

**Good Americans:
Italian and Jewish
Immigrants During the
First World War**

CHRISTOPHER M. STERBA

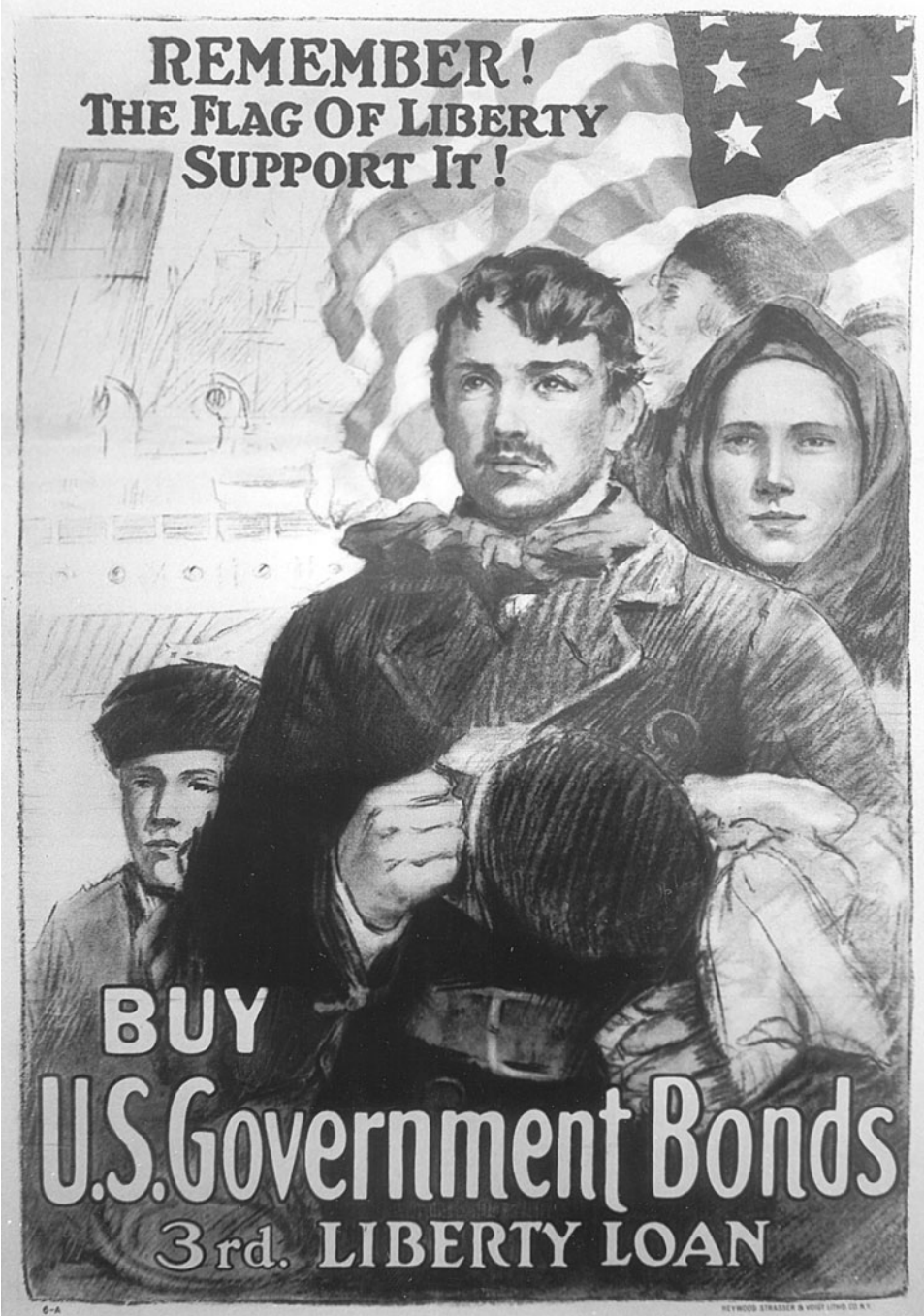
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ITALIAN AND JEWISH IMMIGRANTS

DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR ★★

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Printed in the United States of America
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To my parents, Frank and Shirley

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Contents

	Introduction	<i>The Melting Pot Goes to War</i>	3
	1	The Heyday of the New Immigrant Enclave	9
***	I	Your Country Needs You	31
	2	"Get in Out of the Draft"	
		<i>Raising Volunteers and the Italian Response in New Haven</i>	34
	3	"Not as a Jew but as a Citizen"	
		<i>The Draft and New York Jewry</i>	53
***	II	Training the New Immigrant Soldier	83
	4	Being Italian in the Yankee Division	86
	5	Being Jewish in the National Army	105
***	III	The Home Front	131
	6	"More Than Ever, We Feel Proud to Be Italians"	133
	7	"New York Jewry Must Do Its Duty"	153
	8	"They Were Good Americans"	
		<i>Survival and Victory on the Western Front</i>	175
		Epilogue	<i>A New Voice in Politics</i> 202
		Notes	213
		Selected Bibliography	251
		Index	265

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GOOD AMERICANS

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Introduction

The Melting Pot Goes to War

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Private Abraham Krotoshinsky was in serious trouble on the night of October 7, 1918. A member of the famous “Lost Battalion” surrounded in the Argonne Forest, Krotoshinsky had made his way through enemy positions in a desperate attempt to find relief for his starving and casualty-ridden unit. By sprinting through machine-gun fire, inching along flat on his stomach, and even pretending to be a corpse, he had eluded capture for more than ten hours. “Then my real trouble began,” he recalled, as he neared American trenches. “I was coming from the German lines and my English is none too good. I was afraid they would shoot me for a German before I could explain who I was.” Deciding to call out “hello” several times, “since [the enemy] never used that expression when he tried to talk English,” the young Polish Jew was able to convince nearby doughboys that he too was a U.S. soldier. Despite the fact that he had gone through the same process of training and combat duty as his American-born comrades, his eastern European background nearly cost him his life.¹

The image of Krotoshinsky caught in the middle of No Man’s Land suggests both the extent and the limits of the Great War as an acculturating experience for millions of southern and eastern European immigrants in the United States. These “New Immigrants,” as they were popularly known, arrived in America between the 1880s and the outbreak of the World War in 1914. Among them were approximately 6 million Italians and eastern European Jews, who, compelled by poverty at home and lured by the tremendous industrial growth of the United States, left the social and economic turmoil of their home countries. The poverty and exploitation they endured in America are well documented. So are the bigotry and nativism they confronted, which considered them incapable of assimilating the culture and mores of the United States. To much of the native born public, these newcomers were much less desirable than the British, Irish, German, and Scandinavian immigrants of the so-called Old Immigration from northern and

western Europe that had predominated up to the 1870s. As the country entered the war, America's Italians, Jews, Slavs, Greeks, and other southern and eastern European immigrants were very much in the process of breaking down social and political barriers. Much like Private Krotoshinsky, they still sought the recognition and acceptance of their American-born peers.

To gauge the effect of the war on the new immigrants' settlement in the United States, this study examines the experiences of two specific populations, the Italian *colonia* of New Haven and the eastern European Jewish enclaves of New York City. These two communities were the largest immigrant groups in their respective cities, and helped to produce two of the most compelling military units of the American war effort: an all-Italian machine gun company, and Private Krotoshinsky's own highly decorated organization, the so-called "Melting Pot" Seventy-seventh Division. Making such a significant contribution to the war effort both at home and abroad, these New Haven Italians and New York Jews offer a particularly vivid example of what it meant to be a European immigrant in America during the Great War.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these two groups developed strong communities with very little outside aid or interference. From scratch they had built an impressive range of religious institutions, mutual aid societies, newspapers, and ethnic businesses. Their contact with the federal government was minimal, unlikely to extend beyond Ellis Island, the post office, and an occasional census taker. But in the spring of 1917 they faced a barrage of appeals to participate in a conflict that had been raging in their homelands for three years, a war that had cut off the stream of migration that had brought them to America. In addition to providing soldiers like Private Krotoshinsky for military service, new immigrant men and women "did their bit" in dozens of other ways. They bought Liberty Bonds and War Savings Stamps, gave money to agencies like the Red Cross and Jewish Welfare Board, and obeyed the government's numerous demands for food and fuel conservation. Collectively these activities and others represented the first national experience that the "newest immigrant races" shared with the native-born public. Never again would they be as culturally and politically isolated as they were before 1917.²

Focusing on their experiences, I have asked three central questions of the years 1917–1919, each addressing an important weakness in our historical understanding of ethnicity in the early twentieth century. First, how did the American war effort confront the southern and eastern European immigrant communities of the United States? What were the points of contact, conflict, and consensus? Historians have focused on the repressive treatment of German Americans and immigrant radicals while neglecting the wartime experiences of other ethnic groups. Was that treatment the same for the Italians of New Haven, who solidly supported the war, and for the Jews of New York, whose attitudes were strongly divided? As important, given the

rushed and haphazard character of America's military mobilization, how much of the war effort specifically targeted the nation's immigrants?

My second question focuses on the new immigrants' perspective on the war. How did they respond during the nineteen months of American belligerency? What level of support, resistance, or resignation did they demonstrate in response to the various calls for loyalty, soldiers, money, and industrial production? In the popular view, the American home front was extremely polarized, a struggle between an intolerant and even self-interested prowar crowd and a highly principled opposition movement. While the two immigrant groups of this study might have responded in similar ways, even more important was their continuing identification with their homelands. Italy was an ally of the United States and had been fighting the war since 1915. Czarist Russia, from which most of New York's Jews emigrated, disintegrated on the eve of American intervention, and the revolutionary governments that followed took the lead in asking for a negotiated end to the war. The conflict's destructiveness also boosted the Zionist movement for an independent Jewish state. How did these ethnic ties and concerns play out on the American home front? Did the American-born children of these immigrants view the war in similar terms?

The third and final question is the most critical. How should we understand the long-term significance of the war for the "New Immigration" to America? For the most part we continue to view the first decades of the twentieth century in bits and pieces, often defining them as "eras" and "periods" even though these successive events—the Progressive Era followed by the World War, the Red Scare, the Roaring Twenties, and the Great Depression—may have lasted just a few years in duration. But now that more than eighty years have passed since the end of the war, we should be able to step further back and see larger developments and trends that have shaped the meaning of American ethnicity and democracy through to the present day. The context I found most appropriate for this study is the first fifty years of the southern and eastern European immigrant experience in America. During that time, from roughly the mid-1880s to the mid-1930s, the nation's new immigrant communities rose from random groups of individuals struggling in a new country to a major political force during the New Deal years. What role, if any, did the "war to make the world safe for democracy" play in this transformation?

As these questions suggest, I see the need for new emphases in the interpretation of immigration and ethnicity in American life. The field of social and ethnic history has moved far from the filiopietism of its early, immigrant practitioners—perhaps too far. The first, mainly amateur historians of communities such as the Italian *colonia* of New Haven and the Jews of New York City were primarily concerned with how to document the lives of group members who had left the confines of their ethnic neighborhoods and played important roles in the making of American history and culture.

In sharp contrast, for the last three to four decades immigration historians have largely ignored national events, while focusing instead on topics such as occupational mobility, generational conflict, labor militancy, class structure, and the impact of consumerism and mass culture.³ Rather than incorporating the country's myriad ethnic groups into a broader narrative of American history, this scholarship leaves its readers with the impression that the nation is only an "imagined community," that each of these populations lived, thought, and made history on their own independent terms and in isolation from one another.⁴

The ultimate goal of the present study is to bring national events and a concern for "contributions" back into the story, without asserting that cultural and political consensus ruled or should rule the land. It seeks to explore not only differences in thought and action between immigrants and their native-born peers, but also their mutual influence on each other. What I have found helpful is to view the immigrant experience as a series of events, both great and small. There are the private events of a person's life—getting married, having children, buying a house, starting a business—that helped bind immigrants to a new environment. There are the community events that are important in the life of an ethnic group—the construction of a synagogue or church, employment in a local industry, the election of "one of our own" to public office—that helped nurture a sense of belonging to a particular place. And then there are national events that have an even broader integrating effect, providing experiences that ethnic groups could share with the larger American public.

The First World War played such a role for the country's newest European immigrants. It offered opportunities for participating in American public life that did not exist prior to 1917. People of Italian and eastern European Jewish descent eventually helped to push the United States in a more cosmopolitan, internationalist, and social democratic direction by embracing and championing a new urban liberalism in the 1930s. The First World War greatly accelerated this process, and perhaps made much of it possible.

The new immigrants' story is told chronologically, with a running comparison between the Italian and Jewish experiences. In chapter 1, I survey the historical development of the two communities in order to gauge the level of settlement and social status each had achieved by the eve of America's entry into the war. An examination of their mass emigration, the employment and residential patterns they created in the new American environment, and the institutions and political influence they had developed by the spring of 1917 will provide a basis for evaluating the war's impact.

In chapters 2 and 3, I describe how these communities responded to the most contentious issue of any war, the recruitment of their young men to fight. Ethnicity played a major role in the mobilization of men both in New Haven and New York. A lackluster recruiting drive for the Connecticut National Guard enabled the Italian colony to make its presence felt. Its

eagerness to form the “Italian machine gun company,” a unit composed entirely of Italian-American volunteers, eliminated any potential criticism that the Italian *colonia* was not giving its all to win the war. In New York, the home of the Civil War draft riots, the first national attempt to conscript men deeply troubled the city’s Jewish population. No other ethnic group contested the draft so vigorously, as immigrant memories of czarist conscription and the strength of the Jewish labor movement and antiwar socialism combined in full force during the summer of 1917. In both cities, federal policy drew the new immigrants into public life, expanding their contact with American institutions whether they supported the war or not.

The focus of chapters 4 and 5 is on the recruits who were pulled out of these communities, new immigrant men who felt the wartime demands of the federal government most keenly. The Italian machine gunners trained in France, while most New York Jewish draftees learned how to become soldiers at Camp Upton on Long Island. They encountered unique language and cultural difficulties, but they also endured military discipline with all doughboys regardless of ethnic background. Most important was the integrative and even liberating impact of the wartime state’s most ambitious project, the creation of the National Army. Composed entirely of conscripts, it did not break the color line. But in placing a higher value on a white recruit’s skills and performance than his class or immigrant background, it marked a major departure from previous military practice and pointed to the eventual desegregation of the armed forces three decades later.

In chapters 6 and 7, I look at the experience of Italian and Jewish immigrants “over here” during the war. Landmark events overseas and important developments on the home front forged a new relationship between new immigrant men and women and their adopted country. The Italian Army’s collapse at Caporetto, the turmoil that raged in Russia, and the promise of a Jewish homeland in Palestine helped to diminish the importance of European local and regional ties, as community members increasingly identified themselves in collective terms as “Italian” and “Jewish” Americans. The government’s domestic war effort, meanwhile, carefully cultivated the immigrants’ support and offered them ample opportunities to participate. For the first time their activities in America received recognition and praise.

In chapter 8, I examine the “Great Crusade” from the perspective of the new immigrant soldiers who fought in it. The Italian machine gunners from New Haven and their Jewish colleagues in “New York’s Own” Seventy-seventh Division experienced the worst the western front had to offer. Their heavy casualties would not be quickly forgotten. Though as a group they rarely made headlines after the war, their strong sense of entitlement and loyalty would be deeply felt by their families and neighborhoods through the middle decades of the twentieth century. These veterans represented an important new attitude toward a culture and society that they and their communities had known for less than two generations.

How Italians and Jews won only temporary recognition from the larger American polity, rather than sustained treatment as social, cultural, and political equals, is the subject of the Epilogue. The wave of nativism and anti-Semitism that engulfed the country in the early 1920s made it clear that their wish to be treated with respect and toleration was still far from being fulfilled. The new immigrants and their children did not respond by retreating back into their enclaves, however. Through the 1920s and into the early 1930s they consolidated their gains as residents and took an increasing interest in the public arena where issues of culture, rights, and citizenship were being played out on a national stage.

Private Abraham Krotoshinsky's dangerous mission in the Argonne Forest did not end when he reached the safety of the American lines. He immediately led a patrol back to help rescue the surrounded Lost Battalion. For his actions, the young immigrant received the Distinguished Service Cross, returned to New York City a celebrated war hero, and became a U.S. citizen.⁵

But Krotoshinsky's ethnic origins still figured very prominently in his thoughts and aspirations. He became a committed Zionist, and in the early 1920s a New York Jewish philanthropist sponsored him as a settler in Palestine. Krotoshinsky struggled as a farmer in a Jewish colony for several years before returning to New York a poor and forgotten man. Then, in 1927, his life took still another curious turn, when a newspaper reported that he was unemployed and penniless, with a wife and two small children to support. On the urging of Harlem Congressman Fiorello LaGuardia, President Calvin Coolidge personally signed an executive order giving the veteran a position as a clerk in a Manhattan post office. Krotoshinsky worked there the rest of his life and passed away in 1953 at the age of sixty.⁶

Millions of Jews, Italians, Slavs, and other new immigrants would go through a similar difficult process of permanent settlement in the United States, though in much less dramatic fashion. Their ties to homeland, region, and village, so strong during the first decades of the twentieth century and perhaps felt most poignantly during the conflagration of 1914–1918, would weaken in the interwar period and beyond. The closing of immigration, and the immigrants' new families, friendships, and responsibilities in their adopted country framed and completed the transplantation of a tremendous variety of cultural, religious, and social and political folkways to the United States.

This book will describe the role that the Great War played in this process and suggests that the themes of participation and inclusiveness, as well as prejudice and coercion, were critical elements of the twentieth-century immigrant experience. The story that unfolds here is one of struggle and sacrifice, of hope and achievement. It describes how the war effort, while temporarily curtailing civil liberties in the United States, would help expand the parameters of American democracy to include millions of immigrants and their children from southern and eastern Europe.

I The Heyday of the New Immigrant Enclave

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America's entrance into the war posed challenges for two populations that were very much in flux. By 1917, New Haven Italians and New York Jews had moved well beyond the initial stage of establishing their housing and employment niches and were now able to rely on a wide range of ethnic institutions. Observers regarded these settlements as foreign cities-within-the-city. The immigrants lived and worked mainly with their kinsmen, bought familiar homeland foods from ethnic grocers, and attended religious services and read newspapers (if they could read) in their own languages. The immediate prewar period was really the heyday of the New Immigrant enclave, when its roots in the American landscape were secure and the adult population was still overwhelmingly made up of immigrants.

Yet despite the fact that the *colonia* of New Haven and the eastern European Jewish communities of New York City were very well developed internally, their influence on the larger American settings was still minor. The two groups were the largest immigrant populations in their respective cities on the eve of the war, but their numbers did not translate into a commensurate level of political clout. For the most part, the two groups enjoyed only token representation on party tickets and did not hold other positions of public trust and authority on an important scale—as teachers, policemen, and professionals—let alone employment in the larger nonethnic businesses, banks, and newspapers that wielded power on the local scene. Though they had been in America for close to four decades, neither community had yet found its voice in mainstream public life.

The war thus came at an important moment for southern and eastern European immigrants and their children in the United States. It called for major, sustained participation in a national effort at a time when the communities were nearly ready to move to the next stage of their settlement, from standing largely outside of the mainstream American public arena to asserting a major role in the politics and society that now shaped their lives.

To understand the response of Italian New Haven and New York Jewry to the war, this chapter focuses on both communities' circumstances before 1917. Their rapid growth, internal diversity, and meager but improving social and political status highlight an important era in American urban history. As was true for the many immigrant groups that came before them, their migration not only created hardships but also cultivated a strong sense of achievement and affirmation. What distinguished the experiences of the southern and eastern European immigrants was the "Great Crusade," the most insistent call for citizenship and participation the nation had ever witnessed. Capping decades of Italian and Jewish "colonization," the world war helped to forge bonds of loyalty and affection toward the United States that even the repression and nativism of the postwar era could not break.

★ *The Italians of New Haven*

An excellent description of the rapid growth and development of new immigrant communities in America can be found in the book, *La Colonia Italiana di New Haven*, published by an Italian printer in 1921. Antonio Cannelli, an immigrant who settled in New Haven, provided the most extensive account of the city's Italian population ever written. His book was hardly a work of rigorous historical analysis. His purpose was simple: to commemorate the achievements of a vibrant ethnic community. With great care and obvious pride, he bound the book's three hundred glossy pages in a red cloth hardcover and decorated its Italian text with hundreds of illustrations. Cannelli describes the immigrants' origins and the struggles they endured in the early years of settlement. But the bulk of his narrative focuses on what he considered the most laudable aspects of Italian New Haven: not the colony's vast majority of laborers and factory hands but its handful of doctors and lawyers; not the hallowed institution of the Italian family but its churches, societies, and newspapers.¹

What Cannelli does best is convey a sense of the *colonia's* substantial roots in the city by the time the United States entered World War I. The first third of his book recounts New Haven's past before the Italians came, describing in detail the city's history, its most noteworthy residents, institutions, parks, and monuments. Only after establishing this American setting does he begin a parallel discussion of the Italian community. In this context the colony's statue of Columbus and its variety of ethnic institutions and businesses appear as worthy contributions to New Haven history. The biographies of men like banker Paul Russo and "theater king" Sylvester Poli strengthen the impression that Italians were actively participating in the city's continued growth. Whether they carried a shovel to work or delivered speeches in City Hall, thousands of Italians now viewed their residence in New Haven as permanent. Their personal pasts and futures had become

intertwined with the history of the Elm City, as Cannelli's book vividly testifies.²

The federal census documents the growth that Cannelli describes in less analytical terms. In 1880 the census recorded only 102 persons of Italian descent in New Haven. By 1920 that number had increased to over 34,000, or more than a fifth of the city's entire population (see table 1.1).

These immigrants came mainly from the southern provinces surrounding Naples and to a lesser degree from Sicily and the north of Italy. The vast majority were from rural, agricultural backgrounds. Living in villages and towns, they worked the land as small landowners, tenant farmers, and casual laborers. The typical home was a one- or two-room stone building, which served as shelter for the family and their chickens and livestock. By the late 1800s, Italy's farming population was well accustomed to producing for a market, migrating considerable distances to find work, and learning whatever skills necessary to make ends meet. Men often supplemented their agricultural work by laboring as fishermen, miners, and building tradesmen, or by offering their services in town as tailors, barbers, and shoemakers. Women worked at home and in the fields, but also in small manufactures, and as dressmakers and laundresses. The Catholic parish was the most prominent local institution. Of increasing importance were the mutual aid associations that offered economic and even educational assistance. New forms of community behavior, fostered by poverty and diminishing prospects, preceded the big step of leaving the country altogether.³

Arriving in New Haven, the Italians were part of a wave of immigration and industrial growth that was transforming the city. New Haven doubled in size between 1890 and 1920, increasing from 81,298 residents to 162,537. By 1910 more than two-thirds of the population were either immigrants or American-born children of foreign or mixed parentage. The older wave of European ethnics, dominated by the Irish but also containing substantial numbers of Germans and other Britons, were primarily second- and third-generation residents. The Italians led the more recent arrivals, followed by a large Jewish community and smaller groupings of Poles, Hungarians, and French-Canadians. The city also had an established African-

Table 1.1 Italian-American Population of the City of New Haven^a

Year	Italian American	New Haven Total	Italian % of Total
1890	2,330	81,298	2.87
1900	7,780	108,027	7.2
1910	21,919	133,605	16.41
1920	34,558	162,537	21.26

^a Myers, "Time Differential Factor," 26–27.

American population, accounting for 2.7 percent of the population in 1910. New Haven Yankees, the descendants of New England's Puritan past, represented only a quarter of local residents when America went to war.⁴

Why the Elm City developed into such a polyglot city is best expressed by the slogan "What New Haven Makes—Makes New Haven." By 1918, eight hundred manufacturers of all shapes and sizes produced 155 different lines of goods. Local weapons, tool, and rubber goods makers were the city's industrial backbone, and firms like the Winchester firearms and Sargent hardware companies enjoyed international recognition. New housing, a variety of municipal projects, and the region's railroad network also provided thousands with construction jobs during the Progressive Era. Italians, like so many other groups, found a very heavy demand for their labor in New Haven.⁵

For the *colonia*, local employment defined three distinct stages of settlement. The first, pioneering stage was sporadic and transient. City directories from the 1860s through the early 1880s list an odd collection of laborers, street musicians, and peddlers. *Padrone*, the notorious labor bosses who exploited immigrants in search of work, lived in the area, controlling the labor of hundreds of Italians. Such a motley group of immigrants, whether "bonded" or free individuals, hardly made for a substantial population. A WPA study notes that they were referred to as "swallows." "A not inappropriate name," the report comments, "when we consider that most of them used to return to Italy for the winter months and come back the following spring."⁶

Yet some of these *pionieri* [pioneers] were able to secure jobs with major city firms, creating a beachhead for the mass migration that soon followed. This second phase of Italian settlement, which covered the high tide years of the late-1880s to 1910, was anchored to specific locations on both sides of the Atlantic. Early migrants linked family and neighbors to a handful of Italian-friendly New Haven companies, and particular towns and villages in the regions of Campania, Calabria, Molise, Abruzzi, and the Marches became the main source of Italian labor. As early as 1890, more than a third of the Sargent hardware company's one thousand shop hands were Italian, and in 1902 the New Haven Railroad employed ten thousand Italians. Thousands of "swallows" continued to arrive for seasonal work through the outbreak of World War I. But the great majority now traveled in well-defined paths with precise work destinations in mind.⁷

This second migration stage included many immigrants who came to provide services for the expanding population. Though most Italians were unskilled and semiskilled workers between 1890 and 1910, a substantial minority also ran their own businesses. By 1900, there were more immigrant proprietors per capita within the *colonia* than there were business owners for the city population as a whole. Among the Italian grocers, butchers, and restaurateurs who catered to homeland food and leisure-ways were those who had already diversified their activities, selling steamship tickets and handling

immigrant savings. Skilled urban workers, meanwhile, cut deeply into existing competition in the shoe repair and barber trades.⁸ The tremendous sacrifices of migration notwithstanding, these proprietors and year-round workers laid the foundation for a solid local Italian presence that has persisted to the present day.

In the last phase of Italian settlement prior to 1917, employment became more widely dispersed and immigrants began a meager but perceptible degree of climbing on the occupational ladder. A number of food dealers started up macaroni and bread-making companies, and several businessmen opened ethnic banking and real estate firms. The G & O Radiator Company, formed by two immigrant factory hands in 1915, was the only local Italian-owned industrial firm before the war. For the overwhelming majority of working-class Italians, upward mobility was limited to the movement to semiskilled jobs. After working a few years and learning to speak adequate English, many immigrants were able to escape the back-breaking life of the day laborer and become machine operators, building craftsmen, and even foremen. Allied demands for materiel before America entered the war accelerated this process. Italians and the other newer immigrant groups clearly benefited when the Winchester, Maxim, and Marlin arms factories increased their payrolls.⁹

These developments fundamentally reshaped the demographic makeup of the *colonia*. The proportion of men to women and of immigrants to American-born children showed the greatest change. Many immigrant men chose to marry and raise families in New Haven, creating a core of settled kin that not only included women who were wives or prospective wives, but also sisters, mothers, and female cousins. Single women rarely emigrated on their own to obtain work, usually coming over as family members or friends planning to marry or help others maintain a home, keep lodgers, or run a small business. With married couples came American-born children, who by 1920 outnumbered the first-generation *paesani*. "Many of these immigrants had large families," recalled a resident; "it was not uncommon to find family after family with eight or ten children." When America went to war, children of Italian descent constituted the largest single group of students in the public school system. In three schools they made up more than 95 percent of the students enrolled. Most adult workers were still foreign-born, but a small number of second-generation children with schooling and English skills had begun to enter the work force. On reaching (what their fathers claimed to be) the age of fourteen, they went straight to factories and construction sites or started learning trades alongside their parents. With steady jobs, the first workers born in America symbolized the colony's growth better than any immigrant success story.¹⁰

As the work force expanded in the *colonia*, so did its array of institutions. No individual family, no matter how extended, could satisfy all of the pressing economic and social needs that came with settlement in a foreign country. Societies that offered sick and death benefits, churches that provided

spiritual care, and clubs that organized recreational and political activities sprouted up as soon as the newcomers could create them. Having only each other to rely on, Italians developed an impressive array of institutions to reduce the strain of emigration as much as possible.

The first institutions appeared between the mid-1880s and the early 1890s. Since the population was small, migrants from a variety of regions had to pull together. They named organizations after values and national symbols that were acceptable to diverse memberships. The first mutual benefit societies, *La Fratellanza* (the Brotherhood) and the *Società Giuseppe Garibaldi*, were established in 1884. Immigrants of the Wooster Square neighborhood, after attending Irish Catholic parishes and saving money for several years, purchased a vacant Lutheran church and renamed it St. Michael's in 1889. When the colony unveiled a statue of Columbus in 1892, the first local Italian newspaper heralded its importance. *La Stella d'Italia's* premier issue proclaimed: "Though our colony is small, the hearts of so many Italians beat strongly and in unison, giving proof that when it comes to honoring our homeland, all agree, all act without any hesitation." Early associational activity reflected much of this sentiment. Though immigrants might have preferred to create institutions along regional lines, their small numbers required united effort.¹¹

With thousands of arrivals each year, the number of Italian organizations mushroomed. When a second Catholic church was needed, immigrant numbers were sufficient to finance its construction from scratch. St. Anthony's, established in 1904, ministered to residents of the "Hill," the other large Italian neighborhood. In 1910 the two Italian churches claimed to have more than twenty-eight thousand parishioners, and a third church was built in 1915. This population constituted a large newspaper audience as well. Several Italian weeklies, from four to eight pages in length, carried news from the old country and advice for making a livelihood here in America. By 1913 there were four in New Haven, each promoting its own political and social perspective. *Il Corriere del Connecticut* was the largest and supported the Republican party, while *La Parola Cattolica* addressed the colony's religious concerns.¹²

But immigrants were most active when creating institutions that affirmed their provincial origins. When populations from specific towns grew large enough, the number of mutual aid societies and clubs dramatically multiplied. Between 1898 and 1908, immigrants from Atrani, Amalfi, Castellamare, Scafati, and Minori formed societies named after their hometowns' patron saints. Membership in these organizations and dozens more like them was tightly restricted to people from the same locality in Italy. As finances became more secure, several groups sponsored social events and patron saints' festivals. The many *circoli* [clubs], meanwhile, whose hometown roots were just as strong, promoted a wide variety of cultural, educational, and political activities. Immigrants from Caserta province, for example, formed the *Circolo San Carlino* in 1897 and built a five-hundred-seat theater for

plays and concerts. By 1917 New Haven was home to more than thirty clubs and mutual aid societies, representing clusters of immigrants from all over Italy.¹³

Within a span of roughly thirty years, New Haven's Italian population had grown from a pocket of random individuals to the largest ethnic group in the city. The *New Haven Register* remarked in 1915 that with so many parishes, shops, clubs, and newspapers, the Italians had "everything that would be necessary if they were a community by themselves."¹⁴ Indeed, observers wondered if the immigrants had ever really left Italy. But the rise of the *colonia* was also manifest proof of their desire to settle permanently in the area. The decisions that immigrants were making—to buy homes, raise families, and donate hard-earned wages to ethnic institutions—constituted a commitment to life in America that their "foreignness" to a great extent disguised. With a definite future in their adopted country, they would be very receptive to the calls to service when America went to war. For many immigrants, the "war to make the world safe for democracy" represented an opportunity to express aspirations that outsiders simply did not recognize.

Despite their large presence in the area by 1917, the Italian population did not have a substantial voice in city affairs. Economic inequality and the prejudice it nurtured kept Italians out of positions of local power, while deep cultural, class, and generational divisions prevented the *colonia* from acting in a unified manner. When "American" New Haven threw its full resources into mobilizing for war, the Italian contribution was noticeably separate and unequal.

Of the many internal fissures that divided the *colonia*, none were more profound and debilitating than the regional differences the immigrants brought from Italy. Though they learned American work rhythms and decided on America as their future home, the Italians maintained and adapted as much of their homeland folkways as possible. The ways in which they made sense of their world and endured its severity had developed over countless centuries, in towns and villages that rarely experienced the centralizing influence of an outside power. Their localism only grew stronger in New Haven, where trust and aid were extremely valuable quantities, and close contact with immigrants from all over Italy made regional differences all the more obvious.

The different dialects Italian residents spoke and the variety of patron saints they worshipped demonstrate how resilient and divisive these folkways could be. Though the immigrants could understand Italian, their American-born children often learned just the provincial dialect spoken at home. The most basic building block for constituting a community—the ability of members to communicate with one another—was to a significant degree absent from Italian New Haven. The patron saints of homeland cities and towns were even more numerous than the different dialects. Adoration for these figures went well beyond a reverence for their martyrdoms. Inhabitants

viewed them as protectors and benefactors who could grant favors large and small.¹⁵

Along with these distinctive loyalties and traits went a considerable provincial chauvinism, which was visible among immigrants at work and in everyday life. Plant foremen learned to hire only Italians from a single locality in their departments, and a social worker observed that women from different regions did not associate with each other even though they were neighbors. By the turn of the century, the immigrants had developed essentially three different neighborhoods. The Wooster Square enclave, nicknamed "Little Naples" because of its heavy concentration of immigrants from the province of Salerno, was by far the largest. Two smaller groupings resided in the "Hill" section of New Haven, one composed of northern Italians from the Marches region, and the other of southerners from the provinces of Caserta, Avellino, and Benevento. Not surprisingly, the energy and expense the immigrants poured into their regionally defined societies, clubs, and saints' festivals rarely supported communitywide campaigns.¹⁶

In addition to their provincial loyalties, the outlook of colony members differed according to their place in the social order and their length of residency in the United States. As historian John W. Briggs has noted, the "fluid population" of Italian enclaves made for "increasing complexity and variety as the colonies matured." Class differences within the colony were on a more concentrated scale than was true for the city population as a whole. The overwhelming majority of Italians fell somewhere between the ranks of hustling shopkeepers and lowly day laborers. In 1910, nearly one out of two Italian workers toiled in unskilled jobs. When combined with semiskilled employees, this total accounted for more than 70 percent of the Italian working population. Craftsmen, clerical employees, and shop owners who enjoyed a slightly better standard of living made up more than a quarter of employed Italians in 1910. But their incomes could hardly sustain much more than the hand-to-mouth existence of their unskilled neighbors, and on the eve of the war 90 percent of the Italian population still resided in what was considered the lowest strata of housing.¹⁷

The tiny minority who had the means and energy to pursue interests beyond making a living became the *colonia's* most visible spokesmen. Professionals like Dr. William Verdi and attorney Rocco Ierardi constituted less than 1 percent of employed Italians in 1910. Yet they and a handful of businessmen and editors dominated the colony's political life. These *prominenti's* backgrounds were clearly exceptions to the rule. Sylvester Z. Poli, who owned a large chain of theaters, trained as a sculptor in Paris before coming to America. Paul Russo made use of his Italian education to open the colony's first grocery store, become Yale Law School's first Italian-American graduate, and establish the first Italian bank in the city. City sheriff Frank Palmieri, whose father was a mayor in southern Italy, became the first Italian to win a citywide election in New Haven in 1914.¹⁸

In such a heavily working-class population, it might seem surprising that a strong proletarian voice did not echo through the *colonia*. Except for a strike at the Sargent's factory and the publication of a prolabor newspaper in 1902, there is little evidence of a radical presence in the three enclaves. The local Socialist party attempted to attract Italians with little success. The Elm City was no Lawrence, Massachusetts, or Paterson, New Jersey, places where Italian labor unrest captured national headlines during the Progressive Era. Unlike these one-industry towns, New Haven had a booming and diverse economy that largely satisfied the newcomers' desire for security. The *New Haven Register* singled out the Italian community for its high level of home ownership and "Americanization." What was linked together in the editors' minds was in reality more a reflection of what Italians had come to the city for in the first place: to live and work in a community that provided a better life for themselves and their families.¹⁹

The lack of a strong, united community contributed to the Italians' minor influence on the affairs of the city at large. But so did the severe prejudice the immigrants encountered, based on their poverty as well as cultural distinctiveness. In the first decades of settlement, ethnic antagonism directed at Italians found expression in both word and deed. Antonio Cannelli reported that until the 1880s local Italians concealed their nationality from census takers to avoid harassment. "A few of our older residents," he reported, "recall with deep bitterness the frequent and terrible outbursts of racial hatred that took place." Many factories excluded Italians from employment, claiming the newcomers "were unfit or were troublemakers," and *paesani* who did find jobs continued to suffer verbal and even physical abuse.²⁰

It was not until after the turn of the century that this open hostility began to fade. Because of the sheer weight of their growing numbers, Italians found themselves increasingly tolerated by employers, politicians, and newspaper editors. Italian leaders made much of this transformation possible. The colony's first newspapers and political clubs emerged largely in order to protest discrimination. As a result, New Haven had cleaned up its act to a fair degree by 1917, careful not to offend the Italian fifth of the population in public statements or actions.²¹

Italians nonetheless had little political influence in the Elm City. Tokenism best describes their political status, as both of the major parties wooed voters with favors and minor places on their tickets. With few naturalized citizens, Italians missed out on the patronage spoils that made political involvement so valuable during the period. In 1917, the city payroll included only five Italian clerical employees and teachers, one fireman, and no policemen. The city sheriff's office and a handful of lesser posts were all that the Italians' 21 percent of the population could claim as their own. It would take another, American-born generation to obtain significant power in the city.²²

A curious incident took place in March 1917, which highlighted the extent of the Italians' progress and foreshadowed what they would encounter during the war. A young man from New Haven was arrested on charges of espionage just a few days before the nation declared war on Germany. The police of Bristol, Connecticut, linked Leopoldo Cobianchi to several pieces of incriminating evidence. Detectives discovered among his possessions a map of Bristol marked with a drawing of a cannon. Finding calculations of the gun's firing range, they suspected Cobianchi to be one of a pair of men seen prowling about the city's factory district. Police were particularly interested in his button bearing the cryptic message "One of 1,000" and an essay defending the German policy of unrestricted submarine warfare. To the U.S. marshal who was called in to investigate, it looked as though the rising fears of sabotage were now a dangerous reality.²³

Officials soon realized, however, that there had been a terrible misunderstanding. Cobianchi was a Sargent hardware factory employee who had been taking night classes to prepare for the Yale Law School entrance exam. Upon his instructor's recommendation that he take a break from his work and studies, Cobianchi went to Bristol, but continued to work on physics problems by using features of the local landscape. The mysterious button, which police thought meant "One of 1,000" plotters against the government, was the slogan of the New Haven Young Democratic Club, of which Cobi-
ianchi was a member. The young man's father was the publisher of the New Haven weekly *L'Indipendente*, and Leopoldo had written the paper on German submarines because his father insisted that he learn to argue both sides of an issue. With an explanation for each piece of evidence, the case against Cobianchi was quickly dropped.²⁴

Cobianchi's arrest illustrates the leverage the Italian *prominenti* and newspapers could exert when sufficiently pressed. Leopoldo's father was able to meet personally with the U.S. district attorney and paid his son's five thousand dollar bail bond with a loan from a colony banker. Leopoldo himself visited the city's daily papers to give his side of the story. He was a rising star in local politics and would soon be elected as a city alderman. On the eve of the war, the colony had the means—newspapers, banks, and political connections—to cause quite a stir, if only on behalf of an individual with strong ties to the enclaves' leaders.²⁵

But the case also demonstrated how tenuous an Italian's position could be when connections were not apparent. It is unclear whether Cobianchi's appearance or accent compelled the boarding-house keeper to contact authorities. But as Antonio Cannelli claimed, it was not uncommon to hear of "the small injustice, the minor act of retaliation, the poorly disguised outburst of rage, or at the very least, the unconscious prejudice against anything that is Italian." Cobianchi's ethnicity may have instantly made him an object of suspicion, the feared crime in this case being espionage. His family, education, and aspirations of "working hard to improve his future" mattered