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**Giorgio Giannini**, *L'inutile strage. Contro storia della Prima guerra mondiale*, Città di Castello, Luoghi Interiori, 2018, pp. 254.

The centenary of the end of World War I has elicited a spate of historical essays – not all of them devoid of rhetoric – covering practically every aspect of the conflict. A significant exception to this exhaustive coverage has been the subject of the soldiers who decided to disobey orders or to stop fighting, to fraternise with the enemy or simply to desert. The reason for this continuing lack of historiographical attention appears to be the difficulty of finding documented accounts and statistics on occurrences of such behaviour, other than those available from military justice, where accessible.

This courageous new book by Giorgio Giannini sheds light on this relatively obscure page of the war and, in particular, on Italian participation in the conflict. Its title is inspired by the expression "*l'inutile strage*", the useless slaughter, that Pope Benedict XV used to define the war in his letter to the belligerent nations (1 August 1917).

Giannini paints a fresco of a great tragedy, characterised by a startling number of shootings for desertion or mutiny, summary executions and decimations. At the beginning of his work, the author recounts some possibly less familiar events that occurred in Italy and elsewhere in Europe before the outbreak of the conflict: the fierce debate between interventionists and neutralists, the promulgation of repressive legislation (in Italy by the government of Antonio Salandra), and the actions taken against the war by pacifists.

Few will remember that on the same day that Jean Jaurès was assassinated (31 July 1914), hundreds of representatives of European peace movements gathered in Brussels for an emergency meeting in the hope of preventing the conflict. During the opening speech by Henri-Marie La Fontaine, already a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and President of the Bureau International de la Paix, the news of Germany's mobilisation arrived; the meeting ended a few hours before the invasion of Belgium and the delegates hurried back to their countries before the borders were sealed.

Alfred Fried and Ludwig Quidde, the most prominent figures of the German peace movement, fled to Switzerland to escape persecution, although they avoided issuing any statements on Germany's responsibility in the outbreak of the conflict. The French pacifists, on the other hand, didn't hesitate to condemn the violation of Belgian neutrality, lining up against German militarism and, with few exceptions, joining the army as volunteers. La Fontaine escaped to London, making a last, unsuccessful appeal to European pacifists in which he invoked their long-standing spirit of cooperation and the specific goals they had worked for in preceding years: the abolition of the arms industry and the conversion of armies into militias, the establishment of a Human

Rights Court, parliamentary control of foreign policies, and disarmament. The appeal remained a dead letter. In a few weeks, international organisations that had been bulwarks for peace – the BIP as well as the International Socialist Organisation – became irrelevant. The majority of pacifists, who had never denied the legitimacy of defensive wars, considered their own countries victims of unjust attacks and stood behind their respective governments. Even Nobel Peace Prize-winners, with the sole exception of La Fontaine, came out in favour of the war, and the peace organisations were either dissolved or lost all their members.

The author then turns to events and developments during the war, such as the efforts of Pope Benedict XV to promote a cessation of the conflict, war propaganda, popular opposition to the war, the 1914 Christmas Truce in the area of Ypres, on the Western front, spontaneously decided by French, English and German soldiers. A chapter investigates the role of different protagonists, paying special attention to conscientious objectors, military chaplains, and women.

The tragic situation of Italian military justice is then examined, including its responsibility for ordering some 750 executions by firing squad consequent to death sentences handed down by military courts, especially extraordinary courts martial, and for hundreds of victims of summary executions and decimations at the front.

The author then reviews the dramatic consequences of the war. For Italy, these included 600,000 Italian prisoners of war (100,000 of them died of hardship or disease, after suffering the indignity of being branded cowards and deserters and abandoned by the Italian government); the Austrian prisoners of war in Italian hands; the suffering of the population of the Friuli and Trentino regions, displaced by the war; and the violent treatment meted out to the Italian population of the territories that Austria occupied after the rout at Caporetto in October 1917 (the book has an appendix with information on the Caporetto Commission of Inquiry and the Commission of Inquiry on Military Procurement). The book concludes with pages on memory of

the war, especially during the Fascist era, including the placing of headstones, the creation of monuments to the fallen, and the construction of huge war cemeteries, of military shrines, and of avenues and parks commemorating the dead.

The book's valuable contribution from the point of view of both historical documentation and civic commitment has been recognised with the prestigious "Città di Castello" literary prize.

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