



Italian Nationalism: A Point of View

By Bennett Sherry

The histories of nations are often told as the stories of great men. Men like Otto von Bismarck or George Washington loom large in nationalist narratives. How do our interpretations change when we consider events through the life of a single unnamed (and in this case, imaginary) woman?

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Too Many Italies

Italian nationalism began when Napoleon invaded in 1796. Men with different ideas on how to run a nation argued about what “Italy” should mean for the next hundred years. Yet this is your story. You are a woman who lived through it.

You were born a Venetian and will die an Italian. In between, you’ll be many things.

Your parents lived in the Republic of Venice. At the time of your birth in 1805, the city had been conquered three times: first by Napoleon and France, then by the Austrians, then by Napoleon again. Napoleon was defeated in 1815. Your parents hoped for a free Italy. It was not to be. At the Congress of Vienna, Italy was returned to Austria.

The last people to rule all of Italy were Roman emperors. For the next 1,200 years, people lived in city-states. They were Florentines, Milanese, Genoese, Neapolitans, and Venetians. They were not Italians.

Italy was Europe’s battlefield for centuries. France, Spain, and Austria fought over the Italian city-states. The city-states themselves disliked each other. They often went to war with each other.

After Napoleon’s invasion and defeat, Italians had a common enemy: the French and the Austrians. Italian nationalism began.

A Risorgimento Life

Three famous men shaped your political life. They disagreed on politics, but all were nationalists. They united under the cause of Italian unification—*Risorgimento* or “revival.” These men were:

- **Count Cavour** wanted Italy ruled under a constitution by the king of Piedmont-Sardinia.
- **Giuseppe Mazzini** wanted an Italian republic.
- **Giuseppe Garibaldi** was a true radical. After a failed 1834 uprising he was sentenced to death. He fled to South America. He became well known around the world for his skill as a general.

Men and women across Italy all came together to support these three men. They also wanted Italian nationalism.



A map of Italy in 1843. Showing at least eight separate states, most of them controlled by the Austrian Empire. By Gigillo83, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Your father joined a secret society to resist Austria. Revolts in the south inspired uprisings in northern Italy in 1820. Your father headed to Milan. He died in battle in 1821. Several years later, you met your husband and moved to Genoa. Genoa is a city in the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia.

During the 1830s, rebellions erupted all over Europe. Garibaldi led a failed uprising in Genoa. The Austrian army crushed the uprising. Yet nationalism did not die.

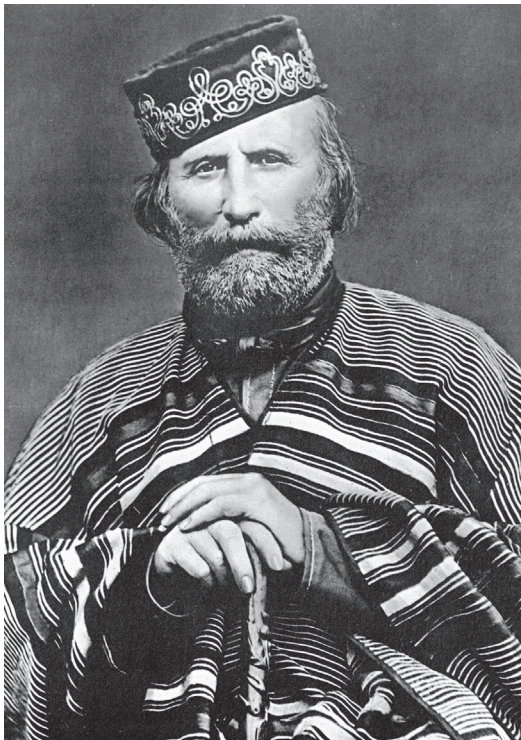
A Fire Across Europe

In 1848, Europe erupted in revolution. People took to the streets across Italy. They wanted a constitution. King Charles Albert of Piedmont-Sardinia marched with an army. He fought against Austria in the hopes of uniting northern Italy.

You joined Garibaldi's volunteer army. They fought a guerilla war on their way from Venice to Rome. Garibaldi and his men, including Mazzini, declared a new Roman Republic.



A painting of Italian nationalists in Milan, 1848 beneath the tri-color Italian flag. Public domain.



Garibaldi in 1866. Ever since he met his first wife, Anita, in Brazil, Garibaldi wore a South American poncho into battle, even when he returned to Italy in 1848. Public domain.



Ana Maria de Jesus Ribeiro da Silva—better known as Anita. Public domain.

The Roman Republic lasted a few months. The disunity of the Italian revolutionaries caused their downfall. Florentines failed to cooperate with Romans. Republicans failed to cooperate with monarchists. In the north, the Austrians defeated Charles Albert. The last two cities to remain free were Venice and Rome.

The republic fell. You fled the city with a few hundred revolutionaries, including Garibaldi and his wife Anita. Two months later, Venice fell to the Austrians. In 1849, you returned to Genoa. Revolutionary leaders fled to exile while you stayed in Italy.

The Kingdom of Italy

You spent the Second War of Italian Independence on the sidelines. You were older. The disappointments of 1848 remained. Your children felt differently. Prime Minister Cavour and King Victor Emmanuel of Piedmont-Sardinia decided to unify Italy in 1859. Your sons marched to war.

Unlike in 1848, the revolutionaries of 1859 made compromises. The biggest compromise was that Italy would be a kingdom, not a republic. Victor Emmanuel would be the king.

You would later read a book. The book had an account of the battle that killed your oldest son:

"[I]t is a sheer butchery; a struggle between savage beasts, maddened with blood and fury."

from *A Memory of Solferino*, by Harry Dunant

The book helped create the International Committee of the Red Cross. They want laws to protect soldiers in war. You wish them well, but you're not hopeful.

You reflect back on your life. In 1861, you became an Italian. Victor Emmanuel, Cavour, and Garibaldi fought against Austria. They united Italy. By 1871, Victor Emmanuel II sat on a throne in the capital of Rome as the first king of a united Italy since the Romans. The nationalist dream became reality.

Your own dreams were not quite fulfilled. You bled for Italy and wanted an Italy free of kings. There is a king and women do not vote.



A satirical 1861 cartoon, showing Garibaldi and Cavour making Italy, as represented by the boot. Public domain.



Expedition of the Thousand, Unification of Italy - Giuseppe Garibaldi at the Battle of Calatafimi, 15 May 1860 by Remigio Legat, oil on canvas, 1860. DEA / A. RIZZI / Getty Images

A Calatafimi Obituary

You die on the same day as Garibaldi. You will not be a national hero, but yours is also a “Risorgimento” story.

You never meet your great-grandchildren. Most of the boys die in the First World War. The ones who survive will resent how little Italy receives after the war. They join a leader who promotes fascism. Fascism is an extreme form of Italian nationalism. The leader is Benito Mussolini. His ideas will help inspire some of the world’s greatest violence.

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Image credits

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Expedition of the Thousand, Unification of Italy - Giuseppe Garibaldi at the Battle of Calatafimi, 15 May 1860 by Remigio Legat, oil on canvas, 1860. © DEA / A. RIZZI / Getty Images.



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