Like the processes by which citizens “came home” from the various possessions Italy lost after the Second World War, researching and writing this study has extended over many years. The seeds for this project were laid in the 1990s during my doctoral research with Italians who had migrated to Trieste from those eastern Adriatic territories of Istria, Kvarner, and Dalmatia that Italy ceded to Yugoslavia between 1947 and 1954. As I recuperated and analyzed memories of this mass migration, “exiles” (esuli) and their descendants I interviewed often mentioned living in refugee camps alongside Italians similarly displaced from Libya or Eritrea or the Dodecanese Islands, all territories Italy lost in the wake of fascism’s defeat. Likewise, esuli who resettled outside Trieste in other parts of Italy in state-built housing often shared their neighborhoods with these fellow Italians repatriated from the former colonies. Nonetheless, these individual memories of common experiences of displacement as “national refugees” (profughi nazionali) found no resonance in either the scholarly literature or the political debates about the eastern border that took off in Italy in the late 1990s. Nor did discussions of Italy’s own refugees in the postwar period make reference to those foreign displaced persons who continued to make their way to the Italian peninsula in significant numbers from the end of World War II into the 1960s. This study is the result of my attempt to fill those academic and political lacunae, as well as to understand the reasons for those silences.

When I began my research, apart from the extensive literature on the Istrian exodus, I had few signposts or secondary literature on the specific Italian case to guide me, a situation that has begun to change in recent years. As a result, the research stretched over years—and soon, continents. Although agreements between the Italian state and the intergovernmental bodies tasked with assisting refugees in the wake of World War II made these Italian displacees the responsibility of the Italian state with a few key exceptions, the international organizations nonetheless played an important role in this story. These agencies included the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation
Administration (UNRRA), the International Refugee Organization (IRO), and the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR). Indeed, the very understandings of national refugees and international bona fide refugees and their respective assistance regimes that emerged in the postwar period developed through a dialogic relationship, as this study demonstrates. I soon realized that the story of Italy’s rebirth after World War II was deeply entangled with the genesis of the postwar international refugee regime. Beginning my research with the archives of the relevant intergovernmental bodies (located, respectively, in New York, Paris, and Geneva), I then identified relevant archives in Italy, as well as in former Italian possessions such as Rhodes (Greece) and Tirana (Albania). I conducted the most concentrated phase of research during the academic year of 2010–2011, while living in Rome.

During that period, preparations for commemoration of the 150th anniversary of Italian unification played out in the press, on the streets, and even at the annual San Remo Song Festival, where comedian Roberto Benigni exclaimed “Viva l’Italia!” and sang Italy’s national anthem, “Inno di Mameli” (also known as “Il canto degli Italiani”) in a pointed message to those who contended that Italy’s unification was something to mourn, rather than celebrate. In a quivering voice, Benigni sang the hymn, which begins with the call to fratelli d’Italia, or “brothers of Italy.” At issue was how to understand Italy’s past, present, and future, as well as just who rightfully belonged to the community of Italian brothers and sisters. Since the nation’s founding, the question of “making” Italy and Italians has preoccupied politicians and scholars alike.

Important initiatives to recuperate Italy’s complex history of emigration and frequent return migration, such as the Museo Nazionale Emigrazione Italiana opened in 2009 in advance of the 150th anniversary, occasioned controversy. Located in the Vittoriano, the monument to Italy’s first monarch, Vittorio Emanuele II—“altar of the Patria” and the symbolic heart of national Italian Rome—the museum provoked criticism. Critics particularly objected to the museum’s final room, whose exhibit compared immigrants to contemporary Italy to Italian emigrants in the past. In addition, some voices called for the dismantling of the museum after the unification celebrations; despite an extended life, the museum shuttered its doors in 2016, though it lives on in virtual space and is slated to find a new physical home in Genoa. These debates occurred in a climate of ongoing fiscal crisis and increasingly charged political discussions about immigration to Italy. At a deeper level, however, they pointed to the long-standing ambivalence of Italian society and scholars toward the experience of mass emigration abroad, as
well as still largely unacknowledged histories of encounters with immigrants of various types in the immediate aftermath of World War II.

On the evening of 17 March 2011, I walked down to central Rome from the Janiculum Hill, where crowds thronged the streets in the rain and damp cold. Despite the show of flags and the requisite fireworks, the celebrations for the 150th anniversary were understated, given their significance. No consensus existed on two key questions: What did it mean to be Italian in the twenty-first century? And how were Italians to understand the arrival of newcomers to their shores? As the residents of places like Lampedusa struggled to offer humanitarian relief to migrants arriving on their island, some Italians on the peninsula argued against sending these migrants on to camps hastily constructed in mainland Italy. Just a month before the anniversary celebration, I had caught a news transmission on a television monitor in the Rome airport as I awaited a plane to Tirana to finish up archival work there. The news featured a makeshift refugee camp somewhere in the north of Italy and captured an ugly confrontation between locals and the Africans at the barbed wire dividing them. One of the African men, speaking broken Italian, appealed to his Italian counterpart, “Siamo tutti fratelli . . . siamo tutti uguali” (We are all brothers . . . we are all equal), he pleaded. “No, non è vero, non siamo tutti uguali,” shot back the older Italian, denying any common ground. In that disavowal of brotherhood, the Italian man also unwittingly denied an extensive history of encounters on Italian soil with refugees and migrants, both foreign and Italian. Marked by forms of solidarity, as well as indifference, these encounters continue to shape Italian legal and social responses to the contemporary migrations that have become only more pressing in the wake of the refugee crises that have made the Mediterranean the central site of dangerous passage to Europe. Contrary to all the claims that Italians in the twenty-first century face an unprecedented refugee crisis, this book demonstrates how in the first decade and a half after the Second World War both the Italian state and everyday Italians confronted a large and complicated refugee “problem”—a refugee population that included Italian citizens displaced with the defeat of fascism.