

# Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

## New Selection 1



# Libraries, archives : Italy

Cultural Field: Society

Cultural Current: Institutions

Cultural Community: Italian

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When the Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed on 17 March 1861, the new nation could pride itself on possessing Europe's largest union library: almost five million volumes, held by more than 200 different institutions – four times as many as in Britain at that time. The peninsula's libraries and archives in the late 19th century were the product of a long history, which explained both their impressive size and their diversity. For centuries they had reflected ecclesiastical and princely power, as symbols and concrete expressions of the cultural hegemony of these two institutions in the modern era. Whilst the opening of the Vatican Library (Rome, 1548) has to be viewed in the cultural context of the Counter-Reformation, the libraries of the royal courts were an indispensable element in constructing the public image of the “patron prince” as protector and promoter of the arts (Modena, 1436). However, the first public library on the peninsula, the Biblioteca Ambrosiana (Milan, 1609), was in the older tradition: an initiative launched by one of the emblematic figures of the Counter-Reformation, Cardinal Federico Borromeo. Not even absolutist forms of government could fundamentally change this ideological framework, even though it actually fuelled a groundswell of opposition in the sense that opening libraries or converting old “literary depots” had come to be recognized as a decisive lever in disseminating knowledge. In Maria Theresa's Lombardy, the creation of five public libraries in the 1770s (Brera in Milan, Cremona, Lodi, Pavia and Mantua, all 1775-78) formed part of a much wider reform of the education system. Similar initiatives saw public libraries spring up across the peninsula, including Florence (1714), Turin (1723), Pisa (1742) and Naples (1780). However, it was only after 1796 and the introduction of Napoleonic institutions, and the simultaneous realization that Italy's textual holdings amounted to a national heritage, that a coherent political project crystallized to create an extensive and organized national system of libraries at departmental level. This was intended to promote a new identity-based cultural awareness, asserting the region's Italianness within the imperial realm. With the works confiscated from ecclesiastical institutions in the “sister states” and then the Kingdom of Italy, the Prefecture for Libraries and Archives embarked upon a massive reorganization and democratization of the country's library system. This resulted in the opening of new specialist (ministerial) and public institutions (Cesena, 1797; Novara, 1800; Como, 1800; Bologna, 1801), but also in the establishment of national libraries intended as repositories of Italy's entire fund of knowledge (Brera, Pavia and Bologna, all 1802). A reinventory of the Vatican Library after Napoleon's annexation of Rome brought to light important German manuscripts in its Palatine holdings. Peninsula-wide, the impact of these Napoleonic reforms was both limited and uneven: limited by a permanent shortage of funds, which often meant

that ecclesiastical libraries were simply seized and their contents redistributed on an ad hoc basis, and uneven because the efficacy of the exercise in any particular region was linked directly to the length of French domination there. In the Kingdom of Naples, for example, confiscations from religious congregations rarely resulted in their books being put to the service of the nation. In this respect, the Royal Library of Naples (1808), richly endowed by Murat, turned out to be the exception which proved the rule – and the rule was slow progress. After 1815, the first Restoration governments had few qualms about taking over the legacy they had been left by the Bonapartes. The historicist importance of the textual heritage was underlined when Angelo Mai, librarian first at the Ambrosian Library of Milan and then at the Vatican Library in Rome, brought to light new manuscripts, both from classical antiquity (Cicero) and in Gothic. The public function was likewise maintained as libraries were now considered one of the bonding agents in a renewed spirit of national belonging. Their progress in this respect waxed and waned as efforts were made to identify those libraries best placed to canonize the nation's literary and scientific identity. The progressive reduction in the number of "national" libraries after unification, from 17 in 1865 to six and then finally to two (Rome and Florence) in 1885, exemplifies how this process was affected by the centralization of the unitary state. The culmination point was reached in 1876, when the Victor Emanuel II National Library was established in Rome. As the location and name indicate, it was meant to crown, showcase and legitimize the achievements of the Risorgimento. Along with its counterpart in Florence, the new institution in Rome was made a copyright library; the other national libraries (Turin, Milan, Venice, Naples and Palermo) had the more restricted mission to disseminate Italian culture at the regional level. Once again, inadequate financing, affecting staff training and acquisitions, prevented political ambitions from being put into effect. Survey figures were flattered by the collection increase owing to the secularization of church libraries and the increase in the number of institutions as a result of the annexation of Latium and the Veneto. As of 1893, Italy had a total of 1852 libraries. Of these, 44, including 15 university libraries, were financed directly by the state, 420 were run by local authorities and 311 were attached to educational establishments, 94 were administered by government bodies, about 180 were under the auspices of religious congregations and 542 were so-called "popular libraries". It is this final figure which demonstrates the state's weakness in this area. Efforts to make reading material accessible to the less educated classes were largely the result of private initiatives, often by the Catholic or Socialist movements. Local governments were latecomers to this trend, not so much setting up their own libraries as offering those already established extra support in order to guarantee their financial continuity. This was the case with the Turin Communal Library founded by the publisher Giovanni Pomba (1869), and with the Milan Consortium of Popular Libraries created by efforts of the Labour movement. The new century brought a twist to the tale. Rather than establishing a decentralized system along British lines, with a dense network of municipal libraries, it was instead decided to create twelve regional "superintendancies" (Soprintendenze bibliografiche, 1909) to manage the nation's library resources and ensure more direct state control. This greater outreach towards common readers coincided with the extension of universal male suffrage (1911), and confirmed the library's vital role, along with the school, as one of the carriers of a myth and self-image of national identity – something the library itself had helped to implant in public opinion.

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