

The Fight for Italian Reunification Inspired the International Left

The first meeting of the Italian parliament in Rome, 150 years ago today, was a symbolic show of national reunification. Yet the battle against foreign domination had raised sharply contrasting ideas of the future Italy — leaving a lasting impact on socialists worldwide.



A painting depicts a scene from the Risorgimento, the political and social movement that consolidated different states of the Italian peninsula into the single state of the Kingdom of Italy in the nineteenth century. (Universal History Archive / Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

On November 27, 1871, Italy's King Vittorio Emanuele II gave an [impassioned speech](#) at the Italian parliament, finally ushering in the complete unification of his country. For centuries, the peninsula had been divided into a patchwork of regions, mostly dominated by the monarchies of Austria, France, and Spain. Napoleon had worked to change this arrangement after the French Revolution, but, after Habsburg diplomat Count Klemens von Metternich's reversal of his reforms at the Council of Vienna in 1815, the three foreign dynasties largely regained their strongholds.

In reaction came an aggressive Italian political movement, reintroducing the long-held concept of Risorgimento — national resurgence. In the 1830s, it was spearheaded by Genoa-born intellectual Giuseppe Mazzini, attracting thousands of young Italians at home and abroad. Above all, they wanted to see the European empires leave the country. Giuseppe Garibaldi, an important disciple of Mazzini's and a member of the Young Italy secret society, stayed in touch with the Genoan for many years and, in 1848, heeded his call to return home and fight. In the meantime, Garibaldi made his name as an important guerrilla leader in South America — a man who knew how to lead a large merchant crew, or an army.

But things didn't go as Mazzini had forecast. He had written Garibaldi that the huge Austrian army in the north of Italy was in a state of near collapse. Traveling through the north months afterward, Garibaldi found just the opposite was true, and the Italian forces were heavily defeated in the Battle of Novara against Habsburg opposition. As for Mazzini, by March 1849, he was appointed to the three-man tribunal running a radical republic in Rome that had just been created. From the start, everyone agreed, Mazzini was very much the lead man.

The battle of Rome would set the radical defenders of the republic, including forces coming from the

north with Garibaldi, against a highly disciplined French army intent on reinstalling the runaway Pope. Garibaldi's men — almost all volunteers, arriving from numerous countries — were celebrated for their bravery in forays against the French army that stunned newspaper readers in Europe and America. But as the monthslong battle unfolded, Garibaldi's view of Mazzini, his longtime mentor, drastically changed.

Garibaldi had been appointed a general — not commander in chief. Yet his military dexterity gave him a high-profile, if short-term, victory on April 30, 1849, as his troops made their way into the city. “When Garibaldi's Legionnaires entered Rome,” writes [biographer Christopher Hibbert](#), the people looked at them with astonishment . . . their bearded faces shaded by the brims of high-crowned, black-plumed hats, were covered with dust, their hair was long and unkempt; some carried lances, others muskets and all of them wore in their blackbelts a heavy dagger . . . and there was no mistaking the broad-shouldered figure on the white horse. Despite the freckled skin burnt red by the sun and the flamboyant black felt hat with its high plume of ostrich feathers, Garibaldi, to some, looked like the Messiah.

Yet by June 30, 1849, an exhausted Garibaldi appeared before the republican assembly to say that he would have to surrender to the French siege. Mazzini, meanwhile, demanded that they keep fighting — strongly suggesting that having martyrs would help their cause. Disgusted, Garibaldi resigned his command and promptly left Rome with his army of four thousand men. Garibaldi would, sometime later, form an alliance with Vittorio Emanuele to complete the fight for Italian reunification — now under the Savoy monarchy.

US Mainstream Reactions

The embattled Roman Republic had attracted much attention in the United States. The most important mainstream media in mid-nineteenth-century America was the country's largest newspaper, the *New York Tribune*, known for its antislavery editorial stance. The editor in chief, Horace Greeley, six years younger than Mazzini, had become a major public intellectual after starting the *Tribune* in 1841. A passionate supporter of social reform, by 1857, Greeley would be a leading figure in the new Republican Party.

“The *Tribune* was a major conduit through which Americans learned about 1848 in Europe,” explains Greeley biographer Mitchell Snay. Greeley had accurately predicted that his audience would be fascinated by the revolution going on in Italy in the late 1840s. As the dismal issue of slavery increasingly obsessed the United States, he said yes to his front-page columnist's request to move to Europe and report from there. Margaret Fuller would capture the interest of Greeley's readers and remind them of their own revolution, just three-quarters of a century earlier.

Mazzini and Greeley — who would never meet — shared a political philosophy that was common to their class in the first part of the nineteenth century. Utopian socialism preached the union of classes to solve social problems. Both men were dedicated to curtailing turmoil between the working and upper classes. At times, Mazzini had called himself a socialist. His definition, though, was wildly different from the Marxist socialists who would soon play a major role in the second half of the nineteenth century — at least in Europe. Noted Italian historian [Gaetano Salvemini](#) would define Mazzini as “one who hoped for social reform but carefully eschewed any talk of class conflict.” This, too, defined Greeley's politics. On both sides of the Atlantic there were various forms of this “ism”: communitarianism, Fourierism, Associationism, and others. They all involved social reform, not revolutionary action.

A Mazzinian Covering the Battle of Rome

Margaret Fuller had spent all her professional life among the utopian socialists. A blue blood New Englander from Cambridge, Massachusetts, she had authored a feminist book, [Woman in the Nineteenth Century](#), and edited Ralph Waldo Emerson's literary publication the *Dial* before being hired by Greeley to write for the *Tribune* in 1844.

Eighteen months later, she headed for London, where she was introduced to Mazzini, who thoroughly mesmerized her from the very beginning. Fuller would have been stunned at Eric Hobsbawm's description of Mazzini, in his own *Age of Revolution* more than a century later, as “the woolly and

ineffective self-dramatizer.” Fuller’s initial description of him was “a man of beauteous and pure music.”

They kept in touch, especially after Fuller returned to Rome, just before Pope Pius IX’s prime minister, Count Pellegrino Rossi, was brutally knifed to death in the middle of an angry crowd. The pope quickly fled south. Over the next several months, until July 1849, Fuller would cover the ongoing battle of radical troops against the French forces trying to reinstall the pope. And she would use Mazzini as her major source of information.

At the same time, Fuller, close to forty, was experiencing her own personal crisis. Much to Greeley’s consternation, Fuller had disappeared for six months in the early spring with hardly a word about where and why she was not writing. Alone and afraid in Aquila, she had given birth to a son. Soon afterward, the father, a young member of the Roman Civil Guard, the Marchese Giovanni Ossoli, had joined her in a quiet marriage ceremony. A friend in Massachusetts counseled her to stay in Italy and not return home. She hired a wet nurse and returned to Rome to cover the war.

“The European revolutionary movement which Fuller embraced and then saw crushed, emerged out of very real and widespread social misery,” write Larry J. Reynolds and Susan Belasco Smith, editors of a [collection of her writings](#). “The Europe Fuller encountered on her travels during 1846 and 1847 teemed with unemployment, famine, and social unrest, as well as . . . despotic governments unable or unwilling to fashion solutions to these problems.”

Solutions were being proposed by others. Friedrich Engels’s *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, published in 1845, and the *Communist Manifesto*, published in 1848, were pointed out to Fuller by a German journalist, though she did not write about either for the *Tribune*. In this period, Fuller, who had had a long interview with the writer George Sand, began calling herself a “radical.” But academic Margaret V. Allen concludes, “her columns show that she implicitly believed that knowledge of wrongs or evils led to their correction.” Poet Elizabeth Browning had claimed that “Fuller became one of the out and out reds,” but Reynolds and Smith write that “Fuller’s militancy had its limits” — doubting that she had become a “red” at all.

Fuller certainly was a steadfast admirer of Mazzini — writing that he was “immortally dear to me — a thousand times dearer for all the trial I saw made of him in Rome.” Her idolatry seemed to increase as the siege went on. But, as Italian American historian Roland Sarti — former department chair of history at the University of Massachusetts — [writes](#), while many feminists in England were inspired by Mazzini, “One suspects that, in some cases, he cultivated them for the sake of the men” they were close to. Fuller, he commented, “was an important figure among the Transcendentalists,” which would have interested Mazzini. But he adds, “She was of minor importance to Mazzini’s life.”

Tragically, Fuller and her small family died in a shipwreck off the coast of New York on July 1, 1850.

From Utopian to Marxist Socialism

The fall of the Roman Republic, a hairbreadth from the midpoint of the nineteenth century, was quickly followed by Mazzini’s profound change in direction once back in London, where he would live as an émigré for the rest of his life.

He was still heavily involved in advocating for the unification of Italy. But over the next twenty years, he would become obsessed by a ferocious hatred of the up-and-coming Marxist socialists. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels emphatically denounced his and similar brands of “reactionary” socialism, “by which they meant conservative critiques of capitalism,” writes scholar Jonathan Sperber in his authoritative [Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life](#). They “made short shrift of ‘bourgeois socialism — what we would today call social reform — the amelioration of the condition of the working class within the capitalist society.’”

This “social reform” was at the very heart of Greeley and Mazzini’s definition of early socialism.

“But little by little as the proletarian movement assumed a more revolutionary character,” writes Salvemini, “and the word socialism became removed from the idea of a simple, cooperative form of democracy and grew to be identified with that of the class struggle — as happened from 1848 to 1851 — under the impulse given by [Louis Auguste] Blanqui and Marx — Mazzini became profoundly antagonistic towards this new movement, with ideas differing so widely from his.”

Mazzini blamed the French socialists for frightening the bourgeoisie and bringing Louis Napoleon’s reactionary imperial regime to power in Paris. “Thus began the systematic campaign against socialism

which he was to wage until the end of his life.” When the Paris Commune raised the red flag over the French capital in 1871, Mazzini viciously attacked the Communards, turning many former disciples against him. “Mazzini’s social system, from the practical point of view, no longer corresponded with prevailing social and political realities,” summed up Salvemini.

Bourgeois Socialism and the US Republicans

In contrast to Mazzini, Greeley’s political philosophy, also eschewing class conflict, remained very much intact and popular in the United States. His own career, from teenage printing apprentice from a poor farming family to editor of the country’s most successful newspaper, was often used as an example by Republican Party leaders.

The *Tribune* did “expose shocking working conditions in many New York City shops,” writes noted Columbia historian Eric Foner in [*Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*](#). Indeed, “unlike many other Republicans, Greeley supported a legislative limit on hours of labor . . . [but] strikes were a form of ‘industrial war,’ the antithesis of the labor-capital cooperation which Greeley desired.” If Greeley recognized the social barriers to economic advancement, he also insisted on confronting “intemperance, licentiousness, gambling and other vices, in the lowest class.” As Snay points out, Greeley’s persistent emphasis on the essential harmony between classes” underscored his deep aversion to Marxist socialism.

“In the U.S. . . . particularly in the large Eastern cities, where large-scale immigration was increasing class stratification and holding down the real wages of all workers, the prospect for rising to self-employment was already receding . . . we know today, of course,” writes Foner, “that in spite of the wide acceptance of the ideology of social mobility, the years after 1860 saw a steady diminution of the prospects for a worker or farm laborer to achieve economic independence.” Yet at the time, Abraham Lincoln would insist that the North had no class who “are always laborers.” This came out of an ethos from colonial times that involved a decades-long stigma against being a “wage slave.” In the Republican Party, being a wage slave was only a temporary existence; so organizing workers was not necessary.

This then would remain a key part of Republican ideology. “Paradoxically,” writes Foner, “at the time of its greatest success, the seeds of the later failure of that ideology were already present.” In the 1860s, Greeley’s party was advocating an economic system that had already begun to lose power. By then, it was estimated that almost 60 percent of the American labor force was employed as wage workers, demonstrating that the new political party, from its inception, advocated for a system that was already a part of America’s past.

Despite the profound problems of the Mezzogiorno, in Italy as in the rest of Europe, at the end of the nineteenth century a mass labor movement emerged for the first time in history. “Nineteen socialist and labor parties were founded . . . between 1880 and 1896” along with a nationwide trade union federation, writes Sperber. By then, the shift between utopian socialism and Marxist socialism was complete, while in the United States, that moment never really occurred. While Mazzini died with a much-diminished following, Greeley’s celebration of economic independence remained very much alive. And it would bear a lasting influence in the enduring split between the US and European Left.