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Revision

Risorgimento: the struggle to unify Italy

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Consider the following question on the Risorgimento, then take a look at the sample student response and examiner's commentary (in red).

Question

How important was the Risorgimento in the unification of Italy in the period 1815–66?

Student answer with commentary

The Risorgimento was primarily a cultural movement which aimed at spreading awareness of Italian culture and identity. Although the movement contained significant political thinkers, such as Giuseppe Mazzini, their beliefs were often revolutionary, attracted limited support and were not central to the process of unification. Similarly, although Charles Albert, king of Piedmont, claimed 'Italia fara da se', this also proved impossible. It was the diplomatic skills of Count Camilio Cavour and the military might of France that played the crucial role in driving Austria out of the Italian peninsula and bringing about unification.

The opening explains clearly what is understood by the term Risorgimento. This is important as the response will argue that the cultural revival was not sufficient on its own to bring about unification. The opening outlines the argument that will be followed, noting that it was not 'Italy' that brought about unification, but the skills of the Piedmontese prime minister and foreign help, notably France.

Some, however, have argued that the Risorgimento played a vital role in creating the Italian state. They have argued that people in the peninsula had their own language and culture but were mostly ruled by foreigners who became more oppressive, while the people grew more discontented. The French Revolution and Napoleonic wars temporarily removed the old governments and provided evidence that change was possible. This coincided with the development of romanticism, which led to Italian writers, poets and musicians teaching people to be proud of their heritage and that the peninsula should be united. As a result, secret societies, such as the Carbonari, emerged and revolutions in 1820–1 and 1831 were attempted. Even though these revolutions failed, it appeared as if all that was needed were great leaders, such as Cavour and Garibaldi, to bring about unification.

The first main paragraph deals with the factor named in the question. It is a good idea to deal with the named factor first, even if you are going to argue that it is not the most important issue. This paragraph puts forward the case that the Risorgimento did play a role and that the revival it engendered meant that all that was needed were strong leaders to complete the task of unification.

However, the appeal of the Risorgimento was largely limited to intellectuals and the educated middle classes. 'Young Italy' was very different in reality from what it seemed to be on paper; its leadership came from those who held high positions in civic life. The revolts of 1820–1 and 1831 were not a national uprising, but regionally based revolts with little communication between revolutionaries, largely because their ambitions were limited by their localism. The social base of the revolutionaries was also narrow — Misley was an academic and Menotti a prosperous businessman. Their aims were often to bring about a constitution for their state, not unite the peninsula. Most importantly, none of the revolutions or revolutionaries were able to do anything to reduce or remove Austrian influence from the peninsula — essential if unification was to be achieved. This failure of the Risorgimento was even clearer in the Revolutions of 1848–9, which failed to attract mass support and showed the unlikelihood of a 'people's war' to liberate Italy. As with 1821 and 1831, many of the uprisings were regional, indicating that the rising was not national or nationalist. Even Charles Albert's wars against Austria that followed were not wars of national liberation but attempts to annex territory in northern Italy.

The argument in the previous paragraph is convincingly challenged and the Risorgimento is shown to have a limited impact. The argument is well-supported with some precise examples. Much of this could be developed, but in time allowed and the scope of the question this is not possible and examiners would not expect everything to be covered.

The revolutions of 1848–9 had an impact on the development of nationalism and were, at least in part, a result of the Risorgimento. Those who were serious in wanting political change began to look to Piedmont with its liberal constitution. Liberals and nationalists were encouraged to return, or move, to Piedmont, which meant that there were an increasing number of people advocating change and this led to the formation of the National Society. Moreover, Piedmont's political and economic change enhanced its role as the natural leader of the peninsula and the power most likely to expel the Austrians from Lombardy and Venetia. However, it was also evident that foreign domination could be ended only with outside help, and that such help would be forthcoming only if the revolutionary ideas of men such as Mazzini were kept in check.

The response returns to the impact of the Risorgimento and it does not completely dismiss it but argues that it had a positive influence on nationalism. It also raises another factor in the unification, namely the development and importance of Piedmont and links that to the Risorgimento. However, the final sentence of the paragraph produces a balanced argument and builds on the opening that foreign help was essential.

It was the diplomatic skill of Cavour, prime minister of Piedmont, that led to French involvement in the peninsula and the removal of Austria from Lombardy and later Venetia. Piedmontese involvement in the Crimean War brought it international recognition, with the British and French grateful for its support, which would be crucial when it was to militarily challenge Austrian rule. Piedmont's involvement ultimately led to Louis Napoleon secretly meeting Cavour at Plombieres and agreeing to join Piedmont in a war against Austria if Austria could be provoked into declaring war. The war of 1859, although not a complete success for Piedmont, did lead to Austria being driven out of Lombardy, although in return Cavour had to hand over Nice and Savoy to France, but the war, despite the agreement at Plombieres, did not lead to the annexation of Venetia. However, it was foreign intervention that had started the physical process of unification and would continue into the 1860s.

The paragraph considers in some depth the role of Cavour and the French in driving Austria out from at least part of the peninsula. The argument is again well-supported, and the candidate is aware of the

limits to this achievement by 1859. However, the response is also clear in reaching an interim judgement that foreign intervention was the crucial factor.

Despite this, it was the National Society that, at least in part, brought about the Grand Duchies joining by engineering peaceful revolutions in Modena and Parma. However, once again foreign intervention ultimately secured their annexation by Piedmont as the British foreign secretary proposed that their future should be decided through plebiscites, which was supported by Louis Napoleon at the Treaty of Turin.

Further balance follows with the candidate weighing the achievement of France in 1859 against that of the National Society. However, once again the discussion is balanced and the candidate is aware that the actions of the National Society might have come to nothing if not for the involvement of the British.

However, in securing the annexation of Naples and Sicily it appeared that it was the actions of the Italian, Garibaldi, that was crucial. It was his army of a 'Thousand' that defeated the Neapolitan army at Calatafimi and then crossed the Straits of Messina to invade the mainland. However, once again foreign powers were important as the British allowed Garibaldi's troops to cross the Straits, preventing intervention to stop them. It was Garibaldi who defeated Naples at Volturno, and Cavour, who through diplomatic action, prevented France from stopping the invasion and ensured that the southern states were liberated from the rule of the despotic Bourbons. Cavour also ensured that the Papal States were liberated by sending in the Piedmontese army. It was therefore Garibaldi who had turned the unification of the northern regions of Italy into the unification of the whole peninsula.

In considering how the southern states were unified with the north the response is clear that it was the work of the two Italians — Garibaldi on the battlefield and Cavour's diplomacy. Once again, an interim judgement is reached that it was Garibaldi who brought about the unification of the north and south.

Diplomacy was also crucial in securing Venetia. This was the result of Louis Napoleon and the Prussian chancellor, Bismarck. Their agreement at Biarritz in 1865 and then a secret treaty between Napoleon and Austria in 1866 ensured Austria gave Venice to France in return for neutrality in its war with Prussia. Although Piedmont aided Prussia in this war they were defeated, but the victory of Prussia at Sadowa ensured that Venetia was transferred to Italy via Napoleon.

The final piece of territory added by 1866 was Venetia and the response is very clear that this was the result of diplomacy and foreign intervention. Once again, military issues are considered and seen as crucial in ensuring the transfer of the territory.

By 1866 Italy, with the exception of Rome, which was still under papal control, had been united. Although the Risorgimento had played some role, particularly through the National Society and its securing of the Grand Duchies, its practical achievements were limited. It was foreign aid that played the most important role, particularly France with its military victory and diplomatic support, but the British and Prussian roles were also significant. In terms of Italian contributions, it was the roles of Cavour and Garibaldi that were the most important. Cavour not only secured international support, but also played a crucial role in modernising Piedmont so that it could be the leading state. However, his vision was of a united north or enlarged Piedmont and therefore without Garibaldi's invasion of the south the whole peninsula would not have been unified. Foreign aid was therefore the most important factor, but without Garibaldi it is unlikely the whole of the peninsula would have been united.

The conclusion weighs up the various factors that have been discussed and reaches a balanced judgement. It starts by weighing up the role of the Risorgimento and while this is not dismissed, the response maintains the line of argument outlined at the start. Similarly, the emphasis placed on

foreign aid follows on the line of argument outlined at the beginning. However, the response suggests that although foreign powers were the most important factor, without Garibaldi's intervention the outcome would have been rather different with only the northern states unified.

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