



AS ITALIAN *Selena Daly* AS ANYBODY

Italy's entry into the war in 1915 prompted 300,000 men to return to



their homeland to join the fight. Were they Italian enough for Italy?



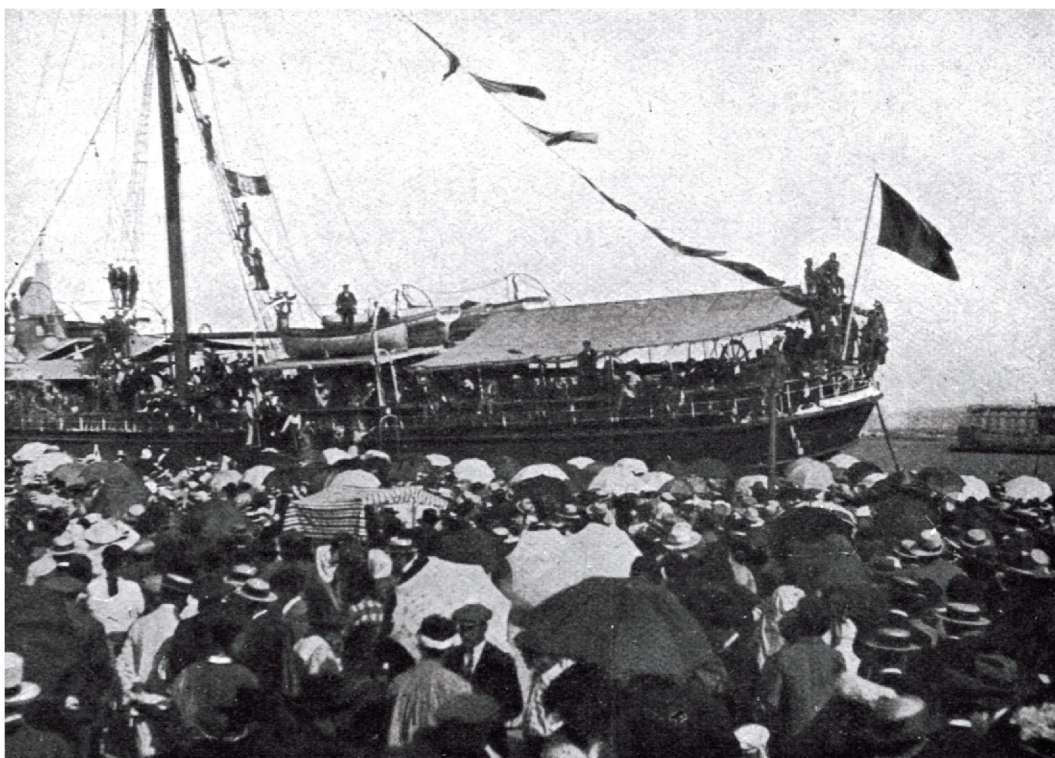
‘War Spirit High in Italian Reservists’ read a headline in the *Democrat and Chronicle* in Rochester, New York

on 25 May 1915. Two days later the *Vancouver Daily World* proclaimed: ‘Local Italians Keen to Join the Colors.’ Following Italy’s entry into the First World War on 23 May, similar stories appeared in newspapers from Nice to New York, from Sydney to Suez, from Buenos Aires to Boston, as over 300,000 Italian emigrants gathered to answer their country’s call to arms and return to serve in the Italian army.

The First World War is often remembered as an overwhelmingly static conflict, with soldiers engaged in a years-long struggle over a few metres of land. But beyond the claustrophobic confines of the trenches of the Western Front, the war was characterised by an intense mobility of people. In Europe, up to ten million civilians were displaced and labourers were shipped over from China, Southeast Asia, and Africa. Millions of soldiers from European colonies and territories were mobilised and, after 1917, some two million American ‘doughboys’ crossed the Atlantic to serve alongside the Allies.

The mass mobilisation of emigrants, however, was a uniquely Italian phenomenon. German reservists in North and South America were prevented from returning due to the naval blockade, and only minuscule numbers of British and French emigrants made the journey home: during the entire war, a maximum of 2,300 French emigrants travelled to the Western Front. In comparison, in New York alone on a single day in May 1915, more than twice this number of Italian men registered their intention to return to Europe to fight. On the eve of the war, citizens living abroad constituted one-sixth of Italy’s population, numbering roughly five million people. During the war years 300,000 of them travelled to Italy to fight: 100,000 came from the United States; 50,000 from Argentina and Brazil; 90,000 from France, and the remainder from elsewhere in Europe and North Africa.

In statistical terms, emigrants constituted 7.2 per cent of the Italian army’s fighting force of 4.2 million men. This percentage is higher than that of the Australian and New Zealand troops who fought with the British army during the war and the colonial, mainly African, subjects who fought for the French army.



Opposite: the Italian consulate in Little Italy, New York, 25 May 1915. Previous: Italian-American emigrants returning to Italy, 1915.

Above: Italian emigrants departing from Tunisia, 1915.

‘Five days after Italy’s entry into the war, the first ship departed from Buenos Aires bound for Italy with 700 mobilised men on board’

However, while colonial and imperial troops were mustered into separate battalions and expeditionary forces, Italian emigrants, once on native soil, were immediately subsumed into the mobilisation structure of their, or their fathers’, hometowns. The fact that they were not identified as a discrete group in military terms in part explains their relative invisibility in accounts of Italy’s war.

‘Defend your patria’

After war broke out in Europe in summer 1914 Italy declared neutrality and spent the next nine months negotiating with both sides, eventually signing the secret Treaty of London in April 1915, which committed the country to enter the war alongside the Allies within a month. Five days after they did so, the first ship from the Americas departed from Buenos Aires bound for Italy with 700 mobilised men on board. By 5 June the first departures from the US and North Africa had taken place. Each ship was waved off by crowds bestowing flowers, medals, and cigarettes on the men. As the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported in June 1915: ‘The same ships that brought over the macaroni, olive oil, sardines, wines, cheese,









Opposite: Italian soldiers
in a trench, 7 July 1918.
Previous: Italian
emigrants aboard the
Duca degli Abruzzi,
5 June 1915.

Above: military camps
on the Pasubio, Veneto,
Italy, 1915-18.

‘The same ships that brought over the macaroni, olive oil, and marble to Brooklyn took back to Italy the guns, aeroplanes and the troops to use them’

artichokes and marble to Brooklyn took back to Italy automobiles, powder, guns, aeroplanes and the troops to use them.’ Reports of the departures filled the press for months, so much so that by the following March the Buenos Aires newspaper *La patria degli italiani* had to admit that there was nothing new to add to accounts of the voyages, so familiar had they become: ‘What can the pen describe after so many reports of the same type? The readers know the scene as well as if they had been there themselves.’

But why, in May 1915, nine months after the conflict had broken out in Europe, would so many men rush off to fight in the war? Some emigrants were, of course, motivated by sincere patriotism and a desire to claim the Italian-speaking territories of Trentino and Trieste from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Such a motivation resonated most strongly with those hailing from the better-educated middle classes, much as was the case in Italy. Patriotic feeling was also generally stronger among those young men who had either been born or raised outside Italy, usually in the Americas, and brought up on a diet of parental nostalgia.

Many, though, were not necessarily patriotic but had a cultural attachment to Italy and a general feeling that returning to serve was the right thing to do. Even some of those who were extremely well integrated into their adopted nations heeded the call to return. Oreste Maresca had emigrated from Italy as a boy and had been working on the railroads in Pocatello, Idaho since he was 11 years old; at the war's outbreak, he was proud to be employed as a boiler maker – in his words 'a good job with steady wages'. As he told Italian-American journalist Gino Speranza in 1916-17, he lived just like all his American workmates and felt so Americanised that he had even attempted to vote in a presidential election despite not being a citizen. He had declined to return to Italy for his two mandatory years of military service and yet, when war came, for reasons that were, he admitted, 'kind of confused in my mind', he determined that he had to go.

Youthful naivety, often coupled with a desire for adventure, revealed itself as a common motivator; as was the case in Europe, there was often little understanding of what the war would entail. As Pietro Balsamo, who returned to Italy from the US, recalled in an interview many years later, 'we were total innocents, we did not know why we were fighting in that war, we did not understand anything at all'. The widespread speculation that Italy's entry into the war would be so decisive that Austria-Hungary would be forced to request an armistice within a few months meant that even the most patriotic of emigrant recruits did not necessarily believe they would see action. Vincenzo D'Aquila, born in Palermo but raised in New York, recalled in his 1931 memoir *Bodyguard Unseen* that he and his fellow emigrants 'looked upon the voyage as an agreeable cruise or junket, expecting either to spend a few months visiting the art centers of Italy or at worst to enjoy the pleasures of camp life in the invigorating summer mountain air'.

Despite issuing mobilisation orders to emigrants, the Italian government had limited power to compel them to return to serve. The main incentive they could offer was a negative one: if men did not respond to the draft, they would be subject to severe penalties at a later date should they return to Italy, including lengthy prison sentences. The dilemma was summed up by one emigrant, Luigi Niccolo,

in an interview with Philadelphia's *Evening Ledger* in August 1915. The paper's journalist captured Niccolo's Italian intonation, quoting him as saying: 'If I go to fight for It-a-lee, I become a hero ... If I go not to answer the summons of my coun-tree, I am not arrested here, but I may gaze upon that sunny It-a-lee nevermore.' Initially, many parents urged their children to return so as not to bring the shame of draft evasion on the family. One father in Florence wrote to his son in Cairo that his mobilisation order had arrived and that he should do his duty: 'Make sure you are not absent, I am forcing you. You are Italian and you must defend your patria.'

A frosty welcome

No matter the circumstances surrounding their departure, the journeys, whether via train from Britain and France or by steamship across the Mediterranean and Atlantic, were universally depicted as joyful occasions in the press. The reality of the situation, however, soon became clear. The risks of crossing the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, for example, were far from insignificant. The ships transporting Italian emigrants had to contend with the presence of German and Austrian stowaways, spies, and saboteurs and the omnipresent threat of submarine attack. In September 1915, as multiple newspapers reported, an explosion occurred on the *Sant'Anna* liner while it was 1,000 miles off the coast of Nova Scotia, on its way from New York to Marseille with 1,700 Italian emigrants on board. The men received their first opportunity to act like soldiers as they battled the flames for three days before making it safely to the Azores with no loss of life. Eighteen bombs, many of them exploded, were discovered in the hold. Thereafter, more stringent checks were imposed at American ports and a few days later a plan to blow up another Italian liner with dynamite was thwarted.

When the emigrants reached the front lines the first shock for many of them was the weather. The Italian front snaked for 300 kilometres through Alpine peaks with altitudes of up to 3,000 metres, as well as the Isonzo river valley, and the limestone Carso plateau. Much like soldiers from the most southerly reaches of the Italian peninsula, those men who had travelled from North Africa or South America were unaccustomed to the cold that they encountered

at the front lines. Gaspare Ariotto from Rosario in Argentina claimed in a letter to a newspaper back home that the only thing he was scared of was the cold: 'That frightens us more than Austrian bullets.'

Compared to their non-emigrant counterparts, emigrant soldiers faced a host of additional problems. Letters were a lifeline for all mobilised men but emigrants had to contend with long delays and expense when sending and receiving correspondence from abroad. Cigarettes were also a powerful morale booster for front-line soldiers, but for the emigrant conscript, the difficulty – in many cases, impossibility – of procuring his preferred foreign brand of cigarette was just another reminder of the distance from home. Americo Orlando felt this lack acutely and asked his mother in São Paulo to send him some Brazilian cigarettes. He was overjoyed when in February 1917 – nine months after he had first requested them – nine precious packets of Yolanda cigarettes arrived from his mother: 'I will bless you with every puff I take', he told her. Within a few weeks they were almost all gone: 'They are so good that sometimes I smoke until I burn my lips.'

As Italian as anybody

Of more consequence, though, than these practical issues were the interpersonal and existential problems emigrant soldiers encountered. For those who had been born or spent long periods abroad – and who were essentially encountering Italy for the first time – integration into the army was not a smooth process. Many of these men had cultivated identities and senses of self around being Italian only to arrive in Italy and find themselves treated as foreigners. Benito Mussolini, writing in his war diary, recalled meeting a soldier named Ezio Lucchetti who had been born and raised in Constantinople by Italian parents. He spoke Italian, Mussolini wrote, 'with a slight exotic accent that was a bit Turkish and a bit French'. His fellow soldiers nicknamed him 'the little Arab', which enraged Lucchetti who would object loudly that he was as Italian as anybody else.

As this example indicates, a significant obstacle for many emigrants was the Italian language. Most of the emigrants dealt with the resulting feelings of displacement by seeking out other 'foreigners' with whom they had more

in common than the non-emigrant Italians around them. Robert Di Folco, who had been brought up in Scotland, did not speak much Italian upon his arrival in February 1918. He noted in his diary that he preferred to associate with a group of other Anglophone Italians from Ireland, Scotland, and England that he had met on the journey to Italy – 'a happy little band' who nicknamed themselves 'the Allies'. Many young men returned from Egypt to their fathers' hometown of Livorno and frequented the local caf  s as they awaited enlistment. Gino Arbib, a grenadier, recalled the atmosphere in a letter published in an Egyptian newspaper in July 1915: 'There are many of us and we are so united that sometimes we are surprised to be in a city so far from Egypt; and to complete our illusion is the ease with which we can meet ... these groups of young men happily speaking Arabic with each other, to the amazement of those around [us].' Even when emigrants had not been abroad for very long, they could find that it was easier to speak to others in English, French, or Spanish than try to communicate using their different dialects of Italian, which were often unintelligible to one another.

Another issue particular to the returning emigrants was that of attitude and how they were received by other Italians. Although in strictly legal terms the emigrants were merely complying with mandatory conscription orders like all other soldiers, many felt that they had chosen magnanimously to bestow their service on the Italian army. As a result, the emigrants were often particularly affronted when what awaited them in Italy was not the hero's welcome and unstinting praise that they had expected. By early December 1915 the crowds greeting the ships and trains in Italy had thinned and public attention had grown somewhat tired of the spectacle of returning *americani*. Cesare Mainella arrived from the Argentinian summer to a cold and rainy December day in Genoa and was indignant that 'there was nobody to greet us apart from the carabinieri'. More than a year into his front-line service, Gio Bono Ferrari, who had grown up between Italy and Argentina, was imprisoned on a disciplinary matter for eight days on a bread and water diet with only dirty straw to sleep on. As he would put it in his memoir, he was insulted that he, of all soldiers,

should be treated in this way – he who ‘had come voluntarily from America!’

It is clear from their letters and diaries that, in general, the emigrant soldiers were not singled out for special treatment, which often came as an unpleasant surprise. The responses they met with ranged from indifference to open hostility. Family members were, of course, pleased to get the opportunity to see long-departed relations, although Americo Orlando’s relatives were surprised at the patriotism of their Brazilian-born cousin. As he wrote to his mother in 1916: ‘They did not expect that I would be a young courageous defender of the patria.’ To his great shock, Vincenzo D’Aquila realised upon his arrival in Naples that people were ‘too preoccupied with their own daily struggle for their bread and cheese, to give a tinker’s dam whether we came over or not.’ He recalled in his memoir that other soldiers branded them ‘fools, donkeys, boneheads and other choice expressions of contempt’ as the arrival of fresh manpower from abroad was increasingly blamed for allowing the government to prolong the war. D’Aquila’s attitude changed quickly: ‘Frankly, we felt rather sheepish ... Could it be possible we were not wanted? Our full-blown bubble of self-glorification was finally beginning to burst.’

‘The best of our troops’

Throughout the war the returning emigrants would pose a problem for the media and military authorities in Italy alike. While there was recognition that their actions were special, it was problematic to single them out for praise for doing the legal duty required of them as Italian citizens. During the years of the war emigrant soldiers virtually disappeared from official pronouncements and press reports. One of the few to write about them was Mussolini. Having been expelled from the Socialist Party in 1914 for his stridently pro-interventionist views, by 1915 he was serving in the army and editing his bestselling pro-war newspaper *Il Popolo d’Italia*, where, in 1916, he serialised his wartime diary. Mussolini highlighted the unusual patriotism of the emigrant soldiers and concluded that these ‘Italians from America’ were ‘the best part of our troops at the front’, the purportedly voluntary nature of their service emphasised in attempts to motivate a war-weary population.

For the same reason, the figure of the emigrant soldier also became a trope in new schoolbooks. In the 1916 textbook *Italia nostra!* the returning soldiers were held up as paragons of duty, patriotism, and self-sacrifice, who willingly surrendered their comfortable lives abroad, ‘burning with enthusiasm ... impatient to grab a rifle’. Such positive representations were few and far between, however, and, in any case, unlikely to reach the ears of the men themselves.

As the war dragged on it became more difficult for soldiers of all origins to keep up their morale. Disillusionment and the feeling that their sacrifices were undervalued and unrecognised were common among mobilised conscripts. While virtually all soldiers wished for a swift conclusion to the war and to be able to return home, such feelings were heightened for the emigrants who realised that, in the vast majority of cases, had they not returned they could have continued to live in safety abroad. Within a few months of Italy’s entry into the war, intense feelings of regret surfaced for many emigrants, even those who had previously been patriotic. In sentiments echoed across innumerable letters collected in the archive of the military censorship office, housed in the State Archives in Rome, men like Francesco, who had left his home in Oakland, California, lamented to his nephew: ‘What did I do by coming to Italy! What great sin must I have committed to be punished in this way? If I had dreamed of something like this, certainly I would have stayed in America ... I curse the hour that I returned.’

Accompanying these regrets were often stark changes to soldiers’ self-conceptions and feelings of national identity. Having moved to New York as a baby, part of Esterino Tarasca’s motivation in returning had been a desire to connect with the country of his birth, but within a few months he had changed his mind. He wrote of the ‘foolishness I showed in not becoming a naturalized American’ and quipped to his friend that ‘there won’t be any hyphens connected with me when I get back’. Finding himself largely confined to a desk job Tarasca had been almost entirely disabused of his fantasies about the soldiering life. He told a friend in 1916 that his time in the army had consisted of nothing but ‘trickeries, misplaced faith and broken promises’ and that he was angry both for himself and ‘for all the other



Italian troops in
a front-line trench,
Doberdò, Italy, 1916-18.

‘If I had dreamed
of something
like this, certainly
I would have stayed
in America ...
I curse the hour
that I returned’

poor fools that came over from America’.

On 3 November 1918 Italy and Austria-Hungary signed an armistice. The emigrant soldiers’ joy at war’s end was, however, tempered by a slow and chaotic process of demobilisation and discharge, which would become a major political issue in 1919. Over two-thirds of the surviving emigrant veterans chose to leave Italy as soon as they were able. It has been argued that the experience of combat in the First World War transformed men from ‘peasants into Italians’. While this may have been true for those who had never lived outside of Italy, it was not the case for the emigrant veterans. Their experience and treatment during and after the war definitively weakened whatever earlier feelings of attachment they may have had to Italy. The almost universal desire to leave Italy shows just how weak the veterans’ ties were to the nation for which they had just spent three years fighting.

Selena Daly is Associate Professor of Italian Studies at University College London and the author of *Emigrant Soldiers: Mobilising Italians Abroad in the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2025).

Copyright of History Today is the property of History Today Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.