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Andrew Strombeck

Wright State University - Main Campus, andrew.strombeck@wright.edu

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Richard Bausch, *Peace*

Andrew Strombeck

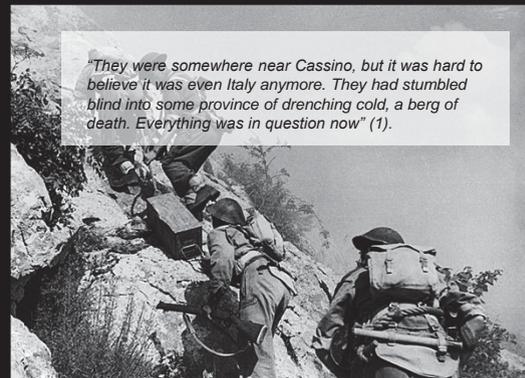
Department of English Language and Literature, College of Liberal Arts, Wright State University

Historical Context: The Winter Line

Richard Bausch's World War II novel *Peace* is set during a stultifying, difficult moment in the Allied campaign to drive German soldiers out of Italy during the winter of 1944. Allied troops had landed in Salerno in September 1943 and had moved steadily up the Italian peninsula throughout the fall of 1943, with the eventual goal of reaching and taking Rome. ("Fifth Army"). But this drive was stopped by German reinforcements at what became known as the Winter Line, a line of reinforcements running across the mountainous territory of central Italy. The official Army history describes the problem concisely: "Each mountain had to be taken, each valley cleared, and then there were more mountains ahead and still another main defense line to be broken." In his comprehensive history of the campaign, *The Day of Battle*, historian Rick Atkinson describes how this campaign became bogged down by rainy weather in the winter of 1944: "Beginning in late February, rain fell day after dreary day. [Fifth Army meteorologist David Ludlum] studied his weather charts from dawn until midnight only to report yet again: more rain. A week passed, then another" (457). This rain became a particular problem around the key site of Cassino, where the Allies had bombed a monastery earlier in the winter. Here, the mountains became nearly impossible to pass in the rain, even as the Germans maintained machine guns and other armaments in the mountains.

Bausch captures the tedium, difficulty, and paranoia of the ground soldier's position in this conflict. He repeatedly calls attention to the terrible weather, delivered in Bausch's minimalist style: "On the side of the mountain in the rain, Marson and Asch were awake" (46) and "Corporal Marson, the only one awake in the freezing darkness" (61). "On the cold hillside—or mountain—Corporal Marson let the freezing hour pass, dreaming of home" (73). *Peace* attempts to convey the tedium and discomfort of this difficult moment in the war. He seems to have chosen this historical moment deliberately because of its stasis. Tactically, the winter weather delays the bombing of Cassino; psychologically, the steady rain symbolizes the relentlessness and entrapment of combat. The mountains also posed problems for the army as a whole, but come, in Bausch's narrative, to depict the difficulty of moving forward in wartime.

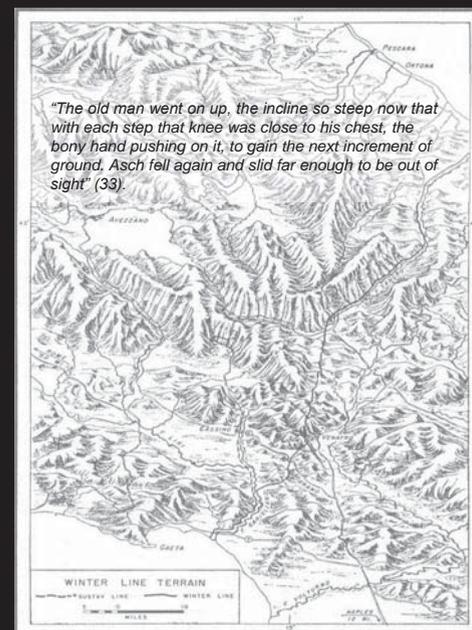
According to Atkinson, though not without losses, the Allied forces made relatively rapid progress in southern Italy, particularly on the island of Sicily and the lower part of Italy. Atkinson observes that by September 1943, only 8,000 Germans occupied "the foot of the Italian boot" (178). While Salerno was a difficult battle, the Germans retreated from Naples after losing that city (Atkinson 239). Throughout 1943, then, the Allied forces moved up Italy quickly, but were stalled at the Winter Line. Bausch emphasizes the deadness of both progress and winter by contrasting the mountain with Palermo (albeit ironically): "Corporal Marson, halfway up the mountain in the freezing rain near Cassino, remembered how hot it had been in Palermo, and how much he hated it" (44). Bausch captures the awfulness of the men's position by contrasting the scene with flashbacks to Palermo, where Marson and the other men relaxed and socialized with locals, in particular the energetic Mario, who brings the men "the best wine. Primitivo" (43) and talks with them about baseball (52). Marson also attends mass at Palermo (49) and talks endlessly about home (57). Bausch's novel, then, reflects the historical sense of stasis that greeted Allied forces at the Winter Line.



"They were somewhere near Cassino, but it was hard to believe it was even Italy anymore. They had stumbled blind into some province of drenching cold, a berg of death. Everything was in question now" (1).

Polish soldiers on the mountain leading to Cassino

Timeline for *Peace* with approximate elevation



"The old man went on up, the incline so steep now that with each step that knee was close to his chest, the bony hand pushing on it, to gain the next increment of ground. Asch fell again and slid far enough to be out of sight" (33).

Mountainous terrain of the Winter Line

Peace's Intervention into History

If the Italian campaign was designed, according to Winston Churchill, to pierce the "soft underbelly" of the Axis, Bausch depicts this undertaking as anything but straightforward ("The Bombing of Monte Cassino"). Taking rich advantage of his historical setting, Bausch uses the historical moment of the assault on the Gustav line to depict the tedium and terror of war. Marson and the other men continually reflect on their entrapment:

He stood against a big tree, breathing the odor of its heavy bark, and thought of the pain in his heel. It hurt worse all the time, and yet he could not quite get his mind around it as pain. This that he felt now, stalking the dark, expecting every second to hear the shot, this was the kind of strain that overmastered the physical discomforts he was suffering, and there was the cold, the freeze of his fingertips and the ends of his toes, the shivering, and the feeling of wanting simply to lie down and rest, even knowing that to rest was to die. He could not conjure the slightest image of his own life before this moment, this black quiet, with the terror of any motion or sound, and the sting in his lungs, the shakiness of the muscles in his lower back and legs (146).

Bausch focuses on Marson's bodily pain here, even as he experiences a psychological strain that "overmasters" his physical pain. While he doesn't depict maimed bodies or widespread bloodshed, Bausch works in what literary critic Sarah Cole calls the "disenchantment" of "the rampaging violence of war" (1636). To Cole, works that operate in a disenchanting mode "reject the ideas of purifying or cathartic violence" in favor of "hom[ing] in on a moment of bodily injury, stressing the force of that irruptive violation and intimating ghastly consequences for the future" (1636). There is nothing purifying or cathartic about Marson's pain: if not "ghastly," it is terrible in its stasis. Few readers coming across this passage will revel in the piercing of soft underbellies of the Axis. Instead, they are likely to be repulsed at the awfulness of Marson's situation. *Peace* as a whole trades in this stasis. Very little time passes, and very little ground is covered throughout the novel's 171 pages. Of course, Bausch accomplishes this disenchanting effect in part through his narrative choices. He tells us little about the larger arc of the war, and even the atrocities committed by German soldiers are heard from a distance. This makes it difficult for readers to balance the terror of war with its larger purposes. It's interesting, in this sense, to contrast the tone of *Peace* with a historical work like Rick Atkinson's *The Day of Battle*—which was published in the same year as *Peace*. While unsparing in its accounts of casualties, *The Day of Battle* is far more interested in a view of the war from a general's point of view than the from an enlisted soldier's point of view. As a work of narrative literature, *Peace* provides a useful companion to the straight history of a work like *The Day of Battle*, forcing readers to endure the plodding movement of an infantry up a mountain instead of a rapidly-moving arrow across a map.

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