

Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

Education : Italian

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Pre-unification Italy

In 18th-century Italy, religious institutions continued to be the main providers of education, alongside schemes promoted by cities and the larger towns. The spread of primary schools was uneven, with a smaller number in the country, above all in southern Italy.

There were some attempts at reform: in the Savoy dominions, secular institutions for poor students were founded, Turin University was reorganized and the *Accademia Reale* ("Royal Academy") founded. From 1774 onwards, following the dissolution of the Jesuit order, there were even more decisive reforms in Austrian Lombardy. The new public primary schools, free of charge and compulsory for children aged 6 to 12, existed alongside "method schools" for training teachers, and the high schools set up in the former Jesuit convent in Milan's Brera district. This situation formed the basis for the educational reforms of the Napoleonic era, which aimed at implanting civic values in students' consciousness. Teachers were subjected to inspection control, and the first policies for female education were introduced; in 1808, the *Collegio reale delle Fanciulle* ("Royal College for Girls") was founded in Milan, an establishment unique in its kind and soon imitated, in 1812, with the opening of the equivalent *Agli Angeli* Royal College for Girls in Verona.

After 1815, almost all the restored governments transferred basic educational control back to the clergy, with the partial exception of Lombardy and Veneto, where the Austrian model persisted and only partially undid Napoleonic policies. As from 1821, "for the primary educational needs of all children", smaller primary courses were set up, lasting two years, in all towns in every parish. Compulsory schooling from 6 to 12 years of age was also laid down, as well as a hierarchy of the schools which included, above smaller primary schools, the larger and technical ones, according to the orientation of pupils for "the study of sciences and arts" or "commerce, economic employment, accounting". The high schools and colleges set up during the Napoleonic period, finally, remained in place almost everywhere. This educational system, definitely more advanced and modern than those in the rest of the country, ensured the Austrian authorities' control, thanks mainly to strict surveillance of the curriculum and teaching staff.

The wish for popular education became a political issue in the first half of the 19th century, and was pursued by the middle classes as an instrument for modernization and economic stimulation. Modern teaching methods were discussed, popular textbooks printed, and schools of reciprocal teaching on the [Bell-Lancaster model](#) were founded, aimed at overcoming the lack of financial resources in small rural municipalities. Piedmont, Lombardy and Tuscany were particularly active.

The political repercussions were also apparent in the curricula. Where reactionary and conservative forces gave absolute priority to religious teaching, in liberal spheres the focus was on basic literacy programmes and technical skills, in the belief, inspired by [Mazzini](#), that schools should provide the people not only with instruction but also with intellectual and moral education, by teaching the [history of the homeland](#) and the lives of great Italians. This model initially took shape in exile: in the free schools founded in London in the 1840s by Mazzini himself, to take in the numerous Italian children living in miserable conditions in the city, "to enlighten

them as to their duties and rights, so that when returning to their homeland they might inspire a better example for their fellow countrymen”.

Educational interest among Italian liberals also had a political effect. Already after the unrest in 1820-21 there was a strict clampdown on schools of the Bell-Lancaster type. More so, the period 1848-49 with its intense involvement of young people and university students, alarmed the pre-unification governments into strengthening links with the Church and by increasing the influence of the clergy within the school system, above all in Lombardy and Veneto. The sole exception was the Kingdom of Sardinia, where education was radically reformed and laicized following a 1848 decree establishing a general council for primary schools, local inspectorates and education offices. Special attention was also paid to the training of teachers and supervision of their work, particularly in religious schools. The school had to provide training in citizenship. Surveillance was needed so that the teaching staff did not “go against the minds which have to drive a nation called on to promote the independence and freedom of that nation”.

Little changed in the south: the school of Basilio [Puoti](#) is remarkable, however, with its *purismo*, the aim of which was to “familiarize” through language so that students could “feel Italian and hold their homeland in their hearts”. The notion of a school as gathering-place and nationalizing institution: such principles also inspired Francesco De [Sanctis](#), particularly in his work as Director of Education in Naples in 1860, effectively refounding the local educational system, and later as Education Minister in post-Unification Italy.

The Kingdom of Sardinia after 1848 and united Italy

Later legislation partly arose in response to an acute crisis. In November 1859, in view of the forthcoming annexing of Lombardy won back from Austria, the “Casati law” came into force, which shaped the Italian school system, at least until the Gentile reforms in 1923. It concentrated on higher education and the training of the elite, along strongly classical lines. The reform attempted to impose centralized control over the entire state machine, including the school system, placed under the authority of an Education Minister and very specific legal rules (the law alone was made up of 380 articles).

The need was felt to forge a new national community in a short space of time and, above all, to educate the ruling class, which was to govern its destinies. This led to an emphasis on higher education, which in the *liceo-ginnasio* structure combined the best experience before unification – the Sardinian one reformed in 1848 and the Lombardy-Veneto one – giving rise to institutes, built in every provincial administrative centre, which through the teaching of ancient languages, history and Italian literature were to become the preferential route for admission to universities, the liberal professions and the civil service.

Primary education, under the responsibility of individual municipalities, partially escaped the tendency towards centralization. (Nursery schools and vocational colleges were still completely overlooked.) Even if its management remained directly under the control of local authorities, the Casati law stipulated that the first two years of schooling should be compulsory, free and equally accessible to both sexes. The implementation lagged, however, since there were no sanctions for the non-observance of these rules, which in any case met with opposition from those who resisted what they perceived as state interventionism. The Casati law was only applied partially, and had to compete with other laws stubbornly defended by the local elites.

However, the real problem, above all in rural areas, was child labour. In the early 1870s, Pasquale [Villari](#)'s criticism of State inaction at the miserable living conditions of the common people served to debunk the positivist dream that improved education would raise living standards.

Legislation passed in response in 1877 (the “Coppino law”) enforced the Casati system's provision of compulsory and free primary education for girls and boys between 6 and 9 years of age. The State began to contribute to the salaries of teachers and founded new schools. In the following decades, religious instruction was removed as a compulsory subject and replaced with “civic rights and duties”.

While modest in its results, the Coppino law anticipated the spirit of later reforms. In the first two decades of the 20th century, increasing attention was paid to technical, vocational and teacher training; and although a

marked distinction remained in force between higher and popular education, increasing state intervention in primary education aimed to provide the entire population with basic literacy and a sense of belonging to a national community.

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