

FACT SHEET

ITALIAN MIGRATION 1900-1945

*“What did you do?” asked the chiropractor. You have muscles like a man” ...
Oh dear, how I worked ... But I had to do it, what could one do?’ Mrs S, who arrived
in Australia during the Depression. From the IHS Oral History Collection.*

Introduction

Between 1901 and 1912 war, poverty, crop failure and natural disaster saw 500,000 people leaving Italy annually in search of work. While the majority of new arrivals in Australia were from the northern regions of Piedmont, Lombardy, Veneto, Friuli and Tuscany, migrants from Puglia, Calabria and Sicily also made their way to these shores. Many were brought out by family or friends who worked outside city centres clearing forests and building railways or in the agricultural, viticultural, fishing, mining and sugarcane industries. By 1914, there were around 10,000 people of Italian origin in Australia.

It was in this period that Leichhardt in Sydney and Melbourne’s Carlton came to be known as the “Little Italys”. Those who settled in the city were employed in the restaurant industry or as artists, builders, terrazzo workers, food importers, musicians, bakers, tailors and labourers.

Between the wars

There was a marked rise in Italian migration to Australia between the two world wars. This was the result of a government policy to increase the population, and a decision by the United States to restrict the intake of Italians. Consequently, by 1939 there were over 33,000 Italian-born migrants in Australia. The flow was interrupted by the Depression and by restrictions imposed by both the Australian and the Italian governments.

Italian-Australians survived the Great Depression of the 1930s by pulling together as a community. Many of those based in the cities moved in with friends and relatives living on the land. Amid massive unemployment and social unrest migrants came to be seen as a threat to jobs and cultural identity. In northern Queensland, business leaders and the Australian Workers’ Union (AWU) formed an employment agreement that sought to undermine Italian domination of the sugarcane industry. In Kalgoorlie-Boulder on Australia Day 1934, the accidental death of an Anglo-Australian patron in a fight with an Italian barman was the catalyst for a race riot that killed two and saw the destruction of Italian-owned homes, businesses and mining camps.

The rise of fascism

From the 1920s onward, Mussolini’s Italy devoted considerable energy to promoting fascism to its citizens in Australia, where local party branches (*fasci*) were established and pressure was applied to join. As late as 1939, Mussolini was still viewed by Australia and other English-speaking nations as a model of modern leadership. There was therefore some pride associated with being fascist and Italian. Many migrants with no real understanding of politics joined the party in a gesture of national pride. In contrast, those Italians who had been forced to escape Mussolini’s Italy made a desperate attempt to draw attention to the looming threat of fascism.

World War II

By 1940, around 40 per cent of members of the Italian community in Australia were naturalised and several thousands Australian-born. When Italy entered the war in that year on the side of the Axis, the members of this community were declared “enemy aliens” and some 4,700 were interned. From 1940 to mid-1947, voluntary migration between the two nations came to a halt. During the war, the only Italians to enter the country were civilian internees and prisoners of war.

Italian migration 1900-1945 in the Italian Historical Society Collection

You will find a range of publications, photographs, correspondence and other documents relating to migration during this period in the following collections:

- Candela Collection
- Del Monaco Collection
- Document Collection
- Fashion Collection
- Food Collection
- Franco Collection
- Library
- Newspaper Collection
- Opera Collection
- Oral History Collection
- Photographic Collection

See also the following Italian Historical Society Fact Sheets:

- Contribution of Women
- Internment: Civilians
- Internment: POWs
- Italian migration 1850-1900
- Italian migration 1945-
- Map: Australia
- Map: Italy
- Proxy Brides
- Trades and Professions

Further reading

The resources listed below can be accessed, by appointment, at the Italian Historical Society.

Publications

Bella Wardrop, S 1996, *By proxy: a study of Italian proxy brides in Australia*, Italian Historical Society—COASIT, Melbourne, Carlton.

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- Jupp, J (ed.) 2001, *The Australian people: an encyclopedia of the nation, its people and their origins*, Cambridge University Press, Oakleigh, Victoria.
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Ruzzene Grollo, D 2004, *Cooper's Creek, Gippsland: the Trevisani = Trevisani in Australia: Cooper's Creek*, Mure, Thornbury, Victoria.

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Audio-visual

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