

Unification of Italy, Historical Background, Foundations, Phases

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The **Unification of Italy**, known as the **Risorgimento** (meaning “resurgence”), was one of the most important political developments of **nineteenth-century Europe**. It **transformed the Italian peninsula from a collection of fragmented states, foreign-controlled territories, and papal domains into a unified nation-state**. The process formally began with the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861 and was completed in 1870 with the annexation of Rome. However, unification was not a sudden event; it was a gradual and complex process shaped by ideological movements, diplomatic strategies, wars, and popular participation.

Historical Background Italy Before Unification

In the early nineteenth century, Italy was not a unified nation but a fragmented region divided into multiple states after the **Congress of Vienna**. The objective of European powers was to restore monarchies and suppress the spread of nationalism that had emerged after the French Revolution and the rule of Napoleon Bonaparte. As a result, Italy was split into several political units such as:

- The progressive Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia in the northwest,

- The conservative and economically backward Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in the south, and
- The Papal States in central Italy under the authority of the Pope.
- Smaller states like Parma, Modena, and Tuscany remained under Austrian influence, while Lombardy-Venetia was directly controlled by Austria.

Ideological Foundations of Unification of Italy

The movement for Italian unification was shaped by powerful intellectual and political ideas that emerged in the nineteenth century.

- Nationalism played a central role by promoting the belief that people sharing a common language, culture, and history should form a single nation.
- Liberalism further strengthened this movement by demanding constitutional government, individual rights, and political freedom.
- At the same time, Romanticism contributed by reviving interest in Italy's glorious past, particularly the legacy of ancient Rome and the Renaissance, thereby fostering a sense of shared identity.

Leaders like Giuseppe Mazzini were instrumental in spreading these ideas and mobilising people towards the goal of a united Italy.

Phases of Unification of Italy

The unification of Italy was a gradual and multi-stage process that unfolded over several decades, involving revolutionary movements, diplomatic strategies, and military actions led by different leaders and forces.

Phase I Revolutionary Nationalism (1830s-1848)

The initial phase of unification was marked by revolutionary efforts led by nationalist leaders.

- Giuseppe Mazzini founded Young Italy in 1831 with the aim of creating a unified, republican Italy based on popular sovereignty. His movement inspired widespread nationalist sentiment, but most uprisings failed due to lack of organisation, military strength, and external support.
- The Revolutions of 1848 further intensified the struggle, with uprisings occurring across Italy.
- However, the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia, led by Charles Albert, was defeated by Austria.

These failures demonstrated that unification could not be achieved through revolutionary action alone and required strong leadership and international alliances.

Phase II Diplomatic and Political Strategy (1852-1861)

A decisive shift occurred under the leadership of Count Camillo di Cavour, the Prime Minister of Piedmont-Sardinia. He adopted a pragmatic approach by modernising the economy, strengthening the military, and pursuing diplomatic alliances. Cavour secured the support of Napoleon III through the Plombières Agreement, which led to a war against Austria in 1859. As a result, Lombardy was annexed, and several central Italian states joined Piedmont through plebiscites.

This phase marked the success of diplomacy and statecraft over purely revolutionary methods.

Phase III Popular Movement and Military Action (1860)

The next phase was characterised by mass participation and military action led by Giuseppe Garibaldi.

- In 1860, he launched the Expedition of the Thousand and successfully captured Sicily and southern Italy. His campaign gained support from local populations and rapidly weakened Bourbon rule. Despite being a committed republican, Garibaldi chose to hand over his conquered territories to Victor Emmanuel II, placing national unity above personal ideology. This act ensured the consolidation of Italy under a constitutional monarchy.

Phase IV Final Unification (1861-1870)

The process of unification was completed in stages after the initial formation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861.

- Venetia was incorporated in 1866 following Austria's defeat in the Austro-Prussian War.
- The final step came in 1870 when Rome was annexed after French troops withdrew during the Franco-Prussian War.
- With Rome becoming the capital, the political unification of Italy was finally completed, marking the end of the Risorgimento.

Factors Responsible for Unification of Italy

The success of Italian unification was due to the interaction of several important factors:

- **Rise of Nationalism and Romanticism:** Writers and intellectuals promoted a shared cultural identity based on language, history, and heritage. Nationalism became a powerful emotional force that united people across regions.
- **Impact of the French Revolution and Napoleon:** Revolutionary ideas such as liberty, equality, and popular sovereignty spread across Italy. Napoleonic reforms also introduced administrative unity, which inspired future unification efforts.
- **Economic Factors:** Political fragmentation created barriers to trade and industrial development. The emerging middle class supported unification to create a unified economic system and remove internal tariffs.
- **Role of Leadership:** Mazzini inspired the nationalist movement ideologically, Cavour used diplomacy and statecraft, and Garibaldi contributed through military action and mass mobilization.
- **Role of Foreign Powers:** France played a crucial but inconsistent role, supporting Italy against Austria but also limiting its ambitions. Britain's indirect support and Prussia's later alliance also contributed significantly.

Challenges in the Unification of Italy

Despite its success, the unification process faced several major challenges:

- **Austrian Control:** Austria's dominance in northern Italy was the biggest obstacle and required military confrontation to overcome.

- **Opposition of the Papacy:** The Pope resisted unification as it threatened his authority over the Papal States, creating a major political and religious challenge.
- **Internal Ideological Conflicts:** Differences between republicans (like Mazzini) and monarchists (like Cavour) created divisions within the movement.
- **Piedmontization of Italy:** Unification is often criticized as an expansion of Piedmont-Sardinia. The new Italian state adopted Piedmont's laws, administration, and taxation system without considering regional differences. This led to resentment, particularly in southern Italy, where people viewed unification as domination rather than liberation. The resulting unrest led to widespread brigandage, reflecting resistance against the new state.
- **Regional Imbalances:** The north was more industrialized, while the south remained agrarian and underdeveloped, leading to long-term inequality known as the "Southern Question."
- **Limited Popular Participation:** Unification was largely driven by elites, with limited involvement of the masses, which weakened national integration.

Impact of the Unification of Italy

The unification had both positive and negative consequences:

- **Political Unity:** Italy emerged as a unified nation-state, ending centuries of fragmentation and foreign domination.
- **Change in European Power Balance:** Austria's influence declined, and Italy became a new power in European politics.
- **Spread of Nationalism:** Italian unification inspired similar movements, especially the unification of Germany.
- **Economic Integration:** A unified market was established, promoting trade and development, though disparities persisted.
- **Church-State Conflict:** The annexation of Rome created tensions with the Catholic Church, leading to the "Roman Question."
- **Incomplete Nation-Building:** Political unity did not automatically create social unity. As rightly observed by Massimo d'Azeglio, "We have made Italy; now we must make Italians." This highlights the challenge of creating a common national identity among diverse populations.

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