

Italian Migration

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Summary

Between 1880 and 1920 thousands of Italians left Italy to migrate to other countries, especially the United States, Canada, Argentina, and Chile. This paper will consider the negative reasons for their leaving their homeland and the positive reasons (real and imaginary) that encouraged them to do so. I will also write about the actual effect of emigration on Italy and on the emigrants.

Italian Migration

According to immigration, steamship, and census records, more than 5 million Italians have left their homeland and came to the United States seeking a better life. (See chart below.) While each immigrant had very personal reasons for making the move, there are certainly some factors that figured more importantly than others in their decisions.

Italian Immigration to the United States¹

1821-1830	409	1901-1910	2,045,877
1831-1840	2,253	1911-1920	1,109,524
1841-1850	1,870	1921-1930	455,315
1851-1860	1,9231	1931-1940	68,028
1861-1870	11,725	1941-1950	57,661
1871-1880	55,759	1951-1960	185,491
1881-1890	307,309	1961-1970	307,617
1891-1900	651,893	1971-1975	93,5506
		Total	5,269,992

It would seem, of course, that the search for a better life was the most common reason, this being the desire for a higher standard of living, including both economic and social goals. Of specific interest is the fact that the largest percentage of Italians who immigrated to America were from the southern regions of Italy, including Sicily and the lands south of Naples, which traditionally are the poorest and most stigmatized regions of Italy.

Prior to 1861, these lands comprised the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and were ruled by a Bourbon king in Naples. With Garibaldi's successful campaign to unite Italy into one nation, northern Italians gained control of the new and highly fragmented nation. Contrary to the myth of the times, southern Italy was not the idyllic homeland one might read about in poetry.

There was a common and curious belief in northern Italy that Sicily was one of the most fertile countries in Europe... This was patently untrue. Free trade after 1861 removed a cushion insulating the island from a fierce and competitive outside world.... Standards of living diminished for many people as her handicrafts began to collapse; and over the next forty years the traditional Sicilian industries continued to decline.²

¹ Bernardo, Stephanie, *The Ethnic Almanac*, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1981, p. 29.

² Finley, M. I., Smith, Denis Mack and Duggan, Christopher, *A History of Sicily*, New York: Viking Penguin Inc. 1987, pp. 185-186.

Southern Italian agriculture and industry had to compete with the new world order established by the Industrial Revolution. The establishment of the factory system and the commercialization of agriculture³ caused the standard of living in southern Italy to further decline.

At the same time, the development of the steamship made migration both easier (reduced from months, the trip was now only five days) and less expensive. (Cunard began providing a regular cross-Atlantic service in 1847.) Steamship companies, in alliance with American industrialists, advertised that America had limitless opportunity.

When one contrasts the inducements to go to America (and not just America but the Western Hemisphere in general) with the conditions in Italy, making the move seems like an easy decision. After 1850, the population of southern Italy grew tremendously, by as much as 25%. The increase in population actually made conditions in Italy worse, as food became more scarce and living conditions more crowded. Inheritance laws favored the first born son, leaving younger sons and daughters, for instance, without an inheritance and therefore an incentive to move where they could build a better future.

Contrary to opinion, though, it was not the poorest Italians who left. Rather it was middle class landowners (or their sons and daughters) and artisans adversely affected by the Industrial Revolution that made the journey.

Closer analysis reveals that the very poor seldom left... Usually those who left were in the middle and lower-middle levels of the peasantry. Supplementing this stream was a characteristic segment of artisans, craftsmen, and others with skills which were increasingly difficult to implement in societies undergoing either a commercialization in agriculture or growing competition with manufactured goods.⁴

In spite of this, many Italians who came to America were employed at the lowest levels of the economic scale, most as common laborers and in factories under adverse conditions. Their reception in America wasn't as welcome as one might think either as is illustrated by the derogatory names given to them by old-stock Americans: "wops," "dagos," and "just as bad as Negroes."⁵ These sentiments were not limited to Americans, either, as northern Italians had a poor opinion of their southern compatriots as well.

These feelings stemmed from significant cultural differences. Southern Italians came from a culture that put the highest regard on the family, to the detriment of all other institutions including church and state.⁶ Immigrants to America by their tendency to stick together and to live in Italian ghettos did little to help this prejudice. They lived in Italian

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 191.

⁴ Bodnar, John, *The Transplanted, A History of Immigrants in Urban America*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985, p. 20.

⁵ Dinnerstein, Leonard, and Reimers, David M., *Ethnic Americans, A History of Immigration*, New York: Columbia University Press, XXXX, p. 54.

⁶ Tomasi, S. M., *Perspectives in Italian Immigration and Ethnicity*, Staten Island: Center for Migration Studies, 1977, p 103.

neighborhoods, went to Italian-speaking churches, and generally did much to try to preserve their Old World heritage in the face of overwhelming odds.

Though it is not the purpose of this essay, such ghetto-ization was to bring conflict to the psyches of the immigrant's children and grandchildren, who became increasingly Americanized and less and less inclined to retain their immigrant forefathers' values.

Immigration, though, was not merely a one-way street. Nearly one-third of all Italian immigrants to the United States eventually returned home. Again reasons for their doing so are as varied as the immigrants themselves.

A comparison of information released by immigration and steamship company authorities shows conclusively that emigration from the United States prior to 1908 as anything but new. This had been going on for years. Official statistics show that from 1887 to 1907, 2,231,961 Italians departed for the United States while 972,695 returned to Italy. Immigration officials conjectured that the causes for the large movement out of the United States could not be attributed solely to the lack of employment opportunities, except in periods of depression. They assumed that dissatisfaction with life in the United States, poor health, the desire to be with relatives and friends, and the fulfillment of an ambition to make money and return home to lead a life of ease, influenced these departures.⁷

For many, then, America was a way to improve one's lot, either by becoming successful in "*la terra del dollaro e del dolore*"⁸ or by gaining enough in America to be able to return to Italy with the financial means of achieving a better life back home.

Not only did immigration to America change the lives of those who emigrated, it touched the lives of those left behind as well. Italians in America remembered their families in Italy with frequent gifts of money; some was meant to allow those who remained in Italy to come to America but much was simply to help those in Italy live a better life. For example, by 1907 "the huge sum of a hundred million lire a year in remittances by émigrés to their families at home"⁹ was being sent back to Italy. In the meantime the large numbers of those who emigrated meant that the price of labor in southern Italy increased as well. The decline in population, in that regard, actually helping to improve the conditions of those who remained in Italy.

By the early 1900's, too, many of those who had succeeded in making their fortunes in America returned home to retire, bringing with them not only their savings but the realization that there were better ways to live and to work. With their savings they invested in their native land and with what they had accomplished they were no longer willing to accept the old ways of deference to the *notabili*.¹⁰

⁷ Greer, Colin, Editor, *Divided Society, The Ethnic Experience in America*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1974, p 136.

⁸ Tomasi, p 25.

⁹ Finley, *et. al.*, pp. 203.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

So immigration influenced change on both sides of the Atlantic: the labor of millions of Italian Americans contributed to the continued growth of the United States and the support and/or return of those same immigrants forever changed the face of Italy.

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