

Policing a Capital City during a 'Revolution' – The squadre in Palermo at the Time of the Italian Unification (1860)

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I. INTRODUCTION

In an article written in 1990, Paolo Pezzino highlighted the strong connection, which, he claimed, existed throughout the 1800s between the emergence and actions of the Sicilian squadre (squads) and the development of delinquent phenomena such as the mafia.¹ This partially teleological interpretation, further developed a few years later in a successful work focused on the 'congiura dei pugnalatori' ('stabbing conspiracy'),² has recently been scaled down by the points suggested by Francesco Benigno in his work on the origins of the mafia and the camorra.³ From a number of points of view, the theme of the Sicilian squads is however central within the revolutionary season of Southern Italy in the nineteenth century and therefore lends itself to various interpretations. As a matter of fact, the squads had a key role in one of the pivotal moments of Sicilian history between 1820 and 1866 (the year of the 'Sette e Mezzo' revolt) and beyond, and in particular during the 1848-49 revolution and Garibaldi's campaign of 1860.

In the year that de facto coincided with the fall of the kingdom of the Two Sicilies and with the attainment of Italian unity, the Sicilian insurgents, hurriedly grouped into armed mobs, once again found themselves on the front lines during Garibaldi's advance towards Palermo. However, while the main object of study has been the 'military' role of these squads,⁴ on the other hand one must consider the events that took place after the city being taken by Garibaldi's red-shirted volunteer army to understand the role of these local individuals in the urban landscape and its immediate vicinity. To this end one may refer to the categories which are typical of the history of police,⁵ which will certainly be useful to analyse how, in the weeks that followed the liberation of the island's main urban centres, Garibaldi's new establishment and, consequently, the Sicilian insurgents (primarily the squads) managed to face the delicate problem of public order ma-

¹ Pezzino, 'La tradizione rivoluzionaria siciliana'.

² Pezzino, *La congiura dei pugnalatori*.

³ Benigno, *La mala setta*. See also Benigno, 'Mafia o maffia?'.

⁴ Corselli, *La liberazione della Sicilia nel 1860*; Merenda, 'Contingente delle squadre siciliane d'insorti'; Pieri, *Storia militare del Risorgimento*.

⁵ Antonielli and Levati, *Controllare il territorio*; Berlière and others, *Métiers de police*; Davis, *Conflict and control*; Denys, *Police et sécurité au XVIIIe siècle*; Emsley, *Policing and its context*. For the question of the relationship between the police and national uprisings see Bayley, 'The Police and Political Development in Europe', while for the specific case of Sicily one must refer to Riall, 'Liberal policy and the control of Public Order', and Riall, *Sicily and the Unification of Italy*.

nagement. This will therefore be the meaning of the present article: the presentation of new elements related to Sicilian squads within a historiographical scenery, which is already wide and varied. We shall therefore elaborate on the origins and composition of the squads, later concentrating on the policing activity performed by those in Palermo in 1860, a prime study example due to the role and importance of the city which had soon become Garibaldi's new capital. In other words, in light of mostly unreleased archival documentation and substantial bibliographical research,⁶ we shall attempt to provide a different interpretation of the events and, most of all, of the participants in the police activity in Palermo, so as to understand and evaluate the characteristics of a popular militia activity in a period of vast political change.

II. A QUESTION OF DEFINITIONS, A QUESTION OF BODIES

In first place, one must provide clarifications regarding old and new players on Palermo's political theatre at the time of Garibaldi's arrival – starting with the 'armed mobs, which in Sicily were known as squads'⁷ – defining each one's role. A philological premise is therefore necessary: in the sources one may find the terms *banda*, *squadra*, *squadriglia* and even *guerriglia* ('band', 'squad', 'squadron' and 'guerrilla') to define the same subject.⁸ The definition 'armed band' maintains a generic nature (a mob may as a matter of fact be formed by bandits or highwaymen,⁹ deserters, draft dodgers and fugitives,¹⁰ armed peasants, insurgents, etc.),¹¹ while other definitions tend to refer to a solely military aspect, the last case in particular. In most cases, however, these definitions are associated to popular forces which are mainly rural (and therefore not urban) and which are commanded by charismatic leaders: said leaders were often local persons of importance or barons who were capable of gathering a vast following. The intention of these leading figures was to control the insurrection so as to defend their own status and their position in the region. Finally, the squads could also be led by common delinquents and bandits who – taking advantage of the insurrectional nature of the events and hiding their criminal actions behind the Italian flag – would then pillage the towns of the province. The most striking case, with a tragic ending in October 1860, was the one of the bandit Santo Meli,¹² who had been a squad commander since the arrival of Garibaldi and was charged

⁶ The archival documentation widely mentioned in the following pages is drawn from the State Archives of Palermo and Turin, where extensive research has been made on military and police documents, and in particular the papers of the police headquarters and the prefecture of Palermo, as well as those from the Sicilian military archive, stored in Turin. Furthermore, a number of public and private archival collections have been explored, belonging to Italian patriots of the Risorgimento such as Francesco Crispi, Agostino Depretis, Vincenzo Orsini, Giuseppe Oddo and others, who will punctually be mentioned further into this text.

⁷ La Farina, *Istoria documentata della rivoluzione siciliana*, t. 1, p. 38.

⁸ Fiume, *Le bande armate in Sicilia (1819-1849)*.

⁹ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*.

¹⁰ Lignereux, *La France rébellionnaire*.

¹¹ Pelleriti, 'Fra città e campagne'.

¹² Riall, *Sicily and the Unification of Italy*, p. 93.

with a number of crimes towards persons and property.¹³ Meli was then executed in Palermo after two separate trials; his “exemplary” sentence was firmly petitioned by Garibaldinian highest authorities, and in particular by the General’s right-hand man, Francesco Crispi.¹⁴

In light of the above, one may suggest a possible usage of the term ‘popular’: the squads are ‘popular’ as they are mostly composed of armed peasants. Their forces are therefore drawn from the most disadvantaged social classes. It is harder to ascertain the possibility that the great involvement of subordinate classes may have been due to economic and social reasons,¹⁵ or if this widespread popular participation to the insurrections of 1848 and 1860 was the indication of a far more deeply-rooted political awareness. The bad harvest of 1859 will certainly have taken its toll to a certain extent, as the redistribution of land and the restoration of the public use of commons were still a fundamental objective for Sicilian peasants; Garibaldinian reforms would only partially have gone in the direction wished by the people. We are therefore confronting a social and popular dimension, and a political dimension, which may not be detached if one wishes to fully understand the significance of the events surrounding the Italian unification, when the Sicilian squads reappeared, this time supporting Garibaldi, to support his national project. In 1860, the priority was not to support the island’s unrealisable dream of being autonomous from Naples, but instead to introduce Sicily into a wider, Italian, framework.¹⁶

On account of these considerations, squads represented a double-edged sword for Garibaldi’s new-born government, due to their rural composition and their political and social aspirations, if present. Garibaldinians also had to rely on squads when marching towards Palermo and, most of all, after the city’s liberation. In those crucial moments it was inevitably necessary to entrust them with public order management, similarly to what had occurred in the previous revolution; to paraphrase the renowned expression coined in a completely different context by Parisian prefect Marc Caussidière: to ‘faire de l’ordre avec du désordre’ (‘to work out order through disorder’).¹⁷

In parallel to Garibaldi’s new government’s use of squads, the authorities quickly activated to reconstitute the entire range of Sicilian law enforcement, which had disappeared shortly after Garibaldi’s arrival, starting with the police. The institution of Palermo’s Questura (‘central police station’), the first one in Sicily, had been an immediate consequence of the battle to liberate the city.¹⁸ Its role, and the actual amount of public safety

¹³ Dumas, *Les Garibaldiens*, pp. 137-155.

¹⁴ ASRAM (Archivio Storico Risorgimentale Antonio Mordini, Barga (Lucca)), b. 16, f. Q.

¹⁵ Renda, ‘Garibaldi e la questione contadina’.

¹⁶ De Francesco, ‘Cultura costituzionale e conflitto politico’.

¹⁷ Caussidière, *A ses concitoyens*, p. 5.

¹⁸ La Lumia, *La restaurazione borbonica e la rivoluzione del 1860*, p. 123.

(i. e. police) guards¹⁹ soon became quite notable in Palermo's political theatre,²⁰ managing to compete with other institutions which had the same tasks and were also still in development, such as the city's national guard.²¹ The reconstitution of the latter was originated by multiple impulses: to swell up Garibaldi's exhausted army, to introduce a set of rules similar to that of the Piedmontese kingdom in view of the then-imminent unification, and to protect the island's traditions, which saw the national guard as the 'palladio della libertà' ('defender of freedom').²²

Another key player on the Sicilian scene in general, and Palermo in particular, was of course Garibaldi's army. Basically composed of volunteers from Northern Italy and some Sicilian contingents,²³ the army was a fixed presence in Garibaldi's capital. The 'Red Shirts' would patrol the city's streets at night,²⁴ protect connections with the municipalities in the province, and control the new Sicilian government's centres of power. Naturally, the primary role of Garibaldinian army, as for any other army, did not consist of police duties. With the exception of greater operations of a repressive nature – for example, the well-known case of Bronte²⁵ – Military authorities would generally attempt to delegate police activity to other law enforcement authorities. One of these was the *militi a cavallo* ('horseback soldiers'), a police force assigned to surveillance of the countryside, originating from armed bands of Bourbon times,²⁶ and the *carabinieri*,²⁷ strongly endorsed by both of Garibaldi's pro-dictators, Agostino Depretis and Antonio Mordini.²⁸ This proliferation of units and institutions with duties that were essentially similar was an obvious indication of a fragile situation among the institutions originated from Sicilian revolution: conflicts of jurisdiction and personal clashes were a common occurrence.²⁹ The presence of squads in Palermo, especially in the early weeks of Garibaldi's government, only managed to make the situation even more chaotic, despite the extreme need for order. Garibaldi's provisions aiming to form an efficient army and national guard, and consequently to limit the fragmentation of power into hundreds of different directions, are to be understood in this sense. The situation needed to be brought back to normality, and

¹⁹ ASPa, RSLG-RP (State Archive of Palermo, 'Real Segreteria di Stato presso il Luogotenente Generale – Ripartimento Polizia'), b. 1561, 'Notamento approssimativo della forza addetta alla Questura del Distretto di Palermo', 8 June 1860.

²⁰ Di Benedetto, Conto della gestione tenuta dalla questura di Palermo.

²¹ Dupuy, *La Garde nationale. 1789-1872*; Francia, *Le baionette intelligenti*.

²² *Giornale Ufficiale di Sicilia*, 25 November 1860.

²³ Scaramuzza, 'Il volontarismo garibaldino'.

²⁴ MRM (Museum of the Risorgimento, Milano), 'Archivio Guastalla', c. 2, b. 14, letter from Palermo square control to the 3rd Brigade control, 24 June 1860.

²⁵ Radice, 'Nino Bixio a Bronte'; Riall, 'Nelson versus Bronte'; Riall, *La rivolta. Bronte 1860*.

²⁶ Fiume, *Le bande armate in Sicilia (1819-1849)*.

²⁷ Carbone, *Gli ufficiali dei Carabinieri reali*; Ibbi, 'Il generale Giovanni Battista Serpi nel Risorgimento'. On this specific point, see also Gramsci, *Quaderni dal carcere*, pp. 242-243.

²⁸ Librino, 'Agostino Depretis prodittatore in Sicilia'; Maraldi, 'La rivoluzione siciliana del 1860'.

²⁹ ASTo, AMS (State Archive of Turin, 'Archivio Militare di Sicilia'), m. 4, f. 1, c. 6 and ASTo, AMS, m. 22, f. 1, sf. 2, c. 47.

a draft of contingents from the island, to be trained and equipped over a short period of time, appeared to be the solution most favoured by the authorities.

III. POPULAR MILITIA AND REVOLUTIONARY WAR

Another relevant point to be made before continuing with the interpretation of the events that followed the liberation of Palermo concerns the theoretical and democratic roots of the draft of Sicilian insurgents in the spring of 1860. Not long after the expedition of the Thousand, Garibaldi found himself addressing over 20,000 perfectly trained and equipped Bourbon soldiers. Therefore, the original unit of red-shirted volunteers needed to be reinforced with a proportionate introduction of local contingents so as to approach the confrontation with the bulk of the Bourbon troops in more favourable conditions. Despite the local population's reluctance,³⁰ not being accustomed to support war efforts in ways other than large-scale taxation, Garibaldi's government introduced military draft to the island. The experiment did not encounter the expected success and, lacking alternatives, Garibaldi had to make virtue of necessity and take advantage of the disorganized enthusiasm of insurgent peasants.

The Sicilian draft provision planned by the General was planted on a democratic, decades-old reflection on military matters.³¹ Ever since the 1830s, Piedmontese patriot Carlo Bianco, Count of Saint Jorioz, had theorized the use of popular forces in war intended as a guerrilla movement against reactionary powers,³² such as Austria, which were instead equipped with large regular armies.³³ Popular forces could therefore reveal themselves to be a fundamental resource not just for the achievement of insurrectional projects conceived within Mazzini's partito d'Azione ('Action Party'),³⁴ but also for Garibaldi's men who drew widely from the volunteer element to support the project of unification.³⁵ In 1853 even Giuseppe Mazzini, the champion of Italian unity, had managed to reclaim the theories of Count Bianco of Saint-Jorioz in a short publication, which was nowhere near the analytic detail and scope of the Piedmontese patriot.³⁶ According to Mazzini, a revolutionary direction of war had a double advantage: on the one hand, it made the war effort popular (being supported by the armed population, who shared the objectives and ideals with passion), on the other it made war 'moral', de facto transforming 'opinion into national enthusiasm'.³⁷ In his opinion, however, the risk of anarchy spreading among popular ranks needed to be avoided at all costs. Said pressure could have been generated due

³⁰ Pezzino, *Il Paradiso abitato dai diavoli*.

³¹ Del Negro, 'Garibaldi tra esercito regio e nazione armata', pp. 253-310.

³² Della Peruta, *Democratici premazziniani, mazziniani e dissidenti*, pp. 39-75; Della Peruta, 'Le teorie militari della democrazia risorgimentale', pp. 61-82.

³³ Bianco di Saint Jorioz, *Della guerra nazionale d'insurrezione*.

³⁴ Frétigné, Giuseppe Mazzini, pp. 110-112.

³⁵ Alberton, 'Finché Venezia salva non sia'; Cecchinato, *Camicie rosse*; Cecchinato, 'Il Regno delle camicie rosse'; Isastia, 'La guerra dei volontari'; Molfese, 'Lo Scioglimento dell'esercito meridionale garibaldino'; Spagnolo, *Il volontarismo democratico*; Trevelyan, *Garibaldi and the making of Italy*.

³⁶ Sarti, Mazzini, p. 62.

³⁷ Mazzini, *Della guerra d'insurrezione*, p. 5.

to lack of proper control from democratic cadres upon drafting armed mobs. This would have had vast political and social repercussions, practically estranging the popular classes, which should have been the largest contingent of the new army, from the thinking class. This fear was also shared by Francesco Crispi who, already in 1855, was imagining the possibility of a new Sicilian insurrection and, knowing the actual situation on the island well, was aware of the need to reconstruct the army and police force immediately after the earliest successes, so as to maintain a firm hold on the country, unlike what had happened in 1848.³⁸

In the squads of 1860 one may therefore see a concrete application (and the limits) of these signature theories of the radical Italian left, which saw the problem as mainly consisting of the composition of these armed mobs, tied to their leaders by relationships of loyalty which would sometimes prefigure typical relationships of patronage, perhaps anticipating mafia relationships.³⁹ Naturally, this question was posed all the more after the liberation of Palermo, when squads gradually lost their military role and acquired a new faculty as a police force, as after all had already happened during the previous revolution.⁴⁰

IV. THE 1848 PRECEDENT

Ever since the unsuccessful revolution of 1848-49, squads had represented the primary resource for the Sicilian population to confront Bourbon military and police forces.⁴¹ In January 1848, the first revolt in Europe to overthrow a reigning dynasty had begun in Palermo, close to Fieravecchia, in the middle of the city centre.⁴² Subsequently, as described by Giuseppe Farina, “Small armed mobs started to form in various points of the town, and where there was no superior command, leadership went to anyone with the audacity of action: those with weapons would follow his example more than his commands; they

³⁸ In 1855 Crispi wrote the following, from London, to Nicola Fabrizi, a patriot from Modena who at the time was in Malta: ‘Pippo [Mazzini] and I have engaged in lengthy reflection regarding the Italian south. Instructions to be sent should be few and precise. Besides a proclamation which, upon occurring, should not obstruct the triumph of the great idea of a united nation, you must insinuate that leaders aim to three points: first, finding money in legal manners, whilst remaining revolutionary; second, organising the country and the armed forces hand in hand as the insurrection expands; Third, to organize public safety as much as possible so as to avoid thefts, which would turn the great party of landowners against our cause.’ (Crispi, *Lettere dall’esilio (1850-1860)*, pp. 101-102, the original can be found in MCRR (Museo Centrale del Risorgimento, Rome), b. 656, fasc. 30).

³⁹ Pezzino, ‘La tradizione rivoluzionaria siciliana’.

⁴⁰ Fiume, *La crisi sociale del 1848 in Sicilia*.

⁴¹ Cfr. Pezzino, *Il Paradiso abitato dai diavoli*, p. 22. On the actions of squads during the upheavals, see also the writings of Calvi, 1851. The squads had in fact revealed themselves to be excellent for urban clashes, but much less, due to obvious limitations of discipline, preparation, and weaponry, in the open field. Calvi, who had been a minister during the 1848 revolution, writes: ‘Most of the people who formed the squads were worth very little in a conflict with true dangers: being used to fight in closed areas, they could not avoid giving bad performances when forced to fight without the protection of a shelter’ (Ibid., p. 323).

⁴² Rapport, 1848.

had no rules, no order, no designs".⁴³ Simply put, few citizens armed in a makeshift manner had attacked police posts (slaughtering the despised birri, for example in the assault to the Prefecture) and then the barracks, taking the authorities by surprise and seizing the weapons needed to continue the insurrection. However, there had already been warning signs for the insurrection.⁴⁴ The first squads of peasants had appeared shortly thereafter, arriving from the nearby countryside. These were mainly formed by farmers armed with a few shotguns and many hand weapons: knives, pikes, and other tools related to country life.⁴⁵

On 20 January 1848 the organisation of bands began. What had begun as a city revolt soon showed all the characteristics of a revolution, covering the entire island:⁴⁶ As would also have happened in 1860, local committees everywhere were arming squads with equipment so they could join the insurrection and at least in part attempt to rule over it, while in larger cities, such as Palermo, a city national guard would form just to protect order and properties, thus attracting severe criticism from the more progressive elements of the island's society, who saw the new institutions as a restraint to the legitimate social requests of most of the population:

*The institution of the national guard, essential in times of reform to block inclinations of absolute control, reassure the citizens, maintain public order, and protect the concessions which have been obtained, is an obstacle and a hindrance during revolutionary movements [...]. [In 1848] the national guard was therefore only originated as auxiliary units for the squads protecting public order; this however was only the appearance, a justification: it had actually been created by the eternal suspicion that those who own have towards those who do not.*⁴⁷

Leaving behind the classist interpretation given by La Farina to the institution of the National Guard, he had correctly understood a point which was crucial to the results of the Sicilian Revolution: the insurrection had left traditional channels and was acquiring a popular characterisation. The division between the democratic and the aristocratic, traditionalist, elements would have been one of the causes for the 1848 revolution's failure.

In those particularly tense circumstances, squad activity had shown to be important in relation to controlling the city of Palermo, despite conflicts with the central institutions and the aristocratic and bourgeoisie classes, which were sometimes implied and

⁴³ La Farina, *Istoria documentata della rivoluzione siciliana*, t. 1, p. 29.

⁴⁴ Cfr. Romeo, *Il Risorgimento in Sicilia*, pp. 256-316.

⁴⁵ Giuseppe La Farina, a protagonist and witness of these events, writes: 'Help from the countryside and from nearby municipalities started to arrive during the night: the first were sixty peasants from Villabate, then others from Misilmeri, from Bagheria, from other places: they were received with applause, embraces, kisses; and so by the morning of the 13th one could count about 300 men armed with rifles, and just as many with scythes, bill hooks, knives, and those steel instruments which popular enthusiasm makes into weapons' (La Farina, *Istoria documentata della rivoluzione siciliana*, vol. 1, p. 31).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁴⁷ La Farina, *Istoria documentata della rivoluzione siciliana*, t. 2, pp. 110-112.

other times quite evident. As a matter of fact, cautions Paolo Pezzino, the 1848 Sicilian government's illusion to 'maintain order with the squads' is only momentary,⁴⁸ specifically due to their composition: 'Rustic and rough men, accustomed to all sorts of danger, of uncultured morality, armed, within a society with no repressive public force, soon realized that all was allowed to them', as noted by an observer of the Sicilian situation of the time.⁴⁹ The result was therefore a

*situation of institutional vacuum where a popular and vulgar armed force finds itself in a position of power, contrasted not by governmental institutions, despite protecting "classist" interests while nonetheless being an expression of power that is considered to be legitimate, but instead by other armed forces, also characterized by an organized private use of violence.*⁵⁰

This was therefore a volcanic situation, changing continuously and constantly. In 1848-49, Sicilians improvised themselves as soldiers with a certain success until, when the international political situation changed, the Bourbons managed to establish a strong contingent that was sent by sea to recover control of the island, so the Sicilian political class and administration, already weak due to internal conflicts, collapsed before the Neapolitan menace, generating a flow of migration towards all of Europe, composed of the elites who had jeopardized their position due to the revolution.⁵¹

Peasant uprisings had also periodically occurred on the island after the restoration,⁵² driven by individuals such as baron Francesco Bentivegna.⁵³ In these cases, the role of rural populations had once again turned out to be fundamental. This would become all the more realistic in 1860 when, in reaction to the failure of the Gancia uprising in Palermo, the resistance remained active in the countryside around the city thus making it difficult for the authorities to subdue the reluctant populations of the Sicilian inlands. Relying on confident knowledge of the areas, which were often irregular woodlands – as is obvious still today to anyone who observes the so-called Conca d'oro ('golden basin') which surrounds the Sicilian capital – and consequentially provided with great movement capability, the squads were capable of resisting to the attacks of the military factions sent against them by the Neapolitan authorities. They were not however able to make a move on the city, as it was firmly controlled by Neapolitan soldiers.

⁴⁸ Pezzino, 'La tradizione rivoluzionaria siciliana', p. 52.

⁴⁹ Calvi, *Memorie storiche e critiche della rivoluzione siciliana*, p. 211.

⁵⁰ Pezzino, 'La tradizione rivoluzionaria siciliana', p. 57.

⁵¹ Recent studies on Italian exiles of the Unification movement are by Bistarelli, *Gli esuli del Risorgimento* and Isabella, *Risorgimento in esilio*. For further information on the case of the Mediterranean, see Isabella and Zanou, *Mediterranean Diasporas*. On specific relation to the case of Sicily, see instead Ciampi, 'Gli esuli moderati siciliani alla vigilia dell'annessione dell'isola'.

⁵² For the question of the peasants' revolt in 1860 see Mack Smith, 'The peasants' revolt of Sicily in 1860', pp. 201-240.

⁵³ Sansone, *Cospirazioni e rivolte di Francesco Bentivegna and Spiridione*, *Storia della rivolta del 1856 in Sicilia*.

V. PALERMO IN THE SUMMER OF 1860

In 1860, the ancient capital of the kingdom of Sicily was a city with about two hundred thousand inhabitants, enclosed by a circle of walls interrupted by about fifteen doorways. It was through one of the latter that Garibaldi entered Palermo on 27 May 1860.⁵⁴ After about a week of combat he took control of the city,⁵⁵ which had been weakened by the damage provoked by Bourbon shellfire, as proven by historical images collected by French photographers Eugène Sevaistre and Gustave Le Gray.⁵⁶

Fundamental for the expansion of the already worn out ranks of the Thousand, after the clash of Calatafimi in particular, squads had a decisive, albeit noisy and disorderly, role in the breach of Palermo. They could therefore be found within the city already on the day after its liberation, counting on hundreds if not thousands of men.⁵⁷ According to what had been written at the time, during operations around the city ‘The squad of Carini, the one of Capaci, the one of cav. Santa Anna, the one of mr. Coppola, the one of Borgetto and finally the one of Oddo were in action’.⁵⁸

On the days that followed their arrival, they seemed to have been spread throughout the urban area, due to needs which were initially military, as long as the clashes with the Bourbons continued, and later mainly deployed in protection of the area, so as to ensure a tangible presence on the territory. In 1848, squads were stationed in eight districts, spread in the residential areas ‘so all points of the city would be protected’.⁵⁹ A similar distribution was repeated in 1860.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Trevelyan, *Garibaldi and the making of Italy*.

⁵⁵ Mundy, “Hannibal” at Palermo and Naples.

⁵⁶ <https://fotografieincomune.comune.milano.it/FotografieInComune/ricerca?query=sevaistre>.

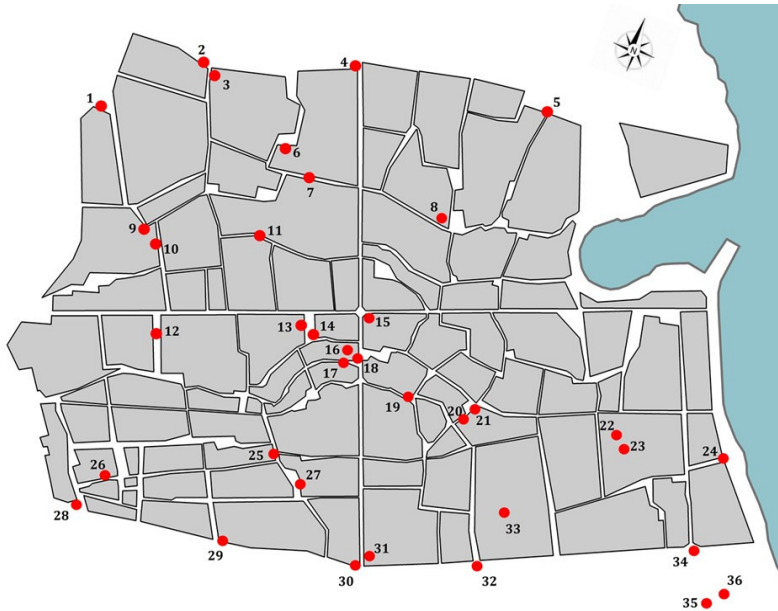
⁵⁷ Numbers vary depending on the sources, but it is conceivable that they were composed of at least 3000 men.

⁵⁸ SSSP (Sicilian Society of Storia Patria, Palermo), ‘Sala Lodi’ b. 10, n. 1080.

⁵⁹ Di Marzo Ferro, *Un periodo di storia siciliana*, p. 84. In 1848, the districts assigned to the squads had been those of the Carmine convent, the Carminello convent, the convent of S. Francis of Assisi, the convent of S. Nicola of Tolentino, the convent of S. Augustine, the Jesuit college, the police station at S. Domenico and the house of Olivella (ibid.). In particular, at the Carminello convent were the squads of Giuseppe Oddo – who will be mentioned several times in the next pages – Francesco Cortegiani, and Tommaso Giordano.

⁶⁰ There were many similarities between 1848 and 1860 in Sicily, especially regarding public safety and its management. To this end, a section of Pasquale Calvi’s study on 1848 can easily convey the similarity between both revolutions: ‘The revolution, as said, had destroyed the government, had dismantled law enforcement, had suspended the magistrates’ authority, had dissolved all the state’s public administrations, as well as those of the communities. Nobody could know how much time, and how many great works, would be needed to replace the moral and civil chaos that follow a revolution of this nature with the normal pace of affairs. – Private and public safety, a precious result of the government’s moral and physical strength, of respect for the magistrates, of the strict and inescapable application of the law, is first of all the primary condition for an uncontested collection of public contribution, and when it is drained by opposing forces, industrial activity decreases, production from properties decrease, as they may only thrive in the shade of security, and consequentially the nation’s revenue dries out, becoming incapable to provide the necessary means for conservation and defence of the State’ (Calvi, *Memorie storiche e critiche della rivoluzione siciliana*, p. 211).

A contribution by Pietro Merenda at the eighteenth social congress of Palermo, held in the Sicilian capital in May 1930, specifically deals with the contingent of Sicilian insurgents and their distribution within the capital on the early days of June 1860.⁶¹ Here Merenda related a large amount of data contained in the writings from 1860 and 1861 by Sicilian general Giuseppe La Masa, a veteran, along with other patriots, of the 1848 uprising; in this sense, the continuity between both revolutions is undeniable. The contribution of Merenda's data, along with other contemporary publications, has allowed to chart a map of the distribution of squads in Palermo in 1860.⁶²



1	Porta di Ossuna	10	Papireto	19	Calderai	28	Porta Montalto
2	Porta Carini	11	Celso	20	Fieravecchia	29	Porta S. Agata
3	Porta Carini	12	Protonotaro	21	Fieravecchia	30	Porta S. Antonino
4	Porta Macqueda	13	Piazza Bologna	22	Gancia	31	Porta S. Antonino
5	Porta San Giorgio	14	Piazza Bologna	23	Gancia	32	Porta Termini
6	Cantone Aragona	15	Cantoni	24	Porta dei Greci	33	Magione
7	S. Agostino	16	Università Q.G.	25	Salita Banditore	34	Porta Reale
8	S. Domenico	17	Università Q.G.	26	Albergaria	35	Orto Botanico
9	Papireto	18	Università Q.G.	27	Carmine	36	Orto Botanico

⁶¹ Merenda, 'Contingente delle squadre siciliane d'insorti'.

⁶² Pecorini Manzoni, Storia della 15a divisione Türr.

The deployment of squads in inhabited areas complied with a firm strategy of territory control, in the vicinities of the doorways just as much as within the bastions. As a matter of fact, they were allocated so as to occupy key nodes of the urban fabric: squares, monasteries, barracks, the town hall (Palazzo Pretorio), the university's areas, the central police headquarters, and so on. As can be easily imagined, this distribution branches out abundantly. Thanks to their presence in the urban setting, squads were able to help the authorities protect public order and, consequentially, the new political order risen with the 'revolution'.

However, this deployment of squads also hides a second motivation. Fearing the return of the same situation as 1848, when many groups had become uncontrollable, Garibaldian authorities had established that squads were to be confined to quarters just like 'regular' troops. After the first chaotic days, Garibaldinian officers had assigned the squads to barracks and monasteries: the situation was returning to normal,⁶³ the Bourbon menace was moving further and further away, and the need to maintain thousands of armed peasants within the capital or in the surrounding woods was no longer on the agenda.

VI. SICILIAN SQUADS AND POLICE

As written by Francesco Renda, participation of peasants in the first weeks of the campaign was extremely important, if not decisive,⁶⁴ save for then losing strength and motivation as the new power, despite being revolutionary, started to form, in good measure protecting the previous social and economic order. Furthermore, the need to guarantee order within the city and the countryside required greater professionalism from the police forces. On the other hand, the peasant squads, which had been at the centre of those early days were defined by their pronounced improvisation. According to 'a note of forces guarding the Carminello district from 12 to 13 June 1860', the squad commanded by Colonel Giuseppe Oddo would have been formed of 150 men, 81 of whom were armed with rifles and 69 with blades.⁶⁵ This evidence could have applied perfectly to any of the squads, which had joined Garibaldi in the late spring of that same year.

From a monetary point of view, as well as for weaponry, the squads of Palermo depended on the State Secretariat for War, at least in theory. Payment, which was sometimes irregular, varied depending on rank but was generally not too high (on average, it was set to 3 or 4 tari – the Sicilian currency – per day for a basic soldier, the equivalent of a day labourer's salary). The main difference from the case of Catania, where squads were also present, is that in Palermo, despite being composed of volunteers from the countryside

⁶³ An exceptional testimony in this regard comes from historian Michele Amari, who disembarked in Palermo on July 1st, 1860 and was soon afterwards destined to be given assignments within Garibaldi's government: 'In Palermo one does not hear of the robberies nor the murders nor the other brutalities of '48' (Amari, *Carteggio*, vol. 2, p. 97) and also: 'one lives in full safety of persons and of possessions: business and commerce are carried out as always, people are circulating on the streets until the late night' (*Ibid.*, p. 98).

⁶⁴ Renda, *Storia della Sicilia dal 1860 al 1970*, pp. 155-163.

⁶⁵ SSSP, 'Sala Lodi', b. 42, n. 2067.

around the city, squads were paid with military funds. In the case of Catania, on the other hand, squads, mainly assigned to the protection of public order, were partly composed of volunteers, who therefore received no financial subsidy, and the rest were individuals defined as 'hired soldiers', who therefore served in return from payment by the local municipal institutions. In the new capital of Garibaldi's dictatorship part of the squads' forces would soon have merged with the police, under direct orders of the Questura.⁶⁶

As mentioned previously, in Palermo public order was guaranteed by various players, mainly by Garibaldi's army, gradually assisted by the 'public safety guards', hurriedly organized by the new government and by the national guard. However, among the papers of colonel Oddo, squad commander, besides a number of documents related to the use of the squads he gathered for the battles in Palermo, we can also find key information related to public safety in the early days of the capital's liberation.

The regulations issued by the colonel to control the discipline of his men closely remind of those for military districts but, reading between the lines, besides the most common rules in matter of cleaning and of orders of service, appeals, and reviews, one may also find some references to the role that squads might also have taken in an urban context. The eighth and final article in Oddo's regulations, redacted several times, says in its second comma that 'when the National Guard will require reinforcements of men, in this case the Leaders of the centuria [i. e. a sub-division of the squad] may relocate as many men as are requested by aforementioned Unit'.⁶⁷ The possibility of the squads' intervention in matters of public order, which then punctually happened between the 19 and 20 June, for that matter without being called by the national guard, was therefore expected not just as a theoretical possibility. That night a patrol, after hearing loud noises coming from a house at half past four in the morning, decided to intervene after distinctly hearing screams of 'thieves, thieves' coming from the Cassero, and these screams came specifically from the building of S. Margherita, and due to this problem – wrote the patrol leader in his report – I hurried to go there, along with my squad, and upon arrival there [...] and having found a person disturbing the De Stefano family, who lived in said house, I promptly took him in, along with two women who live on the top floor'. Those arrested, the attacker and two women, very probably two prostitutes, would then have been entrusted to the national guard, which had also arrived in the meantime. Therefore, although the duty of Palermo's squads was not to perform police activity in a strict sense, they were also allowed to and were even required to intervene when offences were being committed, or if they were called to intervene. It was therefore not infrequent that certain patrols drawn from the squads left the barracks along with Garibaldi's red-shirted volunteers to inspect the city streets, especially by night.

⁶⁶ Di Benedetto, *Conto della gestione tenuta dalla questura di Palermo*. In the first weeks, large sums of money were granted to the Questura by Garibaldi's military superintendence to pay the salaries of soldiers and of squads controlled by police authority. Afterwards, the entire police division came under the orders of the Secretary of Internal Affairs.

⁶⁷ SSSP, 'Sala Lodi', b. 42, n. 2040.

However, it was mainly outside urban areas, in the rural zones closest to the city, that squads could have an important role, be it positive or negative. For example, around mid-June 1860, in Monreale, few kilometres away from Palermo, the criminal actions of an armed band brought to the intervention of the authorities, who in turn sent a squad, led by Giovanni Corrao, a high officer among those closest to Garibaldi, to attempt to solve the situation. It is interesting to note that in that occasion, along with Corrao, one of the city's commissioners, Salvatore Cappello, also left from Palermo. The message sent to the capital's Questura by the leaders of the Ministry of War says the following:

*It is known to us that in Monreale are certain unruly individuals who, as leaders of bands, instigate internal discordance, causing foul behaviour from the people and thus breaching public peace, which is so important to our Government, especially when it is lacking.*⁶⁸

The operation was a success and Corrao's squad stayed in the city some days longer to fully restore public order. The case of Monreale in June 1860 is of particular interest as the situation that had brought to the decisive action of Garibaldinian authorities had developed due to an exceedingly premature disbandment of the local country squad, due to the excessive burden its support had had on the town's expenses.⁶⁹

The presence of squads in the countryside could therefore have been the cause of actual problems of public order, due to their composition, their indiscipline, and their actions, which were sometimes openly criminal.⁷⁰ Historiography is well aware of this perspective. As had already happened in 1848, 'discipline, which had always been little in the squads,'⁷¹ also proved to be a problem of some relevance in 1860. To this we must add an inherent tendency to unlawfulness from some leaders, which could in certain cases result in prevarication and brutality towards specific individuals or entire communities.⁷²

For example, in those troubled days it was also not uncommon in coastal areas very close to the capital for some squads to bring about unorthodox, if not openly criminal, behaviour. Vincenzo Orsini, secretary of War, wrote the following to one of his subordinates, Baron Bentivegna:

The secretary of State for Internal Affairs has informed me of the deep grievances forwarded by the Pretore [Mayor], as the forces assigned to Acqua dei Corsari had blocked the transport of large amounts of bread towards Pa-

⁶⁸ ASPa, RSLG-RP, b. 1560, c. 506, La Porta to S. Cappello, June 1860.

⁶⁹ ASPa, RSLG-RP, b. 1560, c. 572.

⁷⁰ ASTo, AMS, m. 12, f. 5, c. 199.

⁷¹ La Farina, *Istoria documentata della rivoluzione siciliana*, vol. 2, p. 7.

⁷² In this regard, an event which occurred in late August of 1860 is worth mentioning, when a battalion of Palermo's national guard, led by colonel Amato Poulet, had to travel to Capaci to overcome a squad which had de facto become the ruler of that entire municipality, and the population had become its prisoner: 'That municipality's destiny had been handed to wrongdoers who allowed themselves any abuse, any brutality, any infliction, any misdeed. The inhabitants were subject to the strength of these men from the worst class of society, who were keeping the town in complete disarray so as not to be hindered in their own intentions. Furthermore, these men imposed a wheat tax and obstructed the formation of a National Guard, "element of order and of safety"' (ASTo, AMS, m. 1, f. 2, sf. 7, cc. 93-96).

*lermo. As I am shocked by how forces assigned to maintain good order allow themselves to act against their own duties, I encourage you to express my personal [...] resentment to the leader of said forces, hoping that these inconveniences no longer occur from now on, to avoid the implementation of severe measures.*⁷³

In other words, a squad assigned to protect a portion of territory very close to the dictatorship's capital had exceeded their limitations and the government had pronounced itself ready to intervene. Episodes such as these could only undermine trust in Garibaldi's government's trust towards squads, a trust which was already damaged. In June 1860, once their positions in Palermo had been ensured, the quickest solution to come before the executive power was therefore to disband the squads, also considering the experiences from 1848.⁷⁴ The dismantlement was gradual and lasted several weeks. In fact, while on the one hand the disbanding of the squads responded to a logic of strict maintenance of public order, on the other there was the problem of managing the flow of men, in the hundreds if not thousands and often armed, who were dispersing out from the city and into the surrounding countryside, sometimes causing trouble.

VII. CONCLUSION. THE DISBANDING OF THE SQUADS

To achieve a balanced judgement of Sicilian squads and their actions, one must highlight the fact that due to their composition and indiscipline they would often establish themselves as disturbing agents rather than as guardians of public order. Over a short period of time, this consideration brought to the discontinuation of the squads; their place would have been taken by the army and the national guard, which Crispi was attempting to assemble. On 25 May 1860, in a letter to colonel Vincenzo Giordano Orsini, soon to be the Secretary of War, the Sicilian statesman declared: 'Please, ensure that you organize the troops, so that we may free ourselves of the squads. You have all the power and the means.'⁷⁵

Now free from Bourbon domination, what Sicily increasingly required was order; in first place, to ensure the stability of its financial and social structures, as well as of its elite class,⁷⁶ and then to allow Garibaldi and his army to travel beyond the strait of Messina and accomplish the project of Italian unity. An updated and efficient management of public order was also necessary to provide Europe with a reassuring image of Garibaldi's government, which in the continent's chancelleries was prematurely being classified as one of many left-wing radicalisms. Restructuring the national guard and organising the police force would have been a response to these views.

⁷³ ASTo, AMS, m. 12, f. 5, c. 199, draft letter of V. Orsini to F. Bentivegna, 16 June 1860.

⁷⁴ *Giornale Ufficiale di Sicilia*, 15 June 1860 and *La Masa*, 1861, p. 173.

⁷⁵ *Biblioteca Ambrosiana Milano*, b. Y20 inf., n. 14.

⁷⁶ Benigno and Torrisi, *Elites e potere in Sicilia dal Medioevo ad oggi*.

From a typically liberal point of view, the police force represented an instrument that was required not just to control the territory, but also as an instrument that would maintain discipline of civil life, of the community, and more in general of the entire country. Therefore, in view of the Italian unification, the undisciplined enthusiasm of the squads needed to be substituted with the new political order initiated by the 'Sicilian revolution'; in other words, a popular police force had to be replaced by a professional one. The composition of the squadre and their revolutionary past, and present, caused their role to be limited in time and in space, until their gradual distancing from the capital. The Government's decision would have finally led to the overcoming of the impasse of 1848 and, on the other hand, would have begun the process of standardisation of the Sicilian government's institutions, and notably their police forces, to those of the kingdom of Sardinia in view of the unification, thus providing further drive to the quick political and institutional transition between a 'before' and an 'after': from a fragmented and divided Italy to a unified Italy.

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