

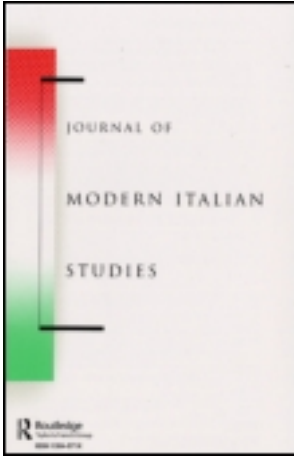
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Enrico Sappia: Cospiratore e agente segreto di Mazzini

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Maurice Mauviel and Elso Simone Serpentine (2009) *Enrico Sappia: Cospiratore e agente segreto di Mazzini* (Mosciano Sant'Angelo (TE): Artemia Edizioni), 545 pp., ISBN 9788895921082, €25.00, soft cover

With the death of Salvo Mastellone in January 2012 aged ninety-one, Italy lost its foremost Mazzini scholar. His *Mazzini Scrittore Politico in Inglese: Democracy in Europe, 1840–1855* (2004) deserves particular recognition as an exemplary work of intellectual and political history. In all of his writing about Mazzini, Mastellone presented him as a protagonist of European democracy, a viewpoint shared by Stefano Recchia and Nadia Urbinati in their celebratory *A Cosmopolitanism of Nations: Giuseppe Mazzini's Writings on Democracy, Nation-Building, and International Relations* (2009). With the end of the Cold War, the crisis of communism, and the development of the European Union along the associative nationalist lines in keeping with the spirit of Mazzini's hopes and predictions, he seemed to have outlasted his foremost and much-hated rival on the left, Karl Marx. Through the work of such scholars as Mastellone, Recchia and Urbinati, his ideas about nationalism and democracy acquired renewed currency.

Mazzini's legacy consisted not only of his published work, but also of the personal influence that as a charismatic leader he exerted on colleagues, followers and politically or intellectually significant segments of society. Maurice Mauviel and Elso Simone Serpentine present their biography of Enrico Sappia as just such a case study of Mazzini's influence.

Little is known about Sappia's family background. Born in Nizza (present-day Nice) in 1833, he completed his schooling by the age of fifteen and then embarked on a life of travel and adventure. At sixteen, in 1849, he witnessed the proclamation of the Roman Republic. His career as a Mazzini agent began then. What such a professional designation actually meant in Sappia's case, however, involves considerable uncertainty. Amidst mysterious courier assignments to various parts of Europe, he conceived a plot in 1850, without Mazzini's knowledge, to assassinate the King of Naples, Ferdinand II. Mastellone examines this period with his trademark exactitude in *Mazzini Scrittore Politico in Inglese* and makes no mention of Sappia or the plot to kill Ferdinand. The plan miscarried through Sappia's indiscretion, and he spent the next four years in a Neapolitan prison.

At this point in the story, Mauviel and Serpentine introduce their main theme: the debate in the primary sources and the scholarly literature over Sappia's historical significance. They mount a vigorous defence of him against the accusations primarily of Marco Antonio Canini in *Briciole di storia* (1882) and Edmondo Cione in *Il paradiso dei diavoli* (1949). Sappia's critics, past and present, have dismissed him as a half-crazy and morally bankrupt self-promoter whose connections with Mazzini belonged to the realm of fantasy when they did not involve outright treachery. For Canini and Cione, as well as many other authors, Mazzini adherents such as Sappia brought dishonour and disgrace to the cause.

In their rebuttal, Mauviel and Serpentine acknowledge the sketchiness of the documentation for much of Sappia's life, especially his Mazzini period. A very unclear picture of Sappia as a conspirator and secret agent of Mazzini emerges from their book. He served in the Piedmontese army during the 1850s, with the aim of spreading Mazzinian ideas among the troops, the authors explain amidst their

speculations about how charges of homosexuality against him may have compromised his intended mission. For the period immediately following his discharge from the army, almost no documentary evidence exists. The authors fill this gap in the story with a discussion of what we do not know about Sappia's life during the Risorgimento and with a presentation of competing explanations of what might have happened to him at that time. Whether he fought with Garibaldi during the Risorgimento and the post-Risorgimento can neither be confirmed nor excluded. The authors are similarly non-committal about the question of whether he ever married or had children. Interrogative sentences abound in the book.

Few though the known facts about Sappia are, the authors managed to produce this lengthy biography of him partly by speculating about the blank spots in the historical record. They also meticulously examine his extant writings, always in strident opposition to his detractors. For example, contrary to the dismissive evaluations of Canini and Cione, they claim that his *Mazzini, Histoire des conspirations mazziniennes* (1869) deserves to be prized as a major primary source account of the period. That the book has not been cited as a historical source since 1895 they blame on a spiteful and unmerited campaign of denigration against him.

Working as a journalist in Paris on the eve of the Commune, Sappia continued to embrace Mazzinian republicanism. Like Mazzini, he rejected the Commune as a false step for the left. Mazzini's rejection of the Paris Commune resulted in a nearly total eclipse of his influence on the revolutionary left. He died soon afterwards, but his followers long had to endure the hatred and contempt of anarchists, communists and all those who continued to believe in class conflict and revolution. Sappia had an additional burden to bear. He was suspected of having served as a spy for the French government and then the Prussian military. In their attempt to rehabilitate his reputation, Mauviel and Serpentini dismiss these suspicions, while conceding that the ambiguities and lacunae of the historical record do not admit of absolute certainty with regard to Sappia's conduct in Paris.

On page 219 of this 545-page book, we read that following the Commune Sappia's 'role as conspirator was concluded forever'. The rest of the book deals with his subsequent career as a journalist, teacher and historian. He moved in Masonic circles and attached himself to local political figures and magnates, initially in the South before returning to his native Nizza. Mauviel and Serpentini make large claims for the importance of his newspaper work and of the local histories that he wrote. As a high-school teacher, he fascinated students with his aura as an old-time revolutionary. In Nizza, he founded *Nice historique*, one of his most successful publications. In this journal, he sought to present vignettes of the city's historical past. The Accademia Nissarda, founded in 1904 as a support organization for the journal, made him its secretary, a position he held until his death two years later.

Mazzini scholars continue to ignore Sappia, Mauviel and Serpentini lament. Mazzini himself denied that Sappia was an agent of his, possibly, the authors claim, to shield him from prosecution. In any case, the flimsiness of the documentation for the 1856–66 period of his life decreases the chances that Sappia will be seen now as a major figure in the history of Mazzinianism. He emerges instead as a minor figure still beset by controversy. Mauviel and Serpentini have added to the controversy, but they have not settled it. Their book is to be appreciated for its alternative interpretation of a much-maligned figure of the Risorgimento and post-Risorgimento periods, but most of all for

its rare photographs of Sappia and the teeming cast of characters who came and went in his bizarre life.

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Umberto Levra, ed. (2011) *Cavour, l'Italia e l'Europa* (Bologna: Il Mulino), 268 pp., ISBN 9788815150448, €20.00, soft cover

True to its title, this book offers eleven pieces by experts which focus primarily on Cavour's complex relationship with the rest of Europe and its effect on his critical, yet sometimes reluctant, role in creating united Italy. Divided into four sections, it discusses first his formative years and then the development of his political, economic and religious programmes. It then examines the 'realization' (and constant adjustment) of those programmes, and finally how he was seen by contemporaries in France, England and Germany. Thoroughly versed in the relevant bibliography, the authors generally acknowledge the difficulty of saying anything new about their subject; yet taken together the diverse essays offer a unique portrait of the great Piedmontese statesman against a detailed European landscape. While it is well known that Cavour travelled much more extensively in countries to the North than in Italy (indeed, he never ventured south of Florence), these essays demonstrate just how thoroughly his world view was pan-European and how he conceived of his goals in Piedmont, and eventually Italy, as part of a general civilizing project of liberty and progress that transcended borders and dynasties. As Giuseppe Galasso says in his piece on Cavour and the Mezzogiorno, as a leader he worried less about the boundaries of an Italian/Piedmontese state than about its liberal qualities. Thus he comes across in this volume as being at heart an idealist, albeit one whose thoughts and actions were tempered by a highly pragmatic approach born in part from his experience running a large agricultural enterprise as a young man.

In his formative reading, according to Adriano Viarengo, Cavour eschewed the now-famous canon of Risorgimento romantic literature that helped inspire many other actors of the age. Rather, he preferred utilitarian philosophy and political economy: tastes he interestingly shared, particularly for Bentham, with young members of Turin's bourgeoisie. His travels reinforced this intellectual framework, and according to Luciano Cafagna he came to discover Italy only through the economic lens of Europe as he considered its backwardness compared with the progress being made in France, England and Belgium. Indicatively, his first mention of Italian independence was in his well-known article about railroads (written in French in a French journal), which he saw as the hallmark of the arriving and thriving Industrial Revolution. Freedom was the key to modernity, and economic liberalism had to be matched with political and religious liberty, yet the practical lessons of recent European history had to be taken into account. Thus the June days of Paris (rather than the February Revolution) convinced him that republicanism was untenable – indeed detestable – and while Guizot's *juste milieu* was his theoretical watchword, it was England's evolution without revolution that, according to