



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Tone-deaf propaganda: American perceptions and misperceptions of Italy during the great war

Fazzi, D.

Citation

Fazzi, D. (2023). Tone-deaf propaganda: American perceptions and misperceptions of Italy during the great war. *Contemporary European History*, 2023, 1-12. doi:10.1017/S0960777323000097

Version: Publisher's Version


License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3716430>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

ARTICLE

Tone-Deaf Propaganda: American Perceptions and Misperceptions of Italy during the Great War

Dario Fazzi 

Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, 4331CK Middelburg, The Netherlands
d.fazzi@roosevelt.nl

One of the ways in which Wilsonianism permeated Europe during the Great War was through the activities of the Committee on Public Information (CPI). Historians are still discussing the effectiveness of the CPI's propaganda abroad. This article contributes to this debate by focusing on and problematising the case of Italy. The Italian scenario confronted the CPI with a series of challenges that exposed the limits of America's germinal public diplomacy. The author's argument is that, in spite of its numerous attempts, the CPI's activities in Italy resulted in a substantial failure, which was mostly due to an inter-institutional conflict of interests and competences between the CPI and the US embassy in Rome. Such a short-circuit prevented US propagandists from developing a genuine understanding of the Italian public's preferences and resulted in what people in the Peninsula perceived as a general lack of empathy.

In the afternoon of 28 July 1918, the 332nd Infantry Regiment of the United States Army – a bunch of young, good-looking, well-equipped, and well-trained guys from Cleveland and northeast Ohio – and a few US aviators marched across the streets of Milan, Italy, bringing military assistance and medical support upon the request of the Italian government, which needed help in preparation for a crucial offensive against the Austrian forces. An Italian military band waited for them and, when the Americans arrived in the city centre, it started playing 'The Star Bangled Banner' on a loop. Cheering Italians welcomed the US troops with flowers, shouting insistently 'Viva l'America! Viva l'Italia!' on their passage.¹ Throughout the remaining months of the war, hundreds of US citizens volunteered in Italy for the US Red Cross, carrying both fundamental material aid and an equally important message of alliance. Italy, through US military and civilian support, was meant to be included into an ever-extending community of progressive nations.² At least this was Washington's design.

In the short term, Italian people widely appreciated this effort and endorsed the plan, insofar as it seemed to alleviate the burdens of the war. The momentary appreciation, however, did not translate into long-lasting gratitude, that is, into a genuinely positive sentiment toward the United States that could be strong enough to create a common sense of belonging, a unity of purposes and long-term political objectives working at both the domestic and the international level. The US intervention in the Great War did not create in Italy the conditions for an effective working of what Karl Gustafsson and Todd Hall have defined as 'the politics of emotional deference'. Washington's actions did not systematically attempt to achieve a set of shared policy outcomes that could go beyond the war efforts nor did they establish consensual norms that could respect the referent group's – in this case,

¹ Matthew J. Seelinger "'Viva l'America!': The 332nd Infantry on the Italian Front', The National Museum of the United States Army, available at <https://armyhistory.org/viva-l-america-the-332d-infantry-on-the-italian-front/> (last visited 23 Sept. 2022).

² Julia F. Irwin, 'Nation Building and Rebuilding: The American Red Cross in Italy during the Great War', *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 8, 3 (2009), 407–39.

both Italian elites' and the common people's – feelings.³ The joy, admiration, respect and recognition for the efforts of the US allies in Italy crossed the whole country as the war continued. But these feelings, as this article shows, were rather ephemeral and did not contribute to the shaping of a new transatlantic alliance after the war.

The main problem with Italians' short-lived gratitude toward the Americans was, to continue with Gustafsson's and Hall's narrative, the hierarchical ordering of such a feeling.⁴ In fact, the many US actors involved in the Peninsula valued, assessed and interpreted Italians' emotional deference in various ways and at times conflictingly. Most of them expected Italians to endorse the precepts of liberal internationalism fully. Others thought that the seeds planted by the US government in Italy would have needed time to blossom and therefore selected the terrain on which to sow them carefully. All of them, however, shared high expectations of Italy's alignment with the US moral and political leadership in Europe, confirming that material and cultural aid as well as the search for gratitude were all but ideologically neutral endeavours.⁵

This article emphasizes how the inflated expectations of many US actors operating in Italy during the Great War stemmed from a series of misperceptions that undermined the possibility for Italian gratitude to consolidate and work as a booster of transatlantic relations. In so doing, it locates the reasons for such misunderstandings in the clash between those US federal institutions that were in charge of promoting the US's image and war efforts in Italy, namely the Committee on Public Information (CPI) and the US embassy. The complex, non-linear, and at times openly conflictual relationship between the CPI and the embassy in Rome constituted, as this article argues, one of the main constraints for the ripening of gratitude in Italy. In other words, the argument here is that, in spite of its numerous attempts, the mechanics of US propaganda campaigns in Italy, upon which the development of deference, gratitude and ideological empathy depended, did not work due to an inter-institutional conflict of interests and competences between the CPI and the US embassy in Rome. The two US institutions were trapped into an institutional turf war, a struggle for power, functions and influence that had a crucial impact on the shaping of the overall reception of the US image and mission in Italy.

As Charles Schencking has demonstrated in a recent article on the US anti-Japanese cultural campaign in the Second World War, the relationship between gratitude and propaganda is a complex one.⁶ US policy makers shrewdly used ingratitude as a trope to vilify Japanese enemies and promote messages of cultural and ideological superiority at the same time. In contrast, political propaganda has been used not only to foster a common sense of belonging among citizens but also to nurture those material bonds upon which both individual and collective gratitude ultimately rest. In his classic study of Nazi propaganda in Germany, Arye Unger clearly emphasised how ideological indoctrination and material assistance were crucial to stimulating the mobilisation of the masses and developing among them a sense of gratitude toward the Nazi welfare system.⁷ The symbiosis of persuasion and coercion contributed to developing both gratitude towards and fear of the regime. In the case of US First World War propaganda in Italy, cultural promotion and indoctrination went hand in glove with material assistance and was meant to create a positive attitude among Italians about the purposes of US intervention. This is not to say that the creation of gratitude was the ultimate goal of the US propaganda machinery in the Peninsula; rather, propaganda was supposed to pave the

³ Karl Gustafsson and Todd H. Hall, 'The Politics of Emotions in International Relations: Who Gets to Feel What, Whose Emotions Matter, and the "History Problem" in Sino-Japanese Relations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 65, 4 (2021), 973–84.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 973–4.

⁵ Elizabeth Piller, 'American War Relief, Cultural Mobilization and the Myth of Impartial Humanitarianism, 1914–17', *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 17, 4 (2018), 619–35.

⁶ J. Charles Schencking, 'Generosity Betrayed: Pearl Harbor, Ingratitude, and American Humanitarian Assistance to Japan in 1923', *Pacific Historical Review*, 91, 1 (2022), 66–103.

⁷ Aryeh L. Unger, 'Propaganda and Welfare in Nazi Germany', *Journal of Social History*, 4, 2 (1971), 125–40.

way for the consolidation of gratitude in that country and, as this article argues, the difficult management of the former hindered the progress of the latter.

One of the ways in which Wilsonianism permeated Europe was through the activities of the CPI.⁸ To what extent did this centrally coordinated effort to engage with foreign cultures and publics succeed? Historians are still discussing the overall effectiveness of the CPI's propaganda. In this regard, the case of Italy helps to further problematise the issue. Indeed, the Italian scenario is particularly intriguing because in that country the CPI was confronted with a series of complex challenges that exposed the limits and dysfunctionalities of the US's still germinal public diplomacy. In a country whose participation in the war had been opposed, contested and variously justified, the CPI had to find, and sometimes create from scratch, new avenues to reach out to both political elites and common people. Thus, while trying to popularise Wilsonianism, the activities of the CPI in Italy ended up further increasing the political and ideological fractures that were crossing the country, hindering the creation of a common sense of national gratitude toward the US ally.

The embassy operated mostly at the elite level, and while being much more aware of the many conflictual pressures characterising Italian society, it failed to establish an efficient and fully working programme of social engagement that could have nurtured a positive attitude toward the United States in the long term. At times, as this article shows, the clash between the CPI and the embassy undermined the functioning of US official propaganda in Italy as a whole. This clash prevented US propagandists from developing a genuine understanding of the Italian public's preferences and resulted in what people in the Peninsula perceived as a general lack of empathy. In particular, this article shows that if, on the one hand, Wilson's newly established agency put forward an overarching communication plan aimed at offering a broader strategy for the war and a vision for the post-war world order, the embassy, on the other hand, holding a better grasp of the Italian socio-political context and a deeper knowledge of the mechanisms – including the emotional ones – that affected the local political debate and public opinion, tried to steer US propaganda towards much more pragmatic and less idealistic aims. The friction between the two governmental bodies caused a short circuit both in the promotion of US interests and in the reception of Wilsonianism in the Peninsula. Such a short circuit, then, affected the resilience of a sense of gratitude that the Americans tried without success to foster across Italy throughout the war.

Inter-institutional conflicts and miscommunications were not the only causes for the difficult orchestration of US propaganda in Italy. Compared to what happened in other European countries, US material support was streamlined in Italy mostly through unofficial channels, which largely depended on Italy's uneven infrastructural development for their functioning; this, in turn, contributed to further dividing the Peninsula and affected the ways in which gratitude towards the United States developed.⁹ On top of this, a lack of empathic engagement with Italian elites' dissatisfaction with Italy's liberal democracy, with the rising demands of popular masses that claimed a broader public space and better political representation, and with the deep material and moral damages that the war had caused to the socio-economic structure of the country increased the gap between US intentions and ambitions on the one hand, and Italy's reality on the other. Such a lack of empathy, here defined as an unsympathetic approach, resulted in a lingering dissatisfaction toward Atlanticism and in the drift toward forms of government that were antithetical to the Wilsonian, liberal democratic design.

⁸ Daniela Rossini, 'The Italian Rediscovery of America during World War I', *North Dakota Quarterly*, 60, 1 (1992), 226–54; Gregg Wolper, 'Wilsonian Public Diplomacy: The Committee on Public Information in Spain', *Diplomatic History*, 17, 1 (1993), 17–34; Stefano Livi, 'Exporting Americanism: Arthur Bullard and American Propaganda in Russia', *USAbroad – Journal of American History and Politics*, 2 (2019), available at <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-2752/8549> (last visited 16 Dec. 2022); Lloyd E. Ambrosius, 'Wilsonianism and Transatlantic Relations', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 16, 4 (2018), 356–61.

⁹ Elizabeth Piller, 'Beyond Hoover: Rewriting the History of the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB) through Female Involvement', *International History Review* (2022), available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2022.2113553> (last visited 8 Mar. 2023).

In order to better explain the activities of the CPI in Italy and its relations with the embassy, this analysis draws on the broader study of the reception of Wilsonianism in Europe. Historians have been exploring the connections between liberal internationalism and the European political discourse, most of the time arguing about the illusory nature of the US's grand design.¹⁰ Wilson's political ideals, this narrative goes, never gained a firm footing across the Old Continent and his popularity was overall ephemeral.¹¹ This does not mean, however, that Wilsonianism did not generate any impact whatsoever in Europe. In fact, scholars have provided enlightening examples of the many ways in which Wilsonianism percolated into national cultures and how, in turn, this phenomenon spurred a series of national adaptations and interpretations of Wilsonian ideas.¹² In studying Italy, historians have thoroughly investigated the reception of Wilsonianism as a model on the basis of which Italian political elites tried to tailor the future of Italian liberal democracy.¹³ The substantial failure of Wilsonianism, measured mostly through the rise of nationalism and authoritarianism, has been rarely associated with a deep lack of emotional sympathy, on behalf of US institutions, with the national contexts in which it tried to operate.¹⁴ This short study tries to fill this gap by taking stock from an emerging scholarship that underlines the relevance of emotions in foreign affairs and interpreting an inter-institutional, all-US conflict as one of the main causes for the short-lived fate of Wilsonian visions in Italy.

Asking for Faith

Shortly after the US Congress declared war in April 1917, President Woodrow Wilson issued an executive order establishing a new, largely independent federal agency, whose main aim was to coordinate US varied and multifaceted war propaganda.¹⁵ The Committee on Public Information (CPI) was chaired by George Creel, a fervent progressive, journalist and devoted follower of Wilson's democratic internationalism.¹⁶ Creel organised the CPI's activities around a simple idea: German militarism posed

¹⁰ Christopher McKnight Nichols, 'Woodrow Wilson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Beyond: American Internationalists and the Crucible of World War I', in Elizabeth Borgwardt, Christopher McKnight Nichols and Andrew Preston, eds., *Rethinking American Grand Strategy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 175–200.

¹¹ Eckart Conze, *The Great Illusion: Versailles 1919 and the Reorganization of the World* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2018); Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹² Frank Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century: U.S. Foreign Policy since 1900* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Lloyd E. Ambrosius, *Wilsonianism: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy in American Foreign Relations* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2002); John A. Thompson, 'Wilsonianism: The Dynamics of a Conflicted Concept', *International Affairs*, 81, 1 (2010), 27–47; Trygve Throntveit, 'The Fable of the Fourteen Points: Woodrow Wilson and National Self-Determination', *Diplomatic History*, 35, 3 (2011), 445–81.

¹³ Piero Melograni, *Storia politica della Grande Guerra, 1915–1918* (Bari: Laterza, 1972); Daniela Rossini, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Myth in Italy: Culture, Diplomacy, and War Propaganda* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Anne-Sophie Nardelli-Malgrand, 'Building Peace in Spite of Peace: From the Criticism of Wilsonianism to an Italian Democratic Revisionism, 1918–1920', *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, 3, 4 (2018), 28–34; Jacopo Perazzoli, 'Woodrow Wilson, Italian Socialists, and the Self-Determination Principle during the Paris Conference', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 25, 5 (2020), 508–27.

¹⁴ On the relevance of emotional sympathy see Todd H. Hall, *Emotional Diplomacy: Official Emotion on the International Stage* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015) and Barbara Keys, 'Henry Kissinger: The Emotional Statesman', *Diplomatic History*, 35, 4 (2011), 587–609.

¹⁵ Executive Order 2594 Creating Committee on Public Information, 13 Apr. 1917, available at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-2594-creating-committee-public-information> (last visited 14 June 2021). On Wilson and the CPI, see Aaron W. Marrs, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1917–1972, Public Diplomacy, World War I* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2014) and, for a recent appraisal of it, John Maxwell Hamilton, *Manipulating the Masses: Woodrow Wilson and the Birth of American Propaganda* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2020).

¹⁶ George Creel, *Rebel at Large: Recollections of Fifty Crowded Years* (New York, NY: Putnam, 1947); Stephen L. Vaughn, *Holding Fast the Inner Lines: Democracy, Nationalism, and the Committee on Public Information* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

an existential threat to US democracy, it endangered US economic and strategic interests, and it was antithetical to the values that US citizens cherished the most: freedom and security. Under Creel's guidance, the CPI ideologically sustained the rationale behind Washington's participation in the war. The Committee popularised the US war purposes and postwar plans, promoted people's mobilisation, and contributed to generating support for the war. All in all, the CPI became one of the main interpreters and translators for Wilson's crusade to make the world safe for democracy.¹⁷

From the start, the CPI was organised into several divisions.¹⁸ The Speaking Division was perhaps the most prominent one. It recruited more than 75,000 volunteers and specialists who became known as the 'Four-Minute Men' for their ability to communicate US war aims in very short speeches.¹⁹ The Film Division was responsible for the production and dissemination of newsreels and documentaries that put in sharp contrast the Allies' heroic efforts with Germany's barbaric conduct.²⁰ The Division of Pictorial Publicity had the task of capturing people's imagination and rendering visually the administration's goals and objectives.²¹ It created some of the images that left the longest-lasting imprint on US culture, including James Flagg's famous portrait of Uncle Sam bearing the 'I Want You' message. The News Division covered the war in the most important US newspapers and magazines and secured free advertising space in a number of US publications. This division took care of promoting campaigns aimed at selling war bonds, recruiting new soldiers, and stimulating patriotism. To cut off any possible criticism and to keep a strong hold over the flow of information, the News Division also launched an 'Official Bulletin', which became the main channel through which Americans were informed about the war.²²

Interestingly enough and relatively less-known even among historians, however, the CPI's broad and all-encompassing activism was not confined to domestic censorship and propaganda.²³ Quite the contrary, the Committee was very much involved in spreading the reasons for US military involvement abroad as well. The CPI, indeed, had a pretty large Foreign Language Newspaper Division that kept an eye on hundreds of weekly and daily US newspapers published in languages other than English. A Foreign Picture Service, a Foreign Press Division, an American Hungarian Loyalty League, and a Scandinavian Bureau completed the picture of the US war propaganda overseas.²⁴ The CPI thus represented the first attempt to centrally – that is, federally – coordinate US public diplomacy. Up to that moment, US efforts to engage with foreign publics had occurred mostly through private endeavours. The CPI gave structure, funds, body and shape to the US crusade to educate the world on the precepts of liberal democracy.²⁵

¹⁷ Nick Fischer, 'The Committee on Public Information and the Birth of US State Propaganda', *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, 35, 1 (2016), 51–78.

¹⁸ Report on the Committee of Public Information by M.I. 4–8, The Military Intelligence Branch, Executive Division, General Staff, May 1918, in Records of the Committee on Public Information: General Correspondence of Chairman George Creel, July 1917–Mar. 1919, Military Intelligence Report on CPI, Record Group 63: Committee on Public Information, NC-7, Entry 1: General Correspondence of George Creel, Chairman, July 1917–Mar. 1919, Folder Military Report, National Archives, College Park, Maryland (NARA), 7.

¹⁹ David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004); Alan Axelrod, *Selling the Great War: The Making of American Propaganda* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2009).

²⁰ David Mould, 'Washington's War on Film: Government Film Production and Distribution 1917–1918', *Journal of the University Film Association*, 32, 3 (1980), 17–29.

²¹ Clayton Funk, 'Popular Culture, Art Education, and the Committee on Public Information during World War I, 1915–1919', *Visual Arts Research*, 37, 1 (2011), 67–78.

²² Clayton Funk, 'The Committee on Public Information and the Mobilization of Public Opinion in the United States during World War I: The Effects on Education and Artists', *Journal of Social Theory and Art Education*, 14 (1994), 120–47. Stephen Ponder, *Managing the Press: Origins of the Media Presidency, 1897–1933* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 1998), especially 91–107.

²³ See Nick Fischer, 'The Committee on Public Information and the Birth of US State Propaganda'.

²⁴ Report on the Committee of Public Information by M.I. 4–8, The Military Intelligence Branch, Executive Division, General Staff, May 1918, 22–3.

²⁵ Nick Fischer's and John Maxwell Hamilton's quoted works are, in this regard, breaking new grounds in the analysis of the CPI as the first example of state-coordinated propaganda. See also Gregg Wolper, 'Wilsonian Public Diplomacy: The

In the first months of its existence, the CPI managed not only to fulfil the vital duty of countering negative propaganda at home, but it transformed itself into a genuinely global organisation. By May 1917, the CPI, while supplying more than 30,000 newspapers with feature articles, providing a weekly news service and sponsoring governmental propaganda of any sort in the United States, had also prepared and printed for worldwide distribution 18 million copies of fifteen different pamphlets, which were translated into seven different languages. To make this worldwide operation and complex machinery work, the CPI established and coordinated cable news services in Europe, the Far East and Central America. According to some contemporary US military analysts, the CPI was carrying ‘the meanings and purposes of America to all people’ of the world, supporting the fight for public opinion in every country.²⁶

The head and mastermind of the CPI’s foreign propaganda was Will Irwin. Irwin was one of the most important US war correspondents and an editorialist for the influential *Saturday Evening Post*. Before joining the war effort, he had maintained some radical views – his progressivism being closer to Teddy Roosevelt’s visions than those of Wilson. Once appointed to the CPI, however, Irwin dutifully worked to advance his country’s cause and make anything possible to enhance its chances of victory.²⁷ It was Irwin who convinced Creel, in February 1918, of the necessity to establish a CPI office in Rome.²⁸ The situation in Italy was rather peculiar. To a large extent, for the United States, Italy represented a problematic ally. Its military performances were rather poor, affected as they were by under-equipped units, munition shortages, general lack of morale and mistrust toward the highest commanders.²⁹ Moreover, Italy’s relations with other European allies were not always linear and were largely dependent on both secret diplomacy and promises of territorial gains.³⁰ In addition, Italy needed both material and ideological support to keep sustaining its war effort. But it was the fragmentation of the Italian public debate, torn apart as it was between nationalists, interventionists and democratic internationalists, that represented one of the main obstacles that US propaganda in the Peninsula had to overcome.³¹

Prominent Italian public intellectuals and fervent supporters of Italian nationalism such as Enrico Corradini, Luigi Federzoni and Alfredo Rocco welcomed the war as a nation-unifying and ‘purifying bloodbath’.³² With them, the famous poet Gabriele D’Annunzio and the futurist writer Filippo Tommaso Marinetti celebrated the war from a purely aesthetic point of view. Fewer liberals of the old guard were supporting the war for reasons similar to Wilson’s ideals, i.e. self-determination and anti-Prussianism, but their positions varied greatly. Republicans who were inspired by Giuseppe Mazzini’s ideas saw the war as the fourth Italian War of Independence and as an opportunity to complete the process of national unification by conquering those territories still in the hands of the Hapsburg empire. Leftist intellectuals à la Gaetano Salvemini preferred to frame the war in terms of Italy’s moral regeneration, as a way to renew political and intellectual elites alike while forging a new sense of national belonging.

Thus, in setting up the messages to convey to the Italian public, US propagandists had to weigh very carefully all these different viewpoints and navigate across some pretty stormy waters where

Committee on Public Information in Spain’, *Diplomatic History*, 17, 1 (1993), 17–34, and Caitlin E. Schindler, *The Origins of Public Diplomacy in US Statecraft: Uncovering a Forgotten Tradition* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2018).

²⁶ Report on the Committee of Public Information by M.I. 4–8, The Military Intelligence Branch, Executive Division, General Staff, May 1918, 35.

²⁷ Burton St. John, III, ‘An Enduring Legacy of World War I: Propaganda, Journalism, and the Domestic Struggle over the Commodification of Truth’, in Paul M. Haridakis, Barbara S. Hugenberg and Stanley T. Wearde, eds., *War and the Media: Essays on News Reporting, Propaganda and Popular Culture* (Jefferson, GA: McFarland, 2009).

²⁸ Letter from Will Irwin to George Creel, 15 Feb. 1918, Record Group 63: Committee on Public Information, NC-7, Entry 1: General Correspondence of George Creel, Chairman, July 1917–Mar. 1919, Irwin, Will, Folder 334, NARA, 1.

²⁹ John Gooch, *The Italian Army and the First World War* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³⁰ Paul du Quenoy, ‘With Allies Like These, Who Needs Enemies? Russia and the Problem of Italian Entry into World War I’, *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, 45, 3/4 (2003), 409–40.

³¹ Daniela Rossini, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Myth in Italy*.

³² Richard Bellamy, *Croce, Gramsci, Bobbio and the Italian Political Tradition* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2014).

conflicting interests, diverging objectives and antithetic ideals could very easily distort and misinterpret US intentions and goals. The US's main target audience in Italy, in other words, was emotionally highly susceptible and the US cultural planners needed to know and understand which chord to strike in order to avoid dangerous misunderstandings. An early proof of this came in December 1916, when President Wilson issued his famous note to the belligerents, a document that was supposed to provide all the war-fighting nations with some common objectives for their struggle: security, self-determination and international recognition above all.³³ After Wilson's 'peace note', Italian public opinion grew sceptical about both the relevance and the likelihood of any US involvement in the conflict. Even though President Wilson, in his remarks, had appealed to the restoration of the so-called Italia Irredenta to Italy, his ideas were generally met with sharp criticism across the country. In the words of the US ambassador to Rome, Thomas Nelson Page, the note was received and described with a tone bordering 'insincerity', and it was risking alienating the support of large portions of the elites, while simultaneously strengthening the positions of neutralists and socialists.³⁴

From that moment onward, Wilson's reputation in Italy was in free fall. Rumours circulated that the US was not at all interested in intervening in the war and that Wilson, whose rhetoric was filled with anti-Germanic tropes and vague references to freedom and democracy, was not interested in supporting any of Italy's requests. The overall impression in the Peninsula was that the US president was fighting a personal crusade on his own. According to Vittorio Scialoja, the Italian Minister for War Propaganda at that time, the common opinion in Rome was that neither the US people nor Congress were supporting Wilson in his actions. As a result, Scialoja remarked, the US president could hardly be believed and trusted, and his promises all sounded like rather empty declarations of principles.³⁵ These rumours were instilling in 'the minds of the Italians, the idea that the President's notes carry little weight in America or elsewhere'.³⁶ Misunderstanding and mischief were thus taking the lead in shaping US-Italian relations and were fostering, at least according to the US ambassador to Rome, a rising and widespread lack of trust, which the ambassador did not hesitate to define as 'un-Americanism'.³⁷ Moreover, to add fuel to the fire, Italy was being subjected to heavy and rather pervasive British propaganda. The United Kingdom was playing, in the words of the US observers, a sort of dictatorial game in Italy, as the Peninsula remained absolutely dependent on British exports of all sorts of commodities and raw materials, from coal to grain, from steel to ammunitions. UK whisperers were also subtly advancing the idea that US representatives in Italy had strong connections with Austria and were secretly working against Italy's interests.³⁸

Thus, when news of the US declaration of war broke out in Italy, Washington's choice was welcomed with a mix of enthusiasm and cautiousness. The US decision raised a lot of expectations, but the general mood was largely suspicious.³⁹ Italian military circles appreciated the entrance of the United States into the war for its strategic potential and considered it a major turning point in terms of balance of forces.⁴⁰ Gabriele D'Annunzio celebrated the news with an ode that juxtaposed the regenerating light of the US flag's stars with the darkness of a war-weary Europe. The poem was meant to present Americanism – not Wilsonianism – as a new form of nationalism. US weapons,

³³ 'President Wilson's Note to the Belligerent Nations', *The New York Times*, 21 Dec. 1916, 1.

³⁴ The Ambassador in Italy (Page) to the Secretary of State, 27 Dec. 1916, in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1916, Supplement, The World War* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1929), 121.

³⁵ 'Suggestions Concerning the War Made by President Wilson 18 Dec. 1916, and Replies of Belligerents and Neutrals', *American Journal of International Law*, 11, 4 (1917), 288–317. See also Stefano Marcuzzi, 'A Machiavellian Ally? Italy in the Entente (1914–1918)', in Vanda Wilcox, ed., *Italy in the Era of the Great War* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

³⁶ The Ambassador in Italy (Page) to the Secretary of State, 7 Jan. 1917, in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, The Lansing Papers, 1914–1920*, vol. I (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1939), 745.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 750.

³⁹ Daniela Rossini, "'Profeta per un Anno': Woodrow Wilson e l'Italia nella Grande Guerra", in Daniele Fiorentino and Matteo Sanfilippo, eds., *Stati Uniti e Italia nel nuovo scenario internazionale 1898–1918* (Rome: Gangemi, 2010), 157–68.

⁴⁰ Francesco Brazzale, Luigino Caliaro and Andrea Vollmann, *Grande guerra. Americani in Italia, nascita di una superpotenza* (Vicenza: Rossato, 2017).

to the visionary poet, bearing the beauty of the modern technology that produced them, signposting the liveliness that was languishing in Europe, came to shine a new light on the darkness into which the Old Continent had dragged itself. The stars of the US flag, and the passion, loyalty and sense of belonging they inspired, seemed to D'Annunzio to be paving the way for a fresh start, a completely regenerated future.⁴¹

Most of the Italian political elites, however, saw Wilson's move under a different light. They considered the US intervention to be an instrument through which it sought to undermine the leadership of the United Kingdom (and in part France too) rather than as a genuine attempt to defend Italian interests and goals.⁴² As the US ambassador to Rome put it, Wilson's decision was interpreted in Italy as a way to overcome a feeling of 'subjugation' to London and Paris. The majority of the Italian people, according to ambassador Page, still needed to be convinced, indoctrinated and persuaded of the positive consequences that the US involvement in the war would have brought about for their country. The Americans, in other words, were asking for an act of faith, without having sufficiently invested in building the kind of trust upon which war propaganda could be grounded.

Grateful to Whom?

Whereas it was clear to the US war planners and policy makers that US propaganda was crucial in a country like Italy, there was wide disagreement on who should perform it, with which human and financial resources, under which programmes and through which activities. The embassy claimed a major role in it and wanted to manage, organise and coordinate the whole operation. The CPI, on the other hand, maintained the uniqueness of its mission and structure, and put forward the distinctive nature and expertise of its Foreign Division to perorate in favour of its exclusive mandate.

Ambassador Page's intentions were clear. Since the beginning of the US war operations, he tried to establish – and lead – a brand-new information service located at and run by the US embassy in Rome. 'I am going to send copies of a speech or two which I have had an opportunity to deliver here in Rome and which I hope may have some effect in opening the eyes of the Italian people to what America stands for', Page wrote to the State Department, maintaining that these speeches would have constituted part of his 'general plan to try and interpret the United States to Italians as something of much more value to them than they have hitherto been led to imagine'.⁴³ Page's master plan was much more complex than gaining the trust of Washington's officials and convincing them to finance his propaganda in Italy. He wanted to put together 'a sort of Intelligence Department for the purpose of obtaining and collating all the information obtainable' in that country, which Page thought would be crucial to strengthening US–Italian relations.⁴⁴ His idea was to create an operative office whose functions would have encompassed intelligence collection, overt and covert operations, cultural and public diplomacy, and of course war propaganda. Page had been thinking through most of the details for his department, up to the point of selecting an ideal candidate for the job. To Page, the US's new 'good man' in Italy, as he defined him, would have been Mr. Gino Speranza, an Italian–American journalist whose articles had appeared in the *Outlook*, *The New York Evening Post* and many other magazines in the United States.⁴⁵

The ambassador's ideas were dismissed as soon as they reached Washington. There, Creel openly complained about Page's attempt to sideline him and his committee, warning against the

⁴¹ Carl A. Swanson, 'D'Annunzio's Ode All'America in Armi (IV Luglio MCMXVIII)', *Italica*, 30, 3 (1953), 135–43.

⁴² David D. Roberts, 'Croce and Beyond: Italian Intellectuals and the First World War', *International History Review*, 3, 2 (1981), 201–35.

⁴³ The Ambassador in Italy to the Secretary of State, 18 Apr. 1917, in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, The Lansing Papers, 1914–1920*, vol. II (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1939), 8–9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Liliana Saiu, *Stati Uniti e Italia nella Grande Guerra, 1914–1918* (Florence: Olschki, 2003).

consequences that greenlighting the ambassador's plans would have had. If, in October 1917, Creel was still sceptical about creating a CPI office in Italy, after noticing Page's activism in Rome, he started putting pressure on Wilson.⁴⁶ Eventually, Creel managed to convince the president not only to formally open a CPI office in Italy but also to give it all the necessary authority to perform war propaganda operations in that country.⁴⁷ To chair that office, Creel initially asked Frank J. Marion, who directed the CPI's operations in Spain as well. Marion, though, believed his presence to be especially important in Spain, where a harder job was needed to keep the country in order. He was also convinced that Italy deserved a special mission on its own due to the logistic problems of the country and the many conflicting messages to which Italian public opinion was exposed.⁴⁸ Creel agreed with Marion and on 11 March 1918 he appointed the prominent Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, Charles E. Merriam, as special CPI envoy to Italy.⁴⁹ Merriam coordinated all the CPI activities from his office in Rome and under his supervision the CPI expanded its programmes widely, disseminating US messages and the lynchpins of Wilsonianism through the Italian public.

As Daniela Rossini writes, in its heyday the CPI office in Italy had about a dozen speakers travelling across the country. The professional propagandists were often accompanied by prominent Italian-Americans on tour in the Peninsula, such as Fiorello LaGuardia or Constantine Panunzio. According to some estimates, in just three months the office had been able to reach out to more than five million people.⁵⁰ In spite of the relative success of these activities, however, Creel was not entirely satisfied with the state of the art of US propaganda in Italy. In April 1918, he confessed to his fellow Wilsonian supporter Frank I. Cobb that further work was necessary in Italy in order to gain the confidence of both the local people and the political elites. In particular, Creel stressed that in Italy it had become very difficult to avoid confusion and misrepresentation by the local public.⁵¹ Creel was lamenting that all the professionals that the CPI had been appointed to promote liberal ideals in the Peninsula had failed to grasp the intimate and deep contradictions that were affecting the Mediterranean country. Creel started thinking that only experienced politicians could perform a better job in Italy as they generally held a deeper understanding of the political situation in that country. Hence, he decided to appoint a New York assemblyman of Italian origins, Salvatore Cotillo, as a special envoy for the CPI and dispatched him to Italy in May 1918. In a short period of time, Cotillo's experience in Italy became the quintessential example of the kind of difficulties and dysfunctions that were affecting the CPI mission in the Peninsula.

Cotillo, indeed, was moved mostly by personal purposes, not by ideology. He wanted his experience at the CPI to be functional for a successive bid to Congress.⁵² At the same time, he seemed to be seeking personal prestige and recognition. In fact, as soon as he arrived in Italy, he started taking advantage of any opportunity to collect honorary degrees or other forms of official acknowledgement. Upon his arrival in Rome, Cotillo was decorated as a Commendatore of the Crown of Italy and was privately acknowledged by both the Italian Premier Orlando and the influential Senator Guglielmo Marconi. Apparently not satisfied with these credits, Cotillo went so far as to ask Creel for an official

⁴⁶ Letter from George Creel to Frank Marion, 26 Oct. 1917, Record Group 63: Committee on Public Information, NC-7, Entry 1: General Correspondence of George Creel, Chairman, July 1917–Mar. 1919, Frank J. Marion, Folder 8, NARA, 1.

⁴⁷ George Creel, *How We Advertised America* (New York, NY: Harp & Brothers, 1920).

⁴⁸ Letter from Frank J. Marion to George Creel, 15 Jan. 1918, Record Group 63: Committee on Public Information, NC-7, Entry 1: General Correspondence of George Creel, Chairman, July 1917–Mar. 1919, Frank J. Marion, folder 8, 3.

⁴⁹ Memorandum from George Creel to Will Irwin, 9 May 1918, in *ibid.*, Will Irwin, Folder 334, NARA, 3.

⁵⁰ Daniela Rossini, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Myth in Italy*, 121.

⁵¹ In Apr. 1918 Creel wrote to Frank I. Cobb saying he agreed on the necessity for further work in Italy, as the US had been sending there only 'picked men', letter from George Creel to Frank I. Cobb, 16 Apr. 1918, Record Group 63: Committee on Public Information, NC-7, Entry 1: General Correspondence of George Creel, Chairman, July 1917–Mar. 1919, Frank I. Cobb, Folder 124, NARA 1.

⁵² Letter from George Creel to Will Irwin, 1 Aug. 1918, in *ibid.*, S.A. Cotillo, Folder 144, NARA, 1.

endorsement from the US president, which Wilson refused to concede. Over the course of his Italian mission, which in total lasted for five months, Cotillo was able to overspend his budget almost three-fold, compiling a rather inaccurate report, taking a few pictures of prisoners of war, and, in his own words, ‘managing a few other things’.⁵³ Not surprisingly, then, Cotillo was replaced without regret by Frederick C. Howe, a progressive reformer who had been in charge of Ellis Island and was known to the Italian elites for having been pretty soft on deportation.⁵⁴

Cotillo’s trip proved that, in spite of the CPI’s genuine intentions to coordinate war propaganda in Italy, the actual implementation of such a plan was ultimately and to a large extent dependent on the discretion of the single individuals who were operative in that country.⁵⁵ Thus, the success of the entire operation was strictly connected to the success of these individuals’ endeavours – and therefore depended on their bias and prejudice as well as on their abilities to create empathy and strengthen or exploit emotional bonds. In fact, when Howe stepped into Italy, he came with completely different intentions from the ones that had moved Cotillo. Howe did not confine himself to social life and luxury hotels as his predecessor did. On the contrary, Howe started touring the country, visiting its poorest areas and experiencing first-hand the standards of life of millions of Italians. On several occasions, Howe deemed the situation of certain parts of Italy as nothing less than feudal.⁵⁶ It was only after the CPI, through Howe’s activism, had taken the pulse of Italy’s real-life conditions that the focus of its campaigns changed dramatically. The promotion of democratic internationalism, liberalism and Wilsonianism left room for investments in much more material goods, such as food, aid and assistance.

Yet, recalibrating the CPI’s activities around aid was not enough to win Italians’ hearts and minds. The CPI, indeed, started funding a wide range of relief organisations, seemingly unaware of the consequences that a certain paternalism might have had in the Peninsula. For instance, when the YMCA distributed posters carrying the slogan ‘resist’, Italian people perceived it as an insinuation that Italy had not sustained its war effort adequately and for long enough, and people ‘openly expressed displeasure with such propaganda’.⁵⁷ The CPI’s officers lamented that bill postings of this sort were having an unfortunate psychological effect and were often provoking widespread anti-US reactions among Italian people. Creel reacted by reinforcing the CPI’s centralised structure and control and asking the heads of the YMCA and other aid organisations working in Italy such as the Knights of Columbus and the Salvation Army to strictly follow the CPI’s instructions. As Creel remarked, the CPI had to be considered the sole organisation responsible for foreign propaganda and no other US institution, public or private, could have interfered with it without jeopardising the whole US propaganda effort in the Peninsula.⁵⁸

In the eyes of the US ambassador to Italy, however, the problem with US propaganda in Italy rested precisely in this kind of centralisation. The poor records and substantial failure of the CPI in promoting and fostering a genuine understanding of US political culture gave the embassy in Rome further reason to complain about the fact that they had been excluded from the entire operation. When President Wilson spoke about the rectification of the frontiers on the exclusive base of nationality – a declaration that upset Italian public opinion as it did not mitigate Italians’ perceived vulnerability nor did it settle the Adriatic Question – Ambassador Page wrote that ‘the situation . . . especially among the civil population’ was ‘sufficiently serious’ and that the United States had to explore any

⁵³ Letter from Salvatore Cotillo to George Creel, 22 Oct. 1918, in *ibid.* See also Salvatore Cotillo, Report of Work Performed in Italy for the Committee on Public Information, 22 Oct. 1918, in *ibid.*, S.A. Cotillo, Folder 145, NARA, 3.

⁵⁴ On 1 Aug. 1918, Creel decided to call Cotillo back to the United States, in *ibid.*, Miscellaneous, Folder 328, NARA, 1. Letter from George Creel to Vincent H. Auleta, 1 Aug. 1918, in *ibid.*, Miscellaneous, Folder 6, NARA, 1.

⁵⁵ Writing to Frank Cobb, Creel acknowledged that the committee had only sent ‘picked men’ to Italy ‘for some time’ and that this had hampered the CPI’s efforts in that country, see Letter from George Creel to Frank I. Cobb, in *ibid.*, Frank I. Cobb, Folder 124, NARA 1.

⁵⁶ Letter from Frederick C. Howe to George Creel, 27 May 1918, in *ibid.*, Frederick C. Howe, Folder 315, NARA, 1.

⁵⁷ Letter from John Hearley to George Creel, 25 Oct. 1918, in *ibid.*, Charles Merriam, Folder 17, NARA, 1.

⁵⁸ Memorandum from George Creel to Will Irwin, 4 May 1918, in *ibid.*, Will Irwin, Folder 334, NARA, 1.

possibility and make use of any occasion and means to show the Italian people what it was doing ‘to aid and sustain them’. Page was condemning the fact that the Italians had not been adequately reassured of the fact that they could ‘rely more and more on America’, and was complaining that the US government had not done enough ‘to justify their expectations’. In substance, Page was deeming the CPI responsible for having failed to meet Italian expectations, engage with Italian requests and create sympathy with local forces before attempting to foster ideological support for Washington’s objectives.⁵⁹

Ambassador Page was very keen on reporting to the president about any misstep that the CPI took in Italy. He wrote to the president that rumours had been circulated in Italy according to which Wilson had made some public statements conflicting with Italy’s postwar hopes. Page stressed that these false allegations were very popular and had been spreading widely, completely unchallenged by the CPI. The rumours had grown to such an extent that the ambassador felt compelled to publish an official note of denial, which, Page remarked with pride, had then been commented on very favourably and positively by the Italian press. The ambassador’s claim that there was a ‘defeatist propaganda’ in Italy due to a ‘certain nervousness on the part of the public’ and to the inability of the United States – that is the CPI – to address this issue, was meant to ask for more autonomy and power vis-à-vis what he considered to be a dysfunctional committee led by Creel and his fellow liberals. Page thought that the Italians were still looking to the United States as the most important ally. But he also believed that only the ambassador had a real understanding of the political and social situation in Italy, and that only the embassy could manage and design an effective propaganda machinery that would have allowed Wilsonianism to take effect in the Peninsula.⁶⁰

Conclusion

In hindsight, Page was right. The CPI’s lack of connection with the Italian political landscape, its rather indiscriminate financing of any sort of friendly support to the war and its general misinterpretation of Italian society did not stimulate the growth of liberal–democratic values within the Italian elites nor did it help to clarify the lynchpins of Wilsonianism to the Italian people. The CPI gave the Italians an early example of modern publicity techniques, which, among others, was particularly welcomed and appreciated by the moderate pro-war socialist editor Benito Mussolini (whose journal became heavily subsidised by Merriam and the CPI). The CPI’s actions were glorified and celebrated by visionaries such as D’Annunzio, who saw in it all the potential of modern political machineries. But, as the US ambassador remarked on many occasions, the CPI did not succeed in promoting the fundamental tenets of democratic internationalism because of a lack of connection and understanding of, first and foremost, the political emotions dominating the country in which it operated. As a result, the CPI did not avoid – and could not avoid – the rapid emergence of nationalism. As historian Frank Costigliola has argued, American propaganda in Italy substantially failed to create a vital centre in Italian politics. The clash between the CPI and the embassy proves that the roots of this failure are partly traceable to both a lack of inter-institutional coordination of US propaganda efforts and a general misunderstanding of Italy’s socio-cultural milieu, which eventually severely

⁵⁹ Another critical point came in Jan. 1918, after Wilson’s statement on Austria–Hungary. US Secretary of State Robert Lansing wrote to Wilson on 25 Jan. 1918, saying that Italian people were dissatisfied with the president’s words. The Italians believed that if their frontiers had to be regulated only on the basis of nationality, they would have remained vulnerable to attacks and the Adriatic Question would have remained unsettled. Lansing stressed that it was crucial to give Italians some sort of reassurance: ‘if Italy gains the impression that she is not to strengthen her position in the Adriatic, the Italian people will become discouraged and feel that the war has no actual interest for them’, Lansing wrote. See the Ambassador in Italy (Page) to the Secretary of State, 7 Jan. 1917, in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, The Lansing Papers, 1914–1920*, vol. II (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1939), 89.

⁶⁰ The Ambassador in Italy (Page) to the Secretary of State, 26 Mar. 1918, in *ibid.*, 117.

hindered the emergence of empathy and gratitude in Italy. Not surprisingly, then, after Versailles a sense of gratitude toward the the United States was largely absent in Italy and, quite the opposite, the expression 'son of Wilson' became a popular and vicious insult, stigmatising someone's untrustworthy, patronising and rather self-interested behaviour.⁶¹

⁶¹ Frank C. Costigliola, *Awkward Dominion: American Political, Economic, and Cultural Relations with Europe, 1919–1933* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 94.

Cite this article: Fazzi D (2023). Tone-Deaf Propaganda: American Perceptions and Misperceptions of Italy during the Great War. *Contemporary European History* 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777323000097>