

## **AT THE CENTER OF THE MEDITERRANEAN: THE ITALIAN PENINSULA'S ROLE DURING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION**

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By **Paolo Conte**

***This article is part of a collaboration with the [Commission internationale d'histoire de la Révolution française \(CIHRF\)](#) following the August 2022 meeting of the [International Committee of Historical Sciences](#) at Poznań, Poland. The Commission convened a panel on “revolutionary nationalism in a global perspective” together with the Japanese and Korean National Committees and the Network of Global and World History Associations.***

In early February 1798, the Italian patriot Matteo Galdi published in Paris a pamphlet entitled *Discours sur les rapports politiques-économiques de l'Italie libre avec la France et les autres États de l'Europe* to highlight the geopolitical importance that the proclamation of a Republic in Italy could have on the French-English conflict being waged in the Mediterranean.<sup>[1]</sup> Galdi, who was from Salerno, on the west coast of the Kingdom of Naples, lived in Milan where he wrote for the democratic newspapers of the Cisalpine Republic, which was one of the “Sister republics” born in Italy after the French military campaign in 1796. In this pamphlet, he argued that the republicanization of the Peninsula and its islands would allow the formation of a political and commercial alliance between France and Italy, which would be the first stage of a more extensive “league.” He proposed a union between the various countries of southern Europe, which he called the “League of Liberty” so that “the peoples of the North would be forced to accept peace, finding themselves powerless to harm those of the South.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Galdi had already started this line of thought at the beginning of the Italian *Triennio* 1796-1799, when he had published *La necessità di stabilire una Repubblica in Italia*, in which he presented Italy's republicanization as a crucial step for Paris' European policy, since the Mediterranean would become “a sort of lake for the French Republic.”<sup>[3]</sup> He would develop and refine this proposal further the following summer with his publication *Relations between free nations*,<sup>[4]</sup> which Anna Maria Rao has examined in her work on the impact of the Mediterranean on Italian patriots.<sup>[5]</sup>

The Italian version of the *Discours* had already been published in the spring of 1797, whereas the journalist Couret de Villeneuve's translation into French is dated 15 Pluviôse an VI (3

February 1798). The pamphlet therefore appeared in France almost a year after its original edition at a time when the Directoire's ambitions to attack England were increasingly being replaced by new military strategies concerning the southern front. This translation served to legitimize new politico-military options to encourage – before Bertrand Barère's text on *La Liberté des mers*, which appeared a month later – a Mediterranean perspective on the revolutionary process. Both the support of the French Directoire for this pamphlet, demonstrated by the fact that its publisher was the printer of the legislative Chambers François Baudoin, and successive events confirmed the importance of the Mediterranean in the stakes of the Revolution. In mid-February, the arrival of General Berthier's troops in Rome marked the birth of the Mediterranean Roman Republic, while a few months later the start of the Egyptian campaign formalized the opening of a southern front, proving that the spread of ideas and concepts of republicanism were shaped under conditions of international warfare in Europe.

Following Antonino De Francesco's suggestions, my aim is to reflect on the impact of these areas on the birth of Italian republican patriotism and on the events of the revolution, well before the Italian campaign of 1796.<sup>[6]</sup> Rejecting overly deterministic approaches, but still valuing the weight of context, this approach examines the influence that the Mediterranean dynamics had both on the international political struggle and on the thinking of Italian patriots such as Galdi. 1798 was a crucial year for the spread of the revolution in the Mediterranean, marking a major geopolitical shift that had conditioned the revolutionary struggle since the proclamation of the Republic. However, this year was characterized by a continuation of previous military strategies, which is why it is important to place the Egyptian expedition in a European context marked by the birth of the "Sister Republics". From this point of view, I share Ian Collier's thoughts on the appropriateness of placing the Egyptian expedition in a European context because during this decade "the Mediterranean became in many ways the great laboratory of the Revolution."<sup>[7]</sup>

By "thinking of the French Revolution as a Mediterranean revolution,"<sup>[8]</sup> the sea can be conceived as a set of possibilities as fascinating as they are complex. This framework helps to investigate how Italian patriotism was born into a broader Franco-European context. Italian patriots' interactions with French armies and diplomats fueled their hope to shake up the monarchies of the *Ancien régime* and highlighted the strategic importance that a republicanization of Italy could play in the success of the French Revolution across Europe.

In this context, the geographical centrality of the Italian Peninsula in the Mediterranean Sea was a source of concern for its governments, an element of interest for Paris and a factor of hope for local patriots. Italy was not merely a backdrop to the Revolution: its societies underwent massive political change and its patriots contributed to shaping ideas of republicanism as well as the Revolutionary wars.<sup>[9]</sup> Examining the Mediterranean vocation of the Revolution through Italy therefore involves investigating the geopolitical issues that, from the time of the Convention, were triggered in the waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea, namely between the southern French coast and the coast of Liguria, between maritime capitals such

as Rome and Naples, and between the three major islands of the western Mediterranean: Corsica, Sardinia, and Sicily.

Firstly, it should be remembered that this maritime basin had been of importance to France even before 1792. England's victory in the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) had marked a turning point, after which Paris had begun to strengthen its interests in southern Europe, as demonstrated by the signing of the Treaty of Compiègne in 1764, which laid the foundations for the future occupation of Corsica. In November 1789, at the request of the Corsican deputy Christophe Saliceti, the Constituent Assembly officially decided on the island's annexation to France. The southern front was more affected by the proclamation of the Republic, given that at the end of September, French armies entered Nice, a town on the southern coast that was under the aegis of the Kingdom of Sardinia and whose annexation would be ratified just a few months later.

In this context, the exhortations of French diplomats to increase the Republican presence in Italy became increasingly explicit in Genoa and Venice. In Sicily, the local police reported suspicious movements, informing the Court of Naples about the circulation of dangerous books and the formation of Masonic lodges. Pressure from French diplomats working in northern cities to encourage maritime operations in the Peninsula's ports, as well as plans by republican soldiers to invade Sicily, continued to reach Paris for several years.<sup>[10]</sup> For example, in April 1793 the *chargé d'affaires* in Florence, Alexis La Flotte, invited his government to begin a landing in the State of Rome which would then "move northwards" because he was convinced of the usefulness of the Mediterranean front in the war against the northern powers.<sup>[11]</sup> Two years later, the French admiral Benoit Bordé sent his government a plan for the invasion of Sicily on the eastern coast of the island, where the cities of Catania and Syracuse were animated by a pronounced "democratic fermentation."<sup>[12]</sup>

Far from being isolated, these suggestions contributed to the formation of a Mediterranean front which, although secondary to the northern front, had significant repercussions in the local political struggle.

The opening of the Mediterranean front dates from the winter of 1792-1793, when a series of events marked the real acceleration of Republican operations that played a crucial role in the development of Italian patriotism. In mid-December, Admiral Latouche-Tréville entered the port of Naples at the head of thirteen frigates to impose diplomatic conditions on Ferdinand IV, threatening to turn the city into a "monument of ruins."<sup>[13]</sup> A few days later, other French ships under the command of Admiral Truguet headed for Cagliari with the aim of occupying Sardinia. It was in this context that the massacre of the French diplomat Hugou de Bassville took place in Rome on 13 January following his request to display Republican flags. This was also the background to the Convention's decision in early February to send a commission of three deputies to Corsica. The aim was to ensure the Republic's control of the island in the face of the revolt led by Pascal Paoli: a decision which coincided with the declaration of war on England on 1 February.



Map of the enclave of Oneille, on the Ligurian coast (1758)

Although temporary, the presence of French ships in Mediterranean waters had significant consequences for political life in Sardinia and the Kingdom of Naples. On the island, the local population's triumphant resistance to Truguet's fleets led to a period of several years characterized by major politicization, driven first by separatist bodies and then by anti-feudal revolts.<sup>[14]</sup> This period has long been exalted by regional historiography from a pro-independence perspective, whereas it would be worth investigating the connections with broader European events. In Naples, where Latouche-Tréville's expedition lasted several weeks and enabled the first contacts between French soldiers and local patriots, the conspiratorial struggle in the south intensified over the following months. For example, in autumn right in the middle of the siege of Toulon, a *Society of Friends of Freedom* was active in spreading rumors about the possibility that, once the port of Toulon had been recaptured, French republicans would resume their operations towards Naples. In the belief that France would intervene militarily, Neapolitan patriots organized a veritable conspiracy in the spring of 1794. Their aim – according to testimony gathered by the *Giunta di Stato* – was that “the whole world had to be reduced to a republic.”<sup>[15]</sup> The discovery of this conspiracy by the Bourbon police led to the arrest of many of these conspirators as well as the flight northwards of all those who managed to evade capture, including Galdi.

The spring of 1794 was a crucial time: a democratic insurrection in Cagliari forced the Piedmontese administration to leave Sardinia, while in Turin the local authorities discovered another anti-monarchical conspiracy. Most importantly, the *Comité de Salut Public* authorized a military operation on the Ligurian coast after being relieved by the recapture of Toulon while also threatened by the English landings on Corsica. Its aim was to occupy the ports of Oneille and Loano, two Piedmontese enclaves located in the territory of the Republic of Genoa. The possession of the ports was considered necessary to facilitate communications with the

Corsican Republican faction. This operation, which according to orders from Paris was to be carried out by sea to respect Genoa's neutrality, was carried out by land to speed up a conquest that was deemed increasingly urgent in the face of the growing English presence in the Mediterranean. It was no coincidence that one of the *Représentants en mission* charged with this initiative, the Corsican Saliceti, opted for this operational change: he was the same man who had obtained the annexation of his native land by the Constituent Assembly and who had been part of the delegation sent to the island to quell the uprisings for independence. Thus, the conquest of Oneille is one of the events linked to the Corsican War, which was a major factor in the conflict between France and England in the Mediterranean.

Furthermore, a Republican Commissariat was set up in the town of Oneille under the responsibility of Filippo Buonarroti, a Tuscan patriot who welcomed the many refugees who had since arrived. These were Italian patriots forced to flee their homelands following the failure of the conspiracy in Naples and Turin, as well as Corsican republicans obliged to leave the island because of their opposition to the Paolist faction. Thus, long before the birth of the "Sister Republics," Oneille became the scene of the first prolonged encounter between these democratic patriots and revolutionary France, or – as Buonarroti put it – the "asylum of the Italian sans-culottes."<sup>[16]</sup> These men proved to be extremely useful, both for managing the republican administration in the conquered countries and for spreading a propaganda war in the surrounding territories. Established because of the general interest of the Republic on the Mediterranean front, the Commissariat d'Oneille was both a place of refuge and a political laboratory for many patriots, becoming a crucial experience for the political growth of Italian republicans.<sup>[17]</sup>

Even the military operations of the famous 1796 Italian campaign were not just aimed at attacking Austria but took on a major Mediterranean connotation from the outset. In June, General Bonaparte ordered the capture of the free port of Livorno, considered strategic in the conflict with the English, then signed the armistice of Bologna with the Pope to secure control of Ancona on the Adriatic Sea. Above all, he encouraged a new expedition to Corsica, where in the autumn the French put an end to the English presence. Even in the following years, if the formation of the Neapolitan Republic confirmed the importance played by the southern front, thereafter, Italian patriots from their exile in France only relaunched their plans for the republicanization of Italy as a tool that served French interests in the Mediterranean.<sup>[18]</sup>

In conclusion, by exerting a remarkable influence on the military strategies of the French Republic, these Mediterranean areas had a major impact on the course of the Revolution and on the political careers of local patriots such as Galdi who were forged here and entrusted their hopes and goals to this basin. In their writings and through their political initiatives, the patriots posed the question of Italian unity and independence for the first time. They did so by looking beyond national borders and seeking to exploit the Peninsula's centrality in the Mediterranean to mobilize the aid of the French Republic. For them, Italian nation-building had to take place in and because of the Mediterranean, bearing in mind the possibilities and constraints of the international context.

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**Title**      **Image:** A 1760 map of the Italian peninsula.  
Source: <https://www.venditastampeantiche.com/carte-geografiche-antiche-italia/72-carte-geografiche/cartografia-italiana/italia/2648-l-italie.html>

### **Further Readings:**

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[3] Matteo Galdi, *Necessità di stabilire una repubblica in Italia*, Milan: Veladini, 1797: 73.

[4] Matteo Galdi, *Dei rapporti politico-economici fra le nazioni libere*, Milan: Pirotta e Maspero, 1798.

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[11] AMAE, Correspondance politique, Toscane, 145/B, f. 88.

[12] AMAE, Correspondance politique, Naples, 123, f. 201.

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