

# Unification of Italy

The Unification of Italy was a 19th century political and social movement that resulted in the unification of the different states of the Italian Peninsula, into a single state - the Kingdom of Italy.

Beginning in the 1840s, the unification was completed in 1871, the same year as the unification of Germany.

This article will give details about the Unification of Italy within the context of the IAS Exam.

## Background of the Unification of Italy

The Italian Peninsula had fragmented into different city-states upon the demise of the Western Roman Empire in 476 AD. Although briefly united under the Ostrogothic Kingdom, it again fell to disunity following the invasion of the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantine Empire) in the 500s.

The northern half of Italy was under the control of the Holy Roman Empire (a German-speaking Empire) beginning in the 8th century while the central and the southern half were intermittently governed between the Kingdom of Naples, Kingdom of Sicily and the Papal States.

The state of affairs continued well into the 17th century until the rise of the Italian city-states, such as Milan and Venice, changed the balance of power in the region. Wars would be fought between the states and the Holy Roman Empire culminating in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Although it would end the involvement of the Holy Roman Empire, most of Northern Italy would still be ruled by the Spanish branch of the Habsburgs, who ruled the Holy Roman Empire at the time. The Spanish Wars of succession would end the Habsburg Rule in Italy by 1714

Italy was thus divided into many small principalities, and it would remain that way until the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789.

## Italy under Napoleon

Towards the end of the French Revolution, Napoleon Bonaparte would begin a series of wars that would change the political landscape of Europe for years to come. Napoleon conquered the Italian city-states and turned it into a single administrative unit. As part of the French Empire, the Italian people would imbibe many ideas of the revolution such as liberty, equality and fraternity. Above all, active participation by the people in governance was encouraged, something unheard of in the Italian states for centuries

The empire established by Napoleon had served as a fuel for revolutionary ideas, as he even encouraged nationalism. Italy would be split again following the Napoleons' fall in 1815, its

city-states divided among various European powers, with the Empire of Austria having the most power. But by this time the Italian people had enough of foreign involvement in their land and would begin a series of insurrections to drive the foreigners out and unite their country.

## The Unification of Italy Begins

During the 1820s and 1830s, the movement for unification would grow finally culminating in revolutions break out in many Italian states in 1848. Although the revolutions would be suppressed, it did little to stem the tide of revolutionary activities. Giuseppe Garibaldi would emerge as the face of Italian unification during this period.

Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-1848) was a revolutionary who had taken part in 1848 insurrection but had to go into exile when it failed. Lending his support to King Victor Emmanuel II of Piedmont, he would return to Italy in 1860 bringing with him an army consisting of volunteers from Sicily and Naples. In 1858, Victor Emanuel, along with other northern Italian states, had allied with France to permanently end Austrian involvement in the region.

The insurrection in 1860 would be a success as Garibaldi and his army of Redshirts would conquer the island of Sicily and Naples. Meanwhile, the northern states had joined up with Piedmont-Sardinia and accepted Victor Emmanuel II as their King. Garibaldi handed Naples and Sicily to him in November 1860 and by 1861 Italy was declared as a kingdom. Only Venice and Rome would remain under foreign control and they became a part of Italy in 1866 and 1871 respectively. Thus, the Unification of Italy was completed.

## The aftermath of the Unification

Although the reunification was a reality, it leads to total domination of the Kingdom of Piedmont. Despite promises that regional authorities would participate equally in the government, it was the ruling class of Piedmont that dominated the government during the initial years.

The Italian people wanted a united Italy with a weak central government and strong states. What they got instead was a strong central government with little to no power exercised by the states.

The new Kingdom of Italy was structured by renaming the old Kingdom of Sardinia and annexing all the new provinces into its structures. The first king was Victor Emmanuel II, who kept his old title.

The new constitution was Piedmont's old constitution. The document was generally liberal and was welcomed by liberal elements. But this was resented by pro-clergy elements in Venice, Rome Naples and Sicily.

The first decade of the Kingdom of Italy saw civil wars raging in Sicily and Naples which was harshly suppressed. The inevitable long-run results were a severe weakness of national unity

and a politicized system based on mutually hostile regional violence. Such factors remain in the 21st century