

ALLA CORRENTE

Giuseppe Garibaldi

(Please read this with reference to last month's piece on Cavour. That piece contains much of the history that I have omitted in this piece on Garibaldi to avoid duplication).

Giuseppe Garibaldi was born in Nice on July 4, 1807. His father was a fisherman and also piloted trading vessels along the Mediterranean coast. When Garibaldi was a child, Nice, which had been ruled by Napoleonic France, came under the control of the Italian kingdom of Piedmont Sardinia. It's likely that his great desire to unite Italy was rooted in his childhood experience of essentially seeing the nationality of his hometown being changed.

Resisting his mother's wish that he join the priesthood, Garibaldi went to sea at the age of 15. He was certified as a sea captain by the age of 25, and in the early 1830s he became involved in the "Young Italy" movement led by Giuseppe Mazzini. The party was devoted to the liberation and unification of Italy, large parts of which were then ruled by Austria or the Papacy.

A plot to overthrow the Piedmontese government failed, and Garibaldi, who was involved, was forced to flee. The government sentenced him to death in absentia. Unable to return to Italy, he sailed to South America, where for more than a dozen years he lived in exile, making a living at first as a sailor and later as a trader. He was drawn to revolutionary movements while in South America, and he fought in both Brazil and Uruguay. While in Uruguay, he led forces that ultimately were victorious over the Uruguayan dictator, and he was credited with ensuring the liberation of Uruguay.

Exhibiting a keen sense of the dramatic (a trait he always maintained to his own advantage), Garibaldi adopted the red shirts worn by South American gauchos as a personal trademark. In later years his billowing red shirts would be a prominent part of his public image.

While he was in South America, he stayed in contact with his revolutionary colleague and mentor Mazzini, who was living in exile in London. Mazzini continually promoted Garibaldi, seeing him as a rallying point for Italian nationalists. As revolutions broke out in Europe in 1848, Garibaldi returned from South America. He landed in Nice, along with his "Italian Legion," which consisted of about 60 loyal fighters, ready to begin the process of unification.

As war and rebellions broke out in parts of Italy, Garibaldi commanded troops in Milan before being forced to flee to Switzerland. From there, he intended to go to Sicily in order to join a rebellion there, but instead was drawn into a conflict at Rome. In 1849, taking the side of a newly formed revolutionary government in Rome, he led Italian forces battling French troops who were loyal to the Pope (Pius IX). After addressing the Roman assembly following a brutal battle, while still carrying a bloody sword, Garibaldi was encouraged to flee the city.

Garibaldi's South American-born wife, Anita, who had fought alongside him, died during the perilous retreat from Rome. Garibaldi himself escaped to Tuscany, and eventually to Nice. The authorities in Nice forced him back into exile, and he crossed the Atlantic yet again. For a time he lived quietly on Staten Island as a guest of the Italian-American inventor Antonio Meucci. While in New York in the early 1850s, he once again took up seafaring, and at one point served as captain of a ship that sailed a round trip to the Pacific and back.

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In the mid-1850s Garibaldi visited Mazzini in London. Soon after this, he was allowed to return to Italy. He was able to obtain funds to buy an estate on a small island off the coast of Sardinia, and devoted himself to farming. However, never far from his mind was the political movement to unify Italy (the Risorgimento, the name taken from Cavour's political newspaper in Piedmont). He followed the movement with passion and kept in touch with the revolutionary leaders and groups.

Political upheaval ultimately led Garibaldi into battle. In May 1860 he landed in Sicily with his followers, who came to be known as the "Thousand Red Shirts" (I Mille). Garibaldi defeated the Neapolitan troops, essentially conquering the island, and then crossed the Straits of Messina to the Italian mainland.

After marching northward, he reached Naples and made a triumphant entry into the undefended city on September 7, 1860. He declared himself dictator. Seeking a peaceful unification of Italy, Garibaldi turned over his southern conquests to the Piedmontese king, (Victor Emmanuel II) and returned to his island farm. The Kingdom of Italia was established by the new Italian Parliament on March 17, 1861, and the King of Piedmont-Sardinia (Victor Emmanuel II) was declared King.

The eventual unification of Italy took more than a decade, however. Garibaldi made several attempts to seize Rome in the mid-1860s, and was captured three times and sent back to his farm. In the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), Garibaldi, out of sympathy for the newly formed French Republic, briefly fought against the Prussians. However, with the Prussian victory over the French, France's position in Italy was destroyed. Pope Pius IX could no longer count on French forces to protect Church holdings in Rome (the last bastion of the Papal States that remained after 1861). The new Italian government took control of Rome, and Italy was essentially unified.

Garibaldi was eventually voted a pension by the Italian government, and he was considered a national hero until his death on June 2, 1882.

-Dr. James J. Boitano
(Adapted from: Robert McNamara, About.com Guide)

