



Andrea Possieri. *Garibaldi*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2010. 245 pp. EUR 16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-88-15-13975-7.



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Rethinking Garibaldi: A Man of Action Who Lived for Revolution

Many studies of the Italian Risorgimento have placed Giuseppe Garibaldi somewhere between myth and reality. These works have often referred to the *Nizzardo* as a central figure of the Italian struggle for national independence and rhetorically celebrated Garibaldi as an outstanding example of patriotism. This romanticized narrative overshadowed the reality of his person and has impaired his historical representation. Despite Garibaldi's place in national folklore, on the 200th anniversary of his birth, some fringes of public opinion chose to highlight his ruthlessness and cruelty rather than his heroism. These contrasting representations revamped the debate of whether he was truly a hero or a villain in Italian history.

Andrea Possieri argues that Garibaldi is better understood within the broader framework of the Risorgimento, the complex political, military, and cultural process that led to Italian national unification. In his well-written work Possieri suggests that Garibaldi was a man of action whose charismatic leadership derived from his anticlericalism, revolutionary spirit, and patriotism. These traits

located his public persona between that of a *caudillo* and a tribune of the people (p. 11). Contrary to the rhetorical image that, among others, was propagated by Giuseppe Mazzini and Alexander Dumas, Garibaldi was far from imbued by personal loyalties toward the Piedmont state. Instead, he uninterruptedly vacillated between state legality and insurrection and ultimately identified with a single revolutionary institution: the Masonry. While describing Garibaldi's lesser-known political identity, Possieri reveals the lingering tension that marked the political relationships between Garibaldi, the Savoy monarchy, and both republicans and democratic leaders. Inspired by Lucy Riall's groundbreaking work *Garibaldi: Invention of a Hero* (2007), which emphasizes the socially constructed nature of Garibaldi's myth, Possieri also highlights how Garibaldi's popularity was the result of a rhetorical strategy that was sustained from his military success. Thus, Possieri contends that the *Garibaldinismo* became a malleable and multifaceted form of political culture that was later borrowed by republicans, socialists, fascists, and even com-

munists. Moreover, it was transformed into a political liturgy which uninterruptedly fed the myth of the Hero of the World and became a powerful tool to mobilize the young bourgeoisie in and outside the Italian borders (p. 18).

To demonstrate Garibaldi's revolutionary essence, Possieri narrates his story through the lenses of his South American and Italian experiences and succinctly summarizes a wide set of literary works, coeval literature, and biographies. In chapter 1 the author deals with the fictitious nature of Garibaldi's memoirs, the inaccuracies about his political education, and the role that the nineteenth-century public sphere (newspapers, associations, and printing industry) played to monumentalize Garibaldi's image and boost his international notoriety. Possieri avers that Garibaldi's past romanticized narrative was inflated by the lack of archival research and the work of intellectuals who ascribed Garibaldi's exceptional virtues to his spurious noble heritage.

Instead, chapters 2 and 3 portray Garibaldi as a young sailor who grew up in the city of Nice and was moderately educated through scholastic, maritime, and political training. Possieri shows that, although Garibaldi was exposed to patriotic and humanitarian ideals during his time as a sailor, his decision to move to South America was dictated more by economic needs rather than a conscious political choice. Nonetheless, it is during his experience in South America that Garibaldi conceived the idea that war itself was a goal rather than simply a means. In a highly unstable sociopolitical context Garibaldi sharpened his guerrilla tactics, enjoyed unprecedented public visibility, and became object of a legendary narrative which also romanticized and distorted his encounter with his wife, Anita, a female heroine of the national Risorgimento. This narrative depicted Garibaldi as a "pirata-centauro" as it highlighted his military skills on sea and land, his role as a heroic pirate, and his identification with the gaucho culture (pp. 111-112).

In the following three chapters, the book focuses on Garibaldi's role in the Wars of Italian Independence. In chapter 4, the author argues that, although his return to Italy in 1848 was received with diffidence from the Savoy monarchy and open hostility from the Catholic Church, his fame served as a source of military mobilization for the young bourgeoisie who responded to his patriotic call to arms. The events of the Roman Republic of 1849, however, clearly proved the factionalism of the patriotic front, the weakness of its revolutionary project, and fur-

ther distanced Garibaldi from his ideologues, above all Giuseppe Mazzini. As a consequence, Garibaldi fully embraced the monarchical-unitary project on the path to national unification.

After documenting his subsequent exile, the author narrates Garibaldi's participation in the Second War of Italian Independence in chapter 5. Possieri demonstrates that the military weakness of the Bourbon Army and its lack of political leadership facilitated Garibaldi's campaign; however, his military strategy clashed with Count Camillo di Cavour's political blueprint, having the Piedmontese statesman sent troops to Southern Italy under the pretext of "stopping the revolution" (p. 181). He argues that this event was a turning point in the Italian struggle for national independence. In the Teano's meeting, Garibaldi not only submitted to the king and his liberal leadership but his troops were also disbanded, putting an end to his revolutionary dreams. Above all, the 1860 expedition, which was later portrayed by Marxist scholars as a "betrayed revolution," proved Garibaldi's political duality with Piedmont, the complementary nature of Garibaldi and Cavour, and Garibaldi's absence of a precise political design.

In chapter 6, the author concludes with a description of Garibaldi's growing political marginalization after 1861 and his death. Between 1861 and 1867, his revolutionary ambitions toward Venice and Rome met the firm opposition of the new Italian government, whose realpolitik defied Garibaldi's insurrectional strategy. Although his limited involvement in the Third War of Italian Independence and his failed uprising inside the papal state marked "the end of the Risorgimento," Garibaldi's popularity remained untouched (p. 216). Enjoying public support, Garibaldi continued to promote his anticlericalism and untamable patriotism, even briefly participating in the French Commune of 1871. At his funeral in 1882, the "Nizzardo" was celebrated as one of the founding fathers of the nation.

As this overview suggests, Possieri's work examines Garibaldi's personal and political story to further revisit the process of Italian Risorgimento as a spontaneous insurrection that was driven by a single and coherent political project, took a linear trajectory, and inevitably led to the independence of the Italian peninsula. Possieri shows that Garibaldi's revolutionary character shaped his views and actions and clashed with both the ideological precepts and the political mires of leaders such as Mazzini and Cavour. The author depicts Garibaldi as an average man whose extraordinary popularity and suc-

cess was not dictated by superior political, intellectual, or military skills but rather by an unparalleled revolutionary passion. Possieri convincingly demonstrates that, although this passion fueled Garibaldi's subversive and rebellious military leadership, it was also his hubris, ultimately transforming him into a mere "political resource" (p. 188).

At the same time, Possieri's use of secondary sources and his narrow focus on Garibaldi's revolutionary character raise questions about his work. While the author describes Garibaldi's political formation and the development of his revolutionary leadership in great detail, the lack of archival research undermines the author's effort to fully explain Garibaldi's unparalleled popularity and his role within the broader process of national unification. Thus, the story of Garibaldi's leadership as a conscious collaborative effort that was orchestrated by Garibaldi himself and his political supporters remains obscured by background information that only partially elucidates its historical significance. In particular, as the book progresses, Garibaldi appears increasingly caught within a network of historical events that catalyzed and limited his individual agency, and the lack of firsthand sources leaves his reactions to the events unclear.

As a result, the general coherence of the argument that presents Garibaldi as an irrepressible revolutionary suffers from a sort of double narrative that accompanies his personal and political experiences in both South America and Italy. In addition, while this biography depicts "Garibaldinismo" as a fluid rather than static political and popular category, there is little about its changing meaning. From this perspective, devoting more attention to Garibaldi's role as an agent of Italianess within the nineteenth-century public sphere would have also furthered scholarly understanding of how his public persona responded to both the hopes and fears of "regular Italians" who witnessed or participated in the process of national independence.

Despite these observations, this biography is a valuable attempt to historicize the Garibaldi phenomenon far from a mythological narrative that has often distorted his public image. It will greatly appeal to a general audience, and could be of interest to specialists who may benefit from Possieri's analysis of Garibaldi as a revolutionary leader whose strengths and weaknesses well mirrored those of the national Risorgimento.

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