

BREVISSIMA STORIA D'ITALIA (Prima parte)

The Unification of Italy

From the fall of the Roman Empire (mid-4th century) until the mid-19th century the territory that makes up modern Italy consisted of a politically fragmented region. While the Catholic Church carved out a state in central Italy ruled over by the Pope, different areas of northern and southern Italy came under the shifting control of local rulers and direct control by foreign powers such as the Holy Roman Empire, Austria, Spain, and France. This fractured political reality created large regional differences between various parts of the peninsula.

In the first few decades of the 19th century, Italian nationalism grew throughout the peninsula, and calls for a united Italian state increased in aristocratic, intellectual and bourgeois circles. This period and movement is known as the Italian *Risorgimento* [*resurgence*]. Early groups that wanted more rights and liberty from their foreign rulers eventually coalesced in the 1830s into the group **Young Italy** [*la Giovine Italia*], under the charismatic leader **Giuseppe Mazzini** (1805-1872). Mazzini not only wanted a unified Italy, but he wanted the new Italian state to be a democratic republic. Mazzini was convinced that the only way to achieve this was through revolution. As revolutions swept across Europe in 1848, Mazzini seized the opportunity and called for a pan-Italian revolution. Mazzini himself led a guerrilla force into Rome, seized the city, and declared Rome a republic, causing the Pope to flee. Although this and other revolutions around Italy during that year were all eventually quashed, the enthusiasm for an independent Italian state was rising.

Whereas Mazzini might have had the fervor, the next man with the real political power and strategic acumen to unify Italy was **Camillo Benso di Cavour** (1810-1861), prime minister of the **Kingdom of Sardinia**, made up of the island of Sardinia, the region of Piedmont, the region of Savoy, and Nice. Cavour's original intentions were simply prestige and power for the Kingdom of Sardinia, but his goal – uniting the Italian peninsula under the same flag - was one and the same with those who wanted an Italian state. Moreover, the Kingdom of Sardinia had a moderate king in **Victor Emmanuel II**, who ruled in a parliamentary constitutional monarchy: a political arrangement not as democratic as Mazzini had fought for, but one that many of those who sought an Italian republic would be willing to accept.

Cavour knew that the most powerful nation in northern Italy in the mid-19th century was the **Austro-Hungarian Empire**, which possessed the large and rich territory of Lombardy-Veneto. Knowing that the Kingdom of Sardinia could not defeat the Austrians alone, Cavour tried to position the kingdom in a politically advantageous position by entering the Crimean War on the side of France, Great Britain, and the Ottoman Empire in the mid-1850s. Meanwhile, Cavour strengthened Sardinia and its territories from within, building railroads and improving the military. Although the Kingdom of Sardinia joined the Crimean war late and made very little real impact on the outcome, Cavour's move had gained his state powerful international friends in

Great Britain and France. With their help secured, Cavour stirred up nationalist rebellions in the territory controlled by Austria: Cavour's troops invaded Lombardy from Piedmont, and France immediately sent troops to aid in the effort. The Kingdom of Sardinia won the conflict, and Austria surrendered Lombardy to the Kingdom of Sardinia in 1859. At the same time, Italians in Parma, Tuscany, and other central and northern Italian states rebelled against their independent rulers and were annexed to Sardinia the following year. In exchange for its help, France received the territories of Savoy and Nice.

With northern Italy now largely under the Sardinian flag, Cavour sent **Giuseppe Garibaldi** (1807-1882) with a small force of about 1000 men (*i Mille*) to southern Italy in 1860. Garibaldi was a long-time Italian revolutionary, and had been part of Mazzini's force that had attempted to set up a republic in Rome in 1848. Even though Garibaldi was furious with Cavour for having ceded Nice to France — Garibaldi was from Nice — Cavour managed to placate him and Garibaldi began his campaign, swiftly conquering Sicily before crossing onto the southern Italian mainland, encountering little resistance along the way. In October of 1860, Garibaldi turned his conquests over to King Victor Emmanuel II. In **1861**, Victor Emmanuel proclaimed all his territory to be the **Kingdom of Italy**, and thus he became the first modern King of Italy, a parliamentary monarchy.

The only parts of modern Italy which remained outside this new country were the Papal States in the center and the Veneto in the northeast. Realizing that a direct attack on the Pope would lead to international intervention, Cavour secretly encouraged riots and protests in the Papal States and before long two of the three states joined Italy, leaving the city of Rome standing alone. Rome was protected by the French, and the Veneto was still under Austrian control. The new Italian state (of which Cavour was the first prime minister) bided its time. In 1866, with Austria at war with Prussia, Italy saw an opportunity and joined the Prussian cause. After Prussia's victory, Italy annexed the Veneto.

The new Italy

Prussia proved a useful partner again in **1870**, when a conflict between France and Prussia caused France to pull its troops out of Rome. The Italian Army attacked Rome, fighting its way into the city by breaching the walls at the **Porta Pia gate**. The Pope's army, no longer supported by the French, capitulated quickly: the Pope surrendered and Rome was at last made the capital of Italy. However, the Pope refused to recognize the Kingdom of Italy as legitimate, and considered himself a prisoner in the Vatican. The Italian Parliament passed a "Law of Guarantees" which promised that its army would defend the independence of the Pope and provide him with a pension. But it was a unilateral decision, having no force in international law, and it stopped short of recognizing the Pope as the sovereign of an independent state. Only decades later, in 1929, the Church and the Fascist regime signed a pact that normalized the relations between the Italian state and the Vatican.

After the conquest of Rome in 1870, Italian politicians settled down to manage the economy, to build up the new country's military power, and—in the telling phrase of the Piedmontese author

and statesman Massimo d'Azeglio—to “make Italians once that Italy had been made” [*Fatta l'Italia bisogna fare gli italiani*]. Popular disaffection was high, especially because of the grist tax [tax on grain] and conscription that were introduced. Some highlights of the years 1870-1914 (when World War I began):

- Italy was ruled by governments of the left and of the right and the political situation was volatile;
- Italy acquired territories in Eritrea, Somalia, and Libya;
- Industrialization began to take root, particularly in the North, with the development of industries like the automobile industry (Fiat was founded in 1906).
- The South faced significant challenges, including a lack of industrial development and persistent poverty;
- Poverty was also widespread in the rural North;
- There was mass emigration, particularly to the Americas and other parts of Europe;
- Literacy rates gradually increased, but a significant portion of the population remained illiterate, especially in rural areas;
- Only certain categories of men could vote (men who owned property and paid a certain amount of taxes; who were literate. Women could not vote).