War in Val D'Orcia, 1943-1944 Study Guide

War in Val D'Orcia, 1943-1944 by Iris Origo

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

The narrative of this book consists of a series of diary entries written at the height of World War II by an American-born woman, Iris Origo or the "Marchesa" married into an aristocratic Italian family. In the midst of events shaped by the social, political, and military contexts of the time, the Marchesa writes of the challenges faced by her family, her community, and her adopted country during the struggle to maintain some semblance of normal, day-to-day life in the face of increasing, debilitating war and violence.

The book's editor introduces the diaries with a brief summary of the social, political, and military circumstances that triggered the eruption of World War II. Next, the Marchesa prefaces the diaries with brief commentary, written after the conclusion of the war, of the belief in the human spirit that characterized her actions and those of others in the Val d'Orcia community during the fighting.

The diary excerpts themselves begin with events in January of 1943, when the war in Europe had already been underway for a number of years. The Marchesa writes of the arrival of a group of children taking refuge in the relative safety of the Val d'Orcia, a group that increases in number once the mothers of the initial refugees see how safe and well cared for their children are. She also writes, in considerable detail of events on the world stage of the political and machinations of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, of Mussolini's relationship with German dictator Adolf Hitler, and of the determined attempts by the Allied forces to defeat their coalition. She also describes how, over the course of the year, what seems to be self-defeating apathy on the part of the ordinary Italian citizen evolves into a grim determination to ensure that those victimized by war are taken care of whenever and however possible. Her diaries reveal how she and her family become leaders in the Val d'Orcia community of these activities, the ongoing and intensifying effort to preserve humanism in the face of increasing, and increasingly desperate, military brutality and callousness. The diaries also reveal, somewhat surprisingly, that in the midst of all the suffering and her work to alleviate it, the Marchesa is expecting a child and, in May of 1943, gives birth.

As 1943 continues, Mussolini is overthrown and the Allied forces gain both influence and strength, driving the German and Italian armies back. As they retreat, however, the brutality and desperation for land, safety and supplies increases, with the result that the Marchesa's home, and the Val d'Orcia as a whole, become increasingly overwhelmed. This, the diaries make clear, puts the lives and well being of the farmers in the valley, as well as the refugees they keep safe, in increasing danger, danger they continue to ignore in the name of preserving human life and dignity. The Marchesa's description of, and commentary on, the events of 1943 comes to an end with commentary on the irony of celebrating Christmas, with its associated imagery of peace and love, in the midst of brutality and destruction.

1944 begins with increased tension in the Val d'Orcia, as the occupation by the retreating German armies continues and intensifies. Eventually, Allied attempts to bomb

the Germans into complete surrender lead the Marchesa, her family, and the refugee children to evacuate to Montepulciano, a larger community yet to be overrun by retreating Germans. After a hazardous, tiring journey, the group arrives in safety, and are welcomed by the war-fatigued, but compassionate, citizens of the city. The retreating Germans pass through, but their stay is brief and the war in Italy comes to an end in July.

When the group returns to the Val d'Orcia, the Marchesa discovers that the construction of the house is still intact, but the house's interior, the farms in the valley, and the surrounding countryside have all been ransacked. While fully aware of the challenges faced by the community in rebuilding, the Marchesa writes of the determination she shares with her tenant farmers to rebuild life in the valley as it once was.

Introduction and Preface

Introduction and Preface Summary and Analysis

The narrative of this book consists of a series of diary entries written at the height of World War II by an American-born woman, Iris Origo, married into an aristocratic Italian family. In the midst of events shaped by the social, political, and military contexts of the time, the Marchesa writes of the challenges faced by her family, her community, and her adopted country during the struggle to maintain some semblance of normal, day-to-day life in the face of increasing, debilitating war and violence.

Introduction - The book's editor describes the two main circumstances defining the nature and content of the narrative. First, he sketches in the biographical background of its American-born author, the Marchesa Iris Origo and how she came to live in the community of Val d'Orcia in Tuscany. He then, and perhaps more importantly, sketches in the book's historical context - specifically, the origins of Italy's involvement in World War II in the ambitions of the Italian Fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini, and his alliance with German dictator Adolph Hitler. The editor then details the military, social and political changes of fortune experienced by Italy as a country and the Marchesa over the two years covered by the period of the diary concluding with commentary on how the work and ways of the Val d'Orcia community changed for the better after the war came to an end.

Preface - In text written after the conclusion of the war, and in language that is at times quite poetic, the Marchesa describes the geographical and climactic environment of Val d'Orcia before the war, and her family's relationship with the farmers who worked the land. She refers to that relationship as "more intimate" than that of landlord and tenant, and "more friendly" than that of employer and employee. It was, she contends, a "partnership." She describes how the community came together to help and support not only each other but any refugee, ally or fascist, who came to them for aid, the struggles to sustain that support and the difficulties she had both writing and preserving the diary. She also writes frankly about her occasional lapses into "political bias and national prejudice" but then contrasts that commentary with lengthy consideration of why she and the other members of the Val d'Orcia community aided each other. Their aid, she contends, was grounded the belief that all humanity was, and is, essentially the same.

As the introduction suggests, it is impossible to understand the diaries, in terms of both its action and its themes, without at least a broad-strokes understanding of the military and political context in which the diary was written. Initiating that understanding is the primary purpose of the Introduction, discussed clearly and openly. The Introduction also, however, contains important information about the character and situation of the Marchesa that, on some level, defines her attitude throughout the events she describes. She is clearly portrayed as having married into the Italian land-owning aristocracy which, in economic cultural and social terms, gives her a degree of responsibility for those whose livelihood she and her husband's family oversee known as the tenant

farmers. What is interesting about the Marchesa in these circumstances, as she herself suggests in the Preface, is that rather than considering the tenant farmers as serfs, people upon whose labor she and her fellow aristocrats made their income and took their ease, she instead considered them to be fellow human beings, partners rather than servants. This essential attitude defines her attitudes and actions throughout the narrative supplied by the diary. They are all, aristocrats and laborers alike, in the same situation.

1943, Part 1

1943, Part 1 Summary and Analysis

The diary in January begins with present tense narration of the arrival at La Foce of seven children, six girls and one boy, all taking refuge from fighting in Genoa. The children, the Marchesa writes, had been hidden for two months in a tunnel beneath the city, were all homesick, all ill, and eventually able to cry themselves to sleep.

The Marchesa contemplates the social, political and military reactions to a series of Allied bombing raids on Italian cities, saying the primary response of the Italian people was resentment - of the Allies who conducted the bombings, of the fascist government who created the circumstances that led the Allies to think such bombings were necessary, or of both. She later describes the arrival of another group of children refugees and how, when their mothers came to visit, they insisted upon leaving their other children, so that the total number of children at La Foce eventually swelled to 23. She contemplates the suffering of the children, and her own reaction to their experiences.

The diary entries for April consist almost entirely of summaries of the course of military and political events - bombings, deals, negotiations, alliances made and broken. The Marchesa comments, with some frustration, on how the people seem, almost universally, to be reacting with resentment and anger, but don't seem willing and/or able to take any sort of action. She comments, however, that "on the part of those elder citizens who remember a different Italy," there was "a profound sadness and a sense of shame."

After describing, in considerable detail, an Allied air raid on the small Italian town of Grosseto, the Marchesa again suggests that the response of the vast majority of Italian citizens to the war continues to be "a dumb, fatalistic apathy." Entries then focus on the arrival, treatment and behavior of a group of British prisoners of war, now housed on the La Foce estate - one of the prisoners, the Marchesa writes, being a gardener to a British aristocrat. She comments on her feelings of sympathy with the prisoners, of the oddness of hearing their broad British accents in the middle of the Italian countryside, and of their gladness at being in more comfortable quarters than the military prison in which they were originally kept. The brief entry for May 14 refers to the Marchesa's arrival in Rome for the birth of her baby. Subsequent diary entries during her time in Rome refer to air raids to the beauty of both the nights and the days, and to the continuing flirtations of young people even while the atmosphere of potential bombings lingers. Entries also refer to rumors of a coup and of booby trapped watches, dolls, makeup and other supplies dropped from Allied bombers. The final entry for May describes press coverage of political debates taking place in England over the necessity for the bombings.

The entries for this section introduce and develop several of the narrative's key themes - the horrors of war, the transcendent value of humanity, and self-sacrifice. But while vivid, evocative images of bombing and destruction and of generosity towards other human beings are all included in this section, perhaps the most powerful element is how the Marchesa refers, almost in passing, to her baby. Up to this point in the diary, she has made no reference to being pregnant, and nowhere else in the diary does she comment in any significant detail on the process of birth, of nursing, or of any other aspect of being mother to a newborn. Granted, she had assistance from servants, and granted the baby is not her first. But even under those circumstances, pregnancy and birth are challenging (to say the least) to a woman's mind, body, and spirit. The fact that the Marchesa puts so much emphasis, in her diary and apparently in her life, on the challenges facing those other than herself suggests a great deal about who she is as a human being, and furthermore manifests an important component of the book's exploration of two of its three main themes.

Another interesting point about this section of diary/narrative is the repeated reference to the apathy of the Italian citizenry. There are two sides, it seems, to this coin. One is a sense of helplessness and resignation, of being aware that the war is being fought on socio-political-military levels far outside the level of both experience and power lived by ordinary citizens. The other is the sense that the so-called ordinary people, simply struggling to sustain their daily lives, are in no meaningful way taken into account by those on those higher socio-political-military levels of society. The thought almost seems to be that if the higher ups don't care about them, why should they invest at all in the outcome of their squabbles? It's interesting to note, however, that over the course of the diary, apathy turns to actionbut of a clearly different, much more humanist sort than those on the higher levels seem to be interested in and/or practicing.

1943, Part 2

1943, Part 2 Summary and Analysis

In the midst of continued rumors about a coup and about impending German occupation, the Marchesa gave birth to her daughter, Donata. The following day, the third anniversary of Italy's entry into the war, the Marchesa writes that there are few celebrations, but continued air raids. Meanwhile, her husband Antonio brought news of Fascist attempts to conscript some of the estate's farmers, and of being requested to donate one of his cars to the militia. Also, the Principessa de Piemonte undertakes another cover diplomatic mission, investing reports of a poorly equipped / functioning Red Cross hospital. On the 23rd of June, the Marchesa and her baby daughter returned to La Foce.

The diary entries for July are focused almost exclusively on military and political events. Early in the month, there was a poorly regarded speech delivered by Mussolini, further rumors of the coup (which the Marchesa no longer believes), and the landing of Allied troops in Italy and a subsequent increase in flights across Italy by German bombers attempting to fight them off. In the middle of this, the Marchesa writes, is Donata's christening, a day of faith and celebration in which prayers for her preservation and indeed the preservation of all life had, the Marchesa comments, additional meaning. In the following days, Allied invasions continued, bombings continued and propaganda continued to be published and distributed by both sides. The Marchesa's descriptions of the faithful gathering at the Vatican are juxtaposed with the desperate arrival of the family of one of the refugee children. At the end of the month came news that Mussolini has fallen, the power of the Fascists had been dissolved, and that the Allies declared victory even while the Germans urged the Italians to keep up the fight. The propaganda war continued, the Marchesa writes, with fascists being attacked and/or placed under house arrest, and the now non-fascist military continuing to be in charge.

The Marchesa writes of the swirling rumors and conjecture resulting from Mussolini's downfall and the end of Fascism, commenting that "everyone interprets such events as he has heard of, in the light of his own desires." While liberal Italian newspapers and commentators resumed activities, German presence and activities in Italy increased. This led the Marchesa and others to the conclusion that Italy's involvement in the war was more about Germany than anything else, and that Allied attacks on Italy were also more about Germany. This belief is reinforced by the resumption of the bombing of Rome, and by the arrival of a pair of German soldiers, apparently more convinced than ever of the rightness and necessity of their country's cause. Shortly afterwards, "the first bombs fell in the Val d'Orcia," causing a degree of damage but no casualties. Rumors of armistice flared and then died away, the Allies took Sicily, and the air-raids continued. "The common citizen sits and waits," the Marchesa writes, "but with an ever-increasing dread of invasion and diminishing hopes of peace."

Here again, important personal events (the birth of Donata, the Marchesa's birthday) are referred to almost in passing as the Marchesa continues to focus on external events and circumstances. A noteworthy exception is her commentary on Donata's christening and the irony of seeking God's blessings on a newborn life while bombs are dropping all around is inescapable, as is the further irony of the Pope, under similar circumstances, asking for similar blessings on all people.

Also in this section, the Marchesa's commentary suggests that the peasantry, the ordinary people, were beginning to awaken from their apathy and realizing that they not only had to become more proactive if they, their homes, and their ways were to survive, but also that their opportunities for action were oriented less towards military action and more towards human action. In other words, they began to realize they could do more good for themselves, and perhaps for humanity in general, by providing comfort, aid and support to their fellow human beings as opposed to blowing them to bits or killing them in ways, and for reasons, that the Nazis are (later in the diary) portrayed as doing

1943, Part 3

1943, Part 3 Summary and Analysis

Happiness at the continued breakdown of Fascist control, the Marchesa writes, was tempered with increasing gloom at the prospect of increased German control, and of intensifying Allied attempts to break that control. Indeed, as German presence in Rome and elsewhere in Italy intensified, difficulties in free transportation increased, more and more supplies were requisitioned by the German army, and more and more soldiers deserted the Italian army out of resistance to having to fight alongside German soldiers. Meanwhile, German determination to take custody of all prisoners of war, including the British prisoners still housed on the La Foce estate, increased, as did the determination of the Marchesa and her husband to keep "their" prisoners out of German hands. Eventually, as German activity increased all over Italy, the Marchesa and her husband plotted with Sergeant Knight, the leader of the British soldiers, to ensure they evaded German capture. The plot is, for the most part, successful, with the community of Val d'Orcia missing the soldiers a great deal and the Marchesa commenting, in a footnote, that they heard from eighteen of the escaped soldiers that they got back to England safely, but never heard again from Sergeant Knight. Meanwhile, the Marchesa writes about encounters with compassionate German soldiers and about the difficult journey of two Italian soldiers, aided by Russian peasants and doctors as they strove to return from participation in the Russian campaign, only to find themselves humiliated by German commanders. These soldiers, the Marchesa comments, were two of dozens of deserters and escaping prisoners of war that took refuge in the estate's woodlands while increasingly desperate German leaders strove to maintain military, social, and political control.

October - As the Allies continued their slow march through mainland Italy in their efforts to clear out the remaining German occupation, the Germans destroyed the towns, communities, and houses they were forced to leave behind, taking any and all supplies they believed they will need and destroying the rest. Aware that the approaching winter will be difficult, the Marchesa, her family, and her tenants stored food and other supplies in secret locations, aware that in their rush they hid things they might need and forgot things they should have hid. She comments, however, that she quickly realized she had to make do. "All that one clings to," she writes, "is a few vital affections." Meanwhile, stories of family and friends, the destruction of their homes, their desperate attempts to preserve the lives of family members, also appear in the diaries, as do comments on the increasingly desperate war crimes perpetrated by both the new Fascist government and the Germans. The Marchesa reproduces the newly adopted introduction to the government's radio broadcasts, comments on the varied reactions to the socio/political uncertainty gripping the country, and narrates a close encounter Antonio had with some American soldiers who, in their turn, were navigating an encounter with a small squad of Germans. Finally, she comments on received news of activities undertaken by resistors to the Germans and the Fascists, and refers to recently imposed laws intended to deter such activities.

The narrative's theme relating to the transcendent value of humanity appears in an unexpected manifestation in this section, specifically in the Marchesa's commentary on the visit of the two German soldiers. She finds herself surprised by their evident humanity by the fact that they have similar feelings and experiences to herself and her tenant farms. The suggestion here is that she, like so many others, has fallen victim to the idea / practice of stereotyping, of assuming that the attributes of a community are also those of an individual. Her experiences with these two soldiers, however, are juxtaposed with the story of the German commanders in particular and of German atrocities in general. There is the sense here that as the result of learning of those atrocities, it would have been (is?) difficult, to say the least, to continue to think of Germans in general as human beings. Introduction of, and commentary on, these atrocities continues throughout the narrative, becoming the primary component of the narrative's thematic consideration of the horrors of war. In other words, stories of the inhumanities of some people are, throughout the narrative, juxtaposed with stories of true compassion and selflessness, with the latter clearly being portrayed as an ideal and/or model form of behavior, even when faced with other behaviors that are so obviously models of what NOT to do.

1943, Part 4

1943, Part 4 Summary and Analysis

As winter began, the grip of the Germans and the new Fascists tightened. The families of young recruits were threatened with severe reprisals if those recruits didn't turn up for service in the new Italian army, and many of those recruits felt they had no choice but to comply with their orders. Jews, the Marchesa writes, were being rounded up all over Italy, particularly in Rome, and being shipped off to concentration camps. She also recounts several other instances of cruelty and violence perpetrated by both the Italian Fascists and the Germans, commenting on "the bulk of hatred accumulating" against both groups of oppressors. She describes a morning in which several different sorts of fugitives arrived at La Foce, some seeking food, others seeking clothes, others seeking maps, still others simply seeking a place to sleep. Finally, she describes the increasing experience of being trapped not only physically but psychologically and of visiting her husband's ancestral family home.

The Marchesa recounts stories of shell-shocked peasants recruited into the army, of desperate Jewish refugees from Rome, of beginning to teach the refugee children, of the upsurge in torture being perpetrated by both the Fascists and the Nazis, and of the tense atmosphere of violence in Rome. Meanwhile, she prepares for Christmas, writing of how the Pope's Christmas message suggested that he was all too aware of the futility of preaching about peace and goodwill but also of how, as she left church on Christmas Day, she was aware of the presence of just that sort of goodwill. The section concludes with the story of a Catholic cardinal who rescued a group of Jews and the nuns who have them rescue from a squad of Germans.

Here again, images of hope and prayer are tellingly, almost painfully, juxtaposed with images of / commentary on atrocities and torture. At the same time, however, it's important to note that while the Pope is preaching hope, the Marchesa and her colleagues are taking action to ensure that hope is both rewarded and ongoing. Her narrations of both her own actions and those of others, in particular the Catholic cardinal are clear embodiments and/or manifestations of the narrative's central thematic consideration of the transcendent value of humanity, a consideration that comes particularly clear in the face of hardship and destruction.

1944, Part 1

1944, Part 1 Summary and Analysis

The new year began with the region's first snowfall, rumors of Allied invasion, which later in the month turn out to be at least somewhat true, as Allied troops land near Rome, and the execution of Italian politicians who had refused to take an oath of loyalty to Mussolini. Mid-month brings an attack of scarlet fever to one of the children in the Marchesa's care, and news that the Castelluccio is to become the headquarters for a squad of German troops. The Marchesa, her family and workers hurried to move the best furniture, books, and other possessions into hiding places on the Val d'Orcia's remote farms. Mid-month also brings the beginning of a long parade of refugees - children and families, Allied prisoners of war escaped from their German captors, even elderly women traveling in high-heeled shoes and fur coats, in such a hurry to leave Naples that they had no time to collect appropriate clothing or footwear. All receive what help the Marchesa can offer.

On one of her increasingly rare visits to Florence, the Marchesa became aware of the intensity and brutal imagery of German propaganda. Meanwhile, refugees continue to pass through the Val d'Orcia, with the Marchesa paying particular attention to one of the valley's peasants who continued to provide shelter and support to four British prisoners of war, fully aware that he stands to be executed if caught. Also this month, in one of the diary's longest entries, the Marchesa contemplates the hardships she and other Italians are facing, and wonders what the world will be like at the end of the war. Almost in passing, she refers to learning of her mother's death eighteen days after the fact because of obstructed mail delivery. The destruction of a centuries-old abbey and the deaths of several of its monks takes up much more narrative time, as does consideration of the case of an abandoned baby.

As German forces methodically and deliberately flooded potentially farmable land, the Marchesa received a letter from a friend wondering "what will be left of this wretched country" and complaining about how Italy is, in spite of its efforts at building peace, being left with less and less. Meanwhile, as spring began, the Fascists continued enforced recruitment even while squads of partisans continued to hide in the forests and stage guerilla attacks on the Germans and their Allies. One of them, Larig, eventually revealed himself to be untrustworthy, hinting at one point that he would even spy for the Germans if the money was good enough. Meanwhile, Antonio visited Rome, returning with news of the suffering there and upon his return being confronted by a group of violent partisans demanding protection money. Later in the month, a chattering child put the work of the farm in danger, but the Marchesa and her husband cleverly plot their way through it.

The noteworthy points in this section include another example of how the Marchesa, at least in her diaries, downplays important personal events and emphasizes the suffering of others. This can be seen as a manifestation of the narrative's thematic contemplation

of the idea, and value, of selflessness. Details of German atrocities continue, as does the sense that circumstances are going to get worse before they get better. Then there is the commentary on Larig, which can be seen as a contemplation of the lengths to which those desperate to survive will go.

At this point, it is interesting to pause and consider again the actual circumstances under which the diary was written. Not only was the Marchesa the mother of an infant, not only was she supervising the care and treatment of dozens of refugee children, not only was she taking responsibility for the well being of her tenant farmers, and not only was she offering support to any human being who came to La Foce for help. Somehow, in the middle of all this, she found the time and energy to sit, think, and write, at times at evidently considerable length. In short the Marchesa, apparently without intending to do so, is portraying herself as a remarkable human being, an embodiment of one of her own thematic considerations such as the transcendent power and seemingly almost unlimited spiritual resources of humanity and compassion.

1944, Part 2

1944, Part 2 Summary and Analysis

The activities of partisans, both genuine and impostors, continued. The self-serving activities of the corrupt Larig were discovered, with the result that he was put on trial by his fellow partisans and executed. Meanwhile, a small band of partisans fought off a larger, but dispirited, band of Fascists, while an over-excited band of partisans attempted to hold a Fascist deserter and his family hostage, but were talked out of doing so by Antonio. Antonio also confronted a German officer who attempted to gain control of the Castelluccio in spite of repeated assertions that another German officer has already done so. For her part, the Marchesa is particularly troubled by the ruthless execution of what she describes as a harmless workman, which took place as his wife and child watched and by the impending death of a lonely, frightened young man away from home and suffering from severe pneumonia.

May - Shortly after a pair of visits from fighters whom the Marchesa and Antonio suspected were not the partisans they claimed to be, the Marchesa was upset to learn about an article published in a Fascist newspaper denouncing her as both an aristocrat, living on other people's money, and a supporter of resistance. She and Antonio are reassured by a pair of apparently humane German commanders that La Foce is safe. The Marchesa and Antonio, however, were not entirely reassured, particularly in the wake of the brutal investigations and interrogations of the allies of a recently executed Fascist sympathizer and of anti-Fascist sympathizers. Brutality, it seems, is everywhere - even in the lives of an elderly female friend kept in prison without food or water for days on no charges. Meanwhile, the partisans and fascists continued their back-and-forth skirmishes, the Allies continued to advance, both Allies and fascists continued to air-drop propaganda on the Val d'Orcia, and the stream of refugees continued.

The Marchesa's descriptions of Fascist atrocities become increasingly graphic at this point on, clear and specific without being lurid or gratuitous. There is the sense here that she is, at least to some degree, writing about them in such detail because she wants to remind herself of the inhumanity she and others are striving to counter with compassion and grace. Her determination to continue her mission is the reason why she is so concerned about the newspaper article, not because it is right but because repercussions from the article have the potential to disrupt, if not actually ruin, her mission completely. Again, however, she finds hope for both her personal circumstances and for humanity in general in the actions and attitudes of the German officers, who seem to at least have a degree of humanity and/or sensitivity about them.

At this point, it might be worth taking a quick look at Antonio, the Marchesa's husband. She never writes particularly of affection between them, of love or romance or desire. Apparently too busy with other things, and just as apparently more concerned with broader strokes experiences of humanity, there is nevertheless the strong sense that

they are kindred spirits, a couple united not only in feelings for each other but in shared belief systems about the world and about humanity's place in it.

1944, Part 3

1944, Part 3 Summary and Analysis

As Allied bombing runs and other activities brought the release of Rome from German control closer, the Marchesa worried whether German retreat would be cut off. "If not," she comments, "our troubles are just about to begin."

Then begins an intense, detailed, virtually day-by-day narration of the experiences undergone by the Marchesa, her husband, the children in their care, and the workers with whom they share the Val d'Orcia during the German retreat. As the Allies advanced through Italy and as the Germans retreated, both sides continued attacking each other. There are also rumors, put about by the defiant Germans, that a deadly secret weapon, long suppressed, was being mobilized by Hitler against England. The Marchesa comments that she has had no word from home on what the situation is. Meanwhile, the La Foce household struggled to retain a semblance of normality and at the same time, prepared to move the children out of the line of retreat. Antonio was asked to be a leader of the rebuilding team in a nearby town, and the Marchesa writes that she found it interesting to be part of the conversations about what was going to happen after the Germans left.

Around mid-month, the Germans arrived at La Foce, taking control of both the house and the farms in the surrounding valley. Antonio managed to negotiate relative safety for the household, but safety became increasingly difficult to maintain with the arrival of more and more Germans, the consequent increase of Allied arms fire, and sudden downpours of rain. As the household moved into the cellar, away from the ever-advancing weapons fire, Giorgio died, the children became increasingly upset, and the Marchesa was struck by the strange inefficiencies of the German soldiers.

Eventually, the shelling became so intense and so dangerous that the Marchesa and her household had no choice but to evacuate. She and Antonio led the household across dangerous country to Montepulciano, where they eventually found rescue and shelter - Montepulciano, it seems isn't as close to the front as La Foce. For a few days, in spite of a desperate German presence, existence for the refugees was relatively peaceful, with the Marchesa receiving news from a La Foce farmer that the house and many of its belongings were still mostly safe.

On June 29th, the Germans were almost entirely driven out of Montepulciano (a few pockets of resistance remained, but were soon taken over by the Allies, and the citizens of the town emerged from hiding. The Marchesa, while concerned about her appearance, was nevertheless happy to receive a visit from Col. Cardiff, a British officer who affirmed that for the most part, La Foce was whole. Finally, the Marchesa was relieved to learn that the German propaganda/rumors about the destruction of England were exaggerated - it had been damaged, but survived.

Upon returning to La Foce, the Marchesa discovered the structure of the house intact but its contents and gardens ransacked. She also discovered that most of the farms in the Val d'Orcia were in similar condition, with many of the farm families living in appalling, profoundly unsanitary and dangerous conditions, short of food and of almost every conceivable supply. Happily, she discovered that one of her beloved dogs had survived, but that another hadn't.

As the narrative concludes, the Marchesa writes of the actions being taken as the citizens of the Val d'Orcia rebuild their lives, and starts finding hope within herself and the farmers who share her land.

The first point to note about this section is the detail with which it is written. Considering the circumstances the Marchesa describes, it is little short of remarkable that she somehow managed to find the time, energy and inclination to write in the way that she did. This raises an intriguing question. What was it about the Marchesa's character that made writing so important, that drove her to make the time and expend the effort to chronicle the events of her life in the midst of doing all that she did to make the lives of the little community, of which she is the head, easier? This sort of writing under these circumstances might be considered, by some, as selfish and, to a degree, insensitive. How does this perception square with what the Marchesa reveals about her actions and attitudes towards others?

The second noteworthy point about this section is how it clearly portrays the sufferings and privations of war such as the ruthlessness of the German war machine at the same time as it points out its ironies such as the drifting, ineffectual German soldiers and opportunities to experience more positive aspects of human existence like courage and compassion. The final noteworthy point about this section is related, in that the description of what the Marchesa and her community find when they return to La Foce can be seen as a metaphoric evocation of those positive aspects of humanity. The house has been damaged, but it still stands. The dog has been wounded and traumatized, but it is still alive. The community of farmers and aristocrats has been shaken and materially/spiritually brutalized, but they continue in their determination to both rebuild and support each other in the rebuilding process. In other words, the narrative concludes with a thematically central, ultimately positive vision of humanity's capacity for triumph over some of the worst possible adversities, which is a triumph made possible, the Marchesa's experiences suggest, by on some level simply being a human being helping another.

Characters

The Author

As portrayed in the editor's introduction, the Marchesa Iris Origo was the daughter of an American who had lived a short portion of her life in the United States but was raised in Europe. This, the editor comments, was the result of her father's desire that she live in a place "where she does not belong" in order to become more worldly and free from nationalistic patriotism, a desire fulfilled after her father's death when Iris was young and her mother moved the family to Italy. There, Iris grew to maturity and eventually married an Italian aristocrat, working with him to revolutionize the agricultural industries in the community where they eventually settled, the Val d'Orcia. During World War II, the Marchesa found herself torn between two loyalties, to her home country and culture and her adopted country and culture. Ultimately, though, the Marchesa devoted her time and energy, as well as the family's financial and material resources, to preserving and protecting the lives of the local people as well as anyone else taking refuge from the ravages of war. Over the course of the narrative, the Marchesa comes across as passionately and tirelessly devoted to preserving the well being of those for whom she has taken responsibility - the Val d'Orcia's tenant farmers, the children taking refuge in her home, wounded and deserting soldiers on both sides of the conflict. Her actions simultaneously embody and reflect the narrative's central thematic considerations of the transcendent value of humanity and the power of self-sacrifice in realizing that transcendence.

Antonio

Antonio is the author's husband. While their relationship is never discussed in any depth, he is portrayed as being just as committed to the humanist cause as the Marchesa, and as an active participant in the day-to-day activities of the Val d'Orcia community. He is also portrayed as being actively involved in the larger, ongoing, evolving socio-political workings of the non-Fascist Italian community, workings determined to ensure that Italy, as a country and as a culture, survives.

Mussolini, Hitler

These two dictators, as the result of their respective desires for domination and power and the practices of brutality and genocide that emerged from those desires, were the primary instigators of World War II. Mussolini was an Italian fascist, Hitler was a German Nazi, and their alliance brought death and destruction to large portions of Europe, in terms of both geography and populations. In metaphorical terms, they are the embodiments of the anti-humanity sentiment and practices against which the Marchesa and the members of the Val d'Orcia, in their humanist determination, struggle physically and spiritually.

The Principessa di Piemonte

An Italian aristocrat, the Principessa is portrayed throughout the diaries as a mediator, a go-between providing communication between the royal family and the citizenry.

The Refugee Children

At the beginning of the diaries, a group of children arrives at La Foce taking refuge from the bombing and fighting in their home cities. There are glimpses, in the diaries, of the Marchesa's efforts to continue their education, to entertain and distract them, but her first priority is simply to preserve and sustain their lives. Their well being, she seems to imply, is her primary concern.

The British Prisoners of War

At the same time as the Marchesa provides safety and support for the refugee children, she is providing what comfort she can to a group of British prisoners of war, housed by German and Italian military authorities on the La Foce estate.

Sergeant Knight

Knight is the leader of the British prisoners, a man whose reasoned caution and careful planning result in the successful escape of several of his men. The Marchesa comments, however, that she has no idea whether Knight himself managed to escape.

The Catholic Cardinal

In the entry for December of 1943, the Marchesa narrates the story of a Roman Catholic cardinal who, in an act of self-sacrifice, preserved the lives of a group of Jewish prisoners. His actions, for both the Marchesa and the reader, are a powerful evocation of the narrative's thematic focus on the transcendent value of human beings and of the need for self-sacrifice in support and recognition of that value.

The Two German Soldiers

In August of 1943, the Marchesa and La Foce are visited by a pair of German soldiers, whose self-righteousness and absolute, almost obsessive belief in the German cause lead the Marchesa to the realization of just how difficult the struggle to defeat Germany is going to be.

Schwester Marie

Marie is the La Foce community's resident nurse. She helps the Marchesa with her newborn daughter and with the refugee children. As the war continues, Marie takes responsibility for all the elderly, the ill, and the wounded who take refuge with the Val d'Orcia community.

Larig

A deserter from the Yugoslavian army, Larig led a growing band of deserters and refugees hiding in the forests of the Val d'Orcia and conducting a campaign of guerilla warfare against the German forces and their allies.

The Partisans

"Partisans" is the name given to Italians who fight to free Italy from German influence, doing so either in militarily organized fashion or in guerilla, more random fashion. On several occasions throughout the narrative, the Marchesa and the Val d'Orcia community provide refuge, safety and supplies to partisan fighters.

The Fascists

On the other side of the Italian coin are the Fascists, followers of Mussolini who believe in, and support, his determination to turn Italy into a world power through exerting control over every aspect of the country's life.

Beppe, Giorgio

Beppe is the leader of the partisan faction hiding in the Val d'Orcia woods. While the actual membership of the group ebbs and flows, Beppe remains there consistently, providing an effective liaison between the Partisans and the Marchesa. Giorgio is a young Italian partisan who takes refuge with the Marchesa and dies in the middle of the June 1944 fighting.

Objects/Places

World War II

This war, fought in the years 1939 and 1945, engaged the military forces of the entire international community ranged, for the most part, in one of two camps, the so-called Allies and Axis (see below). The conflicts in the narrative can be seen as a micro-cosmic manifestation of the larger conflict - in other words, the conflict between life-preserving humanism and life-destroying dictatorship.

The Allies

The Allied forces in World War II were led by Great Britain, America, and Russia. The social, political and moral philosophies of these three nations were, for the most part, grounded in democracy of the sort despised by the Axis powers.

The Axis

The Axis forces in World War II were led by Germany, Italy and Japan, whose philosophies and practices were grounded in fascism (see below).

Fascism

Fascism, as a social/political movement, was (and continues to be) grounded in the principles of racial and/or ethnic superiority, of absolute authoritarian government, of the leadership (dictatorship) of a single, charismatic individual, and of a contempt for democracy. Day-to-day manifestations of fascistic behavior and thought were the primary obstacles against which the Marchesa, and the Val d'Orcia community, fought during their struggles of 1943-44.

Italy

Italy was/is a relatively new country, having consisted for centuries of a collection of city/states and only formulated into a single entity in the mid-1800's. A member of the Allied forces in World War I, it was taken over by Mussolini and Fascism in the early 1920's.

Germany

In direct contrast to Italy, Germany as a nation had (has?) a centuries-long history of seeking, and acquiring, power. Its defeat in World War I, perceived in Germany as a

humiliation, was the trigger for the rise to power of Fascist/Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler who aligned with Mussolini to become the primary European members of the Fascist Axis.

The Val d'Orcia

This valley in West-Central Italy is the area in which the family of the Marchesa's husband, for several decades, made its home and established an agricultural community.

La Foce

"La Foce" is the name of the Marchesa's estate, and of the expansive, richly furnished house at the heart of that estate. La Foce becomes the center of the Marchesa's efforts at providing refuge and safety for family, refugees, and deserting soldiers. It eventually becomes a base of operations for retreating German forces.

The Castelluccio

A centuries-old castle on the La Foce estate, the Castellucio is, at various times in the narrative, used as a barracks for German soldiers and for their prisoners of war.

The Woods and FaThe Newspaper Article rms

The forests and small-holdings on the La Foce estate become a place of refuge for those fleeing the war and for partisans fighting the war as guerillas (as opposed to organized, drafted soldiers). The Marchesa's diary entries recount several instances in which she and her husband held secret meetings with their allies in both the woods and the farms, and other instances in which the people hiding there had close encounters with Fascists and Nazis determined to capture, imprison, and/or execute them.

The Newspaper Article

A short article condemning the Marchesa as both an aristocrat and a provider of support to the partisans placed her, her family, and the refugees in her care in danger. Only Antonio's direct intervention with the local German prefect saved her and the Val d'Orcia community, farmers and refugees alike, from investigation.

Themes

The Transcendent Value of Humanity

This is the diary's central theme, manifesting in several aspects. The first, and most apparent, is the way in which the Marchesa seems to respond to anyone and everyone who comes to her for help. Marchesa discusses the treatment of children, their parents, the elderly, partisans fighting German occupation, Germans deserting their army, Italians en route for home, tenant farmers, refugees from bombed-out cities, strangers and friends alike. The treatment each receives springs from the Marchesa's essential belief that every human being ultimately deserves to be treated with, and to live in, dignity, integrity and freedom. A related manifestation of this theme can be seen in the emphasis her diary places on stories of those who act in a similar way, in particular Catholic nuns and priests who give refuge to Jews and families who provide refuge for their men who refuse to fight on the side of Fascism. At the same time, and somewhat surprisingly, the theme manifests in the Marchesa's discovery that on some level, the hated Germans are fighting for the same things she is, which are home, safety, family, and dignity. Yet another manifestation of this theme can be seen in the larger, socio-political-military context within which the events of the diaries unfold - specifically, in the battle between the authoritarian dictatorships and the free, democracy-driven Allies. In other words, the battle between humanist and anti-humanist behavior is fought, throughout the diaries, on two planes of the global, and the personal.

Self Sacrifice

This theme manifests in both substance and style, defining an essential aspect of the narrative's contemplation of the value of humanity and the lengths to which people will go in recognizing it. In terms of substance, the diaries are filled with narratives of individuals forgoing safety and comfort as they courageously act to preserve the lives and well being of their fellow human beings in the face of imminent, often inevitable, frequently barely escaped danger. A particularly vivid example is the tale of the Catholic Cardinal but on a humbler scale, the Marchesa repeatedly refers to her tenant farmers protecting those taking refuge in their barns and homes from Fascist/Nazi investigations even when they know they could very well be shot. The Marchesa herself embodies this theme, as does her husband, both frequently placing themselves in danger as they repeatedly put their beliefs into practice. Meanwhile, in terms of style, self-sacrifice manifests in how the Marchesa writes about her experiences in relation to those of the people around her - specifically, in the way she downplays the challenges in her personal circumstances in order to focus clearly on those of the people around her and of the Italian people as a whole. Examples include her lack of reference to her pregnancy, to the birth and infancy of her daughter and to the death of her mother. The point is not made to suggest that the Marchesa does not care at all about any of these events/circumstances. On the contrary, the evidence of the diaries suggests that she is remarkably sensitive, thoughtful, and compassionate. Her choice of subjects for

commentary simply suggests that she prioritizes consideration of the challenges facing others above contemplation of, and commentary on, those she faces herself and that she simply puts others first.

The Horrors of War

Throughout the diaries, the two primary themes outlined above play out within the context of recurring images and/or narratives of war's destructive potential and practices, as manifest on physical, emotional, and spiritual levels. In terms of the first, there is the ongoing, often intensifying, threat of physical destruction, of places and/or of human bodies. Then there is the emotional toll such destruction takes, the grief and suffering associated with loss of place, of loved ones, and of identity. Finally, there is spiritual destruction, of the sort referred to in the Marchesa's observations on apathy being the initial response of the Italian people to the increasing violence around them and, perhaps even more frighteningly, in her commentary on the cold ruthlessness of the Axis powers, particularly of German atrocities. Their actions, her narrative seems to be saying, are those of individuals whose simple human souls have been blackened, corrupted, or simply eliminated by the desire of their leadership for power.

It is important to note, however, that in her consideration of the physical, emotional and spiritual horrors of war, the Marchesa writes with restraint and understatement. She is not gratuitous in her descriptions and commentary, but for the most part describes what she sees and experiences in a clear but quite dispassionate way. Only occasionally do the horrors seem to hit home for her or rather, only occasionally does she WRITE about the way they hit home for her. They seem, most of the time, to simply be the facts, experiential truths within which the spiritual truth she values more is both tested and proven.

Style

Perspective

This author, like the author of perhaps the most famous war diary in the world, Anne Frank, is personally and intimately positioned to write on the subject from a place of experience. In other words, she is writing about things she has lived, seen, felt, and suffered. What is different about the Marchesa, however, is the fact that unlike Anne Frank, she is the product of relative American privilege and aristocratic Italian privilege in particular. It is important to note that this aspect of her life rarely, if ever, makes itself apparent in the diaries, the commentary on the article published in the Fascist newspaper being the notable exception. Nevertheless, there is the sense that her social and financial position does play a role in her personal perspective, in the thematic perspective of her writings, and above all in her actions. Would she, in fact, have been as materially generous if she had less financial resources to be so? The point is not made to suggest that she behaved philanthropically because she could afford to be, but rather to offer a reminder that in many narratives, and perhaps particularly non-fiction narratives, perspective is as often defined by what an individual doesn't focus on and/or mention as well as on what s/he DOES. Ultimately, though, the main point about perspective has less to do with why the diary was written than why this particular set of excerpts was PUBLISHED. The diary, like any diary, was in all likelihood with the intent of simply chronicling events. There is the clear sense, as the introduction suggests, that this particular section was published with the intent of pointing out the value placed by the Marchesa on human life, and of suggesting to the reader that this value is something that should be of more universal importance, particularly in times of war.

Tone

The tone of the diaries is defined more by its focus on events than on reflection, and by its consideration of activities and situations of others rather than on those of the writer. This is, perhaps, unusual for diaries which, in general and almost by definition, are devoted more to considerations of the writer than of others. In the case of this particular diary, however, considerations of self run somewhat deeper than an initial consideration might suggest. In other words, the tone of the diary is reflective of its themes, and vice versa, reflecting its writer's selfless perspective on the value and necessity of assisting humanity in times of need. It is at times objective and at other times entirely subjective. Ultimately, the diary is an intriguing, and engaging, tonal mix of the politely horrified and the equally politely passionate, of matter of fact distaste and equally matter of fact determination. While this approach may not entirely engage the reader's emotion (it could be argued, in fact, that as a diary it was never really intended to do so, the book effectively creates and defines a clear picture of the tensions between two fundamentally different philosophies on human existence as manifest in the life and experience of a single individual. It's important to note, meanwhile, that in doing so, the

book clearly asks the reader to consider whether s/he would do as that human being did.

Structure

The book's format is essentially straightforward, following a linear progression of events from day to day, from month to month, and from year to year. While it seems clear, and logical, that descriptions of those events have not been shaped or revised to accommodate, and/or be accommodated into, a more novelistic and more traditionally narrative structure, they do so anyway. In other words, there is a sense of the "introduction / development / resolution" structure that defines conventional plotting, of the "developing conflict, increasing tension to a climax" experience, for both teller and hearer, that has defined storytelling from its very earliest days. This structure, as it has done perhaps for millennia, draws the reader in, awakening a sense of curiosity about what's going to happen next, about how circumstances are going to affect the lives of the individuals caught up in them, and how their lives/experiences are going to reflect and/or manifest the themes at play drive those events. Again, the point must be made that this structure cannot have been consciously adhered to by the author. Caught up as she was in the events she describes, she cannot possibly have known how they were going to turn out. It may be, however, that this section of the diaries was chosen for publication because that structure was found to be present after the fact. If that is in fact the case, a relationship between structure and theme clearly emerges, with structure reinforcing and manifesting the section's thematic contention that valuing the human spirit can, will, and should ultimately triumph over even the most inhumane circumstances.

Quotes

"...the request for the lodging of a p.o.w. would have to be weighed against the danger to the farm which sheltered him, the dressing of a partisan's wound against the risk to the nurse and to the other patients in her charge, the pleas of the starving townsfolk who...came all the way from the city to beg for food against the needs of the children and partisans whom we must go on feeding here" (Preface, pg. 12.)

"I have no doubt that to those living in a different climate and seeing the same events from a different peep-hole, many of my judgments will appear mistaken, naïve, prejudiced, and even wrong. Most certainly I have swallowed propaganda without realizing it; but ... are [my readers] quite certain that they have never done so too?" (Ibid, pg. 15 - 1.)

"These - the shared, simple tasks of everyday life - are the realities on which international understanding can be built. In these, and in the realization that has come to many thousands, that people of other nations are, after all, just like themselves, we may, perhaps, place our hopes" (Preface, p. 15 - 2.)

"There is something terribly moving in this exodus - something, too, so deeply wrong in a world where such a thing is not only possible but necessary ... for the present we can try to salve our consciences by giving them food, shelter and love. But this is not enough. Nothing can ever really be enough" (Part 1, 1943, February - pg. 23.)

"In the towns, in the country, the key-note is apathy. And everywhere, talk, talk, talk, and no action. Resentment without a sense of responsibility. The fruits of twenty years of Fascism" (Ibid, April, p. 25.)

"...I do not think that, when all is over, the dispassionate historian will be able to maintain either the Fascist thesis - that these air raids have at last aroused the Italian people to hatred of the enemy - nor certainly the Allied one, that they have only awakened resentment against Fascism" (Ibid, May, pg. 29.)

"During the long night before her birth I heard from the next room, through my own pain, the groans for morphia of a young airman whose leg had been amputated" (Ibid, June, pg. 39.)

"We all have a lump in our throat. Hope - perplexity - anxiety - doubt - then hope again - infinite relief. A weight has been lifted, a door opened; but where does it lead?" (Ibid, July, pg. 47.)

"Undoubtedly, the majority of the Italian people do want peace, but how many, in order to obtain it, are prepared to break with German and to submit passively to Allied occupation I have no idea" (Ibid, pg. 52.)

"The Italians feel that they have succeeded, at a considerable risk, in ridding themselves of Fascism ... the Allies, who for years have been urging them to this course, have now shown that they are utterly indifferent to the liberty of Italy, except as a stepping stone to Germany's destruction" (Ibid, pg. 55.)

"It is impossible to convey the depth of the conviction in his voice...while he expounded to us the familiar doctrines which had been taught him ... he was not being a propagandist, but simply stating a creed, a creed to which he brought an absolutely single minded, self-denying devotion, with no half-shades of humor, self-criticism, or doubt...the results are formidable: the results that Hitler intended to produce, and that fifty Mussolinis could not produce here" Ibid, pg. 58-59.)

"While the majority of the people want nothing but peace, and the Army is clearly demonstrating its reluctance to fight, the intransigence of the Allies' terms is only equaled by the firmness of Germany's refusal to remove her troops. Whatever happens, Italians now realize that their country must become a battlefield; and their only choice...is merely whether they shall remain half-hearted participants or passive spectators" (Ibid, September, pg. 61.)

"...before they leave, they produce photographs and anecdotes of their children. Both refuse to talk war or politics...and they leave with a promise to bring us a sack of boots...for our workmen. It is all very odd - and very unlike any preconceived notions of war" (Ibid, pg. 77.)

"'It's the sort of thing one reads about in books,' says one of the prisoners with gusto...but privately I hope that the more dramatic episodes of that sort of book...may not come our way" (Ibid, pg. 81.)

"In every farm there is a deep regret at their going. Everywhere they have become a part of the family. They played with the children, helped the housewife with the chores, shared their rations...on their side, too, there was an equal liking. Perhaps when they get home, to Yorkshire farms and Midland towns, they at least will speak well of the Italians" (Ibid, pg. 87.)

"'I believe in God, Lord of Heaven and earth. I believe in justice and truth. I believe in the resurrection of Fascist Italy. I believe in Mussolini and the final Italian victory'" (Ibid, pg. 93.)

"...each little town or community rules itself - fairly successfully, since there is (at least in this district) a temporary truce to party politics and a general feeling of unity in confronting the general misfortune" (Ibid, pg. 96.)

"A grim, long winter lies before us, at the end of which none of us can tell whether our homes will still be standing, or our children safe; and we must meet it with what we can muster of patience, courage and hope" (Ibid, October, pg. 102 -1.)

"At some stations, where the nurses have received permission to take baskets of grapes to the prisoners, they have concealed small saws in the bottoms of the baskets -

thus enabling the men to saw through the bars of the train's windows, and escape" (Ibid, p. 102 - 2.)

"As the circle in which our live moves grows smaller and smaller, and the immediate menace more threatening, our mental horizon shrinks to that of the peasants, and with this narrowness creeps in something of their skepticism towards all vague schemes for the future, all remote Utopias" (Ibid, December, pg. 107.)

"As I go from one familiar room to another - all now full of German soldiers - I have a strong presentiment that this is the end of something: of this house, of a whole way of living. It will never be the same again" (Ibid, pg. 113.)

"Life is returning to the medieval pattern: as the outside world is more and more cut off, we must learn, not only to produce our own food and spin and weave our own wool - but to provide teaching for the children, nursing for the sick, and shelter for the passer by" (Ibid, December, pg. 120.)

"...coming out I felt, in the familiar exchange of Christmas greetings, a bond of deep understanding born of common trouble, anxieties and hopes such as I never have felt before. And in the attitude of the farmers to all the homeless passers-by...there is a spontaneous, unfailing charity and hospitality. Even now that the risks have increased...there is no farm which would refuse them shelter..." (Ibid, pg. 122.)

"'I look upon them," [the cardinal] said, 'merely as persecuted human beings; as such, it is my Christian duty to help and defend them. One day,' he gave himself the pleasure of adding, 'perhaps not far off, YOU will be persecuted: and then I shall defend you'" (Ibid, pg. 125.)

"Anatole France, in his old age, intended to write a novel, of which the title was to be Les autel de la peur. The Altars of Fear - could a better title be found for an account of our times?" (Part 2, 1944, January, pg. 130.)

"...cars continually drive up, with people feverishly hurrying away from Rome or towards it - according to their circumstances and their political opinions" (Ibid, February, pg. 137.)

"It is odd how used one can become to uncertainty for the future, to a complete planlessness, even in one's most private mind. What we shall do and be, and whether we shall, in a few months' time, have any home or possessions, or indeed our lives, is so clearly dependent on events outside our own control as to be almost restful" (Ibid, pg. 140.)

"Shall we have any money left, or work for a bare living? In what sort of a world will our children be brought up? What should we teach them to prepare them? Can any peace or order be restored again in this unhappy, impoverished, and divided land?" (Ibid, pg. 141.)

"Every day now, whenever I go out of the house, I find a little group of famished people sitting in the farm courtyard; haggard women, with babies in their arms and other children waiting for them at home; thin ragged schoolboys or old men, carrying sacks or suitcases - all begging for food to take back to Rome" (Ibid, May, pg. 187.)

"Fascism is not so much being destroyed as crumbling before our eyes. By the time of the Allies' arrival here, nothing of the whole wretched structure will be left, and its supporters will have vanished into thin air" (Ibid, June, pg. 194.)

"'Justice,' [the document] says, 'will be performed - but this is no time for private grievances. We can afford to be generous.' It is strange, after this conversation, to return down the hill, and find the courtyard still full of German troops" (Ibid, pg. 201.)

"They hang about interminably with nothing to do, and never seem to be where they are really wanted, nor do any of the German troops show the slightest interest in, or helpfulness towards, members of other units than their own" (Ibid, pg. 214.)

"This glimpse of a tiny segment of the front increases my conviction of the wastefulness of this kind of warfare, the disproportion between the human suffering involved and the military results achieved...[towns] destroyed, the countryside and farms studded with shell holes, girls raped, and human beings and cattle killed. Otherwise, the events of the last week have had little enough effect upon either side: it is the civilians who have suffered" (Ibid, pg. 216.)

"We have left behind everything that we possess, but never in my life have I felt so rich and so thankful as looking down on all the children as they lay asleep. Whatever may happen tomorrow, tonight they are safe and sound!" (Ibid, pg. 221.)

"We sit talking by the uncertain light of the only lamp - now and again a shell falls outside - the Braccis produce glasses of wine, Colonel Cardiff has some biscuits - we discover mutual friends at home. It is like a party in a dream" (Ibid, pg. 233.)

"The whirlwind has passed, and now, whatever destruction it may have left, we can begin to build again. And it is here that the deepest qualities of the Italian people will have a chance to show themselves...resigned and laborious, [they] turn back from the fresh graves and the wreckage of their homes to their accustomed daily toil. It is they who will bring the land to life again...destruction and death have visited us, but now - there is hope in the air" (Ibid, July, pg. 239.)

Topics for Discussion

Do you think the relationship between the Marchesa and the tenant farmers would have been such a partnership if the bonds of that relationship had been forged and tested in other circumstances? Is it the war that made them all, at least in the Marchesa's mind, of equal human value? Or do you think that the Marchesa is simply, under any circumstances, a compassionate and broad-minded human being?

The narrative paints a vivid picture of the complex and apparently contradictory nature of humanity, of its dark side such as the actions of the Nazis and Fascists co-existing along side its brighter side such as the actions of the Marchesa and others who offer support, shelter, and safety. Discuss your experiences of these two sides of humanity. What have these experiences taught led you to believe about how you want to live your life?

Consider the quote from pg. 133, referring to the "altars of fear." What does this image suggest to you? Discuss how the image relates to the experience of war in general and of the Marchesa in particular.

Discuss whether in similar circumstances you would act in the same way as the Marchesa. Would you put yourself at risk to help others, no matter who they were? Would you act from a place of faith in universal human value?

Consider the quote from pg. 15 - 1, and discuss the principles and practices of propaganda. What would you say are prominent examples of propaganda put forth by recent governments? Why do you think that propaganda was distributed? What were its effects? What were the truths and/or the lies behind it? What is the difference between propaganda and information?

Consider the quote from pg. 107 in the context of the Marchesa's aristocratic status and perspectives. What are the implications here of her reference to the peasants? Debate how much of an aristocrat the Marchesa actually is in terms of her actions, attitudes, and belief systems.

Consider the quote from pg. 201 in the context of contemporary attitudes towards Islam in the wake of the 9-11 terrorist attacks. Debate the questions of whether mercy and compassion are, or should be universal of whether justice is grounded in compassion, in vengeance, or in some combination of both of whether it is possible or valuable to transcend violence and the belief systems that gave rise to it in the name of a greater spiritual truth.