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Special issue: The Italian Risorgimento: transnational perspectives

Introduction

Oliver Janz and Lucy Riall

The term 'transnational history' has made rapid ground in recent scholarly debate. In some ways the latest manifestation of an approach that has been variously described as international, comparative, world or global history, transnational history seeks to overcome a historiography focused on the nation and to displace the focus on the nation-state by studying non-governmental institutions, civil associations, informal groups and/or individual actors. Its primary claim to innovation lies in an emphasis on movement, interaction and interpenetration between and across different groups, societies and political units. Thus, the main concern of transnational history is with linkages and networks, perhaps especially in the so-called 'Global South'; with respect to the latter, an implicit aim of the approach is to challenge the 'Eurocentrism' characteristic of historical writing at least since the Enlightenment.

One measure of the success of transnational history is the expansion of its scope to include a vast array of old and new objects of study. World markets and commodity flows, migration and diasporas, the spread of ideas, concepts and representations across borders, the history of diplomacy and European integration, imperialism and the postcolonial experience: all these topics and more have become the focus of a new transnational 'turn'. In fact, so popular has the term become that its conceptual vitality may be at risk. In the words of an *American Historical Review* 'conversation' dedicated to the topic, the transnational approach 'is in danger of becoming merely a buzzword among historians, more a label than a practice, more expansive in its meaning than precise in its application, more a fashion of the moment than a durable approach to the study of history' (Bayly et al. 2006, 1441).

However, if we shift our gaze away from the Global South (or indeed, North America and Northern Europe) towards Southern Europe and more specifically nineteenth-century Italy, a very different picture comes to light. Here with a few notable exceptions, such as research on Italian migration to the Americas or on political exiles and military volunteers, the transnational approach has had little influence, especially in more established scholarly circles.[1] Much more striking is the extent to which the study of the Risorgimento and liberal Italy has remained national, and arguably sometimes parochial, in interest, focus and methodology.

Such a strong concentration on Italian history within national borders is, on the face of it, quite surprising. For instance, it is a well-documented and long accepted historical fact that Italian forces in the Risorgimento were reliant on actors outside Italy, be they French Emperors, Prussian and Austrian conservatives, British liberals or papal sympathisers. And every student of nineteenth-century Europe knows that the unification of Italy was an event of European, if not global, significance. There is one simple possible explanation for this neglect of transnational history: those who work on the Risorgimento are constrained by career paths and a conservative

profession that tend to emphasise narrowly national concerns; at the least, it is clear that until now much of the impetus for developing a transnational approach has come from foreigners or Italian scholars working abroad. It may also be that the perception of national 'uniqueness' that underlay the Risorgimento (along with many other nineteenth-century nationalist movements) has continued to condition historical understandings of Italian unification to this day. But, whatever the reason, the national and nationalist focus within Risorgimento studies has been hard to shift. A general recognition of the role of international factors in the making of Italy has not, until now, translated into a broader interest in the process of transfers, the role of entanglements and the impact of associations outside and across Italy's borders.

In this special issue of *Modern Italy*, we analyse the Risorgimento from a transnational perspective. More specifically, we aim to consider some of the interactions between, on the one hand, expressions of, and opposition to, Italian national identity and, on the other hand, people, networks, ideas and trends beyond the peninsula. Whether the national frame is able adequately to include the global influences on (and of) the Risorgimento is a question asked – implicitly and explicitly – by all our authors. How far Italian nationalism was merely one element in a more fluid, diverse and cosmopolitan experience is another.

Taken together, these kinds of questions do more than place the Risorgimento in a comparative context, although they can help us to contest the sense of exceptionality that has been such a dominant feature of Risorgimento historiography. They also take us in a different direction entirely. Indeed, the essays published here suggest that, when viewed from a transnational perspective, Italian patriotic discourse was but one voice among many. For example, instead of looking at relations between Venice and Vienna in terms of national domination of Austria over Italy, David Laven and Laura Parker 'locate Venetians within a transnational cultural space, and … highlight the extent to which the local, municipal, regional, and national could all work for as well as against the empire'. They conclude that the shared conversation between Venetians and Austrians during the Risorgimento had an importance equal to, if not greater than, Venetian resistance to Habsburg rule. Ferdinand Göhde considers 'transnational soldiers' in the Risorgimento not in terms of the national – that is, in terms of their role in Italian wars – but in the broader context of new military history. He focuses on the organisation and experience of military life, and concludes that military volunteering in the Risorgimento was far from being an unambiguous expression of political commitment: instead, the decision to travel to, and/or fight in, Italy appears to be the result of several, sometimes competing motives.

Essentially, when seen from a transnational point of view, aspects of the Risorgimento assume a different significance and meaning. For instance, if considered as a transnational phenomenon, the 'anti-Risorgimento' (or conservative opposition to Italian unification) seems far more important and interesting than if viewed through a national(ist) lens. As Simon Sarlin shows in his essay, between them the forces of counter-revolution and the Catholic Church constructed an impressive and complex transnational network based on militancy and money. They mobilised men to fight for the Pope and deposed monarchs, and they left a lasting legacy in the form of an anti-liberal, legitimist identity.

A transnational perspective can also make suspect the role of the nation as a basic unit of analysis. So Marco Meriggi in his essay suggests that national unification threw into relief the existence of several 'nations' within Italy. In the former Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, the ousted Bourbons did much to promote the idea of a nation in opposition; in particular, the military campaign to restore order in the South 'could be narrated and represented as North against South, and as a war launched by one nation, seduced by the myths of modern "materialism",

against another which was still imbued with traditional values'. At the same time, Meriggi argues, different 'nations' – one reactionary, one progressive – existed within the South; moreover, each of these Souths looked to a different Europe for inspiration and as an example of what to avoid. Here a transnational approach not only alters our perception of North–South 'difference', it also adds ambiguity to the interpretation of national identity and suggests that our understanding of what constitutes a nation may need modification.

A striking feature of the essays published here is the extent to which they integrate a transnational perspective with other historical approaches. Göhde applies the methodology of *Alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life) to the study of soldiers' experiences, and all the authors implicitly use the practice of Italian micro-history, with its emphasis on shifting the scales of analysis (Revel 1996; Lüdtke 2000). Meriggi's account of the relationship between North and South in unified Italy incorporates the insights of German global history and, in particular, the work of Jürgen Osterhammel on the global history of civilisation (Conrad 2010; Osterhammel 2009). In their essays, both Carlotta Sorba and Lucy Riall take the opportunity to bring the new cultural history of the Risorgimento closer to transnational history (Banti 2000; Banti and Ginsborg 2007).

Sorba considers the 'classical theme' of the relationship between Italian nationalism and opera and gives it a transnational twist. She shows how profoundly music in Risorgimento Italy was affected by the international experiences of its protagonists; as she puts it, 'composers and librettists negotiated with consummate ease the complexities of a narrative system whose national borders were by no means sharply defined'. For them, the 'slippage from texts and episodes peculiar to a foreign cultural tradition to themes more consonant with their own national sensibility' was both habitual and unproblematic. In a similar vein, Riall argues that Garibaldi's fame as the 'hero of two worlds' was the direct result of overseas encounters. In effect, his was a 'transnational' life spent outside Italy, experienced through migration and exile; it was travel that brought him into contact with other political groups and ideas, and which shaped and produced this most Italian of heroes. Indeed, when it comes to explaining Garibaldi's popular appeal, especially beyond Italy's borders, his time in Montevideo or in New York may well be more significant than what he learnt while he was in Italy. And in this respect, Garibaldi's political struggles in Italy should be seen as merely episodes (albeit important ones) in a much longer, global life.

In the essays that follow, we address just some of the problems raised and only a few of the themes suggested by a transnational perspective on the Risorgimento. For example, our understanding of Mazzini, his ideas and his networks could benefit greatly from the kind of transnational study undertaken by Maurizio Isabella for an earlier period (Isabella 2009). More work is still needed on the transnational role of the Catholic Church and the very particular issues that this raised for Italian nationalism (Riall 2010). The relationship between Italian unification and the unification of Germany 10 years later cries out for analysis by a transnational historian.

Transnational history displaces nationalism from its central position at the heart of Italy's foundation story. But this is not to say that a transnational perspective should lead us to ignore or underestimate the role of nationalism in the making of modern Italy. What it can do is help us to understand the difficulties that patriots faced in establishing nationalism as the dominant discourse as well as the different mechanisms they used in this process. Moreover, by refocusing attention onto other, non- or supra-national actors, dialogues and networks, it challenges the explanatory hierarchy that privileges the nation as both cause and outcome of the Risorgimento. It also muddles the narrative of nation-building that Risorgimento patriots constructed and that has proved so tenacious in shaping present-day historical research.

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Note

1. See, for example, Isabella (2009); Pécout ed. (2009); Bevilacqua, de Clementi and Franzina, eds. (2001–2002).

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