

National Movements in Italy and in Central and Southeast Europe The Difficult Implementation of the Idea of the Nation

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FIRST OF all, I wish to thank the Rector, Professor Ioan-Aurel Pop, the President of the Academic Senate, Professor Ioan Chirilă, and the entire academic community for the great honor of being here with you today. I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the warmth and spirit of familiarity that have accompanied my presence in Cluj.

At the same time, I want to thank the Dean of the Faculty of History and Philosophy, Professor Ovidiu Ghitta, as well as all the colleagues in this faculty for the honor conferred upon me by the award of this honorary title.

I am excited, honored and content, first and foremost, because of the prestige of Babeș-Bolyai University. Secondly, because receiving such recognition in this country is the crowning of a research career in which the history of Romania played a very important part. It started with my master's thesis and my first study on Romanian topics, published in 1975. Thanking you

again, I would like to continue with a short speech on a subject that I think is appropriate for this occasion and represents at least part of my scientific interests.

The historiography of the unification of Italy and of the national movements in Central and Southeast Europe is very rich. The first works date back to a time when the nation states had not yet been accomplished. It is impossible to summarize the whole topic in just a few pages, but quite easy to notice are its numerous political implications, as well as the diversity of approaches to it, from strictly scientific and neutral studies to ideological or myth-oriented contributions. Here I intend to trace the broad lines of the relations between the political events that took place in the Italian Peninsula and in Central and South-Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century.

The fact that there were actual and conceptual relations is not surprising, since the geographical positioning itself favored them. Moreover, for many centuries, the old Italian states, such as Venice or Genoa, had engaged in trade and other types of relations with the countries and peoples of the Balkans.¹ In the period of national revivals, in the nineteenth century, these relations found new reasons for their existence. This does not mean that the Italian public opinion was well informed about what was happening beyond the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, nor that important Italian events had always or constantly been of interest to the peoples in this part of Europe or, in any case, to their ruling or intellectual elites.

The first national insurrection in the Balkans, the one led by Karagjorgje (Black George), did not capture the attention of the Italians. However, even Napoleon Bonaparte expressed his esteem for the leader of the insurgents and his military capabilities. The Italian public knew nothing concrete about the appeals made by some Moldavian and Wallachian nobles to the emperor of France to promote the birth of a noble Republic in the Danubian principalities, an idea that was never realized.²

During the Napoleonic period, on the other hand, there were very active relations between the Italian and the Greek patriots. The unfortunate expedition of the Greek “protomartyr” Rigas Velestinlis or Feraios, at the eve of Greek struggle for independence, did not start from Trieste by accident. Trieste was a city subjected to Austria but had a strong Italian identity and was the center of an important Hellenic community. As it is known, Rigas was an Aromanian who lived in Wallachia for a long time.³

With the outbreak of revolutionary uprising of 1821,⁴ the number and type of these relations certainly changed. The struggle of the Greek insurgents against the Sultan quickly created the myth of independent Greece. The phenomenon of philhellenism was international, not only Italian, but the successes of the Greeks were a real example for the Italian patriots, for a nation that had to rise against foreign domination and absolutism. Italian philhellenism is well-known,

although it deserves a historiographical revision.⁵ Let me emphasize a few relevant elements. In 1822, several Italians fought against the Ottoman troops at Peta and some lost their lives in that bloody battle. The Italian Vincenzo Gallina contributed significantly to the drafting of the first Greek Constitution, that of Epidaurus.⁶ Later, a well-known politician, Santorre di Santa Rosa, who had left Piedmont after the failed revolutionary movement of 1821, lost his life on the island of Sfakteria.⁷ Despite some disappointments, thanks to more illustrious names, such as those of Foscolo, Berchet, Pecchio or the painter Hayez, Italian philhellenism did not disappear and continued throughout the whole century.⁸ It should be noted that it was sometimes combined with the cultural fashion of Orientalism: just think of the fame of a character like Ali Pasha of Tepelena/Ioannina.⁹ Eventually, a few decades later, the philhellenic current mingled with that of Garibaldi.

In the second half of the century there were great changes. The formation of the Italian unitary state under Cavour's direct attention became a model for all the nations that had been fighting for independence and unity: from many small and medium-sized states a large one was born and quickly found its place among the Great Powers, even if it did not occupy an equally important place. Therefore, other nations could also hope to achieve their own independent national state.

Garibaldi's conquest of the South created a new myth.¹⁰ It became popular and desirable throughout Europe. Many Greeks hoped that a new expedition led by Garibaldi would free those compatriots who still lived under Ottoman rule, or that they might even dethrone the unloved King Otto of Greece. Victor Emmanuel II, king of Italy since 1861, had nourished the vain hope of placing his son Amedeo on that throne.¹¹ The history of the two peoples, Greek and Italian, did not cease to have elements in common for that reason. In the period 1866–1867, Italian volunteers, under the aegis of Garibaldi, went to Crete to help Greek insurgents against Turkish repression. The presence of Italian volunteers fighting for Greek freedom—among them, the two sons of Garibaldi, Menotti and Ricciotti—demonstrated the continuity of a strong ideal and of the political connection between the two peoples.¹²

The idea of the nation inspired other Italians who wanted to fight for Greece in 1881, in order to expand its borders beyond what the Great Powers had initially assigned to it. Prime Minister Alexandros Koumoundouros preferred to avoid conflicts. Meanwhile, the first uncertainties arose about the implementation of the idea of nationhood, with the specific example of Epirus.¹³ Because of the Bulgarian-Rumelian crisis of 1885–1887, these doubts were renewed concerning other countries as well, reaching the point where two Balkan states, Bulgaria and Serbia, went to war with each other and not against an empire.¹⁴

The difficulty of distinguishing which was the most just national cause re-emerged in 1897. Again, the Greek nation went to war with the Ottoman Empire to liberate Crete and, again, the Italian volunteers went to fight alongside their Greek friends: the experience ended in defeat at the Battle of Domokos in Thessaly.¹⁵ These events did not interrupt the process of completing the Greek national state, including territories with a mixed population, but here I mention them, above all, as a further example of the interrelationships between the Italian and Balkan worlds. In addition to what I said about the contrasts that had arisen between the national programs of different peoples, I must refer to the last Garibaldian expedition to Greece, led by Ricciotti Garibaldi in 1912: it clarified to the public the problem of the difficult implementation of the principle of nationhood.¹⁶

A certain reassessment in the historiography about the empire dominated by the Habsburgs starts also from the finding that that generous idea of nationhood had to be reduced and applied in the actual context of those territories and peoples, a reality that is difficult to reconstruct or dissect in a precise and safe manner. In these considerations, we are helped by the intellectual output of a revolutionary thinker of the nineteenth century, namely Giuseppe Mazzini. Not only was he the symbol of a revolution in the view of both sympathizers and opponents, but he was also, thanks to his ideological baggage, one of the links between the Unification of Italy and the national revival of Central and South-Eastern Europe. In any case, he, who hoped for the formation of a state for each nation (but also for collaboration between nations), opted for a different solution than the national state when, at an older age, he was faced with the geographical, demographic, civil and political reality of the Danube-Balkan area. He proposed—like others—the idea of a confederation among the state entities that would have maintained their individuality.¹⁷ Perhaps, unwittingly, he paid an indirect compliment to the complex imperial political structure he wanted to destroy, namely Austria, which for centuries had united different peoples.

Mazzini's plans had no real consequences for the history of the peoples in the Danube-Balkan area, but his ideas were well known in Romania, Bulgaria and among the South-Slavic populations. Not only Nicolae Bălcescu, but also Constantin A. Rosetti, the Brătianu brothers, the Golescu brothers and others considered the famous Genoese a master. Several essays by Ștefan Delureanu demonstrate this.¹⁸ In particular, the direct relationship between the Italian thinker and Dumitru Brătianu, who entered Mazzini's narrow circle, is well known, as he imagined a *Giovine Romania* in the context of that *Giovine Europa* created by the famous Genoese. In 1849, Bălcescu intended to recruit a Romanian legion to help the Roman Republic led by Mazzini. Eventually, Bălcescu died in Palermo in 1852.¹⁹ In his office at the *Românul* (The Romanian) newspaper, the

progressive liberal Constantin A. Rosetti kept images of Mazzini and Garibaldi and considered the former a *maître à penser* for the Romanian patriots.²⁰ In real terms, however, there are no significant achievements as regards the collaboration between the Italians and the Romanians in the pre-unification period.

The Romanian nation, located between the Lower Danube and Central Europe, had good reason to look to Italy. In the mid-nineteenth century, starting from specific historical data, intellectuals and politicians created the idea that Romania was a Latin island in a Slavic sea, a Western fortress against the worrisome power of Russia that fully revealed its danger by intervening in Moldavia, Wallachia and Transylvania in 1848–1849 to put an end to various national revolutions. During the Crimean War, the role of the Danubian principalities became important in the hard confrontation between the Tsarist Empire and the other Great Powers.²¹ Therefore, in the Romanian countries, the Latin and Western cultural and linguistic tradition spread and became stronger. The boyars' children became acquainted with liberal or democratic ideas in Paris. If the Pole Star for the Romanian patriots was France, they also looked to Italy long enough for Ion Heliade-Rădulescu to propose normalizing the Romanian language by using Italian.²² Naturally, the Romanians' interest in Italy increased as a result of the formation of the unified Italian national state and they paid particular attention to the victories of Garibaldi.

Romanians and Italians had no opportunity or reason to engage in any broad collaboration during the struggle for independence from the order dictated by empires, but Romanian historiography insisted on the similarities between them. Indeed, an isochronic curiosity of the main passages and events can be observed: the revolts of 1821, the revolutionary attempts of 1848, the achievement of the first unification in 1859 and 1861, the consolidation of unity in 1918.²³ However, there are more differences than similarities between the two national unity movements. Romania and Italy were different countries due to their economic, cultural and political evolutions: only in Transylvania—which was the last region to become united with the Romanian state in 1918—were there cities similar to the Italian municipalities. The movement to unite the Romanians began and was directed for decades by an elite who lived in the Principalities that were under Ottoman rule. The Italian unification movement found its guide in independent Piedmont, which possessed a respectable army. The first part of Romania's unification movement developed under the aegis of international diplomacy. In Italy foreign intervention was fundamental for the success of the national struggle, but there were also bloody battles and actions such as the Expedition of the Thousand which easily created a heroic and mythopoetic atmosphere.²⁴

After achieving Romania's independence, the two national states entered the same alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary. Both governments regarded the Triple Alliance with reservations since this was an alliance chosen for reasons of sheer international balance: it was known that the Romanian and the Italian public could not forget that some of their compatriots were subject to Austria-Hungary.²⁵ Few were surprised when, at the beginning of the World War, Rome and Bucharest preferred neutrality and then made the decision to enter the war alongside the Entente,²⁶ in the belief that they could obtain considerable advantages for their peoples and states. This goal was actually achieved, especially in the case of Romania.

The relationship between the Italian world and Serbia is a subject that calls for a much broader approach than we can perform here. Suffice it to recall that in 1848–1849, the Piedmontese government, the most committed to the fight against Austria in Italy, tried in vain to persuade Belgrade to use its influence to get the Serbs to fight alongside the Hungarians, not against them.²⁷ The Unification of Italy was later a model for the Serbs, both for the Expedition of the Thousand and for the teachings of Mazzini, which influenced the formation of that Serbian *Omladina*.²⁸ In the 1860s, however, the Serbian government preferred the path of prudence rather than participate in a fight against Austria: it was trying to find a way to escape the Sultan's sovereignty. Its leader Ilija Garašanin was not tempted by the project of the Danubian Federation, which was to rise on the ruins of empires.²⁹ However, several years later, many Italian volunteers went to fight alongside the insurgents in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1875–1876,³⁰ in the first phase of the Great Eastern Crisis, which gave rise to the independence of Romania, Serbia, Montenegro and made possible the birth of an autonomous Bulgarian Principality.

The Italian presence in the Balkans became more important during the already mentioned Bulgarian-Rumelian crisis of 1885–1887, but as a Great Power rather than as a supporter of the national movements.³¹ In fact, the Balkan area was an important training ground for Italian diplomacy. The interest in Southeast Europe continued until World War I and beyond.³² It was no coincidence that Italy had a queen from Montenegro at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Italian elites mainly dealt with the fate of Albania, at the request of the important Italian-Albanian community, which was briefly joined by the Garibaldi and Mazzini currents.³³ *Sed de hoc satis*.

The Italians encountered difficulties in applying the principle of the nation in their relations with the world of the Southern Slavs, given the complex Adriatic issue, which demanded so much not only from politics, but also from the historiography of both camps. I will not discuss these elements here.³⁴ However, I

would like to recall that in 1906 Aurel C. Popovici, the Romanian intellectual from Lugoj, in his great project of restructuring the empire along a federal model, as the United States of Greater Austria, was thinking of creating two Italian Länder, one of which would have included Trieste alongside Gorizia and Istria (the other was Trentino).³⁵

BEYOND THE difficulties in applying the idea of the nation, it can be said that the movement for the Unification of Italy had very close and important relations with and exerted a certain influence on the national movements and struggles of the peoples of Central and Southeast Europe. This influence was not decisive in practice and had no more important effects than the pan-Slavic solidarity demanded by the Russians or the diplomatic and military action of Austria-Hungary and the other Great Powers with interests in the Balkans. It is equally true, however, that historiography has plenty of reasons to continue investigating those relationships, as well as the Italian influence. □

Notes

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Abstract

National Movements in Italy and in Central and Southeast Europe:
The Difficult Implementation of the Idea of the Nation

The paper presents the content of the lectio magistralis delivered by the recipient at the doctor honoris causa ceremony hosted by Babeş-Bolyai University. It broadly outlines the relations between the political events that took place in the Italian Peninsula and in Central and Southeastern Europe in the nineteenth century, in the period of national revivals. Thus, in Italy, the struggle of the Greek insurgents against the Sultan quickly created the myth of an independent Greece. Conversely, Garibaldi’s conquest of the South created a new myth that became popular and desirable throughout Europe. As to the Romanians, their interest in Italy increased as a result of the formation of the unified Italian national state and they paid particular attention to the victories of Garibaldi.

Keywords

Italy, Central Europe, Southeast Europe, Garibaldi, Mazzini, national movements, idea of the nation