

Christopher M. Sterba, *Good Americans: Italian and Jewish Immigrants during the First World War* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 271 pp.

Italians and Jews were among the largest ethnic groups to arrive in the United States with the so-called second immigrant wave between the late 1870s and the early 1910s. By drawing extensively on newspaper accounts as well as regimental histories, war diaries, and other autobiographical sources, Christopher M. Sterba examines the response of New Haven's Italian Americans and New York City's Jewish Americans to World War I. He also addresses the impact of the conflict on the newcomers' lives to analyze the assimilation of those two minorities within their adoptive country. Unlike previous comparative research into Jews and Italians, which has focused on single cities,¹ he studies each community in a separate environment. This is a valuable approach to cast light on the interaction between the single minorities and the broader U.S. society, although it prevents *Good Americans* from focusing on Jewish-Italian relations. Still, the volume deals with an issue that scholarship has generally overlooked.

Sterba maintains that Italians and Jews shared similar prewar experiences. As latecomers to the United States in terms of succession of immigrant tides, they faced widespread bigotry, discrimination, and prejudice in America. Religious beliefs were an additional source of intolerance as Jews and the mostly Catholic Italians faced a prevailing Protestant environment. Moreover, neither minority enjoyed much ethnic cohesiveness. Due to the belated achievement of political unification in their native country, Italian newcomers retained localistic allegiances and tended to identify themselves less with their fatherland than with their ancestral region, province, or even village. Likewise, the children of the Jewish immigrants who came from Germany in the late 1840s and early 1850s usually distanced themselves from their fellow ethnics of East European descent.

According to Sterba, the outbreak of World War I and especially the entry of the United States into the conflict marked a major disruption in Italians' and Jews' somehow parallel histories. As their adoptive country sided with their motherland against the German and Austro-Hungarian empires, most of New Haven's Italian Americans

supported the U.S. war efforts enthusiastically. Conversely, socialistic feelings and hate of the Russian Empire, which many Jews had left to escape from tsarist pogroms and antisemitic abuse, initially made a significant number of New Yorkers from a Jewish background lukewarm toward American intervention in the conflict. While several Jews joined the ranks of the Seventy-seventh Division of the U.S. Army, their fellow ethnics were the backbone of the antiwar movement and opposition to the draft campaign within the People's Council for Democracy and Peace and other pacifist organizations. Nevertheless, the subsequent fall of the tsarist regime and, most of all, the Balfour Declaration on Palestine strengthened Jews' commitment to American participation and victory in the war both on the home front and in the battlefield.

However, in Sterba's view, Italians' and Jews' loyalty to their adoptive land at wartime did not mean the demise of the ethnic identity of these minorities. Scholars have pointed to the army as a means of nation building in Europe and have stressed that World War I was the climax of the nativist call for one hundred percent Americanism in the United States.² Sterba acknowledges that military service contributed, for instance, to improving the English-language skills of the theretofore Yiddish- or Italian-speaking soldiers. Yet, contrary to those interpretations and following more recent scholarship,³ he also holds that the army tried to accommodate religious and national diversities and that the war experience strengthened the ethnic consciousness of Italian Americans and Jewish Americans. Proud of their contribution to the American victory, both communities felt empowered and entitled to voice their ethnic concerns after the end of the conflict. As a result, Italian Americans protested against President Woodrow Wilson's neglect of Italy's claims at the peace conference in Versailles, and Jewish Americans came out against an outburst of antisemitism in postwar Eastern Europe. Sterba shows that rather than severing immigrants' ties to their ancestral roots, World War I turned the newcomers and their offspring into more cohesive ethnic minorities that superseded intergroup divisions along lines of regional origins.

While Sterba's arguments are convincing, his evidence is sometimes inferential and circumstantial. (117, 190) His narrative is always fascinating, although it occasionally indulges in eye-catching, unlikely sentences. For instance, one may reasonably doubt that Chinese was spoken in such a "Tower of Babel" as the U.S. Army in 1917, (116) because Chinese immigration to the United States had been barred since 1882. Even more troubling is Sterba's little grasp of European history. For example, he repeatedly refers to prewar Italy as a "Republic," (32, 47, 151) while this country was a kingdom until June 1946. It is almost unbelievable that this blatant mistake survived the editing of a reputable publisher such as Oxford University Press.

Sterba's research is particularly revealing of the feelings of rank-and-file soldiers of Jewish and Italian extractions in the U.S. Army. His touching pages about conscripts' everyday life during training and fighting in France can appeal to nonacademicians, too. Still, scholars might wonder to what extent the Italian experience in New Haven was representative of the attitude of this ethnic group nationwide. For instance, if Sterba had looked at Italians in New York City or elsewhere as well, he would have found a significant number of Italian Americans who opposed the war and were members of the Socialist Party.⁴ It therefore remains for future scholars to place his findings in a larger perspective and to determine whether his case studies of New Haven and New York City were the rule or the exception for Italians and Jews.

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Notes

¹Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Judith E. Smith, *Family Connections: A History of Italian and Jewish Immigrant Lives in Providence, Rhode Island, 1900-1940* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985); Kathie Friedman-Kasaba, *Memories of Migration: Gender, Ethnicity, and Work in the Lives of Jewish and Italian Women in New York, 1870-1994* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Rose Laub Coser, Laura S. Anker, and Andrew J. Perrin, *Women of Courage: Jewish and Italian Immigrant Women in New York* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999).

²Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1977); Paolo Macri, *La società contemporanea* (Bologna, Italy: Il Mulino, 1992), 340; James O. Olson, *The Ethnic Dimension in American History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 177-78.

³Nancy Gentile Ford, *Americans All! Foreign-born Soldiers in World War I* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001).

⁴Elisabetta Vezzosi, *Il socialismo indifferente: Immigrati italiani e Socialist Party negli Stati Uniti del primo Novecento* (Rome, Italy: Edizioni Lavoro, 1991), 166-72, 175-77, 183-84.