

Little Italy in the Great War: Philadelphia's Italians on the Battlefield and Home Front by Richard N. Juliani. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020. 314pp.

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This book paints a richly textured tapestry of the experience of Italian Americans on the eve of, during, and in the immediate aftermath of World War I, taking for its model Philadelphia's Little Italy. Juliani tells the vivid, dramatic story of an entire immigrant community, pulled in multiple directions by competing identities, allegiances, and interests—towards *la madre patria* many had recently left, and towards the adoptive country to which they had come in search of a better life.

One of the more fascinating aspects of this story concerns Rome's substantial efforts to persuade Italian citizens abroad to go back and fight under its flag. These efforts mixed ardent appeals to patriotism with the threat of losing the right of return for those who did not heed the call to military duty and the various measures blocking their relatives, spouses, prospective spouses, and children from leaving Italy to join them. The book thus offers a helpful corrective to prevailing accounts of individual participation in the Great War as driven by a surge of nationalist passions sweeping across Europe and trampling on class consciousness and narrow material interests. To be sure, many Italian Americans did volunteer to fight for their ancestral homeland primarily out of nationalist fervor. This appears to have been the case with Vincenzo D'Aquila, whose rediscovered autobiography *Bodyguard Unseen* (1931) was translated into Italian as *Io, Pacifista in Trincea* and reviewed in *Italian Americana* (XXXVIII [Winter 2000]: 79-82). For many others, however, the choice of dropping everything and traveling across the globe to risk violent death must not have been that obvious, hence the need for the deployment of the coercive power of the Italian state.

Ultimately about 100,000 out of 600,000 eligible Italian "reservists" in the United States made their way across the Atlantic to fight against Austrian forces, roughly the same number of Italians that served on the Western front under the colors of the American Expeditionary Force. Incidentally, the broader American population displayed a similar, all too human, reluctance to willingly go in harm's way: the explosion of patriotism when the United States entered into the war, manifested in rallies and parades throughout the country, did not translate into sufficient flows of volunteers, requiring the adoption of a selective draft.

The fine-grained nature of the account of events related to Philadelphia's Italian-American community is a point of strength of the book. Yet it also highlights its main weakness: amidst such a detailed narrative, some readers may struggle to follow the author's voice and grasp his main line of argument. What is more, Juliani does not leverage the wealth of information at his disposal to systematically achieve his goal "to examine the impact of the war on the [Italian American] men who served in the rank of the [US] military and civilians who defended the nation in industrial and civic roles on the home front" and thus provide "a better understanding of the relationship of war to such matters as diversity and assimilation" (p. 5), often opting for story telling (well-documented as it is) over structured comparisons. Take for example a central claim of the book that the experience of Italian Americans performing essential functions on the home front and even more so of those fighting on the Western Front influenced powerfully their assimilation as Americans (pp. 42-43, 65, 122, 256). Though the thesis is plausible (and it is in line with more general claims in sociology, political science, and evolutionary biology about the effects of violent conflict on ethnic and national attachments), Juliani fails to offer systematic evidentiary support for it. Future studies may try to fill this gap by engaging in a careful comparison of the trajectories of social and political integration for three groups of Italian Americans: those that fought for Uncle Sam in World War I, those that contributed to the war effort on the home front, and those that joined the Italian military ranks but eventually returned to the US.

Despite these flaws, one can only be grateful to Juliani for providing such a granular view of the lives of Philadelphia's Italian Americans at this critical juncture in history.