



Most of them won't be coming back

military-Earth thinking notebook

Le Chef de bataillon Sébastien PY

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Témoignages

More than an account, "Most will not return" is the testimony of a young Italian artillery officer on the Russian front. Only 28 days are recounted in this book, but what days, those of the retreat of German-Italian forces since the Don, from December 19, 1942 to January 17, 1943, under constant threat of encirclement by Russian forces. It is therefore not so much a road book as the gaze of a witness plunged into this turmoil, a witness who was one of the survivors of this agony in which only 10% of Italians survived.

Most will not return can be read from at least three distinct but complementary angles. The first, unavoidable, thunders the reader, it is about the suffering of the combatant and an inevitable reflection on the ethics of the soldier. Then comes the historical aspect of this relatively unknown episode of the Second World War. Finally, a tactical aspect is also particularly highlighted through the retreat of a troop, whether it is ordered on the German side or transformed into a rout on the Italian side.

There is no shortage of testimonies in literature when it comes to describing human suffering. The horrors of war, often described in a pathetic way as in the First World War, the main argument of pacifists, find in this book a rare approach. Indeed, if physical suffering, moral suffering, fear of death are omnipresent, they are always exposed without hatred, without a spirit of revenge, with an astonishing compassion. This does not prevent the author from making judgements: on the barbarity and inhumanity of the German soldiers who shoot prisoners, finish off or abandon their Italian allies; on the barbarity of the Russian soldiers and especially the partisans as a revenge against the forces of theThe barbarity of the Russian soldiers and above all the partisans as a reprisal against the Axis forces and their own population; the weakness of the Italian troops and the imperialism of its command; its own renunciations as an officer, finally, in the face of hunger, cold and the desire to save its own skin. But in this harsh and bitter overall description, it is above all the author's humility that stands out; humility in the face of his own weaknesses, compassion in the face of the enemies, and the desire to save his own

skin's weaknesses, compassion in the face of his comrades' parking lots, a willingness to preserve his humanity in spite of everything so as never to sink into the bestiality of certain allies or adversaries. Finally, in order to realize the importance of the speed of the Italian losses, let us listen to the author commenting on his arrival in Chertkovo after 11 days of retreat: "How many of us arrived in Chertkovo? According to the calculations that we officers later made, we estimated that out of the thirty thousand men taken from the Don's pocket, we had been about eight thousand to get there".

The historical aspect of Eugenio Corti's testimony is also a remarkable reading element. When the book was published in 1947, there was a huge surprise in Italy. On the one hand, because in that period Italy was very much influenced by the Communist Party and the Soviet fighter was one of the liberators of the On the other hand because these thirty thousand Italians who fought on the Eastern Front almost all died or preferred to forget this tragic episode. As a lesson of remembrance to his compatriots, the author rehabilitates these Italian fighters by exhuming their history, proving by his future commitment to the Free Italian troops at Monte-Cassino that a soldier's honour is never lost. We need to go back to this very special post-war atmosphere in Italy and Europe to understand the full force, the scope of this story, which, even to this day, has remained unique. The young Eugenio Corti, in June 1942, volunteered on the Russian front. He wanted to see for himself the value of his German allies, the transformation of Russia into the Soviet Union. He came back strengthened in his moral and ethical convictions; disgusted by the systematic planning of German barbarity while emphasizing the qualities of his fighters; dumbfounded by the Soviet authorities' manipulation of the Russian soldier, capable, at the time, of the worst exactions.

Finally, the tactical part completes the reading of the work. Of course, no particular theory is developed, no treaty is presented. But with an astonishing lucidity, Eugénio Corti describes the retreat of his army corps and a tactical analysis of such a military action emerges. There is a striking comparison between the German organization and the Italian debacle. On the German side, the withdrawal was planned and logistics were never lacking, as was order within the units, right down to the lowest levels. On the Italian side, there was a rout from the very first hours: Vehicles and equipment were abandoned, mainly due to the lack of fuel, food supplies were scarce and practically non-existent, the command, at the operational and tactical levels, was absent, even the few generals present were totally disoriented. Corti describes this disorganization many times. Here is an example: "This spectacle brought me back to the beginning of the retreat, to the fleeing trucks covered with clusters of humans. A few days later this phenomenon had taken on incredible proportions... Columns of motor vehicles, mixed with columns of men on foot, were fleeing in indescribable panic. People clinging to the tarpaulins of trucks and then, at the end of their strength, let themselves be rolled on the ground, often ending up crushed.1] "The willingness of some officers to order this retreat did not change anything; it turned into a rout and only the Germans managed to maintain a semblance of consistency among the Italians and allowed the survival of a few thousand of them. 2] This result was all the more regrettable since the "Pasubio" division [3] had never allowed itself to be pushed down on the Russian front.

"Most of them will not return" is therefore more than just a testimony about the war. First of all, it is a unique work because it describes an important episode of the Russian front that has never been seen before. It has also provided a vision of these battles free from the systems of thought of the time. It then provides an obvious lesson on the difficulty of maintaining order and organization within a force during a retreat. Finally, it can be the prerequisite for the reading of the novel "The Red Horse", a vast fresco by the same author, whose action is largely located on the same Russian front, and which would also deserve a card to promote its reading.

[1] Op. cit p 138

2] "Manytimes I wondered...what had become of us without the Germans. And unfortunately I must answer this: only we Italians would have all fallen into the hands of the enemy." op.cit. p 141

[3] the Pasubio division with the Torino division represented the two Italian divisions of the 35th German-Italian^{Corps}

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