

ITALY.

INTRODUCTION.

THE most important problems of European politics have been largely connected with Italy, ever since the northern tribes found their way across the Alps to its fertility and sunshine. The early developments of its fire-and-sword wrought civilization belong to archaeology and ancient history, but there is in the period of which the following pages are a condensed record, one phase of the struggle for the domination of Italy which has a peculiar interest for the English reader. It is that in which the British power, having led the forces of Europe to the overthrow of Napoleon, began to repair the ravage his conquests and invasions had wrought, by the promotion of that constitutional liberty which the imperial experience of British statesmen had found to be the only barrier against similar convulsions. For though Napoleon had left the field of action, all the moral and material forces which he had so long and successfully employed were still ready to the hand of another possible master. The Revolution, which had prepared them for him, had entered into the blood of Europe, and especially into that of Italy, where his action had been most thorough. Perhaps no task was ever undertaken by any government, more difficult than that which lay before the rulers of England, to check the progress of anarchy, and yet foster the real interests of constitutional government.

The circumstances in which we live do not permit us to judge fairly of the difficulties thus encountered. We are too much in the habit of regarding the conservative British aristocracy—at that time the most potent influence in the direction of European affairs—as sympathetic with absolutism, forgetting that the only example of popular liberty then known to Europe had filled it with blood and ruins, and that the European populations were in a state of political ignorance. It was this ignorance which had made the French revolution possible, and which made it necessary to guard against the uncontrolled extension of political liberty in the interest of liberty itself.

And England was the only power in a position to undertake this work. Russia could hardly be considered an European country in the sense of being interested in the task, and her armies had only been the brute instruments of the conservative powers in repelling an unmitigated oppression which menaced every section of the existing order of things in the old world. Prussia was relatively a small and weak power; conservative France was paralysed for all good, and helpless; Austria alone offered valid support in carrying out any scheme of civic restoration. Austria was, moreover, the only power with which England came into contact in the solution of the problem of what to do with Italy, the country which, lying between France and Austria, was destined to be the battle-field of their rivalries, or the ally of one against the other. The problem was complicated by two considerations, viz. that France, England's hereditary enemy, had from time immemorial shown a determination to absorb Italy or reduce it to the condition of a vassal province; and that, while any addition to the power of France was a matter of vital importance to England, all the rulers of France from Richelieu downward, had considered the erection of Italy into a strong and united nation as a menace to French predominance. Unquestionably there was so much of self-interest in the friendship which England, from the first,

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-67586-5 - The Union of Italy 1815–1895
 W. J. Stillman
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction.

3

has shown towards the progress and prosperity of Italy. This friendship has been somewhat influenced by the necessity of maintaining the best relations with Austria, but national politics are necessarily conducted on those lines. Sound statesmanship is careful of permitting sentimental motives to control international dealings, but even these were not absent from the sympathy which a large majority of Englishmen, official and private, have always shown for Italian emancipation.

While English sentiment and policy always favoured that emancipation, those of France have as constantly operated for Italian subjection. In the duel over the shaping of Italian institutions which began in 1815 and which has not yet been fought out, the maintenance of good relations with Austria was indispensable to the success of England. In none of the difficult problems which British statecraft has had to solve has greater mastery of its difficulties been needed or shown, than in this, of baffling the constant efforts of France to reduce Italy to subjection, diplomatic or military, and of keeping touch with Austria while urging the progressive liberation and constitutional evolution of Italy. If in this work the statesmen of England differed, and in differing more or less, approved or opposed the methods of government of Austria, there is no ground for surprise. There was always before them the terrible lesson of liberty carried to excess. For us, with the problem worked out before our eyes, it is easy to see what might have been, had statesmen possessed the gift of prescience. But the Italian proverb—"Of the wisdom of yesterday, the ditches are full"—can never be better applied than here.

Taking into account all the conditions of time, growth and circumstance, no one has a right to say that England could have done more to show her sympathy for the healthy liberty of Italy than she did from 1812, when she gave a constitution to Sicily, to the year 1882, when she invited Italy to join her in the control and civilization of Egypt. Her pressure was constant on Austria in the disastrous years of 1848–9, to induce

the Emperors of Austria to develop gradually the free institutions which the people could wisely use. But it is in entire consonance with the conditions I have above pointed out, that, while she never relaxed her urgency to that end, she as invariably opposed any tendency which should render Italy more subject to France. It was a sound apprehension, growing out of the perception of the danger of French friendship, that led her to oppose those tendencies of Cavour which ended in the war of 1859 and the emancipation of Lombardy. And, studying the problem as worked out, with no personal interest in the question, and certainly no partiality for Austria, I am profoundly convinced that most of the morbid conditions of current Italian politics are due to the germs planted in the national constitution by that initial mistake. On that occasion Italy was betrayed, as English statesmen anticipated, by her ally, as she always has been, and always will be, because the real strength and independence of the Italian nation are obstacles to French ambition. It might have been better for Italy to wait many more generations in order to fulfil the prophecy, *Italia farà da se*, than to be helped a step by France. One of the wisest of Italian patriots once said to me, “Italy was made too quickly and too easily.”

If the following pages do not insist more strongly on this central lesson of Italian history, it is because the continual repetition of the moral of a story is wearisome, and is indeed useless when one has read the story itself. The wisdom of England’s constant friendship for Austria is shown, it seems to me, by the present position of Italy in the Triple Alliance, which, if not the ideal league it was planned to be, has at least displayed Austria, so long the scourge of Italy, as her constant, and on the Continent her only constant, friend, and after England her wisest and firmest. Studied in this light the history of the Kingdom of Italy becomes one of the most interesting examples of national evolution, of which political philosophy can take account.

CHAPTER I.

VITTORIO EMMANUELE I.

THERE can be no question that at the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars Italy was in fact a “diplomatic expression.” Any conception of the unity of Italians as a nation was only to be found in rare and enlightened individuals. Napoleon had left the country deprived of its youth, of its energy, but also of a great many of its ancient prejudices, and had succeeded in demolishing many ancient traditions without laying the foundations of the new edifice. The Lombards hated the Neapolitans as the Tuscans did the Piedmontese; Sicily was a nation apart by race and history, and had been given during the English protectorate in 1812 a brief term of constitutional government which left reminiscences rather than habits; all else had been exposed to despotic government without any trace of constitutionalism¹, and Piedmont alone seemed to have developed any trace of that national character which was to become the basis of Italian nationality. The French had made themselves detested to such an extent through the barbarities and exhaustive policy of Napoleon, that even the Austrians were accepted in northern Italy as saviours. But

¹ The Republics of Venice and Genoa could hardly be considered constitutional governments in the true sense of the word, and they were to the last anti-Italian.

the French régime through the whole peninsula had pretty thoroughly demolished the popular traditions of reverence for the “legitimate” rulers.

In Piedmont circumstances were fortunate for the beginnings of the new nation. Conservative in character, independent, attached to its own institutions, Piedmont had, undoubtedly, resisted better the invasion of Napoleonic influences than any other part of Italy, and formed a fixed point to which it was possible for the other loose elements of Italian nationality sooner or later to gravitate. King Vittorio Emmanuele I, a character rather feeble than vigorous, without great intelligence and disposed to despotic government, had nevertheless a keen sense of the importance of his dynasty and a strong repugnance to the influences which had been left behind by the French. He was easily persuaded to efface everything that remained of the French domination. He abolished the Code Napoleon, annulled all the legislation for the administration of the country, and went back to the general conditions of government in 1790. He destroyed entirely the French system of administrative magistracy and of military organization, and even went to the excess of dismissing from official employment the functionaries who had been employed under the French administration.

The first step toward the union of the states of Italy into one nation was the annexation of Genoa to Piedmont. At the same time there were negotiations, leading rather to moral than political results, for the annexation of Lombardy to the new kingdom. The annexation of Genoa was however the only indication, at the beginning of the career of the officially recognised Piedmont, of the agglomeration which has since become the kingdom of Italy. The conservatives, even in Piedmont, distrusted the unitarian spirit to such an extent that the most conservative Piedmontese regarded it as revolutionary. Bersezio says that Piedmont was so little united in habits to the rest of Italy, “that by the great mass

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-67586-5 - The Union of Italy 1815–1895
 W. J. Stillman
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

1.]

Vittorio Emmanuele I.

7

of people it was not even known that they were Italians." One of the most intelligent and original Italians of that day, Count de Maistre, had written from St Petersburg, "Cultivate the Italian tendencies; they are born of the revolution. Your method of proceeding—timid, neutral, suspensive, balancing—is destructive. Let the King make himself head of the Italians; let him call to all the civil and military employments, and even to those in his court, people of revolutionary tendencies, even those who are prejudiced. This is vital, essential; words fail me, but this is my last word, my last expression: if we stand uncertain and become an obstacle,—requiem eternam." But the King was not a man to listen to such bold counsel. The Piedmontese Minister in London urged on Lord Castlereagh the union of Lombardy with the duchies of central Italy as a step towards the formation of an Italian group separating lower Italy from Austrian influence; and the Italians residing in London, forerunners of the exiles of '48, had sent agents into Italy to agitate for the accession of Lombardy to Piedmont. Vittorio Emmanuele would have willingly accepted the enlargement of his state as far as the Mincio, sacrificing to such a result even the legitimacy of the royal line, but he was unwilling to give a constitution. He hated the Germans and desired to remove them out of Italy, but rather because he desired to be master in his own house than because he hated despotism. The treaty of Paris of 1814 had assigned to Piedmont, Savoy, Genoa and Nice, which satisfied the ambitions of the King, although he had by the treaty lost Annecy.

Nor was the annexation to Piedmont better received by the Genoese. That ancient republic, although it suffered from the French domination, reconciled itself with great difficulty to the annexation to Piedmont, and received the new administration with repugnance and even hostility. The people refused to be assimilated to the Piedmontese and the most conspicuous members of the aristocracy declined to recognize

the Piedmontese administration, retiring to their villas, and withdrawing from public life until the revolutionary epoch in 1848. A revolutionary committee was formed in Genoa in which an aspiration for Italian unity was, curiously enough, coupled with revolt from Piedmont.

The Queen of Vittorio Emmanuele, Maria Teresa of Austria, played an important part in the politics of the period. Personally attractive, with great vivacity and intelligence, she returned to her kingdom from the exile of Sardinia, her despotic tendencies intensified, and a sentiment of royal importance exaggerated. She re-established in greater magnificence the forms and ceremonies of royalty—chamberlains, masters of the royal house, grandees of the court—as if Piedmont were a great empire; and added her influence to the series of arbitrary measures which marked the period of the first years of the reign of Vittorio Emmanuele I.

The restoration of the court proved the restoration of the old system of public corruption, and perversion of justice; titles, privileges, charges at court, decisions of the magistrates, became the property of an aristocracy ruined by the past vicissitudes of the national life, while measures adopted for the enforced liquidation of the debts of the state were turned to the profit of the favoured classes. The Minister of Finance, Gian Carlo Brignole of Genoa, issued a decree of liquidation of the state debt, which, taken together with the general suspension of payments and rumours of failures, produced a great reduction in the value of the public funds. People in the intelligence of the court were best enabled to acquire the bonds at low prices, and it is even said that the Queen herself shared in these speculations. The legal transactions which had taken place under the French administration were declared null and void. The royal authority, by annulling contracts made under the French administration, and authorizing debtors to refuse to pay their debts, disturbed the entire system of credit. Against the remonstrances of wiser counsellors the

King had been persuaded by his advisers that, as everything in the state belonged to him in his sovereign quality, so even the private affairs of his subjects were under his control.

Ecclesiastical relations played again an important part in the state policy. The tendencies of the King had always been strongly clerical, and the privileges of the Church, destroyed by the revolution, were restored with usury. The clergy had always been a secondary support to the throne and the King had no intention of allowing the injuries inflicted by the revolution to remain. All the public edifices which had been confiscated by the French, with the convents, gardens and lands, were restored to the Church, as well as the direction of the schools. The privileges of the Jesuits were restored, and in the years 1816 and 1817 the Church returned substantially to its original condition in Piedmont. Colleges, hospitals and other beneficent institutions were turned into convents and monasteries; and the Jesuits resumed absolute control over public instruction in Piedmont. The current conception of educational requirements during this period is thus given by Bersezio. Two years of elementary instruction in which the scholar learned to read, to write and to know numbers were sufficient for the people. A priest was always the schoolmaster, and in the provinces the scholars left the school knowing scarcely how to read print and to write badly their own names. The supreme director of the schools was the parish priest. For the children of the middle classes, six years in Turin, four years in the provinces, of instruction in literature and rhetoric, in which the Latin language, arithmetic in the first four operations, a little knowledge of geography, some notion of philosophy and the history of the House of Savoy, were all that was imparted. Neither modern languages nor art was included. A single teacher for each class, himself not very wise; the method of instruction, rod for the back and rulers for the fingers. After this came two years of philosophy, logic, ethics, natural history, geometry, physics, ancient history and a little Greek. Of these

schools, the supreme direction was in the hands of the bishops. Priests and friars were everywhere in the secondary schools and in the university. There was no chair of the philosophy of history, of the philosophy of law, of comparative philology or political economy. The lecture-rooms were miserable, scarcely tolerable. Clinical instruction was considered of no importance; the sanitation was under the clergy; great favouritism in examinations was shown, so that those who did not pass in the University of Turin were sure to be passed at Genoa. The students were not permitted to enter a billiard-room or a café or to be present at any public spectacle, and they were compelled to retire at nightfall. Teachers were treated in the same manner; they were even obliged to present their certificates of pastoral communion, and the secondary professors were obliged to wear the priestly garments and be under the orders of the bishops and parish priests.

The deadening influence of absolutism, reinforced by the system of education of the Jesuits, paralyzed all scientific as well as literary study. The academy of sciences, reconstituted under ancient regulations, excluded literature; and the Agrarian Society, as it was reconstituted, only showed the intellectual misery of its surroundings. The only notable literary characters were Grassi and Napione; Doctor Edoardo Calvo in the popular dialect, Alberto Nota in the drama,—both mediocre—and Silvio Pellico outside of Piedmont, were the only writers who reflected the least honour on Italian literature.

In the war department, on the contrary, the Marquis of San Marzano accomplished something. The ten million francs indemnity received from France he used in reconstructing the forts of Exilles and Exillon and in restoring the bridge of Lesseillon destroyed during the war. San Marzano instituted a military academy with aristocratic tendencies, but useful, and founded the military order of Savoy. General Dessaix was imprisoned for five months in pure animosity to those who had served the Emperor, so great was the hatred