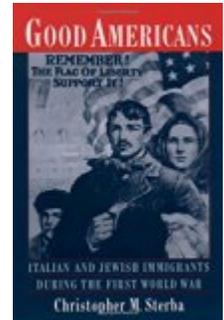


Christopher M. Sterba. *Good Americans: Italian and Jewish Immigrants during the First World War.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. viii + 271 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-515488-7.



Reviewed by James Westheider

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Among others in the early twentieth century, Theodore Roosevelt believed that war was a crucible, the ultimate "melting pot" that converted European immigrants to the United States into true "Americans." In *Good Americans: Italian and Jewish Immigrants During the First World War*, Christopher M. Sterba tests this belief in regards to Jewish immigrants in New York City and Italian immigrants in New Haven, Connecticut, during World War One. In what is a well-researched and well-argued monograph he makes a compelling case that the war did accelerate the process of assimilation for these two groups and indeed offered opportunities "for participating in American public life that did not exist prior to 1917" (p. 6).

Sterba chose to examine the two populations in question for a variety of reasons. The Italian "colonia" in New Haven and the largely eastern European Jewish enclaves in New York represented the largest immigrant groups in their respective cities. Both were involved in two of the more interesting units of the American Expeditionary force; the Italians in an Italian American Machine Gun company, and the Jews as members of the

77th or "Melting Pot" division. Both had already passed through the initial phases of settlement and had formed tightly knit communities with a whole range of ethnic institutions. But both groups also wielded little political power or economic influence outside of their ethnic enclaves at the beginning of the war, something the conflict would change. The "Great War" came at a time when both groups were ready to enter the mainstream and begin to play a major role in the political and social life of the wider community. They responded to a barrage of appeals from officials to actively participate in the conflict and did their part in a variety of ways; from service in the armed forces to buying Liberty bonds back home. These events collectively represented the first experiences many of them had shared with the nation at large, and neither group would ever be as isolated culturally and politically as they had been prior to the war.

Despite these similarities, America's entry into the Great War brought somewhat different reactions from the two communities. The Italians in New Haven supported the war effort from the

very beginning, while New York's Jewish population was initially bitterly divided over American participation. In both cases the way each group viewed its place in their new homeland and how they felt about their country of origin would greatly influence this perspective.

By 1917 the Italian colonia was firmly established in New Haven. The nearly 34,000 Italians represented over 20 percent of that city's population and had an established infrastructure of schools, churches, newspapers, mutual aid societies, and other institutions. Though Italian in culture, these institutions displayed a deep commitment to their new home. "With a definite future in their adopted country," Sterba argues, "they would be receptive to the calls to service when America went to war" (p. 15). Equally important was the fact that Italy was an ally and a combatant. Most Italian Americans had very strong emotional and family ties to the old country, and contributing to the American war effort was in effect also aiding the mother country in its struggles. This was especially true after Italian military disasters at Caporetto in November 1917. This "dual patriotism,"--support for their adopted country and for Italy--made New Haven Italians the most "outspokenly pro-war population in the city" (p. 143).

There were divisions within the Italian community, but these paled in comparison to the deep fault lines running through New York's Jewish population in 1917. The approximately 1.5 million Jews in that city were an extremely diverse group religiously, politically, economically, and ethnically. The New Haven Italians were virtually all Catholic, for example, and all were from Italy, but the 2000 synagogues in the big apple included Hasidic, Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative denominations, and served congregations whose members came from numerous European nations, but especially Germany, Russia, Austria, and the Ottoman Empire. In fact, Sterba claims that the greatest division within the community was

along ethnic lines, pitting the older, more established and professional German Jewish community against the newer, more numerous, and poorer Eastern European arrivals. Politically they ranged from conservative Republicans to anarchists, as well as displaying strong support for the Socialist party and Tammany Hall Democrats.

Their reaction to the war was equally as diverse. The German Jewish community and its leaders, such as Jacob Schiff and Isaac Siegel, were strongly interventionist, fearing that failure to support the war effort could lead to charges of disloyalty from non Jewish Americans. The "downtown" or Eastern European Jews however, opposed American participation largely because they had little love for one of the key allied nations, Russia. They had fled their former homeland to escape forced service in the Czarist armies, vicious prejudice and murderous pogroms and many quite openly rooted for a German victory in the East. There was also a well-organized and popular antiwar movement led by the Jewish left. This all changed after Britain's Balfour Declaration supporting a Jewish homeland in the Middle East, and the rise of the Bolsheviks to power in Russia in late 1917. Former opponents of American intervention, such as the garment unions and most of the socialist organizations, now not only became avidly pro-war, but also more supportive of the Zionist movement, to help create a refuge for their co-religionists ravaged by war in Europe. New York's downtown Jews, much like the New Haven Italians, could also display a "dual patriotism;" by loyalty to a primarily old world cause, Zionism, and still be "100% American."

Both the Italian and Jewish immigrants serving in the military came into much greater contact with native-born Americans than they had in the past, further strengthening their bonds to their adopted nation, and their assimilation as Americans. For example, the first real Thanksgiving dinner many of the Italians enjoyed was in

France with the 77th. But there were some key differences. Sterba found that an immigrant doughboy's wartime experience depended much on the type of unit to which they were assigned. He argues that the newly created federal divisions, such as the 77th, composed largely of New York draftees were better at providing for the needs of a multi-cultural rank and file than the National Guard units, such as the Connecticut 26th, with its old and established traditions. The "Yankee" Division celebrated its colonial, Anglo-Saxon heritage, not its modern cultural diversity. The Italian machine gunners served in an institution that largely replicated the segregated culture and society that they had known back in New Haven.

In comparison to the relative hardships suffered by the Italians in the Yankee division, the Jewish draftees in the New York 77th "Melting Pot" Division were pampered by a Federal government anxious to allay their fears over conscription. The government and the Army displayed a sensitivity to ethnic differences and religious concerns that was usually lacking in the federalized National Guard units. The commander of the 77th Division General J. Franklin Bell, for example, brought a prominent Rabbi from New York to Camp Upton, where the men were training, to provide religious services for Rosh Hashanah, and granted most of the men furloughs so they could go home for Yom Kippur.

For both groups, however, being viewed as "Americans", overseas in France, and not as Italians or Jews, helped solidify their growing self image as Americans, and their common wartime experiences with the native-born within their units helped diminish the cultural divide between both groups and lead to greater cohesion and unity. The same dynamics were also occurring stateside in their old neighborhoods. The food drives, bond drives, and war rallies they organized and attended, along with other immigrant populations and native born citizens, expanded their contact with

federal and local institutions and encouraged them to assert themselves outside the boundaries of their ethnic communities, further tightening their bond to their new homeland. Despite the inevitable condescension and stereotyping, for "the first time their activities in America both as groups and as individuals, received sustained recognition and praise" (p. 132).

During the 1920s this hard-won recognition achieved by the immigrants for war-time service would come under attack by a growing wave of nativism and anti-Semitism in their adopted homeland. But far from destroying the new bonds of citizenship and forcing them to take refuge in their ethnic enclaves, both groups fought back and asserted their right to participate in the greater community. Both groups became far more involved in the political system and both witnessed tremendous upward mobility in their communities. Sterba argues that this was especially true for New York's Jewish community. By 1930 more than half of the doctors, lawyers, and other professionals in Gotham city were Jewish. More importantly for the nation at large, New York's Jewish voters had switched their allegiance from the Socialist party and the radical left, to support for reform Democrats, championing a more cosmopolitan, internationalist, and social democratic direction, and aiding in the election of such influential and powerful figures as Al Smith, Robert Wagner, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Ultimately, for the Italian and Jewish immigrants who were involved in it, the war did not produce a disillusioned "lost generation," it strengthened their ties and allegiance to their new nation.

For anyone interested in immigration, urban or, World War One history, *Good Americans* would be a valuable addition to your collection.

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