

Marco SORESINA

Italy Before Italy. Institutions, Conflicts and Political Hopes in the Italian States, 1815–1860

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Italian unification represents a topic in historiography which is still of interest to many contemporary historians. In fact, the enormous amount of research that revolves around the period 1815–1871 of Italian history is evidence of this. As the title of the book suggests, there was a different “Italy” before “Italy” that was established in 1861 as the Kingdom of Italy. During the period from 1815 to 1861, the Apennine Peninsula represented a politically fragmented structure of states that differed not only in size, but also politically and economically. They also diverged in terms of legislative, administrative and educational systems, and to a certain extent, even in language. Despite the efforts made by nationally-minded — mostly Italian — historians to adore the Italian unification, the Italian states did not exhibit the features of a future united state at this time, although certain common aspects could perhaps be found. As a matter of fact, until the early 1840s, only a very small number of Italian subjects wished to become part of a large unified state.

One might consider relevant in this

context to mention the well-known dictum of Klemens von Metternich, the Austrian Chancellor and probably the most important statesman of the Pre-March period, who claimed that the word “Italy” is a mere “geographical expression”. The small sovereign but at the same time weak Italian states were part of a mosaic that was about to complete itself first in 1861 — or in 1870 if you like — and about to create a national medium-sized state. In fact, the weakness of these states was one of the reasons why the Italian politicians and nationalists eventually adopted the idea of a unified Italian state.

However, by eliminating the weakness of these governments absorbing them in a single country, all these individual states were also about to bring to the new kingdom practices and experiences related to their own systems of government, regulations, traditions and cultures. These differences, although more than a century and a half have passed since the unification, are still evident. In February 2018, a new book from the series of Routledge studies in modern European history

entitled *Italy Before Italy. Institutions, Conflicts and Political Hopes in the Italian States, 1815–1860*” was published that deals with these states, with this “Italy before Italy”. The author of this book, Marco Soresina, Associate Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Milan, dedicated his lifelong research to the political, economic, social and cultural history of Italy from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries.

Soresina’s book is divided into seven parts through which he displays in chronological order the most significant events concerning the Apennine Peninsula during 1815–1860. The first chapter introduces the reader to the situation that the Italian states faced during 1814–1815. In order to do so, the author mentions the development of the peninsula under Napoleonic rule and places emphasis on the impact of the Congress of Vienna’s decision regarding the Italian territory. In the short subchapter, the author also deals with the term “Risorgimento” and discusses its different meanings and approaches to it. Here he tries to show that *“national unification was not a matter of destiny, but was above all the result of the weakness of the Italian states and the consensus of international diplomacy”*. Taking account of the current revisionist discourse of Risorgimento and in the light of historical research, this finding can be regarded as appropriate.

The second and the third chapter deal with the Italian states in 1815–1848. The second one examines the development of government institutions and administration for each in-

dividual state, showing mostly weak, less efficient and rigid government apparatuses that responded poorly to the needs of their subjects and often did not conform to the “spirit of the time”. Hand in hand with this reality followed the formation of informal secret societies and sectarian movements — among others famously known Carbonari —, later in the 1830s and 1840s the creation of official political movements such as Young Italy or Neo-Guelphs. These movements then came up with various political programmes expressing dissatisfaction with the respective governments and state administrations, mostly also requiring some form of unification of the Italian states as the only way out of their miserable situation. These political endeavors in connection with the uprisings of 1820–21 and 1831 are examined in the third chapter.

Some historians consider the revolutionary years 1848–1849 and the so-called “First War of Independence” as the real inception of Risorgimento. The beginning, course and consequences of these two significant events are addressed in the fourth chapter and continues in the next chapter with the institutional and political developments during the so-called “second restoration” in 1849–1859. The only chapter that breaks the chronological order of the book, the sixth one, refers to the entire period of 1815–1860 in connection with the social and economic situation, living conditions and language and education. Logically, the final chapter is devoted to the so-called “Second War of Inde-

pendence” and the emergence of the Kingdom of Italy, not omitting all the peripetia accompanying this process, such as the fall of the governments in Central Italy or Garibaldi's conquest of the south.

Each chapter is accompanied by notes at the end and extended by the cited bibliography and further reading. The relatively small number of notes suggests that this book is not the result of profound scientific research, but rather, as the author himself admits in the introduction, a work of synthesis. This is also reflected in the amount of cited bibliography and further reading which provides a link to a deeper understanding of a particular issue. This literature is carefully selected by the author, showing that the author only chose those works based on the results of the youngest historiography and did not resort to the (mostly older) monographs presenting the unification process of Italy with a more or less nationalist approach and thus creating a misinterpretation of Risorgimento. However, given the theme of the book, it is not surprising that the bibliography and further reading are predominantly Italian-written works, although some English-written ones have also been included.

What is worth highlighting about this book is the focus balance between the overall approach to the unification and the individual one in respect of the various Italian states. In each chapter, the socio-institutional developments in particular states are described in order to briefly and aptly explain the situation on the peninsula in the de-

cares before 1861. In a simple, readable language, the author presents a comprehensive analysis of the political, economic and social realities in the Italian states, which can be a very helpful source for the newly interested ones in view of the extensive scientific production on these subjects.

Another important benefit of the book is that the author's focus in such a short publication lies not only on political events, but also aimed at following the developments in other areas, including economic and social ones. The Italian states were still mostly agricultural societies in the first half of the nineteenth century with slowly developing agricultural transformations and with—compared to other, especially Western European states—non-existent industrial revolution. Together with changes in the society such as the growth of the middle class and the bourgeoisie, the formation of public opinion or increasing influence of the press, these economic societal realities formed a significant element in the process of unification of Italy and must be borne in mind when assessing the evolution of Risorgimento. Considering the growing popularity of gender history, which has also affected historiography of Risorgimento in recent years, the passage in the book on women's political participation is also understandable.

In the overall evaluation of the book it is important to state that from the research point of view the book does not bring anything new, which was not, after all, the author's goal. Yet the book represents a welcoming

and—surprisingly to date missing—concise overview of the history of Italian unification. It can be recommended especially to those who desire basic knowledge of Risorgimento in its various, complex contexts, where this work can be regarded as an excellent starting point for studying Italy in the first half of the nineteenth century. This publication will definitely find

its way to the readers, taking into account the constant discussion about the formation of modern nations in the long nineteenth century, which even today is not at all devoid of importance, particularly as the role of nationalism in—not only—European politics is still prevalent.

Daniel Martinek