

every other place, Italian workers are eagerly sought after because for the same salary they are much more productive than the ever-complaining drunkard Irish or lazy blacks.” The newspaper reported the reconstruction of the events that “nailed” the responsibility of the murder on a group of about one hundred “indigenous” workers, armed with rifles, who had mercilessly terrorized and threatened harmless Italian workers and killed Buzzotta.” *La Tribuna* lamented and denounced the lack of protection for Italian immigrants by the Italian government, mentioning as proof that the even the Erwin’s lynchers had not been found. “The Italian colony is rightfully indignant and is still waiting for effective action by the Italian government. If nothing happens everyone will be persuaded that it is useless to spend money for ambassadors and embassies since all they are good at is acting like the diplomats of... the Grande Duchess of Gerolstein.”<sup>85</sup> Just as stern was another comment published by the newspaper: “Once again this proves that in too many states of the Union there is a chronic and widespread habit of treating Italians worse than the ancient Helots, with no spirit of humanity and justice. How long will our flesh and our names be subjected to the offenses and scorn of such scum — protected and made even more cocky by total impunity?”<sup>86</sup>

## 10. DAVIS, WEST VIRGINIA, 1903

This episode wasn’t a true lynching. Rather, as Ambassador Mayor described, was an attack against Italians with “some characteristics of a lynching.” The event took place in the context of a labor conflict and competition for jobs among ethnic groups. The ambassador reported that on May 29, 1903, in Davis, West Virginia, during the night “a box full of dynamite exploded under a house where 37 of our fellow Italians were sleeping.” The results were tragic: one person died immediately for the effects of the explosion and

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<sup>85</sup> The reference is to the *opera buffa* by J. Offenbach *La Grande Duchesse de Gerolstein* (1867).

<sup>86</sup> “Gli Italiani in America.” *La Tribuna* August 24, 1901.

a second died a few days later from his injuries. From the fragments of news that could be gathered, it seemed that the bombing was caused by competition for jobs and was aiming at terrorizing the Italian workers and force them to abandon the place. The Italian consul in Philadelphia moved quickly to contact the police superintendent in Davis, demanding the most vigorous protective measures for the local Italian population.<sup>87</sup> The investigation conducted by Speranza that we previously introduced, had revealed the existence of maltreatment of Italian workers in West Virginia.<sup>88</sup> The report described a terrifying picture of their living conditions, ranging from intimidation to “brutal terrorism.” These included recruitment practices by Italian bosses with no scruples; the abuses by store owners who had the monopoly on the sale of every possible item in the encampments; and the impossibility to leave the camp. “Those labor camps — Speranza wrote in his investigation-denunciation— look like deserts, livable only by feral animals [...] The isolation makes the men anxious to run away. It is proven that armed guards are employed to intimidate workers and to prevent them from leaving the camp. As far as labor organizations are concerned, in West Virginia union members are more or less the same number as non-union workers: this creates a climate of conflicts and reprisals.” Italian workers at Camp Davis at that time belonged to the non-union faction and were considered “scabs.”

The murder, or lynching, was made possible by the neglect of public authorities “despite the fact that it had been predicted for a long time.” This element enabled the victims’ families to request an indemnification from the American government.

Giovanni Angelone submitted immediately a request to the Italian Embassy to process his claim with the American government for \$25,000 as reparation for the death of his brother Vincenzo, due to the lack of protection by local authorities.

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<sup>87</sup> ASDMAE, idem. From the Italian Embassy in Washington to MAE. June 7, 1903.

<sup>88</sup> The report drafted by Speranza, in date May 15, 1903, is in *Bollettino Emigrazione*, 1903, 14.

Without much enthusiasm, the usual official steps were taken by the Italian consul in Philadelphia with the governor of the state; and by the Embassy with the secretary of state “to obtain, we hope, the punishment of the culprits.” The Embassy was rather pessimistic both about the chance of a trial and the chance to obtain an indemnification: “About the request for indemnification, it would be naïve to expect it would come from the offenders since they will never be known, or, if they are discovered, they probably are workers and agents of the Labor Unions: people with no money.” Even if the request for an indemnification could be pursued, in that moment it wasn’t politically viable to “monetize” the “blood price,” as demonstrated by the accusations against Minister Prinetti by Senator Fava for the Erwin lynching: “Moreover, in the present case that has some characteristics of a lynching and where there is a victim, I don’t know if the intervention of the Royal Embassy would receive approval, after the very recent declarations of Minister Prinetti who rejected, in front of the whole Senate, the shame of having exacted blood price.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> ASDMAE, *idem*. From the Italian Embassy in Washington to MAE. June 29, 1903.