



**Charles Killinger.** *Gaetano Salvemini: A Biography.* Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002. xx + 348 pp. \$67.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-96873-1.



**Reviewed by** Alexander D. Grand (Department of History, North Carolina State University)

**Published on** H-Italy (March, 2003)

When confronted by the eternal question why Italy could not produce a modern, middle-class democratic political party that was neither Marxist nor Catholic, one might be tempted to answer, Gaetano Salvemini. Salvemini was the square peg in any party's round hole. A major historian, driven by an austere moralism, Salvemini constantly sought to turn his ideas into practical policy, yet he was a mediocre—no, terrible—politician. In fact, fellow exile Max Ascoli accurately described him “as the greatest enemy of politics of all the men I have known” (p. 274). Few individuals in Italian public life have broken with as many parties and allies, ranging from the Italian Socialist Party to *Giustizia e Libertà* and the Mazzini Society. In short, Gaetano Salvemini was a difficult man who attracted deep attachments and bitter enmity. As a result, he is no easy subject for a biographer; nonetheless, Charles Killinger has managed to write a sympathetic, yet balanced and fair assessment of Salvemini's life and work. Based on the massive collection of Salvemini's writings and correspondence as well as extensive archival research, Killinger's biography should become the standard work on the subject. It is the first full treatment of Salvemini's early career and his years in exile in America.

Salvemini's career began in the 1890s and ended with his death in 1955. His earliest works were on medieval

Italian social history, but his publications covered the entire range of Italian history and made major contributions to our understanding of Italian fascism and its foreign policy. His political career closely paralleled his scholarly activities. The son of a southern lower-middle-class family on the slippery slope of downward mobility, Salvemini was drawn to the economic and social problems of his region. His basic inclinations were reinforced by his studies at the University of Florence with the noted *meridionalista* Pasquale Villari. Salvemini's preoccupation with the problem of southern under-development, along with the failure of the Italian liberal state to remedy the situation, was both a strength and a weakness. Killinger makes it clear that contact with the realities of southern poverty drew Salvemini toward practical programs and concrete reforms. He advocated land redistribution, tax reform, and, above all, universal suffrage which he felt would break down the network of clientelles that formed Giovanni Giolitti's parliamentary majority. When Salvemini could not win the enthusiastic support of the Socialist party for his program, he broke with the party, accusing it of compromise, which represented the cardinal sin in the Salveminian universe. Killinger is perhaps too indulgent with Salvemini's inability to reconcile his practical program with any sense of political reality. Filippo Turati better understood that universal suffrage would not benefit the cause of socialism in the

South and opted for a more gradualist approach. In fact, Turati's political perspective, based though it was on the northern working class, was infinitely superior to that of Salvemini.

Salvemini's two greatest errors came through his unrelenting opposition to Giolitti whom he totally misunderstood (until much later in his life when repentance did little good) and through the campaign for Italian intervention in World War I. In both cases Salvemini opted for a theoretical conception of politics that had little connection to the reality of Italy. It did not help matters that when Salvemini ran for parliament, local thugs associated with Giolitti tried to kill him. It must be said, nevertheless, that, for all his faults, Giolitti understood Italy better than Salvemini, knowing how long it would take to modernize Italian society; thus, he was not into quick fixes. In contrast, Salvemini was seduced by the Italian entry into World War I as a way to break the hold of the old liberal class over political life and to democratize politics. Unfortunately, by allying with the far-right Nationalists including the revolutionary extremist Benito Mussolini, Salvemini undermined his own democratic and Wilsonian position. In the polarized climate of post-World War I Italy, Salvemini's combination of reformist domestic policy and conciliation toward Yugoslavia had little chance of winning the day. Of course, his rigid moralism kept him from supporting either Nitti or Giolitti, who were closest to his democratic positions and the most viable opponents of Mussolini. Later, after 1922, when Salvemini protested against the violence that the Fascists used against the democratic opposition, he conveniently forgot his glee when nationalist mobs physically attacked Giolitti and his friends in April and May 1915. The interventionist violence, not Fascist squadrist, was the first attack on parliamentary government and Salvemini loved it.

When everyday politics took a backseat, after the Fascist seizure of power in October 1922, Salvemini's moralism went from being a burden to become a pole star of the anti-fascist opposition. In exile after 1924, he fought a lonely battle against Mussolini's regime with the only

weapons he could muster. He employed his own experience, the documents that he had on hand, and, eventually, the resources of Harvard University to mount a powerful indictment against the Fascist regime. Far sooner than most of his contemporaries, and better than many current historians of Italy, Salvemini saw through the fraud that Mussolini perpetrated on the world. As Killinger shows, Salvemini's analysis of Fascist foreign and domestic policies went beyond political polemics to catch the sham that passed itself off as fascism. But Killinger does not hide Salvemini's inability to translate his principled opposition to the regime into a coherent political position during the years of exile and in the post-war. To the end of his life, Salvemini preferred to attract a loyal band of disciples rather than to build a viable political movement. After the fall of fascism his anticommunism and his hostility to clericalism left few alternatives. The third force in Italian political life never materialized and, even if it had, Salvemini would probably have found it too accommodating. As an aside, Killinger asserts that Salvemini's empiricism, his faith in science, and his rigid moralism made him more compatible with the Anglo-Saxon outlook than with the Machiavellianism of his own country. I think that Killinger is on to something. Salvemini was one of the leading Italian Wilsonians in 1918. He partook of some of the hypocrisy and moral blindness of American presidents like Wilson as well as the current occupant of the White House. It goes without saying that Salvemini was uncomfortable with the flexibility and pragmatism of Franklin Roosevelt.

Killinger has done an admirable job of placing Salvemini in the context of his times. While the author might have been too gentle for this reviewer's taste, he offered ample material from which to draw conclusions that were less favorable to Salvemini. The biography is a remarkable portrait of a man who sustained a career that lasted over fifty years on the power of his will and intellect. Popular or not, Salvemini was a vital force who left a lasting mark on Italian politics and historiography. Killinger caught the man with all his virtues and shortcomings. No one can ask for more.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-italy>

**Citation:** Alexander D. Grand. Review of Killinger, Charles, *Gaetano Salvemini: A Biography*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. March, 2003.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7378>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).