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Silenzio: The Effects of World War II Policy on Italian-American Identity

Luca Signore

Martini Battistessa had lived in Richmond, California for 20 years. On a chilly February evening in 1942, he calmly walked into a local bar and offered a friend fifty dollars to shoot him in the head. The friend laughed at him and Battistessa left. Battistessa's naturalization request had been denied: he was now classified as an enemy alien to the United States and would have to abandon his house. He walked to the nearby railroad tracks. The conductor of the south-bound train felt a harsh judder, and then silence.¹

In the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, 600,000 Italian-Americans were branded as enemy aliens.² For many, like Martini Battistessa, the stigma of being labeled as such was too much to bear. The remaining Italian-Americans would later be forced to register as enemy aliens, and carry with them an identifying pink booklet. They were required to forfeit contraband items such as shortwave radios and firearms. They were subjected to a dusk-to-dawn curfew in certain areas. Ten thousand were forced to leave their homes based on being located in strategic military zones. Finally, "257 of those deemed most

¹ Lawrence DiStasi, "The Relocation of Italian Americans in California during World War II," in *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret History of Italian American Evacuation and Internment during World War II* (Berkeley, CA: Heydey Books, 2001), 39-40.

² Lawrence DiStasi, "One Voice at a Time," introduction to *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, XVII.

dangerous were then interned for the duration of the war.”³

The internment of Italian-Americans in the Second World War is a subject that is often overlooked or barely mentioned by World War II scholars. Perhaps this is due, in part, to the staunch difference between the number of Italian-Americans and Japanese-Americans that were interned. Despite this quantitative disparity, the treatment of Italian-Americans during this time exemplifies a period which forced them to believe “that if the penalty they have incurred is not for something they have done, then it must be due to *what they are*.”⁴ Thus, the Italian-American internment is both a footnote and a tragedy.

Purpose and Background

The purpose of this work is to add a voice to the limited historiography of the Italian-American internment. The majority of the works that discuss the Italian-American internment characterize it through a comparison to the Japanese internment.⁵ While statistics of the Japanese internment are essential in providing context for the Italian-American experience, this story deserves attention as a separate entity, for the reason that, at the time of their evacuation, relocation, and internment, over five million people of Italian

³ Lawrence DiStasi, "Morto il Camerata," in *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, 3.

⁴ DiStasi, "One Voice at a Time," introduction to *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, XVIII.

⁵ Stephen Fox, *The Unknown Internment: An Oral History of the Relocation of Italian Americans during World War II* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 186.

descent were living in the United States.⁶

The Italian-American internment must be examined separately from the Japanese internment because their experiences and roles in the United States at the time were vastly different. In truth, the similarities between the Italian-American and Japanese internment end at the word "internment." It would be both inaccurate and insensitive to suggest that the suffering of interned Italian-Americans was on the same scale as that of the Japanese. Despite this, both of these groups had their basic human freedoms revoked by the country to which they had pledged allegiance. Many of the Italian-Americans who lived this dark story are no longer alive. However, through the study of their lives their voice can still be heard. The aim of this paper is to highlight the unique circumstances which led to the way the Italian-American internment was carried out. The importance of the Italian-American internment lies not in the numbers, but rather in its role in shaping Italian-American identity. Prior to the war, many Italian immigrants considered themselves "dual" citizens. Joe Cervetto, when questioned on whether he preferred Italy or the United States said, "You have a mother, and you have a wife. You love both of them, different love. You cannot go in bed with your mother, but love your mother, and you love your wife. You can't say I want one to love or the other. It's the same thing like your country."⁷ Cervetto went on to say, "I said I would never go against the United States.

⁶ Lawrence DiStasi, "How World War II Iced Italian American Culture," in *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, 303.

⁷ DiStasi, "One Voice at a Time," introduction to *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, XVI.

Because the U.S. is my country,” and yet he was detained for several months in 1942.⁸ The internment, and the stigma which it begot, resulted in many individuals severing their ties with Italy. The Italian-American internment is still relevant today because of its role in shaping Italian-American identity.

Possibly the most important factor to consider in the analysis of the Second World War's effect on Italian-American identity is assimilation. James A. Crispino defines three forms of assimilation: Anglo-Conformity, Melting Pot, and Cultural Pluralism.⁹ According to Crispino, the three forms of assimilation blend into each other, in the aforementioned order, to form the “straight-line theory,” which he claims is upheld in the case of Italian-Americans.¹⁰ Crispino based his analysis of assimilation on seven measures of assimilation: Cultural, Structural, Marital, Identification, Attitude Receptional, Behavior Receptional, and Civic.¹¹ Crispino's claim that Italian-American assimilation upholds the straight-line theory fails to incorporate the Italian-American internment as a motivating factor.¹² The straight-line theory may apply to Italian-Americans living outside of the West Coast, regardless, California and its neighboring states were affected to the greatest extent, from an ethnic standpoint, because of the war.

Assimilation, for Italian-Americans, cannot be

⁸ Ibid, XVI.

⁹ James A. Crispino, *The Assimilation of Ethnic Groups: The Italian Case*(Staten Island, NY: The Center for Migration Studies of New York, 1980), V.

¹⁰ Crispino, *The Assimilation of Ethnic*, V.

¹¹ Crispino, *The Assimilation of Ethnic*, 33-34.

¹² Crispino, *The Assimilation of Ethnic*, 99.

approached in the same manner as that of other white European groups. Italian-Americans, even before World War II, were not considered to be “white.”¹³ Instead, Italian-Americans pertained to “a rather precarious racial middle ground between African-Americans and whites.”¹⁴ Thus, analysis of racial tensions during World War II often excludes Italian-Americans.¹⁵ In this paper, assimilation will be considered using two different approaches. First, a *de jure* analysis will examine the context in which economic and political acceptance is evaluated, and, secondly, a *de facto* approach will place Italian-American identity on the spectrum of whiteness.

The Italian-American Experience Prior to World War II

In order to better understand the context of the Italian-American internment, it is imperative that one examines the experiences of Italian immigrants prior to the war. Italians accounted for an enormous percentage of the United States’ immigrant population. Over two million emigrated from Italy between 1924 and the outbreak of war.¹⁶ However, it is important to note that only 28 percent of Italian immigrants in the

¹³ Stefano Luconi, *From Paesani to White Ethnics: The Italian Experience in Philadelphia* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 154.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 155.

¹⁵ Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Italian Americans and Race: To Be or Not to Be White," in *Merica*, ed. Aldo Bove and Giuseppe Massara (Stony Brook, NY: Forum Italicum Publishing, 2006), 94.

¹⁶ Andrew F. Rolle, *The Immigrant Upraised: Italian Adventurers and Colonists in an Expanding America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 30-31.

United States were naturalized by 1920.¹⁷ Three-fourths and two-thirds, respectively, of German and English immigrants were naturalized by this time. Thus, the Italian immigrant population was “the least assimilated numerically.”¹⁸ This statistic suggests that Italian immigrants were reluctant to “cast off all vestiges of old-world culture” for the “speedy adoption of American citizenship.”¹⁹ The fact that Italian citizenship is handed down through *jus sanguinis* – the acquirement of citizenship based on your heritage, not your place of birth – provides a possible explanation for this phenomenon. The Italian government included a page of instructions with its passports which stated: “The immigrant should never abandon his feeling of the value of being an Italian.”²⁰ This document outlined the expectation that Italian immigrants “transmit to your descendants the sacred flame of the love of the distant fatherland.”²¹ The Italian immigrant before the Second World War was then forced to decide between accepting the expectations of Italian citizenship and assimilating fully into American society. The fact that many Italian immigrants did successfully integrate into the American economy before the war suggests that they were not required to abandon their Italian citizenship and culture in order to live comfortably.²²

The story of Guido Branzini serves as an example for the relative prosperity of Italian immigrants prior

¹⁷ Fox, *The Unknown Internment: An Oral*, 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 6.

²⁰ Paul Radin, *The Italians of San Francisco: Their Adjustment and Acculturation* (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 113.

²¹ *Ibid*, 133.

²² Fox, *The Unknown Internment: An Oral*, 4.

the war. Branzini emigrated from Italy in 1923 in search of the American dream. He worked in a variety of agricultural jobs and saved enough money to return to Italy to marry his childhood sweetheart.²³ The fact that he was able to earn the money necessary to make three trips between California and Italy in a span of a few years indicates that he had both the finances and time necessary for such travels. Upon his return to Italy he would declare "*Io trovata l'America,*" I've found America, to his family.²⁴ The American dream was more of an ideal than a reality for the majority of immigrants during this time. Guido would earn enough money to buy a refrigerator, a gas stove, a new car for his family, and, eventually, to open his own produce market.²⁵ Guido Branzini's self-proclaimed attainment of the American dream illustrates the ability of some Italian immigrants to assimilate into American society.

Another example of Italian immigrant prosperity is found in the story of Italian fishermen living on the California coast. At the time, the West Coast fishing industry was one the largest in the world and provided food for the entire United States.²⁶ Many Italian immigrants were fishermen before leaving Italy. Fortunately for them, the Californian coastline and climate resembles that of Italy and allowed a smooth transition into

²³ Velio Alberto Bronzini, "A Market Off Limits," in *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, 32.

²⁴ Ibid, 32.

²⁵ Ibid, 33.

²⁶ Lawrence DiStasi, "A Fish Story," in *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, 63.

fishing in their new homes.²⁷ They practiced a “variant of *campanilismo*” which dictated that immigrants from the same village live and work in close proximity.²⁸ Crews on Italian immigrant fishing ships were often comprised of family members “to reduce friction and enhance the cooperation needed.”²⁹ Thus, the immigrant Italian fishermen illustrate the reluctance of many to assimilate fully into American society and culture, while still integrating into the American economy.

An important distinction must be made between Italian immigrants in big East Coast cities and those on the West Coast. The Italian immigrants in the East were primarily farmers from the south of Italy.³⁰ Those on the West Coast were also farmers and fishermen but significantly wealthier than those who went to the East Coast. This is evidenced by the fact that it cost around \$120 to travel from New York to San Francisco in 1870, during the peak of Italian immigration to the United States.³¹ This amount, based on current inflation rates, is around \$3500 today.³² A farmer from the South of Italy, where unification heavily favored the North economically, would not have been able to afford such a journey. One could argue that Italians who immigrated to the West Coast were, on average,

²⁷ Andrew Rolle, *The Italian Americans: Troubled Roots* (New York: The Free Press, 1980), 2.

²⁸ DiStasi, "A Fish Story," in *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, 65.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 65.

³⁰ Rolle, *The Italian Americans*, 4.

³¹ *Ibid*, 4.

³² WolframAlpha, accessed March 19, 2014, <http://www.wolframalpha.com/input/?i=%24120+1860+USD>.

more highly integrated into the American economy than those who ended up in large East Coast cities. For example, Andrea Saboro, an Italian banker, founded the Italian-Swiss Agricultural Colony, a wine-producer that would eventually supply half of California's wine.³³ Another Italian immigrant, Amadeo P. Giannini, founded *Banca d'Italia*, which later became Bank of America.³⁴ An Italian immigrant support group founded in San Francisco raised \$1,400 to aid fellow Italians in New York.³⁵ Thus, the Italian immigrants on the West Coast, those which were most affected by relocation and internment, were integral to the local economy. This distinction is important because it is relevant to the discussion of whether Italian immigrants were "accepted" in the United States prior to the war.

Italians and Other Immigrant Groups

The Italian immigrants on the East Coast, from the first wave of immigration to the eve of World War II, were in constant strife with the Irish immigrants.³⁶ The Irish came from the first large wave of immigrants to the United States, whereas the Italians primarily came in the second. The Irish were able to establish themselves as the top immigrant population in many of the East Coast's large cities and conflicted with newer

³³ Humbert S. Nelli, *From Immigrants to Ethnics: The Italian Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 74.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 73.

³⁵ "Italian Immigration: Question Discussed by Italian Residents of This City," *Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco), July 31, 1888.

³⁶ Crispino, *The Assimilation of Ethnic*, 24.

groups like the Italians.³⁷ The West Coast Italians initially immigrated during the California Gold Rush in the late 1840s, which coincided with a large group of Chinese immigrants coming to California in search of gold.^{38,39} The Italian and Chinese immigrants, much like the East Coast Italians and the Irish, often clashed.⁴⁰ Italian immigrants chided the Chinese for being illiterate and for not bringing their families with them to the United States.⁴¹ However, the illiteracy rate among the Chinese was a meager 7% compared to the 53.9% of Southern Italians living in San Francisco.⁴² Furthermore, the majority of Italian immigrants who came to California had left their families behind in search of the American dream.⁴³ On the West Coast, the Chinese were discriminated against on a larger scale than Italian immigrants, and the aforementioned statistics suggest that this was mainly due to hypocritical racial prejudices.⁴⁴ Thus, Italian immigrants occupied a more favorable position within the spectrum of whiteness.

³⁷ Ibid, 23.

³⁸ Micaela di Leonardo, *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience: Kinship, Class, and Gender among California Italian-Americans* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 55.

³⁹ Rolle, *The Italian Americans*, 176.

⁴⁰ "Chinese vs. Italians," *Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco), December 13, 1851.

⁴¹ Wendy Rouse Jorae, *The Children of Chinatown: Growing Up Chinese American in San Francisco, 1850-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 43.

⁴² Ibid 43.

⁴³ Francis J. Brown and Joseph Slabey Roucek, eds. *Our Racial and National Minorities: Their History, Contributions, and Present Problems* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1937), 358.

⁴⁴ Jorae, *The Children of Chinatown*, 97.

It soon became evident to Italian immigrants that they stood to benefit from discrimination against the Chinese. California's Anthony Caminetti, one of the first Italian Americans elected to the House of Representatives, actively lobbied for Oriental exclusion.⁴⁵ Gino Angeluzzi's father, an Italian immigrant, remembered a boyhood game in San Francisco "of tying the long hair of Chinese people in a knot and running like hell!"⁴⁶ This sense of racial superiority found among many West Coast Italian-Americans supports the notion of being able to attain whiteness through a shared dislike for Asian immigrant groups. The idea of Americanization through racism suggests that the adoption of racist stereotypes and language from the dominant culture may actually help transition into it.⁴⁷ This practice is evident in the accounts of many Italian-Americans who spoke of the "Japs" as enemies.⁴⁸ Many Italian-Americans refused to see the treatment of Japanese-Americans as a justifiable version of what was happening to them.⁴⁹ However, the use of racial slurs and prejudices against the groups that were generally disliked in mainstream American culture allowed many Italian-Americans to become more "white" and, through an unusual transitivity, more American.

The stories of Guido Branzini and the Italian

⁴⁵ Rolle, *The Italian Americans*, 72.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 72.

⁴⁷ Vecoli, "Italian Americans and Race," in *Merica*, 100.

⁴⁸ Richard Aquila, *Home Front Soldier: The Story of a GI and his Italian American Family during World War II* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 201.

⁴⁹ Mary Tolomei, interview, in *The Unknown Internment: An Oral*, 98.

immigrant fishermen demonstrate two distinct versions of early Italian-American identity. For some Italian immigrants, such as Guido Branzini, the identities they assumed in the United States were characterized by public assimilation while maintaining Italian traditions in the private sphere. The fishermen, on the other hand, had no desire or urgency to assimilate into American society because they lived with, worked with, and married other Italian immigrants.⁵⁰ Similarly, other Italian immigrants were not interested in obtaining citizenship because "Italians just stayed in their own little group" and "that's all they needed."⁵¹ Even though many Italian immigrants integrated into the United States, whether economically, socially, or culturally, this was not viewed as a strong reason for obtaining citizenship. Thus, the Italian immigrant before World War II was unlikely to apply for citizenship due to his loyalty to Italy and a lack of incentive to do so. This, then, illustrates Italian-American identity prior to the war as being plural in the sense that Italian immigrants either could not, or refused to, recognize the possibility of having to choose between Italy and the United States. Or, in the words of Joe Cervetto, picking between their mother and their wife.⁵² However, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order No. 9066 they would be forced to do exactly this.

⁵⁰ DiStasi, "A Fish Story," in *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, 65.

⁵¹ Ugo Giuntini, interview, in *The Unknown Internment: An Oral*, 13.

⁵² DiStasi, "One Voice at a Time," introduction to *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, XVI.

Outbreak of War and Italian Detainment

Executive Order No. 9066 was signed on February 19, 1942 by President Roosevelt as a result of mounting public pressure to act.⁵³ This pressure stemmed from the paranoia that came after the Japanese attack of Pearl Harbor. How could Americans feel safe if one of the biggest naval ports could be decimated without warning? This newfound sense of vulnerability would result in a widespread distrust of immigrants who originated from the Axis countries.⁵⁴ In fact, a total of 267 Italians were arrested in the United States before the day that Executive Order No. 9066 was signed.⁵⁵

From the minute news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor hit the rest of the United States, people began to put pressure on the government to act. The first step that the government took was "issuing the orders for summary apprehension of German, Italian, and Japanese aliens determined...to be dangerous to the public peace and safety of the United States," on January 7th, 1941.⁵⁶ The United States government justified this action under Section 21, Title 50 of the U.S. Code, containing the Alien Enemies Act of 1798. The Alien Enemies Act defined an enemy alien as "a person who is a citizen, a subject, an alien, or a denizen of a nation that is at war with the United States."⁵⁷ This order was carried out under the super-

⁵³ Fox, *The Unknown Internment: An Oral*, 41.

⁵⁴ DiStasi, "One Voice at a Time," introduction to *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, XIII.

⁵⁵ Gloria Ricci Lothrop, "The Untold Story: The Effect of the Second World War on California Italians," *Journal of the West* XXXV, no. 1 (January 1996): 11.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 8.

vision of Edward Ennis, who was Director of the Enemy Alien Control Unit of the Justice Department. On the first day, 77 Italians were arrested. By December 10th, 147 Italians were in custody. 25 of the Italians were interned.⁵⁸

The next step of the U.S. government's plan on the West Coast was undertaken by Attorney General Francis Biddle. Biddle extended the reach of enemy alien regulation on January 14, 1942, when he announced that each enemy alien over the age of fourteen must be issued identification cards including a picture, fingerprints, and a signature. This requirement came into effect on February 2, 1942. The registration of enemy aliens in Los Angeles had to be extended by two days because over 6,800 people showed up on the first day.⁵⁹ Finally, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order No. 9066, which legitimized the arrest, detainment, relocation, and internment of enemy aliens in Military District One. The man responsible for the defense and safety of the district was Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt. General DeWitt would prove to be relentless and brutal in his prosecution of enemy aliens. General DeWitt's "single-minded concern about enemy aliens" was a result of deep-rooted belief in fifth columnists - potential internal saboteurs - among the enemy alien population.⁶⁰

The signing of Executive Order No. 9066 would prove to be the culmination of both government and public pressure. Various organizations voiced their opinions

⁵⁸ Ibid, 8.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 10.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 12.

and urged the government to take action. The Native Sons of the Golden West called for the arrest and internment of all enemy aliens on the West Coast. The Young Democratic Club of Los Angeles also favored the relocation of Germans and Italians born in the United States.⁶¹ Opposite to those who favored either relocation or internment for Italian enemy aliens were those who saw the Italians as friends. A *New York Times* article from October 13, 1942, urged Americans to realize that the Italians in the United States do not represent Mussolini, but rather Mazzini and Garibaldi. Furthermore, the piece supported the removal of literacy tests for citizenship applications in order to facilitate the process for Italian aliens.⁶² Despite this and other forms of opposition to the detainment, relocation, and internment of enemy aliens, Executive Order No. 9066 began a large-scale process of arresting, detaining, and, in some cases, interning Italian enemy aliens.

It is important to note that what the *Los Angeles Times* called a "great manhunt" for enemy aliens began long before the signing of Executive Order 9066. As early as 1939, when war erupted in Europe, the Federal Bureau of Investigation began tracking those who voiced pro-Axis or pro-fascist beliefs.⁶³ Even before the order to arrest enemy aliens, the FBI intercepted their mail. The mail seized by the FBI was generally benign and posed no threat to national security. One woman's letter was investigated because

⁶¹ Ibid, 12.

⁶² "He Who Has Faith in Italy," *New York Times*, October 13, 1942.

⁶³ DiStasi, "Morto il Camerata," in *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, 3.

she told the recipient that she enjoyed the blue skies she saw from her terrace because they reminded her of Italy.⁶⁴ Another letter between an Italian-American soldier and his family was seized despite it mostly containing advice from the subject's father about avoiding "diseased" women in foreign ports.⁶⁵ While these letters highlight the harmless nature of many of the seized documents, they also exemplify the government's paranoia about potential "fifth columnists."

In some cases, this paranoia was justified. The FBI seized a letter from O. Scalise to Ruggero Santini which contained phrases such as "Our dear, good Italy," "The orderly regime of Fascism," and "Our beloved Duce."⁶⁶ A woman wrote to her friend about how she "can still feel the thrill" after shaking Mussolini's hand.⁶⁷ Another letter expressed anti-Semitic remarks such as "The Hebrews must all have their throats cut! Even Christ if He returns to life," and that the "Crazy Criminal in Washington" will use the Jews to "harm the Axis."⁶⁸ Many of those who wrote letters such as these were eventually detained and questioned by the FBI.

The FBI compiled a list of enemy aliens deemed dangerous to the United States.⁶⁹ This list was given to

⁶⁴ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Intercepted Letter from R. Santini, Misc. Doc. (1940).

⁶⁵ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Intercepted Letter from Italian Alien, Misc. Doc. (1942).

⁶⁶ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Intercepted Letter from O. Scalise, Misc. Doc. (1942).

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Intercepted Letter from O. Scalise, Misc. Doc. (1940).

⁶⁹ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Memorandum for: The Commanding General, Misc. Doc. (1942).

federal agents around the country with orders to arrest, detain, and question the enemy aliens. Those placed on the list were given different ratings according to their perceived danger to the United States. Those who were deemed most dangerous were given a rating of "A." Those the government deemed not as dangerous but worthy of surveillance were given a rating of "B." Immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt signed Proclamation 2527, which declared that "an invasion or predatory incursion is threatened upon the territory of the United States by Italy."⁷⁰ The Executive Order 9066 gave the U.S. government the ability to intern anyone they deemed dangerous – both enemy aliens and citizens.⁷¹ The arrest of over 1,500 Italian resident aliens was carried out for the duration of their classification as enemy aliens.⁷² The reasons for the arrests range from reasonable – within the context of the war – to completely ludicrous. Those who were arrested were usually detained at either the Sharp Park INS detention center near San Francisco, or at Terminal Island near Los Angeles.⁷³ They were often never told of the reasoning behind their arrest, except that there was a presidential warrant for it.⁷⁴ They were then detained at one of the centers for multiple days while they awaited trial, or they were shipped off to internment camps. Filippo

⁷⁰ DiStasi, "Appendix A: Timeline of Events," in *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, 313.

⁷¹ DiStasi, "Morto il Camerata," in *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, 3.

⁷² *Ibid*, 3.

⁷³ Lothrop, "The Untold Story: The Effect," 13.

⁷⁴ Rose D. Scherini, "When Italian Americans Were 'Enemy Aliens'," in *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, 13.

Molinari, the sales representative for *L'Italia* in San Jose, was arrested without explanation and sent to the Missoula internment camp still in his pajamas and slippers.⁷⁵

The detainment and questioning of Italian-Americans during this time is especially pertinent to the wider discussion of its effect on identity because it reveals the contrasting natures of the American and Italian notions of citizenship. Specifically, it demonstrates America's expectation that enemy aliens completely sever ties with their country of origin as an act of loyalty. Many Italian-Americans found themselves in this dilemma, often having to decide between their homeland and adopted home. In order to fully understand the implications of such a dilemma it is important to consider what it meant to be Italian at the time. The Italian government, unlike the American one, did not take issue with its citizens assuming another country's nationality.⁷⁶ Importance was placed on cultural ties – including language, history, and geography – rather than legal ties. Furthermore, the Italian government viewed the immigration of its citizens to other nations as a way of exporting a “world-extensive and strong Italy.”⁷⁷ This is especially relevant to the issue at hand when one considers the arrests of Italian-Americans for maintaining connections with Italy.

Pietro Perata was arrested for allegedly having “made statements detrimental to the best interests of the U.S.” Perata stated that he “favored the U.S. in this

⁷⁵ Ibid, 13.

⁷⁶ Radin, “*The Italians of San Francisco.*” 113.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 8.

war” but that “he still did not want to see Italy lose because that was his homeland.⁷⁸ Perata was given a rating of “A” and detained. Angelo Fanucchi was given an “A” rating because he spent three years in the Italian Army. The report also highlighted the fact that he had a sister living Italy, though he had not corresponded with or sent money to Italy for several years. Fanucchi had even professed his loyalty to the United States and offered to assist the war effort. The United States issued an Executive Subpoena for his arrest.⁷⁹ Giuseppe Peppino Lepore, when questioned, “affirmed loyalty to U.S. and stated he was not in favor of the Fascist government.” Lepore sent \$15 to \$20 per month to Italy to support his two sons. This led the FBI to report that Lepore “is greatly concerned over his children’s welfare and therefore might be sympathetic towards the Italian cause.” Lepore was given a rating of “A” and detained.⁸⁰ Louis Berizzi told the hearing board that he “believed in democratic principles and did not believe in Fascism.” However, he also expressed concern for his family, saying that he “did not like the idea of having [his] mother bombed.” The board interpreted Berizzi’s statement to mean that he did not want Italy, his so-called “mother,” bombed. Berizzi was interned.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Report on Pietro Perata, Misc. Doc. (1942).

⁷⁹ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Report on Angelo Fanucchi, Misc. Doc. (1942).

⁸⁰ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Report on Giuseppe Peppino Lepore, Misc. Doc. (1942).

⁸¹ DiStasi, “One Voice at a Time,” introduction to *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, XV.

Impact of Wartime Policy on Italian-Americans

In essence, the United States government was asking many Italian-Americans to not only cut their ties with their origins, but also with their family – the most important entity in traditional Italian culture. Mr. Bertaldo, an Italian living Oklahoma City, was required to “assure agents that neither he nor his wife had any relatives in Italy and they had not received any correspondence from there for several years.”⁸² For Giuseppe di Prima, the war forced him to pick between two different families. Di Prima, fearing the outbreak of war between the United States and Italy, opted to return to Italy “rather than risk the American draft and the possibility of having to fight against relatives in Italy.”⁸³ He brought his immediate family with him but was forced to leave behind his sister and his nephews. Di Prima referred to this event as his family being “divided.”⁸⁴ The outbreak of the war, and the subsequent regulation of enemy aliens, was especially damaging to Italian-American identity because it often affected familial ties, one of the important – if not the *most* important – tenets of Italian culture.

The FBI decided the fate of the Italians who were interviewed based on their perception of how dangerous they could be to the United States’ war effort.⁸⁵ The majority of those interviewed by the FBI were

⁸² Nancy C. Carnevale, “No Italian Spoken for the Duration of the War’: Language, Italian-American Identity, and Cultural Pluralism in the World War II Years,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 2003, 8.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 9.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 9.

⁸⁵ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Report on Corrado Petroni, Misc. Doc. (1943).

initially given an “A” rating but either unconditionally released or paroled. The phrase “USA declined prosecution” appears as the final sentence in these reports.⁸⁶ The government’s reluctance to prosecute Italians on a large scale shows that many Italian-Americans were impacted by the wartime policy, though a relatively small portion was interned. Additionally, an analysis of why the majority of Italian-Americans were not interned elucidates the role of the United States’ enemy exclusion policy in shaping Italian-American identity.

The Italians who were not interned, but who were unable to obtain American citizenship, were forced to relocate away from military zones.⁸⁷ For many, the exclusion forced them to move from their homes. Celestina Stagnaro Loero, a seventy-six year-old, 4-foot-10, 140 pound woman, was forced to move from her house on the Santa Cruz coast. She had lived in that same house for forty-one years and raised two sons there, both of whom were enlisted in the U.S. Navy. Furthermore, the Stagnaro family was a prominent fishing family who had strong connections to the Monterey Bay. Loero moved herself and all of her belongings to a house inland off Highway 1 within forty-eight hours.⁸⁸ Gervasio Comelli was also classified as an enemy alien during the war. He, unlike Loero, lived far enough away from Santa Cruz to avoid relocation. However, his farm was located within the restricted zone west of Highway 1. He was unable to

⁸⁶ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Report on Valentino Rovai, Misc. Doc. (1942).

⁸⁷ Geoffrey Dunn, "Mala Notte: The Relocation Story in Santa Cruz," in *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, 106.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 103.

work his farm and forced to find a job in a tannery instead.⁸⁹ Another Italian had an estate with a winery in Arcata, California. When he was forced to leave his home he lost not only his house, but also his livelihood.⁹⁰

The stories of these people highlight perhaps the greatest paradox of the Italian-American internment: those who were interned often suffered less from an economic standpoint than those who were forced to relocate. Obviously, those interned were denied the very freedom on which America was founded. That being said, Italians in the internment camps sometimes earned more money through menial tasks, such as ironing and folding clothes, than they did in their civilian jobs.⁹¹ On the other hand, twenty percent of the Italians employed by the half-million-dollar-a-year San Francisco fishing industry were forced to leave their jobs because they worked in a restricted zone.⁹² Ironically, the economic hardship faced by Italian-Americans during the war hurt the United States economy equally and eventually influenced the decision not to relocate and intern Italian-Americans to same extent as the Japanese.⁹³ Japanese-Americans accounted for only one percent of the Pacific states' population and primarily worked in the agricultural sector. The Italian community was active in various

⁸⁹ Ivano Comelli, "Wrong Side of the Highway," in *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, 115.

⁹⁰ Lily Boemker, interview, in *The Unknown Internment: An Oral*, 78.

⁹¹ Marino Sichi, interview, in *The Unknown Internment: An Oral*, 96.

⁹² Fox, *The Unknown Internment: An Oral*, 68.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 102.

sectors of the economy, and evacuation policies for them would “have direct Nation-wide import” and hinder the United States’ war effort.⁹⁴

The experience of the 257 Italians who were interned illustrates the controversial nature of the United States’ internment policy. Internment for Italian-Americans was radically different from that of the Germans and Japanese. Arturo Toscanini, an Italian-American orchestra conductor, gave Italian internees books and instruments through donations.⁹⁵ Those in the Missoula camp were allowed to put on a play for the residents of Missoula, Montana.⁹⁶ Italian internees were given food that was rationed for the rest of the United States.⁹⁷ Others were grateful that they were interned rather than deported because they feared going back to Italy and being forced to join the Italian Army.⁹⁸ Alessandro de Luca, an internee at Missoula, when asked, “How do you like Missoula?” replied, “Very much, and you may tell the Chamber of Commerce here that we do.”⁹⁹ Enrico Giuseppe Bongi, an Italian living in San Francisco, told the FBI that he “had been working hard” that year and that he would like to go to an internment camp so that he could rest

⁹⁴ Ibid, 129.

⁹⁵ "Toscanini's Re-Education Campaign," *The Washington Post*, November 21, 1943.

⁹⁶ *Bella Vista: An Unseen View of WWII*, Public Broadcasting System, 2010.

⁹⁷ Chester G. Hanson, "Italian Prisoners 'Overcome' by Food," *Los Angeles Times*, September 24, 1943.

⁹⁸ James Brooke, "After Silence, Italians Recall the Internment," *New York Times*, August 11, 1997.

⁹⁹ Missoula Sentinel, 8 May 1941.

and play bocce with his friends.¹⁰⁰ However, as the days passed in the internment camps, the Italians' sojourn became less leisurely. Internees, despite the "luxuries" they enjoyed, became incredibly bored with life in the camps. Some believed that being bored in the camps was a more favorable alternative to "going home to a country embroiled in war."¹⁰¹ Marino Sichi, the internee who earned more money by ironing shirts than he did as a free man, admitted "I didn't want to stay there. All kidding aside, it wasn't any fun."¹⁰² The effect of the actual internment of Italian-Americans during World War II cannot be measured by the number of people interned. Rather, it must be measured through its role in altering and shaping postwar Italian-American identity.

The threat to intern Italians on the same scale as the Japanese was spearheaded by General DeWitt. DeWitt, a fierce xenophobe, was adamant on carrying out the relocation in a timely manner due to belief that retaliatory raids from Italy and Germany were imminent.¹⁰³ President Roosevelt disagreed with DeWitt and claimed that "it is one thing to safeguard American industry, and particularly defense industry, against sabotage; but it is very much another to throw out of work people who, except for the accident of birth, are sincerely patriotic."¹⁰⁴ Thus, in the eyes of President Roosevelt, Italian-Americans had been transformed

¹⁰⁰ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Report on Enrico Giuseppe Bongio, Misc. Doc. (1942).

¹⁰¹ Carol Van Valkenburg, *An Alien Place* (Missoula, MT: Pictorial Histories Publishing, 2009), 19.

¹⁰² Sichi, interview, in *The Unknown Internment: An Oral*, 96.

¹⁰³ Fox, *The Unknown Internment: An Oral*, 33.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 102.

from potential saboteurs to “sincerely patriotic” in less than twelve months. The United States’ internment policy during World War II was, therefore, motivated by “economics, politics, and morale...with race as a reinforcing factor.”¹⁰⁵ Economically, and from a morale standpoint, it made no sense to imprison 600,000 people who could contribute to the war effort. In terms of politics, losing the vote of the largest immigrant group in the United States would hurt the political interests of President Roosevelt in the wake of the 1944 election.¹⁰⁶ The question of race inevitably draws comparison to the Japanese-American internment.¹⁰⁷ However, the “spectrum of whiteness,” which is paramount in the understanding of the Italian-American experience during World War II, is often overlooked. By October, 1943, all 600,000 unnaturalized Italians were freed from the stigma of being classified as enemy aliens.¹⁰⁸ When Italy surrendered on September 8, 1943, the majority of the Italian internees were released.¹⁰⁹

The internment of enemy aliens during World War II has clear roots in racial prejudices. In 1924, just seventeen years before the attack on Pearl Harbor and subsequent stigmatization of enemy aliens, the United States halted immigration, especially from Asia. The decision to intern certain people based on their nationality caused Italian-Americans to evaluate their posi-

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 185.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 184-185.

¹⁰⁷ Van Valkenburg, *An Alien Place*, 49.

¹⁰⁸ "Rules Not Relaxed for German, Jap Aliens, U.S. Warns," *The Washington Post*, October 26, 1942, 2.

¹⁰⁹ DiStasi, "How World War II Iced Italian American Culture," in *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, 303.

tion on the spectrum of whiteness. To claim any kind of allegiance to Italy would be seen as allegiance to the Axis, and, by association, allegiance to Japan. The importance of the internment in shaping postwar Italian-American identity is apparent in the fact that, while only a small portion was sent to the camps, it put their loyalties into question. The question of loyalty is especially pertinent to the wider discussion of identity because it demonstrates an incompatibility of Italian cultural loyalty with American political loyalty. The role of language in Italian cultural identity exemplifies this incompatibility.

Before the United States entered World War II, the two-sided nature of Italian-American loyalty was, for the most part, accepted. While there was animosity towards Italian immigrants in many parts of the country – exemplified through the use of the word “wop” and the prevalence of beatings and lynchings – those living in the West Coast were assimilated to a much greater extent.¹¹⁰ The experience of West Coast Italians was characterized by assimilation into the American economy and “the acceptance of American values while retaining respect for Italian tradition and culture.”¹¹¹ Italian-Americans could speak Italian, celebrate Italian holidays, and teach their traditions to their children, as long as they were politically loyal to the United States. The San Francisco Italian-American community created several institutions which allowed them to continue their traditions while being assimilated into the greater community. The Italian-American community founded the Italian Mutual Aid Society

¹¹⁰ Fox, *The Unknown Internment: An Oral*, 7.

¹¹¹ Radin, “*The Italians of San Francisco*,” 113.

which established educational programs for its members and hired Italian-speaking physicians to serve the community.¹¹² Also available to the Italian-American community were parochial schools which taught Italian.¹¹³ The importance of language cannot be overlooked. The use and teaching of Italian allowed Italian-Americans to keep alive “the sacred flame of the love of the distant Fatherland” while integrating into American society. World War II forced Italian-Americans to largely abandon the use of the Italian language in order to prove their loyalty to the United States.

Italian-Americans, unlike the Japanese, were not easily identified by physical characteristics, and thus, their language became a “marker of their foreignness.”¹¹⁴ The FBI, when conducting searches of Italian-American homes, looked for Italian language newspapers, letters, other documents written in Italian, and shortwave radios that could transmit Italian language broadcasts.¹¹⁵ Julia Besozzi was questioned by the FBI because she was a member of the Board of Directors at the *Scuola Italiana Marconi*.¹¹⁶ Mario Augusto Parisi was arrested and excluded from Military Areas 1 and 2 because he operated a movie theater that showed Italian language films.¹¹⁷ Speaking Italian became a “basis enough for suspicion and further investiga-

¹¹² Rolle, *The Italian Americans*, 39.

¹¹³ Nelli, *From Immigrants to Ethnic*, 73.

¹¹⁴ Carnevale, “No Italian Spoken for the Duration,” 9.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 10.

¹¹⁶ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Report on Julia Besozzi, Misc. Doc. (1942).

¹¹⁷ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Report on Mario Augusto Parisi, Misc. Doc. (1942).

tion.”¹¹⁸ According to the FBI, the use of the Italian language was a major element of Mussolini’s nationalistic approach to fascism.¹¹⁹ To speak Italian in the United States was to propagate Mussolini’s message abroad. Furthermore, it meant to the FBI that those who were speaking Italian agreed with Mussolini’s policies. Interestingly enough, there were many Italian-Americans who did praise Mussolini, although not for his actions in World War II.

Many Italian-Americans believed that Mussolini was a good leader, but that his mistake was allying with Nazi Germany.¹²⁰ They praised him for the excellent retirement system he established and for modernizing Italy’s roads and railroads.¹²¹ Others blamed him for their treatment in the United States, saying “if it wasn’t for Mussolini they wouldn’t have fought against America.”¹²² This is another instance of Italian-American pluralistic loyalty. They praised Mussolini for improving the living conditions in Italy before the war, and then they chided him for getting Italy involved with Hitler.¹²³ Interestingly enough, the United States government praised Mussolini in the 1930s for “bringing economic and social progress to his people” and as “a savior of capitalism in a world struggling against communist revolution.”¹²⁴ Indeed, praise for Mussolini

¹¹⁸ Carnevale, “No Italian Spoken for the Duration,” 10.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 11.

¹²⁰ Joe Cervetto, interview, in *The Unknown Internment: An Oral*, 161.

¹²¹ Umberto Tonini, interview by the author.

¹²² Mary Cardinalli, interview, in *The Unknown Internment: An Oral*, 181.

¹²³ Fox, *The Unknown Internment: An Oral*, 26.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 36.

was not only tolerated, but even accepted before the war. When war finally broke out in Europe, the United States conveniently forgot that Fascism “had been a national phenomenon rather than an ethnic importation.”¹²⁵ This further complicated life for Italian-Americans. When Germany became America’s enemy, so did Italy and Mussolini. To praise him, if even for providing a better life for relatives in Italy, put an Italian-American’s loyalty into question. Before the war, one could identify themselves as Italian but not be seen as fascist. However, the FBI equated the use of Italian with potential disloyalty, a move which further distanced Italian-Americans from Italy.¹²⁶

The issue of language has had perhaps the most significant and long-lasting effect on postwar Italian-American identity. The number of Italian speakers in the United States decreased from 1.8 million in 1930 to 1.2 million in 1950.¹²⁷ Italian-American shopkeepers placed signs in their windows which read “No Italian Spoken for the Duration of the War.”¹²⁸ The *Societa Italiana di Mutuo Beneficenze* (The Italian Society of Mutual Charities) became “Victory Benefit Association.”¹²⁹ Many Italian-Americans changed their names to Americanized forms.¹³⁰ When speaking, traditional Italian hand gesticulations were replaced with Ameri-

¹²⁵ Ibid, 36.

¹²⁶ Carnevale, "No Italian Spoken for the Duration," 16.

¹²⁷ "Detailed Language Spoken at Home and Ability to Speak English for Persons 5 Years and Over --50 Languages with Greatest Number of Speakers: United States 1990". United States Census Bureau. 1990. Retrieved July 22, 2012.

¹²⁸ Carnevale, "No Italian Spoken for the Duration," 13.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 13.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 13.

can ones such as shoulder shrugging, face twitching, and waist turning.¹³¹ The message was clear: if Italian-Americans wanted to become loyal Americans, they would have to abandon the use of the Italian language. The stigma of speaking Italian is inextricably linked to the sense of shame that Italian-Americans experienced during the war.

The notion of shame is central to the question of Italian-American identity during World War II. Clara Bronzini, an Italian-American whose husband's market was shut down because it was located in a restricted zone, would say "*non abbiamo fatto niente a nessuno*" – we have done nothing to no one.¹³² To many Italian-Americans, not only those who were interned, World War II brought about a sense of shame that questioned the very essence of their being. If they were being punished despite not doing anything wrong, they reasoned, then the issue must be their identity. The release of 600,000 Italian-Americans from the stigma of being labeled as "enemy aliens" presented an opportunity for them to prove their loyalty to the United States.¹³³

Many of the Italian-Americans who were interned decided to join the United States military upon their release. Overall, 400,000 Italian-Americans contributed to the United States war effort.¹³⁴ Some joined the Army as interpreters, a job which allowed them to use their language without the stigma of being seen as

¹³¹ Fred Gardaphé, "The Italians and the 'Mericans," in *'Merica*, 70.

¹³² Bronzini, "A Market Off Limits," in *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, 34.

¹³³ Carnevale, "No Italian Spoken for the Duration," 19.

¹³⁴ Luconi, *From Paesani to White*, 102.

disloyal. Ironically, many young Italian-American men went to fight for the United States – and died for the United States – while their parents were being relocated from their homes.¹³⁵ Those who could not contribute physically to the war effort donated through the purchase of war bonds; the Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA) bought over \$3.3 million worth of war bonds.¹³⁶ Others, when released from relocation or internment, moved out of the predominantly Italian neighborhoods and into diverse suburban areas.¹³⁷ Two-thirds of schools that offered Italian language classes ceased to offer them, and forty percent of Italian language periodicals were discontinued.¹³⁸ Having shed the label of “enemy alien,” Italian-Americans found themselves and their lifestyles drastically changed by the war.¹³⁹ The war allowed Italian-Americans to assimilate into mainstream American culture, however, this assimilation did not account for cultural pluralism. The options for Italian immigrants were clear: “become American in your speech, your habits, your dress, or you will be viewed with suspicion.”¹⁴⁰ If Italian-Americans wanted to become accepted as loyal Americans, they would have to abandon many traditional aspects of their identity.

¹³⁵ Lawrence DiStasi, "War within War: Italian Americans and the Military in World War II," in *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, 272.

¹³⁶ Luconi, *From Paesani to White*, 102.

¹³⁷ Carnevale, "No Italian Spoken for the Duration," 25.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 25.

¹³⁹ Vecoli, "Italian Americans and Race," in *'Merica*, 102.

¹⁴⁰ DiStasi, "One Voice at a Time," introduction to *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, XVI.

Legacy of the Italian-American Internment

The final aspect of Italian-American identity during World War II that must be examined is its legacy. In order for Italian-Americans to become accepted in the United States they were asked to forget: forget their traditions, forget their language, forget their identity.¹⁴¹ The majority chose to forget. The result of this is a permanent cultural amnesia about having to abandon ties to one country in order to maintain loyalty to the other. Paul Pisicano, an Italian-American architect, noted "Since the war, Italo-Americans have undergone this amazing transformation...We stopped being Italo and started becoming Americans."¹⁴² It is because of this amnesia, because this stigma of not being American, that the story of the Italian-American internment was left largely untold.

The experience of Italian-Americans during World War II contributes to the greater discussion of assimilation and whiteness. The overarching question here is "who decides who is white?" Some historians claim that Italian-Americans "opted" for whiteness.¹⁴³ In reality, Italian-Americans were presented with an ultimatum rather than a choice. The Italian-American internment must also be considered with regards to the question of assimilation. It is my belief that Crispino's straight-line theory does not apply to Italian-Americans. Crispino claims that Italian-Americans progressed from Anglo-conformity assimilation to melting pot assimilation, and finally to cultural plural-

¹⁴¹ Ibid, XVII

¹⁴² DiStasi, "How World War II Iced Italian American Culture," in *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, 307.

¹⁴³ Vecoli, "Italian Americans and Race," in *'Merica*, 104.

ism.¹⁴⁴ However, given the historical evidence, it appears that many Italian-Americans already practiced a form of cultural pluralism. World War II, the stigma it created, and the internment all contribute to the decline of Italian-American cultural pluralism and represent the beginning of Italian-American Anglo-conformity. It was not until the 1960s, during the period of ethnic revival, that Italian-American cultural pluralism began to resurface, although the subject of internment was still handled in the same manner: "Don't talk about it."¹⁴⁵

Herein lies the legacy of the internment. In silence. A silence that, paradoxically, speaks the truth of the Italian-American experience during World War II. In this silence we find the internment of a few, and the shame and suffering of a people.

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¹⁴⁴ Crispino, *The Assimilation of Ethnic*, V.

¹⁴⁵ DiStasi, "One Voice at a Time," introduction to *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret*, XXI.