

Encountering Italy: Military Service and National Identity during the First World War

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Abstract: This article explores the idea of 'Italy' in the imagination of peasant and working class Italian soldiers during the First World War, as revealed in soldiers' letters, diaries and memoirs. After first outlining the organisational structure of the armed forces and the way this influenced men's wartime experiences, it analyses the ways in which military service could offer experiences and encounters which helped to shape an idea of Italy in men's minds. Once under arms, men visited parts of the country they had never seen before and developed personal relationships with fellow citizens from other parts of the peninsula. They encountered the reality of state power often for the first time, and were educated in the idea of national duty. Men's wartime experiences and encounters influenced their understanding of nation, patriotism and of their duty towards the nation at war. In the much debated development of Italian national identity, the First World War was a critical moment. The article argues that soldiers' ideas about Italy did indeed change during the war, and a greater sense of national identity began to emerge, but that this process was not necessarily elite-directed or controlled. Instead by the time men were demobilised after the war they had developed their own image of nation and nationality based on personal encounters and experiences, and their subjective assessments of the war itself.

Keywords: First World War, national identity, military service, Italy

The war which Italy fought in 1915-18 can be described in many ways. If nowadays we tend to call it the First World War, contemporaries mostly called it the Great War – a phrase which was used as early as 1915. In Germany and Britain it is possible to find mentions of 'the First World War' even before it ended. But in Italy we find another name given to this conflict: the Fourth War of the Risorgimento, or the Fourth War of Independence. This name relies on the vision presented by the war's supporters at the time – the irredentists and nationalists who supported intervention in 1915 – and to some extent endorsed by the successive liberal and Fascist regimes. In their view, the war was designed finally to complete the unification of Italy, a process rather than event, which had begun in 1848 and was pursued successively in the wars of 1859-60 and 1866.

In the years immediately after the Italian victory, the phrase 'Fourth War of the Risorgimento' was engraved on many local war memorials (Vidotto et al., 1998), and it flourished in later years as the 'liberal' perception of the conflict: Adolfo Omodeo, pupil of Benedetto Croce, strongly emphasised the idea of a Fourth War of Independence in his important work *Momenti della Vita di Guerra* (Omodeo, 1934). This vision of the war can still be found today: a book published in January 2011 to celebrate the 150th anniversary of unification, entitled *101 battaglie che hanno fatto l'Italia unita* (101 Battles which made United Italy) (Frediani, 2011), includes the First World War as part of 'making Italy'. The central element in the process of perfecting unification was completing the national territory, since the incorporation of Trento, Trieste and their respective hinterlands was vital for the final achievement of the nation as physical entity. But arguably the war was equally important in pursuing the other dimension of the Risorgimento: completing the unification of the Italian people. Without Italians, that is to say without Italianising the masses, the process of the Risorgimento would be incomplete. To use the oft-cited (if perhaps apocryphal) words of Massimo d'Azeglio: 'we have made Italy, now we have to make Italians'. This article will address the First World War as a war of unification, not of national territory but of the people and their national identity.¹ Did the conflict serve to unite Italians and increase their sense of *italianità*, and if so, in what ways?

The focus of this study is on the masses, rather than the elite groups who were more likely to support the war and already to identify with the nation. Interventionism and irredentism emerged as important movements within intellectual circles, and the mobilisation of pro-war sentiment was chiefly a socially and culturally elite phenomenon in 1915. Even in Germany and Britain, war enthusiasm was much less widespread than has been commonly assumed (Verhey 2000; Gregory 2008). In Italy the pro-war sector of society was particularly restricted, and the liberal view of the war as the conclusion of the Risorgimento relied heavily on the writings of young male intellectuals and on middle-class views and experiences. Omodeo wrote that 'usually soldiers were not much persuaded by the war and did not always understand their officers, who saw the war from a historical-political perspective' but the men 'placed a complete faith in their officers' (1934, 263).² It is a truism that national identity was weak among the working classes and the peasantry before 1915 and many historians have explained the experience of the Great War as one characterised wholly by repression, since there was no genuine patriotic feeling.³ Since the Second World War, a very different interpretation from Omodeo's liberal, Mazzinian vision has predominated, emphasising popular hostility or at best indifference to the war and highlighting the considerable role of repressive mechanisms in enforcing compliance and obedience in wartime (Isnenghi, 1967, 2002; Procacci, 2000; Forcella and Monticone, 1968). This

scholarship has emphasised the reluctance of peasants and workers to fight, the extreme physical and psychological hardship they experienced and the callous indifference of the political and military authorities. In turning the focus onto the conscript masses who made up the vast majority of servicemen, and using a much broader range of sources than had been previously considered (or indeed permitted under the Fascist regime), these scholars portrayed a more rounded and complex picture of the war which more fully reflected the social and political situation in early twentieth-century Italy. Yet this approach has made it harder to situate ideas of patriotism or the process of nationalising the masses during the war.

Studies of Italian nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s make it clear that a considerable degree of mass participation was achieved (Gentile, 2006) nor should this be a surprise. As Miroslav Hroch has observed, 'ideas could not flow through Europe by their own inspirational force' nor could 'intellectuals "invent" the national community' in the absence of essential preconditions (1996: 79). Hroch's distinction between 'national consciousness' and 'nationalism' is useful here since it highlights the way in which the completion of the nation-state – a goal of nineteenth-century Italian nationalism – did not necessarily obviate the need for a continuing national movement. Following Hroch, Hobsbawm points out that the transition from an elite-directed movement to the moment when 'nationalist programmes acquire mass support, or at least some of the mass support that nationalists always claim they represent' only sometimes 'occurs before the creation of the nation-state; probably very much more often it occurs afterwards, as a consequence of that creation' (1992: 11-12). This is a useful corrective to the idea that the Italian need to nationalise the masses after unification was a significant aberration. In this context, the First World War can be seen as the continuation or even culmination of the nineteenth-century nation-building process.

The letters and diaries of ordinary combatants make it clear that this situation was complex, and no single explanation can hope to encapsulate the experiences and views of so many individuals. This article uses the writings of peasants and workers to explore the ideas about the nation which some men developed during the conflict, arguing that the experience of the war, and in particular the experience of military service, could play an important role in 'Italianising' the conscripts who served. This does not mean, however, that the official national discourse – of irredentist territorial acquisition in the name of the Savoy dynasty – was simply accepted or universally internalised. Rather than passively submitting to a top-down process enacted through propaganda and patriotic education, men could find their own ways to develop notions of Italy and Italian-ness during the First World War.

Military service and the idea of the nation

Military service has long been acknowledged as a critical element in the development of national consciousness – Eugen Weber, for instance, highlighted its importance in his classic work *Peasants into Frenchmen* (1976: ch. 17). In order to assess the impact of this experience during the war, it is helpful to have a clear understanding of how Italy's armed services functioned. As established in 1861, the Italian army was based on conscription, with compulsory military service for all males at the age of 18. To be called up meant to acknowledge the existence of Italy and the power of the state to intervene in citizens' lives. Men received call-up papers with instructions to present themselves at the local recruiting office on a specific date, for their medical inspection; those who failed to pay their way out of the obligation, or persuade the medical officers that they were sick or disabled, served for three years. The army was not a popular institution in Liberal Italy – indeed in 1910 national service was reduced to two years, in part due to this unpopularity. The officer corps, which was reserved for social elites, bitterly resisted the admittance of middle-class cadets or promotion on merit rather than seniority. Moreover the army's main responsibilities in the first fifty years of the unified nation had done little to attract popular support or respect: chiefly its role had been to fight in colonial wars in Africa (largely uninteresting to the general populace and not always successful), while at home it had been extensively used for the maintenance of public order. The requirement that the military should perform policing duties was extremely unpopular with officers and men alike and prevented the growth of a strong sense of popular loyalty to the army as an institution (Rochat, 1991: 42-9; Gooch, 1989: 118-9). The Italo-Turkish war over Libya in 1911-12 had in fact indicated a number of problems within the organisation and operation of Italy's armed forces; unfortunately, victory against the disintegrating Ottoman Empire served only to promote complacency in political circles over the army's quality and level of preparation, and acted to impede rather than hasten necessary reforms.

Along with the absence of a strong sense of duty or obligation towards the nation in the form of military service, this unpopularity helps to explain the high rates of draft evasion, a phenomenon which the army had worked hard to eliminate in the years before the war. In fact a clear acceptance of a patriotic duty to serve militarily is usually a corollary of a well-developed schema of citizen's rights and responsibilities, taking as its model the French *levée en masse*.⁴ Political theorist Margaret Levi writes that 'National patriotism is a relatively modern basis for [military] service. It requires a sense of one's country as an entity that can legitimately demand contributions and to which loyalty can be given' (1997, 42-3). In France, for example, a clearly developed sense of moral obligation tied citizen-soldiers to the nation, such that the duty to defend the fatherland was part of a

network of reciprocal obligations linking the people and the state (Audoin-Rouzeau 1992, 180-3). Given that Italian political institutions in the pre-war era were lacking in accountability or transparency, it is not surprising that a comparable acceptance of military service was far from universal. Indeed, a few of the most marginalised Italian citizens did not even understand what conscription entailed, and had no real idea of the state's power. When one man 'of no fixed abode' was arrested in June 1916 for failure to respond to the draft, it emerged that he had not realised that in wartime the state might require citizens to present themselves for military service (Paloni, 2005: 64-5). When conscription was first introduced in 1863, at least 11.5 percent of draftees had failed to report, while a further 10 percent of those who *did* report for duty received exemptions of various kinds. By 1910, despite fluctuations in the intervening years, the rate of evasion was still around 10 percent (Del Negro, 1980: 433, 449-59). Nor was military service universally accepted even once the war was under way: the classes called up in September 1915 and April 1916 showed a 12 percent rate of evasion, but this declined steadily such that by February 1918 the rate was 8.7 percent, lower than before the war had begun (Del Negro, 1980: 462). This reflects far more effective coercive mechanisms from both military and civil authorities: at least 100,000 men were charged with draft evasion during the three and a half years of war, and many evaders were identified and arrested. The decreased rates of evasion by 1918 may also reflect a growing national consensus in the months after Caporetto about the necessity of service. In fact it is notable that rates of evasion in wartime were not dramatically higher than pre-war rates: overall, in the face of conscription the Italian population was surprisingly compliant, even if politically unenthusiastic. Compared to the 100,000 charges of draft evasion, some five million men were successfully called up during the war, of whom around four million served in various capacities. The vast majority of military-aged men therefore complied with conscription – but military service in itself could not act to create loyalty to the nation-state (Forcella and Monticone, 1968: 434).

The army in 1915 was composed of 96 infantry regiments⁵ (rising to 236 over the course of the war), which were arranged not on the basis of regions or localities, but instead were recruited from two different regions and stationed in a third; the entire regiment was reposted on average every three to five years (Rochat and Massobrio, 1978: 93-4). This policy of national recruitment for infantry regiments had been introduced in 1861 by General Manfredo Fanti,⁶ then Minister of War, in order to foster a sense of *italianità* and to reduce potentially dangerous local loyalties (Gooch, 1989: 66-67). In other words, the army was seen as a critical tool of 'Italianisation' from the moment of unification. Politicians on both left and right accepted that regional recruitment would have been more militarily efficient as well as more economical, but it was also agreed that the national recruitment

strategy was politically essential (Rochat, 1991: 78-9). Only a very few exceptions, such as the renowned Sassari Brigade from Sardinia, and the elite mountain troops of the *Alpini*, were regionally organised.⁷

The implications of this organisational structure were numerous; first of all, from a logistical perspective, it was a costly and time-consuming system which greatly complicated and slowed down the process of mobilisation. From the standpoint of unit cohesion, often considered to be a vital factor in sustaining troop morale, the system was also problematic: in contrast to the regional recruitment common in other contemporary armies – of which the British ‘Pals’ Battalions are the most dramatic example – the deliberate mixing of men from different areas created a barrier to the rapid formation of a collective identity. On the other hand, this structure offered men a unique chance to encounter their fellow citizens from other parts of the country. To take one example more or less at random: the 111th infantry regiment, part of the Piacenza Brigade, included men from 27 different locations between 1915 and 1918: Milan, Como, Lecco, Bergamo, Brescia, Piacenza, Varese, Lodi, Genoa, Venice, Ferrara, Parma, Jesi, Livorno, Florence, Arezzo, Rome, Naples, Reggio Calabria, Messina, Catania, Catanzaro, Sulmona, Syracuse, as well as Soazza and Melvagia in Switzerland, and six men born in Africa. This represents a variety of men from the north, centre, south and islands (Brigata Piacenza, 1919).⁸ In other words, military experience was a vital moment of encounter: Italian men met and mingled with others from all over the country, and had the chance to feel that they were part of something much larger than themselves. This will be one of the themes of the article, as these encounters offered a crucial space for exploring the concept of *‘italianità’*.

A note on sources

Measuring soldiers’ sentiments is of course always a challenge. The most useful source for this project is war-time letters, though there are a number of difficulties including postal censorship by both military and civil forces, self-censorship in the interests of protecting civilians, and psychological difficulties in discussing traumatic experiences. In the Italian case there is the further problem of limited literacy among working-class and peasant men, as shall be discussed below.⁹ It can also be a challenge to find discussions of nation, patriotism and duty in peasant correspondence. Letters kept alive a close relationship between soldiers and civilians: as Martha Hanna writes of a French peasant couple, ‘at no time did the distinct worlds of combatant and civilian ... exist in isolation from each other’ (2006: 23). Correspondence revolved chiefly around personal concerns such as the health of children, the likelihood of leave or the conditions of the family farm than with the thorny question of national identity. Self-reflexion was something of a luxury, and it is worth

considering whether national issues would have been of interest to the original intended reader, and thus deserving of inclusion in men's correspondence. In other words, we can't assume a lack of interest (in the idea of Italy or of *italianità*) just because of a lack of evidence. That said, men did sometimes write about the war, and about their understanding of Italy and of what it meant to be Italian, and letters can serve to help provide some understanding of the nature of popular patriotism and national identity.

This study uses letters from several collections: many of the letters available today have survived solely because they were picked up by the censors. Inevitably therefore these are not a neutral sample but rather represent texts which in one way or another were of concern to the authorities. These letters are mostly in the state archives, in the records either of the military tribunals or of the minister for the interior and the local prefects who were responsible for censorship of civilian mail (since post was censored twice, by both military and state authorities). Usefully, many have been published (Spitzer, 1976; Procacci, 2000) as have parts of the rich archive of letters sent to the King, Queen and government ministers (Monteleone, 1974; Baroncini, 1999).¹⁰ The other major archival source of letters is the collection made by various regional institutes of the National Committee for the history of the Risorgimento which, under the guidance of Paolo Boselli (Prime Minister in 1916-17), made a special effort to collect diaries, photographs and letters, along with many other types of war-time material, encouraging families to deposit their papers with their local institute for Risorgimento history. The advantage of these collections is that they give us a chance to see the type of material which was not picked up by the censor, which is vital if we are looking for evidence of patriotic feeling and support for the war, since in this area censored letters are little help. Here too the source is not entirely neutral: the public was urged predominantly to deposit papers and records of the fallen, not of surviving soldiers; and of course if there were substantially hostile or ambivalent elements in the letters, families might be less likely to gift the papers to these public institutions in any case. But by drawing on different types of letter collection it is possible to build a more balanced picture. Diaries (and memoirs based on them) are also valuable sources, and in recent years many have been made available through publication. Diaries usefully side-step the problem of military censorship, though self-censorship was still an issue.

Soldiers' views on Italy and on military service

When Italy declared war in May 1915, the first men to be mobilised were the cohort already under arms for their regular military service. One such was the 24-year old Amadeo Rossi, a shoe-maker from the Cesena region

who had reached the rank of corporal. Writing home in July 1915, he claimed that:

Every day today we suffer for the fatherland. And it is our duty, as our old people did in times past. And today our duty awaits us towards our beautiful Italy, and we shall not let them call us cowards but on the contrary heroes for all time of history (Bellosi and Savini, 2002: 375-7).¹¹

This reference to 'what our old people did in times past' suggests a clear link to the Risorgimento, as perhaps does the idea of being 'heroes for all time of history'. By October Rossi was already wishing for peace – but only after he and his fellows managed to 'cast out the enemy from our unredeemed lands'¹². Rossi was to die in action ('heroically' according to his commanding officer) in November of 1915.

The language used in patriotic letters is significant: we find mentions of the 'rights of our Italy' and an abundance of references to defending, protecting or safeguarding the nation. Defensive patriotism was a much easier sentiment to generate at a popular level than an aggressive nationalism, and hence propagandists often portrayed Italy's war aims as fundamentally defensive. Of course after the battle of Caporetto in 1917, when the Austro-Hungarians occupied a substantial area of the Friuli and Veneto regions, it was even easier to make this case. From the very start of the war there are also many references in men's letters – as in the propaganda – to the Austrians as the 'centuries-old enemy'. Occasionally we find a more specifically territorial focus to patriotic rhetoric, like the need to 'ensure the natural boundaries of my Italy' (Bellosi and Savini, 2002: 112) but often these are direct echoes of propaganda (including the many patriotic prayers circulated by military chaplains) rather than spontaneous declarations.

In 1918, as the state tried to counter the disaster of Caporetto and the grave rifts it had revealed in the nation, propagandistic efforts were greatly increased both within the army and in civil life. These not only emphasised the (newly) defensive nature of the war but also the idea of links with the past.¹³ The authorities supported the production of illustrated trench journals which, it was hoped, would increase patriotic determination among the troops. These publications emphasised the link between fighting for one's family and for the nation, bolstered by alluding to the wars of unification, and urging soldiers to continue the struggles of their forefathers: 'Men, your grandparents will have told you of the infamous cruelties of the Austrians in their time... the wolf may change his fur but not his vices' (*Il Grappa: per i soldati del 138 fucilieri*, 1918: n.8). The implication was plain: the war of 1915-18 was the continuation and completion of the Risorgimento, and the vindication of one's grandparents' struggles. The letters of Alfonso Maffeo, a shopkeeper from the province of Salerno, illustrate how these publications might be received: his references

to patriotic sentiment and national war aims actually increased greatly over time, emerging above all after the battle of Caporetto and throughout 1918. His postcards home suggest that to some degree he had internalised the new patriotic rhetoric which was heavily promoted in the final year of the war. The 'official' discourse could actually help soldiers to cope with the situation in which they found themselves by providing an all-encompassing narrative framework for their own experiences (Schiavino and Vecchio, 2003: 34). For example on 8 June 1918, Maffeo wrote:

Always cheerful never frightened you should be calm we have become strong warriors and can say so with our heads held high never as shirkers [...] God will guard me from every danger, the important thing is that the centuries-old enemy must be defeated so that the war will end soon (Schiavino and Vecchio, 2003: 96).

Earlier in the conflict his references to the end of the war had not made it conditional on victory in quite this same way nor had he made many references to the enemy, suggesting the influence of external sources on his vision of the conflict, and that propaganda was not necessarily always unsuccessful or unwelcome.

But how far did the rhetoric of liberation and unification convince? Memorials created in 1919-20 often used the language of redemption, yet the letters of ordinary soldiers more frequently suggest that they saw the war as one of conquest, not of liberation (Omodeo, 1934: 263). Men saw the war zone as definitively 'not Italy' whereas going home on leave was 'going into Italy': some even headed their letters from the front line 'Austria'. This does not indicate a mentality that the lands being fought for were simply 'unredeemed' parts of the nation, or 'enemy-occupied territories': the Carso, the Asiago plateau and the Carnia mountains did not feel like Italy to the men. The irredentist rhetoric of liberation had not been fully absorbed. Italy's rare successes were not necessarily seen as worthwhile: when the town of Gorizia was finally captured in August 1916, 24-year-old farm worker Cesare Menghi (d. April 1917) was angry rather than delighted. On 15 August he wrote to his sister 'Up here we are devoured with rage to hear that in Italy they are celebrating the capture of Gorizia and ringing the bells they should be ashamed'. The following day he was even clearer in a letter to his father: 'What is Gorizia to you all when one day you won't have your dear sons any more?' (Bellosi and Savini, 2002: 312-3). Elsewhere we find the idea that the war was for 'the conquest of a wretched piece of land' (Procacci, 2000: 426) or 'conquering a pile of useless rocks' (Revelli, 1977: 73).

However, if expansionist war aims and the ideals of the Risorgimento were not themselves necessarily enough to build *italianità*, it seems that there were other elements which could promote the growth of national identity. The experience of wartime military service, rather than the

objectives of the conflict, could in fact serve to help 'make Italians' – as could encounters with other parts of Italy and with fellow Italians, which helped to create and spread a sense of what Italy meant, and how as individuals they might relate to the nation.

Geographical familiarity and curiosity

For many Italian soldiers, military service and mobilisation represented the first time they had visited other parts of their own country, and often the first time they had been on a train. While army life of course meant time at the front, troop rotation systems meant that in theory a mobilised unit spent only 25 percent of its time in the trenches (Melograni, 1965: 273-4). The remaining time was spent in reserve areas or rest zones away from the front lines, which could include many of the towns and cities of the Veneto region. During these periods men engaged in labour duties, training exercises and (limited amounts of) rest and recuperation activities. New recruits spent a minimum of two or three months in training camps before deployment, while some units served within Italian territory on garrison duty, maintaining public order and defending ports against naval bombardment. Thus wartime experience meant not only life in the trenches but an unprecedented degree of travel around the country, and to judge from men's letters, diaries and memoirs it is clear that most were fascinated by visiting new parts of Italy and meeting new people from other areas. The process of military service could in this way help to educate ordinary soldiers about what Italy was and what values it represented. In the social construction of the nation, these encounters were a critical element in constructing an 'imagined community' which was not reliant primarily on print culture but on lived experience (compare Anderson, 1991).

Amadeo Rossi, mentioned above, found himself in Venice undergoing training when the war began and was still there in mid-July. His time in that city made a huge impression on him, overwhelming him with its beauty, culture and civilisation, and giving him a much better sense of what 'Italy' meant. He wrote home long descriptions of 'the beautiful city of Venice' which left him 'very satisfied', describing the Rialto Bridge and above all Piazza San Marco:

I have also seen the main square which leaves you open-mouthed at its monuments that are there and even just the church of S. Marco alone [...] is a marvel to be seen (Bellosi and Savini, 2002: 372-5).

If in his first letters he appears to feel himself merely a visitor, he soon begins to describe it as '*our* beautiful Venice'. A sense of ownership has gradually developed through his time in the city, where – crucially – he was not a tourist but a member of its defending force. A week or two later

he is regularly writing of 'our beautiful Italy'; Venice had acted as a synecdoche for Italy. Through building a sense of connection to this iconic city, Rossi developed a personal and even proprietorial link to the nation itself.

Military service had long entailed this kind of visit to unfamiliar cities and landscapes. A young Sardinian stationed there in 1910-11 wrote home to describe Florence in detail to his family, waxing lyrical about Santa Maria Novella, the Duomo and Giotto's Campanile, and his visits to the Uffizi galleries (Loi Corvetto, 1998: 51-2). Descriptions of training or military life occupied relatively little of his letters in comparison. The tenant farmer Giuseppe Sacchetti, just 18 years old when the war began, wrote home enthusiastically about the Tuscan countryside which he admired from the windows of the train, before describing the regional capital in terms which would strike a chord with any tourist today: 'Florence is an extremely beautiful City it's a marvel but it is too luxurious and it's too expensive to live whereas in the small villages you can eat for your money' (Bellosi and Savini, 2002: 379).

Sacchetti was also keen on the local girls, who were apparently prettier than those back home in Romagna, but he wrote from Pisa to reassure his girlfriend Assunta that 'I haven't discharged my rifle here' (Bellosi and Savini, 2002: 381). Other soldiers from Romagna, posted elsewhere in Italy, wrote with similar interest and enthusiasm, admiring Bologna or Turin, which they compared very favourably with Cesena (Bellosi and Savini, 2002: 319, 356).

Of critical importance in these experiences, and the descriptions of them which men offered, was aesthetic beauty: art, architecture and urban spaces feature heavily in their accounts of the towns and cities they visited, while descriptions of majestic mountains or dramatic coastlines show that the landscapes of Italy also impressed their visitors. Such visits helped to shape an idea of the national territory but also promoted a vision of Italy and Italian-ness which was oriented towards culture and refinement. The idea of Italy as home of the Renaissance and originator of Western conceptions of beauty was already well established in national discourse at the time, and one understanding of Italian 'values' was rooted in cultural refinement and the appreciation of art and beauty (Gundle, 2000). The cultural experiences of these soldiers, and their admiration of Italian art and beauty, was therefore significant in bringing them into (a particular vision of) the national community.

Wartime travel also offered other ways to understand the nation. For the Campanian shopkeeper Alfonso Maffeo, the war offered business opportunities: concerned with managing his business from a distance and personally overseeing the wholesale buying throughout his time training in Taranto, he greeted his deployment northwards in May 1917 with equanimity. 'Keep calm because where we are going we will be fine, maybe

even better than in Taranto. I can also be useful to you all in regard to commercial matters because in the north of Italy one can buy better than in Naples' (Schiavino and Vecchio, 2003: 73). Maffeo's mental geography was primarily commercial in orientation and deployment to the north represented a chance to purchase quality goods for the family shop in person. This letter also highlights the extent to which familial concerns could override interest in or concern for the war itself – yet might still reflect a growing familiarity with the nation itself.

Of course not all impressions were positive: the Sardinian who so admired Florence was unimpressed with Ravenna, for instance, and criticised it on aesthetic grounds. 'You ask me if Ravenna is nice? uh... Cagliari is much prettier. If you leave aside Piazza Vitt. Emanuele, and via Cairoli, the rest just looks like a big village' (Loi Corvetto, 1998: 71). Men also criticised what they saw as inferior farming practices in some regions, or inadequate standards of hygiene. The men were most likely to be critical of Southern cities: one described his flea-ridden tumbledown accommodation with the comment 'right away you realise we're in Sicily' (Bellosi and Savini, 2002: 354). But even negative impressions of Italy were a significant element in building men's understanding of the country, its geography, culture and traditions, identifying similarities and differences with home.

To a considerable degree these experiences were as much touristic as military: before deployment to the front, or on garrison duty, or during training and rest periods stationed away from the war zone during the conflict, the troops saw new cities and towns as visitors might. If it was not possible to return home – since it was too far away or if, as men from Sardinia and Sicily sometimes found, home leave had been suspended – then the only option was to take to tourism: 'I will spend my 15 days' leave in some beautiful city in Italy' wrote a young Cagliari man who found himself in this situation in April 1917 (Loi Corvetto, 1998: 124). Military service as tourism was not a unique phenomenon during the war, and has been observed clearly in the writings and experiences of Australians serving in Egypt and in Europe during the First World War (White, 1987; White, 1991). White's studies of Australian soldiers' letters and diaries suggest that an adventurous spirit and a tourist impulse can even help to explain enlistment within the (wholly volunteer) Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) forces. Indeed it is arguable that to this day, the 'tour of duty' is still very much a 'tour' of unfamiliar territories and is experienced as such by troops (Brighton, 2004).

Encounters with fellow soldiers

In men's letters, diaries and memoirs it was an almost universal norm to comment on the geographical origins of every new acquaintance. New

friends, travel companions, members of the platoon or company, as well as officers and NCOs, were all identified by regional origin (e.g. Salsa, 1995: 93; Dominiononi, 1993: 43). When a young company commander from Cagliari was transferred to a new unit after Caporetto, his first description for his family was of its regional make-up: 'This new regiment is mostly made up of Sicilians but there are some Sardinians and Tuscans' (Loi Corvetto, 1998: 130). Men were keen to recount regional differences, often describing the exchange of local customs or foods (especially desserts) as well as shared activities, such as prayers: 'I am with two men from Bari and they are like a piece of bread [i.e. good, wholesome] every evening we say our prayers together' wrote a Cesena man (Bellosi and Savini, 2002: 111).

Singing was perhaps the most important shared activity of this kind. Soldiers' songs were in around a dozen different dialects, though Neapolitan and Lombard were the most common: as men shared songs from home or learned new tunes from other parts of the nation, they were able not only to diversify their repertoire but also to build a shared identity (Savona and Straniero, 1981). Pieces which were known across the country, such as the old-folk song, *Quel Mazzolin di Fiori*, served a very useful role in bonding men from different regions (Lussu, 2000: 19). Along with old hymns, patriotic anthems from the Risorgimento and folk tunes from around the nation, there was a proliferation of new songs during the war which emerged in a form of standard Italian that could be shared by all. Soldiers also exchanged accounts of the home towns and of the places they had visited in the course of their service, uniting the experience of encountering others with that of encountering new places: 'The soldiers discuss the towns and villages they had seen during the war, and in general the nostalgia is in inverse proportion to the proximity of the front line' (Dominiononi, 1993: 63). Parliamentary Deputy and junior officer Luigi Gasparotto was interested to record the diversity of his unit:

The company commander [...] and my fellow second lieutenant were both old acquaintances from Milan. The soldiers were builders, casual labourers or peasants from Comasco and Varese, [...] almost all socialists, veterans of the way of the world ... [who] want to discuss everything, with everything and against everything (Gasparotto, 2000: 29-30).

He was rather pleased when 'other "reserves" arrived. They were from Naples: and so in our company all Italy was represented' (Gasparotto, 2000: 41). The idea of the company acting as a microcosm of the nation illustrates the political appeal of the national recruitment structure.

Of course alongside interest in fellow nationals there are many examples of regional prejudice, especially towards Southerners. A soldier from near Padua wrote to his fiancée Luigia after the discovery that one of his companions in the barracks has stolen the letter and photo which she

had sent him, commenting that 'they say that he is capable of doing horrible things and I am not surprised because he is a Sicilian' (Beltrame Menini, 2001: 39-40). A Romagna man wrote, 'I am well I'm alone but there are some [men] who are frightening and it is always those Neapolitans' (Bellosi and Savini, 2002: 110). Two Milanese officers, rejected by a pair of local women in Palmanova, complained that 'the Southerners always get the women very quickly' (Salsa, 1995: 25). Naples in particular was a target: in one episode, mutinying Alpini were heard to shout 'Down with sergeant-major Giacchino! Down with the Neapolitan!'¹⁴ Interviews with witnesses suggest that the men's grievance was based on the sergeant-major's personal manner and his physical manhandling of one of their number; but in expressing hostility to him they chose to focus on his origin - which in a relatively cohesive northern unit emphasised his status as a foreigner. When the Neapolitan Armando Diaz was appointed as Chief of the General Staff in November 1917 some similar prejudices emerged. Official historian and staff officer Angelo Gatti observed the resentment of 'the Piedmontese nobleman [General Mario Nicolis di] Robilant, who will certainly not be happy to work under the Neapolitan Diaz' (Gatti, 1964: 345). Likewise, the aristocratic Colonel Adriano Colocci described Diaz in his diary as 'a freemason and a Camorrist' (Pelo, 1992: 60). As a *marchese* (marquis) from Jesi in central Italy, Colocci regarded Diaz as his social and regional inferior. These instances of hostility are unsurprising given that such prejudices still exist today, and show perhaps one of the oppositional elements in the construction of national identity, offering an internal 'other' as a counterpart to the external other provided by the enemy.

These prejudices could also of course act to limit the development of a strong national identity, as could strong regional or local identities. If men identified themselves primarily with a locality, it was hard for *italianità* to seem valid or important. And many men recorded their delight at meeting up with men from their own town or area, even if they were strangers: amid the dislocating, disorientating experience of war, men from home were a source of comfort which could not be easily substituted. Yet the opportunities provided by mingling with men of diverse geographic origins should not be underestimated, offering at least an imaginative basis for the construction of an Italian national community.

Language

Geographic origin brings us to the question of language and dialect, highly significant in terms of national identity. Consider the example of the 111th regiment mentioned above, with its 27 different military districts of origin: there must have been at least half a dozen distinct dialects spoken within the regiment at any one time. Genuine communication difficulties were uncommon but did certainly arise;¹⁵ the Milanese Carlo Salsa, for instance,

was unable to understand his comrade's 'terrible Neapolitan exclamations' while a soldier from the Val d'Aosta 'muttered to himself in his barbaric tongue, perhaps swearing in his own way, cursing by who knows what saints of his own land' (Salsa, 1995: 46, 87). Potentially, this linguistic diversity could create disciplinary problems in that Salsa, an officer, was unable to understand what his subordinate was saying in his presence.

Equally problematic was the significant potential for fraternisation or sympathy with the enemy which was facilitated by shared language or dialects (Inchiesta Caporetto, 1919: section 575). When Italian-speaking Austrian soldiers were taken prisoner it caused confusion for the troops who captured them. One memoir recounts reading the (Italian language) letters from such a prisoner's wife and the sense of fellow-feeling this created: the prisoner, from the 3rd Tirol Kaiserjäger regiment, is described as 'an Italian, from the Folgaria plateau' (Gasparotto, 2000: 35). If he was 'an Italian', why was he the enemy?¹⁶ The use of a common language on both sides might also cause more practical confusion. In his novel, *Un Anno Sull'Altipiano*, Emilio Lussu recounts an episode where, in the confusion of dusk, his platoon was fired upon by men from his own company. 'From the enemy lines a deep voice gave the order in Italian to fire.[...] "Perhaps the sergeant's right", I said to myself. They must be Hungarians from the Adriatic coast'. (Lussu, 2000: 29). The use of language to identify 'otherness' broke down where allies spoke strange dialects and enemies spoke a familiar language, leaving space for ambivalence and uncertainty, while the lack of shared linguistic identity made it harder to construct other kinds of shared identity as soldiers – or fellow nationals.

This complex situation, and the daily encounters between men from different parts of the country, necessitated a new means of communication – a shared language, which could help constitute a shared identity. What happened, therefore, was the growth of standard Italian – or rather that variant known as '*italiano popolare*'. This variant offered new communicative possibilities between men of different regions and localities who could build a sense of collective identity – both within the context of their military units, and within the context of the nation (Antonelli, 1990; Baroncini, 1999). *Italiano popolare* was also strongly associated with the need to acquire at least some degree of literacy (Rocchi, 1994), a significant feature of the peasant experience of the war. Many learned to read and write for the first time in the trenches, while those who had acquired some level of literacy before the war found themselves actually putting their skills into practice, reading and writing regularly for the first time in their adult lives.¹⁷ Of course, correspondents at home were also working to develop functional literacy skills at the same time, often with a degree of difficulty: peasants' letters to and from the front very frequently mention difficulties in comprehension or the struggle to write legibly, or even harshly criticise their correspondents' writing ability. Nonetheless, letter-

writing was a vital arena of contact between home and front not only in contact but in form, as the nationalisation of language involved not only soldiers but their families, friends and patrons at home. The written form which soldiers developed was not, usually, simply a written version of their local dialect; on the contrary, dialects at this point in time rarely had a recognised written system and in any case were considered to be an exclusively oral phenomenon. Instead soldiers and their correspondents struggled to master a form of standard Italian which, while it presented localised lexical features, was nonetheless recognisably a national language, not a local one. Benedict Anderson notes that 'the fixing of languages and the differentiation of status between them' was a process easily manipulated in pursuit of self-conscious nation-building (1991: 45). Yet the development of *italiano popolare* was a bottom-up phenomenon, building on the similar linguistic mingling which had been stimulated by the experience of mass emigration but involving an even greater number of individuals. This is another highly significant moment in the Italianisation of the masses and should not be underestimated, nor should its character be ignored. Where Anderson emphasised the role of 'print-languages' in the spreading of national sentiment not only through their creation of forms of exchange and communication but through their rule as 'languages-of-power' (1991: 44-5), in the case of Italians during the First World War it was the written but exclusively non-printed *italiano popolare*, a subaltern language, which most significantly promoted national communication.

Conclusion

If the First World War served as the continuation or conclusion of the Risorgimento it did so perhaps more significantly through the Italianisation of people than of territory. This process is illustrated not only in post-war political developments but even more directly in the letters sent by soldiers from 1918, which compared to those of 1915 show a greater awareness of the nation and of Italy. There were many reasons for this transformation but arguably personal encounters lie at the heart of the process: the many encounters with other parts of Italy and with other Italians which were an intrinsic part of military service. Of course, Italy was present in the lives of the masses through the potent repressive apparatus of conscription and of military discipline, so this greater awareness of state and nation need not intrinsically have formed a wholly positive image. Equally, the official nationalist discourse of the war which was frequently presented through propaganda was by no means necessarily internalised: the territorial aspirations of irredentists were often seen more as conquest than as redemption, as acquisitions rather than unification. Yet though the process of top-down nationalisation may have had at best partial success, there is

evidence that personal encounters, travel and the obligations of military service did help to promote a sense of *italianità* and slowly but surely advanced the long process of Italian Unification.

Notes

1. The debate over the role of the First World War in promoting the nationalisation of the masses is by no means limited to Italy, but a full comparison lies beyond the scope of this study. It is notable however that much of the scholarship on national identity and the war focuses on the processes of memory, commemoration and myth-creation which took place both during and after the conflict (see e.g. Mosse, 1991) perhaps even more than on the experience of war itself.

2. All translations by the author.

3. See Procacci (2000) for one example.

4. For a comparative study of the origins of national military service after the French Revolution and its link to citizenship, see Hippler (2007).

5. Procedures for artillery, cavalry, engineers, logistics etc. differed somewhat and are excluded from this study, which focuses on the infantry since these made up the majority of the army.

6. Fanti was responsible for the successful siege of Gaeta in 1861, for which he was awarded the Gold Medal for Military Valour, but resisted the direct incorporation of Garibaldian officers in the new national army, highlighting the difficulties in creating a national institution right from its inception.

7. Some of the newly formed regiments showed less regional diversity than before the war, but in general all tended to become more heterogeneous over time (Ufficio Statistico, 1927: 99-162).

8. The most extreme case is that of the 2nd infantry regiment which recruited men from 54 districts from Milan to Messina, and was stationed in 11 different cities through the war (Rochat, 1991: 60).

9. For a full discussion of the advantages, difficulties and implications of using letters for a study of the First World War in Italy, see Caffarena (2005). For theoretical considerations and a comparative reflection see Hanna (2003; 2006).

10. A digitisation programme is also under way: <http://aiter.unipv.it/lettura/RE/>

11. In translating extracts from peasant soldiers' writings I have endeavoured, so far as possible, to retain the original style, grammar, punctuation and capitalisation, in order to maintain the original effect.

12. Rossi writes '*terre ridente*' instead of '*irrendente*', an error in writing which significantly changes the meaning from 'unredeemed' (clearly his intention), to 'laughing' or 'smiling'. This slip suggests his unfamiliarity not only with writing but with the very concept he is describing.

13. On the propaganda campaigns launched after Caporetto, see Gatti (2000).

14. Archivio del Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, Serie G.M. 1915-18, busta E2, fasc.17: 4th Alpini/Cervino Batt., 29/4/1916.

15. Such misunderstandings were ripe with comic potential, see trench journals e.g. *Dalla Trincea: Giornale del Combattente del 58a divisione*.

16. Conversely, Austro-Hungarian soldiers were confused by the presence of Italian speakers in their army, and of loyal Austrian civilians who spoke Italian (Gál, 1991: 27-37).

17. The acquisition of literacy among peasants was also emphasised in the French army, as part of the programme of nationalisation; military service also helped to spread the French language among dialect speakers in the late nineteenth century (Weber, 1976: 298-9).

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