The *Risorgimento*
Italy 1815–71

*Tim Chapman*

“*We have made Italy, now we must make Italians.*”
The Risorgimento: Italy 1815–71

Tim Chapman
Contents

The Author

Chapter 1  Origins of the Risorgimento
  1.1  Context
  1.2  Eighteenth Century Origins
  1.3  Impact of Napoleon

Chapter 2  Italy in 1815
  2.1  The Congress of Vienna
  2.2  Society in 1815
  2.3  The Economy c. 1815
  2.4  Obstacles to Unification

Chapter 3  The Revolutions of 1820–21
  3.1  The Revolution in Naples, 1820
  3.2  Piedmont
  3.3  Conclusions

Chapter 4  The Revolutions of 1831
  4.1  Parma and Modena
  4.2  The Papal States
  4.3  The Carbonari and Secret Societies

Chapter 5  Mazzini

Chapter 6  Nationalist Writers

Chapter 7  The Revolutions of 1848–49
  7.1  Causes
  7.2  Piedmont and the War of 1848–49
  7.3  Milan and the ‘Five Glorious Days’
  7.4  Venice: The Independent Republic of Saint Mark
  7.5  Sicily and Naples
Chapter 8  Piedmont c. 1850

8.1  Introduction
8.2  Piedmont before 1848
8.3  The Statuto
8.4  Cavour’s Rise to Power

Chapter 9  Piedmont’s Modernisation, 1850s

9.1  Introduction
9.2  The Piedmontese Economy c1850
9.3  Cavour’s Economic Policies
9.4  Anti-Church Policies
9.5  Cavour’s Diplomacy 1852–58
9.6  Republicanism after 1850
9.7  Napoleon III
9.8  Conclusion

Chapter 10  War against Austria 1859

10.1  Plombières 1858
10.2  War against Austria 1859
10.3  Piedmont and the Duchies
10.4  Garibaldi
10.5  Garibaldi and Sicily
10.6  The Attack on the Mainland
10.7  The Role of Piedmont 1860
10.8  Conclusions

Chapter 11  Italy in the 1860s

11.1  Towards Unification in the 1860s
11.2  Venetia and Rome
11.3  How unified was Italy by 1870?
11.4  Conclusions

Chapter 12  Historiography

Bibliography
The Author

Tim Chapman is the author of *The Congress of Vienna* (1998) and *Imperial Russia* (2001) as well as numerous articles for History magazines. He teaches at Wisbech Grammar School in Cambridgeshire.
Chapter 1 Origins of the Risorgimento

1.1 Context

The creation of the state of Italy has a reasonably clear finishing point in 1860. This was when most of the minor states that had previously existed in the peninsula joined together. They included Piedmont, Lombardy, the Papal States (except for Rome) and the Kingdom of Naples and Sicily. The formal declaration of the new Kingdom of Italy occurred on 17 March 1861. While there were subsequent additions of territory in 1866 (Venetia), 1870 (Rome) and 1919 (Alto Adige or southern Tyrol) Italy had been largely unified by 1860.

The origins of unification are much less clear. Contemporaries took quite different views as to the beginning of the route to unification and historians have debated it since. In part, the debate has been made more complicated by the use of two similar but significantly different terms; Risorgimento and unification. The Italian word ‘Risorgimento’ has been commonly used to describe how the situation of 1860 had been achieved whereas, strictly, it refers to a revival or ‘resurgence’ of national life in Italy. This was what Italian nationalists—writers, artists and thinkers—wanted for their country. It amounted to much more than mere unification: it was about a return of Italy’s national strength in which its people felt pride in their country. It alluded to Italy’s glorious and prestigious past in the form of the Roman Empire and to cultural achievements such as the Renaissance.

Unification when it occurred, though, was much more narrowly based. It was achieved despite a largely passive population and through the efforts of political leaders through their wars and diplomacy. Foreign states contributed enormously to the process by direct intervention or their willingness simply to stand aside. Territory was traded and fought over with little regard to the inhabitants’ wishes such that the vast majority of the population of the peninsula called ‘Italy’ hardly considered themselves ‘Italian’ either at the beginning or the end of the process. The sometimes clinical and Machiavellian diplomacy that was employed to achieve unification was a far cry from what the writers had hoped for. And a clear demonstration of how disunited the population was can be seen in the years immediately after 1860 when the southern
half of the peninsula rebelled and the country declined into civil war.

The way in which Italy’s route to unification occurred in practice, and the desire amongst some for a *Risorgimento*, meant that the two became entangled. This has therefore made it difficult to give a clear and definite starting point; certainly, a pinpoint date has proved elusive.

### 1.2 Eighteenth Century Origins

The beginning of the *Risorgimento* has been placed by many historians in the eighteenth century. Beales points out that ‘Nationalism cannot be found in Italy in the middle of the eighteenth century’.\(^1\) Coppa, by contrast, suggests that by the end of the century it was beginning to take root.\(^2\) Much attention has been given to the writings of Vittorio Alfieri who was a Piedmontese nobleman and who was first to use the term ‘*Risorgimento*’. He wrote plays in the 1780s and 1790s which were both successful and patriotic; as such, they received a fairly wide audience. They were written in the Tuscan type of Italian—the official form of the language—but he also wrote political tracts designed to raise increase Italian patriotism. In 1784, he wrote in *The Prince and Literature*, ‘this small peninsula is still the same as that which previously conquered nearly all of the then known world’ in reference to the achievements of the Roman Empire. ‘And it was still the same Italy which a few centuries later enlightened the rest of Europe with the arts and sciences’ he continued, indicating how it was Italy that began the Renaissance.\(^3\)

A second writer of significance in this period was Carlo Denina, a historian. His unique contribution was to write a history of Italy; this was new since previous historians had looked at the history of Venice or of city states such as Florence which were localised. Writing a ‘national’ history was innovative and implied a common experience and identity.\(^4\) Some historians have continued the pattern of writing regional histories alongside the national one in recognition of the states’ separateness.\(^5\) However, the impact of these early ideas was necessarily limited and marked out a pattern for the future. The penetration of the writers’ ideas was restricted, at best, to the educated élite. Censorship and printing restrictions muted Denina’s efforts, although Alfieri

---

had a little more freedom as a dramatist. The vast majority of the population was composed of illiterate peasants who anyway spoke their own strong dialects of Italian rather than Tuscan. They therefore had neither the ability nor the awareness to appreciate what was happening in these early stages of political discussion.

1.3 Impact of Napoleon

What did have an impact was the French Revolution and its aftermath. In the 1790s, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic armies conquered the Italian mainland and enforced many new political ideas—perhaps best summed up by the revolutionary motto of ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity’. These were a simplified version of many of the ideas of the eighteenth century Enlightenment in which the natural and human worlds were systematically reassessed. Politically, it meant more tolerance, freedom and faith in humanity’s own progress and goodness.

The Enlightenment’s high ideals did not easily translate into high-minded politics. The French Revolution of 1789 in which the Paris mob stormed the Bastille led to the subsequent execution of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. The republic that followed in the early 1790s saw the first attempts to apply the new political ideas but they were accompanied by The Terror—a period of bloodletting in which thousands were guillotined or drowned in the name of the revolution. The exodus from France of royal army officers of noble descent meant that a gifted military leader such as Napoleon was able to rise through the officer corps quickly. Successes in northern Italy and campaigns in Egypt helped him secure the leadership of France from 1799 and his coronation as emperor in 1804. His genius for organising institutions as well as for conducting military campaigns made France a more dangerous enemy for all of the other great powers in Europe. From 1802, most of mainland Europe was allied to or controlled by France and in these territories the French imposed their new systems of rule.

This applied to the peninsula of Italy too. Before the wars of the 1790s, Italy looked much as it had in 1748 when the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle ended the War of Austrian Succession. There were a dozen states of varying sizes and under different types of political rule. The largest states were the Kingdom of Piedmont (including the island of Sardinia) and the Kingdom of Naples (including Sicily). Across the middle of the peninsula were the Papal States ruled from Rome and including The Romagna and the Marches. Several republics existed—Venice, Genoa, Lucca and

---