THE ITALIAN RISORGIMENTO
State, society and national unification

LUCY RIALL

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Historical Connections is a new series of short books on important historical topics and debates, written primarily for those studying and teaching history. The books will offer original and challenging works of synthesis that will make new themes accessible, or old themes accessible in new ways, build bridges between different chronological periods and different historical debates, and encourage comparative discussion in history.

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Historical Connections will put the search for these connections back at the top of the agenda by exploring new ways of uniting the different strands of historical experience, and by affirming the importance of studying change and movement in history.

Geoffrey Crossick
John Davies
Joanna Innes
Tom Scott
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Chronology

1796–9  France invades and occupies the Italian mainland.
1814–15 Congress of Vienna partially restores pre-Napoleonic rulers and boundaries. Austria is established as the dominant power in Restoration Italy: Lombardy-Venetia become provinces of the Austrian Empire and protective alliances are signed with the Papal States and the Two Sicilies.
1820–1 Constitutional revolutions in the Two Sicilies and in Piedmont briefly challenge Restoration government, but are suppressed with the aid of the Austrian army.
1830–1 Revolutionary uprisings in Central Italy are suppressed by Austrian and French intervention.
1831 Giuseppe Mazzini organises ‘Young Italy’ to fight for ‘the conquest of Independence, Unity, Liberty for Italy’. Carlo Alberto becomes king of Piedmont. The European Powers sign a Memorandum calling for reform in the Papal States.
1834–7 A series of Mazzinian uprisings and expeditions take place throughout Italy. The repression of ‘Young Italy’ and its infiltration by police spies forces Mazzini into exile in London.
1843 The publication of Vincenzo Gioberti’s Del primato morale e civile degli italiani marks the emergence of the idea of an Italian confederation under the Pope (‘Neo-Guelphism’) and of moderate liberalism as a political movement.
1846 Election of Pio IX as Pope. A number of reforms are introduced in the Papal States.
1847 The periodical Il Risorgimento begins publication in Turin under the editorship of Camillo Benso di Cavour.
A revolution in Palermo in January is followed by a series of revolutions and disturbances throughout Italy, which lead to the granting of constitutions limiting monarchical power. In March, after a revolution in Vienna and the flight of Metternich, revolutions take place in Venice and Milan (where the Austrian army is driven out of the city during the celebrated *cinque giornate* or ‘five days’). A Republic is declared in Venice. Piedmont declares war on Austria but is defeated at the battle of Custozza in July and signs an armistice. In May, Ferdinand II carries out a coup to restore monarchical power in Naples.

In January, the Pope flees Rome and a Republic is declared. Mazzini invites delegates from all over Italy to a Constituent Assembly to discuss Italian unification. Grand Duke Leopoldo flees Tuscany and a republican government is established in Florence. Piedmont again declares war on Austria and is again defeated at the battle of Novara in March. Carlo Alberto abdicates and his son Vittorio Emanuele II becomes king of Piedmont. In April, Bourbon power is re-established in Sicily. A French army intervenes against the Roman Republic to restore the Pope. Under Giuseppe Garibaldi’s leadership, the Roman Republic holds out until July, when it is finally defeated and the Pope is restored. Grand Duke Leopoldo returns to Florence. The besieged Venetian Republic falls to the Austrians in August.

Cavour becomes prime minister of Piedmont and introduces a programme of economic and political reform.

A Mazzinian, anti-Austrian insurrection in Milan is easily suppressed.

Piedmont participates in the Crimean War. At the Congress of Paris, the ‘Italian Question’ is raised.

The ill-fated expedition to Sapri in Southern Italy led by Carlo Pisacane causes a crisis in Mazzinian circles. The Italian National Society is established by former Mazzinians to agitate for Italian unification under Piedmontese leadership.

In January, an attempt is made on Napoleon III’s life by an ex-Mazzinian (Felice Orsini). In July, a secret pact is signed between Napoleon III and Cavour, whereby France offers military assistance to Piedmont, who will provoke a war with Austria; Piedmont will
receive Lombardy and Venetia; France will receive Nice and Savoy (previously ruled by Piedmont).

1859
Austria declares war on Piedmont in April, and France comes to Piedmont’s assistance. After the battles of Magenta and Solferino, Napoleon III signs an armistice with Austria at Villafranca. Piedmont receives Lombardy but not Venetia. In a fury, Cavour resigns as prime minister.

1860
In January, Cavour returns to power in Piedmont. In March, plebiscites in Central Italy lead to the union of Tuscany and Emilia (comprising the Duchies of Parma and Modena and the Papal Legations) with Piedmont-Lombardy. In return for French agreement to the union, Nice and Savoy are ceded to France. In April, Garibaldi leads the expedition of the ‘Thousand’ to Sicily. Between May and July he conquers the whole of the Two Sicilies, and prepares to march on Rome. The Piedmontese army invades the Papal States in September in order to forestall Garibaldi’s advance on Rome. Garibaldi hands over Southern Italy to Piedmont. In October, plebiscites in Southern Italy vote for union with Piedmont.

1861
A Kingdom of Italy is declared in March, with Turin as its capital; Vittorio Emanuele II of Piedmont becomes Vittorio Emanuele II of Italy.

1862
Garibaldi’s attempt to march on Rome is halted by Italian troops at Aspromonte.

1864
The ‘convention of September’ moves the Italian capital from Turin to Florence.

1866
Italy participates in the Austro-Prussian war on the Prussian side. After Austria’s defeat by Prussia (and despite Italy’s defeat by Austria), Venetia is ceded to Italy.

1867
A further attempt by Garibaldi to march on Rome is halted by Papal troops at Mentana.

1870
French troops are withdrawn from Rome to fight in the Franco-Prussian war. Rome is occupied by Italian troops, and is declared the capital of Italy. The Pope refuses to recognise the legitimacy of the new state, and declares himself a ‘prisoner of the Vatican’.
Map 1 Italy’s Restoration states 1815
Map 2 Italy and the events of 1859–1860
Map 3 The Kingdom of Italy 1870
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The Risorgimento and Italian history

In Italian history, as in Italian politics, the Risorgimento has played a central role. Like the experience of the French Revolution or German unification, the Risorgimento is considered to be a defining moment in Italy’s history, the period when Italy becomes a ‘nation’ and enters the ‘modern’ world. Through the Risorgimento, the modern Italian state acquires its ‘founding fathers’ (Cavour, Mazzini, Garibaldi) and its political ideals (liberalism, nationalism, republicanism). Conceptually, the Risorgimento has also been crucial to Italian historiography. It describes a number of different transformations—the collapse of the ancien régime and the development of a parliamentary system, the breakdown of traditional rural society and the birth of modern, urban life, the transition from a feudal to a capitalist economy and the replacement of local or regional identities by a single national culture—all of which have been central to present-day understanding of historical change. The political, social, economic and cultural experiences of Italians from 1815 to 1945 (and, arguably, beyond) are explained, interpreted and assessed on the basis of these ‘modernising’ processes.

The functional importance of the Risorgimento to both Italian politics and Italian historiography has made this short period (1815–60) one of the most contested and controversial in modern Italian history. Just as politicians have squabbled, from 1861 onwards, over the Risorgimento’s political legacies, so have historians of the Risorgimento quarrelled about the primary determinants of change and modernisation. At the centre of these debates is a set of rhetorical devices first employed by Risorgimento liberals to denigrate the governments of Restoration Italy. The term ‘Risorgimento’, literally translated, means ‘resurgence’ and refers to a common, idealised past as well as to a less than perfect present. Mazzinian democrats were particularly successful in offering a series of heroic alternatives against which the everyday realities of Restoration Italy could be