

The Italian Emigration of Modern Times

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*Relations between Italy
and the United States concerning
Emigration Policy, Diplomacy
and Anti-Immigrant Sentiment,
1870-1927*

By

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ABBREVIATIONS

ASDMAE	Archivio Storico Diplomatico Ministero Affari Esteri (Diplomatic Historical Archives Foreign Affairs Ministry)
MAE	Ministero Affari Esteri (Foreign Affairs Ministry)
Pacco	File
Pos.	Position
FRUS	U.S. Department of State. <i>Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States</i> . Washington D.C.

INTRODUCTION

By the late 1800s the United States was the greatest destination of Italian emigrants. The United States represented for them not only the promise of a brighter future but also the fragility of that dream. Italian immigrants were valued as a source of cheap, unskilled labor always ready to accept a job for lower wages than Americans. Thus, both American employers and workers looked down on them as an inferior race. In addition, Italians were stereotyped as dangerous subversives, anarchists, and troublemakers. Numerous episodes of violence and even lynching of Italians occurred in the late 1800s and early 1900s in the United States. In most cases the violence went unpunished by the local authorities, regardless of the innocence or guilt of the victims. Italian diplomatic representatives protested vigorously the federal government's failure to protect Italian nationals working on U.S. soil, who were supposed to be protected by existing treaties. However, Italian diplomats usually adopted a realistic attitude of prudence and moderation and made efforts to maintain good relations between Washington and Rome—except for the New Orleans lynching of 1891, which provoked a serious diplomatic crisis and national pride in the Italian Parliament culminating in Rome's recall of its ambassador.

One of the most striking features of Italy's modern history is the great migration of the Italian people shortly after completion of the country's unification in 1871. Between 1876 and the onset of World War II, roughly twenty million emigrants left the Italian peninsula and the islands of Sicily and Sardinia, representing 10 percent of emigrants throughout the world during that period of time. The majority of Italian emigrants were poor, unskilled, landless peasants or owners of tiny parcels of land. The search for wages scattered them more than it did any other European emigrants of that era. Almost half stayed in Europe, while approximately one third went to North America, and smaller groups went to Australia or Africa. The majority of Italian emigrants were men who found work in several sectors—construction, mining, industry, and agriculture.¹

¹ Denis Mack Smith, *Italy: A Modern History* (1959; repr., Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 238.

In the last two centuries of Italian history, there has not been a phenomenon of such magnitude and persistence as the continuous migratory movement. While the history of Italian emigration has often been absent from books of modern Italian history, scholars of emigration have attempted to study the migratory flux and the reasons why millions of Italians left their homeland to start a new life elsewhere. They have pointed out that emigration is not necessarily indicative of a state's embarrassing illness, but is a normal social phenomenon that has continuously occurred in history. Indeed, in an era of globalization, Italy has recently become a receiving country, a land of immigrants rather than a land of emigrants.²

Prejudice, however, has often relegated the figure of the emigrant to the fringe of society, destined to be removed, forgotten, and ignored in narratives of national histories. Yet, scholars of Italian emigration history have made an attempt to reintroduce the emigrant into mainstream history.³ Undoubtedly, emigration is a difficult topic, connected as it is to a vast array of questions concerning geographical-territorial mobility, a great variety of jobs and trades, different reasons for leaving the homeland, various patterns of adaptation in the receiving countries, and the issue of mixed descent that spread Italians abroad during a long migratory diaspora.⁴

It has been estimated that approximately sixty million Italians or individuals of Italian descent live abroad today, almost as many as are currently living in Italy. It is interesting to note that a study conducted to celebrate the centennial of the Italian unification revealed that, during that hundred years, as many as twenty-six million Italians left (the first census taken after completion of unification, in 1871, found that the population of the newly forged Kingdom of Italy amounted to twenty-six million). Although emigration cannot be reduced to one unique model for each region or each generation in modern Italian history, such large figures indicate that mobility permeated modern Italian society and that, beyond individual and regional differences, many children of the Italian peninsula left to escape poverty and to better their lives. Moreover, such large figures point out that the history of Italian emigration should be included in mainstream national history as these "lost children" must have had an impact on the development of Italian history and on the spread of Italian

² Ferdinand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 2 volumes.

³ Donna Gabaccia, "Italian History and gli Italiani nel Mondo, Part I," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1997): 45-66.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 47-49

culture abroad. The elusive nature of emigration as a historical phenomenon, however, makes it hard to restore the emigrant to his or her rightful place in Italian history.

Undoubtedly, several factors caused such a dramatic emigration phenomenon, including poverty, scarcity of labor, and agrarian crises. There was no region of the Italian peninsula where individual laborers were loath to go. Emigrants went wherever work could be found, but found European and American labor markets the most open and welcoming.⁵

Although there were no significant differences between northern and southern emigration from the Italian peninsula, the United States became a promised land especially for southern Italians who had suffered greatly because of heavy taxation, modest income, debts, evictions, and foreclosures. In North America southern Italian immigrants found work at the very bottom of the labor market: in the mines, railroads, and construction industry. However, the pay was good, and they could send remittances back home to their wives to pay old debts, buy a parcel of land, or provide for a daughter's dowry.⁶

The emigration phenomenon had a profound impact on Italian society. Economically, such a tremendous movement brought a great deal of wealth to the Italian peninsula. Not only did the emigrants send money to their families, thus ameliorating their standard of living, but also the continuous influx of foreign currency helped finance industrialization in Italy in the early twentieth century. Also, the Italians abroad always desired products from their country of origin, thus stimulating exports. Furthermore, the remittances sent by the emigrants to Italy were in part deposited in post offices or invested in government bonds. Hence, the availability of money allowed the Italian government to divert emigrants' savings to the development of the northern "industrial triangle."⁷

With men leaving to search for their livelihood elsewhere, society underwent feminization. In some areas, entire towns were denuded of people. The cycle of life changed. Young people tended to marry earlier and, after marriage, men left, investing their wives' dowries in their journey across the ocean. In spite of the distance, husbands and wives could share successes and failures, and wives could be entrusted with savings sent by their emigrant husbands. Remittances represented the main support of the family itself but, because of the distance and long periods of

⁵ Robert Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times* (1919; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924), 3.

⁶ Ercole Sori, *L'emigrazione italiana dall'unità alla seconda guerra mondiale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1979), 83-84.

⁷ Gino Arias, *La Questione Meridionale* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1970), 420.

separation, the number of births diminished. The family as an institution, however, managed to survive.⁸

The emigration of millions of citizens engendered heated debates about the phenomenon and what it meant for Italian society, economy, and politics. The political debates concerning emigration and the subsequent laws and policies implemented were expressions of every different political and economic ideology present in Italy from the completion of unification to at least 1888.

The majority of politicians in parliament opposed free emigration while a minority argued spiritedly in its favor. Defenders of emigration argued that it helped to maintain social order, eased the pressure of overpopulation, and created foreign markets for national goods. Opponents feared that the loss of manpower would cause labor shortages and would weaken the institution of the family.

During the 1880s, official opposition to emigration subsided as colonial fever gripped most European nations. The debate in Italy shifted from how emigration could be most effectively limited to how it could be more profitably utilized. Should emigration be spontaneous or state-directed? Should emigrants be left free to emigrate wherever they wished, or should they be made a tool of Italian imperial policy? In the 1880s and 1890s, the Italian government chose the latter option and committed the nation to a series of fruitless wars that ended ruinously and did little to alter the emigrants' preference for the Americas. It was during the tenure of Prime Minister Francesco Crispi (P.M. 1887-1891; 1893-1896), a strong proponent of state-directed emigration to Africa, that the first important emigration law was passed on December 30, 1888. Although restrictive, the law of 1888 represented an effort by the state to regulate the activities of agents and navigation companies, to regulate the terms of transportation contracts, and especially to recognize that emigrants must be protected.⁹ The law, however, reflected the contradictions of the times and the lack of consensus about whether emigration was good or bad for the country.

Following a humiliating defeat at Adowa, Ethiopia, on March 1, 1896, Crispi fell from power, and the liberals in the Italian Parliament revived the argument for the Americas. Also, in the meantime, it became apparent

⁸ Giorgio Mortara, *Le popolazioni delle grandi città italiane* (Turin: Unione Tipografica Editrice Torinese, 1908).

⁹ Ferdinando Manzotti, *La polemica sull'emigrazione nell'Italia unita fino alla prima guerra mondiale* (1962; repr., Milan: Società Editrice Dante Alighieri, 1969), 81-83; Gianfausto Rosoli, ed., *Un secolo di emigrazione italiana, 1876-1976* (Rome: Centro Studi Emigrazione, 1978), 254-255.

that the emigrants' remittances from the Americas were crucial for the economy, whereas Africa was a drain on the economy. The result was passage of the law of 1901, a ground-breaking law whose main aim was to protect the emigrant. The most important feature of the law was the creation of the new office of Commissioner General of Emigration (CGE), located in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs rather than in the Ministry of the Interior, which traditionally had had jurisdiction over emigration matters. The Commissioner General of Emigration was entrusted with the responsibility for protecting emigrants from abuse and cruel exploitation rather than policing their activities as the Ministry of the Interior had previously done. The establishment of the CGE represented an important accomplishment in dealing with the phenomenon of emigration. Indeed, in spite of a few limitations and shortcomings, the law of 1901 can be considered a true landmark in the history of Italian emigration.¹⁰

During the interwar period, however, nationalist, imperialist politicians dominated Italian foreign policy and opened the way for the rise of Benito Mussolini to power in 1922. Eventually, it was Mussolini, the *Duce* of Fascist Italy, who decided to abolish the CGE and replace it with the General Bureau of Italians Abroad (*Direzione Generale Italiani all' Estero*) in 1927. Arguing that Italy was a country of superabundant energy, Mussolini chose to call emigrants "Italians abroad." He also tried to emphasize the positive aspects of emigration, to raise the general esteem of Italians abroad, to ameliorate the overall image of Italy, and to spread Italian culture in the world. He emphasized the need to regulate and control the emigration flux and especially to make it temporary and not permanent. Nonetheless, what Mussolini and his associates did for the emigrants was too little too late.¹¹

Over the course of several decades, liberal governments issued laws that were increasingly supportive of emigration and that provided greater protection for emigrants. These laws grew out of the gradual acceptance of the notion that emigrants were citizens, that they were the responsibility of the state and must, therefore, be protected at every phase of the migratory process. The fascist state embraced this policy, but unlike liberal governments, sought to utilize its citizens abroad to advance Italy's prestige and interests and to fuel nationalistic fervor. To achieve these goals, Mussolini convened an International Conference of Emigration and

¹⁰ Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times*, 477; Rosoli, *Un secolo di emigrazione italiana*, 258; Manzotti, *La polemica sull' emigrazione*, 156.

¹¹ Philip Cannistraro and Gianfausto Rosoli, "Fascist Emigration Policy in the 1920s: An Interpretative Framework," *International Migration Review*, vol. 13, no. 4 (1979): 673-692.

Immigration in 1924 and established a financial Institute of Italian Workers Abroad and also *Fasci all' Estero* (Fascist clubs abroad). A whole network of Fascist clubs outside Italy was established soon after Mussolini's march on Rome (October 28, 1922). The purpose for these clubs was to export fascist doctrine, to implement a spiritual and cultural penetration of other countries, and especially to stimulate a sense of national sentiment in Italian emigrants. Mussolini did not want to allow Italians abroad to be assimilated into alien cultures. Rather, he wanted to utilize the emigrants to enhance the prestige of Italy abroad as well as to diffuse Italian culture and civilization.¹²

The emigration policy conducted by the Fascist regime differed from the policies enacted by the liberal governments that preceded it in that it attempted to enhance the economic and political value of the emigrant. Fascist emigration policy was consistent with a larger political centralization trend as well as with the ideology of the Fascist regime. For example, the office of Commissioner General of Emigration was abolished not because of the desire to eliminate an office that had become pretty much autonomous, but as a result of a general policy of political centralization, including pursuit of demographic growth and control and regulation of the migratory flux. Political centralization, demographic exaltation, and control of emigration were all components rooted in fascist ideology and the pursuit of national prestige, the spread of *Italianness*, and preservation of national sentiment abroad among Italian nationals.¹³

Mussolini's vision of emigration and emigrants clashed with the growing protectionist and anti-immigration legislation being enacted in many countries. Among them was the United States, which in 1921 and 1924 enacted laws that effectively closed its borders to emigrants from southern and eastern Europe. In fact, after passage of the 1921 law, Italian emigration to the United States was reduced from 408,104 in 1920 to 114,912 in 1921 and to 120,501 in 1924. After 1924, the number of Italian emigrants coming to the United States continued to fluctuate as follows: 96,435 in 1925; 117,422 in 1926; 125,423 in 1927.¹⁴

The legislation of the 1920s was the culmination of decades long, deeply-felt anti-Italian sentiment that portrayed Italians as generally hard-working and industrious and as a very dependable source of cheap labor, but also as dangerous subversives prone to trouble making. This contradictory image of the Italian immigrant, rooted both in deep

¹² Alan Cassels, *Mussolini's Early Diplomacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 195.

¹³ Rosoli, *Un secolo di emigrazione italiana*, 259-260.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 346.

xenophobia and economic conflict, produced waves of violence and numerous cases of lynching in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In most cases, violence, harassment, and lynchings went unpunished by the local authorities, regardless of the innocence or guilt of the victims. Yet, Mussolini protested the reduced quotas, even though neither he nor the liberals had succeeded in winning effective anti-lynching laws to protect the emigrants.

Italian emigration to the Americas, mostly to the United States, went through three phases. From 1876 to 1890, the majority went to Argentina; then until 1897 Argentina and Brazil were almost equally favored by emigrants; from 1898 to the outbreak of World War I and then the interwar period, the United States became the chief outlet for Italian emigration. This emigration continued until legislative restrictions checked that current and forced the emigrants to seek South American countries again.

Why were Italians disliked or even hated to the point of provoking violence and lynching that went unpunished? What provoked such episodes of violence in the United States? What kind of reactions, if any, were there on the part of Italian diplomats in the United States? This study will examine episodes of lynchings of Italians in Eureka, Nevada (1879); Vicksburg, Mississippi (1886); Louisville, Kentucky (1889); New Orleans, Louisiana (1891); Seattle, Washington (1892); Denver, Colorado (1893); Walsenburg, Colorado (1895); Hahnville, Louisiana, (1896); Tallulah, Louisiana (1899); Erwin, Mississippi (1901); Ashdown, Arkansas (1901); Davis, West Virginia (1903); and Tampa, Florida (1910). These episodes were emblematic of the violence, racism, and xenophobia to which Italian nationals were subjected in the United States during that period. These cases of violence against individuals of Italian origin strained relations between Italy and the United States and opened the way to various and complex diplomatic incidents. In particular, the 1891 lynching of New Orleans so soured relations between the two countries that there were rumors of war, culminating in Rome's recall of its ambassador.

The Italian government's frustration with Washington was based on the claim that the United States had failed to comply with the 26 February 1871 treaty between the two nations which contained a reciprocity clause providing for mutual protection of foreign-born citizens as well as equal treatment of foreign-born and native-born individuals residing in different states of the Union. Based on the treaty, foreign-born and native-born were entitled to equal treatment. However, Washington responded that the acts of violence against Italians were outside its jurisdiction to investigate. It was the responsibility of the state, not the national authorities, to

conduct an investigation and bring the guilty parties—if any were found—to justice. Federal constitutional delegation of powers to states, an important feature of the U.S. Constitution, presented a dilemma to foreign-born citizens in that it made it very difficult to find an acceptable solution to the problems caused by ethnic hatred and violence. It was a contradiction in terms that the President of the United States, who indeed represented all of the states of the Union in relations with foreign countries, did not have the power to interfere with the individual states beyond putting pressure on governors or the local police force in cases of violence perpetrated against foreign-born nationals. There was a fundamental conflict between the right of the single states to manage their own affairs and the responsibility of the U.S. federal government to comply with international treaties that guaranteed the right of foreign-born citizens to receive mutual protection as provided by the reciprocity clause.¹⁵ Resolving the diplomatic crisis between the Italian and the United States governments depended upon compliance with existing treaties, protection of citizens (both Italian nationals and naturalized citizens), and compensation of victims' families by awarding payment of an indemnity, the so-called "blood price."

The United States government took the position that there was no liability on its part for acts of mob violence, that protection of aliens residing in the United States must rest with the local authorities, and that criminal prosecution for any acts of mob violence was also the responsibility of the state authorities. Furthermore, in case of the government's paying indemnities for acts of violence, payment was made merely as an act of charity and liability was denied. This attitude placed the United States in an embarrassing position because of the failure of the federal government to comply with existing treaty obligations. In fact, the contention between Washington and Rome provoked a movement in the U.S. Congress advocating passage of an anti-lynching federal law to protect aliens from mob violence. No fewer than four presidents—Benjamin Harrison, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft—suggested a federal law providing for punishment of crimes against aliens in violation of the guarantees of the treaties. However, proponents of such laws found strong opposition in Congress. The main objection to the enactment of such legislation was that it would grant to an alien better rights than those of a citizen in the United States. Italian representatives in

¹⁵ ASDMAE, *Trattati e Convenzioni fra il Regno d'Italia e i governi esteri*, vol. IV (1 January 1870 to 1 January 1873) (Rome: Tipografia Nazionale di G. Bertero, 1874), 144-155; United States-Italy, Treaty of Commerce and Navigation (February 26, 1871) in Malloy's *Treaties*, 1:969.

the United States protested the failure of the U.S. Congress to confer jurisdiction in cases of mob violence on the federal courts and stated that, until such power was conferred, the Italian government would have reason to complain of violation of the existing treaties and would continue to hold the federal government responsible for mob violence. Proposals submitted to the U.S. Congress for anti-lynching legislation calling for federal jurisdiction over violence against either native-born or foreign-born victims never became law.¹⁶

In recent years, scholars have produced numerous studies about white mob violence against African Americans, but the lynching of whites remains relatively neglected. The purpose of this study is to shed light on episodes of violence against individuals of Italian origin in the United States between 1879 and 1910; to analyze causes, motives, and characteristics of such mob attacks; and to assess the role of Italian diplomats in asserting the right of aliens to protection by the U.S. government according to existing treaties. Although the contention between Rome and Washington was never resolved in a satisfactory manner except for payment of indemnities to the victims' families, long and patient diplomacy on the part of Italian representatives in the United States prompted the beginning of a movement in Congress in 1892, following the lynching of eleven Italians in New Orleans (14 March 1891), for passage of a much-needed federal anti-lynching law aimed at protection of aliens in accordance with treaty rights. Bills for this purpose were introduced in the Senate in 1893, 1899, and 1908, and in the House in 1900, 1902, 1903, 1905, and 1907. In 1922, the Dyer bill included a clause for the protection of aliens, adopting the form suggested in 1892. The Dyer bill failed, as did successive measures introduced in the 1920s when restrictive immigration laws curtailed the immigrant flux into the United States. As immigration to the United States subsided, so did anti-immigrant sentiment, xenophobia, and violence against aliens.

Undoubtedly, constitutional issues, states' rights, and racial prejudices were serious obstacles to the enactment of a federal anti-lynching law. The Italian government protested vigorously the failure of the U.S. government to comply with existing treaties, to protect aliens on U.S. soil adequately, and to confer jurisdiction on the federal courts in cases of mob violence. In

¹⁶ Charles H. Watson, "Need of Federal Legislation in Respect to Mob Violence in Cases of Lynching of Aliens," *The Yale Law Journal*, vol. 25, no.7 (May 1916): 561-581; David O. Walter, "Legislative Notes and Review Proposals for a Federal Anti-Lynching Law," *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 28, no. 3 (June 1934): 436-442.

general, however, Italian diplomats in the United States adopted a realistic attitude of prudence and moderation and, except for the case of New Orleans (which provoked a serious diplomatic crisis and national pride, culminating in Rome's recall of its ambassador), they tried to maintain good relations between Washington and Rome. In fact, continued emigration and its value to Italian society as a "safety valve" and as a source of foreign currency and capital accumulation took precedence over protecting emigrants from American lawlessness. The Italian government was powerless to force protection through U.S. legislation. Yet, it refrained from cutting off emigration to the United States—a place where emigrants were at considerable risk because of racism, economic resentment, and the American habits of vigilantism and lynching.

CHAPTER ONE

THE GREAT MIGRATION FROM ITS ORIGINS TO THE CLOSURE OF THE AMERICAN GATES

Italian immigrants were often looked down upon and subjected to discrimination and even lynching. Thus, violence, harassment, and discrimination that Italian emigrants suffered when they settled in the United States challenged Italian legislators and diplomats at a time when they had to deal with post-unification problems, economic issues, agrarian crises, and lack of resources that prompted the children of Italy to leave their country to make a living elsewhere. The economic impetus that drove emigration also promoted a strong bent toward caution and pragmatism within the Italian government in its diplomatic dealings with the United States over the protection of Italian workers against abuse.

The first great migratory wave of contemporary Italy went on between 1880 and 1930. During those fifty years, more than 17 million men and women left their homeland in order to make a living elsewhere. Some left and were able to come back; most never returned. These individuals were workers, artisans, and above all peasants. Mobility was not an unusual phenomenon; individuals had moved frequently in the previous centuries. However, there were some new elements in this modern “great migration”—magnitude of numbers, fast rate of departures, and choice of new lands across the Atlantic.

Undoubtedly, poverty, misery, and the condition of Italian agriculture were important factors in originating such a huge migratory wave, but there were also other elements, most notably an international labor market that was becoming increasingly complex. However, the transfer of labor from the agricultural to the industrial sector was not continuous or even linear; hence, agriculture never ceased to offer opportunities for a population that was in crisis.

Indeed, a look at the first decade of the nineteenth century can be most enlightening for an understanding of emigration. Two major areas in Italy attracted seasonal migrants—the western part of the Po River Valley (Piedmont and Lombardy), where about 50,000 laborers went to work from Piedmont, the Appennines, and the Alps (including 4,000 from

Switzerland and Bavaria); and the coastal areas of central Italy, including the Tuscan Maremma and the Roman countryside, where laborers converged from the Appennines, Umbria, Abruzzi, and Calabria.¹ In addition, Piedmont exported laborers to the Dolomites Alps, Venetia, and Austria-Hungary.² There was no region of the peninsula from which young laborers would not depart for seasonal work of various lengths, walking hundreds of miles and sleeping under the sky. Such migratory phenomenon has been called “the major system of temporary migration in western Europe.”³

Was there a difference between internal migration and emigration abroad? An inquiry conducted during the Napoleonic era suggests that there was no difference, that the usual division that scholars have been drawing between domestic and external migration is an artificial one, for laborers were willing to go wherever work could be found, be it Austria-Hungary or Switzerland or the Roman countryside. While a line of division between domestic and foreign migration could be artificially drawn, the motives for departure usually can be ascribed to one common root—the crisis of the agrarian economy. In drawing a map of labor mobility and migration, one should not consider political geography, but the economic motive. Indeed, it was usually the individual laborer who chose where to migrate: whether to stay in the peninsula, to go elsewhere in Europe, or to go across the Atlantic to the Americas. The various destinations, then, represent the most uncertain factor, as where to go depended upon the push-and-pull phenomenon, the individual’s choice, and the complex changes in the international labor market. With time, such a complex labor system would reveal a tremendous vitality and would generate more migratory labor.⁴

¹ Ian Lucassen, *Migrant Labor in Europe 1600-1900* (London: Croon Helm, 1987), 234-244.

² *Ibid.*, p.260. Lucassen has analyzed an inquiry conducted during the Napoleonic era aimed at verifying the reasons why young men did not answer a call for conscription. The main result was an enlightening analysis of migratory movements in Italy and other parts of Europe under Napoleon.

³ Leslie Page Moch, *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe since 1650* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 78.

⁴ Enrico Pugliese, *L'Italia tra migrazioni internazionali e migrazioni interne. Atti del Congresso Internazionale per il XXI secolo*. Dossier di ricerca, Volume II (Rome: Agenzia romana per la preparazione del Giubileo, 2000), 42.

During the thirty years between 1871 and 1900, Italian agriculture was relatively stagnant in terms of productivity, investment, and mechanization. In order to supplement meager profits, one could resort to seasonal work beyond the Alps or near the Apennines, and to domestic industry. In many villages women and children were employed in domestic industry. The family income thus came from a combination of various sources, thus resulting in the formation of a “hybrid society.”⁵

The first wave of mass emigration of agricultural laborers was sparked by an agricultural crisis that struck Europe between 1873 and 1896, when prices of main crops produced in the Italian countryside dropped because of an influx of grain coming from the rest of Europe and from the United States. Indeed, since 1873, American grains had invaded European markets, lowering prices.⁶ Rice prices also fell in competition with rice coming from Asia through the Suez Canal. Even silk manufactured in almost every region of Italy entered into competition with Indian silk. Wool production also suffered from miscalculations that sacrificed natural pastures to grain production. This last calamity affected shepherds from Abruzzi, who were the first group of emigrants to leave the motherland. Pasture, sheep, and wool production had provided a livelihood for entire provinces. For example, in Lombardy the province of Bergamo had employed about 30,000 weavers annually for about eight centuries.⁷

Hence a series of calamities—bad crops, low prices, natural disasters, foreign competition, and the crisis of domestic industry—continually strained the peasant population. As a result of all these factors, a huge mass emigration occurred, which may be considered one of the most extraordinary movements in history. As one historian writing just after World War I put it, “In its chief lineaments it has no like. Through the number of men it has involved and the courses it has pursued, through its long continuance on a great scale and its role in other lands, it stands alone.”⁸

Though mass emigration movements began earlier, Italian official statistics of emigration began in 1876 when the Italian Bureau of Statistics started an important collection of figures that has been continued ever since. It was Leone Carpi, an economist and journalist who had taken part

⁵ Moch, *Moving Europeans*, 68.

⁶ Ercole Sori, *L'emigrazione italiana dall'unità alla seconda guerra mondiale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1979), 115-117.

⁷ *Notizie sulle condizioni industriali nella provincia di Bergamo*, in *Annali di statistica* IV (Rome, 1891), 38.

⁸ Robert Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times* (1919; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924), 3.

in the Risorgimento, who diligently compiled a set of figures from 1869 to 1876. Once the office of the Commissioner General of Emigration was established in 1901, the CGE integrated the available data with the diligent work conducted by Leone Carpi.⁹ The information and statistical data that Carpi had compiled shed light on the social and moral conditions of the new united Italy.¹⁰

A careful analysis of available data shows some constant features of Italian emigration: emigrants responded both to internal adversities and to external factors pertaining to the labor market. Hence, the migratory curve unfolded in an uneven line, showing peaks and valleys, usually sparked by economic factors such as lack of work. A more constant element was gender: those who emigrated tended to be men. In fact, it has been shown that the more distant the destination, the higher was the percentage of male emigrants.¹¹

During the first phase of emigration (1869-1875), departures averaged about 100,000 per year, peaking in 1872 and in 1873 when 140,680 and 139,860 individuals left. Of these, 70 to 80 percent were men aged twenty to forty, originating from the countryside; women accounted for only 10 percent, as did children under the age of fifteen. As for their origin, male emigrants were mostly from the region of Venetia (*Veneto*), which at that time contributed 30,000 to 40,000 departures per year. Emigrants came also from other northern regions such as Piedmont, Liguria, and Lombardy, as well as from central and southern Italy (contributing about 5,000 individuals yearly). The reasons for the departures were the continual disintegration and fragmentation of land holdings into smaller and smaller parcels and the crisis of domestic industry. Laborers from Venetia usually went to Austria-Hungary; Piedmontese tended to go to France and, in smaller numbers, to Argentina; Lombards went to France, Switzerland, and Austria; and more and more emigrants from Liguria left

⁹ Leone Carpi, *Dell'emigrazione italiana all'estero* (Florence: Civelli, 1871). In this monumental work Carpi reported that about 555,000 Italians lived in what he called Italy's "colonies" abroad. Nearly half of these lived in South America, mainly in Argentina, Uruguay and southern Brazil. Nine percent lived in North America, mostly in the United States. Another third lived in transalpine Europe and 15 percent in North Africa, Greece and the eastern Mediterranean.

¹⁰ Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times*, 6.

¹¹ Moch, *Moving Europeans*, 99.

for Argentina and Brazil. Beginning in 1864, steam ships left from Genoa for both South and North America.¹²

Mobility across the Alps was due to the agrarian crisis, to the weakening of domestic industry, and also to the building craze that was going on in various parts of Europe such as France, Switzerland, and Austria. Italian peasants and agrarian laborers were willing to leave the field and to migrate temporarily in order to build railroads, bridges, tunnels, and other means of transportation. For instance, between 1872 and 1881, Italian peasants built the St. Gotthard Rail Tunnel, a tunnel through the Alps between Italy and Austria, thus ameliorating communications between the two countries.¹³

As migratory movements intensified both on a European and an intercontinental scale, the new exchange circuits saw not only movements of human beings, goods, and capital, but also an exchange of germs and parasites. For instance, a formidable destructive agent of vineyards, the *phylloxera*, came from New York to southern France, to move further down to Italy. Moreover, Italian laborers coming back from Austria, France, and southern Germany imported the cholera germ, which provoked two successive deadly epidemics in Italy in 1893 and in 1910-11; however, it was seasonal laborers coming back from Apulia and the Caserta area who contaminated the region of Abruzzo.¹⁴

Between 1888 and 1897, Italian society faced its most critical years. A series of factors, such as the decline in the price of grains, suspension of trade with France because of a tariff war, and crises in the silk industry and domestic industry prompted a growing number of Italian laborers to emigrate. Adding to this labor outflow was the introduction of labor-saving agricultural machinery and chemical fertilizers which hurt small farmers who could not afford them while favoring the large landowners. For example, in 1888, the province of Mantua, already distressed because of continual floods of the Po River, contributed to an unprecedented 6,146 departures out of a total of 25,000 individuals leaving the region of Lombardy that year.¹⁵

Most interestingly, emigration had now become a family affair. Indeed, the region of Lombardy saw an exceptional number of family

¹² *Notizie statistiche sulla emigrazione italiana all' estero dal 1869 al 1976*, in *Annuario statistico della emigrazione italiana dal 1876 al 1915*. Commissioner General of Emigration (Rome, 1926), 1705-1740.

¹³ Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times*, 165.

¹⁴ Costantino Felice, *Il disagio di vivere. Il cibo, la casa, le malattie in Abruzzo e Molise dall'unità al secondo dopoguerra* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1989), 102-103.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

departures, as did Piedmont, Emilia, Tuscany, and the Marches.¹⁶ This remarkable change was a significant indicator of the distress experienced in the countryside of those regions as well as in the rest of Europe where the building craze had also ended. While Europe was in a recession, new labor markets opened in the Americas. Desperate for labor, Argentina and Brazil lured workers by promising free housing, guaranteed employment, land at advantageous prices, and periods of tax exemptions. Hundreds of thousands of Italian adult males started undertaking the journey across the Atlantic. They spent the winter there, earning about 350-400 lira, thus doubling their total annual income and avoiding falling into poverty.¹⁷ Opportunities in Argentina and in Brazil, however, were far from similar. While Argentina offered some promise for social mobility, Brazil became notorious as a place of harsh suffering and broken dreams.¹⁸

The United States had been a magnet for Italian emigrants since the Italian unification and, by the late nineteenth century, had become the greatest destination of Italian emigrants. The United States represented for them both the promise of a brighter future and the fragility of that dream. By the 1890s, the United States accounted for 20 percent of the entire migratory wave and 36 percent by the second decade of the twentieth century. Between 1906 and 1910, when over 1,300,000 Italians entered the United States, the percentage rose to 41 percent.¹⁹

Historians have long debated whether emigration from southern Italy was relatively late to occur compared to emigration from the northern regions of the country. The transatlantic migratory wave began in 1879, when the number of departures from the Italian peninsula reached 24,000. At that date the southern regions contributed relatively small numbers: Basilicata and Calabria sent 2,500 to Brazil and Argentina and Campania sent approximately 1,000 to the United States. However, by the end of the 1880s, the numbers had greatly increased. Of the 44,000 Italian emigrants who went to the Americas at that time, 24,000 came from southern regions (10,000 from Lucania and Calabria, 9,000 from Campania, and 5,000 from

¹⁶ *Notizie statistiche sull'emigrazione italiana*, 189.

¹⁷ Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times*, 252-278.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 294-298.

¹⁹ Gianfausto Rosoli, ed. *Un secolo di emigrazione italiana, 1876-1976* (Rome: Centro Studi Emigrazione, 1978), 27.

Abruzzi) went to the United States, while 20,000 northerners (11,000 from Piedmont and 9,000 from Lombardy) went to Argentina.²⁰

Although emigration from southern Italy was not late, there were some differences from that of the North. The transatlantic migratory wave from the southern regions shot up between 1885 and 1888, whereas massive northern departures began in 1888. The abolition of regional customs barriers after unification in 1861 worsened conditions in the southern regions. The North adapted fairly well to the new legislation because prior to unification, it had already adapted to liberal economic policies, whereas the Bourbons administered the South, operating under strict protectionist rules. After unification, the new rulers extended free trade policies to the South without considering southern conditions. Severe losses were sustained when the new Italian government eliminated marginally productive industries by allowing free competition from the North. Some southern textile producers were accustomed to 100 percent protection, whereas by 1860 in the North Piedmont had reduced its duties to about 10 percent of value. Moreover, the South suffered from poor industrial infrastructure, which tended to limit trade. It was also resistant to the introduction of goods from the North, and its agrarian society was used to local consumption and was much less open to external stimuli.²¹ The abolition of the regional customs barriers, therefore, severely disrupted the southern economy, prompting the earlier migratory phenomenon.

The Italian government brought further ruin to the small landowners in the South by imposing onerous taxes. The burdens on farmers in the form of land ownership, public registry, and succession taxes tormented the Italian countryside. The heavy fiscal burden as well as low wages and high fees could be traced to endemic problems beginning over a hundred years earlier. Along with the ill-considered confiscatory fiscal policies of the central government after political unification in 1871, these were the main causes of southern emigration.²²

²⁰ Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Time*, 3-22; Sori, *L'emigrazione Italiana*, 28-60; it must be noted that during the year 1888, 71,000 emigrants from the region of Venetia went to Brazil lured by the Brazilian government's policy of financing the voyage.

²¹ Denis Mack Smith, *Italy: A Modern History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959; reprint 1969), 49-50; Spencer Di Scala, *Italy From Revolution to Republic, 1700 to Present* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1995), 121-123; Giovanni Carano Donvito, *L'economia meridionale prima e dopo il Risorgimento* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1928), 58.

²² Sori, *L'emigrazione italiana*, 82.

The new taxation was a sort of modern version of ancient relationships of servitude that had long been oppressing the peasantry in the Italian peninsula. It is not accidental that, in the early phase of the great migration, landowners would go after those emigrants who had left behind unpaid debts. Indeed, those laborers had left because it was not worth their while to stay and continue working, simply to be locked in a vicious circle of debts leading to sure eviction.²³

In spite of harsh conditions, however, southern laborers were the most reluctant ones to undertake the journey across the ocean. Those from Apulia and Sicily, in particular, resisted as long as possible after grain prices began to fall in 1873.²⁴ According to historian Gino Luzzatto, at first the fall of grain prices did not prompt agrarian laborers to emigrate and abandon their small parcels of land. In the 1880s, however, the crisis provoked by the *phylloxera* epidemic,²⁵ a formidable parasite that had affected vineyards in France but spared southern Italian regions for about twenty years, led Italian landowners to plow under grains and plant vineyards in Apulia and Sicily. In these regions, vineyards sprang up and southern producers continued to produce wine, even after the tariff war broke out in the 1880s between Italy and France that limited wine exports to France. It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that southern laborers abandoned the fields and emigrated to the United States.²⁶

The United States then became a sort of Mecca, a promised land for southern Italians. The principal reason for this was the easy availability of jobs in the mining, railroad, and construction industries. The pay was good enough to allow them to pay off old debts and perhaps regain possession of their own foreclosed land. There is plenty of evidence that such factors were good reasons to prompt southern Italian peasants to emigrate, especially small landowners or tenant farmers.²⁷

Many of the adult males left with the intention of returning and often went back and forth several times between Italy and the United States. Their goal was to earn enough money to protect their land holdings at home both from foreclosures and from government policies. Hence, for a

²³ Gino Luzzatto, *L'economia italiana dal 1861 al 1894* (Turin: Einaudi, 1968), 183.

²⁴ Since 1873, American grains had invaded European markets thus lowering prices; see p. 13.

²⁵ See p.15.

²⁶ Luzzatto, *L'economia Italiana*, 436.

²⁷ Sori, *L'emigrazione italiana*, 83-84

few decades, migration was seasonal and temporary; there was no total departure, no radical break with the emigrants' roots.²⁸

Even permanent migration never excluded completely a possible return to Italy. It is this attitude that explains in part the mushrooming of "Little Italies" where immigrants replicated familiar patterns of social life, preserved their language, and found refuge from the harsh realities they confronted daily outside these "little Italies." Immigrants had to undergo a mysterious process of unmaking and remaking. In the older person, the resistance was greater than in the young. It was the children and the grandchildren, who made concessions more easily because they had less of the Old World to discard, who would become fully integrated into American society.²⁹

The exodus from the Italian peninsula continued to increase from the beginning of the twentieth century to the outbreak of World War I in 1914. During that period, the South took the lead while in other regions departures diminished. From Piedmont, there were a total of 30,000 departures, and from Campania 80,000, while Sicily claimed 120,000 people crossing the Atlantic. Moreover, interregional and transalpine migrations did not stop. Domestic migratory labor continued to be attracted to the Po River Valley, the Roman countryside, and the Sicilian fields. But the number of these domestic migrants diminished. According to figures published by the Italian Labor Bureau, between 1901 and 1905, about one million laborers were involved in interregional migration on the Italian peninsula.³⁰

Such tremendous movement of emigrants brought considerable wealth to the Italian peninsula and had an impact on Italian society. The standard of living of those who were involved in the migratory wave improved considerably. According to calculations by Giovanni Lorenzoni, those who came back for brief periods brought with them 500-1,000 lira in gold, while those who returned for good brought 5,000- 20,000 lira in gold.³¹ This capital and remittances improved dramatically the standard of living for those who were involved with emigration. As soon as the money sent by the emigrants arrived, the wives who had stayed behind made sure to show off the success of their absentee husbands. They would visit banks, post offices, and notaries; pay off their debts; buy land; and make

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 86-89.

²⁹ Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times*, 292-295.

³⁰ *Annuario Statistico Italiano*, Vol. III, 265.

³¹ Giovanni Lorenzoni, *Inchiesta sulla piccola proprietà coltivatrice formatasi nel primo dopoguerra* (Rome: Tipografia Operaia Romana, 1939), 177; please note that before World War I the U.S. dollar equaled 5 lira.

marriage contracts for their children. Thus the impact of emigration started being felt in society and on those who had stayed. With their husbands away, women started engaging in activities that traditionally had been the exclusive sphere of men. Landlords were now appalled that the poor were no longer poor and that women now seemed to be in command. It looked as if the world had turned upside down. The money sent back home by the Italian emigrants played an important role in the economic policy of the liberal governments and in the behavior of the small industrial, financial, and political circles that implemented it.³²

Demographic changes, too, were a direct consequence of emigration. The Italian population got older and, of course, with men leaving to find their livelihood elsewhere, society went through feminization. In some areas, entire villages, entire towns, saw their population diminish. The cycle of life experienced tremendous changes. Young people married earlier, and most young men left the country at twenty, often investing their brides' dowries in their journey across the ocean. In spite of the distance, a wife could share successes and failures, pains and struggles, and could be entrusted with savings more than could fathers or brothers. There were also those who left their towns and vanished in the big metropolis overseas, formed a new family nucleus, and never again returned to the point of origin.³³

The family, whether it was a complex network of elaborate kinship or a small nuclear unit, did change. Those who were emigrating, while waiting on the pier to board the ship, often entrusted their wives and children to their own parents, even though usually not to live under the same roof. Rarely did young men who had emigrated return to the paternal home after having emigrated. Having experienced independence and autonomy, they found it hard to return to the parents' home.³⁴

The family as an institution, however, somehow survived the trials and tribulations connected with the harsh conditions of emigration and separation. Since young couples were separated for long periods of time, the number of births diminished. The remittances, however, were the main support of the family itself.³⁵

³² Ruggero Romano, "Una tipologia economica," in *Storia d'Italia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1972), Vol. I, 260.

³³ Gino Arias, *La questione meridionale* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1921).

³⁴ PierPaolo Viazzo and Dionigi Albera, *La famiglia contadina nell' Italia settentrionale 1750-1930*, in Marzio Barbagli and David Kertzer, eds, *Storia della famiglia italiana, 1750-1950* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992), 170.

³⁵ Giorgio Mortara, *Le popolazioni delle grandi città italiane* (Turin: Unione Tipografica Editrice Torinese, 1908).