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Italy and the Approach of the First World War

Richard Bosworth

Macmillan Education

ISBN 978-0-333-31207-0 ISBN 978-1-349-17022-7 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-17022-7

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St. Martin's Press, Inc., 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

Printed in Hong Kong

First published in the United States of America in 1983

ISBN 978-0-312-43924-8

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Bosworth, R. J. B.

Italy and the approach of the First World War.

(Making of the Twentieth Century Series)

Bibliography: p.

1. Italy—Politics and government—1870–1915.

2. Italy—Foreign relations—1870–1915. 3. World War, 1914–1918—Italy. 4. World War, 1914–1918—Causes. I. Title. II.

Series: Making of the twentieth century.

DG568.5.B66 1983 945.08 82-16841

ISBN 978-0-312-43924-8

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FOR EDMUND

Preface

An Italian immigrant recently arrived in Australia commented: 'For the first time, we had a taste of Australia – beach, fried chicken and flies, flies swarming all around us, we had to be careful not to eat them.'¹ An Australian demographer who was a key adviser to governments on an immigration programme after the Second World War wrote in 1948 that earlier Italian immigrants had found a place on the Queensland sugar fields: 'Here they were tolerated and even welcomed so long as they did not compete with white labour and white owners.'²

When I walk around the corner from my house near the University of Sydney, the shop-fronts tell me 'Macelleria', 'Pasticceria', 'Farmacia' and the rest. Australia is now the host to perhaps 500,000, perhaps 1,000,000 who are Italian or of Italian descent. But Italian emigration to Australia has not necessarily brought profound understanding between our two countries, as the two introductory quotations indicate.

Cliché and prejudice are also not unknown among scholars. When my earlier book, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers* (Cambridge, 1979), was assessed in Italy, one reviewer found it necessary to define me as a 'kangaroo' of scholarship. For another, conservative historian, worried that I traduce Liberal Italy's 'always honourable and advantageous' foreign policy, it was important and significant that I was one of the 'democratic sons' of 'Botany Bay'.³ Among my Anglo-Saxon friends, on the other hand, I am often regarded as a curious and recalcitrant lover of Italy.

In this context, my book has a triple purpose. First, my task has been to follow the pattern in this Macmillan series so well established by Z. S. Steiner and V. R. Berghahn. What does modern scholarship say about Italy's part in the causation of the First World War? To what extent can a 'primacy of internal politics' or a 'primacy of external politics' be located in the diplomacy of Liberal Italy?

There are other, more diffuse tasks as well. Often in the European

history courses of Anglo-Saxon universities and in the English language historiography, Italy has been accorded a minor role. Some acknowledgement of Garibaldi, Cavour and Mazzini, a few bad jokes about Mussolini; and that has been enough. As an object of history modern Italy has been as far down the list of importance as Italians used to be lowly placed on the hierarchy of race.

But Italian history deserves fuller consideration. In modern times, so many -isms, nationalism, liberalism, fascism, Eurocommunism or Christian Democracy, have flowered first in Italy or have provided there the most stark examples of gaps between theory and practice, intent and achievement. Italy is also the 'nation' of so many obdurate regionalisms; its history is not that of Italy but of the Italies. In providing a relatively general analysis of the relatively ignored period before 1915, I hope to stimulate some of my English-language readers into discovering more of this story of contradiction and failure, survival and humanity, which is the history of Italy since the Risorgimento.

With regard to my Italian readers, I have a final task. I write as an outsider, inevitably ignorant, and inevitably without the passion and the plotting of politics which continues so to influence Italian historiography. At the same time, I can offer some knowledge of the wider context in which Italy was and is placed abroad, and some understanding of the international structure to which Italy has contributed.

A preface is a place in which to preach, and in which to offer thanks – thanks to my publishers for their courtesy and efficiency (and to Sarah Mahaffy for lunch in a London pub), to my family for their patience (though they do get to participate in trips to Italy), to my friends, and to that Italy in which this book was researched and written (and which even digested the fact of an Australian, temporarily lost for words, and his son playing cricket in a Venetian park).

RICHARD BOSWORTH

Venice and Sydney