

A. Giuntini, *Il canale di Suez e l'Italia (1856-1869)*, Pacini, Pisa 2021, pp. 174.

The Italian contribution to the large infrastructure companies that in the nineteenth century characterized the expansion of the most technically and economically strong nations does not always appear evident, due to the general idea that Italy's kingdom was not, in the early stages following the Unification, very capable of international participation.

Using documents that do not interrupt the narrative flow, Andrea Giuntini reconstructs the experience of the design and construction of the Suez Canal. This is a theme that had not yet been addressed in a complete and unified way by national historical research.

The involvement of Italy, even before the unification, was not limited to the French project of Ferdinand de Lesseps with the design of Luigi Negrelli, an engineer of Italian origin, but of Habsburg belonging, which a certain rhetorical historiography has often tried to Italianize (see the new book by Andrea Leonardi), and expert railway builder. In a broad sense, the opening of a new trade route in the Mediterranean, which was also a political and cultural one, was important for the new Kingdom, also for colonial expansion in Africa.

At the beginning of the book Giuntini carefully reconstructs the Italian presence in Egypt, a territory that had always exerted a kind of magnetic fascination for Europeans. At the inauguration of the Canal (1869) – which represented the crowning achievement of “modernity” in the nineteenth century – at least 12,000 Italians lived in Egypt, in a varied world of adventurers and serious professionals, all in search of fortune.

Even if the idea of a canal connecting the Mediterranean to the Red Sea dates to Napoleon, it is from the 1840s, in France, that projects are drafted. The vision was, however, European, so to speak, with Great Britain, Holland, Spain discussing it. The Kingdom of Savoy also plays a role, with a talented engineer, Pietro Paleocapa, whose biography is also outlined in the book. Cavour himself, after the Crimean War, pays attention to the project.

And even before the Unification, all the Italian states are interested in Suez, in a general debate that evaluates its implementation in a positive way, with a view to a unitary kingdom able to play its part in the new context of a changing world economy.

And it is in the years leading to the Unification, in the late fifties, that the project comes alive, with the incentive of the port regions, Liguria, Tuscany, but also of the Papal States, and Trieste.

An aspect that Giuntini deals with decisively is the connection of the Canal with the new and always developing technologies related to infrastructures. Suez was created for steamships, for a more mature navigation system and for regular and safe routes. There is also the urgency of providing the newborn Italian State with a network of railways and roads, not disconnected from the port system. The telegraph and a capillary postal network, which takes advantage of trains and ships, fills the gap in the Canal navigation. The author analyses these infrastructural interlinkages in an original way, with a coordinated and modern approach. In the construction phases and since its opening, the Canal becomes increasingly “popular” with the port of Genoa, as a bridgehead for Italian navigation on new routes.

The inauguration, which Giuntini defines “European”, is the triumph of the “positive” technique able to bend nature to the needs of man, in

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an increasingly marked “globalization”, which is flanked by a sense of wonder, increasingly highlighted by the great international exhibitions around the world, which also define new frontiers of tourism.

In 1869, concludes Giuntini, Italy is not able yet to take full advantage from the Canal, due to both technical and socio-political backwardness.

This book provides an overview. It is rich of ideas and will prove useful for future research, including research on the “mythology” of the Canal, which the author refers to in the final pages of the book.

The book unfortunately lacks an iconography, which would have contributed to its enjoyment and to the reconstruction of the paths linking Italy and Egypt.

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