

1859–60, which still feels fresh and relevant today despite being published more than half a century ago.

## Reference

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Nick Carter

Australian Catholic University

[nick.carter@acu.edu.au](mailto:nick.carter@acu.edu.au)

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.937633>

**Il Regno delle Due Sicilie e le potenze europee, 1830–1861**, by Eugenio Di Rienzo, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2012, 229 pp., €14.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-88-4983-22-59

In the many and crowded debates that characterised the 150th anniversary of Italian unity in 2011, the history of southern Italy attracted considerable attention, and not only from professional historians. In this context, a number of little known political events that took place within and beyond the borders of the Kingdom of Two Sicilies came to the fore. These illustrated the influence and (more or less legal) intervention of the principal European powers in Italy, which determined the historical and institutional ‘destiny’ of the kingdom. Some pieces of the complex puzzle that led to Italian unification, however, were still missing. Eugenio Di Rienzo’s recent work completes the picture. Through extensive research based primarily on diplomatic sources – once again shown to be of fundamental importance in the reconstruction of historical events – he documents many little and barely known aspects of the crucial period 1830–1861. Di Rienzo places in the contemporary international context the foreign policy choices and conduct of France and England especially, both of which were always attentive to, and worried by, political changes in the Italian states.

England always considered itself to be in credit with the Kingdom of Naples for having supported it at several crucial historical moments, beginning in 1799. The most recent ‘help’ from England had been during the Neapolitan revolution of 1820–1821, which had resulted in the adoption of the 1812 Spanish Constitution, a text considered subversive by all of Europe’s rulers. On that occasion, the ambiguous neutrality of England had been a crucial factor in the invasion of the kingdom by Holy Alliance forces. The invasion resulted in the brutal suppression of the first constitutional experiment attempted in pre-unification Italy.

In the following decades, England did not react well to what it perceived as displays of arrogance on the part of King Ferdinand II, who sought to be ‘independent’ from French and especially English influence. In pursuit of this goal, Ferdinand from the 1830s had adopted a policy of absolute neutrality, a dangerous strategy that irritated the Western European powers, particularly when it became tied up with the defence of Neapolitan economic interests (the so-called ‘sulphur war’ with England was emblematic of this). The tension between Ferdinand and England escalated notably from 6 July 1846, when Lord Palmerston, who had little sympathy for the Bourbon king, became British Foreign Secretary. After the repression of the Neapolitan constitutional experiment of 1848, Ferdinand ordered the arrest of leading patriots who had

participated in the redaction of the constitution and in the ensuing liberal government, among them Silvio Spaventa, Luigi Settembrini and Carlo Poerio. At this point, European public opinion became interested in the trials of political prisoners in the Bourbon Kingdom (an interest that continued until unification). Diplomats from the various European states usually attended the court cases (the English minister William Temple often talked with Poerio during the hearings), as did journalists from the most important newspapers of the day. After the publication in 1851 of Gladstone's letters to Lord Aberdeen that revealed the inhuman treatment suffered by Neapolitan political prisoners, the English press, led by *The Times*, repeatedly denounced this terrible situation: 'Schiavone ... has lost the use of one eye and nearly that of the other; ... Pironti, labouring under paralysis, unable to move and in chains; and, not to mention more, a young man of 34 years, called Alfonso Zeuli, who is dying of consumption from the dampness of his prison, reduced to a skeleton, scarcely able to breathe or to speak; he has had the last sacrament, and yet he is in chains!' (*The Times*, 7 June 1856).

Di Rienzo seems to consider the indignation of English – and European – public opinion almost as an effective 'propaganda' weapon, in some way used instrumentally by the English government, to discredit further the Kingdom of Naples in the eyes of all Europe. Unfortunately, the extant documentation on those prosecuted for political reasons (the 'Italian' historiography has often undervalued the contribution of southern patriots) confirms the accounts of the English press and government. These in turn became the object of parliamentary debate elsewhere in Europe. The presence of foreign diplomats at the ongoing political trials annoyed and rattled the Bourbon monarch, who demanded detailed information on those attending. The English government underlined its concern for the Neapolitan political prisoners through a request to the king to grant amnesty to a number of patriots; in 1855, it even considered carrying out a raid to free Settembrini and Poerio. This plan, however, was never put into action because of the trial around the same time of several prominent conspirators in Naples. The English government and press closely followed the so-called Mignogna trial – *The Times* reported on each hearing – and it was really because of European, and above all English, 'public opinion' that the defendants received relatively mild sentences (Corciulo 2005).

As Di Rienzo notes, neither the king nor his ministers understood that neutrality threatened to leave the Bourbon kingdom dangerously isolated internationally. Ferdinand II even refused to take part in the Crimean War alongside France and England (in contrast to the astute Cavour, the prime minister of Piedmont). Di Rienzo is also right to argue that England was unscrupulous in pursuit of her national interests, often disregarding international norms in favour of her own commercial objectives. This was, he writes, 'a strategy of commercial imperialism disguised as a defence of free trade principles' (p. 34). Nevertheless, one should not forget that European public opinion, especially between 1848 and 1860, was almost unanimously against the Kingdom of Naples due to Ferdinand's refusal to adopt reforms. From 1855, even Russia, Belgium and Spain joined England in asking Ferdinand to make a conciliatory gesture and release Poerio, Settembrini and Spaventa. The Neapolitan king finally agreed to this in 1859, just months before his death, as part of a wider amnesty. At the same time, though, Ferdinand also announced further repressive measures aimed at future political dissidents.

Ferdinand's successor, the very young Francesco II, immediately demonstrated his intention to follow his father's example in pursuing neutrality and opposing constitutional reform, even though he did effect a government reshuffle in a liberal sense, appointing as prime minister the aged francophile and former aide-de-camp of Gioacchino Murat, Carlo Filangieri di Satriano. However, the force of circumstances allowed no time for considered decisions. On 23 January 1860, France and England signed a commercial treaty that further isolated the Kingdom of

Naples. At the same time, the patriot Alberto Mario started collecting funds in London in support of Garibaldi. The little known sources used by Di Rienzo to tell the story of the Thousand are of great interest, and his narrative reads like an enthralling thriller. He argues that the English fleet, finding itself 'fortuitously' in the harbour at Marsala, deliberately placed itself in the line of fire of the Neapolitan navy (that had in any case received confused and ambiguous orders) when the Garibaldini first landed in Sicily. The Neapolitan government protested vehemently against the 'manifest support of the English fleet' (p. 150) for the Red Shirts. However, these protests, although supported by other European states, did not trigger an international intervention. On 25 June 1860, Francesco issued a draft constitution, at the same time requesting an agreement with Piedmont. By now, though, the fate of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was sealed. Naples fell to Garibaldi on 7 September 1860; Gaeta capitulated in March 1860. Francesco and his wife Maria Sofia became exiles. The Piedmontese then held a popular plebiscite in the south in support of annexation. A great deal of confusion surrounded the plebiscite and there was considerable ballot rigging (including, it is said, by the Camorra, now lined up against the Bourbons). This official act placed a pseudo-legal seal on the annexation of the Kingdom of Naples by Piedmont.

The inertia and passivity of Neapolitan foreign policy, the Bourbons' political myopia and fear of Jacobinism, and the interests of the major foreign powers, England in particular, together contributed to the destruction of the most populous and most important of the 'small' European states. Garibaldi's invasion and Piedmont's subsequent annexation of an independent sovereign nation had taken place without any official declaration of war.

Some years later, in the House of Commons, the conservative MP Pope Hennessy described the events of 1860 as 'a dirty affair'; there was also much criticism of the conduct of the Piedmontese army in the ensuing 'Brigands War' in the south. George Cavendish Bentinck declared that the English government in 1860, in violation of all international laws, had set fire to southern Italy; in so doing, he argued, it had committed a great error. Meanwhile, one of Disraeli's closest collaborators, Henry Lennox, declared that the United Kingdom had prostituted its foreign policy by supporting an illegitimate and wicked enterprise that had inaugurated a real reign of terror. The southern provinces of Italy, including Sicily, which had hoped to obtain a degree of political autonomy from Piedmont on the strength of its past conflicts with the Bourbons, paid heavily for this state of affairs. The mass migration of southern Italians to the American continent after the approval of the 1863 Pica law (which, in violation of the guarantees provided under the Italian Constitution, established military courts in the south to deal with suspected 'brigands'), was tragic testimony to a unification process that could have followed a different course and reached a different conclusion.

*Translated by Andrea del Cornò, Nick Carter and Cristina Massaccesi*

## Reference

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Maria Sofia Corciulo  
*Sapienza Università di Roma*  
*mariasofia.corciulo@uniroma1.it*

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.937632>