

Classifying Italy

The neighbor's house sported a *prato inglese* that required ostentatious watering at the crack of dawn, and by the reassuring suppleness of the English lawn beneath our feet we all knew that our host was a gentleman, not some television mogul from Cinecittà out of Rome whom, of a morning, one would be embarrassed to see on the beach in an argument with a Ukrainian girl in tears over a broken promise. No, this was Sabaudia, where Count Volpi di Misurata let me have his summer house for a couple of weeks, and there I was, a foreign body, a foreign nobody really, at the house of the neighbor I had not met, at a party where the lawn was pure William Wordsworth and the drinks plentiful, though not so plentiful, of course, as to cast a vulgar shadow of American-style bonhomie on the host's reputation as a gentleman.

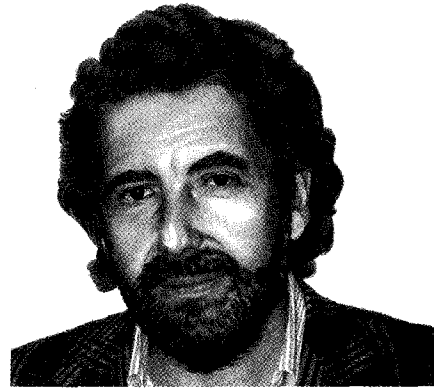
A girl I chatted up seemed susceptible enough, and nearly ten years on I remember my peroration. I had asked her if she'd ever tasted cucumbers with honey. Then it started. "What is it with you Italians," I said. "Why are you always so proper when it comes to social expression? Why is your friendly banter a Russian's idea of what goes on in a mortuary? Why is it that if I come up to an English girl and say, 'Do you come here often?' she will think I'm a moron, but when I come up to you and say, 'Do you like cucumbers with honey?' you think I'm a lunatic? You want me to ask if you come here often, don't you? You crave the reassurance of a cliché, you long for the sweet dulcimer of bourgeois propriety. Have you no intellectual shame? Just look at this parody of a lawn! You insist on gentility you can actually poke at with your toe." Unaccountably, she laughed.

It was only later that I understood why. She was the wife of one of the princes Torlonia, scions of the Roman banking family whose money is still extant and whose papal title is drier than most on the membership roster of the

Circolo della Caccia. Though middle-class by birth, she could afford to laugh at Italian society, middle-class to the marrow of its funny bone. A subsequent turn of fate was still more illuminating. Years later she left her husband and ran off with a penniless photographer friend of mine, a Russian roué who immediately made her pregnant. She has had the child and now lives in a small flat in the center of Rome, discussing life's eventualities with her decorously scandalized parents in Parioli and a Greek chorus of equally respectable girlfriends. She no longer laughs at my tirades. Italian society, for her, is no longer a joke.

There is really only one class in Italy, the middle. From the men in orange repairing a drain just beyond my window in Borgo Vecchio to the cream of local society on the opening night at the Teatro Massimo, everyone is, and is happy being, a bourgeois. "Well, that's Sicily," a scoffer may intervene. Yet I have spent the better part of 20 years in Italy, with residences in Rome, in Florence, in Venice; I have done the writer's tours of duty in Naples, in Sardinia, and in the Dolomites; I have made the idler's forays to the Argentario peninsula, the fancy emerald isles of the Bay, the *aperitivo* terraces of social skiing and climbing; and I can tell you from observation and experience that the scoffer is in all likelihood an Englishman who is thinking of buying a hillside villa in Tuscany.

The Palermo laborer has a green salad with his midday meal. In Venice the longshoreman, eating his lunch in the "Da Marissa" working men's canteen in Tre Archi, will order a plate of fruit before he takes his coffee. In Rome a motorcycle repairman may think his repast incomplete if it has not been followed with a little cheese. Imagine the reaction of the man's social counterparts in Berlin, Chicago, or Manchester, to say nothing of Warsaw or Kiev. Forever thence the full force of peer opprobrium, and phrases like *frigging salad*, *what*



kind of man, and *goddamn faggot* would be his lot wherever he went. His wife would probably leave him: "My mom knew straight off he was kind of weird." The barmaid would titter every time he ordered a beer: "You sure you wouldn't rather a pink lemonade?"

At the upper end of the social spectrum, it is the poverty of the national language that suborns the Italian mind-set, conditioning the aspirant grandee much as the sophistication of the cuisine conditions the most abject of proletarians. Like food, language is a school of life, a straightjacket to spontaneity, a denominator of class and a regulator of conduct. If there is now in Italy a repository of sensibility or attitude not inherently middle class, it is to the vanishing vocabularies of regional dialects one must look to find it.

Standard Italian has reduced communication to an exchange of cartoon bubbles, life to a series of ritualistic actions, thought to a tireless search for the kind of ideas an American newspaper editor would term appropriate. The aristocracy of Europe, historically, valued its independence of mind as it valued its right to bear arms; the lower classes, likewise, were jealous in their defense of what lares and penates had been handed them by their ancestors; only the bourgeoisie, as a newly emergent stratum, was keen to trade individual liberty for the common mean and to exchange tradition for the freedom of trade.

Tomasi di Lampedusa's view of revolution as a dream of the idle has been writ large on modern Italy ever since. That her middle class is the only one in Europe with a distinctively human face is another, longer and happier, story. ☺

Caucasian Trap

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's order to attack South Ossetia's capital, Tskhinvali, was a breathtakingly audacious challenge to Russia, to which she was bound to respond forcefully. That response was promptly exploited by the American mainstream media machine and the foreign-policy community in Washington to paint Russia as a rogue power that is not only dangerous but intrinsically malignant. The vehemence of that rhetoric exceeds anything ever said or written about *jihad*, before or after September 11.

However, Russia's response was too prompt and too devastating to suggest an improvisation under the pressure of unexpected circumstances. Moscow seems to have acted in line with a plan to maneuver Washington into a position of geopolitical weakness unseen since the final days of the Carter presidency almost three decades ago.

The intent behind Georgia's attack was apparent in the name its general staff gave to the operation—"Clean Field"—and in the "shock-and-awe" assault on Tskhinvali.

Saakashvili was led to believe that he was tacitly authorized to act as he did. President George W. Bush has treated Georgia as a strategic partner ever since the Western-engineered "Rose Revolution" that brought Saakashvili to power five years ago, and last spring he strongly advocated NATO membership for Georgia. The United States and her allies (notably Israel and the Czech Republic) have armed Georgia for years, and over a hundred U.S. military advisors were actively involved at all levels of training and equipping the Georgian army. The Bush administration has repeatedly supported Georgia's "sovereignty and territorial integrity," which implies the right to use force to bring South Ossetia and Abkhazia to heel. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's high-profile visit to Saakashvili in Tbilisi on July 9-10 calls to mind April Glas-

pie's famous encounter with Saddam Hussein shortly before his invasion of Kuwait. Five days later, U.S. forces held a joint military exercise with the Georgian army, with more than 1,000 American troops participating.

Saakashvili may be forgiven for imagining that the United States would bail him out if things went badly. It is noteworthy that he was not disabused of such notions, Miss Rice's feeble claims to the contrary notwithstanding. The calculus in Washington appears to have been based on a win-win scenario.

Had Georgian troops occupied South Ossetia in a blitzkrieg operation modeled after Croatia's "Operation Storm" while the Russians remained hesitant or ineffective, Moscow would have suffered a major strategic and (more importantly) psychological defeat after almost four years of sustained strategic recovery following the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine in 2004. If Russia intervened, however, she would be duly demonized, and the United States would continue to block her entry into the WTO, seek to suspend her G-8 membership, accelerate the deployment of missile-defense systems in Eastern Europe, and push for NATO expansion with new vigor. "Old" Europeans—the Germans especially—would be pressed to abandon their détente with Moscow. A resentful Georgia would become chronically anti-Russian, regardless of Saakashvili's future, thus ensuring a long-term American presence in the region.

At the time of this writing, a month after the crisis, the score appears to favor Moscow.

The Georgian army performed so poorly that a military *fait accompli* on day one was out of reach. It failed to secure the southern approaches to the Roki tunnel under the Caucasus mountains, the only land route from Russia into South Ossetia capable of handling significant military traffic. Excesses



against Ossetian civilians made the "innocent victim of aggression" narrative hard to sell.

The response came swiftly, including Moscow's formal recognition of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia on August 26, indicating that the tandem Medvedev-Putin acts smoothly in setting political objectives and achieving them militarily. Moscow stopped short of effecting a "regime change" in Tbilisi while demonstrating its ability to do so, thus creating room for third-party diplomatic initiatives. The Europeans promptly bypassed Washington, brokering a truce that was pleasing to Moscow. NATO's expansion along the Black Sea is stalled, with no major Old European power willing to risk any further complications with Russia.

Kosovo did establish a precedent, after all, one that Moscow is exploiting to its advantage while making Washington sound hypocritical when invoking international law and respect for the territorial integrity of states.

The outcome of the crisis in Georgia is a blessing in disguise for those of us who believe that America should not be "engaged" in each and every hot spot around the world. It offers further evidence that the American interest demands a sane relationship with Moscow that acknowledges that Russia has legitimate interests in her own backyard. Once those interests are recognized in Washington, the world will be a safer place. That neither likely new occupant of the White House accepts that simple fact bodes ill for global stability, in general, and for the "War on Terror," in particular, for many years to come.