

How widespread was nationalism in Italy before 1848?

CASE FOR “IL RISORGIMENTO”

Historiography: Italian history has been written by the victors’, the people that actually succeeded with “**Il Risorgimento**” – the “**Italian Revival**” – unification. Fascist historians – important with the idea of Italian rebirth, to glorify Italian nationalism; Italian socialist historians – wanted to glorify the secret societies and rebellions during this early period; English liberal historians (like George Macaulay Trevelyan) – Italian unification was part of a steady growth of liberalism and nationalism fighting against conservative prejudices and oppressive rulers + Benedetto Croce

1. Writings + cultural changes (literature, music, poetry, paintings, etc...) might be considered part of a national revival
2. The cultural revival forward a national language and made people consider them being “Italians”. This started to break down the regional barriers
3. Oppression and foreign rule (Austrian) in Lombardy and Venetia made nationalism stronger. It encouraged the formation of secret societies, rebellions, mutinies...
4. Mazzini and “**Young Italy**” influenced young radicals

...so the conclusion was that the unrest in Italy before 1848 was constant and it converted the masses to nationalism. Now they just needed leaders!

CASE AGAINST “IL RISORGIMENTO”

Historiography: Modern historians (Denis Mack Smith, Hugh Seton-Watson, Derek Beales) look at “**Il Risorgimento**” as a gradual growth of nationalism (after 1815) where Italy made little progress before 1848 and that the actual unification was more of a chancy affair. Beales even go so far that he called it a “*patriotic myth*” (1981). All of them claim that the troubles before 1848 in Italy were minor upsets with little long-term impact:

1. Uncertain aims and the nationalist motives were not always of importance. Some just wanted constitutional or liberal concessions from the regional ruler
2. Sicilians wanted to be separated from mainland Italy
3. The local and/or regional connection was much stronger than a national cause. Rebellious groups from different States did not cooperate because their local allegiance was much stronger. Some northern states were fairly independent and others had not much interest in expelling Austria and instead be put under the rule of Piedmont-Sardinia
4. National unity under a centralized strong government was not the main idea before 1848. Federalism with strong fairly independent states was an equal possibility (if not stronger possibility)
5. The Italian masses were never affected by nationalism before 1848. The peasants did hardly ever participate in any of these early rebellions. The

small minority that was involved in liberal affairs before 1848 more often rebelled for economic reasons than pure nationalism

6. It was a narrow circle of middle class, mainly professionals, intellectuals and army men + a few liberal aristocrats, mostly from Northern Italy, that supported the unrest. Their motives were (as mentioned above) often economic or political advancement – with other words they rebelled for reforms that would benefit them, not anybody else.
7. Barriers of language, dialects, custom, prejudice and the lack of a formal education system worked against the cause of the educated middle class. The masses had no idea what nationalism meant...
8. It's first in the 1840's that Italy started to share a national language. Before – French in Piedmont-Sardinia and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, German in Lombardy and Venetia, Latin in the Papal States and many local dialects
9. Very few were members of any society or/and involved in any rebellion. So the rebellions were too weak and on top of that usually poorly planned
10. The two richest "Italian" districts Lombardy and Venetia were not interested in any serious changes before 1840. They were fairly well treated, they had access to the economy of the whole Austrian Empire and the censorship and police methods were not extremely hard. The city of Milan even considered to join the German Zollverein (Custom Union)
11. Some of the more influential rulers (Charles Albert; Pope Pius IX) were not oppressive autocrats. They wanted to transform their own states with necessary reforms which made the idea of an Italian unified state even more unlikely...