Giuseppe Garibaldi and Sweden: Between Solidarity and Scandinavism

by Monica Quirico

The book entitled *Scandinavia: Her Fears and Her Hopes*, written in French, was published on February 29, 1856, in Paris, where representatives of the European Powers were discussing peace negotiations with Russia ensuing the end of the Crimean War. The author, Gustaf Lallerstedt, a moderate liberal, a diplomat, and majority shareholder of the liberal newspaper "Aftonbladet", was first in outlining a parallelism between the proactive role played by Piedmont in Italy's unification and the similar one that Sweden, in his opinion, ought to take upon herself vis-à-vis Scandinavian unity. Lallerstedt's aim was also to warn the European nations against the Russian threat; in this perspective, strengthening the United Kingdom of Sweden and Norway (established in 1814) could provide an effective remedy¹.

Sweden had been experiencing for some decades a wave of "Scandinavism", the starting point of which dates back to a theatre performance staged in 1829. Then, the Swedish outstanding academician Esaias Tegnér addressed the Danish poet Adam Gottlob Oehlenschläger, one of the most prominent exponents of Nordic Romanticism, with the following words: "The age of disagreement [between Swedes and Danes] is over". During the 1830s, this wave spread throughout the Nordic countries, particularly amongst university students. Scandinavism was first of all an intellectual phenomenon, but was not devoid of a political program, i.e. the unification, in ways yet to be determined, of Sweden, Norway and Denmark². However, the rhetoric of Nordic unity was unable to hide the not insignificant divergences of the national interests of the three countries involved. For Sweden, the number-one enemy was Russia; Denmark feared above all Prussia and her demands over Schleswig-Holstein; Norway, subject to the Swedish crown, did not look favourably upon a more powerful Stockholm, from which, on the contrary, she was trying to free herself. Actually, what many Swedish Scandinavists seemed to aim at was a joint Nordic kingdom, headed by a king called Oscar or Carl (the most common names within the Swedish royal dynasty).

Swedish Scandinavism was animated, at least in part, by a deep-seated thirst for revenge, due to the humiliation suffered by Sweden in the war against Russia (1808-1809), which had meant the loss of Finland³ and the decline of the country's international influence. When the plans to regain her ancient greatness, either by reconquering Finland or by taking advantage of the Union with Norway, proved to be unrealistic, Scandinavism appeared on the scene as an appealing alternative, at least to certain sectors of the Swedish public opinion⁴. All in all, this wave of Scandinavism lasted for a rather short period: in 1863 Sweden abandoned Denmark to her fate, on the occasion of the Danish territorial confrontation with Prussia concerning Holstein⁵.

After initiating, by means of the above-mentioned 1856 book, the "school" of Italian Risorgimento as a model for Scandinavism, Lallerstedt sponsored a political initiative in favour of Italian unity as such (whose main events the Swedish press featured prominently⁶). In December 1859 the international congress entrusted with the diplomatic resolution of Italy's turmoil was approaching and Sweden was amongst the States involved. Lallerstedt proposed a motion to the Burghers' Chamber, of which he was a member⁷, asking to instruct the Swedish representative at the international congress so that he would declare himself in favour of the self-determination of the Italian people. Such a motion marked a notable novelty as regards the constitutional development of Sweden, since it was the first visible attempt by the Estates to influence foreign policy, until then a prerogative of the Crown. In this motion, the comparison between Piedmont and Sweden was formulated again and openly expressed as revealing an identical interest in the struggle against despotism: now it was the time of Piedmont, tomorrow it might be the one of Sweden, provided that Scandinavism would flourish⁸.

The motion stirred a lively debate within the Swedish Parliament. The first to speak, in the Burghers' Chamber, was August Blanche, journalist and author with liberal-radical leanings, who was to follow closely the issue of Italy's unification until his death in 1868⁹. All the speakers who took part in the discussion, many of whom were leading figures within Swedish public life, expressed their solidarity to Italian Risorgimento. Their disagreement was rather about the political meaning of Lallerstedt's motion, which on the one side launched a challenge to royal privilege in foreign policy, while on the other side might have instilled, in the diplomatic relations with other countries, the suspect that Swedish neutrality was not so obvious as it was commonly believed¹⁰.

Although the international congress in view of which the motion had been intended eventually did not take place, Lallerstedt's initiative, and the positive response by the Estates that it had enjoyed, impressed favourably the political and intellectual circles in the Kingdom of Sardinia: it was indeed the first public stance by a non-Italian Parliament in favour of Italian self-determination¹¹. The two main newspapers in Piedmont, the "Gazzetta Piemontese" and "Gazzetta del Popolo", gave great emphasis to it¹².

The most remarkable reply to the motion of the Swedish Parliament was however the letter to the Burghers' Estate written, on December 23, by Giuseppe La Farina, Secretary General of the "Italian National Society". La Farina was well-known in Sweden, thanks to Blanche's writings. The task of writing this letter was entrusted to him directly by Garibaldi, chairman of that very Society, who also added his signature to the letter¹³. This was Garibaldi's last public act as chairman of the "Italian National Society"; a few days after issuing this document, he resigned from that post. Although doubts have been raised about the role actually played by Garibaldi in drafting the letter, which famously enraged the Swedish foreign minister, Manderström¹⁴, it is undeniable that, at that time, Garibaldi started to develop an interest in Swedish history and political life. This interest left visible signs in Garibaldi's propaganda

statements, signalling further his divergences vis-à-vis the strategies of Piedmont's Prime Minister, Cavour, especially with regard to Italy's need for people's armies, recruited and organised on completely new bases¹⁵.

Garibaldi's popularity in Sweden increased substantially as the result of the Thousand's expedition – a volunteers' army that left from Quarto, near Genoa, to reach and conquer Sicily under Garibaldi's command. On May 31, 1860 the newspaper "Aftonbladet" sponsored a fund-raising in its favour, echoing the similar initiatives started in England and France and inciting its readers to rally behind a people fighting for their freedom. The call, which did not pass unnoticed in Vienna, was signed by members of Parliament from the Burghers' and Farmers' Estates, whilst the members of the Estates of Nobility and Clergy turned out to be absent. The cross-party liking for the Italian struggle that had emerged during the debate on Lallerstedt's motion did not pass the test put in place by the appearance of a popular army. The fund-raising proceeded until September 3 and won not only money, but also seven cannons: one as a gift from a private citizen, six from the village of Stavsjö¹⁶.

The symbolic message of this participation should not be neglected: only a people in arms can fight against despots. This idea, emerged in the Napoleonic age, had become inseparably connected with Garibaldi's exploits, and it led to the creation of the "free shooters" movement, founded in Stockholm in November 1860. This movement, during the first decade of the following century, was to contribute significantly to the debate internal to Swedish Social Democracy about the complex interrelationship concerning socialism, democracy and the country's military diminution¹⁷.

As to the fund-raising initiated by "Aftonbladet", there are some additional elements worth mentioning. The collected amount was intended for the treatment of Garibaldi's volunteers wounded in battle. Many donors had openly demanded that their share was not to be used for violent purposes. Apart from individuals' pacifist feelings and Sweden's official neutrality, practical reasons contributed a great deal, too: in Turin, a ladies' committee for the treatment of the injured had been already founded¹⁸. Also, the fund-raising's success all over the country is of considerable importance, for it extended beyond the big towns in the Centre-South; indeed, the initial call by "Aftonbladet" was supported by a large number of local newspapers. Of course, most of the money was collected in the big towns, yet the presence of smaller communities was politically meaningful. Poorly engaged in the fund-raising were farmers, in spite of the position taken by their Chamber, and the intellectuals, with the exception of some artists who had served under Garibaldi in Rome, in 1849¹⁹. Noteworthy was also the mobilisation of Swedish women, on whom Garibaldi's call to the Italian women to take part in the liberation of their country had caused a remarkable impression. It is not by chance, perhaps, that the first and until now only biography of Garibaldi ever published in Sweden was written by a woman, the proto-feminist Cecilia Bååth-Holmberg (the book dates back to 1892).

The reasons more often put forward to explain the widespread support to the "Aftonbladet" fund-raising have been the common people's will to contribute to the struggle for democracy and freedom; issues, these, which were mentioned rather often in the letters attached to the donations and coloured with a religious tone. Many of the subscribers were indeed workers and craftsmen, humble people who, as they wrote, even if poor, did want to contribute to the fight against despotism. The result of the subscriptions was sent to Italy on October 29; in the meantime (September), celebrations for the Italian hero's exploits were already taking place in Stockholm and Helsinborg, which were going to be reiterated with even more gusto in the autumn of 1862²⁰.

At the time of the crucial steps towards the Italian unification, Sweden went through changes, which foreshadowed the coming of a new political age and, somehow, would have absorbed the opinion movement orbiting around the issue of Italian Risorgimento. One such change was the crisis in the constitutional relations with Norway, set off by the appointment of the lieutenant, i.e. the representative, within the Norwegian land, of the Swedish crown. This was a public office whose abolition the Norwegians had been demanding since 1814, because it was seen as the official seal of their submission to Sweden. Carl XV's known will to remove it, so as to keep the promise made to Norway as Crown Prince (he ascended to the throne in 1859), had to face the opposition of both Parliament and government, which at the end got the upper hand. It was the beginning of a constitutional struggle amongst the top State bodies lasting until the First World War, which saw the government and the Parliament initially prevailing, yet to the expense of the self-government of Norway²¹.

The other issue which did shake Swedish politics in those days was representation. The pressures for an electoral reform from the Burghers' and Farmers' Estates, who regarded themselves as under-represented in the legislature, increased around 1860, when alarm was aroused not only by the external number-one enemy, i.e. Russia, but also by the internal one, i.e. the democratic and radical groups, of which the Garibaldi-inspired "free shooters" movement signalled, in the moderates' opinion, the most worrying manifestation²².

Progressive public opinion was dismayed because of the news about the battle on Aspromonte, where on August 29, 1862 Garibaldi's troops, whilst marching on the future Italian capital, were stopped by the Italian Royal Army, not the Pope's. Apparently, the newly-created king of Italy, Victor Emanuel II, thought that the time of people's armies was over; after all, his new kingdom had just been established. Garibaldi, wounded and arrested, appeared then in Sweden as a true martyr of democracy and the innocent victim of conservative diplomatic plots. Again, Swedish newspapers arranged a public manifestation of solidarity: a public gathering was held in Stockholm, run by Blanche and attended by more than 1,000 people, and was concluded with the adoption of a document addressed to the Italian leaders, sent on September 23. Garibaldi replied by issuing a letter, *To the people of Stockholm*, dated October 2, the authenticity of which is burdened by a lot of doubts. This letter is in fact filled with references to Scandinavism (the author thanked, for the support

received during the Thousand's campaign, not the Swedish people, but the "blond Scandinavian people", "noble race and amongst the most beautiful in Europe"²³) and it is very radical as to the contents: the trust in the emancipatory potential of labour is emphasised in association with the longing for agrarian reform, universal disarmament, abolishment of the death penalty; all peppered further by a touch of staunch anticlericalism. The letter was published on October 4 by the Genoese newspaper "Movimento", edited by Agostino Bertani.

In Sweden, the reactions to Garibaldi's reply were conflicting: overjoyed was the popular one, annoyed was Carl XV's, despite his being a true admirer of "the General", as Garibaldi was often dubbed in the press. Moreover, an unforeseen turn of events occurred: "Movimento" was forced to publish a denial from Garibaldi himself, who declared to have nothing to do with the message addressed to the people of Stockholm. The disappointment, even if widespread, did not damage the admiration that the Italian hero enjoyed in Sweden. As said, Garibaldi's legacy was to survive for a long time within the "free shooters" movement²⁴.

One of the most prominent representatives of this movement was the aforementioned Blanche, who, in March 1864, went to Florence, where Bakunin had settled. The famous Russian anarchist had spent several months in Stockholm the year before, earning the admiration of leading personalities of different social classes and political tendencies ("Aftonbladet", for example, defended him from the charge of being a communist). Blanche's travel to Italy was intended to build an international network comprising the Swedish radical-democratic groups and the Italian *garibaldino* movement (in a report by the Italian police Blanche was described as a "popular leader from the Scandinavian kingdom"). A visit to Caprera, where Garibaldi spent his rare leisure time, was called for. Bakunin offered gladly to act as a mediator, thus writing to Garibaldi on March 18, 1864 a letter of presentation for his Swedish friend, whose membership in the Freemasonry was remarked, as well as his will to replace, not differently from what attempted in Italy by Garibaldi, the leading monarchic Freemasonry with a genuinely democratic one. The much-desired meeting, however, did not take place, since Garibaldi had to leave for England on official business²⁵.

Still, upon the occasion of his travel to Florence, Blanche met Bertani. During their conversation no doubt arose concerning the authenticity of Garibaldi's message to the people of Stockholm (which actually has been included within the official collection of Garibaldi's works without any preliminary remark). It should be said, perhaps, that the day after the publication of that controversial document, Garibaldi heard of the royal pardon, granted to all those involved in the battle of Aspromonte. Thanks to this pardon, the king and the government could avoid taking any legal action against Garibaldi and his followers, which would have been extremely unpopular. Yet, Garibaldi could enjoy the royal pardon under specific conditions: apart from accepting to retire in Caprera, he had to avoid any open political declaration. That may explain his hurried denial of the fairly radical letter sent to the Swedes; but this is merely a hypothesis²⁶.

In the end, what was new as to the Swedish solidarity movement in favour of Garibaldi was its strong popular character. This movement was a forerunner of the long and creative age of popular movements (labour's, for-temperance, farmers', and free-church-based) that was going to play a major role in the history of Swedish Social Democracy and in the democratization of the country²⁷.

¹See S. Furlani, *La Svezia, lo scandinavismo e il Risorgimento italiano*, "Rassegna storica del Risorgimento", LXIII, 1976, 3, pp. 283-284.

²The first political union among the three kingdoms was ratified in 1397 (Kalmar Union); after wars, splits and reconcilements, the last formal tie, the Union between Sweden and Norway (the latter taken away from Denmark), was released peacefully in 1905. See J. Weibull, *Storia della Svezia*, Stockholm, Svenska Institutet, 1996, pp. 104-110.

³Swedish penetration of Finland started in the XIII Century; following the 1808-1809 war, Finland passed into Russian hands. See Weibull, p. 21 and pp. 74-76.

⁴See Å. Sandström, *Sverige 1809-1864*, in *Det nya Norden efter Napoleon*, Stockholm, Almqvist & Wicksell, 2004, pp. 143-146.

⁵See S. Carlsson, *Svensk historia 2. Tiden efter 1718*, Lund, Esselte Studium, 1980, p. 330.

⁶See B. Nilsson, "En kula till kung Bomba". Garibaldi och den svanska solidariteten, in *Från undersåte till medborgare. Om svenska folkets demokratiska traditioner*, ed. by A. Björnsson, Stockholm, Ordfront, 1981, p. 98.

⁷Swedish Parliament was at that time shared in four Estates: nobility, clergy, burghers, and farmers. See S. Hadenius, *Swedish Politics During the 20th Century. Conflict and Consensus*, Stockholm,

Svenska Institutet, 1997, p. 12.

[8](#)See Furlani, p. 286.

[9](#)See Eimer, p. 143.

[10](#)See Furlani, p. 287.

[11](#)See Eimer, p. 140. The Kingdom of Sardinia comprised Savoy, Piedmont and the former territories of the Republic of Genoa, which had lost its independence to Piedmont after 1815.

[12](#)Quoted in S. Furlani, *La Svezia e l'Unità d'Italia*, "La Nuova Antologia", XCVI, 1961, fasc. 1925, p. 478.

[13](#)See Eimer, pp. 169-171.

[14](#)He is reported to have commented: "Gangs of Jacobins make fun of politics".

[15](#)See Eimer, pp. 176-179.

[16](#)Two of these cannons are still preserved at the Museum of Artillery in Turin

[17](#)See A. Isaksson, *Per Albin*, vol. I, *Vägen mot folkhemmet*, Stockholm, Wahlström & Widstrand, 2002, p. 71.

[18](#)See Eimer, p. 193.

[19](#)See Eimer, p. 187. A revolutionary government, run by Giuseppe Mazzini, Aurelio Saffi and Carlo Armellini, and whose army was led by Garibaldi, was established in 1848 in the Papal States; it represented the peak of the "people war", that is, the attempt to accomplish the national unification

collecting the domestic forces in favour of it, without any diplomatic agreement. The Republic resisted until July 1849, when it was defeated by the French.

[20](#)See Nilsson, pp. 100-105.

[21](#)See Weibull, pp. 106-107.

[22](#)See Carlsson, p. 341.

[23](#)See G. Garibaldi, *Edizione nazionale degli scritti*, vol. V, *Scritti e discorsi politici e militari*, vol. II (1862-1867), ed. by Reale Accademia, p. 154 e 155.

[24](#)See Eimer, pp. 195-201.

[25](#)See Furlani, *La Svezia, lo scandinavismo e il Risorgimento italiano*, pp. 293-298.

[26](#)See Eimer, p. 200.

[27](#)See Nilsson, p. 107.

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