
REVIEW ARTICLES

Sidney Sonnino and Italy

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By the time he was first elected to parliament in 1880 at age 33, Sidney Sonnino had already published a major socio-political document, *I Contadini di Sicilia*, had co-directed a weekly newspaper *La Rassegna Settimanale*, and had become an influential conservative reformer. He assumed his first ministerial position, undersecretary of the Treasury, in 1889 and from then until the end of his active political life in 1919 he was either in the government or a major figure in the opposition. He served as minister of Finance in 1893 and as minister of the Treasury between 1894 and 1896, led the conservative opposition to Giolitti from 1900 to 1913, and, during the *età giolittiana*, headed the government for two brief periods, once in 1906, and again in 1909. Between 1914 and 1919 he acted as Italy's minister of Foreign Affairs; he was the man of the Treaty of London which brought Italy into World War I on the side of the allies and was one of the country's principal negotiators at the Paris peace conference. He managed as well to found and edit a national daily *Il Giornale d'Italia* and to write articles and editorials on most social, political, and economic issues of his day. In short, Sonnino was a major political figure in Italy throughout the entire period between unification and the rise of fascism.

Sonnino was a peculiar sort of public figure. Although he expressed in print his opinion on most public matters, he did not sign many of his articles, especially those which appeared in newspapers. He was a key personality in many controversial policy questions: should Italy enter the war or should she remain neutral; when should she enter if she did and on which side; what should Italy demand at the peace conference and what should she be willing to settle for? And yet, when challenged by critics he

refused to justify or defend his positions. Sonnino probably wanted his actions and ideas to stand or fall on their own merits but when it comes to understanding Sonnino's role in Italian history his reticence creates problems. Contemporaries and later historians have been unable to pinpoint his stance on issues, to determine his role in policy decisions, and to discover the motives behind his actions. Given his importance, this has left sizeable gaps in our knowledge of Italian history.

Sonnino's personal papers were needed to provide answers to questions about his career. But, according to a supposedly reliable source, Sonnino had destroyed all his papers before he died. Fortunately for others in his profession, an American historian, Ben Brown, was not put off by the lack of documents on Sonnino and decided around 1960 to undertake a major study of the politician's career. His decision paid off in 1967 when he located the entire collection of Sonnino's private papers hidden away in an abandoned room in the statesman's summer villa.

The six volumes reviewed¹ here were drawn entirely from this treasure trove: three contain Sonnino's personal diary, one his correspondence between 1916 and 1922, and two collect journal articles, speeches, and newspaper pieces which finally link Sonnino to his anonymous writings. The volumes were edited by Brown and an Italian colleague Pietro Pastorelli and they seem to have done a first rate job in bringing together the materials for publication. In particular, they have succeeded in making the volumes immensely readable even by non-specialists without in any way compromising the original manuscripts. They provide thumbnail biographical sketches of people who figure in the diary and letters. They clarify vague references to dates, memoranda, places, and events. They cross-reference all people, places, dates, etc. so that researchers as well as casual readers can consult the volumes without reading from beginning to end. We can now turn to an examination of Sonnino and his career as seen through these volumes.

Sonnino's brand of conservatism and his way of practising politics reflect his class — that of a wealthy, newly aristocratic Tuscan. In his published articles between about 1870 and 1900, Sonnino comes across as a social reformer: he campaigns for universal suffrage, improved education for rural areas, development of the south, rights for workers to organize and strike, tax reforms and so on. His purpose, however, was not to revolutionize society. Quite the contrary, he hoped to avoid outright revolution through modest reforms. For example, he argued that an increase in the franchise would give more Italians a say in who governed and thus make them more

¹ S. SONNINO, *Scritti e Discorsi Extraparlamentari 1870-1920*. 2 Volumes, editori Laterza, Bari, 1972. pp. 1675; *Diario 1866-1912*. Volume I, editori Laterza, Bari, 1972, pp. XLV+534, *Diario 1914-1916*. Volume II, editori Laterza, Bari, 1972, pp. XII+374; *Diario 1916-1922*. Volume III, editori Laterza, Bari, 1972, pp. XI+407; *Carteggio 1916-1922*. Editori Laterza, Bari, 1975. pp. XV+757.

committed to the system. He even advocated profit-sharing schemes in factories as a way to lessen conflicts between capital and labour; if workers had a stake in capitalism they would be reluctant to rise against it.

He wanted to conserve the system without any fundamental redistribution of power or wealth, an objective discernable in all his writings. Take for example his solution to the southern problem — encourage overseas emigration and provide southern landowners with low interest loans. Sonnino recognized that this policy favoured large landowners on the one hand and exported rather than confronted Italy's difficulties on the other. But by Sonnino's standards both peasants and landowners would benefit from these policies. It is worth noting that with only minor alterations, his proposals have a modern ring to them. After all, federal subsidies to local industries as a way of relieving unemployment is quite similar to Sonnino's proposal to aid landowners.

I found his writings before 1900 more interesting than his later works. In his pre-1900 pieces, his analyses of social and economic relations are extraordinarily perceptive. For example, his description of sharecropping in Tuscany written in 1874 surpassed any that I am familiar with. Although he fails to acknowledge the abuses that went along with the system and romanticizes the harmony between landowners and *mezzadri*, he does recognize that its essence lay in risk sharing. Similarly, I know of no descriptions of economic conditions in the south as vivid as the ones he presented in a series of articles between 1880 and 1900. But after 1900, Sonnino became an important political personage, he had less time and inclination to go and observe conditions first hand, and in any case he turned his attention (at least in publications) to bread and butter political issues.

Sonnino's reserve, his quest for privacy come through with force in his diary. Whatever the source of these characteristics (Giorgio Spini in a charming, informative introduction traces them to his English, devoutly Anglican mother), they affected his behaviour and even what he included in his diary. He had few intimate friends; he tended to keep his own counsel. In his diary he never discusses personal matters nor does he reveal personal opinions. Entries deal in almost telegraphic fashion with the contents of meeting, conversations, and so on — no personal assessment of individuals or events, no strictly private observations. He mentions the Treaty of London only once and then obliquely — he wondered if Brusati, an aide-de-camp of the king, knew of his "accord" with the Entente because of remarks made in conversation. In spite of this reluctance to unmask himself completely even in his diary, these volumes are packed with valuable historical material.

Although many historians will head straight for volumes two and three which cover the war and early post-war years, it would be a mistake to overlook volume one. In it, Sonnino, by describing his activities as a

politicians, gives one of the most graphic accounts have ever read of how parliamentary democracy was practised in Italy between 1870 and 1914. History books try to explain *trasformismo*, but a student is more likely to understand the phenomenon simply by reading Sonnino's record of his own wheeling and dealing than by studying a textbook.

History texts also stress the ability of Italian politicians to manipulate elections through control of local prefects. Sonnino makes no reference to election campaigns but his total lack of concern for his constituents stands as silent witness to this kind of rotten borough system. Sonnino's policies (and those of his fellow politicians as well) were at best what he considered good for Italy, based of course on his own set of preferences. Such a system was susceptible to corruption which made political scandals a convenient way to topple governments. Sonnino himself was above reproach but he was a skilled operator within the system. His diary seems to suggest that he did not foresee that an extension of the franchise would destroy this system.

I can only outline briefly what readers can expect to find in volumes two and three. They contain the story of Italy's negotiations with the Entente and the Triple Alliance, complete with the reasoning that led Italy to join the allies. It seems to me that Sonnino had more or less decided to enter the war against Austria as early as the fall of 1914 but held out until the spring of 1915 in an effort to obtain better terms from the English and French and to allow the Italian army time to prepare for war. Sonnino continued to press Austria for territorial concessions in exchange for neutrality after he had determined Italy's course of action. He does not explain his motives — perhaps a bargaining tactic, perhaps an attempt to divert Austria's attention away from Italy's war preparations. The record of conversations during the spring of 1915 is fascinating: on a typical morning, Sonnino would meet with Bülow, the Kaiser's special representative to Rome and make new demands on Austria; in the afternoon he would confer with the English ambassador to Rome, Rennell Rodd, about war plans.

Sonnino's diary indicates that allied relations during the war were at best strained. No trust existed among the partners and no firm commitments were made to a joint effort against the central powers. Each country had its own territorial or other ambitions and all were reluctant to fight battles that seemed remote from their areas of interest. Why should Italy send troops to Greece; why should France send troops to the Tyrol and so on? The same kind of mistrust and narrow self-interest carried over to the peace conference. The diary provides a straightforward account of the conflicts that transformed the peace into a kind of cold war.

The letters are a useful complement to the third volume of the diary. The correspondence between Sonnino and Bergamini, director of *Giornale d'Italia*, provides a unique commentary on two prominent individuals' atti-

tudes towards fascism. At least in 1922, Bergamini was an enthusiastic supporter of fascism; it promised to end the "red tyranny", to restore law and order, and to give the country strong leadership. Sonnino was less enthusiastic; the fascists had energy and the will to work for Italy but they lacked any constructive programmes to deal with the economic problems facing the country. But neither man was particularly concerned about Mussolini's total disregard for democratic processes; Bergamini did not approve of the "excess" of fascism but then there were compensations.

Why were many Italian leaders so willing to foresake democracy? Occupation of factories by workers had certainly frightened them as had the takeover of uncultivated lands by peasants. Post-war governments had been reluctant to take punitive action against these threats to private property and with the ruins of aristocratic Russia still smouldering, the capitalist class in Italy was uneasy. The war had brought about changes in the electorate; all soldiers could vote and in the first post-war election sixty per cent of the male population cast ballots. Two working-class parties together gained a majority in parliament which endangered the hegemony of the old guard. Many felt that Mussolini could be disposed of once he had accomplished his task. But if we read Sonnino's papers with this question in mind, we can see that the bourgeois oligarchs who ran Italy from 1870 to 1922 were not committed to democratic processes and it was simple enough for them to drop even the facade of popular consent when the going got rough.

