

Mazzini: a prophet for modern times

by Dr Simon Mercieca

THE FIGURE of Giuseppe Mazzini is generally associated with the history of the Italian *Risorgimento*, or the process by Italy became united in one state. Yet, few people know about Mazzini's political writings and that his works are not just a historical text, but also propagate a political ideal which is still relevant in our times. Moreover, very few people know that this political figure had contacts with Malta and that his writings influenced the political development of the Maltese Islands in the 19th and early 20th century.

Mazzini was born in Genoa 200 years ago. He got involved in politics at a very young age. By the age of 25, he had already made an imprint on Italian politics, by establishing what came to be known as the *Giovine Italia* or Young Italy, a political movement aimed towards Italian unification.

By early 1830s, he transformed this political association in a European movement by setting up the association known as Young Europe or *Giovine Europa*, an association which aimed towards European unity. Moreover, the *Giovine Europa* model began slowly to be exported abroad. Even in Malta, an association called *Giovine Malta* was set up in 1901 to promote liberal aspirations.

On the political level, Mazzini was the model of honesty and integrity. In 1848, he became one of the leaders of the Italian insurrection leading to the proclamation

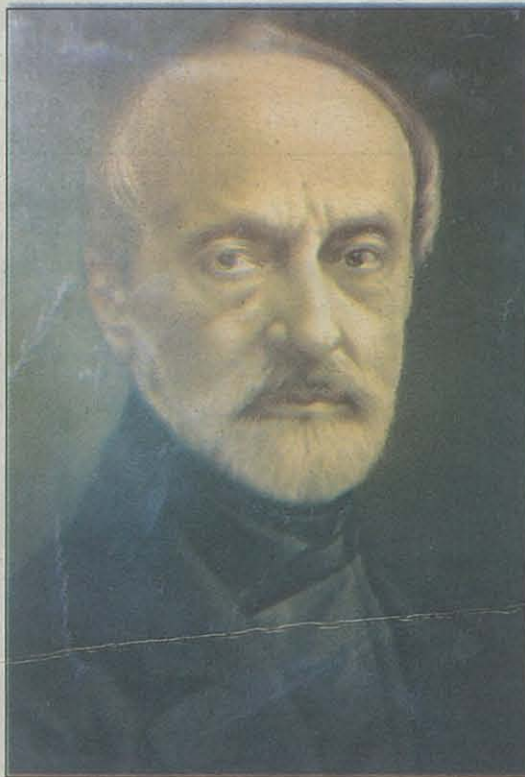
of new states in Italy, one of which was that of Rome.

Pope Pius IX had to escape to Gaeta while Mazzini became the head of the Roman Republic. In this new political set-up, he introduced an innovative and fresh approach to government, based on the principles of liberty and a correct civil and criminal justice, as well as fighting against malpractices of police power and abuse.

A lawyer by profession and human rights activist by vocation, Mazzini wanted his new republic to be a model of right government in sharp contrast to the Rome of Pius IX, where corruption was rife and capital punishment was practised, including against political activists.

Yet, the Roman Republic had a short life. The breeze of revolutions in Europe in 1848 was soon over and many states, including Italy, had the old regimes restored to power. Mazzini had to seek political exile. While he remained a dominant political figure, he was put in the margin of Italian politics.

After the revolution of 1848, there was no space for Mazzini's political thinking in Italy. Italian unification slowly became an expansion of the Kingdom of Piedmont. A republican by conviction, Mazzini had little chance that his political appeal would be heard



GIUSEPPE MAZZINI
(1805-1872)

in Italy. Staunch republican supporters, such as Francesco Crispi, became convinced that only the monarchy could unite Italy.

During the period when Mazzini was being sidelined so that his ideas would not have any influence on the Italian political development, he entered an important phase of his political career, that of

writing. In 1860, he published his most important work, *I Doveri del Uomo* (The Duties of Man), which discussed three important fundamental issues for Mazzini. In the spirit of the Enlightenment and the works of Cesare Beccaria, Mazzini strongly advocated the abolition of the death penalty. The second duty was for man to safeguard the right of property, an issue that was under attack at the time from the extreme left. The third point was the right for everyone to have a good education. In other words, he fought against those principles which nowadays are again raising their head.

Capital punishment is a subject dear to extreme right political factions. Its abolition implied for Mazzini the setting into practice of a just government. The principle of a just government, practising a correct legal system at the service of all the citizens, is now under threat. The so-called centre parties are all over Europe constantly failing in the eyes of their citizens to deliver an honest government, made by the people for the people. Finally, his third claim for the right to property has not yet been fully digested by the extreme left.

Mazzini's message is more than ever relevant today, even in a small context like Malta, where individual rights can still be manipulated as there are persons who try to misuse the system of legal justice. Mazzini worked against the practice where justice was based on the deviant principles of political con-

nections, that is, the contacts that one has with politicians, members of the judiciary or with the prosecuting police officers. In this context, Mazzini's axiom of God and the People, coined as a battlecry for the setting up of a modern state based on the principle of a just government and the proper administration of justice, is more than ever relevant to present-day society.

To better understand these political notions, as well as to have them set in their correct historical framework, Mazzini's history, his relations with Malta and the relevance of his ideas to present-day society are going to be studied in a three-day international conference in Malta that will be held between Thursday and Saturday at the Italian Cultural Institute, Valletta.

This conference is being organised by the Italian Culture Institute, the Mediterranean Institute and the Malta Historical Society, as part of History Week, a biennial activity of the Malta Historical Society.

Scholars from Malta and abroad will discuss different aspects of Mazzini's philosophical thought and political teaching. The conference will explore how Mazzini's writing influenced the local political development while studying the use Mazzini made of the removal of press censorship in Malta in 1838.

The conference will discuss the influence that freedom of the press had on the diffusion of Mazzini's political ideals in Italy as well as in the political newspapers. The role played by Italian political refugees in Malta at the time of the *Risorgimento* will be also analysed.

The conference will conclude with an analysis of the relevance of Mazzini's politics to today's society, in particular to the concept of European unity.