The role of ideas, networks and cultural representations in the support for the Risorgimento and Giuseppe Mazzini among Belgian progressives.

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For too long historiography has been founded on the assumption that the period up to the outbreak of the First World War was only an era of national integration and of national conflicts. Nevertheless, it is precisely in the second half of the ‘long nineteenth century’ that political and cultural transfers (of values, ideas and practices) boomed in Europe and the Atlantic world. The later 19th century saw the evolution of an Europeanized public sphere characterized by increasingly dense networks of transnational contacts. Transnational networks promoted by social groups and political parties became more important in the later nineteenth century. These networks could include liberal solidarity committees in support of battle sites in other nations as well as international conferences.

Recently scholars have been giving more attention to transnational networks and transfers in the history of the Risorgimento, the 1848-revolutions and anticlericalism. Risorgimento-historians have been re-
searching subjects such as the connections between Giuseppe Mazzini and Great Britain and France, the revolutionary appeal of Garibaldi around the world, the participation of French volunteer to the Risorgimento in 1848-1849 and the role of the exile-experience among the protagonists of the movement. Indeed, a transnational perspective is of enormous use in approaching the Risorgimento. Italian state formation and nation-building was partly a transnational process and took place across state boundaries. During the Risorgimento, revolutionaries like Giuseppe Mazzini and Giuseppe Garibaldi made the Italian battle for independence a popular cause outside Italy. Both of them mobilized people across national borders around a common and universal ideal of the freedom struggle. A transnational perspective can also clarify how the annexation of the Papal states and the city of Rome in Italy was perceived in other nations, where frictions between Church and state also came to a head in the second half of the 19th century. Wolfram Kaiser has argued convincingly that these 'culture wars' between Catholics and anticlericals were in the eyes of the combatants in different national contexts a European conflict with a prominent transnational dimension. Free thinkers in different states regarded themselves as part of a broader front engaging the same opponent at a European level just like Mazzini thought of the Italian struggle for national unification as part of a broader European battle aimed at the emancipation of oppressed nationalities all over central and Southeastern Europe.

This article will tie in with this thematic renewal by analyzing the Italian connections of Belgian intellectual and freethinker Charles Potvin (1818-1902). The importance of Charles Potvin in Belgian liberalism and literary criticism is no secret for academics specialized in Belgian intellectual history but his international ties and networks are often neglected. A connection of considerable importance in his life and thought was the Belgian Risorgimento-historians like Roger Aubert, Mario Battistini, John Bartier, Robert van Nuffel and more recently Michel Dumoulin and Sabina Gola only deal with Potvin in a footnote. Due to a broader thematic approach my published dissertation on Potvin did not fully explore this subject. However, examining the connections of Potvin with the Risorgimento can throw a light on the importance of transnational connections, both on an ideological and practical level in the interconnected history of the Risorgimento and anticlericalism in the 19th century. Someone like Potvin was an important figure in Belgium in transforming the actions of Garibaldi and Mazzini into an ideal image of revolutionary politics. We will see how Potvin developed a personalized commitment to and identification with Italy’s perceived oppression and liberation as part of a universal fight for freedom and how he tried to transfer the Risorgimento to Belgian politics by linking it with Belgian history and his own national battle against Catholics. At the end, this article will show Paul Aron wrong when the Belgian literary historian states

6 See The Risorgimento in Transnational Perspective Conference, held by the German Historical Institute and British School in Rome in April 2011 (http://hszoekult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/index.asp?id=3860&view=pdf&pn=tagungsbericht)
that Potvin was ‘an individualistic intellectual who did not participate in any form of collective action or solidarity’.9

We will make the transnational dimensions of the Risorgimento and Potvin’s role in it concrete by focusing on ideas, networks and cultural representations which transcended national boundaries and were used to export the Italian struggle for liberty to Belgium. The first chapter concerns the importance of partly transnationally constituted ideologies and ideas like anticlericalism and liberal nationalism as a binding force between Belgian radical democrats like Potvin and the Italian ‘brothers in arms’. In a second chapter I will focus on the personal contacts between Mazzini and Potvin as an example of organized transnational cooperation among radical democrats in 19th century Europe. The (failed) cooperation between Potvin’s La Nation and Mazzini was a remarkable event in the history of the Risorgimento as a transnational movement. Vittoria Ruffini Tucci and Rosa Terrizi already did research on this case in the 1980s.10 We have furthered their research by concentrating on Potvin’s role and discuss new findings like the correspondence between Potvin and Blanc, within a broader context of the ideological tensions between Mazzini’s political thought and French socialism before and after 1848.

At last, to analyze some of Potvin’s plays and poems will show how cultural representations played an important role in the transfer of the Italy’s struggle for liberty to other nations, making foreigners devoted to the foreign cause of the Risorgimento. Indeed, symbolic practices, representations and emotions are an integral part of the material workings of ideology and nationalism. No wonder the new history of the Risorgimento has been inspired by the methodologies of cultural history. We will see how Potvin tried to evoke the inspiring political myth of Garibaldi and became part of an international network of writers, journalists and artists who tried to immortalize Garibaldi.


A European progressive

Potvin grew up in a bourgeois Catholic environment in the Walloon city of Mons. He attended a Catholic college, after which he studied Law at the Catholic University of Louvain. Searching for kindred spirits, he left for Brussels and enrolled in the Free University of Brussels. He never finished his studies but integrated quickly into the progressive liberal circles of the capital.11 By progressive liberals we mean the left social-progressive wing within the liberal family, a varied group of socially engaged academics, lawyers, 1848 democrats and middle-class merchants, united in the pursuit of social mobility, political participation and dignified living conditions for the lower classes. As the liberal movement grew, so did the discontent with the bargaining policies and after 1848 a new generation of liberals emerged who were critical of these compromise policies. They opposed the doctrinal/conservative liberals in the government who rejected the...
political emancipation of the lower classes. These men advocated a complete separation between Church and State, electoral reform and the improvement of the work- and living conditions of the working classes. Potvin became a central figure among these progressives. We should not underestimate the heterogeneous character of these progressives: they formed a mixture of moderate reformers, radical democrats and republicans, with socialist tendencies and different sorts of contacts with the Liberal Party. The boundaries were not always clear and every categorical division between progressives and conservatives fails to grasp the complex character of these progressives who sometimes evolved towards the conservative establishment.

Potvin would never participate in any election but did play a considerable role in the struggle within the liberal party in Brussels. Potvin publicly supported candidatures of progressive liberals like Louis Defré (1814-1880) and was one of the founders of an electoral association in Brussels to oppose the official liberal association’s list of ‘ministerial liberals’. Potvin was also behind the formation of the pressure group Ligue du Peuple which wanted to gather all progressive and democratic forces in order to oppose the conservative liberal’s refusal of ever introducing general suffrage. Together with Paul Janson (1840-1913) Potvin clearly belonged to the radical leftist side in the liberal spectrum, always wanting to radicalize the battle with conservative liberals. Potvin stood at the base of the polarization between progressives and conservative liberals, eventually leading to the establishment of Janson’s progressive liberal party in the 1880s.

Potvin became a major contributor to the mouthpiece of progressives in Brussels, the political-literary magazine Revue Trimestrielle. Together with some other progressive liberals, he went on to found the successor of the Revue Trimestrielle, the Revue de Belgique. He emerged as one of the major figures among the anticlerical bourgeoisie in Brussels, being an active mason, member of the educational pressure group Ligue de l’Enseignement and even president (1879-1882) of the most important freethinking society at the time, the Libre Pensée. Progressives like Potvin organized themselves in freethinking societies and masonic lodges and expanded the battle against the church into a struggle for social justice against an unjust balance of power and undue privileges.

Potvin also represented a kind of intellectual who tried to defend democratic and nationalistic values on a European scale, and did not restrict himself to the political battle in Belgium. After the coup of French president Louis-Napoleon Potvin believed the whole of Europe was in danger and made friends with different French republican refugees in Brussels like Etienne Arago (1802-1892) and Victor Hugo (1802-1885). Potvin lived in an era of internationalization of intellectual life in Europe. Proof hereof was his active membership of the Association pour le Progrès des Sciences Sociales (AIPSS) in the 1860s. The foundational comitee of AIPSS was domintated by liberals from the Belgian capital. This pan-European forum held congresses in different European cities for

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14 Regarding Potvin’s contribution to the political culture of progressive liberalism in the capital we refer to a soon to be published article of ours: DE SPIEGELER (C.). “Charles Potvin en de progressistische politieke cultuur”, Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis, 2013, 2.


four years in order to influence public opinion and harmonize national legislations. During sessions of this forum Potvin discussed with Clémence Royer (1830-1902) and other French intellectuals/writers on a broad variety of subjects.

Potvin developed into a prominent figure in different transnational networks in 19th century republican and anticlerical Europe. He became the director of a republican paper in Brussels, La Nation, which was supported by some prominent foreign democrats such as Louis Blanc, Victor Hugo and Giuseppe Mazzini. At his death in 1902, he was justly presented by some as ‘one of the last survivors of the generation of 1848’. In his early thirties already Potvin had the honour as a member of the Association of Belgian democrats of meeting the Hungarian republican Lajos Kossuth (1806-1894) in London in 1851. Kossuth held meetings in the United States, Great Britain and France and became the main contact person for republican committees around Europe. The poetic Zeitgeist of 1848 kept inspiring Potvin. He became one of the fiercest Belgian opponents of Napoleon III. At the farewell party of the congress of AIPSS in Ghent in 1863 Potvin toasted on the ‘republican France of 1848’ as to oppose the regime of Napoleon III, a toast which was believed to be deliberately omitted from the official year reports of the organization. As a prominent member of the most important freemasonry lodge in Brussels Les Amis Philanthropes, Potvin was also a key figure in the international collaboration between peace societies and Latin freemasonry in the second half of the 19th century. He was one of the editors of the peace manifesto of Les Amis Philanthropes to the lodges in France and German to end the the French-German war. Potvin was also a member of the Belgian section of the Association Internationale des Amis de la Paix, together with other progressives from the Belgian capital.

Last but not least, Potvin had important contacts among European freethinkers and anticlericals. As the president of the most important Belgian freethinking society in Belgium between 1879 and 1882 Potvin took initiative with César de Paepe (1841-1890), one of the most influential socialist theorists and free-thinkers, to organize the First congress of the Fédération Internationale des Sociétés des Libres Penseurs in 1880 in Brussels, in collaboration with Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891). Potvin’s republican and anticlerical writings and contacts show how the conflict between Catholics and anticlerical in Europe was a conflict with a prominent transnational dimension. In the private correspondence of Potvin we found letters to freethinkers from around Europe, like the British freethinker Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891), the German editor of the liberal Frankfurter Zeitung, Carl Volkhausen (1822-1899) and the Swiss politician, Theodore Curti (1848-1914).

In this transnational public sphere key texts and books were translated and distributed across national borders, so that anticlericals could draw to a substantial extent upon shared cultural resources and intellectual foundations. Potvin’s knowledge on secularist publications and contacts with free thinking movements in other national
contexts were considerable.\footnote{26} Especially the Italian connection is of interest here. Potvin sympathized with\textit{ La Ragione}, the paper of former priest and Italian freethinker Cristoforo Bonavino (1821-1895), known as Ausonio Franchi. Potvin read with great interest the discussion that was going on in\textit{ La Ragione} in 1858 between French and Italian radical democrats/anticlericals like Eugène Sue, Edgar Quinet (1803-1875), Franchi and Francesco Dall’Ongare on the best way to replace Catholicism by rationalism.\footnote{27} French political refugee Désiré Bancel (1822-1871) contributed to the debate by writing an introduction to the French translation of Franchi’s\textit{ Razionalismo del popolo}, published in Brussels. Potvin was the indirect initiator of this discussion when he asked the editor of the paper\textit{ Le National} for the support of Eugene Sue in their anticlerical campaign.\footnote{28} Sue’s contribution caused the reaction of Quinet and others.

Potvin’s own work was also reviewed in\textit{ La Ragione}. A poem Potvin wrote after his trip to Italy about Italy’s struggle for freedom (La Mendiate) received a good review in Franchi’s paper. Potvin’s poem was called ‘a magnificent work of art, a noble testimony of justice and solidarity’ with a clear political undertone: the hope for the deliverance and independence of Italy. A letter of Potvin as a reaction to this review was later published in the same paper.\footnote{29} Povin’s poem was also reviewed by Etienne Arago, a close friend of him, in\textit{ Il Diritto}, one of the most important radical Italian papers. Arago called Potvin ‘a champion of the liberty of nations’ and ‘a soldier of democracy’\footnote{30}. In this European anticlerical and radical democratic public sphere conflicts that began in a specific locality could trigger public discussion in other countries.\footnote{31} For example, Potvin reacted strongly to the Mortara affair of 1858 when the Vatican kidnapped a six-year-old Jewish boy from his family in the city of Bologna in order to have him educated as a Catholic after he had been baptized during an illness by a Catholic domestic servant. This incident caused world wide heated debates over individual conscience, freedom of religion and the rights of family. Potvin used the incident to criticize the dogma of Baptism and more in general ‘l’impuissance morale du catholicisme’.\footnote{32}

Potvin’s networks and ideas concerning liberalism and nationalism were thus determined by interaction with intellectuals and ideological and political movements in other nations. His literary activities and oeuvre on the other hand were mostly confined to the glorification of Belgium’s literary and cultural past and identity. Potvin was an important author of historical and philological works on his country’s (literary) past. He was assigned by the liberal municipal authorities of Brussels to teach courses on the history of Belgian literature and became a respected literary critic. Three of his didactic patriotic historical drama’s were rewarded by the government. Together with Edmond Picard he was one of those important prolific writers who dictated the laws of a nationalist social art through conferences, the organization of literary salons and editing important literary journals.\footnote{33} Nonetheless, Potvin’s dominant position in the official literary field got into conflict with some radical republicans like Louis Watteau\footnote{34} who saw Potvin as l’éternel lauréat des concours poétiques’ and the ris...
ing ‘l’art pour l’art’-movement in Belgium at the end of the century.

Ideas and ideologies supporting the Risorgimento: liberal nationalism and anticlericalism

In this chapter we will explore how liberal nationalism and anticlericalism transcended state boundaries in the 19th century. Exploring the similarities between Mazzini’s and Potvin’s international political thought and the anticlerical propaganda-discourses for Italian Unity in Potvin’s writing show how anticlericalism and liberal nationalism acted as a binding force between the ideas and practices of Belgian progressives like Potvin and the Risorgimento.

Nationalism is often a component in other broader ideological families. In Povin’s case, the concept of nationhood became adjacent to the concept of liberty, which was at the core of Potvin’s liberal thinking. In other words, nationalism helped to fill out the liberal ideas of Potvin. This may appear strange to persons who identify nationalism with a certain conservative and aggressive variation. In contemporary political thought nationalism is often seen as the enemy of liberalism. However, when we delve deeper into the thought of mid-19th century republicans and democrats like Potvin we see a whole different picture. Potvin and other European democrats and republicans saw the unification of Italy and Germany as essentially liberal projects. Respect for national sovereignty was an essential aspect of Potvins liberal worldview. His liberal regard for individual rights was intimately connected with nationalist concerns: just like individuals nations had rights and duties.

Potvin realized that nations could speak the language of aggressive and chauvinistic nationalism. A good understanding of the concept ‘nationality’ became a central theme in the political-ideological debate of 19th century Europe. In 1877 Potvin stressed the importance of defining the concept of ‘nationality’ because this ‘new word’ could be misused for dangerous purposes, and also referred to the use of the word ‘nationality’ in the constitution of the Roman republic in 1849. Potvin wrote that nationalities were necessities in the 19th century and that the ‘indépendance de la patrie’ was both a right (‘un droit’) and a duty (‘un devoir’). Potvin rejected race as the foundation of ‘la nationalité’ as German Romantics like Herder did in their naturalistic conception of the nation, just as language, territory and religion did not determine a nation. After all, the Belgian people consisted of two ‘races’/languages. There was always a higher moral mission or element needed: ‘la fusion du sang dans une commune patrie et l’entente des esprits dans un prince de droit’. Not so much ethnic, religious or geographical but moral barriers defined nationality in Potvin’s worldview. Potvin used the term ‘un caractère morale’ and stressed the importance of a will to unite as a basis of nationality. Mazzini wrote about ‘une pensée commune - un but commun’ in an article on ‘nationalité’. The higher mission of Belgium (‘le devoir de la Belgique’) was, according to Potvin, the defence of municipal liberties, the fusion of the social classes and the solidarity of interests.

This kind of liberal nationalism, in which the nation would be the medium of the international order and a step towards moral progress and cooperation between nations, flourished in Giuseppe Mazzini’s thought. Mazzini and Potvin argued that nations had 37


both rights and duties, just like individuals and that all nations have equal moral dignity; rejecting the politics of hostility between nations.\footnote{42} Both Mazzini and Potvin linked nationality to democracy and a higher moral mission (not to be confounded with later fascist readings which perverted Mazzini’s ideas of a national mission to legitimize aggressive foreign policy), and argued that language, territory and ethnicity were not sufficient to legitimize national independence.\footnote{43} These missions emphasize each people’s unique contribution to the progress of humanity as a whole and these common moral principles and goals were assigned by God. For both thinkers, a nation is God’s creation and it is God who assigns to a people a land and a specific mission.\footnote{44} Potvin’s words are unambiguous here: ‘Une nationalité est un fait, une existence réelle, elle est un mystère de la nature, elle n’a de raison première qu’en Dieu. (...) Dieu seul est maître de cette existence, la tuer est un crime.’\footnote{45}

The similarities in the thought of both Mazzini and Potvin highlight the internationally connected or interwoven history of political and cultural ideas at the time. The identity of mid-19th century nationalist Europe was often a closely interconnected one. There is no doubt that Potvin was inspired by Mazzini’s political thoughts, seen their personal contacts in the 1850s (see below). The publication of Mazzini’s oeuvre in French in 1862 had for Potvin even a historic meaning.\footnote{46} Mazzini’s ideas had an extraordinary appeal for generations of progressive nationalists and revolutionary leaders from his day until well into the twentieth century and inspired several patriotic movements.\footnote{47}

At the core of Potvin’s and Mazzini’s nationalism was the concrete goal of liberty that could be achieved through national revolution. This made Potvin compare the fate of Italy with the fight for independence in his own country. Italy had to fight the same enemies and was guided by the same principles of freedom and unity as Belgium:

Quiconque connaît l'Italie moderne, quiconque a vu et compris ce beau peuple, doit avouer, en son âme et conscience, qu’il est digne d’être libre et qu’aucune nation peut-être n’apporterait au service du bien général plus de puissance et de dévouement. Si l’Italie avait un peu de liberté, un peu de vie, non seulement elle serait paisible. Elle serait grande!\footnote{48}

A couple of years later Potvin went even further with his comparison between Italy and Belgium:

Les Belges qui aiment leur pays se souviendront que les principes qu’elle (Italie) invoque, les libertés qu’elle revendique constituent les bases essentielles, les lois fondamentales de notre proper existence nationale et politique.\footnote{49}


\footnote{43} URBINATI (N.). “The Legacy of Kant: Giuseppe Mazzini’s Cosmopolitanism of Nations.”, p.15.


\footnote{45} POTVIN (C.). ‘Le Livre de la nationalité belge (2e ed.).’ p. 12. Indeed, all this revolutionary spirit did not exclude a spiritualist world view. Not only Mazzini but a lot of prominent freethinkers in Brussels remained attached to a spiritualist worldview with references to Providence, a soul, a higher judge etc. Regarding Potvin’s spiritualism we refer to DE SPIEGLEER (C.). *Charles Potvin (1818-1902) en het social-liberaal denken van zijn tijd,* pp. 84-93. Jeffrey Tyssens has done thorough research to 19th century Masonic funeral rituals in lodges in Brussels. He concludes that in the 1870s spiritualism changed into a more agnostic worldview among these ardent freethinkers. *TYSSENS (J.). "Sur les rites funéraires de la franc-maçonnerie belge du XIXe siècle." Revista de Estudios Historicos de la Masonería, 2011, vol. 3, nr. 1, pp. 158-182.*


Apparently Potvin was convinced that the people of Naples, Piedmont and Rome all belonged to the same ‘nationality’, with its own mission, though many of the obvious markers of belonging to a national community, like a single monarchy, a common language or a continuous history, were absent. In the first edition of Potvin’s short-lived republican paper *La Belgique* a comparison between the Belgian constitution and the constitution of the Roman Republic (1849) appeared to underline the resemblances. Potvin’s paper cynically remarked that the people of Rome were seen as criminals whereas the martyrs of September 1830 were glorified in Europe. As a matter of fact, in Potvin’s eyes, the people of Rome had even more reasons to start a revolution than the revolutionaries in Brussels in 1830.50

Potvin’s liberal nationalist ideals made him thus a strong supporter of the battle for Italian independence. The 1848 revolutions in the Italian states ignited strong passions in Potvin’s soul. The Roman Republic became the ultimate symbol of European democracy in 1848. Potvin’s *La Nation* systematically published the decrees of the Republic, and triumphantly announced that crime had decreased considerably in Rome since the departure of Pius IX.51 The destruction of the Roman Republic by the cooperation between Napoleon and the Pope and the atrocities of Austrian troops in the North determined and radicalized Potvin’s anticlerical and democratic nationalist world view. In 1849 he published a series of political inspired poems of which two were inspired by revolutions in the Italian states. In ‘Le roi de Naples’ Potvin rejected the aggressive suppression of revolutions by King of the two Sicilies Ferdinand II. Potvin mocked the belief in good pasturing Kings, observed how Ferdinand followed the path of his Bourbon-forefathers and compared Ferdinands’ bombardment of Messina with The St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre.52 In the second poem Potvin criticized Pius IX. Like Ferdinand II, Pius was first first seen as a progressive leader. But he became opposed to the ideas of a unit-ed Italy and political reform that drove the Risorgimento. Whereas Ferdinand repressed riots in Sicilia Pius IX appealed for military support of catholic countries. French president Louis-Napoleon decided to send troops to restore the Pope.

These events pushed Potvin towards a more radical anticlericalism which came to serve as another ideological link between him and the Italian unification (next to democratic nationalism). Potvin had to witness how the Church and dictators joined forces in Rome and how the Church had become ‘le drapeau et l’aguillon de tous les despotismes’, with the Papal condemnation of the Polish people rising up against Russia in 1832 still in mind.53 The restoration of the Pope in Rome through a French military intervention by the new French president and future emperor, Louis-Napoleon was unforgivable in Potvin’s eyes, and sparked a more pronounced anticlericalism in his paper *La Nation*.54 His Pius IX-poem is an essential text in this regard. In his verses Potvin accused Pius of abusing his mandate, turning to violence to keep his power and ended with a Mazzinian message:

Et toi, prêtre du Christ, toi que l’amour consacre,
Tu mèles, dans ces vils exploits,
Le Signe de la paix aux glaives du massacre,
(…)
Tu viens de ces Judas te faire le complice
(…)
Ne vois-tu pas qu’il faut, malgré le roi de Rome,
Que le droit triomphe en tout lieu,
Et qu’il ne reste plus, pour commander à l’homme,
Que deux pouvoirs : le Peuple et Dieu!55

The symbolic stand-off between the church and the secular Kingdom of Italy clearly aroused radical democrats in other nations.

50 *La Belgique Démocratique*, 15/5/1850.
51 *La Nation*, 13/03/1849.
Mazzini’s personal reputation among republicans and progressives in Italy and all over Europe reached unseen heights after the merciless Papal restoration, and the siege of Rome probably won him more widespread support than he enjoyed at any other time in his life.\(^56\) The Italian unification became an important issue in the battle between progressive liberals and Catholics in Belgium, both of whom realized that the disappearance of the Papal States would deal a severe blow to the Church.\(^57\)

Potvin played his part in trying to set public opinion in Belgium against French/Austrian ‘imperialist politics’ in Italy and the reactionary role of the Pope and would not limit his engagement to militant poetry. In *La Belgique Démocratique* Potvin elaborated the message of his Pius-poem by publishing a lengthy text on the medieval legislation in the Papal States and a strong condemnation of Pius IX who believed in ‘the force of arms and bombs’.\(^58\) A couple of years later, the assault by the Italian anarchist Orsini on Napoleon III in 1858 inspired Potvin to write another pamphlet in support of the Risorgimento and the Roman Republic in particular: *Liberté*. In *Liberté* Potvin denounced the war crimes of the army of the Austrian general, Radetsky in Northern Italy following their defeat of Charles Albert’s army and the insurgents in Milan in 1848. Potvin based his reconstruction of the Austrian atrocities (scalping, burning people etc.) on the colourful and patriotic writings of the exiled Italian general Guglielmo Pepe (1783-1855)\(^59\) who took command of the Neapolitan army in 1848 and defended Venice against the Austrians. As usual he criticized Pius IX, who had ‘betrayed his people’. He wrote about France’s ‘treason’ and reconstructed the negotiations between Mazzini and the French representative.\(^60\)

By contrast, Potvin had nothing but praise for the regime of the Roman Republic in 1849. He stressed the religious and political tolerance exercised by the three consuls, Carlo Armellini, Giuseppe Mazzini and Aurelio Saffi. The constitution of the Roman Republic with its abolition of the death penalty, freedom of religion and acknowledgement of the old Roman republican ideal came close to the political ideals for which he strived in his home country.\(^61\) This led him to take a strong dislike to the conservative Belgian liberals who did not support the Roman Republic.\(^62\)

Already in 1850 Potvin tried to legitimize the destroyed Roman Republic by criticizing the Papal legal system and the clergy’s abuse of legislative and executive power in the Papal States.\(^63\) In the second volume of his anticlerical anthology *L’Église et la morale* (1859), Potvin regarded Rome as a modern Babylon (‘c’est à Rome que le catholicisme brille dans tout son lustre’) and listed countless examples of injustice and lawlessness under Pius IX and his predecessors. He summarized the work of the anticlerical Aurelio Biancho-Giovini (1799-1862) who wrote about the financial corruption and sexual abuse practices of priests and cardinals in the Papal States under Leo XII and Gregory XVI, Pius IX’s predecessors at the Holy See, and the memoirs of Alphonse Gérard de Rayneval (1813-1858), French ambassador at the Holy Court during the 1850s. Driven by anticlerical rage Potvin copied Bianchi-Giovini’s undocumented story of tyrannic Popes, cardinals with mistresses, illegitimate children and corruption at the Papal criminal court.\(^64\) This was all part of Potvin’s frontal attack against the Catholic Church. *L’Église et la morale* and *Liberté* were published in 1858-1859, when anticlerical street protests against a law regarding the role of cloisters as chari-


58 « La Question Romaine » In : *La Belgique Démocratique*, 15/06/1850.


60 POTVIN (C.), *Liberté*, pp. 18-19; TERRIZI (R.), *Un journal républicain de Bruxelles*, p. 118. The correspondence between Mazzini and the French ambassador was also published in *La Nation: La Nation*, 02/07/1849.


62 POTVIN (C.), « De la démocratie et ses adversaires » In : *La Belgique Démocratique*, 15/07/1850.

63 « La Question Romaine » In : *La Belgique Démocratique*, 15/06/1850.

table institutions created high political tension in Belgium and an ideological warfare was launched by progressives. As a matter of fact, the second volume of *L'Église et la morale* with all the unfounded accusations against the Papal regime was explicitly published by Potvin to oppose the Church as a charitable institution.\(^{65}\)

Potvin did not always need to paraphrase secondary testimonies or studies of the brutal Papal regime to make his point. In *Liberté* and *L'Église et la morale* he cited the announcements of the papal criminal court ("sagra consulta"), posted on the walls in Rome, in order to convince his readers of the brutality of papal repression when Pius IX was restored to power. Potvin had collected these documents when he was himself in Rome.\(^{66}\) At the end of 1853 he had travelled with his old friend Emile de Laveleye (1822-1892)\(^{67}\) from Florence to Rome, via Assisi and Terni, on a ‘vettura’ (an Italian horse-cart).\(^{68}\) They had studied together in Louvain in the 1830s. De Laveleye had already travelled in Italy and became a very important figure in Belgian-Italian relations.\(^{69}\) Many other progressive liberals and acquaintances of Potvin also made a trip to Italy in the 19th century (Eugène Goblet d’Alviella, Karl Grün, Lucien Jottrand etc.) and travel accounts were sometimes published in the *Revue de Belgique*.\(^{70}\)

Potvin arrived in the peninsula at a time of serious political tensions, and was a ‘political tourist’ in Rome at the time that Pius IX reinstalled a repressive regime. Potvin reported how three young customs officers were decapitated near the Piazza della Bocca della Verita in 1854. They had tried for the shooting of a Dominican and six friars\(^{71}\) during the defence of the Roman Republic against French troops.\(^{72}\) These officers had been following the orders of the cruel captain Callimaco Zambianchi (1806-1876) who managed to escape.\(^{73}\) Potvin dramatized the executions by describing how the three ‘martyrs’ shouted ‘live the republic!’ and how the executioner displayed the three heads to the public. His report was aimed at ‘un homme de sang qui gouverne à la place du Saint-Père’, Giacomo Antonelli (1806-1876), the Cardinal Secretary of State who had arranged the flight of Pius IX in 1848 and restored absolute government upon returning to Rome.\(^{74}\)

Seen Potvin’s hatred towards the French imperialistic politics, his sympathy for the revolutionary spirit of the Italian people (‘la révolution était devenue l’âme de ce peuple’) and his belief in Mazzini’s ideas about Italian unification (‘with the popular masses’ it is only logical he strongly condemned the diplomatic motives of Prime Minister Camillo Benso di Cavour (1810-1861) and his agreement with Napoleon III in 1859 at Plombières to chase the Austrians from Piedmont, in return for the annexation of the County of Nice and the Duchy of Savoy to France. Potvin regarded these two as counter-revolutionaries and opposed these kind of tactical alliances, like Mazzini did.\(^{75}\) In *L’Europe et la nationalité belge*, one of his major anti-French works on nationality and European politics, Potvin criticized the undemocratic approval of the annexation of Savoy and Nice, which had been achieved through manipulated plebiscites, considering it to be a blemish on the Risorgimento. By quoting papers of the *Nizzardo*-Italians he supported Garibaldi and the Italian irre-

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\(^{67}\) Emile de Laveleye was one of the most brilliant intellectuals in Potvin’s circle of friend. He became a renowned economist and essayist.

\(^{68}\) POTVIN (CH.). *Emile de Laveleye, Notice nécrologique.* Brussels, Muquardt, 1892.


\(^{71}\) Ibidem. pp. 342-346.


\(^{73}\) Zambianchi, an embittered Jacobin, was an unguided missile. The immunity of Zambianchi and his unpunished crimes were a blot on Garibaldi’s reputation.

\(^{74}\) An article by Potvin on the event was reproduced under the title ‘Martyrologe du Peuple’ in Tabletes d’un libre penseur. The executioner was probably Giovanni Battista Bugatti (1779-1869), the official executioner for the Papal States from 1796 to 1865.

dentists in Nice who opposed the annexation of the County to France.  

Potvin’s support of the Risorgimento was not limited to this kind of anticlerical and anti-French writing and propaganda. When in September 1859 and January 1860 Garibaldi appealed for one million weapons for his army, the Belgian paper *Le Grelot* took the initiative to raise money. In this way liberals could create a symbolic anticlerical alternative to Peter’s Pence, a medieval contribution to the Holy See which was reintroduced as ‘le denier de Saint-Pierre’ in different countries when Pius IX had to flee Rome. Pius IX counted on financial support from Catholics around the world to defend the Papal territories. The Brussels radical paper *Le National* followed the lead of *Grelot* and also collected money for Garibaldi. In order to facilitate the collection a central committee in Brussels was formed, which then launched a manifesto drafted by Potvin who, as we have seen, already had some experience with Risorgimento propaganda writing.

In this manifesto Potvin gave free rein to his nationalist passions. He argued that the Italian people showed a desire to be a free nation, just as the Belgians had shown in the past, and that refusing the Italian people the right to be free would mean denying Belgian nationality! The Belgian liberals had to react against the Catholic attack on the principles of 1830. The ‘comité du Denier de l’Italie’ that signed the manifesto consisted of Lucien Jottrand, François Van Meenen, Albert Lacroix, Eugène Van Bemmel and many others, all of whom were progressive liberals, close friends of Potvin and bitter enemies of the conservative liberals. Of course, the conservative liberal papers did not react very enthusiastically to the initiative, especially since the manifesto was formulated by Potvin, one of the most feared progressive opinion makers and critics of conservative liberal governments. The conservative liberals favoured Comte di Cavour rather than Garibaldi and did not appreciate the radical revolutionary rhetoric of hot-headed anticlericals like Potvin; they had government responsibilities and did not want to start an open war against the Church and religion.

This kind of conflict between progressives and radical democrats and governing liberals did not only occur in Belgium but was a European phenomenon with the tensions between ‘opportunist’ republicans and radicals in France and between Whigs and radicals in England. In the context of expanding franchise, liberals were concerned with the assertion of state supremacy and hoped that their secularizing policies would help them to acquire popularity without becoming populist. The ultramontane challenge never generated sufficient dread among liberal-led governments in Europe to prompt concerted action against the Vatican-state. Radical democrats like Potvin however waged a highly charged anticlerical campaign characterized by a more pronounced hostility to church institutions as such and criticized the bargaining policies. Potvin and other radical democrats around Europe saw the Catholic Church as a massive obstacle on the path to greater political and social progress.

This gap within the liberal movement undermined the success of the initiative in Brussels, but the fervour of the Belgian radicals for the Italian cause also waned because of other more important issues in international politics at the time. In 1860 in the face of Napoleon III’s annexation plans, Potvin and Belgians in general feared the loss of their own independence. This patriotic anxiety united radicals and Catholics around the throne. There was an upsurge in patriotic publications and organizations. It is no coincidence that Potvin published a second edition of his *Livre de la nationalité belge* in 1860, together with a strong condemnation of French despotism and a tribute to the Italian people.

Nonetheless, the sympathy of radicals like Potvin for the Risorgimento never diminished. Radical democrats referred to the Italian cause during different manifestations.

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76 A correspondent of *The Times* called the voting “one of the lowest and most immoral farces which was ever played in the history of nations”. *The Times*, 28/04/1860. POTVIN (C.). ‘Situation de L’Europe. La Sainte-Alliance de la Paix.’, pp. 27-30.


78 KAISER (W.). “‘Clericalism that is our enemy!’: European anticlericalism and the culture wars.”, p. 58 and 67.

tations held in Brussels in the 1860s which had at first sight nothing to with the Risorgimento. During a banquet in honour of the publication of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* by the Belgian anticlerical editor Albert Lacroix (1834-1903) in September 1862 Victor Hugo and Louis Blanc (1811-1882) took the opportunity to talk about the Italian Question, which divided French public opinion back then. Louis Blanc’s speech was one great eulogy for Garibaldi, which outraged the catholic press. Some months later patriots (both catholic and liberal) in Brussels formed a committee in support of Polish independence. On a meeting Potvin spoke in the name of ‘l’opinion démocratique’ and compared the Polish battle with the Italian cause, a point of view which did not please those in the public who did not share Potvin’s ideological views. In february 1866 the Grand Orient de Belgique, the most important Belgian cupola of masonic lodges, organized a Masonic funeral ritual for Leopold I, who had died some months ago. This ritual was attended by hundreds of masons, including a representative of the Grand Orient of Italy. During his final funerary speech Louis Defrè, a progressive close to Potvin, constructed a story in which Leopold went to a better world and was greeted by national heroes who had given their life for their country. At the end, Leopold was also surrounded by ‘the heroes of Italy’: poets, artists, politicians who had fought for the independence of Italy, including Cavour. Driven by the same anticlerical and liberal nationalist emotions as Potvin Defrè reasoned before his masonic public that Rome had been the cause of ruin and misery in the Belgian provinces in the 16th century and was now the obstacle for Italian unity. Belgium and Italy thus had the same enemy and both triumphed. In 1867 Garibaldi was still very popular among these progressives in Brussels. In November a new subscription list was opened to financially support Garibaldi and a total amount of 3.513 francs was collected. Potvin again signed the manifesto, together with other important radicals like Edmond Picard, Charles Buls, Eugène Van Bemmel and François Van Meenen. All this shows the continuing support for the Risorgimento among progressives in the capital.

Transnational cooperation among radical democrats: Mazzini and Potvin

A key feature of the anticlerical and radical democratic European public sphere in the 19th century was organized transnational cooperation. We have already mentioned the conferences of organizations such as AIPSS, Fédération Internationale des Sociétés des Libres Penseurs and the Association Internationale des Amis de la Paix in the 1860s-1870s. Here we will focus on the networks and cooperation between Potvin and Mazzini in the 1850s. Mazzini was the first to organize cooperation between radical democrats with the foundation of the group Young Europe in 1830 during his exile and continued this with the foundation of the Comitato Centrale Democratico Europea (CCDE) in 1850. The initiatives described here went further than joint proclamations and assertions of solidarity but tried to create political communication performing a transfer function. However, as we will see, national and ideological rivalries militated against effective joint actions by radical democrats.

Potvin was the director of the republican paper *La Nation*, which he founded in 1848 with his friend and radical poet/writer Louis Labarre (1810-1892). *La Nation* became an important paper in the reorganization of transnational republican networks in continental Europe in the aftermath of Napoleon’s coup on the 2 December 1851. The paper was read in cities like Turin, London, Madrid, and 243 copies were sent abroad in 1852, for example to cafes in Northern Italy. French exiles in Britain, such as socialists like Félix Pyat (1810-1889) and Louis Blanc, wrote for the paper. Victor Hugo, also an exile from Napoleon’s regime, was asked by Mazzini to write an article in *La Nation* in favour of the Italian people in 1856. From

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81 *Le Journal de Bruxelles*, 25/03/1863 and 1/04/1863.
82 *Cérémonie funèbre en mémoire du Frère Léopold de Saxe Cobourg, 1er Roi des Belges, protecteur de la franc-maçonnerie nationale*. Brussels, Grand-Orient de Belgique, 1866, p. 43.
85 Ibidem, pp. 40-45.
May 1852 onwards, Potvin left the direction of the paper to Labarre and left for Italy soon after. The probable reason for his departure will be discussed below.

Mazzini sought to transform the perception of Italy by creating an extended nationalist network of sympathizers. He perfectly understood the critical role of the press in publishing his political ideas and producing a broad sense of imagined community, both in Italy and abroad. Access to La Nation was one of the ways in which he sought access to the expanding liberal public sphere in continental Europe. This was a logical choice: La Nation needed money, was very favourable towards Mazzini’s ideas and reported extensively on European news. The paper featured a daily news update regarding Italy. Mazzini on the other hand needed a paper on the Continent to spread his message, and in 1852 gave financial support to La Nation. La Nation became the only Belgian paper that kept supporting Mazzinian thought on a regular basis.

The first article by Mazzini that was published in February 1852 was the text of a speech he delivered in London in which he tried to convince the British of his democratic and reformist thought. Labarre and Potvin also agreed to publish multiple articles from Mazzini’s Genoese paper, Italia e Popolo and the correspondence of revolutionaries like Aurelio Saffi (1819-1890) and Liugi Pianciani (1810-1890). Mazzini had in mind that the European part of La Nation would become the official paper of the French branch of his Comitato Centrale Democratico Europea. The French members would partially finance the paper, and Mazzini promised a large investment. Mazzini’s CCDE tried to unite the European democratic and nationalist movements under one flag. Mazzini chose Auguste Ledru-Rollin (1807-1874) and Arnold Ruge (1802-1880) as representatives of France and Germany and Albert Darasz (1808-1852) as the Polish member.

Potvin and Labarre thus agreed to spread Mazzini’s political thought. This also meant supporting Mazzini in his growing criticism towards French socialism. As a matter of fact, Mazzini would eventually use Potvin’s paper to break radically with Louis Blanc and the other French socialist exiles in London. In the 1830s and 1840s Mazzini had already been very critical of ‘materialistic and utopian socialism’, and as early as 1835 wrote that France was no longer the carrier of liberty. His most important publication critical of socialism was a collection of his articles written in 1846-1847 and published under the title Thoughts upon Democracy in Europe. Here he stated that utopian socialism could only result in a ‘despotism of the state’ or ‘the anarchy of passions and interests’. Nonetheless, Blanc and Mazzini spared each other in the 1840s because Blanc still shared a commitment to the Italian cause. Initially, after the fall of the Roman Republic, Mazzini abstained from publicly criticizing the French Left for tactical reasons. He still believed in the revolutionary appeal of France and, with the coming presidential elections in mind, did not want to isolate himself from the French democrats. The tensions between French socialism and Mazzini’s nationalism were growing in the 18 months between the nomination of Ledru-Rollin to the CDDE and Napoleon’s coup. The French socialists inter-
preted the nomination of Ledru-Rollin as a provocation. Ledru-Rollin had been a member of the temporary government after the revolution in February 1848 and of the executive committee that had denied access to socialists like Blanc. Moreover, he supported the repression of proletarian revolts in Paris. Louis Blanc realized in 1850 that Mazzini hated ‘socialism’ and was not favourable towards France, that for him only Italy mattered. Mazzini kept attacking the French socialists in his correspondence with George Sand. The conflict eventually exploded in the first months of 1852 and Potvin had, against his own will, a prominent role in all this.93

It was Napoleon’s coup in France that really triggered Mazzini’s anger; 2 December 1851 confirmed his total lack of confidence in the French socialists and more generally in the revolutionary role of France. The CDDE practically disappeared after December 2nd and Mazzini took the opportunity to ‘clarify’ his position on socialism. He was very disappointed in the passive attitude of the French exiles in London and wanted to replace socialist utopian/theoretical pluralism once and for all with his own democratic thought. A coordinated revolutionary Europe with him as guide was not possible with socialist system theories. In February 1852 Mazzini published in Italia e Popolo a manifesto/attack on French socialism, and another attack in La Nation in March 1852.94

On March 16th, Potvin and Labarre decided to publish Mazzini’s ‘j’accuse’ article, ‘Devoir de la démocratie’, in which he argued that the socialists had corrupted the people by rejecting the principles of faith, promoting an absurd communist ideal, rejecting capital, and acting in a sectarian manner. The article was a French translation of a manifesto by the Comitato Nazionale Italiano (‘Doveri Della democrazia’) which had been published on the 31st of January. Mazzini listed all his reproaches against French socialism: the socialists saw material and physical well-being as a goal and not as a means and therefore corrupted the people; France was lost because of these ‘false prophets’. In Mazzini’s eyes material improvement was only possible through moral improvement. Socialists denied his religious-democratic message: ‘Dieu est Dieu et l’humanité est son prophète’. He accused the socialists of dividing the democrats with their endless theoretical discussions, and was convinced that the disgrace of Napoleon’s coup was a logical consequence of these decadent socialist morals.95

A week after Mazzini’s attack Potvin published a text of his own, ‘L’avenir’, written shortly before December 2nd, to show that the coup indeed could have been avoided. Potvin used a less aggressive and personal style and instead stressed the ideological imprecisions of socialism. French socialism indeed covered an entire gamut of variants and thinkers and was more complex than Mazzini’s stigmatic use of the word ‘communists’ lets us believe.96 Nonetheless, Potvin reiterated Mazzini’s rejection of socialism:

Si le socialisme avait resté, en 1848, dans la sphère philosophique (…) - au lieu de la prêcher, avant qu’elle fut fixée, (…) à un peuple qui, étant incapable de juger ce qui lui manquait, ne pouvait que saisir avidement ses idées de justice et d’égalité sociales - la République française, la liberté européenne étaient sauvées peut-être. (…) Le socialisme doit abdiquer ses prétentions au pouvoir. Son seul droit, et intérêt, est qu’un gouvernement soit établi qui lui permette de former sa science par la libre discussion et d’en tenter même l’application par des essais libres.

Potvin contended that socialist demands were frightening the bourgeoisie. For the Belgian radical the discussions between the different ‘chefs d’école’ proved that plural-


95 «Devoir de la démocratie» In: La Nation, 16/03/1852.

96 RUFINI TUCCI (V.). “Mazzini e la “Nation” di Bruxelles nel 1852,”, p. 311.
istic socialist theories were still not well-de-
defined doctrines capable of being translated
into a political programme.97

In the meantime, the exiled French so-
cialists loosely organized around Blanc pub-
lished their answer to Mazzini in *The Morn-
ing Advertiser* of March 27th. They had not
reacted to Mazzini’s first attack the month
before but this time they had to react. The
letter was signed by Blanc, Pierre Leroux,
Etienne Cabot (1788-1856), Pierre-François
Landolphe (1809-1889), Louis Vasbenter
(1819-1875), Alphonse Bianchi (1816-1871)
and Jules Leroux (1805-1883) but it was
probably Blanc who wrote the text. These
socialists reacted very defensively to Maz-
zini’s article, stating that Mazzini’s personal
ambitions had destroyed Italian unification
and even compared Mazzini with Napoleon.
They reproduced the themes of the reaction-
ary press who liked to present Mazzini as a
conspirator who sacrificed the lives of young
men in the name of his utopian ideals. The
message of the harsh and personal reply
was very clear: the French exiles had given
up everything for their beliefs whereas Maz-
zini had become a marginal figure in Italian
revolutionary circles ....98 The discussion got
out of hand and on the 5th of April Potvin
called on everybody to unite in a short text
in *La Nation*. He defended the strategy and
neutrality of his paper and regretted that the
anti-democratic press had taken advantage
of this discussion.99

Potvin stood at the centre of a polariz-
ing debate. Was it not the task of his paper
to help the French democrats in their battle
against Napoleon? When the French social-
ists asked Potvin to publish their reply in
*La Nation*, he refused, considering the publica-
tion in *The Morning Advertiser* more than
enough. He tried to convince Blanc and the
other socialists to stop this debate:

> Je n’entrerai pas dans le débat (...) Mais ce que je crois de mon devoir,
c'est de vous prier de ne pas porter plus loin les suites d’une discussion
que vous n'avez pas cherchée, je le sais, mais qui pourrait devenir très
funeste. (... Vous en appelez à ma loyauté pour une réponse. Mais Maz-
zini demain, lui, fera le même appel pour se défendre, et resterez-vous
sans riposter? Alors à qui loyalement pourrai-je accorder le dernier mot ? A
personne.100

Potvin corresponded with Mazzini about
his reply to the French socialists regarding
their request to publish their article. Mazzini
convinced him to refuse their demand, con-
fident that he would not dare publish an ar-
ticle in which he was compared to Napoleon!
Mazzini advised Potvin not to be concerned
about the French ‘communistes’ (‘Les sys-
tèmes exclusifs ont perdu la révolution’) and
lashed out once more at Louis Blanc. Accord-
ing to Mazzini, Blanc’s disdain could only be explained by his offended pride be-
cause Mazzini preferred Ledru-Rollin over
him for the CDDE.101

The French socialists were irritated by
Potvin’s refusal: it was Mazzini who had
started this whole disagreement and it was
their democratic task to denounce Mazzini’s
accusations.102 The correspondence between
the French socialists and Potvin, Mazzini’s
attack and the socialists’ answer were all
published in a pamphlet in Brussels in 1852.
This publication undoubtedly embarrassed
Potvin and probably caused his departure
from *La Nation*. He and his paper became
the object of mockery in European demo-
cratic milieux. Nor did Mazzini’s attack pass
unnoticed. The radical collectivist Gustave
Lefrançais (1826-1901) described Potvin
and Labarre as ‘bourgeois republicans’ and
Potvin’s refusal as ‘tartuferie’.103 George
Sand disagreed strongly with her friend
Mazzini and republican exile Victor Schoe-
lcher (1804-1893) regarded Mazzini’s attack
as ‘une insulte et une fausseté’. About Potvin
and Labarre Schoelcher wrote the following:

> Les rédacteurs de *La Nation* se sont
mis complètement à la discrétion des
haines de M. Mazzini, après avoir in-
séré deux attaques de lui ils ont eu
deux fois la déloyauté de refuser la

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97 « L’avenir , écrit avant le 2 décembre » In: *La Nation*, 20 and 27/03/1852.
99 *La Nation*, 05/04/1852.
100 *Des socialistes français, à M. Mazzini.*, p. 9.
Nous avons heureusement rencontré des sentiments plus honorables dans les journaux anglais.104

Karl Marx also followed the whole affair and described it in his correspondence thus:

The fact is that Ledru-Rollin and Mazzini bought the Brussels newspaper for 10,000 francs, out of the proceeds of the Italian loan. And then Signor Mazzini let fly with his first articles, full of the most odious and stupid attacks on France and on socialism, and apropos of the fact that France has lost the initiative. His attacks were so violent that Ledru-Rollin himself now has to take a stand against them.105

What Schoelcher, Marx and Lefrançais did not know was that Potvin and Labarre had hesitated to publish Mazzini’s second anti-socialist article in April, warning him that he was offending some Italian refugees who did not share his anti-socialism. Mazzini’s response to Potvin was that he would never have the support of these Italian exiles in any case.106 Potvin also refused to publish an article by the exiled French republican Charles Ribeyrolles (1812-1860). Mazzini was disappointed in Potvin’s hesitation and demanded unconditional ideological support, in exchange for financial support: ‘Notre drapeau, est-il la vôtre? (…) Vous hésitez maintenant, vous rédoutez les tempêtes (…) Pensiez-vous pouvoir les éviter?’107

Potvin gave in and Mazzini’s second article appeared on the 15th of April. Mazzini tempered his attack of the month before, expressing regret for Ledru-Rollin’s insinuation that he had tried to take advantage of the crisis in French democracy to weaken the country. He clarified his position: he was not ‘against France’ but he observed that France was no longer ‘le peuple initiateur’, referring to the failures of 1848 and 2 December 1851; France was no longer a country with a historical mission, the heir of the revolution. The core of his second article was the same as ‘le devoir de la démocratie’. He blamed the different socialist ‘materialistic’ theories but he avoided personal reproaches.108

In May La Nation gave Felix Pyat (1810-1889) the opportunity to react. Pyat, the most revolutionary and leftist of the exiled French socialists in London, had not signed the pamphlet against Mazzini, and supported Ledru-Rollin, defending France as the ‘mother of the revolutions’.109 The tone of the debate shifted to a more general level discussing the role of France in the democratic cause. Mazzini was not impressed by Pyat’s ‘lunga tiritera’ and realized that La Nation was not going to become a loyal supporter of his ideas. After Pyat’s article the contact between Mazzini and La Nation diminished, as Potvin and Labarre had to prepare themselves for a libel suit against their paper for its anti-Bonapartist propaganda earlier that year.110 La Nation was always in search of allies in their fight against Napoleon III and could not give Mazzini the freedom and exclusivity he wanted. In the end, the cooperation between Mazzini and La Nation stayed weak and sporadic. Mazzini’s personal resentment against the French was of course the main cause of this fiasco. In November 1852 Mazzini tried to arrange a financial agreement with Labarre and Potvin, but was disappointed in the result of the cooperation.111 Nonetheless, La Nation kept presenting Mazzini as the main actor in Italian unifi-


106 Mazzini, the most important exile of the second generation of Italian refugees in London, maintained a difficult relationship with the first generation Italian refugees. The latter had landed in London 10 years before him, after the failed revolutions in 1820-1821. Mazzini criticized them for sacrificing their ideals in order to become integrated in British society. The third generation of refugees who fled to London after the fall of the Roman Republic and Venice were much more favourable towards French socialism/socialists than Mazzini was. FRETIÑÉ (J.Y.). “Mazzini et les socialistes français. Signification et enjeux de la polémique de l’année 1852.”, p. 333.


108 « Initiative révolutionnaire des peuples » In: La Nation, 15/04/1852.

109 « Initiative révolutionnaire de la France » In: La Nation, 08/05/1852.

110 « Procès de la Nation » In: La Nation 07/06/1852.

cation and Mazzini kept reading La Nation.\textsuperscript{112} In the end, Mazzini’s failures were evident on every side: the failure to communicate his ideas clearly, the failure to establish a united movement and the repeated failures of the insurrections that he tirelessly helped to organize.\textsuperscript{113} Nevertheless, Potvin remained a loyal admirer of Mazzini, even when he fell from favour. In 1861, at a time when Mazzini was generally being ignored by the leaders of Italian unification, Potvin wrote a review of the translated memoirs of the Genoese revolutionary. Potvin saw the publication not only as a literary but also political act. He called Mazzini ‘le grand citoyen de la démocratie’, ‘un héros de la patrie’ and ‘le plus grand révolutionnaire de l’Italie et de l’Europe’. Potvin defended Mazzini’s futile attempts at violent revolutions: ‘le dévouement à la patrie est jamais vain, et le sang des héros du droit jamais stérile’ and even compared him with George Washington. Potvin presented Mazzini’s exile as a myth of political oppression, suffering and redemption.\textsuperscript{114} His loyalty to the Genoese patriot stood in sharp contrast with the negative religious adjectives the French socialists and republicans began to use to disqualify Mazzini: ‘le Moïse de l’esprit du mal’, ‘le Mahomet cosmopolite’ etc.\textsuperscript{115} Potvin’s praising words for Mazzini in the 1860s were a logical consequence of his critical attitude towards Cavour and Piedmont’s monarchical leadership.

Mazzini also became a controversial figure among Belgian progressives. When Mazzini died in 1872 the liberal press, both the progressive and conservative wing, reacted ambivalent, combining praise with criticism. Belgian socialists on the other hand did not spare Mazzini in their necrological articles. Potvin saw the publication not only as a literary but also political act. He called Mazzini ‘le grand citoyen de la démocratie’, ‘un héros de la patrie’ and ‘le plus grand révolutionnaire de l’Italie et de l’Europe’. Potvin defended Mazzini’s futile attempts at violent revolutions: ‘le dévouement à la patrie est jamais vain, et le sang des héros du droit jamais stérile’ and even compared him with George Washington. Potvin presented Mazzini’s exile as a myth of political oppression, suffering and redemption.\textsuperscript{114} His loyalty to the Genoese patriot stood in sharp contrast with the negative religious adjectives the French socialists and republicans began to use to disqualify Mazzini: ‘le Moïse de l’esprit du mal’, ‘le Mahomet cosmopolite’ etc.\textsuperscript{115} Potvin’s praising words for Mazzini in the 1860s were a logical consequence of his critical attitude towards Cavour and Piedmont’s monarchical leadership.

Moreover, Belgian socialists did not even support Garibaldi during these days. Reformist socialists like de Paepe did not regard Garibaldi’s battle as a battle for the oppressed proletariat and did not support the revolutionary tactics of Garibaldi. The Garibaldi-myth did not seduce the socialists in Belgium.\textsuperscript{117} Potvin on the other hand tried to enforce the Garibaldi-myth through cultural presentations.

Cultural presentations: supporting the Risorgimento through theatre and poetry

Cultural representations became increasingly important for creating legitimacy of political transfers in the second half of the 19th century.\textsuperscript{118} This can concern pictures, caricatures and monuments by which ideas and policies were visualized. The ideas behind the Risorgimento had to be made salient for a large public in different part of Europe. Poems and theater were for Potvin essential in the creation of what academics would call ‘an imagined national community’. Mazzini and Potvin regarded artistic production as a crucial tool in patriotic propaganda. Both wrote essays and articles on poetry, historical novels, drama or paintings.\textsuperscript{119} Both agreed that art had to be used for a higher nationalist ideal. Potvin, for example, was enthusiastic about the Italian theatre and opera after independence and regarded them as essential in the construction of the new nation. A national culture was the best weapon against foreign annexation, which is why he criticized the policy of some theatres in Belgium who put on only French plays.\textsuperscript{120} It is no coincidence that musical theatre in the first half of the century became part of

\textsuperscript{112} TERRIZI (R.). Un journal républicain de Bruxelles., p. 127-128.
\textsuperscript{114} POTVIN (C.). « Review MAZZINI, Mémoires et ouvrages complètes. » In: Revue Trimestrielle,IX, 2 (1862), vol. 34, pp. 360-365.
\textsuperscript{116} BARTIER (J.). “La presse belge et la mort de Mazzini.”, pp. 409-411.
\textsuperscript{117} DUMOULIN (M.). “Le mythe Garibaldien en Belgique.”, p. 313.
\textsuperscript{119} BANTI (A.M.). “Sacrality and the Aesthetics of Politics: Mazzini’s Concept of the Nation.”, p. 73.
\textsuperscript{120} POTVIN (C.). « Du théâtre italien moderne, à propos des représentations de Salvini, au théâtre de la Monnaie. » In: Revue de Belgique, X, 1 (1878), t. 28, pp. 111-116.
a new network of political communication in Italy. Moreover, theater played also a particularly important role in popularizing and intensifying anticlerical emotions around Europe. Potvin had a lot of experience with these ‘aesthetics of politics’. He wrote numerous plays, poems and historical studies in order to convince the Belgians and (especially) the French of the existence of a centuries-old Belgian national identity.

Potvin tried to put his theoretical writings on an ideal art into practice by writing a poem and piece of theatre about and inspired by the Risorgimento. Both works connected nationalist inspiration with democratic and moral values and were cultural representations which translated the ideas behind the Risorgimento in poetic verses and a heroic narrative in order to facilitate cross-border transfer. His poem La Mendiante and the historical drama Garibaldi show the importance of romantic narratives of major events in a nation’s past and symbols and myths, for the establishment of a modern national identity and its propagandization among a foreign public.

Potvin’s journey through Italy inspired him to write the allegorical and romantic epic La Mendiante, which appeared in the Revue Trimestrielle. In this narrative poem he presents the Italian people as being like a lion in a cage, ready to break out, proud and strong after centuries of enslavement. He uses bombastic romantic verses: ‘Peuple de mendiants, Peuple décuoronné, Peuple Mort, au tombeau par des prêtres mené!’ Potvin reconstructs a dialogue between himself and an Italian poet under a full moon, against the background of the ruins of the Colosseum, the traces of a prestigious past. The two men hear from a distance the songs of a beautiful beggarwoman, Regina, who symbolizes Italian freedom. In the second part Potvin describes the allegorical love story between Regina and the young Carlo. Regina suffered under a hateful aunt, symbolic of the ecclesiastical authorities, who chose for her another man, a soldier. Carlo symbolizes the rebels who fought against the armed forces. Potvin ends his epic with a tribute to Naples and a dramatic reconstruction of the eruption of Vesuvius. Regina flees Rome with her child in her arms, singing to her son: ‘Rome est morte, Naples est fièvre; Tu dois-sur l’échauffa le martyr te le crie- Mourir en sauvant la patrie, Ou vivre en y fondant l’amour.’ Some considered La Mendiante as a Mazzinian and republican pamphlet against the Church.

The one symbol that was able to export the Italian struggle for liberty to other countries and was used in cultural representations was Garibaldi. Garibaldi became a famous figure outside republican circles whereas Mazzini did not receive unanimous support even among European republicans (see above). It was however Mazzini who first discovered the potentially myth-generating qualities of Garibaldi as the personification of Italian romantic narratives. Garibaldi’s courageous actions were perfect for the subsequent creation of his political image as a patriotic hero and offered an excellent case for transnational history. The image of the mythical Garibaldi in paintings, interviews, poems and (fictional) biographies was the product of an international network of writers, journalists and artists. As a radical democrat with strong republican sympathies, it is only logical that Potvin also became an agent in the making of the Garibaldi. La Mendiante was republished in a collection of poems, including one in which Potvin celebrated the entry of Garibaldi to Naples in 1860. Potvin hailed Garibaldi as the embodiment of a brave people: ‘Des siècles de martyrs, des légions de specters! Leur voix sort de la tombe et leur glaive est brandi! Tous n’ont qu’un bras, un cœur, un nom: Garibaldi!’

When Garibaldi died Potvin wrote a historical drama constructed around events in Garibaldi’s life in the year 1849. Potvin

122 KAISER (W.). “‘Clericalism)that is our enemy!’: European anticlericalism and the culture wars.”, p. 66.
124 Le Journal de Bruxelles, 25/09/1856.
was convinced that historical, patriotic dramas on the stage encouraged a broad public engagement with the national past and rendered ideas regarding the nation more accessible to illiterate men and women.\textsuperscript{129} He therefore wrote different historical dramas on the romantic past of Belgium. In this way he sought to establish a national(ist) culture in Belgium, with its own symbols and history. He would try to do the same for Italy. Potvin always adapted history to the political context of his work. His piece on Garibaldi opens with the Marseillaise. The constitution of the Roman Republic is read out to Garibaldi’s army at the Capitol, after which Garibaldi calls on his soldiers to go to Venice. The protagonists are Garibaldi, his wife Anita (1821-1849), some generals and the priest-patriot Ugo Bassi (1801-1849), one of the important ‘martyrs’ of Italian independence. Potvin had read with great indignation about the mock trial of Bassi by the Austrian military court. Potvin’s drama centred mostly on the tragedy of Anita’s death. He exploited the revolutionary quality of the love between Anita and Garibaldi. In the play Garibaldi has to leave Rome to the French troops and flees with the sick and pregnant Anita to a farm. Haunted by the Austrians, Garibaldi swears to his dying wife that he will free Italy. Bassi comforts Garibaldi with the thought that his wife died a martyr, a saint. Garibaldi’s followers convince him to continue the battle. He leaves for Venice and asks the people in the village to bury his wife in the mountains, so as not to give the Austrians the chance to disgrace her body. In Potvin’s fictional version of the story Bassi buries Anita. The final scene is the execution of the tribune Cicerbacchio and the arrest of Bassi. The prisoners shout ‘vive Garibaldi! Vive l’Italie’. The curtains close with the sound of the firing squad. Potvin was of course well aware that the love story between Anita and Garibaldi and the story of martyrs in a narrative of suffering, courage and salvation would capture the imagination of a variety of people. Moreover, it was Garibaldi himself who put the tragic love story between him and Anita in the center of the autobiography that he began to write at the end of 1849. In the memoirs edited by Alexandre Dumas and Marie Von Schwartz, two novel writers, the love story acquired its tragic and romantic quality, as it did in Potvin’s play, and turned into a universal story by the worldwide circulation of the memoirs.\textsuperscript{130}At last, Potvin’s choice to glorify this particular event in the life of Garibaldi rather than more heroic and popular actions like Garibaldi’s Expedition of the Thousand in 1860 show Potvin’s strong republican belief and attachment to the principles of the Roman Republic.\textsuperscript{131}

### Conclusion

Charles Potvin’s democratic nationalist discourse showed a great emotional commitment to the Risorgimento, as shown in pamphlets such as Liberté or his manifesto for ‘Le Denier de l’Italie’. In both these publications and other articles Potvin stressed the similarities between the struggle of the oppressed Italians/the Roman Republic (1849) and the Belgian revolution/battle for independence in 1830. For Potvin nationalism was not the antithesis of the Enlightenment and its universalist principles. Quite the contrary, nationalism began as a universally liberating principle: defending the cause of Italy and Belgium meant defending the cause of Europe and international peace and freedom. Potvin was a firm believer of Mazzini’s political experiment in Rome in 1849 and shared Mazzini’s liberal nationalist views. A fierce anticlerical rhetoric became part of this democratic nationalist discourse when the Church tried to stop the ‘deliverance’ of Italy by collaborating with Napoleon III and the Roman Republic was destroyed. Potvin, one of the fiercest enemies of the French Emperor, played his part in trying to set public opinion in Belgium against French/Austrian ‘imperialist politics’ in Italy and the reactionary role of the Pope. He did this by glorifying the Roman Republic, writing militant poems and criticizing Papal corruption. This last strategy was part of Potvin’s open warfare against catholic morals during the second half of the 1850s. Just like Mazzini Potvin opposed Prime Minister Cavour’s political realism and international alliance pol-


\textsuperscript{130} SCHWEGMAN (M.). “In Love with Garibaldi: Romancing the Italian Risorgimento.”, p. 393.

\textsuperscript{131} DUMOULIN (M.). “Le mythe Garibaldien en Belgique.”, p. 315.
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Potvin’s networks and contacts made him a foremost representative of transnational intellectual exchange in mid 19th-century Europe, as is shown in the ideological and personal relationship between him and Giuseppe Mazzini. Mazzini embodied a new kind of transfer agent in the 19th century: a man who incarnated a particular ideology and belief and was able to mobilize social resources across borders. Mazzini’s contacts with Potvin show the growing importance of transnational networks and cooperation for the transfer of ideas in 19th century Europe. Mazzini’s political thought was expressly internationalist or global in its intended consequences, and Potvin helped spread Mazzini’s thought in Europe through his paper *La Nation*. The publication strategies of Potvin’s paper, Potvin’s quoting from important Italian papers and his cooperation with Mazzini show a transnational public sphere with intense reportage of foreign news and the printing of translated articles by foreign authors. Mazzini’s republican nationalism stressed the rights and duties of nations, had a religious undertone and was inclusive, all of which contributed to its appeal throughout Europe. However, transfers of ideas and cooperation between radical democrats in the 19th century could also fail because of national and ideological barriers and interstate conflicts. Potvin’s sympathy for Mazzini was not representative for the attitude of all European republicans. As a matter of fact, Mazzini’s spiritualism and patriotism clashed aggressively with socialist revolutionaries in Belgium, France and Germany in the 1860s and 1870s. Potvin not only supported Mazzini when his influence reached its zenith with the Roman Republic in 1849 but kept supporting him when Mazzini became detached from the popular masses and began to oppose any form of organized class-conflict and socialist doctrine. At the end, rather than serving as an agent in transnational cooperation Potvin played a considerable role in the early rupture between Mazzini and French socialists in the 1850s. Mazzini used Potvin’s paper *La Nation* to clarify his thought and separate Italian republicanism from French socialism and German Marxism.

Potvin made also use of cultural representations to facilitate Risorgimento-propaganda in this transnational public sphere. Examples of this were the appeal and importance of the Garibaldi-myth, the Roman Republic and female allegories for the Italian nation in his poems and theatre work to evoke a sense of Italian pride and identity.