

# Italian Nationalism: A Point of View

## Author bio

Bennett Sherry holds a PhD in history from the University of Pittsburgh and has undergraduate teaching experience in world history, human rights, and the Middle East at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Maine at Augusta. Additionally, he is a research associate at Pitt's World History Center. Bennett writes about refugees and international organizations in the twentieth century.

## Too many Italies

Napoleon Bonaparte launched Italian nationalism with his invasion in 1796. For the next century, men with famous names and a bunch of different ideologies shot at and argued with each other to define what "Italy" should mean. But this isn't their story. It's yours: an unnamed woman forgotten by history, who lived it.

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

Your parents lived in the Republic of Venice. But by your birth in 1805, the city had been conquered three times: first by the French, led by Napoleon Bonaparte, then by the Austrians, then by Napoleon again. You were ten when Napoleon was defeated. Your parents hoped for a free Venice. But at the Congress of Vienna, the great powers handed your home back to Austria.

The Italian peninsula has rarely been unified. Before 1861, the last people to rule a unified Italy called themselves Roman emperors. For 1,200 years, the Italian peninsula was filled, not with Italians, but with Florentines, Milanese, Genoese, Neapolitans, and Venetians, like you. They spoke in different dialects. In many places, French, Spanish, or Latin were more common than Italian.

These Italian city-states hated each other more than they feared foreigners. In his 1532 book, *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli called for a prince to unite the peninsula and "liberate Italy from the barbarians." No one listened, at least not until Napoleon. For centuries, Italy was Europe's battlefield. France, Spain, and Austria fought over the Italian city-states. The city-states played along, using wars to build their own power. Venetians would rather pay tribute to Paris than be conquered by Naples.

But Napoleon's invasion changed all that. French, and later Austrian, occupation gave Italians a common enemy and launched the story of Italian nationalism. This is also where your story begins.

## **A Risorgimento life**

Your unpublicized political life was shaped by three famous men. They disagreed on ideology, but united under the cause of Italian unification—or *Risorgimento*, meaning "revival." They were:

- Count Cavour – a liberal monarchist who wanted a united Italy ruled under a constitution by the king of Piedmont-Sardinia.
- Giuseppe Mazzini – a republican who refused to compromise on his ideals. He wanted the end of monarchy and an Italian republic.
- Giuseppe Garibaldi – a true radical. After a failed 1834 uprising in Genoa he was sentenced to death, but didn't like that idea much so he fled to South America and fought in Uruguay and Brazil. A brilliant general and guerilla fighter, Garibaldi became an international celebrity. He died in his bed in 1882 at the age of 74.

Three different men, all Italian nationalists. Across Italy, men and women of every political ideology took up the tri-color flag of Italian nationalism.

Conservative Catholics, monarchists, liberals, republicans, and socialists all called themselves nationalists.



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

When you were a young girl, your father joined the Carbonari, a secret society devoted to revolutionary ideals and resistance to Austrian control. In 1820, revolts in the south inspired uprisings in northern Italy. Your father and other Carbonari headed to Milan, where he died on an Austrian bayonet in 1821. Several years later, you met your husband and moved to Genoa (a city in the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia). Your late father would not have approved.

During the 1830s, new rebellions erupted all over Europe. You first saw Garibaldi in Genoa during his failed uprising. The march of the Austrian army soon crushed the dream of a united Italy. Yet, the nationalist fervor that these years had sparked didn't die. You, your friends, and many others were convinced that Risorgimento was not some fantasy. It would happen, and you would help make it happen.

These failed revolutions meant that a bunch of Italian nationalists went into exile, either in the Americas or in Europe. There, figures like Mazzini lived comfortable lives as celebrities. There, they plotted with each other about their revenge, safe from Austrian bayonets. You stayed in Italy.

## **A fire across Europe**

In 1848, Europe erupted in revolution. In Rome and Palermo, Tuscany and Naples, Milan and Venice, revolutionaries took to the streets, demanding constitutions. Charles Albert, king of Piedmont-Sardinia, marched to the aid of Milan and Venice and waged war against Austria, hoping to unite northern Italy under a Sardinian flag. This was what convinced you to sign on with Garibaldi.



*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.*

In the autumn of 1848, you joined Garibaldi's volunteer army as they fought a guerilla war on their way from Venice to Rome. Soon after your arrival, the revolutionaries—including Mazzini—declared a new Roman Republic. It was in Rome, during a few shining months of revolutionary victory, that you met Anita. She was Garibaldi's wife, a Brazilian, whom he had met in South America. A fearless fighter, Anita taught Garibaldi to ride a horse and became his comrade in arms.

The Roman Republic lasted a glorious few months. But—as was the case in all the 1848 revolutions across Europe—the disunity of the Italian revolutionaries was their downfall. Florentines failed to cooperate with Romans, and republicans failed to cooperate with monarchists. The dream of a united Italy crumbled. In the north, the Austrians defeated Charles Albert and he was replaced by his son, Victor Emmanuel. The Austrian army once again marched across Italy, crushing the rebellions. The last two cities to remain free were Venice and Rome.

After pressure from French Catholics, the French army marched to Rome to put the Pope back in control. Garibaldi's army, which included you, won two brilliant victories against larger armies. But the counter-revolutionary forces were too many. The republic fell, and you fled the city with Garibaldi and a few hundred others. Two months later, Venice fell to the Austrians. As you fled Rome in 1849, Anita, who was pregnant, died of malaria shortly before she would have been 28. The rest of you made it to safety in Genoa and Garibaldi fled to exile in New York, Mazzini to Switzerland. You stayed in Italy.

## **The Kingdom of Italy**

Along with the uncompromising Mazzini, you spent the Second War of Italian Independence on the sidelines. You were older, and the disappointments of 1848 lingered. But your children were full of patriotism. So, when Prime Minister Cavour and King Victor Emmanuel decided to unify Italy, your sons marched off to war.

Cavour was a good diplomat. So, unlike in 1848, in 1859, Piedmont-Sardinia had French allies against the Austrians. In exchange for their support, the French received Nice and Savoy in northern Italy. And unlike 1848, radical revolutionaries were sidelined or made compromises in the 1860s. The biggest compromise was that Italy would be a kingdom, not a republic. The king would be Victor Emmanuel. Your sons served in his army.



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

Years later you would read a book that actually included a first-hand account of the battle that killed your oldest son:

*No quarter is given; it is a sheer butchery; a struggle between savage beasts, maddened with blood and fury. Even the wounded fight to the last gasp...almost crazed with suffering. They begged to be put out of their misery, and writhed with faces distorted in the grip of the death struggle.*  
*From A Memory of Solferino, by Harry Dunant*

You take some comfort knowing that the book helped create the International Committee of the Red Cross. Apparently, they want laws to protect soldiers in war. You wish them well, but with all you've seen, you're not hopeful.



*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

You reflect back on what you've been through. In 1861, you became an Italian. Victor Emmanuel, Cavour, and Garibaldi waged another war against Austria and they united the Italian Peninsula. The nationalist dream became reality. But your dreams for Italy were far from this reality. You bled for Italy in 1848. You fought for an Italy free of kings. But in this new Italy, women are not allowed to vote. In 1866, the Kingdom of Italy fought another war and expelled the Austrians from Venice. In 1870, the king annexed Rome. By 1871, Victor Emmanuel II sat on a throne in his new capital of Rome as the first king of a united Italy since the Romans. You should have seen this coming. The nationalists who led armies across Italy—even those you fought with—spoke of a "Fatherland". Italy was not, it seemed, to be a nation for women. King Victor Emmanuel took an old Roman title: "Father of the Fatherland".

## **A Calatafimi obituary**

The same day as Garibaldi dies quietly in his bed, you die quietly in yours. While countless books will tell his story, only your children and grandchildren will tell yours. But your story is a "Risorgimento" story as much as his.

You never meet any of your great-grandchildren, and many won't live long. Most of the boys die in the trenches of the First World War. The ones who survive will resent how little Italy receives after the war—how little their brothers died for. They join a leader promoting a new, extreme form of Italian nationalism, called fascism. His name is Benito Mussolini, and his

ideas will help inspire some of the world's greatest atrocities, and its deadliest war.