

Anarchy to Activism:
Italian Immigrant Politics During Boston's Great Molasses Flood¹

*“Spectators observed the tank crumble, saw the mass of molasses surge all round and crawl like a slowed-up avalanche across inequalities of ground. Buildings were smeared with the fluid, other structures were razed either by the blast or the irresistible mass that buried everything in its path.”*²

-- *The Boston Herald, January 16, 1919*

The “slowed-up avalanche” that engulfed Boston on Wednesday, January 15, 1919 started out as a 25-foot tall wave. It rolled through the narrow streets of the North End neighborhood of Boston at a 35 mile-an-hour clip, leaving destruction and death in its path.³ The time: 12:45 pm. The death toll: 21.

Ask any longtime Bostonian about their family's recollections of the flood's aftermath and chances are, you'll get the same response. Reminiscing about the smell of molasses remains a local sport: the way it lingered for decades, the way you could still smell it on a hot summer day so many years later. Lifetime North End resident Margarete Locchiatto remembered, “My mother got excited. She yelled, ‘Oh my God, we're being bombed. The Germans are here!’”⁴

That Wednesday morning, before the neighborhood's conversation turned to the flood, a visitor to the North End would have heard the streets abuzz about two topics: the war and Prohibition. Locchiatto's mother's reflex reaction to the molasses tank's collapse shows how the war weighed on every American's mind. Though the Allies had reached Armistice two months before, the peace process seemed ongoing and uncertain. Soldiers were still overseas, and the United States' war production continued apace.

¹ Thanks to Professor Sigrid Schmalzer for her guidance and editing help; Mason Bradbury for his translation of *La Gazzetta*; and Fallon Wall, Minnie Weisberger, Nancy Kelleher, and Robert Connolly for editing help.

² “Molasses Explosion Due to ‘Expansion,’ Is Theory on Water Front.” *Boston Herald*, January 16, 1919.

³ Stephen Puleo, *Dark Tide: The Great Boston Molasses Flood of 1919* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 96.

⁴ Anthony V. Riccio, *Portrait of an Italian-American Neighborhood* (New York: Center for Migrant Studies, 1998), 101.



Prohibition, war and molasses: the *Boston American*, January 17, 1919

That industrial hubbub may have been why the tank collapsed in the first place: well, that and prohibition. About 80 percent of the alcohol produced by tank owner United States Industrial Alcohol Company’s (UIAC’s) molasses went toward armaments; the other 20 percent was used to produce rum.⁵ In 1919, molasses, the sticky, thick liquid byproduct of sugar refinement, was used not only for its traditional purposes, as a food sweetener and a base ingredient of rum, but also to make ethyl alcohol (a practice that continued until 1948, when ethylene replaced it in the

⁵ Puleo 11.

production process).⁷ The Allies' military needs demanded ethyl alcohol, a key industrial solvent, and the molasses from which it derived.⁸

So the UIAC stuffed the tank to the gills with molasses. The 2-million-gallon capacity tank held 2.3 million gallons when it fell apart.⁹ Why did UIAC fill its tank to such dangerous levels? The molasses met two pressing and profitable needs: the need for industrial alcohol, and the need for alcohol to make rum. With Prohibition looming on the horizon (the Prohibition Amendment became law just three days after the flood), distilleries wanted to manufacture as much liquor as possible – one last hurrah.

The smell of molasses that lingered in the North End's streets and alleys was not the only change in the neighborhood that January. The reactions the flood provoked from North End residents, and particularly the Italian immigrants who constituted much of its population, demonstrated their changing attitude toward politics, government, and activism.

BOSTON'S NORTH END

The molasses tank stood on Copp's Hill, a peak that juts up from the heart of the North End and overlooks the mouth of the Charles River. The North End, known as Boston's "first neighborhood," originally served as home to the Puritan elite. Over time, Bostonians filled in adjacent areas of swamp, sea, and river to create new neighborhoods. After these new neighborhoods drew the well-to-do away, the North End took on a different character, and "by the mid-1800s ... successive waves of German and then Irish poor had settled there."¹⁰ Boston's

⁷ "molasses." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2009. Web. 20 Dec. 2009 <<http://search.eb.com.silk.library.umass.edu:2048/eb/article-9053224>>.

⁸ "ethyl alcohol." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2009. Web. 20 Dec. 2009

⁹ Puleo 96.

¹⁰ Puleo 31.

first neighborhood became many immigrants' first neighborhood, too (perhaps appropriately, given its position overlooking the waterfront and its passenger ships). By this time, the immigrant-populated, tenement-filled neighborhood scarcely resembled the Boston Brahmin enclave of the eighteenth century. Population density in the half-square-mile neighborhood "rivalled (its contemporary) Calcutta, India ... by 1900."¹¹

Toward the turn of the century, immigration patterns changed: the Irish potato famine ended, slowing the influx of Irish immigrants, and the Italian political and economic situation became more dismal, particularly for southern Italians. As more Italians came to Boston, the demographics of the North End changed drastically.

Between 1900 and 1920, the Boston Italian population swelled from 18,000 to 77,000 (from 2 percent to 10 percent of the total Boston population).¹² Most of these immigrants initially settled in the North End, in "enclaves" based upon their regional origins. Historian William DeMarco explores this phenomenon in his book *Ethnics and Enclaves: Boston's Italian North End*. The neighborhood developed a unique and vibrant culture, based around the familial structure and regional ties the immigrants carried over from Italy.¹³

In 1910, the 10-acre-square North End boasted a population of 30,000 people, 28,000 of whom were Italian – a conservative estimate, given the propensity of the Italian community to avoid census.¹⁴ In that same year, 1910, only 25 percent of Boston's Italians had become naturalized, due to a wariness of the government.¹⁵ This wariness plays a significant role in the history of the Boston Italians.

¹¹ William DeMarco, *Ethnics and Enclaves: Boston's Italian North End* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981), 16.

¹² DeMarco 23.

¹³ DeMarco.

¹⁴ Puleo 32

¹⁵ Puleo 36.

ITALIAN POLITICAL SENTIMENT

Italian-Americans felt suspicious of government and were thus less inclined to become politically active, partly because of the situation they had escaped in Italy. The nineteenth- to twentieth-century Italian exodus was a product of the political turmoil Italy faced during that period.¹⁶ Due to political and economic discrimination at home, immigrants with origins in the most radical areas of southern Italy flooded into Boston and by 1900 dominated North End demographics.¹⁷ Indeed, “the factors which ‘pushed’ Italian migrants to the North End enclaves at the turn of the century” originated from their “frustrations experienced ... at the hands of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century Italian lawmakers.”¹⁸ This meant that the North End Italians looked at their new government with an inherited wary (or even rebellious) eye.

The concept of a unified Italian vote, or group political action, may not have even occurred to North End residents simply because they did not identify themselves as Italian. Overwhelmingly, immigrants from the Apennine Peninsula identified their origins regionally or by city rather than considering themselves Italian, much less American.

Leaving aside the discrimination they had experienced in Italy, many North End immigrants did not like government because of the systematic discrimination they experienced in Boston.¹⁹ As the newest group of immigrants arrived en masse on Massachusetts shores, many Bostonians replaced their traditional “no Irish need apply” bias with anti-Italian sentiments and stereotypes.

These frustrations with government and organized politics meant that Italians did not have a voice in politics, despite their sizable numbers. Though the North End Italians were by far

¹⁶ DeMarco 14.

¹⁷ DeMarco 10.

¹⁸ DeMarco 4.

¹⁹ Puleo 36.

the largest group in the area statistically, they did not elect Italian representatives, and candidates did not have to court the Italian vote because of its relative weakness.²⁰ Instead, the Irish-American politicians who had represented the area when Irish immigrants dominated North End demographics continued to do so. From 1900 to 1915, the Irish political machine helmed by John F. “Honey Fitz” Fitzgerald saw only one political defeat in the North End.²¹ Regardless of the political dominance of the Irish minority in the North End, John Connolly observes in *The Triumph of Ethnic Progressivism* that “a basic infrastructure of public leadership had developed among leading Italians by the early 1900s ... (but they) had little opportunity to translate their civic status into political power.”²²

The Italian voice was not broadcast through traditional political avenues during the 1910s, but it found one outlet that the public heard loud and clear. Anarchists became almost synonymous with Italians during that time period. And the World War I era was a particularly dangerous time for an ethnic group to become associated with anarchists.

ITALIANS AND ANARCHY

The United States’ entry into World War I in April 1917 led to fears of domestic anarchy across the country, particularly in Boston. Suffolk County District Attorney Joseph Pelletier alerted his city that Boston faced “great danger from disturbances by anarchist bands who are holding nightly meetings, planning what they can do to tear down the structure of Government.”

²⁰ James J. Connolly, *The Triumph of Ethnic Progressivism: Urban Political Culture in Boston, 1900-1925*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 57.

²¹ Connolly 58.

²² Connolly 57-58.

Pelletier asked for a “thorough survey ... that we may get the names and addresses of all who are not citizens.”²³ He drew an explicit connection drawn between anarchists and immigrants.

The immigrants to which Pelletier referred were almost certainly Italian. The most widely known anarchist group of the era was the Galleanists, followers of Massachusetts resident Luigi Galleani. Galleani published an Italian-language anarchist newspaper, the *Cronaca Sovversiva*, out of offices in Lynn, Massachusetts. In 1916, the Galleanists incited an antimilitary riot in the North End, which Boston police quelled violently. On November 18, 1916, the anarchists bombed the North End’s Salutation Street Police Station in response to the riot’s dispersal, a move that gained the out-of-towners no friends in the neighborhood.²⁴ As part of Massachusetts’ anti-anarchist campaign, Galleani was arrested in Wrentham on June 15, 1917, and the *Cronaca* outlawed on July 18, 1918. Many anarchists were deported or returned to Italy in the wake of the arrests.

Five days before the molasses flood, on January 10, 1919, police warned North End businessmen about anarchist signs that had been plastered on Commercial Street overnight. The signs attacked the “senile fossils ruling the United States” who had passed a tough bill on immigration earlier that week.²⁵ They threatened: “We will dynamite you.” The fear that had existed in the wake of the 1916 police station bombing resurfaced. Dynamite seemed like a viable threat in January 1919: sites important to war manufacturing had recently been attacked up and down the Eastern seaboard. First Bethlehem Steel Works in Pennsylvania, then the Pont Powder Mill in Delaware, and that very month, on January 2, someone had dynamited the New England Manufacturing Company in Woburn (less than ten miles from the molasses tank).

²³ Puleo 58.

²⁴ "Bomb Blows Hole in Police Station Wall: Anarchists Blamed For Attempt to Kill Men of Harbor Division-- North End Shaken, Windows and Ceilings in Many Houses Shattered Narrow Escape For Four Two Suspects Arrested Harbor Station Is Much Damaged Dynamite Used Is Belief." Boston Daily Globe, December 18, 1916.

²⁵ Puleo 79.

The molasses tank, important to UIAC and the war effort, seemed a likely target for anarchists following its collapse. Its strategic location was almost unparalleled: “the tank ... stood in the middle of Boston’s busiest business district and at the edge of its most densely populated residential neighborhood.”²⁶ Immediately following the flood, observers begged the obvious question: why did the tank stand in such a dangerous location to begin with? Several days after the flood, the *Boston Herald* reported, “It was revealed yesterday that there was considerable objection from residents of the North End to the erection of the tank. Apprehension of a disaster such as occurred Wednesday was the basis.”²⁷ The political insolvency of the North End immigrant population meant that, despite residents’ fears, they lacked the ability to delay or halt the tank’s construction.

Fears about anarchist terrorism permeated reactions to the molasses tank’s collapse. The day after the flood, Walter L. Wedger, the Massachusetts District Police “expert on explosions,” said to the *Boston Daily Globe* that he was “strongly inclined to the belief that there was an explosion.”²⁸ Another major Boston newspaper, the *Boston Herald*, reported on the same day that “an explosion, not of terrific violence, but sufficient to rip the tank apart and let loose the avalanche of destruction, is the explanation that this theory declares.”²⁹ The two newspapers presented the explosion theory as an alternative to the collapse theory that eventually proved accurate. The word “explosion” carried the connotation of a deliberate, violent action. The “explosion theory,” credited to a source in only one of its numerous mentions in various Boston newspapers, may have been propagated in part by the newspaper reporters themselves, as suggested by the loaded vocabulary of this January 17 *Boston Herald* excerpt: “A rumor that the

²⁶ Puleo 2.

²⁷ “Says 15 Bodies Yet in Molasses Tank Ruins.” *Boston Herald*, January 18, 1919.

²⁸ “Explosion Theory Favored By Expert: Full Inquiry Necessary, Says W. L. Wedger.” *Boston Daily Globe* (1872-1922), January 16, 1919.

²⁹ “Explosion Theory Gains Ground as Explanation.” *Boston Herald*, January 17, 1919.

tank was blown up by an infernal machine planted by an enemy alien gains no ground along the waterfront. This sensation perhaps grew out of the reported connection of the distilling company with munitions plants.”³⁰

THE GOVERNMENTAL RESPONSE

Official reactions to the flood expressed suspicions of anarchist involvement. The day after the flood, mayor of Boston Andrew J. Peters stated, “An occurrence of this kind must not and cannot pass without a rigid investigation to determine the cause of the explosion, not only to prevent a recurrence of such a frightful accident but to place the responsibility where it belongs.”³¹ Significantly, the mayor used the word “explosion.” The mayor also called for an official investigation, which spawned a years-long lawsuit and an inquest that went public with some of its findings less than a month later.

The man who reported the Municipal Court of Boston’s findings, Wilfred Bolster, had been appointed chief justice of that court in 1906. The son of another judge who was “particularly prominent in Masonic bodies,” he was born in 1866. With three Mayflower ancestors, as a graduate of Harvard University and Harvard Law, and with a tenure as editor-in-chief of the Harvard Law Review under his belt, the judge perfectly represented the old guard of Boston.³²

Despite Bolster’s finding -- that the company and governmental inspection bore responsibility (“My conclusion from all this evidence is that this tank was wholly insufficient in point of structural strength to handle its load, insufficient to meet either legal or engineering

³⁰ “Molasses Explosion Due to ‘Expansion,’ Is Theory on Water Front.” Boston Herald, January 16, 1919.

³¹ “Mayor Appalled, Promises Probe.” Boston Daily Globe, January 16, 1919.

³² Samuel Atkins Eliot, *Biographical History of Massachusetts: Biographies and Autobiographies of the Leading Men in the State, Volume V* (Boston: Massachusetts Biographical Society, 1914), 1894-1895, 1900.

requirements”³³) -- the judge nonetheless criticized the residents of the North End. He announced, “It is no part of the business of this court to find a scapegoat to order for an indifferent or niggardly public, on the demand of the inevitable prophet after the event.”³⁴ The *Boston Daily Globe* reported that Bolster “holds the public largely responsible for the conditions that resulted in the molasses tank disaster ... He says that a public which, with one eye on the tax rate, provides itself with an administrative equipment 50 percent qualified has no right to complain that it does not get a 100 percent production.”³⁵ Essentially, a representative of the law told the North End community that its own political insolvency meant that it was to blame for the failures of its government. This sentiment did not cultivate faith in a system toward which Italians already felt unease, if not anger.

THE ITALIAN RESPONSE

“Finding the cause of the disaster is not our job, lady justice in her own time will give the details ... we will search for a ready haven from the wrongs the beautiful lady with blindfolded eyes, namely 'the legislature,' has done to us up until now, and continues to do to us.”

--La Gazzetta del Massachusetts, January 19, 1919

In its angry editorial about the flood, *La Gazzetta del Massachusetts*, Boston’s most popular Italian-language newspaper, stated that neighborhood residents had voiced fears about threats posed by the tank and similar local structures for years. The *Gazzetta* called members of the Massachusetts Legislature “Pharisees,” and implied legislative corruption when it charged that

³³ “Public Blamed for Tank Disaster in Findings of Justice Bolster: ‘Eye on Tax Rate’ Policy Scored--Process Issued Against Lessees—Faulty Construction Cause- Building Department Criticised..” *Boston Daily Globe*, February 8, 1919.

³⁴ “Public Blamed for Tank Disaster in Findings of Justice Bolster: ‘Eye on Tax Rate’ Policy Scored--Process Issued Against Lessees—Faulty Construction Cause- Building Department Criticised..” *Boston Daily Globe*, February 8, 1919.

³⁵ “Public Blamed for Tank Disaster in Findings of Justice Bolster: ‘Eye on Tax Rate’ Policy Scored--Process Issued Against Lessees—Faulty Construction Cause- Building Department Criticised..” *Boston Daily Globe*, February 8, 1919.

they did not “disdain mixing politics with business ... in order to be able to enjoy the filthy embrace of Capitalism, that which is exploitative and arrogant.”³⁶ Similar anti-capitalist sentiment could be found in other Italian-language publications like the anarchist *Cronaca*. The *Gazzetta*, however, offered a more tempered, less violent solution to the problem, though it employed similarly provocative language. The week after the flood, the *Gazzetta* proclaimed, “The North End, although it pays the highest taxes on its income, is considered the lair of savages -- it’s our duty, therefore, to avenge ourselves.” What was the vengeance that the capitalist-spiting newspaper proposed? The editors charged their readers to send the paper “a postcard of protest” and assured the readers that once these postcards had been collected, the newspaper would “convene a public assembly.”



Destruction surrounds the tank

Even as Bolster formulated his condemnation of inaction, some North End groups tried to effect change from within the system. For example, the yearly convention of the Columbus Club,

³⁶ *La Gazzetta del Massachusetts*, January 19, 1919.

a group of Italian Republicans, met on Sunday, February 2, 1919. The Columbus Club, “recognized by the Republican leaders in Massachusetts as an active party organization,” had been founded six years before, in 1913.³⁷ The club’s meeting first addressed the issue of dangerous structures in the neighborhood, eyeing gas tanks as potential trouble now that the molasses tank had fallen: “Joseph A. Langone, a North End businessman, presented a resolution regarding the recent molasses tank disaster ... it was voted that the members of the Columbus Club dwelling in the North End protest against allowing great gas tanks to remain in a densely settled district.”³⁸ As further evidence of a desire within the community to gain a political voice, at the same meeting, the club decided to address the “badly split ... Italian Republican vote.”³⁹ Soon after this meeting, the club reached for legitimacy: records show that the “Columbus Republican Club of New England,” located in Boston, was officially incorporated on July 23, 1919.⁴⁰

The Columbus Club’s influence had grown during the previous years: three years earlier, in October 1916, the Republican State Committee held a soiree for the club at the Hotel Napoli. Columbus Club president Pietro V. Donadio (whose name was Anglicized and misspelled in all newspaper accounts as Peter Donandio)⁴¹ announced to the Committee: “The strength of Italian Republicanism in Boston is shown by the fact that East Boston is rapidly being made Republican by the efforts of the Columbus Republican Club.” Club speakers emphasized naturalization of

³⁷ “Kick Against North End Big Gas Tanks: Columbus Club Regrets Senator Weeks' Defeat Convention Pledges Italian Vote to Republican Candidate in 1920.” *Boston Daily Globe* (1872-1922), February 3, 1919.

³⁸ “Kick Against North End Big Gas Tanks: Columbus Club Regrets Senator Weeks' Defeat Convention Pledges Italian Vote to Republican Candidate in 1920.” *Boston Daily Globe* (1872-1922), February 3, 1919.

³⁹ “Kick Against North End Big Gas Tanks: Columbus Club Regrets Senator Weeks' Defeat Convention Pledges Italian Vote to Republican Candidate in 1920.” *Boston Daily Globe* (1872-1922), February 3, 1919.

⁴⁰ Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *Abstract of the certificates of corporations organized under the general laws of Massachusetts* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1920).

⁴¹ *The Donadio, Peter E. Papers*, Italian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

new arrivals as the focus of their mission to mobilize Italians in support of the Republican Party, a goal they would repeat at their February 2nd meeting.⁴²

Exactly one week after that meeting, the next Sunday, February 9, 1919, “with the molasses horror still fresh in mind ... several hundred residents of the North End ... held a spirited mass meeting to protest against the gasometer in (a) congested residential district,” reported the *Boston Daily Globe*.⁴³ Their arguments echoed the ones made at the Columbus Club meeting, which suggests a community ready to rally around an issue and grasp for political agency.

In addition to discussion of the gas tank, the meeting’s chairman, Vincent Brogna, spoke “for five minutes” about Theodore Roosevelt, who had died almost exactly a month prior: according to a newspaper account, “he spoke feelingly of the former President, who, he said, the Italian people loved and respected.”⁴⁴ A resolution regarding Roosevelt’s death had been passed at the Columbus Club meeting the Sunday before. This strong Italian identification with a politician represented a gravitation toward traditional politics and away from the community-harbored anarchist sympathies that had begun to dissipate even before the flood.

The next topic of the February 9 meeting: the gasometer. The area where the gasometer sat “can be made excellent use of in improving the district,” argued Ralph Adams Cram, chairman of the City Planning Board and great-great-grandson of a North End resident who “was what is called a privateer and some called ... a pirate” and whose rebellious spirit Cram wished

⁴² “Italian Republicans Meet: Dinner for Leaders Given by State Committee – Meyer Makes Hit With Italians.” *Boston Daily Globe* (1872-1922). Boston, Mass.: Oct 28, 1916.

⁴³ “Demand Removal of the Gasometer: Mass Meeting in Protest Held in North End.” *Boston Daily Globe* (1872-1922), February 10, 1919.

⁴⁴ “Demand Removal of the Gasometer: Mass Meeting in Protest Held in North End.” *Boston Daily Globe* (1872-1922), February 10, 1919.

to harness for reform. Cram argued for “a wide and beautiful street” to make the North End “the best place in Boston in which to live.”⁴⁵

CONCLUSIONS

An impetus toward reform shows itself in the Italian reaction to the Great Flood. To a society that suspected them of violence, the residents of the North End responded with strongly worded letters and public meetings. The flood not only provoked some Italians into becoming politically active, but their response demonstrated a movement toward traditional political activism that had already laid its foundations in the North End with such organizations as the *Gazzetta* and the Columbus Club. With huge national issues (the war, prohibition) and local ones (the controversial gasometer) looming in Italians’ minds, their impulse toward systematic reform was intuitive, even defensive. The rebellious spirit embodied by the anarchists, who served as an early outlet for the community’s voice, and by the *Gazzetta*, which served as a later one, survived. But the immigrant community’s approach toward change skewed from anarchy and apathy to political saliency – an ultimately more effective tactic.

⁴⁵ "Demand Removal of the Gasometer: Mass Meeting in Protest Held in North End." Boston Daily Globe (1872-1922), February 10, 1919.

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