

I DOVERI DELL'UOMO:
**MAZZINIAN INFLUENCES ON MALTESE
NATIONALISM UNDER BRITISH RULE**

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Mazzini's influence in the 19th century was so great that it is easy mistakenly to believe that its main tenets emanated exclusively or originally from it, whether that be the bond of family or the right to property. These are important constituent elements of Mazzinian philosophy but what distinguishes its legacy above all must surely be Mazzini's strongly enunciated and propagated belief in the nation.

A regard for the nation was rendered indispensable in opposition to the subjection to tyranny, be that foreign occupation or papal rule. It is in Mazzini's heroic attempts to rally the people, including the working classes, under the guidance of God, to the fundamental belief that duty was the obverse of right, and that a social class could not exist outside of its nation, that Mazzini posited the greatest challenge to Marx, and was at his most inspiring and compelling.

In the light of Mazzinian precepts, Maltese nationalism under British rule may be said to have been caught in five internal contradictions, which it tried to juggle.

First, given such a small economically dependent island without rivers or mountain ranges, surrounded on all sides by soldiers and sailors, on land and at sea, only the most idealistic if not foolhardy Maltese would dare preach open rebellion. The British could be seen to have usurped Neapolitan sovereignty, but it was a Maltese leadership that, with the best of intentions, and in despair, had invited them over in the first place. Nor would a Neapolitan rather than a British sovereignty in any way have appeased Mazzinian ideals among a Maltese elite. In an island fortress, barely a crown colony until 1849, any forthright talk of republicanism would have been deemed seditious, if not treasonable. The market for any such ideal would have been small indeed among inhabitants who had been subjected to one foreign domination after another for centuries. It manifested itself in fits and starts, coming into being as an ideology with some considerable difficulty, after an ambivalent head-start in 1798. For Maltese slowly to be moulded into a conscious existence as a people with rights and duties of their own required many a subterfuge and allegory under British rule, which itself veered in time from conservatism to liberalism to imperialism.

The second internal contradiction of Maltese nationalism related to religion and the church. Whereas on the one hand Roman Catholicism was a vital distinguishing ingredient in the make-up of an in-group feeling or nationality distinct from that of British rule, which was Protestant, equally the Roman Catholic Church in Malta held an all-pervasive influence which bordered on the feudal. One liberal-minded Jesuit by the name of Baragli described Malta as “un feudo di Dio” as late as the 1950s. On the whole, it was still the *umma* rather than the *watan*, to use Albert Hourani’s sociological delineation. Within its hierarchy there laboured a militant politically-influential agency, such as that of the Jesuits, which opposed the dearest ideals of Mazzini and all those who sympathised with him. Rather than a unified secular Italian nation-state based on the principles of liberty and equality, such equally zealous elements on the contrary fought a reactionary battle in favour of the ‘Papa Re’. The Roman Catholic Church hierarchy and episcopacy itself was increasingly compromised by diplomatic British carrot-and-stick approaches to ensure its continued sway over the faithful in return for a manifest loyalism to the British Crown. At the same time ‘British Malta’ would not challenge papal authority in any way.

A third problematic concerned the use and abuse made of language. Whereas in other parts of the British Empire native languages were being squashed in favour of English, in Malta it was opportune for Imperial policy to do the exact opposite, especially after 1870. A policy was determined upon to uplift the local idiom into a fully-fledged language thereby to facilitate and to foster a better understanding of English mainly for assimilationist, utilitarian purposes, and simultaneously the gradual elimination of Italian for Imperial, political ones. Whereas in countries that had been unified, such as Britain and France, later Italy and Germany, it became politically expedient for centralizing authority to seek to render the national language standard and uniform, any such process in the case of Malta was vitiated and deviated. Language loyalty or obstruction laboured increasingly under the cloud of a cultural assimilation and a constitutional impasse.

The fourth internal contradiction relates to the three others and, generally speaking, tends to turn the Mazzinian ideal on its head. In creating a new class of beneficiaries, intermediaries and collaborators, more or less on the Macaulay principle first applied to India, a discriminatory assimilationism and social engineering sets in, positing one category or class of Maltese against the other. Interest becomes right, indeed duty; and the ensuing confusion becomes such as to lead one pro-British Maltese newspaper to stress that the highest form of nationalism was actually imperialism.¹

1 H. Frendo, *Patrijott Liberali Malti: Biografija ta' Ġorġ Borg Olivier 1911-1980* (Pin, 2005), p.175.

Because, as Braudel says, he who gives dominates, and because the British change the Maltese economy around in such a way as to have many jobs in their gift in the Royal Dockyard and the British Services, by accident or design there creeps in a genre of what I might call, using Schumpeter's term, social imperialism. In thus setting one class against another, the new against the old, it seemed as if the mighty Britannia with its vast, unparalleled maritime, military and commercial resources could divide and rule happily for ever after.

In this theory of internal contradictions, a fifth strain was and increasingly became the association or identification of traditional Maltese *italianita'* and *latinita'* with disloyalty, with sedition and indeed, by the 1940s, with high treason punishable by death. What had been essentially an indigenous mobilised resistance to a gubernatorial economically-aided assimilation, an attempted self-assertion as to whose right it was to govern - and whose duty it was to respect the governed - became the whipping boy not only of the British but also of all those Maltese who came to see in them and in the British Empire their very livelihood and survival, if not a mirror image of their very selves. Moreover, the fortunes of what had been mainly a culturally-driven, *professionista*-led resistance against a varying military despotism changed by default as it came to be tainted with a neighbouring totalitarian dictatorship, when Mazzini's liberal nationalism of yore turned integral, thus denying the Risorgimento of its original high moral ground. For a while it was as if the British mirror would grow and shine more than ever, but for various reasons that was not to be.

Ultimately, the mirror broke, even if it did not quite smash; and Robinson Crusoe's Friday dressed up for the occasion. The first cracks had appeared already after the First World War, starting with the *Sette Giugno* unrest, but the mass discharges following upon the Second World War re-enacted growing feelings of alienation, and came to spearhead a more generally pronounced will to be free, or at least equal, and to be Maltese - British Maltese if no longer Italian Maltese - never mind belonging to a larger whole of sorts. It was not easy because the Marxist view that it is need rather than ability which determines human history, however crude, is not devoid of truth. How otherwise would one explain the popular plan to have Malta integrated with the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland as late as 1957? It was indeed popular; but not quite popular enough. Other sentiments of nationality and of nationhood, more akin to the Mazzinian version of what constituted a people, breathed still. In the long run, it was these that prevailed, including by 1974, in the very last resort, a republic: the cherry on the cake.

A stricter application of Mazzinian influence on Maltese nationalism would have to make some reference to the master's words. For instance, in *I Doveri dell'Uomo*,

written in 1860 (four years before Garibaldi would pay Malta a visit) in trying to instil the urge to free one's country from foreign oppression, Mazzini makes one of his greatest statements, which again is the reverse of Marxist beliefs about the internationalism of class:

The rights of each individual are equal; the mere fact of living together in Society does not create a single one. Society has greater power, not greater rights, than the individual. How, then, will you prove to the individual that he is bound to confide his will in the will of his brothers, whether of country or of humanity?

Further on, in trying to win over the working man to his vision of a liberated and united motherland, Mazzini exposes the rights of citizenship, while invoking to his side Christian selflessness, sacrifice and love:

You have no rights of citizenship, no participation either of election or vote, in those laws which are to direct your actions and govern your life: how can you feel the sentiment of citizenship, zeal for the welfare of the state, or sincere affection for its laws?

But his message was neither individualistic nor so universalist: it was above all a liberal patriotic and nationalist one. Secondly, it was also a European and humanist one. Mazzini however saw humanity as divided into distinct groups or *nuclei* upon the face of the earth, thus creating the germ of nationalities, but unfortunately, he noted, few indeed were those countries whose present boundaries corresponded to that divinely-ordained design:

O my brothers, love your Country! Our Country is our Home, a house God has given us, placing therein a numerous family that loves us, and whom we love; a family with whom we sympathize more readily and whom we understand more quickly than we do others; and which from its being centred round a given spot, and from the homogeneous nature of its elements, is adapted to a special branch of activity. Our Country is our common workshop... the fulcrum of the lever we have to wield for the common good... Before men can associate with the nations of which Humanity is composed, they must have a national existence.²

2 For text, a handy reference in English translation is the Everyman Library's edition, introduced by T. Jones, *Joseph Mazzini – The Duties of Man and Other Essays* (Lond., 1966). Writings on Mazzini's thoughts and times are legion; there have been some good biographies in Italian, English and other languages, as Mazzini's message, like himself, travelled well

There is no doubt that initially a Maltese elite was influenced by such ideas and sentiments as early as the first half of the 19th century, even as they tried to steer a path between Scylla and Charibidys, proclaiming the first moves towards liberal democracy without falling foul of the Church which, like the King of Naples, opposed a free press in the 1830s. Both feared the usually anticlerical, irreverent and non-conformist Italian *esuli* in the 1840s among the Maltese - “whose language”, as one bishop put it, “they spoke”. It was partly, ironically, the Jesuit question that led to the surrender and departure of Malta’s first civilian Roman Catholic governor in mid-century, when after the fall of the Roman Republic he would not admit freely returning refugees, including Nicola Fabrizio, Mazzini’s secretary, who had been in Malta for years prior to that. The governor, a Jesuitical Irishman and a Catholic, had however admitted many Bourbon supporters, including Jesuits, after the 1848 revolutions.³

When in 1880 a dissenting ‘anti-riformista’ party was formed, they called their first paper *Il Diritto di Malta*, stressing that they had a duty to oppose what was being proposed by the British and those whom they saw as a clique of collaborators “who forgot that they were Maltese.” In an early editorial, it said the masses would soon awake to achieve their rights, a day that would soon emerge “over the historic waves of the Mediterranean”. They would, it held, relift the public spirit, rally our forces, address them towards one end and counsel the proper means for its pursuit. Considering Malta in her Latin Mediterranean setting rather than as an outpost of Empire, the new party saw constitutional liberties as the tool of progress, scorned the Cobden Club’s civilizing mission and pointed to the contradictions of Empire: the British preached liberty among themselves at the same time as they terrorized subjects abroad; acclaimed the march of industry but suffocated this in the colonies; taught philanthropy but still conserved feudalism at home; the British said they were unfurling the banner of civilization, but their professions in relation to their deeds were nothing but “Japhet’s cloak to hide his father’s disgrace.”⁴ Here was the classic Mazzinian tension or rhetoric between material well-being and the spiritual

beyond Italian shores. His bicentenary, 1805-2005, has led to a spate of other publications mainly in Italian about him and his movement; but see *inter alia* the biographies, both called *Mazzini*, by G. Monsagrati, published in Florence in 1994, and by D. Mack Smith, which since 1996 has been available in paperback.

- 3 On all this see H. Frendo, *Żmien l-Ingliżi*, vol. iii: *Is-Seklu Dsatax* (Klabb Kotba Maltin, Valletta, 2004), part II, Chap. 1, *et passim*.
- 4 H. Frendo, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony: The Maltese Experience* (Midsea, Valletta, 1979, 2nd ed. 1991), pp. 27-28.

adherence to a national sentiment and soul, that would not “sacrifice our all for the sole benefit of this famous garrison and Royal Navy.” Thus was a Maltese legally-led anti-assimilationist nationalism born, deriding imperialist rhetoric as hypocritical. That was another notion close to the heart of Mazzini, who despised hypocrisy, lauding sincerity, integrity, devotion and moral commitment beyond measure. Spending most of his own life in exile, his was an example rare for any nationalist to emulate.

People, said the new Maltese party’s leader Fortunato Mizzi, were not governed by might but through affection: “where the former supplanted the latter, slaves may be had but not subjects – slaves in whose heart there rankles a hate against their oppressors, whose yoke they endure only so long as they want the strength and the opportunity to shake it off.”⁵ Again, this could be read as a typical Mazzinian discourse.

By a coincidence, it was in 1889, just as the anglophile Strickland crossed over from Mizzi’s party to the regime’s side to become its chief secretary, that a former Italian Risorgimento exile in Malta, Francesco Crispi (who had even married another Italian exile in Floriana’s St Publius Church) enacted a law to entitle *non regnicoli* such as the Maltese to Italian nationality with the right to vote, a law which in 1908 would come to comprise employment in Italy, that included by 1923 the Italian civil service.⁶ This must have been a onetime exile’s way of saying ‘thank you’ to his hosts, now that he had made it to the premiership.⁷

When in 1901, at the height of Strickland’s high-handedness, Enrico Mizzi set up a youth organisation in Valletta, he called it *Giovine Malta*. In tune with generations of Maltese, the younger Mizzi saw Italy and *italianità* as Malta’s gateway to Europe,

5 *Ibid.*, p., 25.

6 See G. Bonello’s article on the Maltese as “citizens of France and Italy’, *The Sunday Times*, Valletta, 11 Apr. 1999, p. 41. Art. 19 stated that “the citizens of other provinces, even in the absence of (Italian) nationality, have equivalent status as citizens of the (Italian) state, for the purpose of the exercise of the rights contemplated by the present Article.” Crispi’s second lady was Rosalia Montmasson.

7 On Mazzini, Mazzinians and Malta, including Crispi, see H. Frendo, *Żmien l-Ingliżi*, *op.cit.*, especially Part IV, Chap. 1: “Ir-Risorgiment Taljan fil-qrib”, and its bibliography, pp. 143-154. For an overview of Italian activities in Malta in the first half of the 19th century, especially journalistic ones, see H. Frendo, *Miċ-Ċensura għall-Pluraliżmu: Il-Gurnalizzmu f’Malta, 1798-1992* (Pin, 2003), chapters 2-4, pp. 11-32, and the respective references.

8 H. Frendo, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony*, *op.cit.*, p. 137. Cachia Zammit was first returned in 1870 and was to have a long political career in Nationalist ranks.

Europeanity and a Latin civilization. He would have agreed with Mazzini that few borders truly respected nationalities. The whole notion of *patria*, central to Maltese nationalism, was predicated on Risorgimento ideals, best expressed by Mazzini. Post-war organs of the Nationalist Party of Malta were called successively *Malta Taghna*, *Patria!*, *Il-Poplu*; their daily in 1970 was *In-Nazzjon Taghna*. ‘*Patria et religio*’ had been the party’s motto practically since its inception. Mazzini after all was a firm believer in God and his only quarrel was with ecclesiastics who were not sufficiently patriotic, who put other interests or loyalties before those of the *patria*. That tension was not absent from the anti-colonial posture of the Mizzis, who sometimes clashed with what they saw as the episcopacy’s power interests and vice-versa, when they flexed their muscles. It was a leading liberal patriot from Zejtun, Salvatore Cachia Zammit, who already in the 1870s would speak up in the Council of Government against the death penalty.⁸

One who was still more explicitly influenced by Mazzini’s beliefs was Emanuele Dimech, who repeatedly quoted from his writings and spent a number of years in Genova, where he probably joined the ‘romantic’ Partito Mazziniano. A former convict who became a left-wing nationalist, for which he was both excommunicated and exiled, Dimech, a republican, believed in a personal relationship with God, he upheld the rights of the people especially trying to teach and convert workers to the need of a literate and a civic education. Stressing citizenship rights and duties, he condemned the gallows, and proclaimed that there should be equality between the sexes – all Mazzinian tenets. At the same time he spoke highly of the elder Mizzi when he died in 1905, whose meeting he had attended some time earlier.⁹ The second edition of my book about Dimech in 1972 contained a picture I had taken of the monument to Mazzini erected in Piazza Corvetto in 1905, for which it seems that Dimech had been present, with its inscription: LIBERTA’ UGUALIANZA FRATELLANZA A GIUSEPPE MAZZINI NEL 10 CENTERARIO DELLA SUA NASCITA’ – LA MASSONERIA ITALIANA – TRIESTE AL PROFETA DELL’UNITA’ ITALIANA – DIO E IL POPOLO.¹⁰ More recently, from the archives of the Istituto Mazziniano in

9 See his editorial in *Il-Bandiera tal-Maltin* upon Mizzi’s death on 18th May 1905 entitled “Suldaṭ verament li għamel dmiru”: “Bosta minn tiegħu inxtraw; imma min jista’ jgħid li nxtara hu? La rajna litu u lanqas lil uliedu, li llum qeghdin jibku t-telfa tiegħu, igawdu x’impieg tal-gvern bil-mijiet ta’ liri fis-sena. Biss rajnieh – avolja marid, u f’it żmien fuq il-mewt tal-mahbuba martu – fuq il-palk hemm ix-xagħra tal-Furjana, jitkellem mal-poplu biex ifehmu dak li kellu bżonn jifhem.” Cited after H. Frendo, *Ir-Rieda għall-Helsien, 1880-1905* (Azad, Sliema, 1980), p. 159.

10 H. Frendo, *Birth Pangs of a Nation: Manwel Dimech’s Malta, 1860-1921* (Mediterranean Publications, Valletta, 1972), p. 187; but see also my *Story of a Book* (Lux Press, 1972).

Genova, there has come to light a photo which includes Dimech in a group excursion of the Partito Mazziniano to Sturla, just outside Genova, in 1906.¹¹

Dimech was more boldly committed to republicanism than the mainstream Nationalist Party ever was, although anti-British taunts of 'Vive la Republique!' were not uncommon in Nationalist meetings, particularly at the turn of the century. In August 1901, when public meetings in Valletta were prohibited, the statue to Queen Victoria in the city centre was besmirched with an acid solution of nitrate and silver, leading to 23 arrests.¹²

To conclude, it may be said that Maltese nationalism was in its own circumscribed style and ambivalent circumstances, an exposition of Mazzini's "terza via": neither individualistic nor collectivist. It was liberal and patriotic, without being radical socially, so far as egalitarianism was concerned, much less was it prone to as much as a mention of the state appropriating church properties and suchlike. In Malta, nationalism needed to have the church on side, not as an adversary in its confrontation with Britain. It campaigned assiduously for constitutional autonomy, but continued to fear the mass vote, one not linked to a modicum of literacy. It upheld education, but was wary of its use as a means to anglicize and 'de-nationalize'.

In a sociolinguistic situation of *diglossia*, it was nationalist but without a doctrinal nationalistic belief on the lines of the German romantic school, that the indigenous language was synonymous with and identical to nationality and nationhood, that is to the exclusion of other non-native languages which had an established *locus standi*. It would have settled for *pari passu*, the simultaneous teaching of both Italian and English in schools, but such a compromise was derailed. When in 1899 Joe Chamberlain spoke of a deadlined general language substitution, to include the courts and the university, he meant replacing Italian by English, not by Maltese. Garibaldi's son Ricciotti was one of those who spoke out strongly against it.¹³ When in 1934 English and Maltese became the official languages, it was by direct order from London after self-government had been arbitrarily revoked.¹⁴

11 M. Montebello, *Dimech* (PEG, 2004), pp. 316-317. The *Istituto Mazziniano* was only founded in Genova on 22 June 1934.

12 H. Frendo, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony*, *op.cit.*, p. 120.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 116.

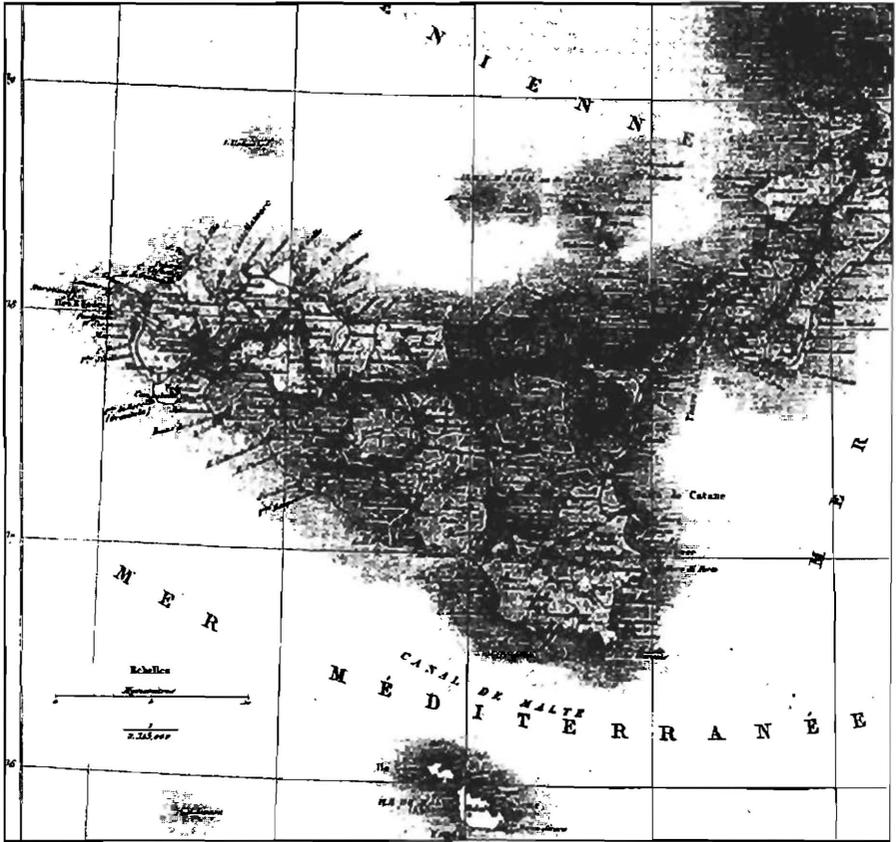
14 On this see G. Hull, *The Malta Language Question: A Case Study of Cultural Imperialism* (Said, Valletta, 1993).

Until independence was attained, Maltese nationalism was hard put to prove that it was not disloyal although it opposed colonialism and wanted self-government, hence there was no formal or open profession of any republican intent; quite the contrary. Maltese nationalism was Roman Catholic but occasionally disagreed with the church hierarchy; it was not theocratic. On the contrary, Mizzi's party constituted the first sustained alternative or complementary national, secular force vis-à-vis both the people and the regime, thus vying for space with the bishop as the shepherd of his flock. The family however always remained one of its core values. To the extent that nationalism in Malta had been a prerogative of the Nationalist Party, in spite of its 'Italian' component or connection, this certainly ceased to be so as Mintoff's Labour Party embraced its own version of nationalism, still more strident and assertive, shifting from integration with Britain to independence from it in 1958 and after.

Religion in the form of Roman Catholicism, as in Ireland and Poland, remained more closely tied to or associated with what in 1950 became Borg Olivier's Nationalist Party, whereas it was now the turn of the more class-oriented Malta Labour Party to tend towards the laicist, secularist, but also nationalistic to a fault. "Malta first and foremost", Mintoff's motto, ironically had been that of the pro-British Malta Union of Fascists before the War. The Nationalist Party's 'third way' became that of Christian Democracy, probably echoing the *Rerum Novarum* at least as much as *I Doveri dell'Uomo*: neither capitalist nor communist.

More recently, as Malta moved into the European Union – in line with another Mazzinian dream - it began to look as if *Giovine Europa* would be taking over from *Giovine Malta*; although in a new phenomenon the rising problem of mass illegal immigration since 2002 may be resurrecting in some quarters Mazzini's favoured idea of God-given territorial homelands, homogeneous nationalities and defined borders, however much they and their respective peoples belonged within the broader sphere of Humanity. "The family", he held, "was the country of the heart."

And finally, although Mazzini never came to Malta, his distinguished successor as leader of the Republican Party, the historian Giovanni Spadolini, did – in 1989, on the 25th anniversary of Malta's independence.



A detail from a map of Southern Italy and Malta entitled 'Italie Méridionale' showing the islands of Sicily and Malta. This map was published in Paris and engraved by Sengteller.

(Private Collection)