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## Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

### History-writing : Italian

Author: Hout, Milou van

The peninsula that aimed to become the nation-state Italy was in the 19th century a plurally divided map of several autonomous states, and history-writing was a key field in which the retrospective and present national unification was to be achieved. Until today, Italian national history-writing, and its entanglement with the *Risorgimento* project, has been the subject of continuous scholarly debates.

Given the peninsula's territorial diffraction, Italian pre-1800 historiography was mainly dominated by urban and regional histories and the observations of European travel-writers foregrounding the classical artistic and monumental heritage. With the emergence of Romantic-Nationalist sentiment in the early 19th century, literary and cultural hero-figures from the past were written into a nationally Italian history, creating a literary and historical *Risorgimento* canon. The historians' canon thus formed reached back to Virgil, Dante, but included more modern writers and thinkers such as Simonde de Sismondi, Vincenzo Cuoco, Cesare Balbo (*Storia d'Italia sotto i Barbari*, 1830; *Vita di Dante*, 1839; *Pensieri sulla Storia d'Italia*, 1858), and Cesare Cantù (*Storia degli Italiani*, 1855).

Given the fact that the *Risorgimento* was facing both the imperial power of the Habsburgs and the temporal power of the Pope, the historical treatment of the medieval period, which in Italy was dominated by the Guelph-Ghibelline struggle between Pope and Emperor, directly reflected present-day political concerns. Historians were divided in neo-Guelph and neo-Ghibelline camps, and the medieval struggles of municipalities and city-states, and their leagues against foreign domination, was often seen as a prefiguration of the 19th-century war of liberation. Sismondi's 16-volume *Histoire des républiques italiennes du Moyen-Âge* (1808), on the medieval city-republics, was followed by his more political digest *Histoire de la renaissance de la liberté en Italie, de ses progrès, de sa décadence et de sa chute* (1832), translated in the same year into Italian (*Storia della rinascita della libertà in Italia*), and inspiring Carlo Cattaneo's *La città considerata come principio ideale delle istorie italiane* (1858). A "neo-Guelph", pro-Papal account of the medieval cities' federated revolt against the Empire was penned by the Benedictine Luigi Tosti (1811–1897): *Storia della Lega Lombarda* (1848); it was dedicated to Pius IX. At the same time, however, the Lombard League was evoked in Verdi's opera *La battaglia di Legnano*, which had its premiere in the short-lived "Roman Republic" in 1849, from where the beleaguered Pius IX had just retreated. Not only does this show the contradictory political agendas for which Italian history could be invoked, it also demonstrates how this intense political historicism (symbolized in the communication with the voices of the dead generations in Foscolo's *Dei sepolcri*, 1809) spilled over into artistic production: opera and history painting, among other genres. In turn, the *Risorgimento* events themselves were immediately invested with historical significance (Cuoco, *Saggio storico sulla rivoluzione Napoletana del 1799*, 1801; Cattaneo, *Dell'insurrezione di Milano nel 1848 e della successiva guerra*, 1849).

As a result, national historiography was strongly finalistic, presenting the *Risorgimento* and the establishment of the independent state as the inevitable outcome of history, and the drive towards unification in the face of foreign hegemony as a dominant historical force. Although an original new tone was struck by the liberal Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), who was inspired by his rediscovery of Gianbattista Vico, there was little space for counter-narratives. The plea for a multi-national nation-state written by the eminent *Risorgimento* figure Niccolò Tommaseo (1802–1874) was excluded from the national historiography, while Alfredo Oriani's *La lotta politica in Italia* (1882), which represented the accession of the Italian south as a Piedmontese military conquest, received only belated interest. As this example shows, the dynamics of regionalism, the Southern Question and the multinationalism of Italy's borderlands posed an ongoing challenge concerning the foundations and extent of the nation-state.

These debates, which also included a sense that the state of 1861 had failed to deliver a true modernization impetus and should be considered a "failed revolution", continued in the 20th century and played into the

emergence of Fascism. Under the Fascist regime, historians drew a teleological line from the Romantic-heroic origins, by way of the “failed revolution”, to the Fascist state as the true fulfilment of the *Risorgimento* struggle. Inspired by Hegelian thinking, philosophers and historians like Giovanni [Gentile](#) and Gioacchino Volpe identified the idea of an Italian nation with the ideal of the Fascist state. In contrast, Benedetto Croce argued that Italian Fascism was the result of a post-1918 crisis without proper roots in Italian politics and society.

A shift in the thinking about national historiography was generated by Antonio [Gramsci](#) (1891–1937). In his *Quaderni del carcere* (1926), written during his Fascist imprisonment and receiving a wide audience after the Second World War, Gramsci argued that the *Risorgimento* had been a “passive revolution”, since it had lacked class consciousness. His theory on cultural hegemony found a wide audience in socialist Italy and beyond.

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