



“The power of lead”- the role of the nineteenth-century British Press in keeping the “Italian Question” before 1860 on the British political agenda and in the minds of the British Public.

Dr. Denis Reidy
Head of Italian Section
The British Library

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Abstract

This paper focuses upon the role of Italian exiles in England in the period 1820-1860, and the growing awareness of the English political establishment of the plight of political prisoners in the Kingdom of the two Sicilies. The role of William Gladstone and Sir Antony (Antonio) Panizzi in taking up the cause of freedom was interrelated with the growing movement to seek a united Italian state. Both subjects were extensively publicised in the English press, influencing the eventual move towards Italian unification by 1860.

I hope you found the title of my paper interesting and hopefully, it might have intrigued some of you. The phrase “The power of lead” can be interpreted in at least two ways. For the present, we will concentrate on the meaning of the phrase in the technological sense, in the way lead was used until comparatively recent times, in printing with lead characters in printing presses using movable type. This paper concentrates on one of the most important and telling examples- the role of the British Press in putting pressure on King Ferdinand II, King of The Sicilies, also known as “Il Re Bomba” or simply “Bomba” and his Neapolitan political prisoners.

This story begins in May 1823 when an unknown Italian, Antonio Genesio Maria Panizzi, arrived in England as a political exile “with not quite a sovereign in his pocket, knowing no one, nor a word of the language” as he once wrote of himself. Antonio Panizzi was born in the small town of Brescello in the Bassa Padana, south of Piacenza, not far from the river Po, perhaps familiar to some of you as the setting for the famous Don Camillo stories written by Giovanni Guareschi which were later brought to the screen starring Gino Cervi and Fernandel as Peppone and Don Camillo respectively. For most of the nineteenth century and certainly before Italy was finally unified in 1870, the peninsula and the country we now refer to as “Italy”, was referred to and unceremoniously dismissed, in the rather patronising words of Metternich, as a “mere geographical expression”, and consisted largely of a patchwork of numerous separate states, duchies, and republics and was predominantly under the rule of foreign invaders. Brescello at this time was in the Duchy of Modena which in this era was under the rule of the tyrannical Hapsburg ‘puppet’ ruler, Duke Francis IV. The use of the word ‘tyrannical’ is certainly neither an exaggeration nor an overstatement. Francis IV’s secret police and spy network were constantly on the lookout for radicals and

subversives who plotted the overthrow of his rule in the Duchy of Modena.¹ Those who were discovered plotting against him would either face life imprisonment or the guillotine - indeed the very blade used to execute Italian patriots is preserved in the Museo del Risorgimento at Modena, a grim testament to the savagery of the regime. Those deemed to be radicals and subversives by their oppressive invaders, invariably faced life imprisonment which, bearing in mind the conditions of most Italian prisons, particularly those in Venetia under Austrian rule, and especially the Nisida, Vicaria and Santo Stefano prisons in the Kingdom of The Two Sicilies, ruled by an equally tyrannical ruler, Ferdinand II, 'Il Re Bomba', invariably meant a slow and drawn out death sentence or immediate execution by the guillotine, hanging or by firing squad. Panizzi, like many Italians at the time, was a patriot and the aim of all patriots in the Risorgimento period, was the overthrow and the eventual expulsion of all foreign invaders from Italian soil. Panizzi led a dangerous double life. Despite having a degree in law from the University of Parma, which was to serve him well later in life, he was employed as a town clerk by day, but by night he enrolled other patriotic sympathizers into the 'Sublimi Maestri Perfetti', a secret society which had links with the 'Carbonari' movement. Unfortunately Panizzi's dangerous double life could not continue indefinitely and his subversive activities were discovered by Duke Francis's secret police. However, he was fortunately, forewarned of his imminent arrest and he was able to cross the river Po and flee Italy for the safety of Switzerland. The matter did not stop there, however, Panizzi was condemned to death in absentia, was hanged in effigy, and all his property in Italy was confiscated. He had clearly not exaggerated the dire circumstances in which he found himself when he described his initial arrival in this country- "with not quite a sovereign in his pocket, knowing no one, nor a word of the language" Indeed, it is very likely that Panizzi only had the clothes he wore on his back (he did not have the time to bring a change of clothing with him) and it is very likely that he experienced the pangs of hunger and was probably forced to undertake some manual form of labour in order to keep body and soul together during the initial period of his stay in London and later in Liverpool. It was at Liverpool where he was advised to travel to by the celebrated Italian poet, Ugo Foscolo, since, in his opinion, there were already too many Italian political exiles in London where, incidentally, Panizzi met William Roscoe the author of his celebrated Lives of Lorenzo De Medici and of Pope Leo the Tenth. It was also while he was at Liverpool that he also met Lord Brougham who was later to become the Lord Chancellor and Sir John Gladstone, father of William Ewart Gladstone, who was later to become Prime Minister and one of Panizzi's greatest friends and most powerful political allies in England.

In 1831, one year before becoming a naturalized Englishman, Panizzi was appointed as an Extra-Assistant Librarian in the Department of Printed Books at the Library of the British Museum. His very considerable talents did not go unnoticed nor unrecognised and his career was meteoric- he rose to become the principal Librarian of the British Museum and it was he who invented his celebrated 91 cataloguing rules and it was he who enforced the Copyright Act. However, his lasting achievement was his concept of and the realisation of the celebrated Round Reading Room. When he pointed out that France had its Bibliothèque Nationale, but England, the richest and arguably the most powerful country in the world at that time, did not, he won the day with his famous 'war cry' - "Paris must be beaten!". Panizzi's also ensured the creation of a significant Department of Printed Books in The British Museum, upon which the basis and the structure of the present British Library (created in 1973) was formed and it's replacement with the new purpose-built modern British Library building at St Pancras today.

It is generally less well known, however, that during his career at the British Museum Panizzi remained true to his strong patriotic feelings and "Carbonaro" leanings and was

¹ For Panizzi's political life, see Constance Brooks, *Antonio Panizzi, Scholar and Patriot*, (Manchester, 1931).

Cavour's unofficial Ambassador in London. Being a very well qualified and cultured man and having relatively easy access to the English Establishment, Panizzi endeavoured to assist the numerous political exiles, especially Italian political exiles, as much as he could.

In 1844 things took a distinct turn for the worse. Panizzi discovered that the Foreign Secretary, Lord Aberdeen had instructed the Home Secretary, Sir James Graham, to order the British Post Office to intercept and open the mail of foreign political exiles living in England, a criminal offence, especially Mazzini's (and he suspected his own) addressed to known patriots in Italy. The contents of their correspondence were then passed on via the Austrian Embassy in London to the Austrian authorities in Italy and thence to the authorities in Naples. Panizzi and his contemporaries were convinced that the transfer of this vital information about the Italian revolutionaries had forewarned the Neapolitan authorities of a planned insurrection and had led directly to the capture, arrest and eventual execution of two of Italy's most loyal martyrs to the cause, the Bandiera brothers Attilio and Emilio in 1844. Panizzi contacted Thomas Duncombe, the radical Member of Parliament for Finsbury, who was sympathetic to Italian and Hungarian causes, to raise the matter in the House of Commons. Panizzi's revelations caused a sensation and he then published an article entitled 'Post Office Espionage' in the *North British Review* in November 1844 in which he pointed out that Mazzini had not plotted "any wicked design against England" (p.269) and condemned a British government which, apart from committing a criminal offence in breaking its own laws in intercepting and tampering with the Royal Mail, to its eternal shame, had "volunteered its services as a spy to the King of Naples" (p.295). In Panizzi's view, Aberdeen and his government had stooped to become informers for the Austrian and the Neapolitan authorities and had assisted in the capture, summary trial and execution of Italian patriots. Once the revelation was in the public domain, satirical cartoons in the British Press abounded, perhaps the most mordant being those which appeared in *Punch* which depicted Graham as "Paul Pry at the Post Office."² Reports also appeared in national and regional newspapers such as *The Morning Chronicle* of February 26 1845, and the *Liverpool Mercury* of February 28 1845 showing the extent to which the sensation was reported not only in the English capital but also in the regions.

² *Punch or the London Chiarivari*, Vol. vii. (1844) p.7.



Fig.1, “Paul Pry at the Post Office” showing the Home Secretary, Sir James Graham, opening and reading the correspondence of Italian political exiles in England before disclosing the contents to the Austrian authorities in Italy from Punch, or The London Chiarivari, Vol. 7, 1844.

and “The Post-Office Peep-Show” which portrayed dubious foreign figures in military or diplomatic uniforms, queuing up to take a peep at letters in a miniature, model ‘theatre’ of the British Post Office in London, on payment of a penny.³

³ Op. cit., Vol. vii. (1844), p. 34.

in several other papers including perhaps the most influential British newspaper at the time, “The Thunderer”, The Times. Palmerston, who was then Foreign Secretary was so delighted with Gladstone’s letters that he had copies printed at government expense and had them dispatched to every court in Europe, including that of Ferdinand II. Many other British newspapers and journals also began to publish accounts of events in Naples and to express opinions on them.⁶ Panizzi wrote a further article in the *Edinburgh Review* in which he passionately wrote: “We implore men of all parties, of all nations, of all creeds to raise a unanimous and unmistakable cry of abhorrence in the name of outraged humanity against deeds to which pagan tyranny, oriental despotism and African ferocity can hardly find a parallel”. The British Press kept up its constant verbal ‘bombardment’, ‘barrage’ and blockade against Ferdinand II “Bomba” for several years. Further satirical cartoons continued to appear in *Punch* such as “How to treat that Bully Bomba” and “Fireworks in preparation” which not only depict Bomba but the Pope as fireworks, not in the form of a Roman Candle or Roman Candles, which in itself would have been rather ironic but rather in the form of “rockets”, with very short fuses awaiting and ready to be lit.

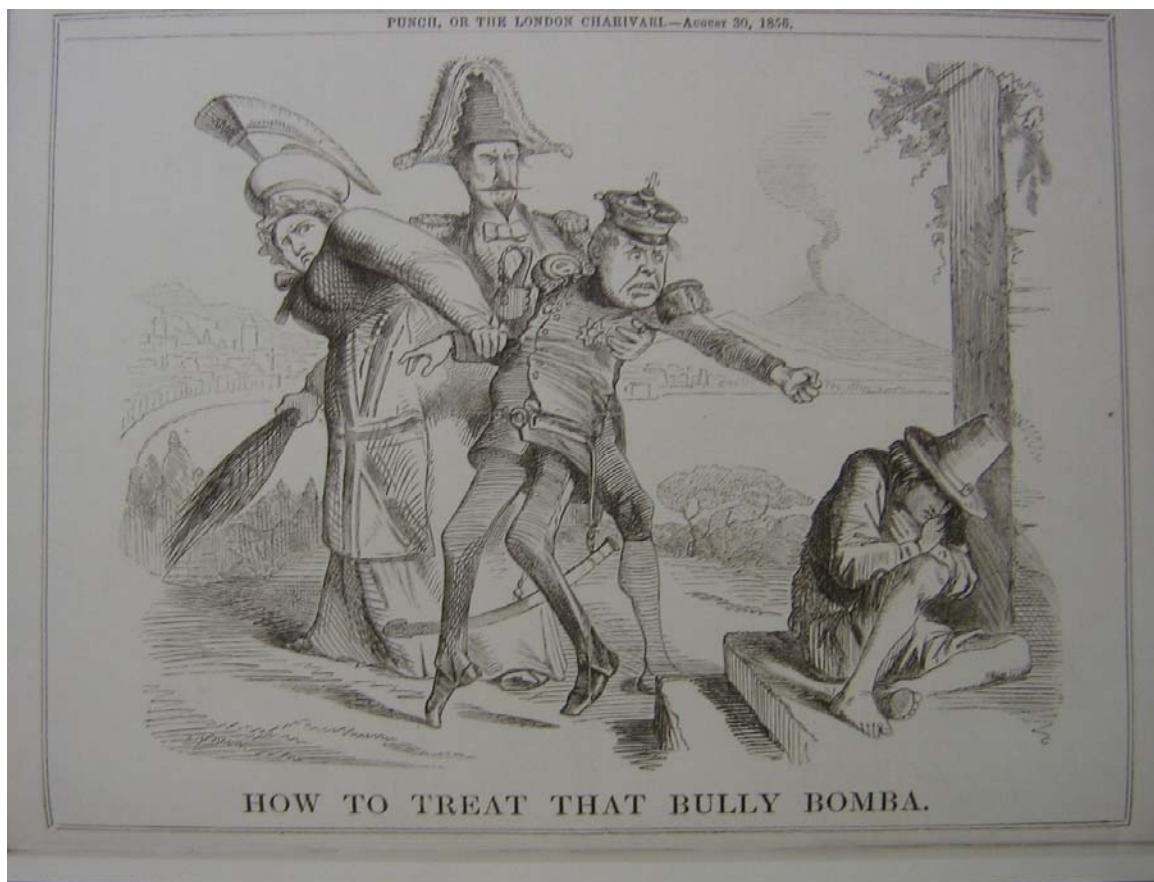


Fig. 3 “How to treat that bully Bomba” from *Punch, or The London Charivari*, August 30, 1856, p. 85.

⁶ Such as the three articles in *The Morning Chronicle* of August 23, 1851, October 29, 1851, January 31, 1852. As late as 1888, the *Birmingham Daily Post* of September 12, 1888 printed an article – “Mr. Gladstone and Neapolitan prisons”.

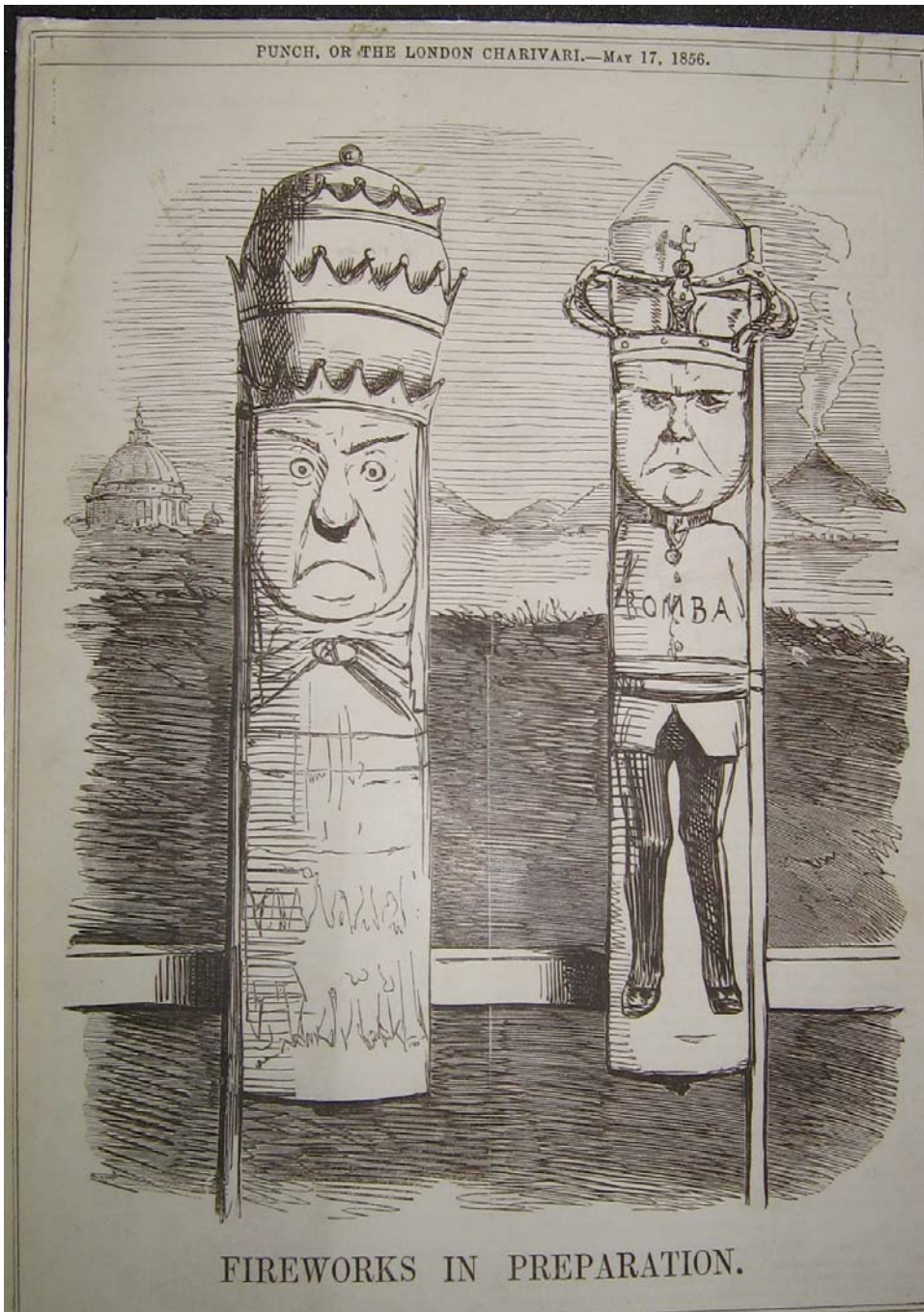


Fig. 4 "Fireworks in preparation" from Punch, or The London Charivari, May 17, 1856.

The constant pressure from the British Press embarrassed Ferdinand II to such an extent that his international reputation and position were no longer tenable and he finally realised that the game was up and he was eventually persuaded to allow the political prisoners to go into exile in The United States. Up to the minute news bulletins on “The Neapolitan Prisoners” or Exiles as they were referred to by the British press, were relayed to readers and the Illustrated London News prided itself on communicating news to its readers and to providing an unprecedented illustrated coverage of progress. The 66 prisoners left Naples in March 1859 on the sailing ship Stromboli and were later transferred to an American ship, the David Stewart. A daring plan was hatched to rescue the prisoners from the ship en route for the States and Panizzi and others overran and took command of the ship and forced the captain to put into the nearest port of call at Cork on the South East coast of Ireland where they received a tumultuous reception on 6 March.⁷ The imagination of the British public had been truly fired.⁸ At Bristol on 23 March another huge crowd gathered to greet them, including members of the press, especially the reporters of the Illustrated London News.⁹ Such scenes featuring tumultuous crowds showing the spontaneous affection of the British public were faithfully recorded by the wood engravers of the Illustrated London News. The Exiles received a tumultuous welcome when they eventually arrived in London at Paddington Station on 2 April 1859. The Illustrated London News captured the scene and immortalised the arrival of the prisoners by putting their portraits on the front page – an unprecedented gesture and an honour rarely accorded to foreign visitors to Britain at the time and only repeated when Garibaldi, the hero of the Roman Republic, made his triumphant visit to England, and specially London, in 1864.¹⁰ Indeed public enthusiasm and support for the prisoners had been whipped up to such a level of frenzy that when a public subscription and The Lord Mayor’s Fund were proposed and set up to assist the Neapolitan prisoners, thousands of pounds were gladly contributed by an ever generous British public to the prisoners. Charles Dickens no less, wrote to Panizzi and, in a generous gesture offered to write or to assist in writing the biographies of the more prominent Italian political prisoners so that the proceeds of the sale of these biographies could generate some extra income for them.

At the beginning of this paper I mentioned that we would also examine the other meaning of the phrase “The power of lead”. Lead, of course, has an awesome power when used ballistically- in bullets, grapeshot, grenades, cannon balls and shells. I ask you to reflect on this question for a moment – which use of lead has had the more power and influence on the history of civilisation?- the use of lead in the printing press since the invention of printing with movable type with lead characters by Gutenberg in the 1450s, or the use of lead ballistically since the invention of gunpowder to propel lead ammunition to its target - which has had more power and impact? Or let me phrase the question in another way- has the power of lead used in the printing press ultimately had more influence and effect on humanity and the history of human civilisation than the power of lead used militarily and ballistically? The answer may perhaps, be found in what happened in the period which we have just examined. Even allowing for the fact that British politics were at their most Liberal with a capital ‘L’ and a small ‘l’, the British Empire and British power were at their greatest at this time. Despite it being the era of ‘gunboat diplomacy’, the

⁷ *The Times*, 9 March 1859, p.11.

⁸ For example, *The Leeds Mercury* ran two articles on “The Italian Question and the Neapolitan Exiles” in its issues of March 15 and March 19, 1859.

⁹ Curiously even reported by the rival newspaper *The Times*, 24 March 1859, p.12.

¹⁰ Once again the engravers of the *Illustrated London News* were again on hand to record the triumphant visit of Garibaldi to London in April 1864 See *The Illustrated London News - Supplement*, 23 April, 1864, p. 397.. Indeed Garibaldi’s visit to England and especially to London was deemed to be so successful that members of the British Government were seriously concerned that riots might break out in London and consequently they asked Panizzi to have a quiet word with the Italian hero and asked him to curtail his visit by a few days.

British Government did not choose to send in gunboats to force Bomba to release his political prisoners although they had the power to do so. Rather the British Government condoned a campaign through the British press. The campaign was slower and took longer to achieve but there is little doubt that the power of lead used by the press was more powerful and probably more effective in creating a climate of opinion within Britain and other European countries which would lead to the unification of Italy. Since not a single shot had been fired in anger, there was certainly less loss of life than the military use of the power of lead. Perhaps in the final analysis, the whole question can be answered in a telling phrase which has noble precedents- ultimately “The pen is mightier than the sword”¹¹

¹¹ The phrase which is a metonymic adage appears to have been first used by the English author Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1839 in his play *Richelieu ; Or The Conspiracy* although Euripides who died c. 406 BC used a similar phrase “The tongue is mightier than the blade”. There are also several biblical precedents from the Old and the New Testaments perhaps the most widely quoted being the Epistle to the Hebrews 4:12 “Indeed the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart”.