

The Sicilian Revolution of 1848 as seen from Malta

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Abstract: *Following the Sicilian revolution of 1848, many Italian intellectuals and political figures found refuge in Malta where they made use of the Freedom of the Press to divulge their message of unification to the mainland. Britain harboured hopes of seizing Sicily to counterbalance French expansion in the Mediterranean and tended to support the legitimate authority rather than separatist ideals. Maltese newspapers reflected these opposing ideas. By mid-1849 the revolution was dead.*

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The outbreak of Sicilian revolution of 12 January 1848 was precisely what everyone in Malta had been expecting: for months, the press had followed the rebellious stirrings, the spread of letters and subversive papers, and the continuous movements of the British fleet in Sicilian harbours.

A huge number of revolutionaries had already found refuge in Malta,¹ escaping from the Bourbons and anxious to participate in their country's momentous events. During their stay in the island, they shared their life experiences with other refugees; the freedom of the press that Malta obtained in 1839 – after a long struggle against the British authorities – gave them the possibility to give free play to audacious thoughts and to deliver them in writing to their 'distant' country.

So, at the beginning of 1848, the papers were happy to announce the outbreak of the revolution:

Le notizie che ci provengono dalla Sicilia sono consolanti per la causa italiana

Era il 12 del corrente, ed il rumore del cannone doveva annunziare al troppo sofferente popolo siciliano il giorno della nascita del suo Re. Tuona l'artiglieria, ed in risposta tutte le campane suonano a stormo. Questa chiamata (tanto desiderata dagli oppressi) chiama i cittadini di tutte le classi in armi; essi si riuniscono in più luoghi, e sfidano la truppa a sloggiarli. I militari ... attaccano e sono respinti con grave perdita ...²

¹ Since the failure of the insurrections in the early 1820s.

² *Il Mediterraneo*, No. 496, 26 January 1848.

The article came from *Il Mediterraneo*, a literary ‘refuge’ of the exiles landed in Malta. The paper was launched in 1838 by two of the refugees, Carlo Cicognani and Tommaso Zauli Sajani,³ and collected the dreams, the struggles, and the ideas of the Italian patriots. The other papers of the island also dedicated their articles to Sicilian events: obviously, this was not always out of *love of country*, at least not for the love of Italy. The British press never thought about hiding the ambitions of conquering Sicily – to counterbalance French expansion in the Mediterranean – and considered the revolution of 1848 as a good means for Great Britain to play the lead in the future events in Sicily. So, even the pro-British press considered 12 January as a liberation date, especially the *Malta Times* a paper which had been launched during the dispute between England and Naples about the Sicilian sulphur monopoly⁴ and since then it had not failed to reveal the real nature of the British interest in Sicily:

*Poche navi da guerra inviate sulle coste siciliane, taglierebbero la Sicilia dal resto del Continente europeo, e metterebbero i suoi bellissimi porti, le sue ricche valli e rosee colline con il suo popolo ardente e appassionato a disposizione della Gran Bretagna.*⁵

Since then, the favourite targets of British press had been, alternatively, the king of the Two Sicilies and France, the eternal competitor for the control of Sicily with its project of a Mediterranean entirely subdued by its forces. At the beginning of the terrible two-year period, the press exalted the ventures of Sicilian rebels, determined to shake off the Bourbon yoke.

In that situation, the press also offered a glimpse of the atmosphere of uncertainty that affected that period. In particular, Maltese editors and British authorities were worried about a possible republican turning point.

‘Liberty can only be given to a people in proportion to its virtue,’ and that there are so few republics, and ever have been so few, is a demonstrable proof that *the people in general are incapable of governing themselves*. Both France and England, as well as Italy, have once, in the course of their history, been purely in the hands of the people. But the people did not, and apparently could not govern themselves, or for themselves, and failed terribly, leaving examples of democratic violence and injustice to induce to the end of the time; Good, however, followed evil from this iniquity of strife and anarchy.⁶

³ Cf. B. Fiorentini, ‘Il giornalismo a Malta durante il Risorgimento Italiano’, in Vincenzo Bonello, Bianca Fiorentini, Lorenzo Schiavone, *Echi del Risorgimento a Malta*, Milan, 1982, 34–5.

⁴ The dispute began in June 1838, when the king of the two Sicilies – to avoid the inconvenient presence of the British merchants in his land – tried to hold them back and granted the Sicilian sulphur monopoly to the French company Taix Aycard e C; a solution to the dispute was found in 1840.

⁵ *The Malta Times*, No. 26, 19 August 1840.

⁶ *Ibid.*

In that period, the rivalry between France and Great Britain gradually became harsher. The little Mediterranean ‘refuge’, as a privileged spectator, followed the evolution of the double rivalry through the pages of its newspapers: the *Malta Times* took side with the support given to the rebels by the British (together with thousands of arms);⁷ *Il Mediterraneo*, instead, ventilated the views of the foreign consuls, the new followers of the Sicilian rebellion:

*Palermo fu bombardata per nove giorni, e gli abitanti ... sostennero con energia e con vero patriottismo il fuoco dei soldati del loro tiranno. Infine una protesta di consoli stranieri, (meno l'austriaco) e la minaccia del capitano del vapore britannico Bulldog di far fuoco sui vapori napoletani, fecero cessare le ostilità.*⁸

Behind the unanimous approval of the revolution there were different interests. The British press took the part of the government, determined to defend Sicily and so to strengthen the separatist tendencies already spread in the land; it was the best way to assure their future protectorate on the island.

For Italian patriots, instead, separatism was rather a threat, not worse than the Bourbon threat: they tried to avoid separatism through an active political propaganda for the unity of the nation and were, indirectly, against Britain.

In April 1848 a newspapers, the *Bullettino Maltese* was launched; it was edited by exiles, many of whom were Sicilian. The opening of the first number of the paper welcomed the year 1848:

Questo anno segna il cominciamento di una grande epoca – l'epoca in cui dal sentiero dell'espiazione e delle prove c'iniziamo ad una vita di eguaglianza, di libertà, di fratellanza ...

*Il sangue sparso in Svizzera, in Cracovia, in Spagna, in Grecia; i lamenti dell'infelice Polonia e dell'Italia; ... la ferocia dei governi ... erano motori sufficienti per chiamare l'Europa ad un comune riscatto, cominciamento di una comune felicità.*⁹

The British press reacted to the presence of the new paper with evident annoyance: the *Malta Times* reacted with especially severe accusations against the *Bullettino*, creating a dispute about the fortunes of Sicily. *Il Mediterraneo* also joined the dispute. Its pages were full of explicit references to the Italian *Nation* that was ready to accept the protection of the allied nations but not their domination. At the end of March, the paper published a speech by Giuseppe Natoli, delegate of the city of Messina at the Sicilian committee. His words were of a violent republican echo and he sincerely admired the French example:

⁷ *The Malta Times*, No. 320, 3 April 1848.

⁸ *Il Mediterraneo*, No. 497, 2 February 1848.

⁹ *Bullettino Maltese*, No. 1, 1 April 1848.

*Il fatto rumoroso della Repubblica Francese è stato ascoltato con entusiasmo dal nostro popolo, ebbro di vittoria ed orgoglioso di avere atterrato il dispotismo in casa sua ed acceleratone la caduta al di fuori. Egli ... ha ritornato l'amplesso fraterno da libero Italiano a libero Francese, ha esaltato di rivedere finalmente un alleato forte che ... ridiviene il sostenitore del principio della nazionalità contro ogni esterna aggressione.*¹⁰

British ambitions fought against political ideas borrowed from French experience: that model was the antecedent and the most direct reference of the Sicilian democratic political theory. British people also wondered about the strong national mood that was animating the rebellion: on 1 February 1848 Lord Gilbert Minto informed Henry John Temple Palmerston that an Italian national mood was spreading so strongly in Sicily that it could interfere with regional interests and British ambitions. The diplomat was so worried about it that he concluded his report asking for information about the real intentions of the British government.¹¹

In April *Il Mediterraneo* published the news regarding the insurrection in the Ionian islands: the archipelagic lands – following the example of Sicilian insurrections – claimed the right to join themselves to Greece ‘pacifically’ and accused Great Britain of the ‘crime of *lèse-nation*’. At the same time Ireland too introduced its appeals for independence: everybody realized that the case of Malta could become a new national question (as ‘Ireland of the Mediterranean’).

In June, an Austrian brigantine entered Grand Harbour, under the command of a young Venetian, Antonio Mazzucato. When he approached the anchorage, the captain raised an Italian flag on the mast; then he went ashore and decided to deliver the ship’s papers to the Sardinian consul Robert Slythe. This act disturbed the entire Austrian consulate: above all, the head of the consulate Ernest Fritscko viewed it as a threat to his authority. When, during a reception on board, Mazzucato run up another Italian flag with the name of PIO IX, bigger than the one he had put up before in the morning, Ernest Fritscko went on board and tore the flags into shreds. That event intrigued everybody and *Il Mediterraneo* took the chance to involve the public opinion in defending the Italian cause. So, the number of 28 June diffused the appeal to Maltese people by Lorenzo Borsini.

*Si permetterà di vomitare siffatti insulti oggi che il santo vessillo italiano viene inalberato nello slancio della vittoria dal guerriero d'Italia, Carlo Alberto, benedetto da quel Pio il cui nome vivrà fino alla consumazione dei secoli? La punizione consista nel vostro disprezzo, o Maltesi, verso il rappresentante degli oppressori d'Italia.*¹³

¹⁰ *Il Mediterraneo*, No. 505, 29 March 1848.

¹¹ *Correspondence respecting the Affairs of Naples and Sicily 1848–1849. Presented to both Houses of Parliament by command of Her Majesty*, London, 1849, 75–6.

¹² *Il Mediterraneo*, no. 509, 19 April 1848.

¹³ *Ibid.*, No. 518, 28 June 1848.

At that point, the question interested and worried Richard More O’Ferrall, governor of Malta, who had already declared that he did not want to allow Malta to become the centre of Italian immigration. At the beginning of July the governor wrote to Lord Grey, the minister for the colonies:

My Lord,

My attention has recently been called to an article in the ‘Mediterraneo’ newspaper of the 28th ultimo, purporting to be an Address from the Italians in Malta to the Maltese People ...; the author presupposing that the Maltese People have an interest and feel themselves bound to uphold the Italian cause, a cause which the Italian refugees have long been in the habits of designating as that of Italian peninsula and adjacent islands, thus insinuating that the Maltese ought from the geographical position of the island to make common cause with Italy and Sicily.¹⁴

O’Ferrall was against the Italians’ liberal claims and called for the immediate expulsion of the irreverent reporter from the island. However, his claim was not admissible and his fears continued to grow: a few months later the destiny of the revolution would be the same and new rebels would find refuge in Malta.

At the end of that troubled year, a new war of words involved the pages of the *Bullettino Maltese* and the *Malta Times*. The former newspaper was really involved in Sicilian events and, issue number 21 of November published a resonant letter of a correspondent from Palermo. The letter clearly expressed the resentment of Sicilian people towards the large nations who acted as mediators:

Da qualche tempo qui giornalmente si pubblicano dei giornali repubblicani. Il nome di Alberto Amadeo non è benedetto come quando da Stabile fu proclamato re dei siciliani. Del resto la maggioranza non desidera altro per ora che di operare repubblicanamente, cioè con energia e indipendentemente dalle potenze, che si dicono mediatrici il cui nome è così odiato che potrebbe facilmente fruttare la morte a coloro che con esse simpatizzano.

Malta’s government did not like that letter, and even less did the motherland that had been working to reach a compromise for the Sicilian cause since the previous month. A week later, the *Malta Times* published the entire letter appeared in the *Bullettino* and expressed a harsh comment on its author’s reliability:

We do not know what credit is to be given to the *Bullettino*’s correspondent, but we think the letter contains a good deal of what is vulgarly called *Fudge*.¹⁶

¹⁴National Archive of Malta (NAM), GOV 1-4-1, O’Ferrall dispatch to Lord Grey, 1 July 1848.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶*The Malta Times*, No. 302, 28 November 1848.

The reply arrived immediately after:

*Diciamo intanto essere mal fondato il sospetto che fa cadere il Malta Times sulla lettera pubblicata ... ed aggiungiamo essere stupida l'osservazione degli editori, poiché non dovevano riportare nelle colonne del medesimo foglio un documento che dà qualche peso alla nostra corrispondenza.*¹⁷

The suspects on British conduct, at that point, could not be hidden:

Or bene, le fanfaronate (fudge) che il Malta Times vuol attribuire alla nostra lettera possono riguardare le tendenze repubblicane che si manifestano in Sicilia, di cui in essa si tiene discorso ... Ma perché si meraviglia di tali tendenze? Giusta la corrispondenza in discorso il signor Temple non sembra voler dispiacere al governo del re.

*Una sola rettificazione ci induce a fare la lettera di Napoli alla nostra, ed è che l'odio contro la mediazione debb'essere cagionato dal sospetto che si ha riguardo l'Inghilterra, siccome delle sinistre mire della Francia non si hanno prove ancora.*¹⁸

That debate did not arouse the sensations of the establishment and the increasing number of the exiles that arrived in Malta provoked emotion in all the people. The fact of leaving their country meant the failure of their wishes.

After the conquest of Messina there was not any hope left; on 10 April 1849, *Il Portafoglio Maltese* first announced the fall of Catania:

*Un'altra città della eroica Sicilia vien di toccare la sorte dell'infelice Messina. Catania è oggi anch'essa caduta in mano dei soldati borbonici. ... Sfiniti in fine i catanesi, sopraffatti da una forza assai superiore, dovettero cedere il campo, e si ritirarono nelle montagne.... Catania fu allora abbandonata al sacco ed al fuoco: e qui s'incominciarono quelle stragi per cui si sono fatti già distinguere in Messina i barbari dell'Europa.*¹⁹

Immediately before the paper went to press, the news of the conquest of Syracuse reached the desk. At the end, there was a sad goodbye to the martyrs of the freedom:

*Come non compiangere quelle tante vittime che pagarono col loro sangue, colla loro vita, il più santo dei desiderj che può avere l'uomo, anzi il diritto più sacro, concessogli da Dio, e da un suo pari negatogli – la libertà?*²⁰

The last moments of pride of Sicily interested Malta: the press in exile clearly showed that there were hidden forces against the revolution, so it condemned the moderates' ambiguity, the abuses of the national guard, the negative mediation of Boudin's France and the suspicious acts of its *comare inglese*.²¹

¹⁷ *Bullettino Maltese*, No. 178, 30 November 1848.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Il Portafoglio Maltese*, 2° paper supplement to No. 570, 10 April 1849.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Il Mediterraneo*, No. 561, 25 April 1849.

At the end of April, a letter from Palermo announced that the end of the revolution was imminent, 30 miles away:

Il partito reazionario alla cui testa è il Barone Riso continua le sue negoziazioni col governo di Napoli per mezzo dell'intrigante Ammiraglio Baudin. La viltà dimostrata da questo partito ... formerà nella storia presente una pagina scritta a caratteri di sangue; ed i Siciliani che non hanno rinnegata la loro patria, e che la difesero con tutta la loro possa, ne trarranno un giorno la più sterminata vendetta Le truppe napolitane si aspettano a momenti, e v'è chi dice che son distanti 30 miglia.²²

The day after, Ruggero Settimo boarded the *Bulldog*, a steamer offered by the London government. By the time the paper was launched, he had already landed in Malta. Following that, the arrivals continued endlessly: at the end of 1849, Malta had at least 600 Italian refugees.²³

²² Ibid., No. 562, 2 May 1849.

²³ Cf. Fiorentini, 201–9.