Introduction

In the late spring of 1860 Giuseppe Garibaldi, a flamboyant irregular soldier, who had spent much of his life abroad fighting as a guerrilla leader, set sail for Sicily from a port near Genoa. On board his two small ships was a motley collection of students and adventurers, many of them barely out of their teens. Their mission was to unify Italy. The prospects for success seemed limited: the group was ill-armed, and few among them had any experience in warfare or administration. Moreover, they did not constitute a promising advertisement for the nation-to-be. Among the thousand or so volunteers were Hungarians and Poles, and the Italian contingent included a disproportionate number from the small northern city of Bergamo. However, in the space of a few months they succeeded in conquering Sicily and the mainland South from the Bourbons; and in March 1861 Victor Emmanuel II, King of Piedmont–Sardinia, became the first king of united Italy.

The success of Garibaldi and his 'Thousand' was both remarkable and unexpected; and when the euphoria had died down, many sober observers wondered whether the Italian state could survive. France and Austria, the two greatest continental powers of the day, both threatened to invade the new kingdom, break it up, and reconstitute the Papal States, which had been annexed by Victor Emmanuel in the course of unification. A much more insidious long-term threat, however, to the survival of the new state, was the absence of any real sense of commitment or loyalty to the kingdom among all except a small minority of the population. The country's new rulers justified

their demands for heavy taxes and military service, the often harsh repressive measures, and the unfamiliar institutions, by appealing to the sanctity and inviolability of the Italian 'nation': but for the overwhelming mass of Italians, the 'Italian nation', indeed 'Italy' itself, meant almost nothing.

The lack of loyalty to the new state haunted the country's intellectuals for many years after 1860. Initially, there was some hope that the introduction of liberal institutions and free trade would unleash the pent up talents and energies of a people who had given the world the civilisation of ancient Rome and the Renaissance; and the new prosperity, it was imagined, would generate support for the liberal order and its leaders. This soon proved illusory. By the late 1870s socio-economic unrest had begun to erode the old certainties. Disillusionment grew; and other less liberal political ideas surfaced that claimed to solve the problem of how to generate in Italians feelings of commitment to the state. These ideas culminated in the fascist experiment of the 1920s and 1930s. The catastrophe of the Second World War gave Italy what was arguably its most cohesive set of values since 1860, the values of anti-fascism. But by the 1990s these were being challenged.

If the task of forging a collective 'national identity' proved so difficult, one reason was the absence of any political substance to the idea of a unified Italy prior to the nineteenth century. Patriotic historians and propagandists claimed to discern a national consciousness in the struggles of the medieval cities (or 'communes') against the Holy Roman Emperors, or in Machiavelli's appeal for the expulsion of the 'barbarian' invaders in the early sixteenth century; but such interpretations were strained. The history of the peninsula after the fall of the Roman Empire was one of confusion and division, a 'hurly-burly of peoples, states, and institutions', according to the philosopher Giuseppe Ferrari in 1858. The historian Arnold Toynbee observed that there were more independent states in central Italy in the fourteenth century than in the entire world in 1934. Given this tradition of political fragmentation, it is hardly surprising that so many Italians found it hard to identify with the unified kingdom after 1860.

This is not to say that the idea of Italy was wholly without political meaning before the nineteenth century. The papacy from the time of

Gregory VII in the later eleventh century had urged 'all Italians' to resist the claims of the German emperors to sovereignty in the peninsula; and in the thirteenth century the Hohenstaufen ruler of Sicily, Manfred, had used 'Italy' as a stick to beat his French opponents. However, the concept was not very widely employed, and its primary appeal was to writers and poets, not politicians. The Renaissance humanists were especially fond of it, though much of their enthusiasm for the term *Italia* derived from the fact that it had been widely used by the Latin authors they wanted to emulate. During the *Risorgimento* – the movement of national revival in the early to mid-nineteenth century – many famous patriots were, like Alessandro Manzoni, professional writers, or else had very strong literary leanings, like Massimo d'Azeglio or Giuseppe Mazzini. A remarkable number of Garibaldi's 'Thousand' produced accounts of their exploits in 1860. Garibaldi himself wrote poetry.

If the idea of Italy flourished strongly among men of letters, it owed much, too, in the Middle Ages and later, to the thoughts of expatriates and exiles. Probably no other region of Europe has produced so many emigrants over the centuries, partly because the population of the peninsula always tended to outstrip the available resources, and partly also because banishment was for a long time a standard punishment for political troublemakers. Under the influence of nostalgia, and thrown together perhaps for the first time, Neapolitans and Sicilians, Piedmontese and Venetians, could forget their differences and summon up an imaginary community to which they all belonged. It was while in exile that the thirteenth-century Florentine rhetorician Brunetto Latini came to the conclusion that 'Italy is a better country than France'; Petrarch discovered his great love for 'Italy' during his time in Avignon; and Mazzini's devotion to the cause of Italian unity was sustained during thirty years in the London suburbs.

If a sense of being 'Italian' often arose through contact with the outside world, it also rested on certain real cultural premises, at least from the Middle Ages. Dante complained that Italy had over a thousand different languages in his day; but the fact remains that merchants, mercenaries, artisans, friars, and beggars criss-crossed the peninsula and presumably made themselves understood without too much difficulty. The development of a common literary language

from the fourteenth century, based on written Tuscan, helped draw together the educated; while the artistic and intellectual achievements of the Renaissance, and the huge wealth of the city states, gave many Italians feelings of distinctiveness and superiority. 'From morning to night', said the sixteenth-century writer Matteo Bandello, alluding to the achievements of explorers such as Cristoforo Colombo and Amerigo Vespucci, 'we hear that the New World was discovered by the Spanish and Portuguese, whereas it was we, the Italians, who showed them the way.'

These glimmerings of cultural nationalism, however, contrasted strongly with the political fragmentation of the peninsula from the sixth century. A succession of foreign invasions, the plethora of states, disputes over sovereignty, and endless domestic wars made the idea of Italy intellectually elusive. 'In what does [Italy] consist?', asked Giuseppe Ferrari: 'What is it that links the republics, the tyrants, the popes, the emperors? ... Scholarship can shed no light: indeed, far from guiding us, it simply provides evidence of chaos.' The absence of any clear unifying themes in Italy's past made a coherent historical narrative of the peninsula, of a kind that would give substance to the idea of Italy, extremely hard to write, and none of the attempts made by humanist scholars in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries came close to succeeding. The one possible exception was that by Francesco Guicciardini. The first 'History of Italy' in English, written by the Welshman William Thomas in 1549, had as its revealing subtitle: 'A Book Exceedingly Profitable to Be Read Because it Entreateth of the State of Many and Divers Commonwealths How they Have Been and Now Be Governed.'

The fashion for historical writing in Italy during the Renaissance declined in the seventeenth century, and nobody sought to follow Guicciardini and attempt a coherent history of the peninsula. In part this was because Italy's cultural pre-eminence, on which so much 'national' sentiment had rested in the later Middle Ages, disappeared; and scholars now had little grounds for viewing the peninsula as a distinctive whole. However, the coming of the intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment in the early eighteenth century, began to change this situation. A sense now developed among the educated that the various Italian states had fallen behind the rest of Europe; and this feeling, combined with a new interest in

economic and social questions, encouraged writers once again to see the peninsula as a unit. The most remarkable historical work of the period, Ludovico Antonio Muratori's *Antiquitates Italicae Medii Aevi* (1738–42), achieved an integrated vision of Italy in the Middle Ages by abandoning the conventional framework of political narrative, and focusing instead on broad categories such as law, trade, and warfare.

However, the Italian scholars of the Enlightenment belonged to a cosmopolitan movement, and their concern was not so much with establishing the specific identity of Italy, but rather with bringing the peninsula into line with the rest of Europe through the elimination of feudal anachronisms and privileges. The French Revolution and the birth of romantic nationalism destroyed this cosmopolitanism. The idea of Italy now acquired a new radical complexion, as the view emerged that the peninsula was not only distinct, but also a 'nation', deserving independence as much as France or Britain. Propagandists scoured Italy's past for evidence to support this belief, well aware, as the Piedmontese aristocrat Cesare Balbo wrote in 1850, that, 'in the absence of virtuous conduct (and this is sadly the case with us), history is indeed of the greatest use, the best possible foundation for a national political programme'.

The problem, however, remained: what was the essence of Italy? Those, such as Giuseppe Ferrari, who favoured a federal solution to the national question, emphasised the struggles of the communes in the Middle Ages for independence from the Holy Roman Empire: Italy, according to this view, was the sum of its autonomous parts. By contrast, those like Cesare Balbo who hoped the papacy would take a leading role in shaping the new nation, preferred to underline the stand of the medieval popes against the German emperors, playing down the fact that often the papacy and the communes were also at odds. Sometimes, what was in reality a social revolt or a local conflict, was recast in a 'national' mould. Michele Amari, the great Sicilian historian (and future Minister of Education), wrote an account of the brutal rising in Palermo against the French of 1282, known as the Sicilian Vespers, depicting it as an episode of revolutionary nationalism rather than (more prosaically and properly) a *jacquerie*.

The distortions to which the historical record was subjected in the national cause indicate how far the idea of unity relied on a willing

suspension of disbelief to carry it forward. Some patriots undoubtedly saw unification as a way of achieving rational economic goals, such as a larger internal market or a uniform currency; but they were not a majority, nor especially influential. In the main, the *Risorgimento* appealed most to those sections of the middle classes – professionals, students, the provincial bourgeoisie – for whom the idea of Italy aroused strong but vague emotions that left little room for reflection. It was these people who applauded wildly any patriotic allusions in the operas of Giuseppe Verdi: the opening chorus of his *La Battaglia di Legnano* (The Battle of Legnano) (1849), for instance, ('Long live Italy! A sacred pact binds all her sons') was greeted on the first night with ecstatic cries of 'Viva Italia!'. The subject of the opera – the defeat of the Emperor Barbarossa by the Lombard League in 1176 – was one of the key episodes of nationalist historiography.

The extent to which rhetoric served to hide the truth about Italy's condition worried some patriots. 'A little bit of idolatry of the past, mingled with golden dreams of a remote future: reality, the present – never', complained the Piedmontese liberal Giacomo Durando, who wanted a federal solution to the Italian question. However, even the most sober succumbed to myth-making. The great Catholic writer, Alessandro Manzoni, dismissed the Middle Ages as a time of violence and division rather than of glorious proto-nationalism, but he still felt the need to create an alternative historical myth based upon the imagined forbearance and humility of ordinary Italians down the centuries. For him, the essential Italy lay in the obscurer and quieter moments of the past, such as after the Lombard invasions of the sixth century, or during the Spanish occupation of the seventeenth century, the setting for his most famous work, the historical novel *I Promessi Sposi* (The Betrothed), first published in 1827.

As the national movement gathered momentum in the 1840s, so too did the desire to ignore the divisions of the past. 'Have you not heard ... that the cruellest word that you can throw [at Italy] is "diversity"', Manzoni asked Alphonse de Lamartine in April 1848, 'and that this ... sums up a long history of suffering and degradation?' However, Manzoni's own humble vision of unity enjoyed very little favour with the public. Much more appealing were the vague grandiose claims for Italian greatness found in Mazzini's democratic programme (with its notion of a glorious 'Third Rome' that would

liberate all of Europe), and in the writings of such moderate nationalists as the Piedmontese priest, Vincenzo Gioberti. Gioberti's *Del Primato Morale e Civile degli Italiani* (On the Moral and Civil Preeminence of the Italians) (1843) enjoyed astonishing success (despite its pedestrianism and long-windedness), a result largely of its rather crude message about Italy's cultural superiority, ancient and modern.

The literary and rhetorical accretions that had accumulated around the idea of Italy played an important role in generating enthusiasm for unification; but they were also a serious liability to the new kingdom. The reality of united Italy fell far short of expectations; inevitably so, as centuries of political division and socio-economic backwardness could not easily be overcome. This painful truth, however, was difficult to acknowledge and even more difficult to accept. Many, at all levels of society, from landowners and intellectuals to factory workers and peasants, turned their anger against the new regime and its leaders. Under threat, and with their own faith in what they had achieved diminishing, Italy's rulers began to toy with political measures and methods that only served to weaken further the credibility of the liberal state. The result was a crisis of legitimacy that led in 1922 to Mussolini becoming prime minister.

The fascist regime strove resolutely to instil in the Italian population a sense of national identity, and thereby to overcome the discordant local, sectional, and class loyalties that had brought the country to the brink of seeming ungovernability on many occasions since 1860. Freed from the ideological restraints of liberalism, fascism used the power of the state on an unprecedented scale to coerce and mould: propaganda, education, and war were the main tools of indoctrination; and Ancient Rome was elevated into the historical repository of national moral and political values. However, Mussolini's ill-fated alliance with nazism, and his attempt to import such palpably alien doctrines as anti-semitism, destroyed much of the credibility of the regime; and the fiasco of the Second World War did the rest.

The collapse of fascism discredited the rhetoric of national greatness (and to some extent the very idea of 'nation') that had underpinned Mussolini's regime; but at the same time it helped to resolve the country's political identity. For the reality of defeat in 1945 was that Italy had no choice but to insert itself into the framework of

western democratic capitalism. However, the more general problem of 'national identity' remained. The new Republic was born under the banner of 'anti-fascism': but the ejection of the Communists, the most clearly anti-fascist of all the parties, from the government coalition in 1947 invalidated this as a unifying principle. The Church under Pius XII tried for a time to turn Italy into the flagship of 'Christian civilisation': but the growth of consumerism rendered this a lost cause.

From the mid-1950s Italy seemed increasingly unsure of its moral foundations. The Christian Democrats, who dominated government (and to a large extent the state too), paid lip-service to Catholic values and exploited fears of communism; but their *raison d'être* appeared, more and more, to be the retention of power for its own sake. What legitimacy they had stemmed in large measure from the often astonishing growth of the economy after the Second World War. However, in the absence of any clear moral leadership, material prosperity generated expectations that proved increasingly hard to control. By the early 1990s the Republic faced a crisis of authority, triggered by the mismanagement of public finances, pressure for European integration, corruption, and the ideological earthquake that had followed the end of communism.

Out of the confusion generated by the collapse of what was soon referred to as the 'First Republic' came a string of new political parties. The most successful of these was Forza Italia, led by the man who dominated Italian politics for nearly two decades, Silvio Berlusconi. Berlusconi's extraordinary brand of populism, intermingled with pronounced authoritarian strains, may have provided some measure of governmental stability. But the continual blurring of public and private interests during his periods of office did nothing to enhance the credibility of the institutions. As Europe became engulfed in a deepening financial crisis in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the persistent moral and structural weaknesses of the Italian state made the challenge of finding viable solutions to the country's difficulties all the harder. In these circumstances, the likelihood grew that popular anger might – as often in the past – become the unpredictable arbiter of the country's political fortunes.