cheeses.

By June, she is trying to arrange transportation out of Italy for her mother and her stepfather, both invalids; though she herself is an enemy alien, she has no intention of leaving Italy. On June 10th, the Germans are within forty miles of Paris. The Italian radio announces that at noon Mussolini will speak to the Italian people from the balcony of the Piazza Venezia. He does, several hours late: the declaration of war has been handed to the Ambassadors of France and Great Britain. At La Foce, where the radio has been put outside so that everyone can listen together, the farmers look at the ground. Antonio says “*Ci siamo*” (“This is it”) and then announces that he is going to look at the wheat. A few days later, the first air-raid sirens sound over Rome, and the Origos apply to take in twenty evacuated children.

Though “War in Val d’Orcia” is full of evocative description, hair-raising anecdotes, and beautifully rendered portraits of courage, this small diary, which ends on August 1st, with the birth of Origo’s daughter Benedetta, is precise, brief, and without stylistic embellishment. Reading it is like holding a black-and-white negative up to the light. It is characteristic of Origo that the reader does not know throughout these pages that the narrator is pregnant until she mentions, in passing, that Phillips does not think that Rome is a suitable place for her accouchement. She has other things to think about. In the fall of 1940, after the birth of her daughter, Origo began to work in the Prisoner’s Branch of the Italian Red Cross, and, as she notes, “had no more time for writing.” She set her pen down until she began the journal that would become “War in Val d’Orcia,” hiding it under the floorboards every night, lest it fall into enemy hands.

As Hughes-Hallett also points out, the word “fascist” has lost its nuance, and is today used as a catchall for villainy. After the Origos married, in 1922, Antonio was the president of the local Fascist *consorzi*, or landowners’ consortium. Landowners were subsidized to sustain and develop their land;

this made it possible for the Origos to turn La Foce from a derelict, impoverished landscape into a self-sufficient economy. When Iris Origo planted her feet in Italy, as her daughter Benedetta describes in a brief, moving afterword, she very much viewed herself as an outsider who was completely taken up with her new life, and she held back from voicing opinions about her adopted country. Like Churchill in the early years, she was an admirer of Mussolini. One of the vital interests of the diary is watching the alert, perspicacious mind of a supremely intelligent person coming alive to the situation around her.

I read this little book with an escalating sense of anxiety. We know what will happen in Italy, and what the war will bring, but Origo, of course, does not. By the end of these pages, my heart was in my mouth. To read it is to witness the slide of a country into tyranny and chaos. It does not feel unfamiliar.

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