

---

## BACKGROUND BOOKS

---

### ITALY

"Physical geography has endowed Italy with few advantages. Within natural frontiers formed by the Mediterranean and the awesome barrier of the Alps, four-fifths of the territory consists of mountains and hills. Not only the great Alpine arc, sweeping west to east from the Mediterranean to the Adriatic, but . . . the Apennines, stretching . . . down the length of Italy . . . set permanent barriers to the possibilities of cultivation."

So writes Stuart Woolf in **A History of Italy, 1700–1860** (Methuen, 1979). Indeed, it was the diversity of Italy's physical and climatic characteristics that shaped "the varying forms of human settlements" and made the achievement of nationhood so difficult. But the peninsula's mid-Mediterranean location, Woolf adds, also gave Italians "a virtual monopoly" over East-West trade for centuries: "Spices and silks, saints' remains and heresies, ancient manuscripts and contemporary plagues, all passed through Italian ports—Amalfi, Pisa, Genoa, Venice—and inland cities—Milan, Pavia, Bologna, and Florence."

Despite its divisive geography, Italy did, of course, achieve unity. How this happened is told in Denis Mack Smith's excellent surveys, **The Making of Italy, 1796–1870** (Harper, 1968) and **Italy: A Modern History** (Univ. of Mich., 1969). "There was a feeling of *italianità* which thinkers were beginning to rationalize and statesmen to exploit," Mack Smith writes, describing the sentiments that permeated 19th-century Italy. "There was the liberating wind from the French Revolution . . . [and] an expanding commercial and agricultural middle class."

No individual played a more crucial role in the *Risorgimento*, or "Resurgence," than did Count Camillo Benso di Cavour (1810–61), the premier and for-

eign minister of Victor Emmanuel II, King of Sardinia-Piedmont. It was di Cavour who met with the French emperor, Napoleon III, in July 1858 at Plombières, France, to discuss what the emperor "could do for Piedmont and Italy."

Shepard B. Clough and Salvatore Saladino's documentary **History of Modern Italy** (Columbia, 1968) describes what happened at that fateful meeting: After eight hours of talks, Napoleon III agreed that Piedmont would provoke Austria into war. France would join the conflict, force the Austrians out of Italy, and Victor Emmanuel II would head a kingdom of Upper Italy. On January 1, 1859, at a New Year's reception in Paris, Napoleon III told the surprised Austrian ambassador, Baron Hubner: "I regret that our relations with your government are not so good as formerly."

In the ensuing Franco-Austrian War of 1859, the French managed to wrest Lombardy from the Austrians, then handed it over to Victor Emmanuel. Several other pieces of the new Italian nation soon fell into place, thanks to di Cavour's skill: The citizens of Tuscany, Modena, Parma, and Romagna decided, in a series of plebiscites, to join Sardinia-Piedmont. And in 1860, the Italian nationalist Giuseppe Garibaldi took over Sicily and Naples by defeating the ruling Bourbon regime. A parliament representing all of the provinces met in Turin, and on March 17, 1861, conferred the title "King of Italy" on Victor Emmanuel II. The kingdom annexed Venice in 1866 and Rome in 1870.

The new monarchy was eager to keep up with its European neighbors in acquiring overseas possessions, as Christopher Seton-Watson points out in **Italy from Liberalism to Fascism, 1870–1925** (Methuen, 1967). "Italy must be ready," declared the Italian newspaper *Il Diritto* on January 1, 1885. "The year

1885 will decide her fate as a great power. It is necessary to feel the responsibility of the new era."

Later that year, as Robert L. Hess's **Italian Colonialism in Somalia** (Univ. of Chicago, 1966) explains, Italy's foreign minister, P. S. Mancini, organized an expedition to Ethiopia's Red Sea port of Massawa—a venture he justified before Parliament by declaring that "the keys to the Mediterranean lie in the Red Sea." (Mancini's opponents suggested that he find the keys by asking Moses to drain the Red Sea.) Although the Ethiopians later crushed Italian forces (killing 8,000 men) at the Battle of Adowa in March 1896, Rome maintained small colonies in Eritrea and Somalia.

The Italians would wait 15 years before launching a second imperial adventure. On September 29, 1911, the Liberal Party government of Giovanni Giolitti declared war on Turkey and invaded Turkish-controlled Libya, as Claudio G. Segrè explains in **Fourth Shore** (Univ. of Chicago, 1974). The Italian Navy quickly seized control of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and the formerly Turkish Dodecanese Islands in the Aegean Sea.

The invasion, Martin Clark observes in **Modern Italy, 1871–1982** (Longman, 1984), was "taken for reasons of internal policy, to placate the Nationalists and the 'clerico-moderates.'" And many priests, he says, had preached a crusade "against the heathen Turk."

By 1930, when Benito Mussolini was in power, some 50,000 Italians were living in Rome's African colonies. According to Denis Mack Smith's **Mussolini's Roman Empire** (Viking, 1976), the Africans did not fare too badly under Italy's Fascist regime. Indeed, the Italians,

Mack Smith says, "built a large network of roads; and by the legal abolition of slavery, the control of pestilence and famine, and the administration of justice, they sometimes gave the local population more active help than their neighbours in nearby British colonies."

Seeking revenge for the disaster at Adowa and yearning to expand his "empire," Mussolini would send his troops to Ethiopia in October 1935. A. J. Barker describes the *Duce's* short-lived Ethiopian conquest in **The Civilizing Mission** (Dial, 1968).

World War II, of course, ended Italy's love affair with imperialism and Fascism. But what would the future hold in store? Several studies cover the crucial post-war years, during which the Italians established a republic, chose the Christian Democrats over the Communists, joined NATO, and became closely linked to the West. These books include H. Stuart Hughes's **United States and Italy** (Harvard, 1979); Norman Kogan's **Political History of Postwar Italy** (Praeger, 1983); and F. Roy Willis's **Italy Chooses Europe** (Oxford, 1971).

Finally, John Haycraft's lively **Italian Labyrinth** (Penguin, 1987) and Luigi Barzini's vivid (if stereotypical) **Italians** (Atheneum, 1986) probably provide the best sketches of Italian manners, mores, and everyday life. "In the heart of every man," writes Barzini, "wherever he is born, whatever his education and tastes, there is one small corner which is Italian, that part which finds regimentation irksome, the dangers of war frightening, strict morality stifling, [and] which loves frivolous and entertaining art, admires larger-than-life-size solitary heroes, and dreams of an impossible liberation from the strictures of a tidy existence."

---

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Professor Charles Delzell suggested many of the titles in this essay.*