WAR AND REVOLUTION IN THE AGE OF THE RISORGIMENTO
1820–1849

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I

The convergence of revolutionary liberal and conservative nationalist ideas was a defining characteristic of the age of the Risorgimento. From the time of the revolutions of 1820–21, revolutionary sentiments found among the Carbonari and Federati received critical backing from the armed forces of restored Italian states. Revolutionaries demanding a constitution in the kingdoms of Naples and Piedmont-Sardinia gained enormous support, and achieved initial success with the backing of a significant part of the armies of the two states. Veterans of the Napoleonic Wars—who had remained in service after 1815 when the dynastic rulers of the respective kingdoms regained their thrones—comprised much of the rank-and-file of the armies as well as their officers. The monarchs retained their military institutions essentially intact, and had purged few officers and men. Thus, when disturbances erupted in Naples in 1820, King Ferdinand IV found his authority challenged not only by civil unrest in his capital, but was confronted by a good portion of his army, which had defected to the side of the opposition under General Guglielmo Pepe. The monarch reluctantly accepted a constitution, and then fled to Vienna.

The success of the Neapolitan revolution encouraged other rebellions throughout the Italian peninsula. In the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia revolutionaries backed by eight infantry regiments demanded that King Victor Emanuel II accept a constitution. He nonetheless refused, and abdicated in favor of his brother, Charles Felix.¹ The new monarch however, was in Modena at the time so that Charles Albert became regent. Charles Albert granted a constitution, but acted without the permission of the new king. Forces loyal to Charles Felix joined with an Austrian army, which had been dispatched from Lombardy-Venetia, and quickly crushed

the revolutionaries. Charles Felix followed this by abrogating the short-lived constitution and purging his army of disloyal elements.

The events of the 1821 Revolution remained in the memory of the Savoyard royal family throughout the Risorgimento. The fear of revolution and concerns about the loyalty of the army meant that devotion to the monarchy would outweigh military ability throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. On occasion, officers who did not exhibit great military skill still found their way into the senior ranks due to their political loyalty. The age of revolution in Italy, the age of the Risorgimento, required the House of Savoy—even the most moderate of its dynasty—to be wary of revolutionaries who claimed loyalty to a monarch who would accept a constitution. The army and its officers had to firmly accept in principle and practice that the best interests of the state and society were held by the prince. The revolution of 1821, and the disloyalty of almost half the Piedmontese army led to a decidedly conservative policy that would insure the stability of the regime. The relationship between army and monarchy would remain firm through the watershed of 1848. At that moment, the monarch, the army and most revolutionaries agreed that any political progress in Italy could only be achieved through cooperation and moderation of revolution. Indeed, none of it mattered if the singular force of the conservative order the Austrian Habsburgs could not be cast out of Italy. Here the revolutionaries and the monarchs tended to agree.

In the decade following the upheavals of the early 1820s, the revolutions of 1831 did not find substantial support from within Italian armed forces. It is true that Carlo Zucchi, a former general of Napoleon's Kingdom of Italy, led revolutionaries in an invasion of the Papal States, but no army experienced massed defections or gave its full support for the revolutionary movements in that year. Italian revolutionaries tended in the majority to support constitutional monarchy. Yet, by 1830 the emergence of Giuseppe Mazzini's republican organization, Giovane Italia, or Young Italy, emerged as the symbol and arm of the most radical version of liberal nationalism. The desire to topple monarchies, establish republican constitutions, and move towards a common national identity found fertile ground in the educated Italian youth who had been born during or after the Napoleonic Wars. The radicalism of Mazzinianism made it completely unacceptable to members of the royal administrations or their armed forces. Among these radical revolutionaries was Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, the nephew of the former Emperor, and future Emperor in his own right. A Carbonari, associated with Mazzinianism, he fled Italy after