# CRIME, DISORDER AND THE RISORGIMENTO

## THE POLITICS OF POLICING IN BOLOGNA

STEVEN C. HUGHES

*Associate Professor of History, Loyola College in Maryland*

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# INTRODUCTION

e qualunque volta alle universalità delli uomini
non si toglie né roba né onore, vivono contenti
Niccolò Machiavelli

The original inspiration for this book came from scholars such as James Richardson, Roger Lane, Wilbur Miller, Alan Williams, Eric Monkkonen, and the many other historians who have studied the police in countries other than Italy. Despite their variety of approaches, all of these authors have recognized the police as a key institution of the modern age, and one that can be tied to a host of historical concerns, including the growth of urban bureaucracy, changing perceptions of crime, shifting class relations, and the evolution of new forms of political power. As a distinct institution, the centralized police is a relatively recent phenomenon, and its advent on the European continent in the eighteenth century and throughout the rest of the western world during the nineteenth century marked a fundamental departure from traditional modes of administration. Both obvious and ubiquitous, the police symbolized a new personalized presence of the government in people's everyday affairs, and it remained to each culture to determine the nature and limits of that presence. Historians have thus come to realize that the method by which a society enforces its laws is often as revealing as the laws themselves.

In Italy, however, police history has not fared well. Until very recently, it has been confined to abstract juridical discussions of the law, which seldom touch ground, and "alternative" diatribes, which seek to expose the police as a nefarious instrument of class warfare.[1] This study

[1] On recent Italian police history see Steven Hughes, "La continuità del personale di polizia negli anni dell'unificazione nazionale italiana," *Clio*, April–June, 1990, pp. 338–339. One should also see Carlo Mangio, *La polizia toscana. Organizzazione e*

originally set out to help fill this historiographical gap. It aimed to provide a local case history of Italian policing which would duck beneath the theoretical umbrella of legislation and observe the police in a real social setting across time. Bologna was selected for the study because after three months of slogging through various cities in Italy it became apparent that its police archives were among the best preserved from the nineteenth century. Moreover, as a provincial capital, rather than a national one, Bologna's police history was somewhat comparable to that of most Italian cities, which had to deal with orders emanating from a detached and distant headquarters. In addition, Bologna sported a lively tradition of local history which included some of the most important and productive social historians in Italy. In particular, the works of Luigi Dal Pane, Carlo Poni, Renato Zangheri, and Athos Bellettini made the reconstruction of Bolognese society a much easier task, and left more time to focus on the police as an institution.

On one level, then, this book is simply a detailed administrative history of Bologna's police system. In a narrative fashion, it describes the papal government's attempts after the Restoration to maintain the centralized police apparatus erected by the French during the Napoleonic occupation. It was adopted not so much as an instrument of social control or public security but rather as a means of reinforcing the absolute authority of the Pope over his temporal dominions. This administrative chronicle shows as well the many efforts to reform Bologna's new police institution when it failed to deal effectively with the prevailing problems of the day, including political conspiracy, rampant unemployment, widespread poverty, and endemic crime in both the city and the countryside. A major theme of these reforms was the growing belief that effective policing depended more on consistent deterrent patrol by uniformed officers than on individualized exceptional measures, such as preventive arrest, special surveillance, or restraining orders. After 1840, this attitude was greatly reinforced by the burgeoning reputation of the London Metropolitan Police force as a model of efficiency and respectability, both of which the papal police sadly lacked. But all meaningful movements towards reform of the police would be hamstrung by the political and financial constraints of the regime as well as by the inveterate opposition to change on the part of the papal curia. When real change did come with Pius IX in 1846 it was soon swept up in the tide of European revolution, leaving the restored papal government in 1849 ever more inflexible in its attitude towards bureaucratic renovation.

*criteri di intervento (1765–1808)*, Milan: 1988; and Giorgia Alessi, *Giustizia e polizia, il controllo di una capitale, Napoli 1779–1803*, Naples: 1992.

In the course of digging this administrative story out of the archives, however, it became apparent that the consistent failure of the regime to reform its police, combined with the deteriorating social situation in Bologna, had serious ramifications for the temporal power of the papacy. Although I had always assumed that the history of Bologna's police would be influenced by political considerations, it came as a shock to find that, conversely, Bologna's politics were constantly being shaped by problems of policing. Consequently, what had originally been intended as purely an administrative history rapidly matured into a reinterpretation of the Risorgimento as it unfolded in the Papal States, and the subtitle "The Politics of Policing in Bologna" clearly reflects the wider causal dimension of the final text.

For all its pages of prose, the main theme of this study is really rather simple. It suggests that the papal regime adopted a modern centralized police system to enhance its absolute power as an administrative monarchy. By centralizing power, however, the new regime also centralized responsibility, eliminating useful buffer institutions at the local level. Even minor matters of sanitation and traffic thus reflected on the regime in Rome, while major problems like poverty and dearth struck at the very heart of papal legitimacy. The papal police could not shake their image as arbitrary and capricious watchdogs of the Pope's absolute prerogatives, yet they appeared incapable of eliminating the basic dangers facing Bologna's citizens. Specifically, their inability to prevent certain types of street crime made it seem as if society might be slipping into anarchy. Combined with hordes of beggars, insolent servants, and radical agitators, these crimes signalled for Bologna's elites the progressive deterioration of social hierarchy. Not only did this fear of crime eventually help discredit the sovereignty of the Pope, but it also mobilized Bologna's elites into organizations of self defense that naturally had political overtones. Twice within a twenty-year period (1828 and 1846) the papal government had to allow Bologna's elites to arm themselves in posse-style Citizen Patrols because of the pressure of rising crime; and in both of these cases the Patrols led to the formation of a Civic Guard that became a rallying point of reform and eventually revolution. Thus the failure of the papal police to assure public order not only kept the regime off balance but helped organize the opposition as well.

Understanding these problems of policing also makes the major political events of the period more intelligible. It helps explain why conservative and cautious men came to lead the revolution of 1831 and why their alternatives of action were so limited. It further illuminates the growth in the 1840s of a moderate program of reform that stressed

education and employment as the keys to a successful and peaceful society. Finally, the complete failure of public security during the revolution of 1848 and 1849 offers new evidence for why the Roman Republic lacked support in Bologna, and why, in the wake of the restoration, those interested in politics began to look north to Piedmont for a program of "order and war." Crime and public disorder were not the only factors affecting the Risorgimento in the Papal States, but they were among the most important and they have hitherto been cast aside by historians as excuses for rather than causes of political action.

The only exception to this historiographical tendency has been John Davis, whose book *Conflict and Control: Law and Order in Nineteenth Century Italy* was published after the original version of this work was completed.[2] Davis has done an exceptional job of depicting the social scene in Italy during the Risorgimento period and has stressed as well the importance of crime and disorder as a political issue among Italian elites. But because of its temporal and geographical breadth, covering all of the peninsula from 1750 to 1900, Davis' book remains very general in its approach and does not delve beneath the surface to portray the causal dynamics of politics and policing at the local level, especially with regard to the significance of civic guards and other voluntary organizations of public security. Likewise, Davis deals very little with the Papal States. His treatment of the problem, however, confirms the basic themes that follow and suggests that Bologna's problems of policing, crime, and public order – and their resulting political impact – were not specific to the Papal States, but rather serve as a key to understanding the unification process in other parts of Italy.

Also in contrast to Davis, the present work attempts to deal with the problem of quantifying crime during the period. Although not vital to the central thesis, which is based on the perception rather than the reality of criminality, the available statistical evidence suggests that Bologna did undergo large fluctuations in the frequency of certain "confrontational" crimes such as mugging and assault to which the Bolognesi were particularly sensitive. Moreover these fluctuations corresponded chronologically with the elites' complaints of insecurity and the rise of the aforementioned posse groups. In order not to break the flow of the narrative, these statistics and discussion of their reliability have been set apart in an appendix at the end. It is further argued that there may have been some connection, albeit a rough one, between popular politics and various sorts of crime. Indeed, it seems that the most politically active sectors of Bologna's lower classes also tended to be the groups most

[2] John Davis, *Conflict and Control: Law and Order in Nineteenth-century Italy*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: 1988, especially pp. 1–187.

suspected of criminal activities. What this suggests, in combination with the fluctuations in crime, is that Bologna's complaints against the papal police and against the regime in general were neither contrived nor misplaced, but arose from very real conditions. Bologna's elites may have overreacted to the danger, but they were not necessarily wrong about what was happening in the streets nor about the basic economic and demographic causes of disorder in the province.

In preparation, something must also be said about the term "elites," which has already started to creep into the text. The term avoids many of the pitfalls of more exclusive categories such as aristocracy and bourgeoisie. While it is true that Bolognese society was heavily dominated by the agrarian nobility, there were sizable groups of landed commoners and propertied professionals who could influence their noble neighbors.[3] Wealthy merchants, lawyers, and professors all enjoyed substantial status within the city and usually held common cause with those who relied on their estates for their livelihood. Certainly in the documents of the day the major divisions in Bologna's social system were those between "civil" citizens who had property to lose and the *popolo*, the masses who used their bodies to earn their bread. Petitions to the papal legate complaining about crime and other matters were inevitably signed by a mixture of nobles, *rentiers*, and professionals that confused standard demarcations of social class. Consequently, it seemed best to opt for the more generalized term "elites" and then differentiate further where absolutely necessary.

In sum, the history of Bologna's police is also the history of the city, and in some ways the history of the country. The failure of the police in both image and performance ultimately led to the alienation of just those groups that should have been most closely tied to the forces of law and order. Papal administrators felt that by adopting the police mechanism of a great continental state they had inherited the means of assuring absolute temporal power, a dream long sought but never achieved by the papacy. Instead, that mechanism could operate only as efficiently as the economic and bureaucratic backwardness of the Papal States would allow. The story that follows then suggests that overly centralized power placed on an incomplete political and social substructure can lead to instability rather than control. The modern police are now a global phenomenon, and many an emerging nation is trying to use them as a means of legitimizing its existence, but the papal police should serve as a warning of what can happen if the pretense of power exceeds its capabilities.

[3] Dominique Schnapper, "Storia e sociologia: uno studio su Bologna," *Studi storici*, 1967, pp. 558–559.