

**RAILWAYS AND THE FORMATION
OF THE ITALIAN STATE IN THE
NINETEENTH CENTURY**

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THE HISTORY OF RAILWAYS

The history of technology demonstrates how, in the nineteenth century, progress in steam and transport technology led to a continuous increase in the speed and quality of railway transport. Only at the beginning of the twentieth century, with the introduction of electric traction and of the internal combustion engine, was a similar qualitative improvement in land transport achieved. In fact, during most of the nineteenth century, the only direct competitors of the railways were canal boats, horse-drawn coaches and wagons. The railways were so successful that the railway network expanded steadily to the remotest corners of the world. Nonetheless, the densest railway network was built in Europe, and this still remains the case today.

Traditional railway history is closely linked to the history of technology and frequently reads like a story of the triumph of man over nature, of breaking the centuries-old constraints of time and space, and of how the world was slowly made as small a place as it is today. Often, this kind of railway history is intended as a tribute to the touching dedication of men to their locomotives, to the personal heroism of railway engineers, and, last but not least, to the progress of humanity and the greatness of the nation.¹

In the 1960s, a different kind of railway history emerged when Robert Fogel's book *Railroads and American Economic Growth. Essays in Econometric History* was published in 1964.² For the first time, a serious effort was made to measure the influence of the railways on the

¹ For a survey of traditional Italian railway history, see Erico Monti, *Il primo secolo di vita delle ferrovie italiane, 1839-1849* (Florence, 1939); L. Briano, *Storia delle ferrovie in Italia* (Milan, 1977); Livio Jannattoni, *Il treno in Italia* (Rome, 1980); Elvira Cantarella, 'Lo sviluppo delle ferrovie dalle origini alla statizzazione', in *Storia della società italiana*, 25 vols. (Milan, 1987); Andrea Giuntini, 'Le ferrovie nella storiografia italiana', *IC* (1990), pp. 327-32; and Andrea Giuntini, *Contributo alla formazione di una bibliografia storica sulle ferrovie in Italia* (Milan, 1991).

² In 1993 Robert Fogel was awarded the Nobel prize for economics for his work.

economy in a coherent way. In this paradigmatic study Fogel tried to determine how big the contribution of railways had been to the growth of national income in the United States of America during the nineteenth century. The results showed that the railways had contributed at most around 4 per cent of national income per year towards the end of the century, which seemed to contradict the suggestion of traditional railway histories that they had brought enormous benefits.

Since the publication of Fogel's book the methodological debate has never subsided. The main opponents to his methods argue that 4 per cent of national income per year, measured by Fogel's partial equilibrium model, amounts to a substantial amount when a general equilibrium model of the economy is applied.³ This technical discussion must be left aside here, but it can be concluded that there is no full agreement among economic historians on how to measure the benefit of railways for an economy.

During the last decade, due to a wider acceptance of these advanced econometric methods by historians, however, the methodological gap between the 'traditional' and the 'econometric' schools of railway history has increased considerably.⁴ Nevertheless, this book tries to steer a middle way between these two 'schools' of railway history by combining the merits of both. On the one hand, the importance of political factors and state intervention in determining the success or failure of the railways is stressed. On the other hand, by making comparisons with other European countries, a meaningful interpretation of those quantitative data available for Italian railways can be offered. No effort has been made to come up with a global measurement of the economic benefits of the railways, or their overall importance for the integration of the Italian market.

The creation of an appropriate statistical framework has presented a major challenge. Socio-economic data before Italian unification in 1860 are hard to harmonize and they are scarce or unreliable for the first decades after unification. The growth rates of gross domestic

See also Robert Fogel, 'Notes on the Social Savings Controversy', *JEH* 29 (1979), pp. 1-54.

³ John James, 'The Use of General Equilibrium Analysis in Economic History', *EEH* 21 (1984), pp. 231-53; Jeffrey Williamson, 'Greasing the Wheels of Sputtering Export Engines: Midwestern Grains and American Growth', *EEH* 17 (1980), pp. 189-217; J. Foreman-Peck, 'Railways and Late Victorian Economic Growth', in James Foreman-Peck (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Late Victorian Economy. Essays in Quantitative Economic History 1860-1914* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 73-95.

⁴ Simon P. Ville, 'Transport and the Industrial Revolution', *JTH* 13 (1992), pp. 180-1; Terry Gourvish, 'What Kind of Railway History Did We Get? Forty Years of Research', *JTH* 14 (1993), pp. 111-25.

product, for example, estimated for the period from 1860 to 1890, are probably too low, but recent revisions have not produced significantly different results.⁵ The data on railways, in particular those related to railway traffic, present problems of harmonization too, since until nationalization the companies which ran the network collected statistics according to different criteria. Not all of these problems could be solved and more research along these lines is needed.

For political reasons in the first decades after Italian unification, the role of the railways in the formation of the Italian state was considered to be very important. One minister of public works remarked in the 1860s that he was given the task of being the architect of Italian unity.⁶ More than half of the state's spending on infrastructure in the 1860s and 1870s was on railways, and for the whole period between 1861 and 1913 the railways absorbed around 13 per cent of the total budget and around 75 per cent of the amount spent on public works.⁷ Given these expenses, it is not surprising, therefore, that Italian politics devoted a substantial amount of time and effort to matters related to railways.

Around this false belief in the great importance of railways for the Italian state, a whole imagery and architecture was created, stressing elements like the speed, progress and 'Italianness' of the new transport system. It was not until after nationalization in 1905, however, that a truly Italian style came into being, and this was even more marked after the rise of fascism. Even a superficial glance at the architecture of the earlier nineteenth-century Italian stations reveals that they had been built by foreign railway companies and according to foreign tastes. These stations continued to dominate Italian railway architecture well into the twentieth century. The new station in Milan, for example, was only opened in 1931.

In the nineteenth century, it was generally thought that the railways were of the utmost importance for the economic and political development of a state. Consequently, all the effects of this technology tended to be regarded as immensely positive.⁸ Moreover, after political unification in Italy it was believed that the railways would economically

⁵ Angus Maddison, 'Una revisione della crescita economica italiana', *MC* 174 (1991), pp. 143–71; Giorgio Fuà and Mauro Gallegati, 'An Annual Chain Index of Italy's Real Product, 1861–1989' (working paper, Ancona, 1994).

⁶ Stefano Jacini, quoted in Epicarmo Corbino, *Annali dell'economia italiana, 1861–1870* (Città di Castello, 1931), p. 175.

⁷ Vera Zamagni, *Lo stato italiano e l'economia* (Florence, 1981), pp. 9–10.

⁸ Even in some contemporary writings the shadow of this unconditional optimism has lingered on; see P. M. Kalla Bishop, *Italian Railroads* (New York, 1972); M. Sereno Storia *del paesaggio agrario italiano* (Rome, 1982), p. 367.

4 RAILWAYS AND THE FORMATION OF THE ITALIAN STATE



Figure 1 Milan central railway station in the 1880s

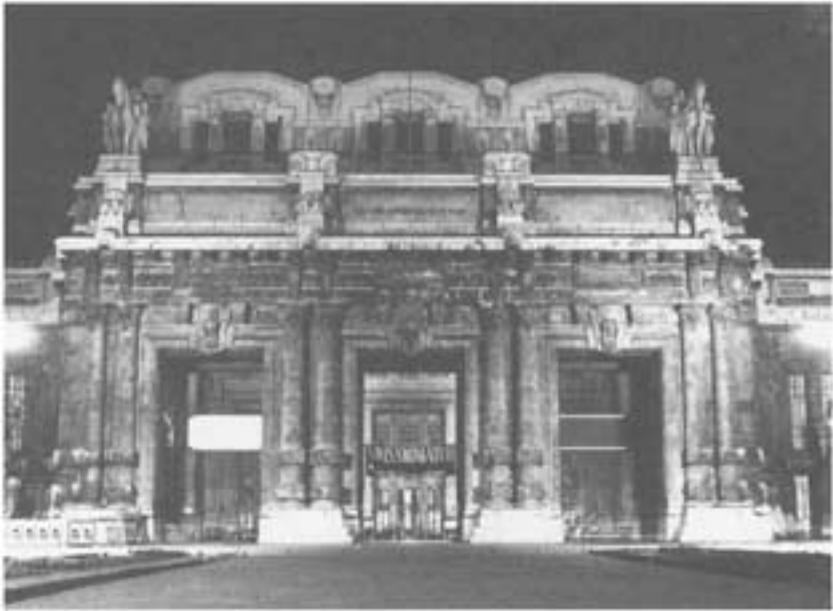


Figure 2 Milan central railway station, 1931

unify and politically solidify the newly formed state and rapidly bring it to a level of development comparable to the northern European states. In economic terms this meant that the railways were expected to cause a general rise in income and that two types of integrational effects were hoped for: first, internal integration between the richer north and the poorer south of Italy, and second, the assimilation of Italy among Europe's major economic powers.

In reality, the economic impact of the railways was much more limited than contemporaries expected. First, this was because Italian governments did not follow a coherent railway policy, which led to insecurity for investors in Italian railways. Various mixed systems, the result of the compromises between proponents of the state versus those of a private railway system, were tried out with a limited degree of success. The responsibilities between the state and the railway companies were not clearly divided and consequently maintenance and new investments were sub-optimal. The overall performance and the quality of service of the Italian railways remained unsatisfactory. Second, because of the generally underdeveloped character of the economy, there was not enough demand for railway transport in the poorer regions. Particularly in the south, where most population centres had a harbour and access to cheap coastal transportation, traffic density on the railways was low. Eventually, in the twentieth century and particularly after the Second World War the income gap between rich and poor regions and between Italy and Europe would narrow, but certainly not exclusively because of the railways and certainly not as quickly as was hoped.

The history of railways from the viewpoint of business history remains largely an unexplored field. The virtual absence of company archives has probably been a major hindrance. Nevertheless, with the information available from official sources and periodicals, an attempt should be made to reconstruct the histories of the various Italian railway companies. Important themes would be, for instance, the functioning of railway management in Italy, its strategies and its responses to state policies.

Apart from the history of technology and various forms of railway history, the historiographical tradition concerning nineteenth-century Italy has had to be taken into account. At the Italian state universities nineteenth-century history was included in what was called *Risorgimento* history, or the history of the re-emergence of the Italian nation after the Renaissance, *il Rinascimento*. The formation of the Italian state was seen as the culmination of a long series of heroic struggles to liberate Italy from its foreign oppressors.

In fact, political unification of the Italian state in the nineteenth century was achieved in three phases, and was a relatively rapid and mainly a military and diplomatic affair. In 1860, almost the whole of Italy was unified under the king of Piedmont, with the exception of the regions of Venetia and Latium. The former territory was incorporated after the Third War of Independence (1866) between Italy and Austria, and the latter in 1870 when Rome became the capital. France's support during the Second War of Independence (1859) came at a price; Piedmont had to hand over to France the territories of Savoy and Nice, Giuseppe Garibaldi's native city. The various wars of independence and the subsequent border changes and disappearance of pre-unification states gave rise to a variety of legal and financial problems for the railway companies which saw border stations moving and their networks falling under different sovereigns.⁹

Time and again, historians have glorified the achievements of the founders of the Italian state and other 'great men' of the Italian nation. Some of these authors have maintained that 'the idea' of the Italian nation could be found in many writings long before the formation of the Italian state and a kind of competition between historians has taken place to push the beginning of this re-emergence of the Italian nation, or Risorgimento, further and further backwards.¹⁰ For this purpose various texts were selected, canonized as fundamental Risorgimento literature, and subsequently declared compulsory reading for schoolchildren. In Italy, this Risorgimento history was heavily influenced by the idealistic philosophy of the famous historian-philosopher Benedetto Croce. For a long period of time Croce was a minister of education under the fascist dictatorship and, consequently, had the power to select textbooks and to nominate his followers to key positions.¹¹ One of the few British historians who were receptive to Croce's writings wrote in a review: 'I should find it easier to write of Croce's book if I had the least idea what it was all about', and 'much of it is the wallowing of the balloon among the clouds'.¹² In fact, Croce's aim was essentially to create a national political myth, not to write history.

Risorgimento history has more recently been put into a proper

⁹ A useful computer program for seeing the process of Italian political unification through a series of 'dynamic' maps is *Centennial*, by Clockwork Software Inc., P.O. Box 148036, Chicago.

¹⁰ For a brief introduction to Risorgimento historiography, see Umberto Marcelli, *Interpretazioni del Risorgimento* (Bologna, 1970). For a more extensive discussion, see Walter Venturi, *Interpretazioni del Risorgimento* (Turin, 1962).

¹¹ In English, see Benedetto Croce, *A History of Italy* (Oxford, 1929).

¹² Derek Beales, *The Risorgimento and the Unification of Italy* (London, 1971), p. 15.

perspective, first by several British historians who have unveiled some of its severest falsifications. Denis Mack Smith, for example, has contributed to the demystification of the actions of Risorgimento heroes such as King Victor Emmanuel, Camillo Cavour and Giuseppe Mazzini in various books.¹³ James Stuart Woolf's textbook, which combines traditional Risorgimento history with other, more critical views, still figures prominently on reading lists for the period, particularly in Italy.¹⁴ More recently, Marxist historians, such as Antonio Gramsci, Giorgio Candeloro and Emilio Sereni have attacked the canons of Risorgimento history by offering an opposing, although sometimes similarly idealistic view of the Italian past.¹⁵ Sereni, for example, argued that the railways had fulfilled the expectations of the Italian bourgeoisie of creating a unified market, although the costs of attaining this had been immense and had been borne chiefly by the masses. Regrettably, Sereni does not bother to find convincing empirical evidence for this thesis.

Last, economic historians have helped to shift the emphasis in nineteenth-century Italian history from the ideal to the real. In this book the great quantity of excellent research undertaken by Italian economic historians was gratefully used. The advantage of working with measurable data allows the economic historian, more strongly so than others, to compare Italy with other countries, and also to take a long-term view of developments when the time-series are homogeneous. This does not mean, however, that economic historians have been spared the ideological debate inspired by economic liberalism on the one hand and nationalism on the other. Despite the occurrence of similar arguments among economic historians, the use of statistics gives at least a solid framework in which arguments for and against can be clearly stated. The role of the state too can be assessed more precisely, since what it intended to achieve can be compared to the actual performance of the railways. A detailed analysis of the system of subsidies for railway companies, for example, can be gauged against their performance.

The debate on the economic history of Italy has a long and respected tradition, and has always been open to foreign participants. An early work by a North American historian, Kent Greenfield, is still

¹³ Dennis Mack Smith, *Victor Emmanuel, Cavour and the Risorgimento* (Oxford, 1971).

¹⁴ James Stuart Woolf, *A History of Italy, 1700-1860. The Social Constraints of Political Change* (London, 1979).

¹⁵ Antonio Gramsci, *Il Risorgimento* (Rome, 1975); Giorgio Candeloro, *Storia dell'Italia moderna* (11 vols., Milan, 1955-86); Emilio Sereni, *Capitalismo e mercato nazionale in Italia* (Rome, 1966).

widely read, chiefly in its Italian translation.¹⁶ In a series of studies which appeared in the 1950s and 1960s in the *Archivio Economico dell'Unificazione Italiana*, Italian and foreign historians published many fundamental studies and produced a substantial amount of useful data. Gino Luzzatto's 1963 book is still a hallmark in Italian economic history up to 1914, and is particularly strong on trade, banking and industrialization.¹⁷

Despite the formation of the Italian state between 1860 and 1870, the Italian economy continued to be characterized by great regional differences.¹⁸ The explanation and measurement of these differences has been a fundamental theme in Italian history. The ambitious railway construction programmes of the 1860s and 1880s which led, as will be shown, to an even spread of the railway network over the whole of the territory, did little to diminish the great regional inequalities. In the 1960s, Rosario Romeo's study of the north-south problem helped to revive interest in Italian economic history worldwide. In this study an interesting interpretation of the role of railways is given for the first decades after unification, but regrettably it has too weak an empirical basis to be taken seriously today.¹⁹ In the 1960s, several North American and Italian authors made important contributions to the understanding of the Italian north-south problem, often by making international comparisons.²⁰ Unfortunately, during the 1970s and 1980s research of the regional economies was not sufficiently developed, probably because of the difficulties in creating an appropriate statistical framework.²¹

The distinct political history and cultural identity of the Italian

¹⁶ Kent Robert Greenfield, *Economics and Liberalism in the Risorgimento. A Study of Nationalism in Lombardy, 1815-1848* (Baltimore, 1934).

¹⁷ Gino Luzzatto, *L'economia italiana dal 1861 al 1914* (Milan, 1963).

¹⁸ Patrick McCarthy, *The Crisis of the Italian State: From the Origins of the Cold War to the Fall of Berlusconi* (London, 1995).

¹⁹ Rosario Romeo, *Risorgimento e capitalismo* (Bari, 1963). For a critique, see Vera Zamagni, *Dalla periferia al centro. La seconda rinascita economica dell'Italia, 1861-1981* (Bologna, 1990), p. 82.

²⁰ Jeffrey Williamson, 'Regional Inequality and the Process of National Development. A Description of Patterns', *EDCC* 13 (1965), pp. 4-85; Shepard B. Clough and Carlo Livi, 'Economic Growth in Italy. An Analysis of the Uneven Development in North and South', *JEH* 19 (1959), pp. 334-49; Richard Eckhaus, 'The North-South Differential in Italian Economic Development', *JEH* 21 (1961), pp. 285-317; and more recently, Alfred G. Esposito, 'Italian Industrialization and the Gerschenkronian "Great Spurt". A Regional Analysis', *JEH* 52 (1992), pp. 353-400.

²¹ With the exception of Zamagni's study which deals mainly with the 1911 industrial census, see Vera Zamagni, *Industrializzazione e squilibri regionali in Italia. Bilancio dell'età giolittiana* (Bologna, 1978).

regions must be taken into account when examining the differences in the economic and social conditions between north and south found in 1860. It must be remembered that in 1860 Italian national identity still had to be 'invented' from quite a small common base. To begin with, the linguistic differences between regions impeded effective communication between northern and southern Italians. Even within regions, such as Apulia, for example, the difference in dialects with Greek or Arab influences created communication problems. And among the northern Italian elite, for instance, it was quite common for Italian to be a second language after French.²² For Vittorio Alfieri, the famous poet, and for many others too, French was the first language and Alfieri learned Italian later in life.²³ When Italian unity came, the use of the Italian language, even as a lingua franca, had not spread sufficiently.

Apart from the north-south problem, the railways have formed another continuous point of debate among historians of Italy. Fascism, for its own military and propagandistic purposes, glorified the railways as symbols of the progress of the nation. Risorgimento historians took over this perspective and interpreted the building of the railway network in the nineteenth century as one among many heroic struggles to reach national unity and economic prosperity.

In the 1960s, this rosy view of railways and Italian economic success was put into a different perspective by a North American economic historian. Alexander Gerschenkron studied Italy as an example of a backward country which industrialized late, but rapidly, between 1896 and 1908. In his view, the Italian railways had not been able to create a unified national market and their performance continued to be poor. Moreover, the benefits of railway construction for Italian industry were to a great extent lost, since they occurred at a time when industrialization had barely begun. The first wave of investment in the 1860s mainly utilized imported products and the investment after nationalization in 1905 came too late to contribute to Italian industrialization. Thus Gerschenkron was the first prominent historian to cast doubt on the contribution of railways to economic growth and their capacity to integrate the national market. It must be noted, however, that he had no profound interest in regional aspects of growth.²⁴

²² Beales, *The Risorgimento*, p. 24.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²⁴ Alexander Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966). For a description of the reception of Gerschenkron in Italy, see Gianni Toniolo, 'Alexander Gerschenkron e l'Italia. Alcune osservazioni nel decimo anniversario della morte', *RSE* 5 (1988), pp. 397-404; Giovanni Federico and Gianni Toniolo, 'Italy', in Richard Sylla and Gianni Toniolo (eds.), *Patterns of European Industrialization. The Nineteenth Century* (London, 1991), pp. 197-217.

More recent research has largely confirmed Gerschenkron's main points. Carlo Bardini, Albert Carreras, Giovanni Federico, Stefano Fenoaltea and Gianni Toniolo, among others, have contributed to the refinement of Gerschenkron's index of industrial production and created a more complete quantitative framework of Italian economic growth and industrial production.²⁵ The meagre contribution of railway investment to the development of Italian industry has been studied extensively by Michèle Merger.²⁶ Vera Zamagni, moreover, has questioned the ability of railways to integrate the Italian market and has supported this thesis with data on internal trade.²⁷

Since Gerschenkron's contributions, economic historians have concentrated on explaining the obstacles to and the problems of economic development and industrialization, rather than glorifying Italian achievements in the economic field. This has formed a healthy antidote to the sometimes bombastic Risorgimento history. In 1990, Vera Zamagni published the first comprehensive overview of Italian economic history since Gino Luzzatto's 1963 book, including the results of much recent research, a substantial amount of which she had undertaken herself.²⁸ This book takes a long-term perspective from the middle of the nineteenth century until the 1980s, and narrates how Italy, starting as a backward country, has today become one of the richest and largest industrial economies. This long-term view of Italian economic history allows for a more insightful interpretation than could be offered by those authors who do not fully realize the long-term implications of the historical processes which they describe. Given this significant long-term economic and social progress, it is no exaggeration to state, with Vera Zamagni, that the foundation for the

²⁵ For Giovanni Federico, Stefano Fenoaltea and Vera Zamagni's national account estimates for 1911, see Guido M. Rey (ed.), *I conti economici dell'Italia. Una stima del valore aggiunto per il 1911* (Milan, 1992); Gianni Toniolo, *An Economic History of Liberal Italy* (London, 1990); Carlo Bardini and Albert Carreras, 'The National Accounts for Italy, Spain, and Portugal, 1800-1990', conference paper, Groningen, 4-8 July 1994.

²⁶ Michèle Merger, 'L'industrie italienne de locomotives. Reflet d'une industrialisation tardive et difficile, 1850-1914', *HES* 8 (1989), pp. 336-70; Michèle Merger, 'Les chemins de fer italiens: leur construction et leurs effets avant, 1860-1915', *HES* 11 (1992), pp. 109-30; Michèle Merger, 'Chemins de fer et croissance économique en Italie au XIXème siècle et au début du XXème siècle. Etat de la question', *HES* 3 (1984), pp. 123-44.

²⁷ Vera Zamagni, 'Ferrovie e integrazione del mercato nazionale nell'Italia post-unitaria', in *Studi in onore di Gino Barbieri* (Salerno, 1983), pp. 1635-49.

²⁸ See Zamagni, *Dalla periferia al centro*, which has also appeared in an English translation: Vera Zamagni, *An Economic History of Italy, 1860-1990* (Oxford, 1993).

'second economic rebirth' of Italy in the twentieth century was laid in the nineteenth.

Thus, in the 1960s, the monolithic Risorgimento perspective was finally broken and a more pluriform and comparative historiography of Italy's nineteenth century came into being. In particular, British, Marxist and economic historians proposed useful alternative interpretations to those offered by Risorgimento historians. Nevertheless, the confusion left behind after the period of large-scale falsification of history during fascism has left a deep imprint on Italian nineteenth-century historiography.

Given this change towards a more comparative perspective on Italian history and the increased use of quantitative methodology by historians, the role of railways in the political unification of Italy and the creation of a unified market deserves a serious re-examination.