Traveler to Arcadia: Margaret Bourke-White in Italy, 1943-1944

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties, and Radicalism</td>
<td>By Alan Filreis, Associate Professor of English, University of Pennsylvania</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam Badeau’s “The Story of the Merrimac and the Monitor”</td>
<td>By Robert J. Schneller, Jr., Historian, Naval Historical Center</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Marcel Breuer House Project of 1938–1939</td>
<td>By Isabelle Hyman, Professor of Fine Arts, New York University</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traveler to Arcadia: Margaret Bourke-White in Italy, 1943–1944</td>
<td>By Randall I. Bond, Art Librarian, Syracuse University Library</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Punctator’s World: A Discursion (Part Seven)</td>
<td>By Gwen G. Robinson, Editor, <em>Syracuse University Library Associates Courier</em></td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News of the Syracuse University Library and the Library Associates</td>
<td></td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Traveler to Arcadia:
Margaret Bourke-White in Italy, 1943–1944

BY RANDALL I. BOND

During the nineteenth century, American artists, writers, and intellectuals flocked to Italy, seeking an escape from the exigencies of the modern world. To them, Italy was a dream realm, a golden Arcadia. Some, however, like the painter Thomas Cole, saw through the dream and brought back to America a stark message about the displacement of nations and the fall of empires. In the 1830s, on the eve of America’s westward expansion, Cole painted his Course of Empire series, tracing the progress of Rome from an Arcadian State, to the Consummation of Empire, to Destruction, finally ending in Desolation. Cole was warning his countrymen not to follow in Rome’s disastrous path.¹

Again, in the mid-twentieth century, Americans who went to Italy (though not as tourists), would bring back messages of warning even more urgent because they were responses to the rise of the fascist Roman Empire of Benito Mussolini. At first, in the 1930s, Americans were impressed with the new Italy, its sense of order and cleanliness, and its success in industrialization and the utilization of technology. Increasingly, however, the dark side of Mussolini’s innovations became apparent, and with the outbreak of World War II, the fascist dream became the world’s nightmare.

In 1943, with the Allied invasion first of Sicily and then the Italian mainland, thousands of Americans were again to view Italy at first hand and discover there both an Arcadia and a charnel house. Although Italy soon surrendered and Mussolini was executed by the Italian people, the Allies still faced the formidable task of defeating the Germans who occupied the country in great strength.

The Allied campaign in Italy was to be long and drawn out, as the Americans and British struggled to dislodge the Germans from their nearly impregnable positions in the mountainous regions of southern Italy. In 1943–44, at the height of the effort, a number of journalists accompanied the American troops to Italy to report on the progress of the war in the Mediterranean theater. Among them was Margaret Bourke-White of Life magazine.

Margaret Bourke-White, one of the best-known American photojournalists, had begun her career in the 1920s as an industrial and advertising photographer. Her fame was enhanced after she joined Fortune in 1929 and helped to create the visual imagery of Life during the 1930s. Collaboration with Erskine Caldwell on You Have Seen Their Faces (1937), a study of the sufferings of the Southern sharecropper during the Depression, had deepened her interest in the plight of individuals caught up in the bad economic times. In 1941 when she and Caldwell traveled to Russia, she focused her camera on the Soviets’ struggle against German aggression for Shooting the Russian War, published in 1942.

After the United States entered the war, Bourke-White was assigned to the 97th Bomb Group in England; she recorded the activities of its assault on German targets in Europe. When the group was transferred to North Africa in late 1942, she followed it by boat, enduring the trauma of a torpedoing. Later she persuaded the military authorities to allow her to accompany one of the crews on a bombing mission against a German-held airbase in Tunisia. Her subsequent photo-essay of this experience in Life reinforced her fame and her reputation for risk-taking.

Back in the United States during the Allied invasion of Italy, she longed again for the excitement of battle and a chance to report this story for Life. Bourke-White left for Europe on a joint assignment for Life and the Pentagon in September 1943. She was accredited to the Army Service Forces, to “tell in photographs the great story of logistics”. As a former industrial photographer, she was uniquely experienced in recording the “chain-belt system” of supplies, food,

2. Margaret Bourke-White, They Called It “Purple Heart Valley” (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1944), 17.
Margaret Bourke-White among the ruins of a bombed-out building (Italy, winter 1943–44). Courtesy of the Syracuse University Library.
medicine and ammunition “which girdled the world [and] reached from our factories to the front lines”. Her assignment also included photographing American combat engineers, artillery, and medical corps personnel.

After a month spent in North Africa documenting the buildup of supplies for the Italian Campaign, in early October Bourke-White arrived in Naples, shortly after it had been liberated by the Allies. She was to remain in Italy until 19 January 1944. Her stay there resulted in a series of photo-essays in Life in the early part of 1944 and a book-length photo-text entitled They Called it “Purple Heart Valley” published by Simon & Schuster at the end of 1944. The title refers to the area around Cassino and the Liri Valley where so many American soldiers were either killed or wounded by German forces entrenched in the mountains. The original dedication of the book was to have read: “For those brave Americans who have gone into Purple Heart Valley never to return”.

“Purple Heart Valley” comprises nineteen chapters of text and seven sections of photographs. After providing an overview of the photographic sections, I will discuss Bourke-White’s message, drawing on selected illustrations and portions of the text, as well as other materials held at Syracuse University Library: the manuscripts for “Purple Heart Valley”, a number of contact prints, and correspondence from the publisher.

Bourke-White worked on the book from February until the Fall of 1944, when she returned to Italy to cover the “Forgotten Front” once again for Life. An examination of her various drafts reveals changes in the chronological order of the text. In the earliest version, the narrative begins with her arrival in Naples to record “the

A Piper L-44 “Grasshopper” observation plane over “Purple Heart Valley” (winter 1943–44). Courtesy of the Syracuse University Library.

greatest engineering story the world had ever seen”: the clearing and reconstruction of Naples harbor.7 In the published version both the text and the illustrations begin with a description of Purple Heart Valley from the air, although she did not make this flight until later in her stay in Italy. By this revision, Bourke-White was attempting to give her opening narrative the sense of an introductory overview to her chronicle of the war in Italy.

The first section of illustrations is entitled “Flight over Purple Heart Valley”. We are introduced to the reconnaissance pilots and planes that flew Bourke-White out into the Cassino Valley for an aerial view of the artillery battles between the Americans and Germans. Through their birdcage windows Bourke-White was able to get spectacular photographs of the war and destruction in Southern Italy.

The second section, "The Wreck of Naples", shows Army engineers reconstructing the demolished harbor of that city. She marveled at how

we could use the rubble directly from a bombed building on the waterfront, load it into a dump truck, take it a few yards away, pour it into the quayside, and continue construction, basing it on a bed of destruction.8

The third section, "Combat Engineers", illustrates the work of the men whose dangerous job it was to clear the roads and paths of mines and other explosives. She also observed the work of those responsible for planning the rebuilding of vital bridges demolished by the Germans on their movement northward. The replacement bridges themselves became the major focus of the fourth section, "Bailey Bridge". These prefabricated structures developed by the British gave Bourke-White the opportunity to photograph the excitement of engineering projects in the field, often carried out under enemy fire, as was the case when a number of these shots were taken. The fifth section, "The Service Forces", includes many of the images from Bourke-White's assignment to publicize the logistical aspect of the war for the Pentagon.

Two chapters of "Purple Heart Valley" describe Bourke-White's visits to medical units in Italy—the 38th Evacuation Hospital and the 11th Field Hospital. The illustrations for the medical chapters are in the sixth section, appropriately titled "The Quality of Mercy". Here and in the related text Bourke-White introduces the reader to heroic doctors and nurses fighting to save the lives of American GIs. She records soldiers brought in from the battlefield in shock, the miracles of surgery under combat conditions, and the generous giving of blood and plasma. In addition to these moments of drama, Bourke-White gives us a detailed picture of the living and working conditions of the American nurses who cared for the wounded GIs delivered to these field hospitals in what Bourke-White describes in one manuscript as "practically a conveyor belt

system from litter to operating table". Bourke-White's feelings about these nurses are evident in the captions which she herself wrote: "They walk in beauty—every damned one of them"; and again, "Wherever there has been a frontier, American women have always been willing to undergo hardships to stand by their men".

Unfortunately, all of the photographs taken at the 11th Field Hospital were lost at the Pentagon, where they were to be developed and censored. These included images of an attack on the field hospital in which some of the nurses were wounded. We know from Bourke-White's "War Record" in the Syracuse University collection that this hospital was located at the front near Mignano not far from the fighting that was going on around San Pietro in the Cassino Valley region. I have been able to determine that Bourke-White was with the 11th Field Hospital in early December, at the time when the action in San Pietro was beginning. Bourke-White subsequently photographed the town's destruction and these photographs were published in Life. The battle for San Pietro (December 1943) was a fiercely fought engagement involving the loss of many American lives. It was documented for the government by Hollywood director John Huston, then in Army service. His film, The Battle of San Pietro, was first banned and then censored before its release in 1945; the shots of the many Americans being placed in body bags too graphically depicted the battle's high cost in human life. I suggest that the Pentagon's "loss" of the Bourke-White hospital photographs and the banning and censoring of Huston's film may both bear witness to the government's concern to hide some of the horrors and bloodshed of the Italian campaign from the American public.

11. Richard Tregaskis, Invasion Diary (New York: Random House, 1944). From this we know that Bourke-White visited the wounded Tregaskis at the 38th Evacuation Hospital around 23 or 24 of November and then left for the 11th Field Hospital at the front near Mignano. The New York Times reports Tregaskis' injury on 24 November 1943.
Nurses in the 38th Evacuation Hospital Unit (Italy, winter 1943–44).
Courtesy of the Syracuse University Library (above and facing).

The final section, “Big Shoot”, covers an American artillery unit mounting an attack on Mount Trocchio on 15 January 1944. This was the last major subject that Bourke-White photographed before
leaving Italy on 19 January. In addition to shots of the 105 mm artillery pieces being fired, she photographed the soldiers responsible for the mathematics and communications systems used to locate targets.

This brief survey of the illustrations of "Purple Heart Valley" and the themes that they represent indicates that during World War II
Margaret Bourke-White was able to bring together the strands of her previous concerns and preoccupations. Early in her career, she was an industrial romantic enamored of the machine aesthetic. During the later 1930s and World War II, she developed a greater social consciousness and became the “humanitarian photographer” who would subsequently record the birth of Gandhi’s India and the struggle for human rights in South Africa.

Among those who influenced the development of her social conscience was the novelist Erskine Caldwell. Their 1937 book, You Have Seen Their Faces, was meant to draw attention to the needs of the rural South. It is replete with images of poverty, hardship, oppression, and racism. Significantly, a number of the photographs and themes in You Have Seen Their Faces provide informative comparisons with illustrations from “Purple Heart Valley”. They indicate that Bourke-White was once again using photography as persuasion, and that her admiration for the machine was being tempered by her desire to record people. The photographs in both of these books represent individuals devastated by the influence of two interconnected crises: the economic depression of the 1930s and the global conflict of World War II. Both had roots in the industrial world that she had glorified in her earlier work. Families uprooted by the Depression and the war were captured by Bourke-White’s lens, whether they were on the road in Ringold, Georgia, or emerging from the ruins of Naples. How families make do after their homes have been destroyed also interested her. She was moved by domestic scenes of families trying desperately to stay together in the face of deprivation. Soldiers and civilians alike suffered from the crises of the twentieth century.

Portraits of the faces of people affected by hardship appear in both books and bring us close to the victims of an industrialized world. The men who appear in them are often unshaven and old beyond their years. For Bourke-White, these men became icons for hard work and hard times. In “Purple Heart Valley” she describes her encounter with veterans of sixty days of fighting in the mountains around Cassino:

I thought I had never seen such tired faces. It was more than the stubble of beard that told the story; it was the
blank, staring eyes. The men were so tired it was like a living death. They had come from such a depth of weariness that I wondered if they would ever be able quite to make the return to the lives and thoughts they had known.  

Bourke-White’s desire to chronicle the human side of her subjects during World War II also places her within the tradition of the journalist Ernie Pyle, a favorite among the American GIs for his no-nonsense reporting of the war. He specialized in down-to-earth stories about the common soldiers whom he met in North

Africa, Italy, France, and finally in the Pacific where he was killed. His column, syndicated through newspapers all over the nation, had a folksy style that appealed greatly to those on the homefront.

Pyle and Bourke-White met several times during World War II. Their first meeting, which occurred in North Africa, was recorded in Pyle’s newspaper column of 27 January 1943. He described her as “pleasant and good looking, with prematurely graying hair. She makes quite a sight in Army trousers and wool-lined leather flying jacket.” He also recorded a rivalry over breakfast marmalade which led Bourke-White to say: “Your work and mine are so different nobody could ever imagine us as competitors, but from now on we’ll be bitter rivals for the general’s marmalade.”

Despite this statement, manuscript material in the Syracuse University collection suggests how much Bourke-White admired Pyle and how much she wanted to match the human quality of his style. First, there is an undated letter from Erskine Caldwell to Bourke-White in which he mentions that “Callahan addressed a book to Pyle. It probably went off, because everything like that was mailed before I left.” Internal evidence would suggest that the letter was written in the summer of 1942, while Caldwell was in Hollywood working on the film Mission to Moscow. If this date is correct, then the Bourke-White book sent to Pyle was most likely Shooting the Russian War, which had just been published. However, there is no Pyle correspondence in the Bourke-White collection to confirm this. The most revealing evidence for Pyle’s influence on Bourke-White is contained in notes for a section on Ernie Pyle intended but never used for her 1963 autobiography, Portrait of Myself. These paragraphs were to be included in her chapter “I Go on a Bombing Raid”:

Re Ernie Pyle. Not quite correct to say we “knew him when” for he was already quite well known. But we knew him before his later great fame as the interpreter and chronicler of the G.I. at war. He was quiet, humble and incon-

15. Letter from Erskine Caldwell to Bourke-White, undated. Bourke-White Papers, Box 11 Correspondence.
spicuous. I always admired the way he manoeuvred to eat always in the enlisted men's mess, not so easy to do when you're visiting a post—this to get firsthand contact with the men. But only when I got back to America [before her trip to the Italian front in 1943] and realized how he plumbed the depths of each man's day to day experiences, did I realize how great he was. These were experiences I heard about myself, just before leaving. For several running days his articles as they appeared dealt with episodes I know. And I marvelled at how deep he had gone, how he had gathered up the nubly thin threads, found the warmth, the heart aches, lived with it in his own inner self (made it his own) tucked it away in his own inner self so it came out filled with warmth, with hominess, with understanding. Although I ran into him often—later in Italy, I never spoke more words with him than hello goodbye. I could see this was the masticating of it, the tucking away inside, the making it his own—to pour it out in words and sentences at last—the result two-fold—the men of whom he writes so real, so recognizable yet with new stature they stand in dignity against a wide horizon.

Though I never really talked with him, never said more than hello, it's a nice day, he taught me more than he will ever know, & now he has been killed. I can never tell him. Came at the right time for me; just beginning to write, just beginning to listen to the words people use; and with the people I photographed [to] probe them as human beings, not just as shapes and outlines on a photograph.

Same outward dress—but what he had made of it—deep, deep from the same but at a wider horizon, in a larger frame. Incidents I had seen or heard told, but so human & infused with meaning. The facts I recognized—but infused with such human feeling. . . . If words can do that, photos should too, I thought. I wish he were alive so I could tell him how much I learned from him.16

The Pyle–Bourke-White connection appears again in the manuscript files for "Purple Heart Valley". A memo from Maria Leiper (one of Bourke-White’s editors at Simon & Schuster) dated 23 March 1944 recommends that Bourke-White check “Pyle’s book” about descriptions of washing his face, using his helmet as a basin, to compare with what she had written on the same subject. The book that Leiper is referring to is probably Here is Your War (1943), since Pyle’s account of his experiences in Italy, Brave Men, was not published until the end of 1944.

In the 13 December 1944 Christian Science Monitor the reviewer states that in "Purple Heart Valley", Bourke-White is “writing down her experience with a directness which is usually called feminine, but which is also the genius of Ernie Pyle".

Again, in a 1945 letter to Dick Simon of Simon & Schuster complaining about how few copies of "Purple Heart Valley" were to be found in New York City bookstores, Bourke-White argues:

I know the current idea about war books, but according to Albert [an editor at S & S] there were only 3 war books which held up, Pyle’s, Mauldin’s and mine. I know I am no Pyle or Mauldin, but I know plenty of servicemen are interested in my book, because they keep writing to me about it. And now with Christmas coming, and with so many soldiers on their way home—boys whose units are mentioned in the book—I would certainly think some effort would be justified, to keep the book in sight in the bookstores.

Cartoonist Bill Mauldin’s book Up Front, recapitulating his experiences in the infantry in Italy, was published in 1945. Included in the Bourke-White correspondence files is a newspaper clipping

19. Letter from Bourke-White to Dick Simon, 10 November 1945, Bourke-White Papers, Box 45 Correspondence.
of a Mauldin cartoon sent to her by Major Jerry Papurt, who appears in “Purple Heart Valley” in the chapter on the Counter Intelligence Corps entitled “Cloak and Dagger Men”. Like Pyle, Mauldin was a favorite with the American GI. Bourke-White was obviously seeking to reach the same audience and liked being compared to them.

In Corporal Jess Padgitt of Des Moines, Iowa, Bourke-White found the means to express, as had Pyle and Mauldin in their own very different ways, the viewpoint of the common soldier. Padgitt was assigned to Bourke-White during the Italian campaign to help her with her cameras and other photographic equipment. He followed her around with a notebook, in which he recorded the names and home towns of the soldiers that she photographed, what jobs they had held before entering the army, and what they wished to do after the war. In the very earliest versions of “Purple Heart Valley”, Padgitt does not appear. In a later manuscript for chapter 5 he is described as “the little corporal who was assisting me”. Eventually, his name appeared in the manuscripts, and Bourke-White’s editors encouraged her to include more of him in the book. Padgitt becomes the subject of “One More Purple Heart”, the final chapter of the book. In the description of his wounding at Anzio, Bourke-White uses him to represent the American GI “who had what it takes”.

In addition to the influence of Caldwell and Pyle on Bourke-White’s creation of “Purple Heart Valley”, one other evidence of Bourke-White’s social involvement must be mentioned: her membership in the American Artists’ Congress, which first met in New York City in February 1936. The Congress, an offshoot of the Communist-inspired John Reed Club, put out a call to artists of all stylistic persuasions to struggle against the threat of war and fascism at home and abroad. Among its members were Stuart Davis, Ben Shahn, Max Weber, Meyer Schapiro, Rockwell Kent, Isamu No-

21. Memo to Bourke-White from Maria Leiper, 4 April 1944: “Plenty about Padgitt, from the very start; characterization of everyone you bring into the story”. Bourke-White Papers, Box 45 Correspondence.
Corporal Jess Padgitt, Margaret Bourke-White’s assistant (Italy, winter 1943–44). Courtesy of the Syracuse University Library.

guchi, Milton Avery, and Paul Cadmus. Bourke-White was one of the early signers of the “call” and she presented a paper entitled “An Artist’s Experience in the Soviet Union” at the group’s first meeting. Other presentations at the Congress included: African-American artist Aaron Douglas on “The Negro in American Culture”, art historian Meyer Schapiro on “The Social Bases of Art, and illustrator Lynd Ward on “Race, Nationality, and Art”. The heavy emphasis upon racial subjects reflected the Congress’s interest in supporting African-American and Asian-American artists whom the mainstream art world had marginalized. Bourke-
White’s involvement with the Congress at this time reinforced the social concern manifested in her work with Erskine Caldwell on *You Have Seen Their Faces*, which was taking shape at the time of the Congress’ early meetings. Bourke-White also contributed photographs such as *Chain Gang* to exhibits sponsored by the Congress.

Bourke-White together with Rockwell Kent was scheduled to speak about the Congress over CBS radio on 14 February 1936. The Bourke-White files include an unsigned letter dated 13 February 1936 and addressed to a Mr. Benson of CBS that summarizes the ideas she was working on at the time. They are central to an understanding of her future work in photography and are useful for understanding “*Purple Heart Valley*”. She makes three main points:

1. Why I believe that I, as an industrial photographer, have a part in this movement. I want to get more of a social viewpoint and background to do the work in which I am interested as part of the social structure.

2. The kind of thing that comes into advertising photography when, for example, I am called upon to present an automobile fitted with rubber tires that will stop short at the mere sight of a child playing in the street.

3. A group of sentences on how I as an artist was willing to do things as long as they developed my technique. Now I’m beginning to wonder if I am working as an artist or publicity agent. If as publicity agent, I want to be doing it for something in which I am interested.\(^{22}\)

We can get some notion of the distance that Bourke-White traveled in the 1930s by comparing her 1933 advertisement for the La Salle Motor Company with her 1937 photograph of flood victims in Louisville, Kentucky. In both photographs she uses her camera as a tool of persuasion, but in the later photograph she was trying to create sympathy for people devastated by a force over which they had no control.

Central to the American Artists’ Congress was its strong anti-

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\(^{22}\) Unsigned letter from American Artists’ Congress, 13 February 1936, Bourke-White Papers, Box 6 Correspondence.
fascist stand. The members of the Congress supported anti-fascist works of art, for example, the lithographs of William Gropper and the paintings of Peter Blume, which referred directly to the conditions of Italy under Mussolini. Overall, Bourke-White’s contact with the work of the Congress would prove valuable when she encountered the reality of fascism in Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s Germany.

When Bourke-White and other thinking Americans came into direct contact with European fascism after the Allied invasion of Italy, the experience led them to think deeply about the larger issues involved. The situation that the Allies found in Italy was a complex one. After Mussolini’s execution and the Italian surrender, the Italians who were once our enemies became our allies, helping to drive the Germans from their land. Many of the American GIs invading Italy were Italian-Americans, some of whom, when they arrived on Italian soil, located relatives they had never met. Bourke-White includes portraits of some of these Italian-Americans in “Purple Heart Valley”: grasshopper pilot Jack Marinnelli, and salvage divers Salvatore Benelli and Patsy Desano, whose parents had regaled him with stories about the beauty of Naples.

But the Americans in Italy were not only liberators. They also formed an army of occupation, for the Allied Military Government was established in order to oversee Italy’s transition from fascism to democracy. Historian H. Stuart Hughes has observed how significant it was that the American liberation of Italy started from the southern portion of the country:

It was from the impoverished, backward south rather than the more prosperous and progressive north that the American troops derived their first—and most lasting—impressions of Italy. These impressions, added to the mediocre record of the Italian armed forces, seemed to confirm the prejudices that Americans already entertained: that the Italians were a dark, dirty, and ignorant people, corrupt, thieving, and cowardly. And so the American soldiers usually behaved with arrogance and tactlessness—if not outright
brutality—toward the ‘Eyeties’ they frankly considered their inferiors.\textsuperscript{23}

For the 23 August 1943 issue of \textit{Life}, novelist and war correspondent John Hersey wrote an article about the Allied Military Government that was later expanded into the best-selling novel, \textit{A Bell for Adano}, which was published the same year as “\textit{Purple Heart Valley}”. Hersey’s novel is a study of American democratic ideals being introduced into Italy under the supervision of Major Victor Jopollo, himself an Italian-American. His book explored the implications of the war beyond the battlefield—implications that also preoccupied Margaret Bourke-White in the pages of “\textit{Purple Heart Valley}”. There, she quotes one officer: “Straightening up this Italian situation is like trying to put toothpaste back into tubes”.\textsuperscript{24} She herself was moved by the Italian civilians whose homes and lives were now in ruins. Like many Americans in Italy, she was profoundly touched by the young children begging for candy, with the familiar cry “caramelle, caramelle”.\textsuperscript{25} Encountering these children wherever she traveled, she remarked that:

It is easier to satisfy a child with a caramel than to answer some of the grownups who were frankly puzzled at the food situation.

It is not easy to administer justly an occupied city, to prevent the growth of a black market, and to see that our supplies are properly distributed. Still our failure to do this may have serious effects on the future. I observed that the


\textsuperscript{24} “\textit{Purple Heart Valley}”, 68.

\textsuperscript{25} Ben Shahn, a fellow member of the American Artists’ Congress, captured this milieu in his contemporary painting \textit{Remember this Wrapper}. A commentator in \textit{Fortune}, where the painting was reproduced, sums it up best: “In \textit{Remember this Wrapper} is all that followed liberation: the passionate joy and, six weeks later, the bitter recriminations. Here is our concern about the liberated peoples—half genuine desire to be helpful, half genuine fear of being taken for a sucker. In the background is a blasted Europe, infinitely remote from a life in terms of chewing gum.” Unsigned. “Aftermath of War”, \textit{Fortune}, December 1945, 172.
friendship with which we were greeted when we landed in Naples rapidly cooled during my stay there. 26

What she saw in her encounters with the civilian population of Naples convinced Bourke-White of the importance of inculcating the next generation of Italians with the values that foster a democratic way of life. She urged that as occupiers of the former fascist countries, the Americans endeavor to change the view of the people that they had liberated. In her opinion, the fault did not begin with our armies of occupation so much as it did with Americans at home. It is the Americans at home that she is mainly addressing in “Purple Heart Valley” when she says:

If we had a living political philosophy, if democracy were an articulate passion with us, we would be able to communicate it to others. There is no use fighting a war unless we leave behind us a better world, and to do that we must get the youth of Europe on our side. 27

Bourke-White’s concerns about American homefront attitudes were confirmed by the comments made by the young GIs whose exploits she was recording. In Chapter 8, “The Muddy Road to Rome” she asks the American GIs what they thought they were fighting for. The answers varied. “I was drafted.” “To get home.” “To protect our homes and our country.” 28 Although the simplicity and naivety of these answers bothered her, she recognized the fears and insecurity behind them. Mostly, it seemed that the GIs were angry with the labor unions and they resented those who had made fortunes from war profits. They were afraid that while they were overseas, women had taken their jobs and would not want to relinquish them after the war. Basically, they wanted to return to an unchanged America. 29

In contrast to the Russians, British, and Chinese whom she had met earlier in the war, Bourke-White found that Americans

27. Ibid., 110.
28. Ibid., 73.
29. Ibid., 76.
“shrank from digging into the issues of this war.” For Bourke-White, the problem was exemplified by the racist attitudes of the white GIs toward the black soldiers fighting beside them. Again in Chapter 8, certainly the pivotal chapter in the book, she tells that watching a “colored ammo squad, under the competent direction of their young commanding officer” led her to reflect on the African-American contribution to the war effort despite the many inequalities that blacks were forced to endure at home and abroad. In Italy the situation was exacerbated by the presence of Italian and German propaganda that portrayed the African-American soldier as barbarian, rapist, and murderer. The section of photographs entitled the “Wreck of Naples” shows two blacks doing the backbreaking work in reconstructing the harbor. Her companion while watching the black troops was an ordnance officer, who remarked upon seeing an African-American officer: “It makes my blood boil to see a nigger with bars on his shoulders”. Later in the chapter, many of the GIs voice their opposition to blacks being enfranchised in the South: “If the Negroes are allowed the same vote as white people, it won’t be very many years until they’ll control the South, and in their present condition they have no business being in executive positions.”

Bourke-White’s discussion of the problems facing African-Americans encapsulated the greater issues of the war and had very definite implications for Americans on the home front. These sections about the African-American and the ordnance officer’s racist comment were removed from the first draft by the military censors who reviewed the manuscript prior to publication. They were re-instated, however, and appear in the published version of the book.

That the problems of African-Americans and global racism were centrally important to Bourke-White’s understanding of the fascist menace that America was fighting is confirmed by the number of unpublished manuscript pages on this topic in the Bourke-White collection at Syracuse. Reading them, one sees her focusing on the

30. Ibid., 79.
32. Ibid., 70.
33. “Purple Heart Valley”, 74–75.
answer to the question she had addressed to the young American GIs she had met in Italy. The photograph of two black GIs in Naples foreshadows that famous image of two black South African miners which has since become a major example of Bourke-White’s humanitarian vision. The idea that she was exploring in 1944 while she was writing “Purple Heart Valley” also shows the steps along the way toward that vision. These pages were written in response to the ordnance officer’s racist remark that evidently cut deeply into Bourke-White’s psyche. A sampling follows:

As we drove on in our jeep I had a good deal of time to ponder over our reasons for fighting this war. “Isn’t this one of the things it’s supposed to be all about” I kept asking myself. Wasn’t it racial prejudice that inspired the burning of books. Wasn’t it racial injustice in Germany that grew into a whirlwind of oppression such as the world has never seen. In fighting the Nazis were we not fighting this racial prejudice, or weren’t we.

I could not blame my officer as an individual. If these conceptions had been made more clear, it would have been impossible for him to say such a thing. This was a canker that grew at home; that ate its way through the land in a time of peace. This was a festering sore from which Americans at home are not exempt. If we did nothing to conquer this at home, it could destroy the next peace.

A remark which I had heard just before I left America to start on this trip came back into my mind. I had been photographing a steel mill, and I was spending an evening at the home of the blast furnace foreman. His wife also worked in the factory. She had gone into defense work [and] learned to be a welder because her brother was in the army and she felt that she was needed in defense work. There had been race riots in a nearby city, and the steel foreman was expressing himself rather forcibly along the theme that if Negroes would stay in their place, and if Jews also would stay in their place, there would be no trouble.
“Why honey” said his wife. “You can’t hate both Negroes and Jews. You have to pick out one or another to hate.”

It was remarkable I thought, that from this bigoted woman could come such a succinct summing up of the question. In her groping way she realized that it was not the particular racial minority that was to blame, it was the need of man in his insecurity to find a scapegoat, an object of hate.

It is unfortunate when that object of hate is within the ranks of our own army, [which] is working and fighting for what should be a common democratic goal.

Racial prejudice is an insidious poison. It has been instilled through Germany until it has become one of the contributing factors of a philosophy which led to war. Democratic America must see the relation that this is a common problem. Just because we call ourselves a democracy, it does not mean that we have a natural immunity against the virus of racial injustice.34

These impassioned statements did not find their way into print, nor do they appear in any of the formal manuscripts that Bourke-White submitted to either the government censors or Simon & Schuster, her publishers. As she was to do with the material on Ernie Pyle, she decided to keep these particular jottings to herself, although she did retain some of their flavor in the finished book.

Bourke-White returned to Italy late in 1944 to work on another story for Life that was eventually called the “Forgotten Front”, a title which reflected the loss of public interest in the war in Italy after D-Day. She made a special effort to record some of the “forgotten men” of that campaign, the members of the all black 92nd Buffalo Division. These photographs were never published by Life. However, the contact prints and captions for some of them are in the Bourke-White collection at Syracuse University. In style and theme they are similar to photographs taken for “Purple Heart Valley”, and they reinforce Bourke-White’s underlying message of the

34. Manuscript material for “Purple Heart Valley”, Bourke-White Papers, Boxes 65–66 Writings.
Staff Sergeant Robert Wilson and Private First Class Wilbur Derrickson (92nd Buffalo Division) at an artillery outpost (Italy, winter 1944–45). Courtesy of the Syracuse University Library.
equality between the contributions of black and white GIs in the war against fascism.

Bourke-White’s plea for racial tolerance extended to the Japanese-Americans who were part of the highly decorated 442nd Combat Team, which had a casualty rate among the highest of the war. Her photograph of this unit in “Purple Heart Valley” is simply labeled “These are fighting Americans”. This photograph and Bourke-White’s advocacy of tolerance were part of a larger effort at this time on the part of most artists and photographers to connect the war abroad with issues at home. In the same year that “Purple Heart Valley” appeared, photographer Ansel Adams published his Born Free and Equal, a plea for tolerance toward the Japanese-Americans who after Pearl Harbor had been rounded up and unjustly interned in concentration camps such as the one at Manzanar, California.

Her assignments in Italy during World War II enabled Bourke-White to develop further her techniques of both photographic and textual advocacy. As a traveler to Arcadia, following in the footsteps of earlier Americans such as Thomas Cole, she brought back to her countrymen new insights about the meaning of democracy and America. In her meditations upon the ruins of fascist Italy and the prejudice and intolerance at their core, Bourke-White was reviving the views of those nineteenth-century Americans who saw in Italy’s imperial ruins a foretaste of the death and destruction that would form the landscape of Civil War America.

It is significant that Bourke-White began “Purple Heart Valley” from an aerial point of view, which, as she says in her first chapter, allowed her an overview of the broader patterns of this war which was largely an industrial one. In her meditations upon the landscapes and events that were passing beneath her eyes, she connected the 1930s world of economic depression to the rise of fascism in the West, and realized how they resulted in the pattern of ruins that became symbolic of World War II. In Italy, flying over the great monuments of western civilization, such as Saint Benedict’s abbey of Monte Cassino, she put into perspective the diverse elements of her experience. How did the GIs she had met and photographed on the ground fit into the complex drama of twentieth-
century history? In a paragraph among her manuscript notes for the book she reveals the core lesson of her travels to the blood-stained Arcadia of war-torn Italy: “Only one thing, I thought, that would make up for the muddy feet, for the constant peril, for the suspended action, lives held in abeyance—that thing was the knowledge of what they were fighting for. In private life, too, it is a blessed thing to see your part in the whole.”

35. Manuscript material for “Purple Heart Valley”, Bourke-White Papers, Box 79 Writings.