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Strife: A Look into the Life of an Italian Immigrant during World War II

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Perhaps the most familiar portrayal of an enemy alien, at least for most Americans, would be the Japanese. While the reason for this standard is clear, stemming from the perceptibility of a threat as witnessed in the attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese and the ongoing debates surrounding the soundness of President Roosevelt’s decision to intern all Japanese Americans, Japan was not the only country at war with the United States during World War Two. Oftentimes, Italy’s role in the Second World War is overshadowed by that of both Japan and Germany. This essay hopes to shed light upon the Italian American experience, in examining the degree to which Italians living in America were discriminated against in the United States while at the same time taking into consideration the influence of both the Italian and American psyches as it relates to the nascent state of Fascism.

“Italy is in some ways a concept as much as a country.”\(^1\) Prior to exploring the discriminatory aspects of Italian Americans during this period, one must first try to understand the American psyche as it concerns Italy which was molded by the circumstances surrounding the pre-World War One era. On the surface, it would seem as if Americans were split in their interpretation of Italy. The “Romantics”\(^2\) consisted of writers, artists and journalists who constantly traveled to Italy, seduced by “misty shadows of the Italian landscape...which served as a conservatory of...old world values.”\(^3\) It served as a “mythopoeic counter image to America”\(^4\) where time
seemed to stand still, and one could reflect upon the very essence of time marked by events in the journey of mankind which offered just enough wisdom in attempting to decode one’s purpose. While undoubtedly captivating, Italy’s atmosphere also instilled fear in the minds of Americans, much accustomed to a more speedy routine and filled with what Frederick Jackson Turner would label an innate “nervous energy,”⁵ who after awhile found such a life unsettling. On the other hand, there were “Nativists” ⁶ whose images of the Italian people were characterized with nothing more than “ignorance, poverty and oppression” ⁷ as witnessed in the mass influx of immigrants, not yet accustomed to life in the new world. They also upheld a sense of Anglo-Saxon superiority, a sentiment also hidden in the “romantic picture,” ⁸ which bolstered during World War One as a result of Italy’s humiliating retreat at the battle of Caporetto; an unfortunate occurrence stamped not only in the minds of Americans but in those of the Italians who would feel its disastrous consequences for decades to come.

The seeds of the Second World War were planted in the Treaty of Versailles. Italy’s inopportune failure in the previous war had become the mainspring behind the Allied decision to swindle a large portion of the country’s rewards promised in the Treaty of London. The decision sparked an uproar, which, among other things, led to the rise of Fascism in Italy as well as in other parts of Europe. At the onset of his new empire, many Americans regarded Benito Mussolini as a hero; one who would rectify the Italian people by a process of modernization and realism. “Mussolini’s dictatorship evidently appeals to the Italian people. They needed a leader...his policy of order, discipline and work.” ⁹ Ironically, while Americans viewed the persona of Italy’s new leader

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⁷ Ibid.,
⁸ Ibid., 13
⁹ Ibid., 59
to be revitalizing, Italians embraced Fascism because of its maintenance and promotion of the
old world values that had been condemned in America. As Roger Daniels noted in his discussion
of Italian immigration, “Two out of three Italians who crossed the Atlantic did not come back to
the United States.”

Though the goal for most immigrants was to return home after achieving
somewhat of a state of financial stability, in some cases the circumstances did not allow it. Itali-
ans perceived themselves to be “unwelcome strangers” in a foreign and hostile land committed
to the notion of Americanization which Italians felt to be an invasion on their personal lives and
an attack on their integrity as its proponents sought to suppress or even eliminate the precious
traditions which united not only the Italian people, but more importantly, the family. In order to
maintain the cultural homogeneity of the family, so threatened by American “culture,” it was on-
ly natural for Italians to cling to Fascism. “La Religione, la Patria, e la Famiglia” served as the
foundation of Italian culture and Mussolini “posed as the embodiment of such Old World trad-
tion.” Hailed as the savior of the Italian people, Mussolini “li (gli Italiani) ha rifatti!” And as he
ventured to do so, he not only uplifted those in Italy but gave new strength to those left in Amer-
ica who continued to battle the pangs of prejudice.

As mentioned previously, discrimination towards Italian immigrants existed decades before
the start of World War Two. Prejudice reached a new height in 1912, as the Democratic presi-
dential nominee Woodrow Wilson described Italians as being a “cursed rabble.” Surely, it ap-
ppears evident as to why Italians felt unwanted in this new land. Although Benito Mussolini was
the catalyst for Italian unification in America attempts were made prior to the establishment of

Press,1972,p.79
12 Ibid.,80
13 Ibid.,78
an Italian Fascist State to rectify the injustices suffered by Italians worldwide such as the forma-
tion of the “Lega Nazione Fiume” following World War One whose members futilely crusad-
ed against the affront at Versailles.\textsuperscript{14} The unmistakable impact of Italian unification within the
United States would begin in 1922 and continue to escalate with each passing year. Fascist prop-
aganda within the United States was organized by the Italian press who “succumbed to govern-
ment control.” \textsuperscript{15} From this, a multitude of pro-fascist papers emerged in major cities of the Unit-
ed States including four alone in the Philadelphia area: “\textit{La Voce della Colonia, L’Opinione, Il
Popolo, and La Libera Parola di Philadelphia}.” \textsuperscript{16} Fervently read by Italian Americans, these
articles prompted the start of Fascist movements across the country, the Fascist League of North
America (FLNA) perhaps being the most notable since mushrooming membership generated a
congressional investigation, which occurred to late, and of no avail. The league’s members were
also affiliated with other Italian fraternal organizations, such as the Sons of Italy and the Dante
Alighieri Society, who pledged their “unwavering loyalty” and their commitment “to fight at
your (Mussolini) command.” \textsuperscript{17} The rapid and fierce mobilization of Italian Americans stirred
reports of conspiracy as it was assumed that Italian communities within the United States had
allied with Fascist Italy against America. Several studies confirm that both printed and radio
Fascist propaganda elicited a “complex attitude, composed of militant identification with Italy
and resentment toward America” from its Italian American audience. \textsuperscript{18}

Well aware of this mindset, United States officials seized on any opportunity to hamper any
sign of Italian unification. Less than two weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor, any Italian
Americans over the age of fourteen and categorized as enemy aliens were interned at Ellis Island

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.,
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.,81
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.,82-83
\textsuperscript{17} Salvemini, Gaetano. \textit{Italian Fascist Activities in the United States}. p.10
or brought to camps in Missoula, Montana. “By January 1942, the status of enemy alien was extended to all aliens of Italian descent.” 19 Extreme measures were employed in Italian enclaves on the West Coast including the implementation of “restricted zones” designed by government issued signs. The plan ordered any “aliens” of Italian descent to relocate to an area not affected by zoning laws. Also put into effect were curfew laws which not only forbid Italians to leave their homes in the time between 8:00pm-6:00am, but prevented them from traveling farther than five miles away from their dwellings. Statistics show that by February 1942, “10,000 Italian Americans were subject to evacuation” and by the following month, “the evacuation and resettlement of as many as 200,000 Italians...from 86 forbidden zones in California alone was being planned by the U.S. government.” Though plans for resettlement on the East Coast did not go as planned, Italians aliens as well as naturalized citizens, were subject to harassment. Italians were instructed to “carry photo identification booklets with them at all times, and were subjected to various travel restrictions.” They also were required to handover any “cameras, weapons, flashlights, and short wave radios” to government officials, particularly FBI agents who unfeelingly barged into the homes of several Italian Americans, demanding the expropriation of such property. 20 Additionally, institutions founded in an Italian heritage were beleaguered. Centers devoted to the instruction of the Italian language were closed; meeting within fraternal organizations continued to monitor, even the Bank of Italy founded by Amadeo Pietro Giannini was impelled to change its name to Bank of America as “Mussolini’s unpopularity began to rub off.” 21 It has become evident, that the war against Italy was a war against all Italians. “They felt war would

20 Ibid.,164-67
mean further discrimination against them,” and it did. 22 As a result of such restrictions, many Italians lost their jobs, which made it more difficult to find affordable housing, which was already lacking, if forced to relocate. Curfew laws coupled with traveling restrictions made manifest the biggest fear of Italians—the breakdown of the family. “A man by the name of Giuseppe DiMaggio could not even visit the restaurant of his son, Joe DiMaggio.” 23 Though a small-scale example, excluding a far more complex examination of the Italian family during this era, the meaning behind it seems sufficient. Fortunately, on October 12, 1942, Columbus Day, it was announced, “Italian nationals would no longer be classified as enemies.” 24 However, this declaration applied only to those Italians considered free, or not confined in an internment camp.

For those in the camps, the story was somewhat different. Though each man was promised a fair trial, they were ultimately denied of their constitutional right. Instead they were separated from their families and without a hearing or notification of the charges against them, shipped away into the interior. Much of their time was spent “performing chores to the upkeep of the camp” while skilled laborers consisting of blacksmiths and machinists had the opportunity to earn “pin money” which averaged twenty cents a day and which allowed the laborers to make small purchases at the camp store. While camp officers did their best to “engage the men in work which would fill otherwise idle hours,” there was time for recreation. 25 Most men formed soccer or bocce teams, others wrote letters or invested their time in other small hobbies. Still others, formed a band whose talent was immediately recognized by camp officers who offered the men a chance to perform for the townspeople of Missoula on several occasions. While it may seem as if the camp was engulfed in leisure, tensions did arise which produced a few brutal conflicts. In an

24 Ibid.,169
article describing conditions in the camp, it is noted that a protest outside of the messing hall took place because Italians suspected the camp managers of toying with the various ingredients of their diet, and even “hogging more of their fair share of provisions.” To restore order, “a man picked up a suet and threw it at an Italian butcher. Then guards arrived with tear gas grenades, causing the crowd to finally disperse.”  

Tensions continued to escalate within the camp, some even causing a division between pro-Fascist and anti-Fascist Italians. A serious incident occurred when U.S. Public Health service physician, Overall Smiley, entered the camps. Smiley would pride himself in inducing conflict among the men. Worst of all, several reports were made against Smiley for sexual assault including those concerning “bestial prostate exams” as well as an extremely disturbing account of a “very strange treatment meant to cure headaches by introducing a tube of respectable size into the anal orifice of the patient.” As if Smiley had not caused enough trouble, he posted a letter of gratitude from one of the internees in the midst of such accusations which caused an uproar between the pro-Fascist men who would remain loyal to the motherland at all costs and those considered anti-Fascist who were willing to renounce their true identity and glorify a foreign flag, in hopes of terminating Italian prejudice. With Italy’s surrender to Allied forces on September 8, 1943, conditions in the camp became more relaxed. Men were free to interact with members of the town, find jobs, and slowly but surely the camp emptied, finally closing its gates in June 1944. On a similar note, it should be made known that the fear of a Fascist uprising also existed in Canada. Approximately 31,000 Italian Canadians were regarded as enemy aliens and about 600 men were arrested and brought to internment camps like Camp Petawawa, a Canadian military garrison, where majorities of Italian Canadians were sent. Aldo Bacci, son of an Italian Canadian citizen with ties to Fascism remembers, “He

26 Ibid.,
27 Ibid.,
(his father) didn’t come home that night. They took him right from the factory, where he worked. My mother had a nervous breakdown; she went in the hospital for a while. She told me ‘take all the Blackshirts and burn them.’

Though the cruelty born by so many Italians may appear minuscule when compared to the atrocities against Jews in Nazi Germany, there is still no justifying the treatment they received. Although, a brief analysis into the mindset of the major cultures as has been provided does pave the way for further explanation. Information about the Italian American experience in response to Fascism is relatively new, beginning in the late 1990s, and while some questions are answered, more mysteries are unveiled not only about Italians but also about America. Though America prides itself in being a ‘melting pot’ of different cultures, doubts arise about America’s tolerance toward others. Though equality is promised to all, perhaps there is an underlying condescension of anything/anyone not American. Finally, a feeling of uncertainty may encircle the government’s intentions. President Roosevelt lightened “security measures” between 1942-1943 because “he needed the support of Italian Americans—the nation’s largest ethnic group—in the fight against the Axis powers... in the impending invasion of Italy.” However, he failed to acknowledge or show appreciation for “500,000 Italian Americans fighting in the U.S. military,” fighting against their brethren if for nothing else but to earn the respect of Americans.

In a fairly recent attempt to amend the injustices performed against Italians who were wrongfully stripped of their liberties during World War Two, a bill was drafted entitled “The Wartime Violation of Italian American Civil Liberties Act.” Former President Clinton was called upon to “formally acknowledge the violations of the civil liberties of Italian Americans during World War Two.” The purpose of the bill was to “encourage federal agencies to support projects that

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28 “Italian Canadians as Enemy Aliens: Memories of World War II.”
would heighten public awareness of this forgotten episode and to provide financial support for such efforts...recommended was the formation of an advisory committee to assist in the compilation of relevant information regarding the matter.” 30

For over fifty years, Italian Americans have kept silent about the matter and continued to endure further discrimination by not only the American people but also U.S. officials themselves such as J.Edgar Hoover and Robert Kennedy who “turned the whole business of crime into an ethnic conspiracy.” 31 The efforts made by Americans to crush the Italian family and taint the very essence of what it means to be Italian shall not be forgotten. As history tends to repeat itself, perhaps such aggressions are part of an interminable cycle, which will seek revenge in yet another struggle.

30 Ibid.,171
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