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Risorgimento, Reform and Revolution

The origins of the Risorgimento

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, many of Europe’s most powerful monarchies suffered a series of setbacks. Political opposition grew, fed in some places by economic problems and in others by resistance to government policy. In the Habsburg Empire, Joseph II’s attempts at large-scale reform severely damaged relations between the crown and the various nobilities of his empire; while in France, the absence of reform and a costly war with Britain led to government bankruptcy and a slow slide into political crisis which culminated spectacularly in the revolution of 1789. In this way, the era of ‘Enlightened Absolutism’ concluded in a clamour of protest against the governments of Europe’s old regime.

It is precisely in this Europe-wide crisis of the eighteenth century that we must look for the origins of the changes in nineteenth-century Italy. From as early as the seventeenth century, most of the city-republics, duchies and kingdoms into which the peninsula was divided had experienced a notable decline relative to their more powerful neighbours. During the course of the seventeenth century much of Italy was ravaged by war and repeated foreign invasion; and some states (the Duchy of Milan, Tuscany and the Kingdom of Naples) came directly under the domination of foreign monarchies. Along with foreign wars, Italy was affected by periodic famines, plagues and popular revolts. However, efforts made by some governments in the eighteenth century to reverse this
decline, to introduce economic and social improvements and to construct more efficient bureaucracies and armies, encountered serious difficulties. Attempts to increase state revenue by raising taxes proved unpopular and often unsuccessful. Both the Church and the nobility opposed government attacks on their privileges and traditional powers. Growing social unrest further undermined political stability.

Especially in the Kingdom of Naples, government efforts to commercialise agriculture by abolishing feudal powers (part of a more general attack on noble and clerical privileges), and by encouraging the growth of an agrarian middle class, ran rapidly into political trouble. Despite the consensus among some ministers and many intellectuals in favour of reform, the government was incapable of implementing its reform programme thanks to the opposition of local power-holders. The poor of the countryside bore the brunt of economic change, and the rapid growth of population increased their problems still further. From the 1760s onwards, outbreaks of popular violence became commonplace in many parts of the southern Italian countryside, and these were often encouraged by the nobility and the Church in an attempt to frustrate government reforms.

Some attempts at reform met with greater success, for example in the Duchy of Milan or in Tuscany where the governments had the advantage of more compact territories and relatively more efficient bureaucracies. Moreover, in these states many among the ruling elites agreed on the need for reform. Nevertheless, whether reform was successful or not, it invariably unleashed a process of change which led to instability across the peninsula. The reformers proved quite unable to construct new bases of support or stable relations of power to replace those of the old regime which they had sought to destroy, and had succeeded in weakening. A creeping disillusionment with Italy itself, a distrust of its entrenched political interests and its traditional societies, became a feature of debates about reform even before the cataclysmic events of the 1790s.
Map 1.1  Italy before 1796
The French Revolution and Napoleon

In 1793 the armies of the French Revolution invaded Piedmont, and occupied its western provinces of Nice and Savoy. In 1796 a new army, reorganised by the young Corsican general Napoleon Bonaparte, invaded northern Italy once more; and with the conclusion of the treaty of Campoformio with Austria in 1797, France gained control of the entire peninsula. These events threw Italy into a period of radical change, as extraordinary as it was complex. From here on until the defeat of Napoleon in 1814, political developments in the peninsula were largely determined by the sequence of victories and defeats experienced by the French armies in a series of wars against Austria, Prussia, Russia and Great Britain.

The French occupations of Italy can be divided into two periods. The first, the Jacobin or Revolutionary ‘triennium’, lasted from 1796 until 1799. A series of republics were established: in northern Italy the Cispadane and the Transpadane Republics, united in 1797 as the Cisalpine Republic; in central Italy the Roman Republic; and in southern Italy the Parthenopean or Neapolitan Republic. These republics were constantly under threat from France’s enemies and from internal opposition; and after the French defeat at the hands of the Second Coalition, they all collapsed and Italy’s rulers were briefly restored. Soon afterwards, however, following Napoleon’s seizure of power in Paris, the French armies launched a counter-attack in Italy and defeated Austria once more at the battle of Marengo. With the treaty of Lunéville in 1801, Austria recognised French domination of the peninsula. After the defeat of the Third Coalition in 1805, only the islands of Sicily and Sardinia remained outside French control; here the Bourbon royal family (Sicily) and the Savoy royal family (Sardinia) took refuge under the protection of the British navy.

Unlike the Jacobin triennium, when republics were founded, the second, longer period of French occupation (1801–14) was based on monarchical rule, reflecting the conservative direction taken by Napoleon in France. Once he had gained domination of Italy, Napoleon also set about its territorial and administrative reorganisation. Three general territorial divisions were established in Italy. Piedmont and a large part of central Italy (including Rome) were
directly annexed by France. A Republic of Italy was created in the north-east in 1802; but after Napoleon’s self-proclamation as French Emperor the republic was reconstituted as the Kingdom of Italy, with Napoleon’s brother-in-law Eugène de Beauharnais as viceroy, and its territories were gradually expanded to include Istria in the east, Trentino to the north, and the Marche to the south. Finally, in southern Italy, Napoleon established the Kingdom of Naples in 1806, with his brother Joseph as its first sovereign. When Joseph left Naples to become king of Spain in 1808, Napoleon placed his sister Caroline and brother-in-law Joachim Murat on the throne.

Murat’s reign in Naples was noteworthy for a number of reasons, not least for his reliance on the support of local elites to assert his kingdom’s autonomy from France. When Napoleon’s hold over Europe began to waver in 1812, following his defeat in Russia, Murat came to an agreement with the allies to declare war on Napoleon’s forces in Italy. But his attempt to ensure the survival of his kingdom by playing a double game with both the allies and Napoleon could not withstand the swings of diplomacy and war. Murat was allowed to keep his throne after Napoleon’s first defeat in 1814, but when he decided to support his brother-in-law after the latter’s escape from Elba the following year, he made a fatal mistake. Following Napoleon’s defeat, Murat was caught in Calabria by Bourbon troops and was executed by firing squad. His death marks the end of French government in the Italian peninsula although not, as we shall see, of its influence over Italian politics.

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of the French occupation for future developments in Italy. In various ways, the experience of the Jacobin years in the late 1790s, and either annexation to France or the creation of satellite kingdoms after 1802, represented a profound break with the past and a powerful harbinger of future hopes and conflicts. The rapid and repeated territorial changes described above worked to undermine the sense of history and of regional difference which had helped to legitimate Italy’s old dynasties. By eradicating the existing boundaries of Italy’s ten states and overthrowing their governments, and creating in their place three entirely new states with new monarchs and different loyalties, Napoleon challenged the traditional authority and right to rule of the old regime. Less spectacularly, but just as important,
the French introduced fiscal and commercial reforms and new communications, all of which aimed to create standardised markets and so ignored or destroyed previous territorial divisions. If only in these ways, the French invasions prepared some of the ground for the development of a more uniform, national identity in Italy.

There were other significant changes too. In particular, the French occupation of the 1790s encouraged the spread of revolutionary ideas and organisations. Even before 1796, Jacobinism had arrived in Italy via the activities of masonic lodges; thereafter, the number of Jacobin or ‘patriots’ clubs grew rapidly. Encouraged by the economist Melchiore Gioia, the idea of an independent Italian republic gathered support as did calls for democratic forms of government, and, from 1796, the Italian patriots began to plan a series of republican conspiracies and uprisings all over Italy. Yet their freedom of action was always constrained by French control and French priorities. In fact, just as Jacobinism began to gather strength in Italy there was a change of government in France, and the more moderate Directory severely curtailed their energetic efforts and revolutionary experiments. As early as 1797, Napoleon began to repress Jacobin organisations in northern Italy.

The Jacobin-patriots represented a new generation of politically engaged revolutionaries. Although their efforts to change the way Italy was governed were unsuccessful, they became an important (positive and negative) inspiration for future generations after the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars were over. Even during their short period of political prominence, moreover, they revolutionised political and cultural life in the main cities. Milan rapidly became a centre of political agitation and vibrant press activity. Here, and in other cities, the patriots introduced a new political vocabulary, bringing words like ‘nation’ and ‘fatherland’ into public debate. New symbols and rituals were established which made appeals to more participatory forms of political identity and, as part of this process, Italy’s past and future became the subject of discussion, while italianità (‘Italian-ness’) was an inspiration for revolutionary iconography. Thus, the French did not bring nationalism to Italy: that, as we shall see, was the task assumed by a later group of Italians. Nevertheless, their impact on the development of an idea and myth of Italy was decisive.
It is useful to reflect on the failure of the Italian patriots in the French period. One problem was that they never comprised a single movement but were instead a series of groups often divided by bitter disagreements over political action and outlook. Even in the northern Cisalpine Republic where they were strongest, they were split between those who called for radical social reforms to help the poorer classes and those of more moderate tendencies who sought to follow the policies of the Lombard Enlightenment. Besides, although the Jacobins spoke for ‘the people’, in reality they enjoyed little popular support. Both in the Roman and Neapolitan Republics, the new governments were unable to control large parts of the countryside. The short life of the Neapolitan Republic saw little in the way of practical achievements: indeed, its rulers seemed to fear the power of the large landowners, and they managed only to abolish primogeniture before the regime was abandoned by the French army and the capital, Naples, was invaded by Cardinal Ruffo’s counter-revolutionary mob.

In 1799, the republics collapsed amid popular counter-revolution. Led often by local nobles and/or by priests, the counter-revolution was directed against the French and the patriots and made up of armed peasants. Peasant uprisings took place in Tuscany under the banner of the Virgin Mary, and Jacobins were assaulted and killed to the cry of “Viva Maria”; peasant gangs also attacked the Jewish ghettos in Livorno and Siena. The most aggressive reaction occurred in southern Italy. From Calabria, Cardinal Ruffo put together a huge, unwieldy group of counter-insurgents which he called the Army of the Holy Faith (Esercito della Santa Fede or ‘sanfedisti’), with the purpose of defending religion against the ‘godless’ Jacobins of Naples. Like other counter-revolutionary leaders in Italy and elsewhere, Ruffo played on popular fears and on resentments over taxes and attendant upheavals, blaming peasant hardship on the republican regime in Naples.

Ferocious counter-revolutionary violence (the so-called ‘third anarchy’) followed the taking of Naples by Ruffo’s army. Even Ruffo himself was powerless to control it. Alleged Jacobins were dragged into the street and massacred by the mob; around 8000 people were accused of treason, and more than a hundred republican leaders were executed. The monarchy also entered the fray. Suspecting the
Neapolitan nobility of republican sympathies, it took revenge by abolishing the noble corporations and attempting to replace them with state-controlled administrations. However, the combination of royal revenge and mob violence destabilised the situation still further. Popular revolt and lawlessness spread to, and continued in, the provinces; and the traditional conflict between monarchy and nobility was exacerbated by royal actions. The brutal reconquest of Naples had an important legacy for republicans too. From that moment on, a deep fear of the counter-revolutionary instincts of the peasants and poor, and an implicit desire to keep the masses out of politics, conditioned the political thinking of many republicans in southern Italy and elsewhere.

Just as important for the political future of Italy was the shake-up given to its traditional structures of power. Italy’s political, legal and fiscal systems were in truth already quite disturbed by the reforms and accompanying crises of the late eighteenth century; they were then destroyed completely by the revolutionary innovations imported from France. New liberties were created, and more effective forms of state control imposed. This changing relationship between state and society was reflected in the promulgation, during the Jacobin period, of constitutions which introduced elective assemblies. Under Napoleon, sweeping changes were made to centralise and standardise all branches of administration. Attempts were made to introduce new legal codes, feudalism was officially abolished, and the taxation systems were reorganised; and, especially in the north-eastern Kingdom of Italy, the government augmented its revenue with great effectiveness. State power was further increased by the organisation of new police forces (gendarmerie or carabinieri) and by military conscription. Across Italy, the attack on the political and economic power of the Church was intensified: ecclesiastical lands were put up for sale and the temporal power of the Pope was declared at an end. Religious freedom was introduced, with equal rights given to Jews. New standardised systems of primary, secondary and tertiary education were set up.

In the area of public administration and the army, the impact of Napoleon was equally revolutionary. Here, as in France itself, the particularism and privileges of the old regime bureaucracy were
swept away, and officials sought to substitute it with the model of uniform and centralised administration created by the Revolution and implemented by Napoleon. From north to south, the expansion of bureaucracies created new employment opportunities for social groups previously excluded from the corridors of power; the revolutionary concept of a career open to talent (rather than money or family connections) meant that men from minor noble families and the middle classes now rose rapidly within the ranks of the state bureaucracies. They benefited from, and so supported, Napoleonic rule, just as traditional power-holders resented the encroachment on their particular privileges and tried to resist the French policy of administrative centralisation. A similar process took place within the army, which was greatly expanded throughout the Napoleonic period. So-called ‘new men’ of relatively humble, middle-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds were admitted as officers in the armies of Napoleon, and were swiftly promoted. Not surprisingly, these officers tended to be fiercely loyal to Napoleon and his new regimes and, like their counterparts in the civil administration, acquired a taste for power in the process of exercising it.

The same cannot be said for Italian peasants. They bitterly resented compulsory military conscription, especially the hardships it brought for their families and the threat it posed to their lives and way of life. Popular protest against the heavy hand of Napoleonic rule, and of the draft in particular, became a commonplace of rural Italy in the years after 1802. In the southern Kingdom of Naples, where the reform programme had anyway been less successful than in the north, full-scale peasant revolt broke out in Calabria in 1806. Helped by British forces, encouraged by the clergy and led by the charismatic brigand Fra’ Diavolo, the conflict between the Napoleonic rulers of Naples and the rural poor raged for two years and was accompanied by terrible violence and loss of life.

Peasant reaction, and the alliance between peasants and the Church, was a striking indication of the disruptions caused by the French period in Italy. It reminds us that the Revolutionary and Napoleonic invasions created losers as well as winners, and that the losers could fight back quite successfully. Thus, the modernisation brought by the French may have benefited some, but not everyone,
and while the impact of change was irreversible, it was also divisive and destabilising. This struggle between those who embraced change and those who resisted it, and between the manifest need for reform and the need to control its consequences, was also to characterise political debate in Italy during the decades following the fall of Napoleon.

**Restoration (1815–30)**

After the defeat of Napoleon in 1814/15, the Congress of Vienna set out to restore the rulers of *ancien régime* Europe, along with most of their territories and former boundaries. In Italy, the Restoration was strictly defined and controlled by the Habsburg Empire, France’s long-term adversary in the peninsula. Not surprisingly, Austrian domination of Italy was guided by the opposition to constitutional government felt by the so-called ‘Great Powers’ at Vienna, associated as it was with the slide into revolutionary violence and war, and by a corresponding desire to bolster up the political and moral foundations (the ‘legitimacy’) of absolute rule. At the same time, the Italian Restoration was strongly influenced by foreign policy considerations. ‘It is on the River Po that we defend the Rhine’, remarked the Austrian Chancellor, Prince Clemens von Metternich: the clear priority was to maintain the balance of power in Italy, which in practice meant a commitment to keeping France out and Austria in control.

So Italy’s territorial settlement reflected its role as a pawn in European diplomacy. Unsurprisingly, the settlement was determined more by Austria’s rivalry with France than it was by any aspiration to help Italy’s rulers recover their traditional powers. Under the terms of the Vienna treaty, Lombardy was returned to Austria, and the former Venetian Republic (abolished by Napoleon) was not restored but also incorporated into the Habsburg Empire; Austrian control was also confirmed by the arrangements for the Grand Duchy of Tuscany and the Central Italian Duchies of Modena and Parma, all of which were ruled by members of the Habsburg dynasty. In central and southern Italy, the Restoration was more straightforward: the Papal States (including the northern
Legations, separated from papal rule for most of the French period) were returned to the Pope; and the Kingdom of Naples, with the island of Sicily, was returned to its absolute ruler, Ferdinando IV (who renamed his kingdom the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, and took the new name Ferdinando I). Both the Pope and Ferdinando I made concessions to Austrian power in Italy, and expected Austrian help in the event of external or internal aggression. Ferdinando signed a permanent defensive alliance with Austria, which gave Austria the effective right to intervene militarily in his kingdom; while the Pope allowed the Austrian army a permanent military garrison in the city of Ferrara.

After 1815, only the Kingdom of Sardinia remained relatively independent of Austria. Piedmont, as it is usually known, was actually made stronger by the incorporation of the Genoese Republic on its Mediterranean coast. Yet, as we shall see, however vital this independence proved to be for the future of Italy, it was not the result of Piedmont's military and political clout in Europe but rather due to its strategic position on the French border. At Vienna, Piedmont was simply conceived of as a ‘buffer-state’ between France and Austria, and it lacked the material force to provide any kind of counter-weight to Austrian power in the peninsula. Nor did Piedmont initially conceive of any such role for itself. Although anti-Austrian sentiment was widespread and increasing among the ruling elite in Piedmont, and while anti-Austrianism offered a potential source of support for the Savoy monarchy, there were few if any signs that Piedmont identified its political interests with those of Italian independence in general.

The policies and problems of Italy's Restoration governments are the subject of chapter 3. Here it is worth noting that the term ‘Restoration’ masked a variety of different attitudes and forms: from the relatively liberal, consensual programme pursued by prime minister Fossombroni in Tuscany to the out-and-out reaction of Vittorio Emanuele I in Piedmont and Francesco IV in the Duchy of Modena. These varieties notwithstanding, the Restoration in Italy was almost everywhere marked by considerable protest and resistance from almost all sections of the elites as well as by the poor. Resistance was partly a European phenomenon: not just in Italy, but in France, Spain and the German states too, the authority
Map 1.2  Italy in 1815
of the restored rulers had been severely undermined by the traumatic experiences of revolution and war. The traditional elites expected much more from the Restoration, that is, the restitution of all their powers, including those taken away during the eighteenth-century reforms; while the ‘new men’ who had rose to power under Napoleon were just as angered by their demotion, and sometimes outright dismissal, following the return of the old monarchies. Popular unrest, such a feature of the French years, continued after Napoleon’s fall. Indeed, a bad famine in 1817 and the need of all rulers to maintain a high level of taxes led to the constant threat and fear of unrest.

It was just this atmosphere of political instability and economic unrest which benefited the ‘secret societies’ or sects. These revolutionary groups – such as the carboneria and the adelfia – had formed originally in opposition to the authoritarianism of the Napoleonic regimes. They had been encouraged in the early 1800s by the British and Austrians as a way of undermining French rule, though in Naples the carbonari grew especially in importance because Murat decided to encourage them. In the aftermath of Napoleon’s defeat, the secret societies spread and proliferated. Their members were in turn, however, to be disappointed by the conservatism of the Restoration in Italy, and quickly became involved in conspiracies against the Vienna settlement.

Important as they are for providing continuity between Jacobinism and the later conspiracies of Mazzini’s Young Italy, especially through the figure of the old Jacobin leader Filippo Buonarotti, the secret societies had a limited practical impact. They shared few clear political aims, and the need for secrecy meant they were unable to develop a general strategy – although secrecy did little to prevent their organisations from being infiltrated by spies. Nor did the secret societies have much in common with other movements of moderate opposition which developed at around the same time, notably the group of progressive liberals based in Lombardy and grouped around the journal Il Conciliatore.

Nevertheless, the obstinate absolutism of some states like Piedmont, and frustration at their lack of influence in others like Lombardy and Tuscany, did push many liberals towards sympathy with the secret societies. In the summer of 1820, a conspiracy
among army officers and carbonari members led to a revolution in Naples, obliging King Ferdinando I to grant a constitution; this was quickly followed by a violent uprising in the streets of Palermo, with popular protest at the economic crisis becoming briefly allied both to the separatist ambitions of Sicilian nobles and to the artisans’ defence of their corporative privileges. To the north, in Piedmont, concern about events in Naples, led to equally intense plotting among army officers and carbonari and eventually, in March 1821, to a widespread insurrection which declared a constitution and proclaimed an Italian federation as its aim (specifically, calling for Austria to be driven out of Lombardy).

The carbonarist uprisings of 1820–1 were a failure, easily suppressed by the Austrian army acting with local forces and the approval of Europe. Other than Austrian repression, there were a number of reasons for the failure, most obviously the internal disarray among the revolutionaries themselves. Although all were offended by the absolutist regimes, divisions between constitutional moderates and the much more radical democrats, both in the south and in Piedmont, meant that they spent as much time stopping each other as they did working together. In Piedmont, officers led by Santorre di Santarosa supported a coup against King Vittorio Emanuele I, in alliance with revolutionary sects, but liberal moderates like Cesare Balbo feared any sign of overt disloyalty to the throne. In Naples and Sicily, there were further disagreements still. That is, moderates and democrats argued about the extent of reform and whether or not to allow ‘the people’ into politics, but their differences were complicated by the presence of other interests and loyalties: by Sicilians who resented rule from Naples and, within Sicily, by other provincial elites (especially in Messina and Catania) who objected to the domination of Palermo. In Sicily, moreover, the nobility’s rejection of Neapolitan rule was met by rural violence on a scale which nobody welcomed or desired, and this helped to turn the nobility against the revolution.

A notable difference between Piedmont and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies emerged during the events of 1820–21. Although Austrian help was necessary for the repression of both revolutions, in other respects Piedmont appeared more stable. In Piedmont, left and right agreed over the need to avoid popular disorder and on
the basic legitimacy of the Savoy monarchy, so that once the king abdicated in 1821, and was replaced by his brother Carlo Felice, the situation stabilised. Thus, while the revolution in the south revealed the huge extent of political, social and even territorial disaggregation, in Piedmont the revolution revealed elements of a basic, and relatively conservative, consensus. The advantages which this consensus gave to the Piedmontese state were to become more obvious over the next four decades.

Young Italy

A period of political reaction came after the 1820–21 revolutions. In 1831, another wave of revolutionary disturbances swept the peninsula, this time affecting above all the Papal Legations and the central Italian duchies, and the pattern established in 1820–21 can be also discerned in these later events. As soon as the regimes were seen to falter, Italian revolutionaries seized the advantage and threw themselves into conspiratorial action, establishing an illustrious tradition of patriotic martyrdom in the process. But they lacked the necessary organisation and/or the material force ever to hold on to that advantage, to restore order and to resist the inevitable counter-attack and reaction which followed. As in previous uprisings, moreover, the mass of the people remained indifferent or openly hostile to the call to revolt.

More important than the revolutions themselves was the fallout thereafter. On the government side, Austrian intervention to crush the revolutions did little to restore political authority or to control the tide of popular hostility which continued to mount after the revolutions were over: in Bologna, for example, repeated uprisings against the papal administration obliged the Austrians to retain a garrison there until 1838. So the revolutions discredited the governments of central Italy, and showed just how shallow their legitimacy was. On the other side, the side of the revolutionaries, matters were just as bad. Political moderates were disgraced by the timid, even equivocal, attitude which they had maintained throughout the revolutionary events, while the democrats proved plainly incapable: unable to take the initiative or organise a practi-
cal movement. The revolutions also signalled the political end of the old conspirator Filippo Buonarroti, whose vain attempt to organise an expedition in France to help the Italian insurrections was blocked by the French government.

The disarray of the revolutionary forces in 1831 is worth stressing, because out of it a new movement emerged. This movement was ‘Young Italy’ (Giovine Italia) led by an ex-carbonaro, Giuseppe Mazzini. Mazzini had been arrested for carbonari conspiracies before the revolutions broke out, and by 1831 had left Italy for France; the disastrous experiences of these years convinced him that it was necessary to create an entirely new kind of leadership which would prepare the ground for the battle to come. In particular, he rejected the carbonarist dependence on France for inspiration and direction, and argued that the future belonged to an organisation which did not subordinate Italian interests to those of the foreigner and would realise Italy’s historic mission to put itself at the head of the movement for the liberation of all nations. Mazzini’s achievements will be assessed more fully in chapter 6: here we will concentrate on the early part of his career (until 1848–49).

Mazzini’s muse was different from that of the carbonari, and the Jacobins before them. Like many young men and women of his generation, he was inspired by the prevailing mood of melancholy romanticism and by its emotional engagement with the past. Young Italy was born out of the romantic sense of Italy’s past greatness, and by the conviction that the nation was created by God not to be divided and oppressed, as at present, but destined by geography, history and nature to be a free, united nation. Mazzini also sought to emphasise the break with the French Revolution by excluding the over-40s from his organisation, and by its unambiguous, concrete objectives: these were nothing less than the overthrow of every old regime in Italy (including, and perhaps above all, the Papacy), and the creation in its place of a new Italy, united as a democratic republic. With Mazzini, the sense of decline and the hope for renewal, which had driven reformers and revolutionaries alike since the 18th century, became linked to a mystical desire for national resurrection or risorgimento.

Between 1831 and 1834, Young Italy rapidly acquired a great notoriety. Its principal means of communication and education
Figure 1.1  Giuseppe Mazzini.
Caldesi, Blanford & Co. albumen carte-de-visite, early 1860s, © National Portrait Gallery, London, UK.

Mazzini is seen in a typical pose, which emphasises both the romantic loneliness of his London exile and his status as the theorist or ‘visionary’ of Italian nationalism (alluded to by the window, bookshelves and desk in the background).
was the published word, and Mazzini also tried to organise a series of insurrections in Italy, starting with what he hoped would be a major revolution in Turin and Genoa in 1833–34. Yet despite these initial advances, and Young Italy’s undoubted success in intimidating the forces of conservatism and reaction, by the mid-1830s this movement too was in considerable disarray. Before the attempted insurrection in Turin and Genoa could get underway, it was discovered by the authorities, and Mazzini fled to Switzerland in despair. In the crackdown which followed, the Young Italy organisation was badly damaged. Only after he moved to London in 1837, did Mazzini’s revolutionary energies begin to recover, although even then it was not until 1840 that he refounded the organisation (this time with a special branch for Italian workers) and began to plan conspiracies once more.

Young Italy was involved in a revolutionary uprising in Bologna in 1843, and associated with the tragic expedition of the Bandiera brothers to the Calabrian coast in 1844. The failed attempt by the latter to spark off a popular revolt among the peasants of Calabria, with a force of some twenty men, indicates both the strengths and weaknesses of the Mazzinian organisation. On the one hand, the expedition failed completely to achieve any of its desired aims: the population did not rise to greet the brothers, as was confidently predicted, and the brothers and their followers were executed by Bourbon troops. The expedition itself was badly armed, infiltrated by spies and had no real knowledge of the territory and inhabitants which it had travelled from Venice to liberate. On the other hand, the brothers’ heroic self-sacrifice was admired by contemporaries, and Mazzini’s public efforts to celebrate what he called their ‘martyrdom’ for Italy attracted the attention of radicals across Europe and further afield. So, Mazzinian propaganda turned a political disaster into something of a publicity triumph, and this contributed to an awakening of interest in Italian affairs both among Italians and internationally.

Mazzini also created a broad radical network, centred on London but with links across Europe and to the Americas. Through relentless hype, Mazzini was able to persuade influential British liberals of the justice and inevitability of the Italian cause, and from the 1840s he began to raise significant sums of money from liberal
sympathisers for his programme. In the mid-1840s, he also scored a major publicity success with the promotion of Giuseppe Garibaldi, a little-known Italian exile based in Uruguay. Thanks in part to the efforts of Mazzini and his followers, and in part to the liberalisation of press laws in many parts of Italy, Garibaldi became a political celebrity in the years leading up to the outbreak of the 1848 revolutions. Through the press, Mazzini promoted him as a new symbol of the national resurgence which he foresaw for Italy, if only the nation were allowed to overthrow its reactionary and corrupt governments (all these issues are looked at more fully in chapter 6).

By the 1840s, however, Mazzini began to face a challenge of another kind. The moderate liberal movement, which had always condemned his programme as unrealistic and dangerous, began to gather political force in Italy. Although the movement itself had deep roots, both in 18th-century Lombard reformism and in the progressive concerns of the Lombard and Tuscan Restoration, most of its members had little direct involvement in politics, preferring instead to pursue their interests in scientific developments and in historical, literary and artistic questions. But in the 1840s, this began to change. Most notably, with the publication of three overtly political books by prominent moderate liberals – Vincenzo Gioberti’s *Of the moral and civil primacy of Italians* (*Del primato morale e civile degli Italiani*, 1843); Cesare Balbo’s *The hopes of Italy* (*Delle speranze d’Italia*, 1844); and Massimo d’Azeglio’s, *The recent events in Romagna* (*Degli ultimi casi di Romagna*, 1846) – the movement acquired a set of political objectives and an explicitly nationalist dimension.

Gioberti’s *Primato* was especially popular and caused a minor publishing sensation. It also opened the way for many moderates in states like Piedmont, Lombardy and Tuscany to become fervent supporters of what was called ‘neo-Guelphism’. In the book, Gioberti laid out an alternative proposal for an Italian confederation with the Pope as president, a quite different – and much more conservative – idea than Mazzini’s unitary Republic. For the first time, in other words, the moderates had a dynamic political programme to rival that of Mazzini. In 1846, the neo-Guelph project was given added force with the election of the ‘liberal Pope’
Pius IX, and subsequently with the seeming endorsement of nationalist aspirations in northern Italy by the Piedmontese king, Carlo Alberto.

By the middle of the 1840s, and especially for the cultural elites of the major cities who mostly despised him, Mazzini’s revolutionary aspirations for Italy appeared to be losing ground. In its place rose a more moderate, and much less democratic, form of nationalism which sought a compromise with Italy’s monarchs (including the Pope) on the basis of gradual, non-violent reform. Carlo Alberto’s turn to liberalism and the nation in Piedmont was then further confirmed by similarly liberal moves undertaken by Leopoldo II in Tuscany, and by the decision of these two sovereigns and the Pope to create a customs’ union. During these years, moreover, a vibrant, liberal public opinion emerged and was consolidated: new journals were published, and liberal associations were established, in which the idea of Italy and proposals for political and economic reform were openly discussed. Although the spread of liberalism was uneven (the Duke of Modena remained resolutely reactionary), by 1847 the sense of political expectation was palpable. It was in this atmosphere of confidence and excitement that the traumatic events of 1848 unfolded.

The ‘springtime of the peoples’ (1848–49)

In January 1848, a major revolt broke out in the centre of Palermo. The army was quickly overcome, and an independent government declared Bourbon rule at an end. By the spring, revolution had crossed the peninsula to Naples, Rome, Bologna, Florence, Livorno, Turin, Milan and Venice, and reached throughout the European continent to Paris, Vienna, Budapest and Berlin. Strikes, riots and demonstrations became commonplace in the major cities of Europe, caused by three years of economic depression and food shortages. Encouraged by radicals, protest spread rapidly thanks also to new forms of communication such as the railway and the telegraph. The effect was to shake the thrones of Europe. After street fighting in Paris, King Louis Philippe abdicated in February; in March, with the city in open revolt, Chancellor Metternich was
smuggled out of Vienna. Amid similarly chaotic scenes in Italy, constitutions were granted by the rulers of the Two Sicilies, the Papal States, Tuscany and Piedmont. The revolution in Austrian Venice led to the declaration of a republic by its leader, Daniele Manin, while in neighbouring Lombardy, the population rose up and after five days of fighting (the famous Cinque Giornate) threw out the Austrian army and its commander, Field-Marshal Radetsky. In April 1848, Mazzini arrived in Milan to a triumphant welcome.

Yet this dizzying series of events, and the apparent ease of victory over conservatism and reaction, masked some grave weaknesses within the revolutionary forces. The most obvious of these was that only some of them were truly revolutionary. In most Italian states, the moderate liberals gained, or remained, firmly in control of government, and once they had obtained constitutions from their rulers, they sought to halt the revolution, to marginalise the democrats and to prevent ‘the masses’ from entering politics. In Palermo, the moderates moved against the democrats who had supported popular revolution; and in Lombardy, Venice and Tuscany, political disagreement was a feature of relations between the two sides from the outset. These divisions would have been less serious had it not been for the strength of their political opponents – notably Austria – who despite appearances to the contrary had suffered no more than a temporary setback in northern Italy. In reality, the triumph of revolution was little more than a mirage, and Italian conservatives were merely biding their time before mounting an effective counter-attack.

Then, the moderate liberals proved unable to hold the middle ground between revolution and reaction. First, they badly underestimated the strength of popular discontent in the cities, and equally overestimated their ability to control the unemployed and artisans who had formed the backbone of the revolution in the early months of 1848. Moreover, focused as they were on urban areas, the moderates ignored the situation in the countryside, and offered no solution to the problem of land distribution which had caused successive waves of peasant protest even before the revolutions began. In some states, such as Lombardy, the new leadership introduced military conscription, thus worsening conditions for the peasants. The overall failure to address the causes and conse-
quences of mass unrest had grim political consequences. On the one hand, in Sicily, fear of peasant violence drove the landowners into the arms of the conservatives; faced with the choice between protecting their property and political freedom, they quickly chose the former, abandoning the liberal government in Palermo and supporting the restoration of royal authority. On the other, in Lombardy and Venetia, it was the peasants who feared the revolution and welcomed back the Austrians: as early as the summer of 1848, cries of ‘Viva Radetsky!’ greeted Austrian soldiers as they marched across the Lombard countryside to reconquer Milan.

At the same time, Italian monarchs proved obstinately averse to reform and to sharing even the most moderate nationalist ambitions for Italy. Initially, moderates had some reason to be optimistic. In March 1848, Carlo Alberto of Piedmont declared war on Austria, and his army was joined by volunteer forces from the Papal States and Naples. The first battle with the Austrians resulted in a Piedmontese victory. However, the rush of volunteers to fight against Austria, a Catholic power, alarmed the Pope and at the end of April he announced his neutrality in the conflict with Austria, and called the papal volunteers home. Then, in May, Ferdinando II of Naples carried out a coup d’état against the liberals, dissolved parliament and ordered the Neapolitan army to return to the kingdom. So, in the space of three months, the united Italian front against the Austrians was destroyed. Disaster followed. In July, at the battle of Custoza, the Piedmontese army suffered a crushing defeat and, shortly afterwards, Carlo Alberto signed an armistice and retreated behind his borders in Piedmont, abandoning Milan to Radetsky and the Austrian army. At the end of the summer, Ferdinando II sent his army southwards to reconquer Sicily.

The Piedmontese defeat, and the actions of Carlo Alberto, Pope Pius IX and Ferdinando II showed that the trust which moderate liberals had placed in their sovereigns was entirely misplaced. Piedmont’s army was no match for the Austrians, the Pope had no interest in Italian nationalism and Ferdinando II was an enemy of the liberals. Neo-Guelphism was a failure. It was at this point that Mazzini seized the initiative back from the moderates. He issued an emotional ‘Appeal to Italians’, declaring that if the war between kings was over, the war of the people had just become. From July
1848 onwards, the democrats gained the upper hand: in Venice, where the Republic had survived the Austrian conquest of Lombardy, popular support for Manin’s leadership remained high; in Rome, following the assassination of the moderate prime minister Pellegrino Rossi and the flight of the Pope to the fortress of Gaeta, the democrats seized control.

Mazzini arrived in Rome in February 1849. A republic was declared in Rome and a constituent assembly was called to discuss the unification of Italy. Universal manhood suffrage was introduced; the tax system was reformed; the Church’s control over education was abolished; and Church property was nationalised, and its distribution among the peasantry was announced. In the meantime, in Tuscany, a similarly radical government took power under the democrats Giuseppe Montanelli and Francesco Domenico Guerrazzi. After the Grand Duke Leopoldo abandoned Florence, a democratic republic was declared in Tuscany as well.

Yet circumstances were no more favourable to the democrats in 1849 than they had been to their Jacobin counterparts fifty years earlier. Neither in Tuscany nor in Venice were military preparations made for the defence of the republics; only in Rome, and much too late, did the republic find in Garibaldi a military leader with the ability to organise a counter-attack, but here too his forces were weak and ill-equipped. Nor, despite the reform efforts of the Roman Republic, did the democrats ever succeed in winning over the bulk of the population. Besides, just as the democrats took power in Italy, the counter-revolution gained momentum in the rest of Europe. In April 1849, Austrian domination of the Italian peninsula was reaffirmed once more, with the second decisive defeat of the Piedmontese army at Novara. This victory opened the whole peninsula to the forces of reaction.

After the defeat of Novara, Carlo Alberto abdicated the Piedmontese throne in favour of his son, Vittorio Emanuele II, but the city of Genoa rose in rebellion just the same. After ten days of revolution, the city was bombarded into submission by the Piedmontese navy; in the same period, the Austrian army brutally crushed a popular revolt in the Lombard city of Brescia and commenced a long, equally violent campaign against peasant unrest and brigandage in the lower Lombardy plain. Austria also
Figure 1.2  Giuseppe Garibaldi in Palermo, 1860.

This photograph of Garibaldi was taken at the height of his fame, during his triumphant conquest of Sicily. The hero’s relaxed, sensual pose was unusual for the period, as was his casual attire, and both emphasise his rejection of political and military conventions. The photograph provided the basis for countless reproductions in illustrated magazines, and is an indication of Garibaldi’s worldwide fame.
intervened against Tuscany. The army occupied the port city of Livorno, known for its radical sympathies, arrested and executed many revolutionary leaders, and restored the Grand Duke to his throne in Florence. Finally, in May, the Bourbon army concluded its long battle to restore royal authority to Sicily when it occupied the capital, Palermo.

So in May 1849, the democrats remained in control only of Rome and Venice. Now Rome came under attack, from Bourbon forces in the South and, more seriously, from a French expeditionary force sent by the new president, Louis Napoleon (the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte), to protect Catholics and restore the Pope. There followed two months of heroic resistance to the French siege led by Garibaldi and by volunteers from all over Italy, which captured the attention of the world’s press. But on 2 July, the outnumbered and outgunned Republic was forced to admit defeat and surrender to the French. With the remainder of his army, Garibaldi tried to march north to help the Venetian Republic, under Austrian siege and in the grip of disease and starvation. His and all other attempts to save Venice failed. The city, the last one in Europe to remain in the hands of the revolution, fell to the Austrians at the end of August.

*The ‘decade of preparation’ (1849–59)*

The revolution paid dearly for the fright given to Italian rulers in 1848 and 1849. Ten years of severe repression ensued. Both Pius IX in Rome and Leopoldo II in Tuscany turned their backs on liberalism; they reintroduced censorship and cracked down on any sign of political dissent or discontent. In Lombardy-Venetia, the presence of the Austrian police and military was felt everywhere, and those who had taken part in the revolutions were denounced, arrested, sent into exile or executed. The repressive atmosphere in the Two Sicilies spared no-one: even the most moderate liberals were arrested and condemned to long years in prison, and all cultural and political activities outside the control of the crown were frowned upon and banned. Only in Piedmont did the constitution granted by the king in 1848 live on, guaranteeing basic
political and civil liberties and allowing a narrow form of representative government. And it was only in Piedmont that the liberal atmosphere of the pre-'48 period endured, and indeed was given a boost by the increasing numbers of political exiles from elsewhere in Italy who now made Piedmont their home.

The impact of the revolutions of 1848–49 on Italian nationalism will be discussed again in chapter 6. At this point, it is worth stressing that the revolutions were a turning point for both moderates and democrats in Italy. At first, the democrats did well out of the events: Mazzini, Garibaldi and others won widespread international fame as a result of their valiant efforts to fight for a republic, and, despite the defeat, Mazzini expected victory soon. Welcomed as a hero when he returned, as an exile once more, to London, he set up a new 'National Italian Committee' and sought new funds to support the next revolution in Italy. But these early advances were misleading. They were followed by a succession of failed insurrections: Milan in 1853, Massa in 1854, Palermo in 1856 and, worst of all, Carlo Pisacane’s expedition to Sapri in 1857. In this last instance, the expedition ended terribly with Pisacane’s suicide amid the total indifference of the local population, and the imprisonment or execution of his associates.

The failure of these poorly prepared, badly armed insurrections was not entirely Mazzini’s fault, but he received all the blame when the uprisings collapsed, their leaders were captured and a general military crackdown ensued. Although Mazzini’s reputation survived in his (now) home city of London, elsewhere his standing declined. The air of failure which attached itself to his activities did little to reassure those already depressed by the experiences of persecution, imprisonment and exile. By the mid-1850s, the democratic movement began to lose both unity and momentum: criticism of Mazzini grew (‘the tyrant of our party’ according to one former supporter), and a series of dissident organisations took shape in cities like Paris and Genoa where his influence was less strong.

By far the most striking sign of the changing political climate was the establishment in 1857 of the Italian National Society. This was the creation of three democrats, Daniele Manin (ex-leader of the Venetian Republic, exiled in Paris), Giorgio Pallavicino
Trivulzio and Giuseppe La Farina (both living in exile in Turin), and it was based on their conviction that the only way forward for Italian nationalism was through an alliance with Piedmont. In effect, what Manin and the others proposed was that Mazzinians should abandon their commitment to revolution and to an Italian republic, and should instead accept the leadership of Piedmont, its monarchy and its army in a combined struggle to throw out the Austrians and unite the peninsula. National unity, rather than independence and freedom, became the prime objective for these democrats-turned-monarchists. In the years after the founding of the National Society in 1857, the movement gathered strength; it gained a large membership, a newspaper and, most importantly of all, the endorsement of the Piedmontese government.

In truth, what these developments reflected most of all was the changing role of Piedmont. This change was due to its new government after 1849 which, quite unlike anywhere else in Italy, took a decidedly liberal direction. After 1849, with the constitution of 1848 as their starting point, moderate liberals found in Piedmont the compromise between royal authority and liberal reform which had eluded them before. The Piedmontese constitution confirmed the power of the crown and the Church, but it also guaranteed freedom of the press and of association. Above all, it allowed for a parliament, that is, an elective body with the power of making and rejecting legislation and, while its power was always limited by an extremely narrow suffrage (less than 2% of the adult male population) and the royal prerogative, parliament offered moderate liberals an autonomous basis of power. Thus, the success of liberalism in Piedmont was unpredicted and never that secure. Yet from relatively fragile beginnings, the moderate liberals managed to reform the economy and to transform political life, and these impressive achievements formed a striking contrast both to political reaction elsewhere in the peninsula and the political disarray within the democratic movement.

Much of the credit for this remarkable success must go to one man, Camillo Benso di Cavour, who became prime minister of Piedmont in 1852. The second son of a minor noble family, whose father had disgraced himself by supporting Napoleon in the early 1800s, Cavour represented in his person and his outlook both
Italy's complex response to modernisation and the moderate solution to it, which was to steer a path between the twin horrors (as moderates saw them) of revolution and reaction. Cavour despised the Austrians and Mazzini in equal measure, and his real passion was for economic progress which resulted, in his view, from free trade, a liberal polity and political stability. His political models were François Guizot in France and Robert Peel in Britain; he especially admired Peel's attempt to guide the Tory party towards a programme of moderate ('conservative') reform thus stealing the radicals' political energy. In addition, Cavour combined these liberal convictions with a genuine talent as a political tactician. Between 1852 and 1859, he used these gifts to dominate Piedmontese politics and, from this position, to assert Piedmontese power within Italy and the leadership of Italy abroad.

Cavour started out in 1852 by ousting the incumbent prime minister, Massimo d'Azeglio. His support was built on a pact (often called an 'illicit alliance' or *connubio*) between the centre-right and centre-left, and the *connubio* gave him both a constant majority in parliament and a solid power base with which to resist the king's attempts to undermine parliamentary authority. Cavour, in turn, used his control of parliament to attack the Church, a main pillar of reaction in Piedmont. Civil marriage was introduced, and state control over education and over religious appointments was established. In 1855, after a protracted struggle in parliament and between parliament and the king, a law suppressing a number of religious orders was passed.

To the battle against religion Cavour joined a battle for economic growth. Free trade agreements were signed with all the major European powers except for Russia, Piedmont's banking and credit system was standardised and modernised, and huge efforts were made to encourage foreign investment. Perhaps the most striking evidence of economic progress was in the development of modern communications, including telegraph lines, canals and (primarily) railways. Cavour was a great enthusiast for rail travel, and during the 1850s railways in Piedmont increased from a mere 8 kilometres of track in 1849 to an impressive 850 kilometres in 1859 (that is, some 47% of all the railway lines in Italy).
War and diplomacy

The ascendancy of moderate liberalism in Piedmont between 1849 and 1859 is often referred to as ‘the decade of preparation’. This phrase reflects the importance of this decade for the growth of Italian nationalism and, eventually, the unification of Italy. As we have seen, the successes of Piedmont contrasted dramatically with the problems of the other Italian states, and the presence of the National Society served to emphasise the legitimacy of Piedmontese leadership over the nationalist struggle. Thanks to the activities of the National Society, Cavour – and even the king Vittorio Emanuele II – became persuaded of the advantages of an alliance with the nationalists. Never an Italian nationalist himself, and strongly opposed to the Mazzinian idea of national unification, Cavour perceived in nationalism the possibility of harnessing its broad appeal to his own political ambitions. These were to eject Austria from northern Italy and make Piedmont the dominant presence in the Lombardy plain (which he correctly recognised to be the future power house of the Italian economy).

Cavour’s methods were traditional, but he put them to quite modern ends. He acknowledged the crucial lesson of 1848–49 – that on its own Piedmont could never defeat Austria – and he also saw that diplomacy was the only way to gain an ally for Piedmont and isolate Austria. His abilities as a diplomat became evident during the Crimean War (1853–56), when he persuaded the king to enter the war on the Franco-British side and to have the ‘Italian Question’ discussed at the peace conference afterwards. From 1856 onwards, he encouraged anti-Austrian agitation in northern and central Italy, and provoked Austria into breaking off diplomatic relations in 1857. His major opportunity came in early 1858, when an ex-Mazzinian extremist, Felice Orsini, threw a bomb at the carriage of the French Emperor (Napoleon III: the former Louis Napoleon) as he travelled to the opera in Paris, claiming as his motive the suffering of Italy and Napoleon’s failure to do anything about it. This attack, which Napoleon III survived, had dramatic, and largely unintended, consequences. It further discredited Mazzini (who had little to do with it), it led to problems in France’s relations with England and, most surprising
of all, it persuaded Napoleon III to seek a rapprochement with Piedmont.

In July 1858, the two statesmen met at the French spa town of Plombières, where they devised an elaborate plan to expel Austria from northern Italy. In return for French help in the war against Austria, Napoleon III demanded the two Piedmontese provinces of Savoy and Nice for France, and a marriage between his nephew, the middle-aged dissolute Prince Jerôme, and the king of Piedmont's daughter, a pious 15-year-old girl named Clotilde. Napoleon also made French military help dependent on Austria declaring war first: only by seeming the aggressor in the war, he insisted, would Austria remain diplomatically isolated and be possible to defeat.

On this basis, the two turned their attention to the map of Italy. In their scheme, at the end of the war Piedmont would be united with Lombardy, Venice and the Papal Legations, and form a Kingdom of Upper Italy; Tuscany would form a separate kingdom with the rest of the Papal States; the Pope would be left with Rome and the surrounding province; while the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies would remain as before. Napoleon III and Cavour also talked of an Italian confederation with the Pope as president, as a consolation for the loss of most of his territory. But the fact was that the two planned an entirely different Italy from the one desired by most nationalists. Italy was to be freed from the domination of the Pope and of Austria but not united in any real sense; and its independence was to be limited by the leadership of Piedmont and France (although who would be the dominant partner in this ruling partnership was left largely undecided).

In January 1859, an alliance was signed between France and Piedmont. Over the next four months, both states did everything they could to provoke Austria into declaring war. Efforts were made to foment insurrections in central Italy; volunteers were encouraged to present themselves for the fight against Austria; and both the king of Piedmont and Napoleon III made inflammatory speeches and remarks about the situation in Italy. Princess Clotilde's marriage to Prince Jerôme was announced. And although these plans for war suffered a temporary setback when Britain's attempt at mediation was accepted by the French, in the end Austria walked into the trap by threatening war if Piedmont did not
immediately disarm. In April 1859, Piedmont refused and Austria declared war.

The war was short – just over two months – but it was decisive for the future of Italy. The combined armies of France and Piedmont narrowly defeated the Austrians at the battles of Magenta and Solferino, and in June Vittorio Emanuele and Napoleon III entered Milan to a triumphant welcome. Yet opposition at home, and the terrible violence of the two battles, led Napoleon to lose his nerve and in July he negotiated a separate peace with Franz Josef, the Austrian Emperor, at Villafranca. By the terms of this treaty, and to the fury of Cavour, Austria lost Lombardy but held on to Venice. Moreover, to save Austria’s face, Lombardy was ceded first to France and only then to Piedmont, thus emphasising Piedmont’s minor position in the European hierarchy of Great Powers. Finally, and despite a series of pro-Piedmontese revolts in the central Italian duchies and in the Legations, the status quo there (and with it Austrian and/or papal authority) was reaffirmed in the treaty.

Undeniable, nevertheless, was the defeat of Austria in northern Italy. During the months that followed Villafranca it proved impossible to restore the status quo, and the liberal governments which were set up in Tuscany and the Legations rejected their former rulers and sought a union with Piedmont. In March 1860, plebiscites were held in the central Italian states, and they resulted in an overwhelming vote in favour of Piedmontese rule. In the same month, Piedmont announced the annexation of Savoy and Nice to France.

So although the national and international outcry which arose after the cession of Savoy and Nice discredited Cavour (now back in power after a temporary withdrawal from politics), the result was largely in his favour. Piedmont had lost two border provinces and had failed to acquire Venice, but in return had gained control of Lombardy (the real prize) along with the considerable bonus of central Italy, defeating Austria and the Pope in the process. Besides, Napoleon III was bruised by the unpopularity of his Italian policy and began to withdraw from the peninsula. Piedmont was left in control of Italy.
Unification, 1860–70

At the moment of his greatest triumph, Cavour was forced to face his biggest challenge yet. The problems which he came to face were due to two unforeseen consequences of the war with Austria. First, as we have seen, the crisis of Austria in Italy was a calamity for Austria’s Italian allies, and its defeat destabilised not just central Italy but the south of the peninsula as well. In particular, the loss of Austrian support had a devastating effect on the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Already reeling from financial problems and the death of the long-lived sovereign Ferdinando II, the Bourbon kingdom now lurched toward disaster. So, when a minor revolution broke out in Palermo and its provinces, the government prove unable to control it. Second, the vacuum left by the Austrians benefited not just Piedmont and the moderates, but their opponents too; and the months before and following the war were marked by an upsurge in unitarian nationalism. Democratic agitation in favour of continuing the war against Austria, and extending it to the Papal States, was led by Giuseppe Garibaldi, the most visible and popular symbol of the Italian Risorgimento. Until spring 1860, Cavour managed to hold back the twin tides of nationalism and revolution. But in the course of the spring, all this was to change.

In the war of 1859, Garibaldi had fought with Piedmont against Austria. A Mazzinian nationalist turned supporter of moderate liberalism in the hope of achieving unification, he was like most nationalists disillusioned by the peace of Villafranca and turned against Cavour in its aftermath. Devastated by the news that Cavour had ceded Nice, his home town, to France, he quickly recovered his revolutionary roots. It was in Sicily, where the news of revolution was being talked up by Mazzinian supporters in the island, that Garibaldi saw some hope, so he set sail from Genoa in early May, with about a thousand volunteers, to overthrow the Bourbon kingdom and unite the South with the rest of Italy. The expedition of the ‘Thousand’ was proclaimed in the name of Italy and the king of Piedmont (‘Italia e Vittorio Emanuele’), but there was little doubt about Garibaldi’s real intentions. These were to challenge Cavour, overturn the Italian settlement and, if successful in
the South, march on Rome, take the city from the Pope and make it the capital of a democratic Italy.

The results exceeded all expectations. In less than six months, with apparent ease, Garibaldi defeated the Bourbon army, first in Sicily and then on the mainland, and overthrew the Bourbon kingdom. He put together a substantial (c.20,000 strong) volunteer army, made up largely of men from northern and central Italy but including some foreign enthusiasts as well; and he proclaimed himself dictator and reorganised the government, with an administration and police force modelled on the Piedmontese system, and introduced a number of far-reaching social reforms. Above all, his conquest of the South gave the democrats a solid basis of power. When, in September 1860, he entered Naples by train to a triumphant welcome it was to find the capital already abandoned by the Bourbon royal family, who had fled to their fortress in Capua a few days before. In October, Garibaldi defeated the Bourbon army on the Volturro river, thereby opening the road to Rome.

Few political leaders have captured the public imagination quite like Garibaldi. Still, the global enthusiasm that greeted his conquest of the Two Sicilies was not shared by the Piedmontese government. Horrified by the implications of Garibaldi’s success for Cavour’s design for Italy, whether this was through a resurgence of Mazzinianism or the provocation of French intervention to protect the Pope, Cavour determined to stop Garibaldi taking Rome. For that reason, in September 1860, he sent the Piedmontese army into and through the Papal States to meet Garibaldi north of Naples. The Piedmontese first defeated the papal forces at Castelfidardo, and took control of Umbria and the Marche, and in October the royal army, led by the king, met with Garibaldi’s volunteer forces in a chilly encounter at Teano. Shortly before, amid growing problems of law and order and peasant violence over land, plebiscites held in the southern mainland and Sicily had voted in favour of annexation by Piedmont. In November, Garibaldi handed power over to Piedmont and left Naples for his island home on Caprera. The following year, in February, Italy was formally united, with Vittorio Emanuele II of Piedmont as its first king and Turin as its capital city.
Map 1.3  The Unification of Italy, 1859–70
The years of the Risorgimento, and the events of Italian unification, are among the most mythologised in modern history, and they are also politically controversial. Behind the myth and the controversies lies the ambivalent nature of what happened in 1859–60. Garibaldi’s greatest success ended in his own defeat; and the union of North and South took place in an atmosphere of distrust, disappointment and popular disorder. Italy was united with Venice still under Austria, and the Pope in Rome protected by a French garrison. Only in 1866, after a disastrous war with Austria, did Italy gain control of Venice; for Rome, the government had to wait another four years before Napoleon III withdrew his troops. And although Rome became the capital of Italy in 1870, Pope Pius IX maintained an implacable opposition to the new ‘usurper’ state, proclaiming himself (and his successors) a ‘prisoner of the Vatican’ and ordering loyal Catholics not to participate in Italian politics.

The problems of ‘post-Risorgimento’ Italy are discussed in chapter seven. But the central ironies of Italian unification are clear from this narrative of events. The main architects of unity, the Piedmontese moderate liberals, had no interest in the edifice. Those who had fought long and hard for its construction – Mazzini, Garibaldi, the democratic movement as a whole – had little part in the final result. The sense of difference and decline relative to European neighbours, which had driven successive attempts at reform and revolution in Italy since the mid-eighteenth century, was not reversed by the wars of 1859–60 with their dependence on France, the failure to reach Venice and Rome and the collapse of the Two Sicilies. The position of the people, also a thorn in the side of Italian reformers and revolutionaries from the Enlightenment onwards, was not altered by unification. Nor, for the most part, did the poor want or welcome these events.

Unification, so often celebrated as the culmination of Italy’s struggle for freedom and unity, was in fact a contingent response to a grave and much longer-term political and social crisis. Events between 1848 and 1860 had simply made more visible the deep social and political divisions which had long destabilised the Italian peninsula, and these had at last exploded in 1859–60 into a bitter, and in many ways unresolved, struggle for power. The successors of Cavour, Garibaldi and Mazzini were to tussle with the
legacy of this conflict in the generations to come. As we shall see, the events themselves, their causes, significance and consequences were to feed endless and often equally angry disagreements among historians as well.
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