

Daniela Rossini. *Woodrow Wilson and the American Myth in Italy: Culture, Diplomacy, and War Propaganda*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008. x + 263 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02824-1.

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Wilson in Italy

“The twentieth century was, as many have claimed, the ‘American Century,’ and the year 1918 was unquestionably the first ‘American Year’ in Europe.” Within the context of America’s rise to world power, Daniela Rossini singles out Italy’s response, where “the myth of America was strongest of all nations in Europe.” It was in Italy that, in 1918, “it ballooned into the ideological void of the aftermath of [the Battle of] Caporetto, filling the vacuum of incompetence presented by the liberal political leadership, which was at a loss as to how to govern a society that the war itself had transformed into a mass society” (p. 1).

The sudden eclipse, if not of the myth, then certainly of Woodrow Wilson’s reputation among Italians, reflected widespread resentment of Wilson’s refusal to agree to all the territorial rewards for which Italy had bargained when, in May 1915, it left its old alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary, to join the Entente. This rupture between Wilson and the Italian leaders that came when the war was won is the subject of Rossini’s chapter “Wilson’s Diplomacy toward Italy.” While granting that the confrontation grew out of conflicting diplomatic policy, Rossini, at the outset of this cultural and diplomatic study, asks the reader to look for the “roots” of the dispute, “in particular to the cultural gulf between the two nations, a gap that sprung primarily from the unequal development of each country’s civil society.” “Wilson’s America,” she writes, “wealthy and up-to-date, was already familiar with mass communication and mass poli-

tics: that made it very different from the elitist and repressive Italy of [Vittorio] Orlando and [Sidney] Sonnino” (p. 2). Orlando was minister of justice when Italy entered the war, became interior minister, and, after the Battle of Caporetto, became prime minister; Sonnino was foreign minister throughout the war.

Having established the book’s sociological as well as political-diplomatic focus, in a chapter “Reciprocal Images before the Great War,” Rossini describes America’s fascination with Italy, as its writers and artists followed the path of Stendahl and Goethe to the fount of beauty. In its earliest stage, this Italophilia expressed a “precocious love of Italian architecture, represented by [Thomas] Jefferson’s Palladianism. In later years, Italy was the inspirational goal of those whom Edith Wharton called ‘a happy few.’ For Henry James they were ‘passionate pilgrims’” (pp. 5-6). It was an adoration that was “first and foremost the expression of a widespread American cultural need,” in which Italy “to a much greater extent than other countries, took on the role of the anti-American and the progenitor of western art,” also a place offering “a temporary refuge from the all-encompassing materialism of America” (p. 9).

Love being not blind, the pilgrim aesthete also took note of certain dangers. “Italy,” Rossini reminds us, “had a corrupting side, as does everything that lives in symbiosis with the past and with death.” So it was that among the happy pilgrims; “after abandoning themselves at first

to the various Italian initiations, there resurfaced a need for critical detachment, for distance which was also an affirmation of American moral superiority over old-world morality." Side by side with art, there was also "filth, superstition, servility, poverty, and a lack of emotional self-control," national character defects that "could be seen everywhere" (p. 10). Even earlier, the "profoundly American [Ralph Waldo] Emerson wrote: 'We go to Europe to be Americanized'" (p. 12). It is a note foreshadowing the arrival of Rossini's Wilson. In pages devoted to what Rossini calls "Negative Images," we find Wilson, in his Princeton days, commenting on Italians who, from 1880 onward, arrived in the United States at a rate of three hundred thousand per year, as "men out of the ranks where there is neither skill nor energy nor any initiative or quick intelligence" (p. 14).

Rossini's main interest is American policy with respect to Italy following the intervention of 1917. On the war itself, and its significance, in a chapter "Two Parallel Wars," she sees it as having marked a "watershed between two profoundly different eras," between "a peaceful, optimistic and rational nineteenth century, and the violent, pessimistic and irrational twentieth century" (p. 33). As for the alliance that developed between Wilson's America and Italy, it brought into wartime association two profoundly different societies, "a wealthy, dynamic society, in a state of continuous expansions, a society that had largely reached the age of mass consumption," and an Italy that, "though it was developing, remained unable to pass through certain bottlenecks and could only partly rid itself of the burdensome heritage of its history" (p. 45). Rossini sees the war as the result of "the fragmentation of the nineteenth century's united framework" which left behind a "polycentric" world in which "conflict with Germany became especially acrimonious" (p. 53).

Of Italy's 1915 intervention in World War I, Rossini writes that though "most Italian parliamentary forces were opposed," a pro-war "interventionist front" took shape, during the months that Italy remained neutral (August 2, 1914, to May 24, 1915) and still within the alliance formed in 1882 with the Central Powers. Meanwhile, the government, "in the crude unadorned language of the nineteenth-century school," bargained for its share of the spoils in a war its leaders expected to be over in a few months. By the Treaty of London, as it is usually, if inaccurately, called, Italy was promised by the Entente a "territorial expansion that went well beyond its ethnic boundary" (p. 39).[1] Rossini sees this situation as the source of what she has called those two parallel wars.

Italy's goal was primarily the defeat of Austria-Hungary, which accounts for Italy's delaying its war with Germany until August 1916. As for American views and war aims, while "public opinion was strongly opposed to autocratic Germany," the nation's "attitude was one of indifference, if not veiled sympathy for the Hapsburg Empire, viewed romantically as emblematic of the old European courts" (p. 48).

Rossini's primary interest is American diplomacy, with a focus on Wilson and Italy. As such, her coverage of Italian events, especially the May 1915 decision to abandon its old allies and support the Triple Entente, is limited. She quotes the historian Guglielmo Ferrero who, at the time, described the intervention "as if an avalanche of hatred had burst down on [Giovanni] Giolitti and the parliamentary system with whom [sic] Giolitti was identified" (p. 41). Giolitti had been prime minister on three occasions, from 1903 to 1914, known among Italianists as the "Giolittian decade."

Readers unfamiliar with Italian political history may find this interpretation of the Italian volte-face and the sudden collapse of the old parliamentary regime unsatisfactory, if not remarkable, especially, as Rossini writes, "the Giolittian system—which had governed Italy successfully for more than a decade—collapsed. The interventionist line prevailed, even though it was opposed not only by Giolitti and the Italian Parliament, but by the Socialists, the Vatican and the majority of the Italian people as well" (p. 41).

Rossini devotes two very informative chapters to Italian and American efforts to inspire the masses and counter Leninist and domestic antiwar sentiments: "Propaganda in Uniform" and "The Arrival of the Professional Propagandist," in which she covers the work of George Creel's Committee on Public Information (CPI) and the use of the Red Cross, the motion picture studios, and the mobilization of academics and journalists. To run the Italian Propaganda Agency, Romeo Gallenga-Stuart was chosen. Prior to the war, Gallenga-Stuart had been a follower of the Nationalist Association, founded in 1911, which advocated a foreign policy of Mediterranean imperialism and the old Triple Alliance and an anti-Giolitti and anti-parliamentarian domestic policy.

In the United States, Columbia University's Charles E. Merriam was conscripted to run the Italian section of Creel's CPI. Like Gallenga-Stuart, Merriam shared a prevailing interventionist belief that the war might put an end to what the pro-war groups called a "parliamentary dictatorship," whose chief, in or out of office, was Giolitti.

“Merriam,” Rossini notes, “considered the Italian governing class as a holdover from the antidemocratic and clientilistic past.... Giolitti in particular was considered a cynical and corrupt politico, skilled at political maneuvering with opportunistic alliances and the exchange of personal favors” (p. 126).

The vast majority of Italian voters and their representatives whom they sent to Parliament in 1913 were in favor of Giolitti’s advice to exploit neutrality as a bargaining chip with the German-Austrian allies, obtaining what came to be known as Giolitti’s *parecchio* (quite a lot). Giolitti’s own word *molto* (much), was changed to *parecchio* by the editor of *La tribuna*, who published the statesman’s letter to his chief of cabinet. It was logical that Rossini’s propagandists, American and Italian, came exclusively from the ranks of the anti-neutralists who portrayed the war as a crusade to advance democracy.

Because these progressive-democratic interventionists are Rossini’s main interest, neutralist sources, both American and Italian, remain in the background. Within this context, however, it should be noted that much of what emerged in 1917 as Wilsonianism was already very much alive in Europe, precisely among those who, in French and Italian historiography, are known as the “democratic interventionists.” When the United States entered the war, it was these European parties and individuals who furnished the cadres of Rossini’s morale-boosting publicists. This in no way detracts from her emphasis on the activities of these willing propagandists. On the basis of much popular as well as archival material, Rossini has retrieved examples of this progressive enterprise. Her use of verbatim passages and her extensive notes are especially valuable.

In her chapter on Wilson’s diplomacy, the question arises as to when Wilson learned of the Treaty of London, in which Italy’s claims went beyond Wilsonian self-determination. Testifying before the Senate in August 1919, Colonel Edward House claimed innocence of the document prior to his trip to Paris, a claim Rossini rejects, citing conversations between Arthur James Balfour and House on April 28, 1917, and also Balfour’s later meeting with Wilson during the foreign secretary’s visit to the United States. But as the task at hand was winning the war, Wilson, House, and Robert Lansing adopted what became known as the “doctrine of postponement,” skirting the issue of Italy’s territorial spoils in order not to create disharmony, leaving the territorial settlement to the Peace Conference (p. 141). In a passage that recalls the Wilson of George F. Kennan’s *American Diplo-*

macy (1951), Rossini feels that the policy of “postponement” itself “betrayed an inadequate understanding of the complexity of the European war, the national antagonisms, the spread of nationalist and irrational attitudes that ran through the Old World societies that had done so much to fuel the outbreak of the war” (p. 141). Rossini also cites Wilson’s belief that, thanks to American economic power, by the time victory was won, the European nations would be “financially in our hands,” as if the America of 1919 enjoyed the international power it would come to have following World War II (p. 141).

Rossini continues with a detailed account of the work of the “Inquiry,” a board of academics established by Wilson in September 1917, an agency its chief, the historian James Shotwell, called a “strange experiment of the mobilization of the political and social sciences to help in shaping the outcome of the new world structure which had to be built out of the ruins of the war” (p. 148). Its most conspicuous and, in Shotwell’s opinion, most arrogant member was Walter Lippmann. By the time victory was achieved, all the secret treaties had been made public by the Bolshevik regime. It was then the Inquiry’s task, as Lippmann put it, to “take the secret treaties, analyze the parts, which were tolerable, and separate the parts which were regarded as intolerable, and develop an American position in each case.... The sensitive spot was Italy. We shaved down the Italian claims to the indisputable Italian territory, which was meant they were not to have Trentino, the Austrian part, and they were not to have Fiume” (p. 151).

Commenting on Italy’s bitterness when the ninth of the Fourteen Points not only cut back Italian control of the east bank of the Adriatic but also made Trieste an open port, Rossini has a kind word for Lansing, who appreciated Italy’s desire to have a facility across the Adriatic. It was, she feels, a more realistic position and one that was closer to Sonnino’s demands. Ignoring his secretary of state, Wilson assured Italy’s ambassador that, as Rossini puts it, “the problem-solving function of the League of Nations would secure the security of the Adriatic zone.” But such a policy only served to call into question the wisdom of Italy’s 1915 decision to join the Entente, and did so, she adds, “without developing any alternative justification for the long and painful Italian war effort. American policy was casting discredit on the liberal governing class and stoking the fires of domestic social and political conflict” (pp. 152-153).

Finally, Rossini comes to what she calls “The Paradox of the Fiume Dispute,” where she describes Italy’s vain

effort to add Fiume to the booty, even though it was not included in the London Treaty. As background for this much-debated dispute, there was Wilson's request that the Allies accept his Fourteen Points as a guide to talks with Germany on the armistice Berlin asked for. It was then that Lippmann and his colleagues in Paris went to work paring down Italy's claims, giving Italy the Brenner frontier but leaving Trieste and Fiume as free ports and reducing Italy's gains on the Dalmatian coast. In the midst of these labors, Vienna called for armistice talks that concluded hostilities. On November 3, 1918, at Villa Giusti, near Padua, Italy's own war ended. In Rossini's account of the often acrimonious personal relationships among the American peacemakers, it was House, who often went off on his own, who seized on Villa Giusti as a way to put off the nasty territorial issue. As it was only a military arrangement, with no attached territorial clauses, Villa Giusti had, so House wrote, "the advantage of avoiding political discussions respecting Italian and other claims before capitulation of Austria is completed" (p. 171). It was an adroit equivocation. Progressives, disparaging of such maneuvering, belittled House as a mere "arranger" (p. 175).

House's casual remarks to Italy's leaders, especially to Orlando, and Macchi di Cellere's dispatches from Washington, in which Wilson was portrayed as pro-Italian, prepared the ground for Wilson's triumphal visit to Italy in January 1919, where he was greeted as a new messiah. Rossini covers all of this in great detail, as she also does Italy's violent reaction to their hero when "*figlio di puttana*" was replaced by "*figlio di Wilson*" (pp. 187-190). Rossini's admiration for Wilson is tempered by her recognition of his limitations. "He showed," she believes,

"how powerful a leader can be if he knows how to appeal to the masses; he shaped a number of instruments of mass communication.... Yet we cannot agree with those who praise every aspect of his political approach. Wilson failed to adequately encourage dialogue with the Allies, or with his political adversaries even in the United States. He devalued diplomacy and this deprived him of the valuable assistance of many of his contemporaries" (p. 191).

Versailles was to be the *vae victis* of old and the source, Rossini believes, of the growing tensions that led to the next world war. Still, she will not lay the blame at Wilson's door. Isolated at Paris, forced to compromise, he held fast to the League of Nations. The book ends on a note of regret, as post-Wilsonian isolationists threw out, along with the pretensions of the Inquiry board, the ideals that inspired the president. In the 1920s and 1930s, she writes, "Wilsonian internationalists were reduced to no more than a small handful." It was only after September 1, 1939, that there was "a shift in American public opinion, and the need for international engagement made itself felt." It was then, with "the United States' full assumption of its hegemonic international role" that "Wilson's heritage could no longer be denied" (pp. 191-192).

Note

[1]. Rossini speaks of a "Treaty of London," as do most historians. But while it did become a state obligation, when it was signed by Italy's ambassador in London on April 26, it was an "accord," contingent on Italy's entry within thirty days into the war against Germany, something Italy's government hoped never to be called on to do, believing the war to be in its final stages.

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