

Spike Lee film opens war wounds in Italy

By Peter Popham in Rome
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Spike Lee at the press launch of *Miracle at Sant' Anna* in Rome

The American film director Spike Lee has provoked a furious row in Italy with his latest film, *Miracle at Sant'Anna*, which opens across the country this week. By depicting the Partisans, the Italian resistance which fought against the Nazis and fascists in the last two years of the Second World War, as partially to blame for one of the worst massacres of the war, he has put a large American boot into an issue which, though 60 years old, is for many Italians still a matter of acute sensitivity.

Last night, the film opened in the Tuscan city of Viareggio, and protesters picketed the cinema, handing out leaflets denouncing Lee's treatment of the massacre.

As in previous films, Lee's mission is to redress the racist errors of historians who – according to him – omit, distort or minimise the role of blacks in his nation's life. He has said that his main aim in the film was "to restore the voice of black soldiers who fought in the war. Black soldiers always fought with great courage and sacrifice for democracy; they were always distinguished by their heroism and humanity, but back home they were still considered second-class citizens."

But in correcting one historical injustice, his Italian critics maintain that he has committed another just as grave.

The massacre in the remote Tuscan village of Sant'Anna di Stazzema, high in the Appenines, began before dawn on 12 August, 1944 when German troops stormed into the village. The local able-bodied men had seen a flare fired earlier and had disappeared into the woods, which is why the great majority of the massacre's 560 victims were women and children.

But in the film it is Partisans, not villagers, who flee into the woods, thus precipitating the massacre. And he creates an imaginary Partisan, named Rodolfo, who actually collaborates with the Nazis. Partisan associations say there was no such treachery at Sant'Anna and no such traitor.

"Spike Lee has turned the truth of history upside down, which is incredibly offensive," Giovanni Cippolini, vice-president of the Italian National Association of Partisans, said yesterday. "His recent declarations, in which he says that Partisans ran away, leaving civilians at risk, have made us very indignant."

To make matters worse, Michele Silicani, the mayor of Sant'Anna, has awarded Lee honorary citizenship of the village, saying, "what matters is that a great director is getting our land talked about, which will encourage tourism." Mr Cippolini does not agree: "For the mayor to have accepted the monstrous lies of this film without a murmur is unacceptable."

In Florence yesterday Lee defended his film. "It's not a historical text, it's a fiction," he said. "There are different versions of what happened at Sant'Anna di Stazzema, so we don't have anything to apologise for," and the whole row "has been enormously blown up by the media". The controversy, he added, "demonstrates that in Italy there is still an open wound". That is one claim that no one will argue with.