



**Italy Celebrates the 150th
Anniversary of its Unification**

By

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With this symbol of three flags, Italy celebrated the 150th Anniversary of its Unification on March 17th of this year. On the day before, President Barack Obama issued a Proclamation honoring the “courage, sacrifice and vision of the patriots who gave birth to the Italian nation.”

Question: How is it possible that a people who had inhabited the Italian Peninsula for over 5,000 years and had spoken a common language during the 1,000 years of the Roman Republic and Empire, and whose literate class had been writing and speaking a version of the Tuscan Dialect since the time of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio for at least 500 years—had to wait until the mid-nineteenth century to become a nation-state—long after the United States of America, the “youngest” nation at that time, had so declared itself?

The answer usually given recites a long list of invasions from Northern Europe, Africa and the Middle East, plus the on-going battle of the Papacy to keep itself free of control by other political entities, from the time of the fall of the Roman Empire.

But that is not the entire story. True, every invading group carved out a piece of the peninsula to call its own, and continuous skirmishes for territory left only temporary boundaries and ruling political entities in place.

What caused the invasions and constant warfare in the first place, was wealth, pure and simple. Whether it was the location of the peninsula in the middle of the Mediterranean making it the chief trading partner of the civilized world, or the arts and crafts which developed into industries which attracted the gold and silver of merchants and bankers as far away as China and England--- wealth, and the ingenuity of the people, rich and poor, to adapt to changing circumstances, is the principal reason so many armies of so many other developing nation-states from the time of the Renaissance on, did their best to prevent the unification of the territory called Italy, except under their own control.

The winner of this battle was himself considered an “outsider”—mainly because of the peripheral base of his own power. The oldest continuous monarchy in Europe at the time was that of the “Kingdom of Sardinia” headed by Victor Emmanuel II, whose territory included Savoy and Piedmont on the extreme northwest border of the peninsula. Its people mainly spoke French formally, and an Italian dialect, although Giuseppe Garibaldi (from Nice/*Nizza*), considered himself an Italian patriot. Strangely enough, one of the principal collaborators in later stages of the unification was the French Emperor Napoleon III, who in his youth had been a member of the radical Italian revolutionary group, the “*Carbonari*”.

So, how did this most unlikely outcome, considering the nature of the deep divisions and strongly held prejudices against such a unification among most of the political leaders of Italy and Europe, actually come about?

Background

First, the French Revolution itself was an empowering motivation for all those discordant voices throughout Italy who wanted to see the demise of the status quo. With the defeat of Napoleon I in 1815 the Austrians became firmly entrenched in Venice, which, before Napoleon bartered it in return for control of the rest of the peninsula in 1797, had enjoyed an independent existence as a rich Maritime Republic lasting almost 1,000 years (the Roman Republic had itself existed for only 500 years).

In the “Kingdom of the Two Sicilies”, which included Naples and the entire lower half of the Boot as well as the Island of Sicily,

insurgencies against resident foreign rulers, whether Spanish, French or Papal, had been almost endemic for centuries. Perhaps the most famous of these was notoriously called “The Sicilian Vespers” which threw out the French (Angevin) and, unfortunately, invited in the Spanish (Aragonese) at the end of the 13th Century.

By the 19th century a lesser branch of the Bourbon family (derived from an area in Navarre, itself on the border of France and Spain) sat confidently in control of Naples and the remains of the Norman territories on the peninsula and Sicily. The result was that, by introducing feudalism into these two areas, the wealth that might have encouraged the type of mercantile and industrial development that had become common to the North, was reduced to mostly agrarian levels confiscated by the “nobility”, thereby forcing the bulk of the population of the South to the level of peasants and sharecroppers (“coloni”) living in extreme poverty and illiteracy.

Astride the central regions of Italy, from Rome to Bologna and the Romagna, around the border of Tuscany, were the Papal States, constantly roiled in controversy and battling to maintain the independence of the Papacy. This was especially true after the Popes returned from the “Babylonian Captivity” at Avignon and the subsequent “Schism” which saw as many as three popes contend for the throne at the same time. Some Popes actually led their own armies into battle (Julius II) and some sought to carve out principalities from the Papal territories for their illegitimate children (Alexander VI).

In the North, where the Lombards and the Tuscans as well as the Venetians frequently fought to control the main passageways on both sides of the Apennines through the peninsula towards Rome and Naples, regimes alternated between Republican and Despotic

governments led by families of rich merchants and bankers. It was this heavy concentration of relatively free and mostly stable political systems that allowed the wealth and creativity of the Renaissance to flourish, and in doing so, become almost impossible to ignore temptations to ambitious empire builders like the Holy Roman Empire, France and Spain.

That series of constant invasions from armies far larger than any that the relatively small city-states of the north could possibly raise, spelled the doom of independence for them and any hope of unification of the country. The only way to survive was through alliances among themselves which usually turned out to be temporary, and with the much bigger powers of the continent, which not only saw themselves treated as subjects rather than equals, but lasted only as long as those powers were themselves dominant.

The Kingdom of Italy and its Flags

The reason for the three Italian flags in the icon symbolizing the Celebration of the 150th Anniversary of the Unification of Italy, was simply that the actual unification took place in three stages. The *Tricolore* was itself based on the French *Tricolour* following the French Revolution. But in 1796 the colors were simply derived from those of the city of Milan, and between 1797 to 1861, as many as 18 variants on this flag were displayed, as little by little, different regions of the country declared themselves in favor of unification. The 1861 flag itself bore the Coat-of-Arms of the Kingdom of Sardinia (Piedmont) on the white stripe.

Even then the area we know as Italy today did not see its final form until after World War I. And the flag itself was not adopted in its current form as the symbol of the Italian Republic until 1946!! (Never let it be said that Italians do things quickly and efficiently!) Not even the name of the country is without controversy and mystery.

While linguists say the name Italy is derived from the Greek word *italoi* meaning calf, because of the many cattle herds spotted in the countryside when the Greeks first arrived, some Greek historians and Roman poets claimed that the name derived from that of Italus, the descendant of the Trojan Aeneas, whose own descendants, Romulus and Remus, established the city of Rome.

But, the term “Kingdom of Italy” seems to have been used for the first time by the Lombards and then by the descendant of Charlemagne, Otto I, who declared himself King in 961 AD., and pretty much controlled most of the Peninsula, including Rome and the Papacy. The territory was too rich not to be taxed and otherwise “plundered” by all those who preceded and followed, including Byzantines, Arabs, Franks, Germans and Spaniards. Napoleon himself was the first in modern times to revive the name “Kingdom of Italy” when he declared himself “King” in 1805. But none of these conquerors was really interested in the creation of a unified nation-state---just in the numbers of conscripts that could be forced to serve in their armies to assist in their conquests elsewhere, and, of course, for the monies that could be extracted to support those ventures.

Nevertheless, it was *Italia* in the 19th Century, and later *Italia Irredenta* that became the rallying cry for those who wanted to see a nation united and extended to the furthest boundaries that history,

culture and language would allow. Unfortunately that never happened---but then, why should we be surprised? Italy is in too critical a position geographically for the outcome ever to have been the ideal one.

Unification in Three Stages

In the early 19th century there were as many as eleven separate political entities on the peninsula plus Sicily (depending on how you count them—San Marino?). Each had its own system of government, ranging from absolute monarchy to oligarchic republic. The laws, judicial procedures, systems of taxation and administration, were as diverse as the entities themselves, and were subject to corruption as one might expect, where “favors” could be done in exchange for wealth or deeds, and where “brigandage” was often considered a heroic occupation (like Robin Hood, with similar results).

The actual movement towards unification gained impetus when French control of the peninsula lost out to Austrian dominance following the Congress of Vienna in 1815, where Metternich described Italy as a mere “geographic expression.” His purpose was to restore Italy to its previous configuration of “states”, but under the control of Austria.

“Peace” lasted until 1820 when first, Naples, led by the radical *Carbonari*, revolted against Ferdinand I and insisted on having its own constitution, based on that recently adopted in Spain. He consented, but Sicily then declared itself independent of the recently constituted Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (each having separate laws and institutions), and war broke out between the Neapolitans and

the Sicilians. The Sicilians demanded their own constitution, not a copy of that of Spain. Ferdinand abdicated but Austria intervened and suffocated both uprisings, leaving the Sicilians convinced that the only recourse was to fight for unification of the entire peninsula under a single government.

The uprisings in the South served to inflame similar conspiracies in the North, but among aristocrats, businessmen and professionals. Massive arrests in Lombardy caused Piedmontese authorities to request similar Austrian intervention against conspirators in their own territory! But these actions only served to arouse the sympathies of the moderates to the cause of unification, thus revealing that not only radical republicans but “liberal” (i.e., constitutional) monarchists also supported the cause.

By 1830 similar battles for freedom and constitutionalism were breaking out all over Europe, especially Spain and Greece (Lord Byron), and an exodus of literati from Italy spread the word about the need for assistance for the cause of Italian unification and independence. Eventually they succeeded in attracting the attention of the British whose major concern at this time was for the stability of trade in the Mediterranean (Malta).

The French joined the fray in overturning their restored Monarchy and establishing that of the “liberal” constitutionalist, Louis Philippe, the Duc D’Orleans. This gave hope to the Italians that something similar might be possible with French assistance. Thus in 1831 the “July Revolution” in Modena, Parma and the Papal States, except for Rome, broke out, but this too was soon crushed when Louis Philippe declared that French blood would be spilled for France alone. (Amazing considering how many Italian conscripts had lost their lives on Russian soil fighting for Napoleon.)

Giuseppe Mazzini, who had begun his political activities as a member of the *Carbonari*, became disillusioned following these two crushing defeats and formed a non-secret society known as Young Italy (*La Giovine Italia*). His purpose was to fight openly, using what later became known as “guerrilla tactics,” for the creation of a single republican nation, which would embody the law of God and humanity that people be “free, equal and brothers” (*liberte`, egalite`, fraternite`*). His thesis, which became the rallying cry of many patriots during the 1848 uprising, was, “*L’Italia fara` da se`*” (Italy will do it by itself). Unfortunately, his goals were not appreciated by the Piedmontese authorities and he was condemned to death *in absentia*.

Giuseppe Garibaldi, who is usually cited as Mazzini’s partner in leading the call for unification, actually took a slightly different tack. Despite the desire of Piedmont to take control of Lombardy and the Veneto from Austria, Charles Albert, Regent then King, became known as the “Hamlet of Italy” for not being able to make up his mind about the appropriate time to make his move. Garibaldi was among those who later favored unification under the “liberal monarchy” of Piedmont, once the constitutional and economic reforms necessary to increase industrial development and trade had been undertaken. The example of Lombardy’s struggle to do the same while the fruits of her labor constituted a full one-third of Austria’s income, made anger and a desire for liberty, a universal outcry.

But Garibaldi himself had been forced into exile in the 1830s after leading a rebellion in the Piedmontese Navy, to South America where he lived for twelve years, married his first wife Anita, and participated in wars for liberation in Brazil and Uruguay, and

adopted the “redshirt” as the uniform of his followers. His military experience in addition to his origins as a seaman, transformed him from a patriotic political revolutionary to a war hardened military commander, ready to gather his own well disciplined troops (not just guerrillas) and lead them into battle. In the 1840s he and Mazzini both turned their attention to Rome as the center for unification, when it first appeared that they might have the support of the Pope himself for the process.

The story of the “liberal” Pope, Pio Nono (Pius the Ninth), is itself an example of fond hopes of liberalization gone sour. After agreeing to certain reforms which caused the people of the Papal States to believe that they, too, could join the economic future that was gradually spreading in Piedmont, and to a limited degree, in other parts of the North, Pius was widely applauded as a “liberal” pope. But when the Pope realized that he might be drawn into a war against Catholic Austria in the process, he changed direction and refused to go any further. He attributed previous reforms to his own “benevolence,” and not to the “Rights of Man.”

But Mazzini and Garibaldi refused to give up. In 1848 they joined an uprising by the inhabitants of the City of Rome itself, and temporarily forced the Pope into exile. In 1849 a Roman Republic was declared, but Pius excommunicated all participants. Then, when a French expeditionary force came to the Pope’s assistance, Garibaldi led a magnificent retreat in which most of his forces remained intact, thereby sealing his reputation as a brilliant military commander. Unfortunately his pregnant wife, Anita, died by his side in the escape (women frequently fought side by side with men during these uprisings).

This defeat destroyed Mazzini's idea that Italy could do it by itself, and led many to the realization that only "great powers" could defeat "great powers." And Garibaldi himself gradually came to realize that, only a "liberal monarchy," not a democratic republic, probably led by the "middle classes," not by the poor and downtrodden as Mazzini had hoped, and allied to one or more of those "great powers," would be the outcome. He fled into exile once again and eventually made his way to New York City where he became a citizen of the United States (and declined a ticker tape parade in his honor).

The man most responsible for achieving that goal was Piedmont's Prime Minister, Camillo Benso, Conte di Cavour. It was he, who, after extensive travels in England, France and throughout Europe, was determined to bring economic prosperity to Piedmont by building railroads to increase exports, and encouraging large-scale agriculture and industry. He founded the newspaper, *Il Risorgimento*, to spread his ideas, and thus gave the name to that wave of the struggle which began in 1848. He ran for political office shortly after Charles Albert agreed to accept a constitution (*Statuto*, in French!) and eventually became Prime Minister under Victor Emmanuel II. It was this development that caused the unification movement to turn to Piedmont, and specifically to Cavour, for leadership and hope.

Surprisingly, it was Napoleon III, who had originally supported Mazzini's aims for a united Italy while he himself was elected President of the French Second Republic after the overthrow of Louis Philippe, who led the force that overturned Mazzini's Roman Republic and freed the Pope. Then, three years into his Presidency of France in 1852, he convinced the French people to change their

new constitution to allow him to be declared Emperor of the Second French Empire (!).

When Piedmont joined with Britain and France against Russia during the Crimean War in 1856, France became receptive to Cavour's goals in Northern Italy. In 1858 a secret meeting took place between Napoleon III and Cavour which resulted in an agreement that, in return for Piedmont's ceding to France the provinces of Savoy and Nice, France would assist Piedmont in a war to wrest control of Lombardy and the Veneto from Austria. (No humanitarian motivation here!) Unfortunately, Napoleon III reneged on his promise to free the Veneto, but Cavour labored on. Thus began what is usually considered the third wave of the movement toward Unification.

After participating in the war of 1859 in the alpine regions of Northern Italy, Garibaldi shifted his sights to Sicily and Naples. He led a group of volunteers called "Il Mille" ("The Thousand," which actually consisted of 1,080 men, who also wore red shirts), into Sicily and, with practically no opposition from the Bourbon army there, was able to set up a provisional government with the insurgents in Palermo. His reputation, it seems, had preceded him, and he was momentarily declared "Dictator" (a la Caesar)! With a much expanded force, he crossed into Naples with the help of the British Navy (!), and met with similar results. He was about to proceed to Rome, when Cavour cut him off with Piedmont troops (with the permission of the Pope!), almost at the border of the Papal States.

Cavour did not want to have another intervention on the Pope's behalf by either France or Austria, or to arouse opposition from devout Catholics throughout Italy at this time, so he convinced Garibaldi to turn away from Rome, and to join with his efforts to

unify the peninsula under the control of Piedmont, despite Garibaldi's anger over the absorption of Nice by France. Thus, the historic meeting between Victor Emmanuel II and Garibaldi at Teano just south of Rome, on October 26, 1860, in which Garibaldi greeted him as the "King of Italy," is one more mark of Cavour's preeminent talents as a mediator.

His political genius was soon after demonstrated by a series of "spontaneous" uprisings and plebiscites which took place throughout Northern Italy and in some of the major provinces of the Papal States as well, voting to join with Piedmont in unifying Italy under the banner of the King of Sardinia. But Garibaldi's capitulation was itself "earthshaking" in its influence, and is considered today the most important single event in the Unification of Italy.

In 1861, not only did Naples and Sicily vote in favor of annexation to Piedmont, but Tuscany, Emilia, the Marche and Umbria voted to do the same, leaving just a small area around Rome and Lazio under the control of the Pope. This did not pacify the Pope, but it did leave him with a remnant of independence he might not have had, had Garibaldi succeeded earlier. Thus on March 17, 1861 the new "Kingdom of Italy" was declared, with its capitol first at Turin and then in Florence.

But that's not the end of the story: In 1866 Italy joined with Prussia in its war of independence against Austria, thereby leading to the unification of Germany, and succeeded in gaining the Veneto as a result. Then in 1870 Napoleon III was himself overthrown at the Battle of Sedan by the newly formed German Empire, and the Third French Republic was established. Italian troops, free of French and Austrian interference at last, were able to enter Rome once again,

and a plebiscite throughout Lazio voted for annexation to Italy (!) despite the Pope's prohibition against voting (*Non expedit*).

Pio Nono excommunicated Victor Emmanuel II but the Italian Parliament voted to move the Capitol to Rome, and the Pope became the "Prisoner of the Vatican." The First Vatican Council almost simultaneously declared the doctrine of "Papal Infallibility," and this previously "liberal" Pope became the most conservative as well as the first "modern" Pope, because of the strengthening of the Papacy in the realm of Faith while diminishing its influence as a political entity. It remained for Mussolini to conclude the Concordat with the Papacy in 1929 that recognized Vatican City as an independent state complete with its own administration and police.

In addition, after World War I, in which Italy fought on the side of Britain, France and the United States, the Treaty of London gave Italy the Italian speaking areas of Trent, Trentino and Trieste, as well as German speaking Alto Adige, but not the former Venetian city of Fiume or the now Slavic speaking territories around the Adriatic also founded by Venice, which were absorbed into Yugoslavia (Slovenia and Croatia). Thus *Italia Irredenta* remained partially unclaimed, although Mussolini did succeed in getting Fiume ceded to Italy in 1924. But his decision to join with Germany instead of the Allies in World War II, ended the matter.

Unfortunately, it also took decades to achieve what Mazzini had hoped to do from the beginning, include the "*popolo*" as well as the middle classes in the political and economic life of the new nation—to create "Italians," not just reluctant subjects of what they considered a new conqueror, Piedmont. The mass emigrations of lower class Italians towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, especially from southern Italy and Sicily, would

clearly mark their dissatisfaction with the outcome of the unification, until the newly created Republic of Italy after World War II finally turned the attention of the entire nation to the poverty and devastation of the region, and began to carry out the necessary reforms to correct the situation in the *Mezzogiorno*.

Thus it was that Mazzini's dream of a true democratic republic for Italy came to be vindicated and realized, but more than a century after he first enunciated it in his call for "*Il Giovine Italia*". The Italian Republic of 1948 not only replaced the Monarchy, it also adopted the form of the *tricolore* which we see today: green, white and red stripes without the Sardinian/Piedmont crest.