

Indro Montanelli: Our Man in The Baltic

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Indro Montanelli, in his lifetime Italy's most famous journalist, was a gruff contrarian figure who liked to see himself as an Italian Whig or Dr. Johnson-style Tory libertarian anarchist. His outspokenness as an opinion-maker in postwar Italy inevitably made him enemies on the Left. In Milan in 1977 he was shot four times in the leg by the Red Brigades while on his way to work. Montanelli was a convinced Fascist when, in 1935, he volunteered to fight for Mussolini in his East Africa campaigns, and all his life he remained in thrall to aspects of the cult of *ducismo*.¹ Africa turned out to be a disappointment for Montanelli, but it was as a reporter in Civil War Spain that his Blackshirt sympathies began to waver after he questioned Fascist pieties regarding war. For the absence of pro-Falangist rhetoric in his Spanish reportage Montanelli was expelled from the National Fascist Party and stripped of his press accreditation.² He was about to be sent into Fascist police confinement (*confino*) in Tunisia³ when at the last moment he was “deported”⁴ to the Baltic republic of Estonia, where it was hoped he would cause no further trouble.

Montanelli arrived in Estonia's capital, Tallinn, in the autumn of 1937 after twenty days spent kicking his heels in Warsaw. His biographer Marcello Staglieno relates that he had a couple of trunks full of Italian novels and foreign language dictionaries (Estonian was an “assolutamente incomprensibile” [absolutely incomprehensible]⁵ Finno-Ugric tongue to him but he was keen to

¹ The Estonian poet Jaan Kaplinski spoke about the politics of his “friend” Montanelli in an interview, “Intervento del poeta estone amico di Indro,” *Pagine della Dante* (October/December 2001): 53–57. “Montanelli told me that Mussolini himself remained a convinced Fascist right up until the end, and that all Italians, or almost all, were convinced Fascists. ‘I myself’—Montanelli admitted—‘was among the convinced.’ In fact—he explained to me—Fascism was a necessary solution in the beginning as it saved Italy from complete chaos.” Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

² The article that sealed Montanelli's fate with the Fascist authorities appeared in the Rome daily *Il Messaggero* on August 19, 1937 under the banner headline, “La disfatta rossa sul fronte di Santander.” Montanelli casts doubt on Franco's victory at the Battle of Santander in 1937 in which the Falangists outnumbered the Republicans by ten to one; Franco's “only enemy” in the end had been the “blazing, insistent, brutal” August heat.

³ From a letter sent by Montanelli from Tallinn (dated September 20, 1937) to the Florentine publisher brothers Enrico and Piero Vallecchi: “ho lasciato la Spagna per ordine superiore, dovevo andare a Tunisia e invece son venuto a dirigere l'Istituto di Cultura di Tallinn: bell'Istituto di una bella città” (I left Spain on higher orders. I had to go to Tunisia, but instead I ended up directing the Italian Cultural Institute in Tallinn: a lovely Institute in a beautiful city). Transcription of letter sent to the author by Sandro Gerbi in 2012.

⁴ See Montanelli's opinion piece “La mia ‘deportazione’ in Estonia,” *Corriere della Sera*, Dec. 22, 1999, 41. By the mid-1930s deportation had become a key element of Fascist repression. In 1935 Carlo Levi, the Turinese writer-artist and medical doctor, was sent into police confinement in a remote Basilicata village, where he was able to gather material for his memoir *Christ Stopped at Eboli*. Earlier, in the winter of 1926, the Sardinian theoretician of Italian Marxism, Antonio Gramsci, had been banished to the confinement island of Ustica in Sicily. Unlike Gramsci and Levi, of course, Montanelli had a number of useful contacts in what Machiavelli called the “alti luoghi” (high places) of local power elites. He could rely on the protection of the Fascist journalist and politician Piero Parini (who, as head of the General Directorate of Italians Abroad, secured the postings for him in Estonia), as well as on Mussolini's Germanophile Education Minister Giuseppe Bottai. (Both Parini and Bottai had fought with Montanelli in East Africa.)

⁵ Montanelli, “La mia ‘deportazione.’”

improve his German). He also had a supply of wool socks “hand-darned for him by his mother” back home in Florence.⁶ As a patrician-mannered Tuscan, Montanelli viewed Estonia as Europe’s dismal “Ultima Thule,”⁷ but he grew to love the country and its people. His imposing rangy presence—he was over six foot tall—seemed to command respect. The Fascist Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Directorate of Italians Abroad) ensured that he was comfortably settled. He was appointed director of the Italian Cultural Institute in Tallinn and offered a lectureship in Italian literature at Tartu University on Estonia’s eastern border with Russia. “In any other totalitarian regime I’d have ended up in a Lager or the Gulag,”⁸ Montanelli said six decades later, meaning, presumably, that Mussolini was not all bad when compared with Hitler or Stalin. Montanelli rarely deviated from the view that Mussolini was, for all his failings, an unfairly maligned leader. The Fascist regime “did not persecute” people, he claimed in his postwar semi-fictional novel *Qui non riposano* (Here They Do Not Rest), adding: “Mussolini era troppo furbo per creare dei martiri” (Mussolini was too clever to create martyrs).⁹ Mussolini appears to be exonerated here from charges of murderous anti-Jewish persecution and the extra-legal internment of Slavs, Romani people, homosexuals, and other “undesirable elements” who threatened the sturdy Blackshirt bond of race and nationhood. If it is fashionable in Italy these days to claim Mussolini as a halfway decent demagogue led astray by an opportunist alliance with Hitler, Montanelli has a part to play in it.¹⁰ (One biography of Mussolini—by a British author—spoke admiringly of the Duce’s “charisma,” “prestige,” and Machiavellian adroitness.¹¹) Behind Montanelli’s comforting and self-absolving apologies for Fascism in its early incarnation lies a view increasingly held in Italy that the Italians were a *brava gente*—a good people—who wanted no part of Nazi German biological anti-Semitism.

The Italian ambassador to Estonia, Vincenzo Cicconardi, an “intelligente e sfaticato” (intelligent and lazy) Neapolitan who had tagged along after Mussolini since the earliest days of Fascism,¹² organized a reception for Montanelli at the Royal Italian Legation.¹³ Copies of Montanelli’s latest book *XX Battaglione eritreo* (XX Eritrean Battalion) were probably on display in the Legation: Montanelli had commanded a battalion of African troops in the Italian imperial

⁶ See Marcello Staglieno, *Montanelli: novant’anni controcorrente* (Milan: Mondadori, 2001), 130. Staglieno, who was one of the founders with Montanelli of *Il Giornale nuovo* (later *Il Giornale*) newspaper in 1974, relates that Montanelli was wearing a heavy Tuscan “Casentino” wool overcoat that reached down to “below” his knees; bony, long-legged, Montanelli cut a striking figure.

⁷ Montanelli uses this expression of Estonia in his article on Germanic culture in the Baltic states, “I baroni baltici non ci sono più,” *Corriere della Sera*, Oct. 11, 1941, 3.

⁸ See Montanelli, “La mia ‘deportazione.’”

⁹ Indro Montanelli, *Qui non riposano* (Milan: Tarantola Editore, 1945), 126.

¹⁰ Montanelli published a book in 1946 provocatively titled *Il buonuomo Mussolini* (The Good Man Mussolini).

¹¹ Nicholas Farrell, *Mussolini: A New Life* (London: Orion, 2003). Contemporary Blackshirt movements such as CasaPound, founded in Rome in 2003 and named after the avowedly anti-Semitic poet Ezra Pound, may not have returned Mussolini to the mainstream, but they are part of a wider, Montanellian tendency that exalts the Fascist past as a romantic drama that offered populist alternatives to parliamentary democracy.

¹² See Indro Montanelli and Tiziana Abate, *Indro Montanelli: soltanto un giornalista. Testimonianza resa a Tiziana Abate* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2002), 45. “Vincenzo Cicconardi, un napoletano intelligente e sfaticato che aveva accettato quella minuscola legazione perché non comportava troppe responsabilità” (Vincenzo Cicconardi, an intelligent and lazy Neapolitan, had accepted his post in that minuscule legation because it did not entail too many responsibilities). Cicconardi appears in Curzio Malaparte’s 1944 autobiographical novel of Axis power depredations, *Kaputt*, trans. Cesare Foligno (New York: New York Review of Books Classics, [1946] 2005), 232: “I liked Cicconardi,” writes Malaparte, “because of the clash between his Neapolitan indifference and irony, and the aspiration for power and glory that the odd shape and the exaggerated size of his skull, his forehead, his jaws and his nose seemed to express.”

¹³ See *Uus Eesti* (New Estonia) newspaper, January 20, 1938, 6: “When the Italian lecturer Indro Montanelli arrived in Tallinn, a reception was organized in his honor.”

Montanelli's maiden lecture at Tartu University on October 26 went badly. He had scarcely begun when ten or so students stood up and, "con un'aria lugubre, come dietro a un funerale" (with a lugubrious air, as if behind a funeral), walked out of the auditorium.¹⁷ Afterwards one of them went up to Montanelli to explain that it was not against him personally that they had protested, but against Mussolini's "illegal" occupation of Ethiopia, for which Italy had been expelled from the League of Nations. Ethiopia was the world's first sovereign state to fall victim to Fascist invaders and it may be that the students feared a similar fate awaited the independent Republic of Estonia. The students clearly had seen the *Postimees* advertisement, in which Montanelli boasted that he had commanded a unit of "indigenous" (local African) Fascist forces in Eritrea over a period of eighteen months. Montanelli reported the "embarrassing" (as he called it)¹⁸ episode to ambassador Cicconardi. "I should add that the protest did not result in any hostile or disrespectful gestures or words said against me or my country."¹⁹ Montanelli's most recent biographers, Sandro Gerbi and Raffaele Liucci, whose two-volume biography came out in 2006 and 2009, relate that Montanelli viewed the students as harmless "left-wing" hot heads.²⁰ Cicconardi was duty bound to alert the Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Friedrich Akel, who threatened the "most severe" measures if an episode of a similar sort occurred again.²¹ No action was taken against the students but a few weeks later Montanelli described the episode in sarcastic terms in an article he wrote on Tartu for *L'Illustrazione Italiana* (Italy's equivalent of *Illustrated London News*). Tartu might be the "the brain of the Baltic," Montanelli scoffed, but the students had expressed a naïve solidarity with "their black brothers" and spoken of Ethiopia as though it was a civilized "European nation."²² Remarks of this sort show that Montanelli, for all his token anti-Fascism, was still enamored of the romance of Fascist empire construction. His break with the conquest-drunk Mussolini at this time was not as "definitive" as he later made it out to be.

Twice a week Montanelli travelled to Tartu by early morning train from Tallinn. The train was "misleadingly" named the Baltic Express, Montanelli complained in a newspaper reminiscence from the mid-1940s, because it "stopped at every available station." (The longest stop was at Tapi, a tiny town which Montanelli bizarrely exalted as "the Bologna of Estonia.") What Montanelli derisively referred to as his "trenino" (little train) was in fact the fastest high-speed train in the Baltic, shooting from Tallinn to Tartu and on to Berlin by way of Tilsit at a speed of seventy kilometers an hour.²³ Montanelli often exaggerated or invented anecdotes in his journalism.

¹⁷ Indro Montanelli, "Tartu, Salamanca del nord," *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, Jan. 23, 1938, 115. Montanelli returned to the episode in *Soltanto un giornalista*, 45–46: "My first lecture was packed. I was astonished to see so many people interested in Italian literature. But after a couple of minutes the students got up and left *en masse*."

¹⁸ "Qui non riposano, 127.

¹⁹ Quoted in Sandro Gerbi and Raffaele Liucci *Lo stregone: la prima vita di Indro Montanelli* (Turin: Einaudi, 2006), 92.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ ASMAE (Historical Archive of the Italian Foreign Ministry), General Directorate of Italians Abroad (DGIE) Ufficio III, Scuole Tartu, pos. 42. Arkel was later executed in Tallinn by the Soviet occupiers in 1941.

²² "Parlarano dell'Abissinia come di una nazione europea, senza sospetto di ridicolo: dissero che loro si sentivano fratelli dei negri e che per questo non potevano approvare l'operato dell'Italia. Ecco perché avevano fatto la dimostrazione" (Without any trace of humor they spoke about Abyssinia [Ethiopia] as though it were a European nation, and said they felt they were brothers of the blacks and that for this reason they could not approve of the actions of Italy. That is why they had made a scene). See Montanelli, "Tartu," 116.

²³ "Il trenino, nonostante l'orgoglioso nome di 'Espresso Baltico,' coglieva il pretesto di ogni casolare per fermarsi con un lungo fischio" (The little train, despite its proud name of Baltic Express, lost no opportunity to stop at every farmhouse, with a long whistle blast). See Indro Montanelli, "Si stampano perché si vendono milioni di pianeti della fortuna," *Corriere della Sera*, June 25, 1943.

Objectivity, for him, lay not so much in the marshaling of precise details, but in establishing “emotional truth.” Montanelli’s mythologizers in Italy today—and there are many—uphold Montanelli as something like a fiction writer *manqué*, who preferred a simple, entertaining falsehood to a dull truth (“*montanelliano*” here becomes a byword for “elaborated”).

By his own admission, Montanelli was not proud of the fact that the majority of his Tartu students were women. “Non c’è donna che, al di fuori di certi rapporti, non mi faccia rimpiangere la compagnia degli uomini e che a lungo andare non mi stanchi e mi esasperi” [There is no woman who, outside of certain relationships, does not make me miss the company of men, and who in the long run does not exhaust and exasperate me], he wrote in an article about his Estonian students for the Turin daily *La Stampa*, explaining: “Noi italiani siamo sostanzialmente misogini (We Italians are essentially misogynistic).²⁴ In compensation, Estonian women struck Montanelli as “very beautiful” and possessing “beautiful legs” (Estonian men, he added for good measure, “are very ugly”).²⁵ His foreign ways and knowledge of Italian literature seem to have rendered him exotic in the Estonian women’s eyes. Montanelli relates that they drummed their feet on the floor by way of applause whenever he entered the lecture hall (he appears not to have known that this was common practice in Northern European academic institutions.) The students’ pronunciation of Italy as “*Itaalia*,” with the long drawn-out double “a,” was charmingly Finno-Ugric to Montanelli and “much better,” he reckoned, than plain “*Italia*.”²⁶ He lectured to the women on the life and work of Dante Alighieri, Alberto Moravia, Luigi Pirandello and the *belle époque* Turin poet Guido Gozzano.²⁷ Photographs of the blue-eyed “professor” (in reality Montanelli held no such title) were cut out from *Postimees* and pasted into university exercise books. At the end of term, amid toasts of rosolio liqueur and slices of sweet Baltic cake, the women presented Montanelli with outsize bouquets of flowers and pink- and baby blue-colored *billets-doux* in “commovente orribile gusto” (touching, horrible taste), Montanelli recorded.²⁸ Montanelli felt so stifled by their attentions (“Mi sentivo vile e mollicio, impotente” [I felt vile and mushy, helpless]) that he feared for what he was pleased to call his “virilità” (virility).²⁹ For all that, Montanelli grew so fond of his Tartu students that he set up a Friends of Italy association for them. Meetings were

²⁴ Indro Montanelli, “Studentesse del nord,” *La Stampa*, May 14, 1938, 3.

²⁵ Indro Montanelli, “Fascino delle terre nordiche: un popolo fra due mondi nemici,” *L’Illustrazione Italiana*, Dec. 26, 1937. See also Montanelli, *Qui non riposano*, 128: “Le donne erano molto belle e gli uomini molto brutti. Le donne molto belle punivano gli uomini molto brutti della loro bruttezza, tradendoli all’infinito” (The women were very beautiful and the men very ugly. The very beautiful women punished the very ugly men for their ugliness, infinitely betraying them). With these and other misogynistic comments, Montanelli revealed himself to be no less “donnaiolo” than other Italian men of the time.

²⁶ Montanelli, “Fascino delle terre nordiche,” 169: “Italia si dice Itaalia: è più bello, è più fluido; avevo l’impressione, dicendo ‘Itaalia,’ di parlare di un’Italia più grande, dell’Italia che sarà fra cinquant’anni” (Italy is pronounced Itaaly: it is more beautiful, more fluid; I had the impression that, by saying “Itaaly,” I was speaking of a greater Italy, of the Italy of fifty years hence). Montanelli’s vision here of a “greater Italy” of the near future is in essence Fascist as it anticipates territorial aggrandizement beyond East Africa.

²⁷ See Montanelli, “Studentesse del nord,” 3. The students listened in rapt silence as Montanelli recited out loud Gozzano’s poem “La Signorina Felicità ovvero la Felicità.” At the end of the recital, they gave him a standing ovation: “Alla fine quando chiusi il libro e mi alzai di scatto con un gesto—lo confesso—un po’ teatrale, anche loro si alzarono in piedi e—cosa contraria alle loro rigide regole di condotta sempre rigidamente osservate—mi applaudirono” (At the end when I closed the book and, with an admittedly slightly theatrical gesture, suddenly stood up, they too stood up and—against their strict code of conduct, which was always strictly observed—they applauded for me).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

held in the university's Modern Languages Department with a portrait up on the wall of the Risorgimento patriot Giuseppe Mazzini.³⁰

Among Montanelli's academic acquaintances at Tartu was the philology professor Jerzy Kaplinski,³¹ a Pole with a Jewish background, who liked to quote from Arthur Rimbaud in the French and played classical piano at concert level. The aggression and mass brutality shown against Jews elsewhere in Europe at this time had yet to reach Tartu University, which in the late 1930s excelled in Judaic and Semitic language studies. Kaplinski asked Montanelli to be a witness at his wedding and, later, a godfather to his son Jaan (the Estonian future poet Jaan Kaplinski).³² Most nights Montanelli ate with Kaplinski at Tartu's Sinimandria (Blue Continent) café-restaurant, where a small "melancholy"³³ palm court orchestra played waltz tunes, and the "Jewish" ballet dancer Lona Max did her cabaret dance turns³⁴ while the students belted out Bavarian Oktoberfest drinking anthems. It was all very gemütlich. One night over beers Montanelli was introduced to the Lithuanian Communist journalist Justas Paleckis, who was soon to become leader of Soviet-annexed Lithuania. Paleckis ("debole di carattere e di nervi" [weak in character and weak in nerves]) was one of the few declared Bolsheviks Montanelli met in Tartu.³⁵ When a drunk Estonian man accused Montanelli of being a spy in the pay of Stalin, a student dealt him such a blow that the man had to spend "ten days" in hospital (so Montanelli claimed: the episode is not mentioned in any of Montanelli's biographies).³⁶ No one in Tartu spoke Russian unless they had to, Montanelli noted. Stern mothers cautioned: "Guarda che se non stai buono, ti mando in Russia dai bolscevichi" (behave yourself or I'll pack you off to Russia to be with the Bolsheviks!).³⁷

Montanelli's apartment in Tallinn apparently belonged to Bertrand Russell's eccentric Baltic German philosopher friend Hermann von Keyserling. (Montanelli also claimed that the Tallinn-born Nazi race ideologue Alfred Rosenberg used to live the flat above Keyserling's, but this is

³⁰ Montanelli, *Qui non riposano*, 126. "Si fondò una società di 'Amici dell'Italia' presieduta da un deputato socialista, e l'università ci diede una stanza per tenervi le riunioni. In questa stanza c'erano un tricolore e un ritratto di Mazzini" (We founded a 'Friends of Italy' society, run by a socialist deputy, and the university gave us a room in which to hold our meetings. In the room was the tricolor [Italian flag] and a portrait of Mazzini).

³¹ See Indro Montanelli, "Jutta," in *Montanelli narratore* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1988), 125.

³² "Yes, it's true, he [Montanelli] was witness at my parents' wedding and agreed with my father to be my godfather"; however, Jaan Kaplinski was born in January 1941, by which time it was too late for Montanelli to be his godfather, as Estonia was by then under Soviet occupation, and Montanelli was no longer in the country. See Kaplinski, "Intervento del poeta estone," 53.

³³ "Orchestrina malinconica," in Montanelli, "Jutta," 133. "Jutta" bears the date-stamp "Tartu, 1938."

³⁴ See Montanelli, "Le studentesse del nord," 3. Montanelli expressed a desire to dance in the Sinimandria with "Lona Max," but she seems not to have existed: or at any rate her name does not appear in any Estonian archive from the time.

³⁵ Montanelli, *Qui non riposano*, 130. Paleckis is also mentioned by Montanelli in his article on Baltic exiles in Paris, "Un difficile pranzo in vicolo Padeloup," *Corriere della Sera*, March 13, 1951, 3: Paleckis "was distantly related to the first president of the Soviet Republic of Kaunas, who died insane, or at least he was shut away as such in a Russian mental home." Montanelli had got his facts wrong: there never was a republic called Kaunas. (Kaunas is Lithuania's second largest city.)

³⁶ Montanelli, "Un difficile pranzo," 3: "il poveretto era finito in ospedale e c'era rimasto dieci giorni" (the poor fellow ended up in hospital for ten days). The drunkard said Montanelli had been "parachuted" into Tartu by the Russians.

³⁷ Abate and Montanelli, *Indro Montanelli: soltanto un giornalista*, 46.

doubtful.)³⁸ The apartment came with an Estonian maid named Bertha,³⁹ who was presumably paid for by the Italian government. On weekends Montanelli called at the Cicconardi residence for its Southern Italian cooking. Cicconardi, who had his own Italian valet and a dog called Rex,⁴⁰ introduced Montanelli to what remained of Tallinn’s imperial Germanic community, which traced its roots back to the medieval Teutonic Knights.



Fig. 2. Vincenzo Cicconardi (seated left), presenting his credentials to the Estonian President Konstantin Päts (seated middle) in Tallinn in 1935. Eesti Suursaatkond Rooma, <https://rome.mfa.ee/diplomatic-relations-between-estonia-and-italy-from-19212021/>.

No biographer of Montanelli has adequately emphasized the extent to which Montanelli revered Estonia’s Baltic German class. While many Baltic Germans viewed Hitler as a putschist upstart who offended their codes of honor and nostalgia for a stratified, socially conservative Germany, many other Baltic Germans were Nazi sympathizers and sympathetic to the pan-Germanic idea that, as Hitler put it in *Mein Kampf*, “one blood demands one Reich.” Accordingly, they shared the Baltic German Alfred Rosenberg’s conviction that they were the product of selective breeding and a high-born Aryan racial purity that elevated them above Estonia’s Finno-Ugrian peasantry. A number of Baltic Germans joined the Nazi Party before Hitler gained power in 1933, earning them the right to be called “old fighters,” with all the advantages that this title conferred on them. So Nazism’s appeal was not just to downwardly mobile petit bourgeois shopkeepers, clerks,

³⁸ Indro Montanelli, “Keyserling qui non riposa,” *Corriere della Sera*, November 13, 1947, 3. Montanelli says he lived in Hermann von Keyserling’s apartment for a year, “e al piano di sopra ci stava un altro barone baltico, Rosenberg, che già faceva parlare di sè, in Germania, come del gran maestro del razzismo e che poi, come tale, è finito sulla forca” (and upstairs, there was another Baltic baron, Rosenberg, who was already making himself known in Germany as a grand master of racism, and, as such, he ended up on the gallows). Curiously, no information exists in the Tallinn Address Office regarding Alfred Rosenberg’s place of residence in Tallinn, but he definitely was no longer living in Tallinn when Montanelli arrived there in 1937. Someone called Elsbeth Keiserlingk (a homonymous near-miss to Keyserling) inhabited the second floor of a wooden mansard house in Tallinn’s Toompuiestee 10 (Toompuiestee was a venerable Baltic German enclave); and the owner of the house next door at number 12 was the German Imgard Rosenberg, but she was not a relative of Alfred Rosenberg. In all likelihood, Montanelli had conflated names and places. Interestingly, Rosenberg gave his first public lecture in Tallinn—on November 30, 1918—at the Blackheads guildhall where Montanelli was initiated. The topic was in keeping with Rosenberg the race fanatic’s lifelong obsession: “Marxismus und Judentum.”

³⁹ Indro Montanelli, “Reval torna alla vita,” *Corriere della Sera*, September 12, 1939, 3.

⁴⁰ See Curzio Malaparte, *Kaputt*, 232.

tradesmen, and minor officials; by the time Montanelli arrived in Tallinn, nearly a fifth of senior SS officers were titled noblemen, and many of the Nazi Party's chief propagandists and mercenaries were enlisted from Baltic German communities. Montanelli, who was a social snob, romanticized the Baltic Germans as a *Herrenvolk* élite who dressed in subfusc black and still dueled with fencing swords (not so improbable: the Reichsführer-SS Himmler had briefly reintroduced dueling as a way of settling matters of honor). In their cult of "death before dishonor" the Estonian aristocrats took pride in their ritually scarred cheeks and nicks to the nose from fencing. Many of them hoped that Hitler might safeguard their age-old faith in their superiority and unquestioned right to be unequal, and allow them to keep their properties, ranks, privileges and high regard for themselves. The Nazis' toxic theories about "blood" and "race" did not altogether displease them. They lived in "melancholy" dilapidated quarters in Tallinn's Upper Town, Montanelli noted, where a lost pro-Tsarist idyll of strudel pastry and Pushkin poetry recitals anachronistically survived. Tallinn without its Teutonic knight descendants would be "come una Venezia senza gondola" (like Venice without its gondolas), Montanelli reckoned.⁴¹ Montanelli was immensely flattered to be asked by the Baltic Germans to join their Brotherhood of Blackheads pseudo-masonic society, founded in the 1400s and named after the black Saint Maurice (whose African profile still adorns the façade of the Renaissance-era Blackheads guildhall in Tallinn at 26 Pikk Street, opposite the Russian embassy). Montanelli's initiation has been ignored by his biographers, but it illustrates the part of him that craved high Germanic society. At the appointed hour, a Baltic German dignitary in a Knights Templar costume tapped Montanelli on the top of his head with the flat of a ceremonial sword and intoned three times in "liturgical-sounding" German: "Und du, mein Bruder, du bist ein Schwarzkopf" (And you, my brother, you are now a Blackhead).⁴² Montanelli was now a proud Blackhead, if no longer quite such a proud Blackshirt.

Montanelli founded an Italo-Estonian Society in Tallinn to rival the Anglo-Estonian Society. The Society aimed to "cultivate cultural relations between Italy and Estonia,"⁴³ and was Fascist propagandist in essence. (The Estonian President's son, the right-leaning Italophile and lawyer Victor Päts, was appointed president.) Members initially seemed to do little but chat to each other in halting Italian over games of chess and contract bridge as a way to alleviate the "quotidiana lotta contro la tristezza" (daily battle against melancholy)⁴⁴ that Montanelli believed the long dark Estonian winter nights engendered. He devised language and literature courses for Estonians enrolled in the Italian Cultural Institute on Kaupmehe Street, where they had access to a library of over four hundred Italian books. Among the Italian classics Montanelli commended to his students were Collodi's *Pinocchio* and *I promessi sposi* by Manzoni. Berlitz teaching manuals were used in the classroom. Montanelli personally oversaw Estonian translations of Alberto Moravia's debut novel, *Gli indifferenti* (*The Indifferent Ones*), and Corrado Alvaro's covertly anti-Fascist story collection *Gente in Aspromonte* (People of Aspromonte), which the "professor" regarded as equal to any work by Giovanni Verga.⁴⁵ Though Montanelli was banned from working as staff on Italian

⁴¹ Montanelli, "I baroni baltici non ci sono più."

⁴² See Indro Montanelli, "Teste Nere: i baroni baltici hanno costituito una misteriosa associazione che ha succursali in tutto il mondo e che impone ai suoi aderenti l'obbligo di giocare al ponte," *Corriere della Sera*, July 20, 1939. In the article Montanelli claims to have met a Baltic "Blackhead" in far-distant Athens. He describes the Baltic Germans of Tallinn as a "nocturnal," "bat-like" people.

⁴³ ASMAE (Historical Archive of the Italian Foreign Ministry), General Directorate of Italians Abroad (DGIE) Ufficio III, Scuole fas. Estonia Affari Generali, pos. IV 42 P.G.

⁴⁴ Montanelli, "Fascino delle terre nordiche," 170.

⁴⁵ Montanelli subsequently became Alvaro's friend. "La nostra amicizia nacque per corrispondenza quando, relegato in Estonia come 'lettore' d'Italiano all'Università di Tartu, un editore locale mi chiese se potevo consigliargli un

newspapers, he was permitted to write feuilletons and occasional pieces on Estonia for *L'Illustrazione Italiana* and for the Turin daily *La Stampa*. For *La Stampa* he turned out a couple of travel articles on Iceland without (according to Sandro Gerbi and Raffaele Liucci) ever having visited the country. The articles were written from the seclusion of his Tallinn flat, but readers would not have known it. “I arrived in Reykjavik late at night,” Montanelli wrote. He described a sudden burst of “hyperborean light” that bathed the Icelandic sea in emerald and amethyst colours. (“I don’t know if this was an extraordinary fortune granted to me by fate due to exceptional atmospheric pressure,” he wonders). Everything about Iceland struck Montanelli as “papier-mâché” unreal—unsurprisingly so as he was not there. (“Even the sun and moon are too round and too yellow to be real.”)⁴⁶ When not visiting Iceland he completed his East Africa novella *Ambesà* (the book is date-stamped “Tallinn, 27 December 1937”; its title means *lion* in the Tigrinya language), as well as a novel set in Italy, *Giorno di festa* (“Tallinn, 1937-1938” [Holiday]),⁴⁷ which he had begun in Ethiopia and which he later said was perhaps the novel dearest to him among all his works of fiction.⁴⁸ (In all, Montanelli would write over forty books.) While in Tallinn he also completed a semi-autobiographical non-fiction short story set in Tartu, “Jutta,” which tells of his friendship with one of his Estonian woman students. Tallinn, a “città-enigma” (mystery city),⁴⁹ charmed Montanelli, and many strange things happened to him there.

One Tallinn encounter he was unable to forget. Boris Engelhardt was the chairman of Tallinn’s Tsarist Russian Club; hearing that a foreign journalist was in town, he asked Montanelli if he would put up a “very interesting” Russian woman friend of his who needed a place to stay until her husband, a Norwegian, joined her from Oslo.⁵⁰ Montanelli agreed to do this, but there was much about the forty-nine-year-old Engelhardt that he did not know and never would know. Information in the Estonian police files complements the little we can learn about Engelhardt from Montanelli’s biographers. The self-styled “Colonel” Engelhardt was a stateless ethnic Russian “journalist and

romanzo italiano da tradurre in quella impossibile lingua. Gli dissi senza esitare: *Gente in Aspromonte*, e presi incarico di comunicarlo all’autore e di fargli la prefazione. Alvaro me ne fu gratissimo. Quando tornai a Roma venne subito a trovarmi, e mi chiese come mai avevo consigliato quel libro suo. ‘Perché – dissi – non lo reputo da meno de *I malavoglia* di Verga.’ Mi guardò incredulo, ma capì che lo avevo detto sul serio” (Our friendship was born out of our correspondence when, relegated to Estonia as a ‘reader’ in Italian at the University of Tartu, a local editor asked me if I could recommend an Italian novel to translate into that impossible language. Without hesitation I told him: *People in Aspromonte*, and I took it on myself to communicate this to the author and to write the preface. Alvaro was very grateful to me. When I returned to Rome, he came to see me right away and asked me why I had recommended his book. ‘Because,’ I said, ‘I consider it an equal to Verga’s *The House by the Medlar Tree*.’ He stared at me in disbelief, but he understood that I had meant it). See Indro Montanelli, “La prosa scultorea di Corrado Alvaro (La stanza di Montanelli),” *Corriere della Sera*, May 29, 2001. Montanelli’s choice of Moravia’s *Gli indifferenti* for the Estonian students is interesting as the novel’s portrayal of complacency and indifference in Mussolini’s Italy had irked the Fascist authorities: the Duce’s journalist brother Arnaldo Mussolini condemned Moravia as a “destroyer of every human value.” To Jaan Kaplinski, many years later, Montanelli said his three favorite Italian authors were “Primo Levi, Dino Buzzati, and Alberto Moravia.” Kaplinski, “Intervento del poeta estone amico di Indro,” 57.

⁴⁶ Indro Montanelli, “Approdo in Islanda: i puri Vichinghi,” *La Stampa*, April 15, 1938, 3. In the second of Montanelli’s articles on Iceland for *La Stampa*, “Ospitalità islandese: la ‘capanna’ di Gunnar,” published on April 29, a man called Gunnar introduces Montanelli to the “philological mysteries of the Icelandic language.”

⁴⁷ *Giorno di festa* was published in installments in *L'Illustrazione Italiana* in the second half of 1938 and published as a book (by Mondadori) in 1939.

⁴⁸ “In Estonia, il tempo non mi mancava. Rimisi mano a *Giorno di festa*, forse il romanzo a cui tengo di più, che avevo cominciato a scrivere in Abissinia” (In Estonia, I had time on my hands. I set to work again on *Giorno di festa*, perhaps the novel that I care the most about, which I had begun to write in Ethiopia). See Indro Montanelli and Tiziana Abate, *Indro Montanelli: soltanto un giornalista. Testimonianza resa a Tiziana Abate* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2002), 48.

⁴⁹ Montanelli, “Fascino delle terre nordiche,” 169.

⁵⁰ Indro Montanelli, “Quisling, lo scandinavo,” *Il Borghese*, April 1, 1950, 41.

shop-owner,” who arrived in Estonia sometime in the early 1920s as an illegal immigrant and correspondent for the Paris-based Tsarist army émigré newspaper *Vozrozhdenie* (The Renaissance). A dandy, Engelhardt dressed from head to toe in fastidious dove grey with gold collar pins. His textile store in Tallinn’s Town Hall Square served as a rendezvous for veterans (and sometimes plain criminals) of the White Russian movement, among them Russian monarchists exiled in Germany, Romanov grand dukes, disgruntled Freikorps combatants, and others who made common cause against the “Reds.” To Montanelli Engelhardt spoke heatedly of the “decadence” of Stalin’s Russia and asserted that unless Hitler waged war against the anti-religious, godless behemoth of the USSR, Russia could not be reborn in Tsarist splendor and autocracy. Engelhardt claimed that he was born in Estonia of Baltic German parents (Montanelli himself refers to him as a “Baltic Russian”), when in reality he was born in Smolensk to a Russian father called Vadim (or possibly Vladimir). With his high forehead, neat moustache and nervous long fingers, Engelhardt was altogether a “personaggio molto misterioso” (most mysterious character),⁵¹ judged Montanelli. Little did he suspect that Engelhardt was an informer for German naval intelligence. In January 1938, shortly before Montanelli met him, Engelhardt had been called in for questioning by the Estonian police after he organized a meeting (disguised as a tea party) in his apartment to discuss plans for Nazi Germany’s hoped-for assault on Soviet Russia. The police had most likely put Engelhardt through the third degree as he was left with a fear of unseen Dictaphone machines and eavesdroppers.⁵² Twice he had been refused Estonian citizenship by the Estonian Home Office.



Fig. 3. 1924–28 Certificate of Identity (“Nansen Passport”) photograph of Boris Engelhardt deposited in archival fond of the Estonian Police Service. ERA. 1. 1. 1171.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² The citizenship files on Boris Engelhardt are deposited in the archival fond of the Estonian Ministry of the Interior. The files consulted for this essay are: ERA.14.12.3100, ERA.45.1.2, ERA.45.1.4, ERA.45.1.5, ERA.1.18490, ERA.1.1.1171, ERA.1868.1.2004, 593 and ERA.949.1.44. Between 1922 (shortly after he arrived in Estonia) and 1936, Engelhardt lived at six different addresses in Tallinn, all of which were under Estonian police surveillance. As an illegal immigrant he was sheltered initially by the Russian Club in Tallinn. The Estonian police presented him with a choice: either he pay a fine of seven thousand Estonian marks or spend twenty days in jail. As Engelhardt did not have the money, his wife paid the fine. Engelhardt spoke very little Estonian; on the two occasions he had applied for Estonian citizenship (October 1937 and November 1939) his request was denied. From his textile store at 13 Town Hall Square (today the Maharaja Indian restaurant) he ran the Estonian branch of the Russian All-Military Union (ROVS), an illegal organization in post-Tsarist Estonia. As an informer for German naval intelligence, he had connections to the Russian Marine officer Peter Novopashenny, who later worked as a cryptanalyst during World War II for the German Wehrmacht cipher bureau (decoding enciphered Soviet communications). Engelhardt died in 1962 in Latvia apparently of natural causes.

Engelhardt's mystery Russian woman friend, Nina, moved into Montanelli's flat with a "menagerie" of two cats, a dog, a squirrel and a raven with "clipped wings" which, Montanelli claimed seven years later in an article for the right-wing *Il Borghese*, "ripped all my curtains to shreds." (This is hard to imagine, but truth blends with untruth in almost all of Montanelli's writings from his Baltic period and after.)⁵³ The woman, in her mid-twenties and "grumpy" as well as "slipshod," was of medium height, with deep-set blue eyes, sharp cheekbones and "fat, vulgar hands." She spoke Russian only and wore a "type of friar's tunic" with a leather belt and Gorki-style knee-length boots. "She wasn't even beautiful," Montanelli protested, adding with his usual misogyny: "Only if she took advice from a Western dress-designer and stayed for a long time in a branch of *Elizabeth Arden* could she have been made to look decent." After five days Nina was reunited with her Norwegian husband, a tall, big-boned fellow who "vaguely resembled" the French *matinée* idol Jean Gabin, Montanelli reckoned. With a stiff military bow he introduced himself to Montanelli in impeccable German as "Major Vidkun Quisling—Norwegian military attaché to Moscow." The name "Quisling" meant nothing to Montanelli at the time and the "odd couple" left the next morning by taxi, "taking with them their menagerie." Montanelli heard no further word of Quisling until two years later when he was astonished to learn that Quisling had become Norway's pro-Nazi Prime Minister. Why Quisling was married to a Russian woman when he so palpably hated all things Russian was explained to Montanelli subsequently in Stockholm by Hermann von Keyserling: in his "anti-Soviet zeal," Quisling had married (and soon afterwards divorced) two other Russian women: by marrying Quisling they were able to renounce their Soviet Russian nationality and claim Norwegian nationality, while Quisling, for his part, could delude himself that he had done so, as von Keyserling put it, "per sottrarre al gregge comunista tre pecorelle" (to subtract at least three sheep from the communist fold).⁵⁴ The first of Quisling's three Russian wives, Alexandra Andreevna Voronine Yourieff, was only seventeen when she married him. In *Quisling's Shadow*, her 2007 memoir, offers a distinctly unflattering portrait of the future Norwegian collaborator.⁵⁵ Today anyone who colludes with a notional enemy might be called a "quisling" in almost any language in the West.

Montanelli was in Tallinn when the third of Stalin's grotesque Moscow show trials—the one that inspired Arthur Koestler to write his fear-ridden novel *Darkness at Noon*—opened on March 2, 1938. The traitorous "scum" in the dock had not only murdered the Leningrad Party boss Sergei Kirov but had made secret agreements with Nazi Germany to partition up the Soviet Union. The Trial of the Twenty-One—eighteen of whom were executed—fortified Stalin's view of himself as a modern-day Ivan the Terrible: harsh but just. The insouciance with which he visited such suffering on his own Russian people both fascinated and appalled Montanelli.

On the day of the executions—March 15—Montanelli published an "exclusive" in *La Stampa*, "Stalin's Double Blow," which chronicled the back-stabbings and murderous curtailment of

⁵³ See Montanelli, "Quisling, lo scandinavo," 41. Montanelli told the same story in Montanelli and Abate, *Indro Montanelli: soltanto un giornalista*, 47.

⁵⁴ See Montanelli, "Quisling, lo scandinavo," 42.

⁵⁵ Alexandra Andreevna Voronine Yourieff, *In Quisling's Shadow: The Memoirs of Vidkun Quisling's First Wife, Alexandra* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2007). Alexandra married Quisling in 1922. She wrote: "In Estonia, we stopped briefly in Reval (now Tallinn), but I had a fever and remember very little from that city other than that it was exceptionally cold for the time of year." Tallinn was known by its Baltic German name until Estonia gained independence in February 1918, so Alexandra must have visited Tallinn with Quisling shortly before that date. Her marriage to Quisling was annulled in 1933.

liberties that culminated in Stalin's earlier elimination of much of the Red Army's officer corps.⁵⁶ The biographer Sandro Gerbi, himself a former *La Stampa* contributor, commends the "straordinaria attualità" (extraordinary relevance)⁵⁷ of Montanelli's article but goes no further than that. Montanelli was, however, the first journalist in the West to describe in plausible detail the macabre black comedy attendant on the June 1937 purge of tens of thousands of perceived Trotskyite "Judas" army commissars. At a time when print journalism was still the prime shaper of the way people viewed the world, Montanelli's was a "sensational" article—a "revelation"—that shed vital light on the Moscow trial that had just ended, said *La Stampa*'s Fascist editor Alfredo Signoretti in his standfirst. Engelhardt himself supplied Montanelli with "insider" information on how high-ranking officers had been arrested and liquidated by the NKVD secret police, who were at Stalin's elbow now whenever he needed them. Engelhardt had personally known a number of the Russian ex-imperial army officers appointed to positions of power by Trotsky in 1918 and later summarily executed by Stalin. Chief among them was the dashing "Red Napoleon" Mikhail Tukhachevsky, marshal of the Soviet Union, who in 1914 defected from Tsar Nicholas II's army to join the Bolshevik ranks. Like Trotsky, Tukhachevsky warned repeatedly of the coming Hitlerite onslaught of Panzers and air power. His association with Trotsky spelled his doom, as the exiled Trotsky had become emblematic of the internal enemies seen to menace the Soviet Union. As Tukhachevsky had done nothing against Stalin and the party (or at least nothing that would justify his arrest), it was decided that he was a paid German agent. His sentencing by a closed military tribunal (the "honor" of a public trial was denied him) revealed Stalin in all his jackal-like opportunism and "fredda feroce furberia" (cold ferocious cunning).⁵⁸ Tukhachevsky was executed on June 11, 1937 in the courtyard of the NKVD headquarters in Moscow. His interrogation protocols still exist; they are marked by brown spots of "flying" blood, suggesting that his head was in rapid motion at the time.

Montanelli followed his *La Stampa* scoop with three essay-length minibiographies of Tukhachevsky for *L'Illustrazione Italiana*.⁵⁹ Written in Tallinn over the spring of 1938, again with

⁵⁶ Indro Montanelli, "Il doppio colpo di Stalin," *La Stampa*, March 15, 1938, 5. Montanelli mentions Engelhardt for the first time in this article, for which he wrote a brief summary: "Le rivelazioni di Engelhardt: Stalin era al corrente della congiura dei generali e del tradimento del capo della Ghepeù dai generali dal nuovo capo della Ghepeù. Così finirono Tugacevski [sic] e Jagoda" (Engelhardt disclosed that Stalin was aware of the generals' plot and of the betrayal of the head of the GPU [the Soviet State Political Directorate] by the new head of the GPU. That's how Tukhachevsky and Yagoda met their end). Genrikh Yagoda, the disgraced head of Stalin's NKVD, a forerunner of the KGB, was executed after the 1938 trial; General Mikhail Tukhachevsky was also executed. In the standfirst that follows, Signoretti writes: "Indro Montanelli ha ricavato—dalla documentazione del col. Engelhardt—un resoconto completo delle vicende che hanno condotto alla macabre commedia battezzata da Stalin col nome di 'epurazione.' Le notizie che il nostro collaboratore [Montanelli] ha raccolto alla frontiera russo-estone, dove egli si trova da tempo, costituiscono una rivelazione, per molti episodi inattesa e sensazionale, dei fatti che precedettero il cosiddetto 'processo dei ventuno,' concluso ieri con la condanna a morte di Bukarin, Rykoff, Jagoda e Krestinski e di altri tredici imputati" (Indro Montanelli obtained—from the documentation [in possession] of Colonel Engelhardt—a complete account of the events that led to the macabre comedy which Stalin had called a 'purge.' The news that our colleague [Montanelli] gathered at the Russian-Estonian border, where he has been based for some time, constitute a revelation, sensational and startling in many respects, of the facts that preceded the so-called 'trial of the twenty-one,' which concluded yesterday with the death penalty for Bukarin, Rykoff, Yagoda, Krestinski, and thirteen other accused men."

⁵⁷ Gerbi and Liucci, *Lo stregone*, 100.

⁵⁸ Montanelli, "Il doppio colpo di Stalin," 5.

⁵⁹ Indro Montanelli, "Tuckacevsky: dalle memorie di un colonnello dell'esercito russo (1918)," *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, March 20, 1938; "Tuckacevsky: dalle memorie di un colonnello dell'esercito russo (1918), II," *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, March 27, 1938; "Tuckacevsky: dalle memorie di un colonnello dell'esercito russo (1918), III," *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, April 3, 1938.

Engelhardt's collaboration, these show Montanelli to be an astute political analyst, who understood before many others that the violent churn in Stalin's senior military echelons was a consequence of state terror on a colossal scale. Annihilation was the only solution to the terrible overcrowding in the Gulag, and Tukhachevsky had found himself at the front of the grim queue.

With his journalist's knack of being in the right place at the right time, Montanelli was in Berlin in August 1939 when news broke of a "non-aggression" pact between Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany. Here was the document that unleashed the Second World War. Secret territorial clauses ("protocols") in the Molotov-Ribbentrop accord would allow Hitler and Stalin to carve up swathes of Eastern and Central Europe between them. Germany was to take the larger share of Poland, while Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Finland, and part of Romania were to be subsumed into the Soviet "sphere of influence." Montanelli, who was now a roving reporter for the Milan-based *Corriere della Sera*, was in Berlin because the newspaper's editor, Aldo Borelli, a card-carrying Fascist Party member since 1922, had sent him to the German Alps to report on a Hitler Youth cycling tour. ("Sei alto, sei biondo e può passare per ariano" [You're tall, you're blond—you could pass for an Aryan].)⁶⁰ Montanelli dropped everything to go to the Polish front.

He was hastened to the front in a chauffeur-driven Wehrmacht Mercedes staff car.⁶¹ On September 3, he was in Bydgoszcz (known as Bromberg to the Germans) in the Polish corridor that connected the free city of Danzig (then under League of Nations administration) to Germany. In his highly elaborated article, "With the Reich Army on the Eastern Front," filed from Bydgoszcz on September 4, Montanelli claimed to have encountered Hitler in the vicinity of Graudenz on the border of the Corridor. The Führer was "dressed plainly" in an "iron-grey" uniform. "Il suo volto non esprimeva nè gioia nè commozione nè compiacenza. Sapete come è il volto di Hitler: ermetico, diafano, lontano come il suo sguardo. Tale era anche oggi...Non ha voluto onori né saluti né squilli di tromba. È apparso e scomparso. Un soldato tra i tanti che vedevano" (His face expressed neither joy nor agitation nor complacency. You know what Hitler's face is like: hermetic, pallid, distant, like his gaze. And so it was today...He didn't want any honors or greetings or trumpet blasts. He simply appeared and then he disappeared, one soldier among the many.)⁶² The trouble with this was that Hitler was nowhere to be found near Graudenz at the time, and Montanelli surely knew it. Commentators on Montanelli and his work in Italy have made almost nothing of this article. Yet it could almost pass for a non-fiction short story; in the guise of reportage Montanelli told a good tall tale. (As a Tuscan he might have appreciated the Tuscan proverb beloved of Italo Calvino: "The tale is not beautiful if nothing is added to it.") In the article, Poland is portrayed as a desecrated, beggared nation, but Montanelli makes no mention in it of the thousands of Slavs and Jews murdered in and around Bydgoszcz by advance guards of the Wehrmacht. Poland's own army, having fought with "ammirevole cocciutaggine" (admirable stubbornness),⁶³ was preparing a strategic withdrawal from the Danzig Corridor.

⁶⁰ See Indro Montanelli, *Le passioni di un anarco-conservatore: intervista a cura di Marcello Staglieno* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2009), 30–35. Montanelli says he was in Berlin at the time in a restaurant in Bayerischer Platz with other Italian journalists, having followed the Hitler Youth cyclists from the Brenner Pass all the way to Berlin. Borelli had earlier sent Montanelli to Albania as a "redattore viaggiante" (roving reporter).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 30. The Mercedes had been "loaned" to Montanelli by the "German Ministry of Propaganda" (that is, by Joseph Goebbels's ministry).

⁶² Indro Montanelli, "Con le truppe del Reich sul fronte orientale," *Corriere della Sera*, Sept. 6, 1939, 1.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Four days later, on September 8, Montanelli was flying over Warsaw with the Luftwaffe.⁶⁴ The Polish capital had capitulated unconditionally, and the Polish state had ceased to exist. From the window of the low-flying plane Montanelli looked down at “un desolato pellegrinaggio di fuggiaschi” (a desolate pilgrimage of fugitives), moving amid clouds of “polvere gialla” (yellow dust) in the direction of the Polesian lowlands away from the destruction.⁶⁵ Polish fighters had tried to use “vecchie pistole, fucili che somigliavano a tromboni, doppiette a baccetta, schioppi da caccia, coltelli, mazze ferrate, forconi da fieno” (old pistols, double-barrel shotguns, trombone-like rifles, hunting guns, knives, maces, hay pitchforks)⁶⁶ to repel the invader, but all this was useless against the “diabolico macchinario di distruzione” (diabolical machinery of destruction)⁶⁷ that was Hitler’s army. Montanelli was moved by the courage displayed by the “polacchi testardi” (stubborn Poles)⁶⁸ against a Wehrmacht that was more like a “machine” than an army. Not one white flag of surrender was seen; Poland seemed to wear a crown of martyrdom.

If we are to believe what Montanelli told his journalist colleague and biographer Marcello Staglieno, his *Corriere* reportage was so unapologetically “pro-Polish” (and therefore insufficiently *freundlich* to Berlin) that it upset his editor, Borelli, who was an ardent Fascist and champion of Mussolini’s anti-Semitic racial laws.⁶⁹ Mussolini may or may not have viewed the reportage as an attack on his Axis partner Hitler; at any rate, Montanelli was expelled from Reich territories. Something told Montanelli that more trouble was brewing in the Baltic on the Soviet Union’s borderlands. He shipped out of Poland via Thomas Mann’s birthplace of Lübeck on a German minesweeper headed for Tallinn. The ship anchored in Tallinn Bay on October 2, 1939,⁷⁰ just as a Soviet military delegation turned up by rail in order to finalize where a number of bases were to be located for use by the Soviet armed forces and by what means the Red Army and the Red Fleet, with their equipment and personnel, should come in. The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact had given Stalin the vital foothold he needed to absorb Estonia into the USSR; but first the Estonians had to allow the Soviets to install their troops and military hardware. Ostensibly this was because Stalin wanted to defend the strategic approaches to the Russian homeland and turn Estonia into a buffer between Moscow and an expansionist and belligerent Germany. By annexing the former Tsarist province of Estonia and the other Baltic states of Latvia and Lithuania, Stalin was able to initiate the Soviet Union’s “historic task” of reconstituting the old Tsarist borders in the northwest of Europe.

As Soviet forces made ready to pour into Estonia, Tallinn harbour was blocked off and civilian traffic cleared from the center; telephone exchanges, bus stations and newspaper offices were shut down. The sky was a drab oyster grey and through the autumn sea haze Montanelli could make out the shapes of the Red Fleet destroyers *Minsk*, *Gordy* and *Smetlivy*. It was an offense to take pictures of the ships; anyone caught out-of-doors with a camera was liable to be imprisoned or worse. The absence of any visible sign of protest was dispiriting to Montanelli (“la città non sembra essersi accorta dell’arrivo dei nuovi ospiti” [the city seems not to have noticed the arrival of its new guests]).⁷¹ If Tallinn was made to acquiesce in gloomy silence, it was because silence was as

⁶⁴ Indro Montanelli, “In volo su Varsavia,” *Corriere della Sera*, Sept. 9, 1939, 1.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Indro Montanelli, “L’inutile lotta dei franchi tiratori polacchi,” *Corriere della Sera*, September 10, 1939, 1.

⁶⁷ Indro Montanelli, “Il dramma di Varsavia,” *Corriere della Sera*, Sept. 19, 1939, 1.

⁶⁸ Indro Montanelli, “Con le truppe del Reich sul fronte orientale,” *Corriere della Sera*, Sept. 6, 1939, 1.

⁶⁹ See Montanelli, *Le passioni*, 71.

⁷⁰ Indro Montanelli, “Sguardo ai Paesi Baltici,” *Corriere della Sera*, Oct. 3, 1939, 1. (Montanelli’s article, incidentally, appears under a photograph of Count Ciano at the Reich Chancellery in Berlin with Hitler and Ribbentrop.)

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

necessary to Stalin as it was to all tyrants and invaders who operated through a police apparatus and press censorship. The enemies of silence—journalists and writers who dared to raise their voice—had to be shut down. And so it was that Montanelli was ordered to leave Tallinn by the Soviet authorities, apparently after he leaked intelligence to the *Corriere* that Estonia's President Konstantin Päts had “fallen ill” after Estonian military staff urged him to take up arms against the Soviet intruder.⁷² True or false? As was so often the case, Montanelli was picking up on rumors. The only way out for him now was across the Gulf of Finland to Helsinki, where his finest work as a journalist was about to begin.

Montanelli reached Helsinki by ship just as hostilities between Finland and Russia were about to erupt. The Finnish frontier at Viipuri (Vyborg), Finland's second largest city, was only a few miles from Leningrad on the Karelian Isthmus, and Moscow, wanting “security guarantees,” demanded this as well as a naval base in southwestern Finland (just as Russia had demanded and—was granted—bases in Estonia). Finnish-Soviet negotiations collapsed in Moscow in mid-November when it became clear to the Finns that their sovereignty was to be compromised. Finland's military commander-in-chief, Marshal Baron Carl von Mannerheim, rejected the proposals outright. Mannerheim had presided over the birth of the independent Finnish republic during the First World War after the Bolshevik Revolution sparked a brief civil war in Finland between the Reds and the Whites. Confident of a quick victory over Mannerheim, Stalin launched a full-blown military assault.

Montanelli put up at Helsinki's Hotel Kämp, where the international press pack was quartered. The biting cold penetrated his Tuscan bones. In the Finnish capital the atmosphere was one of “absolute calm.” The streets were full of silent, semi-comatose ghost people; it was black night at three in the afternoon and the snow cascaded down from a “cielo di cotone sporco” (dirty cotton wool sky).⁷³ A network of trenches excavated on the city outskirts was under snow already, with blue-white national flags flying above. In the press room of the blacked-out hotel Montanelli sensed an extraordinary rallying to a national identity. The Finns showed a “disciplina assolutamente ammirevole” (absolutely admirable discipline) and “un'atmosfera di calma assoluta” (an air of absolute calm).⁷⁴ Borelli urged Montanelli to take the next flight home to Milan: the war, he reckoned, was unwinnable, but Montanelli resolved to stay. He sensed that the Winter War was a moment in history when the world was about to change drastically, and finally, for everyone.

⁷² Indro Montanelli, “La pressione russa sui Paesi Baltici,” *Corriere della Sera*, Oct. 6, 1939, 4. “Ma l'ansia per le sorti del suo Paese è tale che stamani egli [il presidente Päts] sarebbe stato colpito da malore. Anche di questo la popolazione è all'oscuro. Era corsa voce che i capi militari avrebbero tentato d'imporre al Presidente la decisione di una resistenza con le armi” (But the anxiety for the fate of his country is such that this morning he [President Päts] suddenly fell ill. The population has been kept in the dark about this too. Word spread that the military heads attempted to impress on the president the decision to fight back with weapons). Montanelli's biographers make nothing of this article.

⁷³ Indro Montanelli, “Nella capitale deserta,” *Corriere della Sera*, Dec. 5, 1939, 1.

⁷⁴ See Indro Montanelli, “Pausa nei negoziati tra la Finlandia e l'URSS,” *Corriere della Sera*, Oct. 15, 1939, 1.



Fig. 4. Martha Gellhorn. Image from Karbohemia, <https://www.karenkarbo.com/martha-gellhorn-witness>.

Martha Gellhorn (fig. 4.), the American writer and journalist, turned up at the Hotel Kämp a few days after Montanelli. The golden girl from Missouri was drawn to danger and frontline conflict, her preference being for rugged outdoors men (“men at work is what I like”). She had found her ideal in Ernest Hemingway, whom she would marry in 1940, at the age of 32. In snowbound Helsinki, she missed the bright tropic warmth of Havana, where she and Hemingway had courted. Montanelli is not mentioned in Caroline Moorehead’s biography of Gellhorn, yet Montanelli got to know her well in Helsinki. There were tensions. Montanelli admired Gellhorn for her courage,⁷⁵ but he regarded her as a “rossa indiavolata” (devilish Red)⁷⁶ who had purposely not reported on republican atrocities in Spain, which she knew about. In the Helsinki hotel bar, she knocked back vodkas with Montanelli and *La Stampa*’s star reporter Giovanni Artieri, with whom she had covered the Spanish Civil War in Madrid. Gellhorn wrote in disparaging terms to Hemingway of her two new “Italian Fascist” journalist colleagues: “it is too funny being such pals with them, a story in itself.”⁷⁷ Montanelli and Artieri did not share her champagne tastes; by her own admission Gellhorn could appear “snotty and superior,”⁷⁸ and when a British journalist (Geoffrey Cox of the London *Daily Express*) warned her that the press were being bussed out of the hotel in order to escape a Russian bombardment, she dismissed him haughtily and went back to sleep.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Indro Montanelli, *I cento giorni della Finlandia* (Milan: Garzanti, 1940), 178.

⁷⁶ Montanelli, *Le passioni*, 65. Montanelli uses these words of Gellhorn during the interview with Staglieno.

⁷⁷ Caroline Moorehead, ed., *The Letters of Martha Gellhorn* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006), 78. Gellhorn does not name the Italian journalists to Hemingway, but they undoubtedly were Artieri and Montanelli.

⁷⁸ Gellhorn uses these words in a letter to Hemingway, as cited in Caroline Moorehead, *Martha Gellhorn: A Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003), 194.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*



Fig. 5. Giovanni Artieri. *Il Secolo d'Italia*, <https://www.secoloditalia.it/2015/02/ventanni-fa-se-ne-andava-giovanni-artieri-figura-spicco-movimento-sociale/>.

Helsinki was bombed repeatedly in November. Wave after wave of Russian planes took off from their bases in Estonia, which was only fifteen flying miles away across the Gulf of Finland. Montanelli was down in the hotel cellar with Artieri and Gellhorn. “I never felt such explosions; the whole damn place rocked,” Gellhorn told Hemingway.⁸⁰ In a lull the journalists ventured outside. Down one street they saw the flames of a burning bus lying on its side. The air was dense with brick dust. The journalists thought: “poison gas attack!” But no one seemed to be choking to death: it was the airborne brick dust. People shuffled stunned through broken glass away from the flickering murk. “Now you see what it’s like to be on the losing side, don’t you gentlemen?” Gellhorn taunted Montanelli and Artieri.⁸¹ Buildings blazed red against the snow. “How well the Russkis have learned from their new friends,” Gellhorn commented to Hemingway, meaning the example set by Hitler’s blitzkrieg against Poland.

Between them, Gellhorn and Montanelli helped to create an enduring image of the Finns as unflinchingly brave and unrelenting in their resistance to the Soviet invaders. Gellhorn agreed with Montanelli that anyone who could survive the Finnish winter “could survive anything.”⁸² To Hemingway she exalted the Finns as “marvelous, with a kind of pale frozen fortitude.”⁸³ Montanelli was no less struck by the Finns’ steady, stoical manner. (“They are a people alone in their suffering.”⁸⁴) The Finnish word for these granite qualities is *sisu* (it is etymologically related to *sisus*, “inner” or “interior”, and hence akin to gutsiness). Montanelli thought the Finns had *sisu* to burn and he wrote an article about it for the *Corriere della Sera*, entitled “‘Sisu’: virtù finnica” (“Sisu: the Finnish Virtue”).⁸⁵ The Soviets, too, in the person of Marshal Voroshilov, their Defense Commander, saluted the Finns as a “staunch in defense and well-disciplined” people. Sales of the

⁸⁰ Gellhorn to Hemingway, November 30, 1939, in *The Letters of Martha Gellhorn*, ed. Caroline Moorehead, 77.

⁸¹ Ibid. Gellhorn reported to Hemingway that she said this “frequently and “bitterly” to the “two Italian Fascist journalists.”

⁸² Martha Gellhorn, “Bombs on Helsinki,” *Collier’s*, December 1939. “An Italian journalist [Gellhorn does not name him, but it was Montanelli] had remarked in Helsinki that anyone who could survive the Finnish climate could survive anything and we decided with admiration that the Finns were a rough and unrelenting race.” Gellhorn’s Finnish reportage for *Collier’s*—“Bombs on Helsinki” and “The Karelian Front” (December 1939)—is published in Martha Gellhorn, *The Face of War* (London: Virago Press, 1986).

⁸³ Moorehead, ed., *The Letters of Martha Gellhorn*, 78.

⁸⁴ Indro Montanelli, “Un popolo solo col suo dolore,” *Corriere della Sera*, March 14, 1940, 1.

⁸⁵ Indro Montanelli, “‘Sisu’: virtù finnica,” *Corriere della Sera*, September 16, 1941, 3: “Il ‘sisu’ l’hanno soltanto i finlandesi...Dopo cento giorni di Guerra il ‘sisu’ risultò più forte delle bombe russe” (Only the Finns have *sisu*...After one hundred days of war, “sisu” remained stronger than Russian bombs).

Corriere reached 200,000 copies a day thanks to Montanelli's Winter War reportage,⁸⁶ which made him easily the most read Italian journalist of his day. (He wrote an average of one Finnish article a day for the newspaper.) However, his Finnish journalism was not as "anti-Fascist" as he later liked to think it was. Newspapers in Fascist Italy inevitably were obliged to support the opportunist "friendship" alliance between Hitler and Stalin (and therefore take Russia's side), but in private Mussolini was staunchly behind Mannerheim and indeed his enthusiasm for Finland ("this small gallant nation") was shared by many in Fascist Italy.⁸⁷ In Gellhorn's own reportage for *Collier's*, Finland emerges as a "white, deadly cold" land of "slate-colored" skies and "grey" afternoons. Beneath the effortless prose and occasional droll humor ("Finnish is not a language you can pick up in a short time") there conceivably are elements of storytelling and factual distortion; like Montanelli, Gellhorn sometimes embellished or transmuted her reportage into something approaching semi-fiction.⁸⁸ (Three years earlier, in 1936, she had described a lynching in the American South that she had never witnessed.)

Women journalists were not allowed at the front, but Gellhorn somehow got permission. "Going to the front is a great way for us to beat it out of here. And no one could accuse us of abandoning our post," she told Montanelli. Gellhorn was in a restless and "melancholy" mood as the Nordic winter had begun to weigh on her. She asked Montanelli to tell her some "happy stories" to cheer her up. "But as I didn't have any happy stories to hand, she bad-temperedly dismissed me."⁸⁹ Next morning in the hotel reception Gellhorn histrionically read out loud passages from the Bible on the "delights of the afterlife" (so Montanelli claimed: Gellhorn was not known to be religious) while Montanelli and Artieri scrambled round in search of a driver to take them the front. At last, all three set off for Viipuri in a white-camouflaged Italian Legation car; it was dark and the blue-papered headlamps of the Fascist government vehicle "dimly lighted the frozen snow four feet ahead."⁹⁰ Laden with sleeping bags and typewriters the journalists located the Finnish troops bivouacked behind the Mannerheim defences at the Karelian front. Montanelli was filled with admiration for the white-coated, hardy-handsome Finnish soldiers—"ragazzoni solidi" (big solid boys)⁹¹ who showed rather more pity than hatred for the Russian invader. Prodded into battle by their merciless commissars the Russians were mowed down like cattle by the Finnish machine gunners. The Russians had been told that Finland was "attacking them, and so they were fighting to save Russia," Gellhorn observed.⁹²

By the time Gellhorn was reunited with Hemingway in mid-January ("we should never have left Cuba," she told him),⁹³ Montanelli had got used to the mounting civilian deaths and the sight of civilian homes ripped apart. He crossed vast distances on foot and slept in makeshift shelters before returning to the warmth of the Hotel Kämp to dictate his stories to the copytakers in Milan.

⁸⁶ See Montanelli, *Le passioni*, 65. In the space of three months of his arrival in Finland, Montanelli became a household name in Italy.

⁸⁷ Mussolini saw the Winter War as another Spanish Civil War and was more or less ready to send volunteers, weapons, and planes to fight Communism there. See Pirkko Kanervo, *Italia ja Suomen talvisota: Il Duce Mussolini maailman urheimman kansan apuna* (Helsinki: Teos, 2007).

⁸⁸ Gellhorn, *The Face of War*.

⁸⁹ Indro Montanelli, "Nella capitale deserta," afternoon edition of *Corriere della Sera*, Dec. 5, 1939. "Disse che era malinconica e pretese che le raccontassi storie allegre. Siccome non avevo storie allegre a portata di mano, mi cacciò via con malumore....Mentre lei ci recitava alcuni versetti sulle delizie dell'al di là, noi cercammo per telefono un contatto qualunque con gente del luogo."

⁹⁰ Martha Gellhorn, "The Karelian Front," in *The Face of War*.

⁹¹ Indro Montanelli, "Alla frontiera tra Finlandia e Russia," *Corriere della Sera*, Oct. 25, 1939, 1.

⁹² Gellhorn, "The Karelian Front."

⁹³ Moorehead, ed., *The Letters of Martha Gellhorn*, 78.

One night in the hotel dining room he encountered Quisling again “e fu cordialissimo” (and he was most cordial), Montanelli wrote of him a decade later in 1950.⁹⁴ It tells us something about the nature of Montanelli’s politics in post-Fascist Italy that he should have described Quisling as “cordialissimo” even after Quisling was known to have betrayed Norway to the Nazis and had become one of the world’s most notorious traitors. While in Helsinki Montanelli managed to interview Marshal Mannerheim, “an extremely handsome man” who, with his “capelli folti e lucidi, con baffeti neri” (thick shiny hair and black moustache), looked much younger than his “seventy two years.” Mannerheim was most “cordial” (that word again) but all the same rather distant and reserved with Montanelli (“it was difficult to get him to talk about himself and his memories”).⁹⁵ Beneath Mannerheim’s flinty exterior Montanelli detected a Count Cavour-like master strategist, patriot and proud horseman. In the published interview he alludes in the vaguest terms to Mannerheim’s savage reprisals against the Reds in the spring of 1918, when his White forces executed some ten thousand Bolshevik troops in the Bolshevik stronghold of Tampere. In Montanelli’s eyes Mannerheim seemingly could do no wrong, but the atrocity has blackened Mannerheim’s name to this day in sectors of the Finnish Left. The Winter War, fought in darkness and bitter arctic cold, was in many ways a resumption of Mannerheim’s earlier war against the Bolsheviks.

Stalin blamed his losses on incompetence, and replaced Marshal Voroshilov with Marshal Semyon Timoshenko, one of the Red Army’s ablest commanders, who quickly set to work. Timoshenko’s assault on February 1, 1940 saw a barrage of three hundred thousand shells pulverize Finnish defences—nearly three times the number of shells used by the British Army during any one day of the First World War. When Viipuri fell on March 13, the game was up and the Finnish flag was lowered to half-mast as Finland negotiated a painful if honorable peace. Montanelli claimed that he and Gellhorn drank champagne together miserably in the Hotel Kämp’s half-empty restaurant while a Finn played a Sibelius lament for them on the grand piano,⁹⁶ but he must have got Gellhorn muddled up with the (equally glamorous, equally blonde) London *Sunday Times* reporter Virginia Cowles, as Gellhorn was in Cuba by then.⁹⁷ Cowles, who replaced Gellhorn as the Winter War’s pre-eminent woman journalist, later wrote about her Finnish experiences in her bestselling memoir *Looking for Trouble*, published in 1941. (Montanelli is pointedly not mentioned in it.)

Between one hundred thousand and two hundred thousand Russian soldiers had perished over the hundred days of fighting in Finland. The refugee crisis that resulted was described by Montanelli in his book *I cento giorni della Finlandia* (One Hundred Days of Finland), published in Italy in 1940. Half a million Finnish civilians had fled territories in Finland that had fallen to the hammer and sickle. Finnish women and children ended up stranded in freezing temperatures

⁹⁴ Montanelli, “Quisling, lo scandinavo,” 42.

⁹⁵ Indro Montanelli, “Il Maresciallo Mannerheim,” *Corriere della Sera*, Dec. 31, 1939. Sixty three years later, in his long interview with the journalist Tiziana Abate, Montanelli used the same words of Mannerheim: “bellissimo uomo... a settantun anni ne dimostrava dieci di meno” (a very handsome man... at seventy-one, he seemed ten years younger). Montanelli and Abate, *Indro Montanelli: soltanto un giornalista*, 49.

⁹⁶ Montanelli, *I cento giorni*, 151. On March 13—Montanelli reports—the Soviets declared victory over Finland. The day before, on the twelfth, the Soviets had announced the imminent destruction of Helsinki. The only people left in the Finnish capital (“other than the firemen”) were Montanelli and Gellhorn, or so Montanelli claims. In fact, Gellhorn had left for Cuba two months earlier and was back in Havana by January 19, 1940.

⁹⁷ Virginia Cowles, American-born, had gotten to know Martha Gellhorn in Madrid in 1937 during the Franco war. With Gellhorn she later co-wrote a romantic *MASH*-like play, *Love Goes to Press*, about women war correspondents, which opened in a London theater in 1946.

on the Norwegian side of the Pasvik River and in Finnmark county in the north of Norway. There was much human suffering in these scenes, which Montanelli described with an eye to Nordic atmospherics. His job done, he flew to Stockholm, where he met the Fascist fighter ace Carlo Cugnasca,⁹⁸ who was engaged to marry the actor Alida Valli, later famous for her role in Carol Reed's 1948 film *The Third Man*. (Cugnasca was soon to die in combat flying over North Africa.) If there was one word Montanelli loathed more than any other at this moment it was "Bolshevik."

Montanelli was back in Tallinn for the third and last time in September 1941. The details of this return trip have been omitted from his biographies, but they can be reconstructed from Montanelli's newspaper despatches. His German-piloted propellor plane to Tallinn almost "skimmed" the surface of the sea at times to avoid heavy cloudbank over the Gulf of Finland. The Soviets had been ousted only days before as the Wehrmacht pushed eastwards through Estonia towards Leningrad. The Red Banner Fleet had tried desperately to evacuate Soviet civilians, Red Army orderlies, party members and naval personnel as the Germans battled their way in. The operation in which the Soviets hoped to "make a Dunkirk" of Tallinn (as Montanelli put it) resulted in one of the greatest naval disasters in Russian/Soviet history, with casualties estimated at between 11,000 and 15,000. The operation was such an ignominy for the USSR that to this day almost no declassified information exists about it in the Moscow archives. In the sea beneath Montanelli floated the debris of the Soviet navy "as in the aftermath of tidal wave"; a destroyer lay on her side, half shrouded in smoke and torpedo-smashed. "Enormous" diesel slicks indicated where a Soviet submarine had been hit. Death still seemed to be very near at hand to Montanelli, hovering amid the detritus in the sea just beneath his Luftwaffe plane. On its zig-zag flight into Tallinn the Heinkel sent out bright-coloured warning flares to German anti-aircraft gunners not to open fire. Presently the turrets and belfries of the Hanseatic city emerged from the rain-washed haze like a "Lutheran San Gimignano." Montanelli half expected the medieval Old Town to have been crushed to ashes in the fighting, but it had been left largely "unmolested" and was still "intact." Flocks of raucous-throated crows flapped up from the runway as the plane touched down. The military airfield was a strip of tarmac situated between Narva Boulevard and Vana-Kuuli Street; gashes had been torn in the control tower and bomb craters showed "white as ossuaries" in the runway. The outskirts of "Reval" (Montanelli now obediently called Tallinn by its Nazi-approved ancient Baltic German name) had been stormed and pillaged. But, fortunately, the autumn rains had prevented the arson fires started by the retreating defenders from spreading to medieval buildings. Montanelli believed that Hitler had given "precise orders" to his artillery not to shell the historic center, as "Reval" was a waystation in Germany's centuries-old "march eastwards" of civilization against the Slav.⁹⁹ (Reval, a "small Baltic Nuremberg," was, in Montanelli's pro-Hitler view, a Germanic

⁹⁸ Montanelli, *Le passioni*, 69. Montanelli's last dispatch from the Finnish front was dated March 20, 1940. After that he went to Stockholm, where, in the Grand Hotel, he met Cugnasca and his fiancée Valli.

⁹⁹ "L'artiglieria degli attaccanti aveva ricevuto ordini precisi di non tirare sulla città, che in fondo è di stampo tedesco, ha segnato nella storia una tappa—e quale tappa—della secolare marcia della civiltà germanica verso l'oriente e costituisce una piccola Norimberga baltica" (The attackers' artillery had precise orders not to fire on the city, which is deep-down German in spirit and marked by history as a milestone—and what a milestone—in the centuries-old march of Germanic civilization toward the east, constituting a little Baltic Nuremberg). See Montanelli, "Reval torna all vita," 3.

citadel and rightful German territory.) Peace—a Nazi German peace—would rise from the damage, which would be papered over in no time, Montanelli reassured his *Corriere* readers.¹⁰⁰

He dropped his bags off at his hotel and set out to explore. The Soviets had excavated anti-tank trenches in the cemetery of the German cathedral church at Mõigu near the civilian airport. “These Soviets really are macabre,” Montanelli commented in “Reval Gets Back on its Feet,” the first of several sardonic anti-Soviet articles he filed from Tallinn for the *Corriere della Sera*.¹⁰¹ “Not content with fighting among the tombstones, the Russians now lie half-buried among the skeletons of the dear departed.”¹⁰² Though Montanelli surely exaggerated the ghoulishness of the scene, the Red Army’s defensive position in this part of Tallinn had become a deathtrap. Some army horses lay disembowelled in the cemetery dugouts; others were still tethered to cypress trees there. In the Old Town, Montanelli was upset by the sight of “ill-dressed,” “brutalized”¹⁰³-looking Estonians queuing up to buy food outside the near-empty stores. The atmosphere of Tallinn’s bourgeois café life that he had got to know four years earlier in 1937—the toothsome marzipan cakes, the exuberant chatter—had given way to “greedy, rough and boorish” habits engendered by the year-long Soviet occupation with its saturnalia of NKVD arrests, murders, and deportations. The Germans had imposed a nine o’clock evening curfew, “but at least Tallinners can talk openly now, walk about freely, go to the cinema”; they can enjoy “the gift of being alive” (and “la vita” [life], Montanelli added axiomatically, “è più forte della morte” [is stronger than death])¹⁰⁴. Montanelli was delighted to find that his maid Bertha was still alive and to see that Kadriorg Park was filling up once more with nannies and lovers. “Friendly” German soldiers played harmonicas and guitars on street corners and “winked” at the girls. The “daily hammering” of the Internationale was no more. Women had taken to wearing hats again after hats had been banned by the Soviets as “anti-proletarian” bourgeois accoutrements.¹⁰⁵ None of these abruptly available “freedoms” represented the return to “normality” that Montanelli imagined for them: there had been no “normality” to return to, not after the Soviet occupation, and not in the Baltic in that autumn of 1941.

The German high command arranged a “victory” luncheon party for Montanelli and other Axis-power journalists at Tallinn’s Golden Lion hotel (where Arthur Ransome had got married in 1924 and Graham Greene had put up in 1934). At the head of the restaurant table was a man Montanelli referred to as “Colonel Körner”;¹⁰⁶ this was Gottfried Körner, former assistant to the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.: “Volando quasi a pelo d’acqua per tenerci sotto il muraglione di nuvole, vedemmo la rotta punteggiata di detriti di navi come dopo un maremoto, poppe rimaste a mezzo nell’inabissamento, enormi chiazze di nafta che denunciavano l’affondamento di un sommergibile” (Flying almost on the surface of the water to stay beneath the cloudbank, we saw the route littered with debris from ships as if after a tidal wave, sterns left half submerged, enormous oil slicks indicating where a submarine had been sunk). Montanelli excelled at descriptions of ruination caused by war.

¹⁰¹ Indro Montanelli, “Bilancio della battaglia di Reval,” *Corriere della Sera*, Sept. 2, 1941, 1; “Reval torna alla vita,” 3; “Reval si rimette in sesto,” *Corriere della Sera*, Sept. 15, 1939, 6.

¹⁰² Montanelli, “Reval torna alla vita.”

¹⁰³ Ibid.: “le code di gente malvestita...imbruttita.”

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Montanelli, “Reval si rimette in sesto,” 6. “Tutte le donne di Reval—signore, signorine, and signorone—hanno la smania di rimettersi il cappello dopo un anno e mezzo di regime comunista, durante il quale si erano ben guardate dal portarlo per non essere considerate ‘borghesi’ e quindi sospette” (All of the women of Reval—whether married or unmarried and of all ages, including the ladies of high rank and wealth—have a yearning to wear a hat after a year and half of the communist regime, during which they were careful not to wear them to avoid being considered “bourgeois” and therefore suspect).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

German military attaché in Helsinki. Over bottles of French wine Körner mocked the Soviets' blundering and disorderly rout: the Führer's mighty blitzkrieg thrust had left the sea round Reval gratifyingly full of the bodies of dead Communists. The Wehrmacht and SS officers marvelled at the carnage attendant on Stalin's "incompetent" retreat. Why the Soviets had so "furiously bombed" the Estonian town of Viljandi when there were no Germans to be found in Viljandi was a mystery. The Red Army had only achieved the destruction of a number of alcohol distilleries on the shores of Lake Viljandi, which had unforeseen boozy consequences for the fish.¹⁰⁷ Amid flames and ruin of their *own* making the Soviets had run away like the cowards they were. Heil Hitler! It would not be long—Colonel Körner lectured his luncheon guests—before the Führer would reduce Ukraine, Belorussia, and all "Russland" to slavery. No amount of pleading on Montanelli's part in later years can detract from the fact that in late 1941 he was a resolutely pro-Hitler newspaperman, who allowed his anti-Soviet partisanship to color every word of his Germanophile Tallinn copy.

But, eventually disenchanted with Mussolini's pro-Nazi regime, in 1944 Montanelli joined Italy's anti-Fascist resistance movement as a partisan in the clandestine Partito d'Azione (Action Party). In Nazi-Fascism it seems Montanelli had finally come to see only the continued grievousness of Hitler's war in the Mediterranean and a potential desolation for all Italy. Montanelli the ex-Fascist nevertheless remained a difficult man to define, though "difficult" hardly covers it, as his position on the Italian political spectrum is not always easy to fathom. He spent his last years vigorously opposing the tycoon-politician Silvio Berlusconi, but he remained deep-down a man of the conservative Right. As the self-appointed spokesman for Italy's so-called "silent majority," indeed, Montanelli practised a form of Everyman "anti-politics" or even (it sometimes seemed) a paradoxical and ambiguous "Fascist anti-Fascism." He died in 2001 at the age of ninety-two. In 2020, two decades later, Italian students doused the bronze statue of Montanelli in Milan with red paint and defaced it with the words "racist, rapist." Indro Montanelli's colonial-imperialist African past—including his marriage of convenience to the Eritrean minor he was pleased to call his "docile little animal"¹⁰⁸—had caught up with him at last.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Montanelli referred to his Eritrean bride as "un animalino docile" (a docile little animal) in a television interview with Enzo Biagi on May 18, 1982 (*Questo secolo: 1935 e dintorni*, pt. 3, "Facetta nera," RAI 1). After exalting the pre-Axis-Pact Mussolini as "un grossissimo politico" (a great politician) and "un demagogo formidabile" (formidable demagogue) Montanelli gestures to a framed photograph on his study wall of the twelve-year-old Eritrean girl and explains to Biagi: "You see, I was in need of a woman."