The Italian Carbonari

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It may be possible to argue that if there is one secret society that has properly earned the title of "secret society" it is the Italian Carbonari. In any discussion involving the Carbonari there is sure to be mystery and confusion at multiple turns. Historians have generally asserted that the Carbonari was directly related to Freemasonry because of similar statutes and rituals[1] while, in direct contrast, Edgar Holt states that the two movements were unrelated and that "Except on rare occasions there was no connexion [*sic*] between the two movements."[2] Some historians like R. John Rath assume a link with the Illuminati because of the similar communication methods used by both societies.[3] The exact origins of the Carbonari are just as blurred however there is evidence suggesting that the group is of French origin and was introduced to southern Italy by Neapolitan exiles around 1799.[4] Nevertheless, the only real assertion that can be made of their coming into existence is that "they existed in Naples and Sicily by 1806."[5]

As we examine the Carbonari one thing that becomes clear is that their rise coincided with a period of major political upheaval in Italy. For instance, southern Italy had experienced a republican revolution in 1799, an occupation from at the hands of Napoleonic France from 1805 to 1815, and two restorations of the Bourbon monarchy, once after the revolution and once after the occupation.[6] The Treaty of Vienna in 1815 did little to quell the unrest. The treaty, which attempted to restore the *status quo* to Europe after the Napoleonic wars, divided Italy "into a number of petty states which were then assigned to rulers who were all more or less under the thumb or influence of Austria."[7] The effective result of this situation can be summed as:

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1 Bolton King, *A History of Italian Unity*, vol. 1, *Being a Political History of Italy from 1814 to 1871* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1912), 19.
2 Edgar Holt, *Risorgimento: The Making of Italy 1815-1870* (London: MacMillan And Co, 1970), 45.
3 R. John Rath, "The Carbonari: Their Origins, Initiation Rites, and Aims," *The American Historical Review* 69 (January 1964), 355.
4 Rath, 354.
5 Holt, 45.
6 Anthony H. Galt, "The Good Cousins' Domain of Belongings: Tropes in Southern Italian Secret Society Symbol and Ritual, 1810-1821," *Man, New Series* 29 (December 1994), 785.
7 I.G. Capaldi, introduction to *My Prisons: Le Mie Prigioni,* by Silvio Pellico, trans. I.G. Capaldi (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), xiii.

> The Italians, however, who under the Napoleonic domination of their country had been inspired with dreams of political freedom and independence, did not take kindly to the new order of things. It was too much to expect that they would once more consent to have the yoke of an absolute and tyrannical government placed round their necks without so much as a murmur of protest.[8]

It was in this environment that the Carbonari's main goals developed. These goals were a constitution and freedom from foreign rule.[9]

As the Carbonari began to establish themselves they were initially aided with support from a seemingly unlikely source, King Ferdinand, the Bourbon monarch in Sicily. Ferdinand actively encouraged the Carbonari because of "their early opposition to the regimes of Joseph Bonaparte and Murat,"[10] during the French occupation. The Carbonari certainly welcomed this endorsement, however this strange alliance turned out to be a marriage of convenience and the Carbonari eventually became "hostile to the Bourbon dynasty because of its refusal to grant a constitution."[11] The split between the Bourbons and the Carbonari can be further seen by the actions of Canosa, a Neapolitan Prince, when he "organised a royalist secret society known as the Calderai in Sicily to combat the liberal Carbonari."[12]

Nevertheless, the Carbonari remained a major political player in post-Napoleonic Italy and the group displayed a very early brand of Italian nationalism that would develop over the course of the nineteenth century, eventually leading to Italian unification. One of the reasons the group was so influential was its sheer size, both in terms of geography covered and membership totals. Within a few years of appearing in Naples, the movement spread throughout Italy and may have reached 300,000

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8 Capaldi, introduction, xiii.
9 Holt, 45.
10 Holt, 45.
11 Stuart Woolf, *A History of Italy 1700-1860: The Social Constraints of Political Change* (London: Methuen & Co, 1979), 240.
12 John A. Davis, *Conflict and Control: Law and Order in Nineteenth-Century Italy* (London: MacMillan Education, 1988), 137.

members.[13] So what was it that drew people to this movement and did the sect's sheer size help or hinder the group's effectiveness in achieving its objectives? It is to these questions we will turn our attention.

The number reasons for joining the Carbonari were numerous and some have characterized the group as "a generalized movement of protest."[14] The reasons for joining could be as simple as a desire for lower taxes.[15] The Carbonari also drew a very large membership from the middle class and from within the military. This owes to the fact that during the French occupation "the Napoleonic regime declared an end to feudalism and restructured governmental institutions along French lines...opening new positions...and creating new economic possibilities...[especially for those] without noble origins, who had wealth and ambition."[16] This created an environment where the middle class felt that "their new social and economic progress was threatened by the return of absolute government,"[17] and those in military felt a level of "neglect [from] the Bourbon government,"[18] giving both parties motivation to enter into the ranks of the Carbonari. However, central to everything was a constitution and the concept of a free Italy. As Bolton King explains:

> Sometimes they aimed at a federal government under the presidency of the Pope, sometimes at an [*sic*] united Italy with Rome for its capital; but the fantastic constitutions, which they loved to build, ran through every varying shade of republicanism and democratic monarchy, though the idea of Italian Independence was always present. [19]

In addition to their political ideologies, the Carbonari also appealed to the Italian population by

13 Holt, 45.
14 Dennis Mack Smith, *The Making of Italy 1796-1866,* Reissue (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1988), 37.
15 Mack Smith, 37.
16 Galt, 785.
17 Holt, 46.
18 Pietro Orsi, *Modern Italy 1748-1898,* trans. Mary Alice Vialls (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1900), 75.
19 King, 20-21.

portraying themselves as having an implicit relationship with Catholicism. The Carbonari are known to have developed a "Christian phraseology [that] swept in converts of different parties."[20] These different parties even included some low level clergy,[21] a seemingly good indicator that the Carbonari were effective in linking themselves to the Church. One such example of the language developed can be found in one of the groups initiation ceremonies where:

> The novices were told that, in imitation of their Grand Master, Christ, they must necessarily pass through sufferings to purity and happiness; they were crowned with thorns and a reed was placed in their hands. A dramatic representation exhibited part of the agonies of the Saviour, and it was solemnly announced, that the great requisites were to preserve their faith, and mutually assist each other.[22]

Indeed, for the first two levels of Carbonari membership the "emphasis was placed on secrecy, morality, and Christian religious principles."[23] In an attempt to maintain the perceived link to Catholicism, these Christian principles factored into the decision of who was allowed to be initiated into the Carbonari as men of questionable character were theoretically not allowed to enter, although this was only in theory and seems to be rather easily obtained.[24] However, this link to the Church became less important with time as eventually discontented citizens from all classes began to come to the Carbonari and the perceived moral high ground was sacrificed on behalf of a larger membership.[25]

While it is not hard to imagine how portraying themselves as good, morally concerned Catholics would attract a large membership among a devout Italian population it has also been proposed that the religious overtones were used as a means to determine which members were most

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20 King, 20.
21 King, 23.
22 Giuseppe Bertoldi, *Memoirs of the Secret Societies of the South of Italy Particularly the Carbonari,* trans. John Murray (London: John Murray, 1821), 21.
23 Rath, 361.
24 Rath, 361.
25 King, 23.

loyal to the politics of the group. Galt elaborates on this notion stating:

> Carbonari attempted to capture Christ and the Passion through ritual, and in so doing, asserted...their power to restructure a significant symbolic attribute of the established societal order. This was a dangerous activity on the level of discourse and symbolism vis-a-vis likely Church reaction over heresy; and was therefore more appropriate to the more politically committed members...Men who shared in heresy were in the 'same boat,' so to speak, and out of this presumably came a high degree of solidarity...[26]

This proposition is interesting not just because of the implications it held for the Carbonari and their relationship to Catholicism, but also because it highlights the question of how united was the Carbonari in their efforts towards achieving it's goals.

By stating that certain activities undertaken were more appropriate for politically active members it can be easily implied that a portion of the membership was less politically inclined, a problematic division for a group that clearly had political motives. The question of unity can also arise when the political wing of the group is considered, especially given the diverse populace that the group drew membership from and the respective grievances that motivated the differing segments to join. We are also able to see a lack of unity when it came to the specifics of how the Carbonari were to achieve their objectives, an observation King touched on during his previously mentioned discussion on the central focus of the Carbonari being a constitution and independence for Italy, listing the various forms of government members envisioned. Given these divisions, it seems of little wonder that the society was described as having "only links [that] were personal and hierarchic, [which] prevented any real unity of principle."[27]

It is clear that the Carbonari were able to attract a large, diverse membership, but the question of how effectively this membership could work towards a common goal remains, especially given the

26 Galt, 802.
27 King, 21.

internal divisions of the movement. The answer to this question would come along in 1820. By this time the Carbonari was especially strong in Naples and even held influence over the provincial militia, numbering 50,000 men, as the officer that had organized the militia, Gugliemo Pepe, was also a member of the society and was more than willing to use them for political means.[28] It should also be noted that by this time the Spanish Revolution had succeeded, a revolution which saw the King of Spain being forced to accept a constitution from his army.[29] This invigorated the imagination of the Carbonari in Naples as Spain was "a country associated with Naples by many memories and affinities."[30] It was under these circumstances the Carbonari decided to act and attempt to imitate the model of military democracy now seen in Spain.[31] It is important to note that "the revolution was not directed against [King] Ferdinand himself...It was solely designed to secure constitutional government."[32]

On The revolution commenced on July 2, 1820 when two military officers led 127 others, a number "including sergeants and mounted soldiers, proceeded from the Nola quarter...to the cry of 'For God, King, and Constitution."[33] This group marched towards Avellino and and by the time they reached the city they had grown to at least 12,000 in number, all of whom were armed.[34] Once in Avellino "the governor, after some hesitation, joined their ranks; thence they moved towards the capital, whilst several provinces declared themselves in favour of the insurrectionary movement."[35] By July 5, Pepe was at the head of the insurgents[36] and just as he was preparing to take on an offensive campaign "the King, 'of his own free will' granted a constitution, but without defining its terms."[37]

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28 King, 23.
29 Mack Smith, 37.
30 Orsi, 75.
31 King, 23.
32 Holt, 50.
33 Orsi, 75-76.
34 King, 23.
35 Orsi, 76.
36 Orsi, 76.
37 King, 23.

This left the revolutionaries suspicious and they "insisted on a constitution being then and there conceded,"[38] and demanded Ferdinand enact the Spanish Constitution of 1812, partially because "few or none knew more of it than that it was ultra-democratic,"[39] and partially "just because the Spanish constitution was available."[40] In the words of Dennis Mack Smith: "The government of the Neapolitan Bourbons...was spineless, and with little pressure King Ferdinand was persuaded to yield."[41]

At this point it would be easy to stop and say the Carbonari had succeeded. They had after all achieved a constitution that they had sought, but the ordeal was for from over. Among the problems facing the Carbonari was the apparent "lack of widespread popular support for the army, and there was little sign anywhere of much 'Italian' feeling."[42] Considering the large support base the Carbonari claimed it is incredible to think both that there was little support for an army they held considerable influence over and that there was a lack of Italian sentiment despite independence being one of it's clearly stated goals. These facts only seem to highlight how deep the divisions among the Carbonari truly were. The case of Sicily seems to underscore these problems, especially when considering the perceived lack of Italian patriotism. Sicily, which reviled the Neapolitan rule they were under, initially greeted the success of the revolution cheerfully and "it seemed for the moment as if Sicilians and Neapolitans might forget their differences in the common Liberal triumph."[43] This proved to be an overly optimistic view and eventually "the earlier notes of reconciliation were drowned in the cry for independence Sicilian constitution of 1812."[44] The island eventually became engulfed in demonstrations and revolt and the new government in Naples had to send 7000 troops to quell the resistance.[45]

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38 Orsi, 76.
39 King, 24.
40 Mack Smith, 37.
41 Mack Smith, 37.
42 Mack Smith, 37.
43 King, 25.
44 King, 25.
45 Holt, 51.

Another complicating matter for the Carbonari was the already existing divisions were being exasperated as moderate bourgeoisie were now joining their ranks.[46] A preexisting rivalry between radical members based in Salerno and more moderate members based in Naples was now further complicated as the Naples sect became split among itself with members now identifying as anything from a democratic republican to a conservative aristocrat.[47] The ills of these divisions showed quickly as "[once] the initial unity crumbled and the different groups began to consider how best to continue the revolution, the democratic elements rapidly lost control."[48] This was likely a result of the parliamentary leaders who came to power after the revolution were not inherently liberal,[49] although it is not a stretch to imagine this problem could have been avoided if the Carbonari had developed a unified strategy on how to best consolidate power.

Further complicating matters for the Carbonari was the hostile reception their revolution received in the international community, a hostility that even led to accusations being leveled against the group that they were accessories to a larger Spanish conspiracy to overthrow the French government.[50] Although this idea seems far-fetched, international tensions were raised and Metternich of Austria decided to intervene as he "knew that Austria's position in Italy would be endangered if the [Italians] got the upper hand over their rulers."[51] Metternich was also perhaps emboldened by the fact the Carbonari was so divided among itself and himself noted: "In design and principle, divided among themselves, these sects change every day and on the morrow may be ready to fight against one another."[52] The Carbonari did manage to field an estimated 40-50,000 troops, half of whom were militia,[53] however this mattered little as the army "was alike good-for-nothing and undisciplined."[54]

46 Woolf, 258.
47 Woolf, 258.
48 Woolf, 256-257.
49 Mack Smith, 37.
50 J. Limbird, *The Carbonari: Or, The Spanish War Assigned To Its Real Cause* (London: J. Limbird, 1823), 4.
51 Holt, 52.
52 Mack Smith, 31.
53 King, 30.
54 Orsi, 81.

Even worse for the Carbonari, despite conventional wisdom stating it would have been better to remain on the defensive, Pepe, perhaps induced by knowledge of his co-leaders battle tendencies, decided to cross the frontier at Rieti on March 7, 1821 and attack what was described as the whole of the Austrian army.[55] Needless to say, the Carbonari were soundly defeated and before the end of the month the revolution had collapsed.[56]

The Neapolitan revolution was the most successful Carbonari plot, although it was not the only one they undertook. Within days of the defeat at Rieti the Carbonari launched a revolution in Piedmont.[57] This revolution was inherently flawed as part of the plan hinged on an easy military victory against the Austrian forces as they returned from their campaign in Naples, a victory that would theoretically trigger a vote in the neighbouring province of Lombardy.[58] Also working against Piedmont was the fact that "divisions between moderates and democrats were even sharper [than in Naples]."[59] This revolution was short lived as on April 8 a total of 9000 rebels encountered the Austrian army and an equal number of Piedmontese loyalist troops in a battle outside Novara during which they were easily routed.[60]

The Carbonari lost much of it's strength after these revolutions for a one primary reasons, severe political repression. In Naples, this repression manifested itself in the form massive purges led by Canosa in after the revolution.[61] These purges were designed to rid the civil service, the army, and even the clergy of anyone who had Liberal sympathies.[62] It was even noted that "men were arrested quicker than the courts could try them; public whippings made Naples aghast...fearful of proscription many fled to the mountains, or roamed the country in armed bands."[63] Meanwhile, in Piedmont,\ the

55 King, 30-31.
56 Woolf, 258.
57 King, 31.
58 King, 32.
59 Woolf, 260.
60 King, 34-35.
61 Davis, 137.
62 King, 38.
63 King, 38-39.

repression was not noted to have been as severe, nevertheless about 12,000 Austrians "remained to cow the country."[64] The Carbonari leadership was also dealt a severe blow as many were exiled to Spain, France, England, even as far as Egypt and South America.[65]

Another contributing factor was the religious tone of the group, part of their broad appeal, dissipated after a papal brief in September of 1821 where the Pope excommunicated the entire Carbonari.[66] While a case has been made that the motives for this were political, owing to pressures from Austria, the excommunication was only issued after sufficient evidence was found to show the initiation ceremonies of the Carbonari were blasphemous in the eyes of the Catholic Church.[67] Reinerman goes on to argue that this papal action "probably cost the Carbonari adherents among the hesitant and the more devout; to this extent, the condemnation may have contributed to the society's decline."[68]

Overall, the Carbonari's greatest asset, it's sheer size and broad appeal, was also it's greatest detractor. Their broad appeal as a general protest group did draw in large numbers that could have been effectively used, especially considering the military officers the group attracted. However this large group lacked a unified vision and even disagreed on how to enact the vision. The fact that the entire society may not have even been politically engaged on all levels only underscores how deep the divisions within the movement truly ran. While the Carbonari did achieve a constitution in Naples it was short lived and again and only highlighted the infighting within the group when they attempted to consolidate their success. Nevertheless, the Carbonari did set an early precedent for Italian nationalism and kindled a spirit that would carry on up to the unification of Italy.

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64 King, 40.
65 King, 40.
66 Alan Reinerman "Metternich and the Papal Condemnation of the 'Carbonari,'" *The Catholic Historical Review* 54 (April 1968), 55.
67 Reinerman, 62-63.
68 Reinerman, 68.

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