

Migration and Italian Associations in Tunisia

Migración y asociaciones italianas en Túnez

Emanuela Locci

University of Turin, Italy

emanuela.locci@unito.it

ORCID: 0000-0002-5742-4627

Recepción: 08 de agosto de 2022/Aceptación: 10 de octubre de 2022

doi: <https://doi.org/10.15517/rehmlac+.v15i1.52810>

Keyword

Tunisia; freemasonry; Italian Community; anti-fascism

Palabra clave

Túnez; masonería; Comunidad italiana; antifascismo

Abstract

The article aims to research the birth and development of the Italian community in Tunisia, as a result of an intense migration; due to the parallel presence on Tunisian territory of Italians and French especially upon the establishment of the French protectorate and on the peculiarities arising from this coexistence. It will also investigate the ability of Italians to found societies enhancing Italianity, in as schools, the chamber of commerce or lay associations, amid these the Latomist society. For the latter, we will focus on the issues during the fascist period and on some specific anti-fascist clubs.

Resumen

El artículo pretende investigar el nacimiento y el desarrollo de la comunidad italiana en Túnez, resultante de las intensas migraciones, la presencia simultánea en el territorio tunecino de italianos y franceses — más aún después del establecimiento del protectorado francés — y las dinámicas que marcaron esta convivencia. También investigaremos la destreza de los italianos en fundar asociaciones que promuevan el italianismo, a través de las escuelas, la cámara de comercio o las formas de asociacionismo secular a las que pertenece la asociación latomistas. Para esta última, nos centraremos en el periodo fascista y los círculos antifascistas específicos.

The Italian community in Tunisia

Relations between Italy and Tunisia are lost in the mists of time, well before the Roman Empire, but here we will not dwell on the times too far from us to focus on the contemporary history. The first settlement of Italians in Tunisia, which would later be the first core of the community to become pretty influential between the Nineteenth century and the first half of the Twentieth century, can be traced back to the slavery, whose victims were sold and used in the

court of the Bey¹.

Although starting from a dramatic plight, some slaves – also thanks to their own craft – managed either to free themselves or to hold the highest military offices, seeing their skills recognized by the authorities in Tunis. In addition to Catholic Italians, at the end of the seventeenth century also came to Tunisia the Grana: Jews of Portuguese origin who had previously settled in Italy, mainly in Livorno, and who then decided to move to the North African country in search of fortune. In the early days, roughly a hundred people, who settled in Tunis, despite the modest early numbers, would give rise to a thriving economic and social entity in the following decades².

Tunisia's favorable situation—economically and politically—during the Nineteenth century set the fertile ground for the establishment of a thriving and ever-growing community, so it also became mandatory to regulate the presence of Italians through bilateral treaties. Before the unification of Italy in 1861, the diverse Italian states drafted and signed treaties with the governor of Tunis to regulate the rights and duties of Italian migrants. After 1861 they were signed between Tunisia—as a part of the Ottoman Empire at that time—and the Kingdom of Italy.

In 1868 the first agreement, the Treaty of Goletta, named after the place where it was signed, enshrined the protection and recognition of the rights and duties of Italians, both towards the Tunisian authorities and the homeland. According to this deal—signed by Consul Luigi Pinna and Bey Muhammad al Sadiq—several benefits were granted to Italians; the Kingdom of Italy was declared a “favored nation” with all the economic gains that came with it.

The treaty ceased to take effect in 1896 and its lapse soon required other agreements to be made so as not to leave the large colony without a statute ensuring its rights. The new pact converted into three different conventions, one dealing with navigation and trade, the second with the rights of Italians in Tunisia and Tunisians in Italy, and the third with extradition, since the effectiveness of Italian courts in Tunisia had been suspended the previous year.

According to the 1871 census, there were nearly 6,000 Italians in Tunisia. Ten years later there were twice as many, almost 12,000. However, the records for the population of Italian origin are uncertain, most likely underestimated, as many migrants did not check in upon arrival in Tunisia due to the need to pay a tax. The data therefore are biased, suffice it to say women were not recorded since their lives were consumed within the family and did not produce items outside the family frame.

Tunisia was integral to the Ottoman Empire for decades, although characterized by a government marked by strong administrative autonomy from the Istanbul authority, but its political status changed in 1881 and the North African country became a French protectorate. However, the Italian presence stood out more than the French, the figures is clear: more than 11,000 Italians against 708 French. Twenty years later the gap was even more pronounced, with the presence of nearly 72,000 Italians; this picture would remain unaltered for many years.

1 Marinette Pendola, *Gli italiani di Tunisia. Storia di una comunità (XIX-XX secolo)* (Foligno: Editoriale Umbra, 2007).

2 Pendola, *Gli italiani di Tunisia*, 17.

The protectorate was a harbinger of change, although formally rules were established to salvage the rights of Italians, effectively the actual scenario didn't comply with the expectations. Suffice it to say the pursuit of many professions was hindered, for example, Italian companies were barred from public contracts: a great harm on trading issues³. More, during this period, wide-ranging questions opened up about the citizenship of foreigners residing in Tunisia. In 1923 a french act governed the full naturalization of all second-generation foreigners—those born in Tunisia to parents both born in the North African country—. Due to this, naturalizations were aplenty in span 1924-1933. Under fascism the picture changed again; in 1930 in the midst of the fascist era, the french authorities felt strongly the *peril italien* and decided to halt Italian migration, restricting the entry of foreign workers, made possible only if in possession of a labor contract. This measure obviously hit Italian immigration – mainly consisting of manpower – hard.

From 1934 to 1938 naturalizations wavered low and high due to external causes: the racial laws issued in Italy by the Fascist regime meant that Jews who until then kept close ties with Italy opted for French nationality. That of naturalizations was a long-standing affair addressed at various times by Italian and French institutions; in 1935 an attempt was made to resolve the issue of Italian-Tunisians with the Laval⁴-Mussolini agreement, signed in Rome⁵, which seemed to open a new era in the history of diplomacy between the two countries, and seemed to be confirmed in April by the Stresa Agreements and the establishment of “the Stresa Front” amid France, England and Italy⁶. The terms were the following:

Those born before 1945 retained Italian citizenship;

Those born between 1945 and 1965 upon reaching the age of majority could choose their nationality;

Those born after 1965 would automatically become French⁷.

During World War II, in 1944, the two countries still on opposite fronts, France imposed by its own law French nationality on foreigners born in Tunisia after June 10, 1940, of foreign parents at least one of whom was born in Tunisia. The Italian community, given the outcomes of World War II, faced a wide politic of expulsions that maimed it in number, concurring to a sudden downsizing. There are many telling from this period, tracing the main features of a decades-long social and community history⁸. With the arrival of the Allies in Tunis the Italians—with no discreteness between fascists and anti-fascists—suffered severe repression.

3 Pendola, *Gli italiani di Tunisia*, 27.

4 Pierre Laval, French politician (Châteldon, Puy-de-Dôme, 1883 - Paris, 1945). Socialist congressman and –from 1924– independent, he was minister of foreign affairs (1934-35) and Head of the Council (1935-36). He promoted a rapprochement of France and Britain with Fascist Italy and then became increasingly compliant with Nazi Germany. Head of the Vichy government (1942-45), he promoted a collaborationist policy with the Nazis, for which he was executed after the Liberation. “Laval, Pierre,” *Treccani*, page accessed on July 01, 2022, <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/pierre-laval/>

5 Signed in Rome on January 07, 1935.

6 “Laval, Pierre,” *Treccani*, page accessed on July 01, 2022, https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/pierre-laval_res-6ba86fb4-8b74-11dc-8e9d-0016357eee51_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/

7 Pendola, *Gli italiani di Tunisia*, 30.

8 Giovanna Gianturco and Claudia Zaccai, *Italiani in Tunisia. Passato e presente di un'emigrazione* (Milan: Guerini Scientifica, 2004).

Heading into the 1950s—fundamental years of the decolonization phase, a development that also touched Tunisia—at the time of independence from France in 1956 there were 66,500 Italians, five years later the number halved. Many chose the homecoming; others preferred France as their country of choice. Thus ended the experience of the Italian community in Tunisia, at least of its heyday. Today, 900 Italians remain from the oldest community out of a total of about 3,000 effective residents.

Looking at the decades of Italian habitancy in Tunisia and parsing the different migratory flows, Italian emigration to Tunisia appears to be classifiable according to three types:

An economic migration consisting of the small and middle class formed by entrepreneurs and merchants, who came from Liguria, Tuscany, Sardinia and Piedmont. These were interested in pursuing their business, increasing their wealth and prestige. In Tunisia they soon came into contact with the prior Jewish community that held dominion over commercial and financial activities. During these early moves came merchants, bankers, political exiles, freelancers, all people with a good level of education and a high culture and standard of living.

A political migration, which began in 1815, with the post-Napoleon Restoration and went on in 1820/21–1830/35 with the dense revolutionary uprisings, which then led to the Unification of Italy in 1861. It was in 1834—as a case in point—that Giuseppe Garibaldi stayed in Tunis, where he lived for a few months with a group of Mazzinians. After the failed Genoa conspiracy, Garibaldi managed to escape to Marseilles, a death sentence in absentia hanging over his head. He soon had himself employed in Hussain Bey's fleet with the assignment of taking a frigate to Tunis, and once in port he decided to reside in the city for a few months. Tunisia was a propitious territory for political activities and also became a center of gathering dissidents, both in the Nineteenth century and later during the fascist period.

Then there was a migration consisting mainly of labor, of purely proletarian extraction, attracted to Tunisia because of the many construction sites there. Such migration was originally seasonal, only to become permanent due to Italy's growing financial distress. The migrants came mostly from southern Italy, particularly Sicily, due also to the geographical closeness⁹. During that time, Bizerte grew dramatically with the building of the port.

After World War I, the Italian folks, as opposed to the French community, kept growing in numbers. The French, though affected by the Italian cultural bias, were nevertheless aware they could not do without the Italian manpower and, therefore, tried to keep a certain balance. It was not until the 1930s the French downside narrowed and in 1936 a reversal of the trend occurred for that there were about 95,000 Italians and nearly 110,000 French¹⁰.

The community expressed within it a multitude of displays of its Italian-ness, as early as the second half of the Nineteenth century one could count various clubs or societies such as the Italian

9 Paolo Emilio Cardone, "La popolazione coloniale italiana nelle "non colonie": il caso della Tunisia", in *Per una storia della popolazione italiana nel Novecento*, eds. Alessio Formasin and Claudio Lorenzini (Udine: Forum, 2016), 194.

10 Cardone, "La popolazione coloniale italiana nelle "non colonie"", 197.

Casino, which brought together notables, or circles with a political slant¹¹ such as L'Italiano, or even welfare and humanitarian type entities such as the Workers' Society and the Mutual Aid Society. A section of Giovine Italia was also founded, thanks to the efforts of Gaetano Frediani, a friend of Giuseppe Garibaldi and Giuseppe Mazzini, the latter of whom he met during a trip to London. This section held contact with London through Nicola Fabrizi¹² and Benedetto Calò.

A mention apart would merit educational institutions such as the Italian College founded in 1864, thus a few years after the unification of Italy, or the technical school founded a few years later, in 1870¹³. Also of significance are the activities related to the publishing of politically or socially oriented newspapers¹⁴.

At the end of the Nineteenth century other expressions of Italianism saw the light of day, amid them the most notable and representative were—first and foremost—the Dante Alighieri society, founded in May 1893 in Tunis. Its first president was lawyer Attilio Molco, and to his management we owe the creation of school patronages, in which the teaching of the Italian idiom was preponderant. Another president, perhaps the most famous, was Dr. Marcello Brignone, who governed the firm from 1901 to 1929 and made it a point of reference for the Italian community, pursuing the path of teaching Italian but also holding other cultural endeavors prompting Dante Alighieri as the cultural hub of the community¹⁵.

Another institution worth mentioning is the Chamber of Commerce and Arts, established with the aim of backing the initiatives of Italian entrepreneurs. Its founding is pre-empted by the establishment of the Italian Commercial Association, which has Andrea Peluffo as its president. Three years later, on March 24, 1887, the full-fledged Chamber of Commerce was born. During Fascism the Chamber of Commerce went into crisis, many of its members being removed from public office, either since of the Jewish faith or since of they're openly anti-fascist. The Chamber's final act was in 1943, when all Italian institutions were suppressed by French will. The Chamber was founded again only in 1955, when diplomacy between Italy and France was suitable¹⁶.

The community was also the elected home for other leagues—notably secular—basically Freemasonry ones that animated Italian circles for decades.

11 After all, Tunisia soon became a land of welcome and organization of numerous dissident groups, from anarchists to anti-fascists and communists.

12 Nicola Fabrizi patriot and politician (Modena 1804-Rome 1885). Arrested on February 3, 1831 with his brothers Luigi (1812-1865) and Paolo (1805-1859) for his participation in the conspiracy of Ciro Menotti, he was released two days later, while the revolution triumphed in Modena, and became captain of the National Guard. When the revolution failed, he fled to France, where he joined the Giovine Italia, and after the unfortunate expedition of Savoy (1834), in which he took part; he went to fight in Spain against the Carlists. Established in 1837 in Corfu, then in Malta, he tried to arouse uprisings in Sicily and—in 1839—he created the Italic Legion, thus entering into a momentary clash with Mazzini. In 1848 he tried to oppose the merger of the Estensi states with Piedmont and in 1849 he took part in the defense of Rome. Returning to Malta, he resumed his life as a conspirator until 1860 (he contributed to the preparation of Carlo Pisacane's expedition). After the annexation of the South, he supported Cialdini in the repression of banditry. Arrested in 1862 for helping Garibaldi, he fought in the Garibaldi campaigns of 1866 and 1867. Deputy from the 8th Legislature (1861-65), he militated in the left. "Fabrizi, Nicola," *Treccani*, page accessed on September 03, 2022, <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/nicola-fabrizi/>

13 Daniela Melfa, *Migrando a sud. Coloni italiani in Tunisia (1881-1939)* (Roma: Aracne, 2008), 63.

14 Michele Brondino, *La stampa italiana in Tunisia. Storia e società, 1838-1956* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1998).

15 Pendola, *Gli italiani di Tunisia*, 83.

16 Gianturco, Zaccai, *Italiani in Tunisia*, 104.

Italian Freemasonry in Tunisia

Historians do not agree in establishing a certain date of the entry of freemasons in the North African country, some authors—close to Jewish circles—assume that it was in 1773, when the Jews of Livorno, in Tuscany, arrived in Tunis, but the historian of Freemasonry Dudley Wright points the year 1821. According to him, the Masonic Institution was introduced in the country with the massive migration to Tunis of Neapolitans, already active members of the Grand Orient of Naples. What is undeniable is the Italian commitment in bringing the masonry to Tunisia. Italians were the first to set up masonic lodges in Tunisia can be explained both through the geographical issues—its proximity to the coasts of Sicily and Sardinia—and as a consequence of the strong Italian presence. The community was located in the main cities, from Tunis to Sfax, where latomistic activity flourished.

In Tunisia there were both workshops from the Grand Orient of Italy and the Grand Lodge of Italy, here the focus will be on those dependent on the Grand Orient. The first founded under his aegis were: *Cartagine e Utica*¹⁷ (*Carthage and Utica*), *Attilio Regolo and Concordia e Progresso* (*Concord and Progress*) in 1862; *Fede e Costanza* (*Faith and Perseverance*) in 1867, *Il Risorgimento* in 1870, followed by other lodges of which we have deficient news up to 1901 and the foundation of the *Veritas* atelier, whose minutes have recently been found: a pretty useful tool for an effective reconstruction of the activities within it. Thus, an important Italian Masonic center was born in Tunis, acting without the consent of the Ottoman governor, meeting secretly on the outskirts of the capital or at the ancient Roman cisterns near the ruins of Carthage.

Retracing in due course the history of the Italian Masonic experience in Tunisia, according to some sources the first regular workshop established by the Grand Orient of Italy was *Cartagine e Utica*. Taking up Wright's theory, its members were part of the Italian migratory wave following the riots in Naples in 1821, which led to the arrival of several political dissidents, many of them former masons, belonging to the Grand Orient of Naples. In 1865 the lodge changed its name and was called *Figli Scelti di Cartagine e Utica*¹⁸ (*Chosen Sons of Carthage and Utica*) over time was joined by two others: *Nuova Cartagine* and *Attilio Regolo*. The *Figli Scelti di Cartagine e Utica* was a bulwark of the institution in Tunisia and acted as a link between the Italian freemasons and the Grand Orient of Italy. In 1876 the lodge appears to be in perilous conditions: for years the economic scenario in Tunisia was uncertain, specially for strangers, but the Grand Orient of Italy encourages the workshop to continue its activities.

The second workshop sustained by records is the *Attilio Regolo*, founded in Tunis in 1862, but to the present day not enough files have been found to be able to chart its history. To build it and to preside over the oath of the affiliates, the Supreme Council of the Grand Orient of Italy commissioned Quintilio Mugnaini¹⁹, Venerable of the *Figli Scelti di Cartagine e Utica*. The

17 Minutes held on May 26 [Verbale tenuta del 26 maggio], 1863, Rome, Grand Orient of Italy Historical Archives (Archivio Storico Grande Oriente d'Italia, henceforth ASGOI).

18 Alexandre M. Broadley, *The History of Freemasonry in the District of Malta: from the year 1800 up to the present*, (U.S.A.: Nabu Public Domain Reprints, 2008), 82.

19 Quintilio Mugnaini was an exile, a doctor playing a key role in the struggle against the cholera that periodically struck the Regency. He was also employed in the military infantry Corps. See Salvatore Speciale, *Oltre la peste, sanità, popolazione e società in Tunisia e nel Maghreb (XVIII-XX secolo)* (Cosenza: Luigi Pellegrini Editore, 1997), 237.

Attilio Regolo received an invitation to attend the General Assembly held in 1862, represented by Rebuffi. The following year the Grand Orient of Italy notified the resignation of Costantino Nigra as Grand Master, through a missive sent through the Consul General of the Kingdom of Italy in Tunis²⁰. Of the following years we have incomplete news: in 1876 it appears to be in activity although in a weak state of affairs; beyond that date there is no reliable data.

Il Risorgimento

More substantial documentary sources, however, concern the lodge *Il Risorgimento*; it appears that in 1879 it was ruled by Guglielmo Funaro and the following year by Giuseppe Ayra, who on the day of his election delivered a speech on the purposes of Freemasonry and the qualities that brethren should possess. Part of the lecture focused on the works that Masonry could perform in a land like Tunisia, where different cultures and religions room together and “with often cornerwise opposed interests.”²¹

In 1880 the same lodge celebrated the figure of the late Grand Master Giuseppe Mazzoni²² with a magnificent service, and the Orator, Salomone Vais²³, presented Mazzoni’s masonic qualities. The Grand Orient of Italy was in close touch with this atelier, which in 1882 sent a letter to Italy describing the conditions of Tunisian masonic life, at that time particularly harsh because of violent clashes amid Europeans and natives. The letter urged the brethren not to give in to provocation and to do what they could to soothe tempers so that freemasonry would flourish again in Tunisia²⁴. In 1887 its temple, shared with the English lodge *Ancient Chartage N.º. 1717*, was destroyed by fire – the English lodge suffering the most damage, losing a capital of twenty thousand liras. Alexander Meyrick Broadley had founded the English workshop in 1877; within it, English, Italian, French and Arabic idioms were used alternately, and within a year of its establishment it numbers 58 members. The commonality of temple undoubtedly suggests the factual cooperation amid lodges even though they were subordinate to different Obediences, in the wake of the masonic spirit.

Il Risorgimento was also on good terms with Spanish masonic bodies, and in 1886 its Worshipful Master Giuseppe Ayra received from the Supreme Council of Spain the patent of Knight Kadosch—30th degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite—to thank him for his works in aid of Spanish cholera patients. The Supreme Council of Spain conferred this recognition on Luciano Bignas too —as Worshipful Master of *Ancient Carthage* and dependent on the United Grand Lodge of England—; on Philippe Caillat, Worshipful Master of *Nouvelle Carthage* and dependent on the Grand Orient of France, and on another Italian Antonio Ferretti, Worshipful Master of *Fede e Costanza*.

20 Extraordinary meeting minutes [Verbale seduta straordinaria], February 3, 1862, Rome, ASGOI.

21 *Rivista della Massoneria Italiana*, “Libro d’oro della massoneria italiana, loggia Il Risorgimento, Tunisi”, (1882), 79.

22 Patriot and statesman, Giuseppe Mazzoni was Minister of Grace and Justice in the Tuscan government of Guerrazzi and Montanelli. Along with them, he was triumvir after the Grand Duke’s flight. In the Kingdom of Italy he was a deputy from the 11th to the 13th term and a senator from 1879. In the Grand Orient, he was Grand Master from 1871 to 1880.

23 Solomon Vais was a publicist and became Worshipful Master on Christmas Day 1900; we will also find him in the *Veritas* atelier tally sheet.

24 *Rivista della Massoneria Italiana*, “Lettera del Gran Segretario al G. M. della R. L. Il Risorgimento, Malleopulo” (1882), 45.

In the late 1870s Tunisia was affected by a serious economic and social crisis, also resulting from the establishment of the French Protectorate. The strain between France and Italy also had an impact on the workshops, which up to that time had managed to keep external issues from entering the lodge, so the latomistic activities slowed down²⁵. Many Italians thus decided to return home, the lodges stopped working, and only five years later the remnant brethren regained possession of the abandoned temples, preparing for a new era of development and prosperity.

Qualitative data on initiates say that the professional background of Italian Masons in Tunisia was heterogeneous. Out of a total of 517 Masons present between the end of the Nineteenth century and the second decade of the Twentieth century, 115 were merchants or entrepreneurs, 94 freelancers, 44 craftsmen, 34 teachers at Italian schools and 19 landowners, while the rest numbered servicepersons, government officials, clerks and students.

Development of Italian Freemasonry in the Twentieth century

Just the beginning of the new century will show the flourishing of Masonic activities in Tunisia. At that time the Grand Orient of Italy, likewise the Obediences of French and English origin, founded several lodges, such as *Veritas*, *Fides*²⁶ and *Mazzini*. This new point of masonic development followed a phase in which Italian workshops and the entire Tunisian Masonic system suffered as a whole from hostility between the Italian and French communities. This renewed vitality was seen as an excellent first step toward full cooperation between those two sides, but it would have to wait until the end of World War I to reestablish full cooperation between the Obediences and, as a result, between their brethren. Some small steps forward were taken: in 1907 on the event of the establishment of the *Fides* lodge the Worshipful Master stated that its foundation was an opportunity for the two nations to meet, which must coexist peacefully in Tunisia²⁷. A message of brotherhood that would produce its effects years later. In fact—on February 15, 1920—officials of the Grand Orient of Italy and the Grand Lodge of France signed a treaty that decreed their friendship and fraternal cooperation, in a land where they were both foreigners.

Veritas

Taking a small step back and going back to the period of World War I in 1916 -likely due to the fallout of the war, which led to a significant decrease in membership -the Italian lodges in Tunis merged into one, founding *Concordia*. Activities soon turned out to be well underway, with the Tunisian Masonic community always in the forefront of issues concerning the Italian folk. Engaged in charitable works, the workshop operated smoothly and in 1917 solemnly commended

25 Leyla El Houssi, *L'urlo contro il regime. Gli antifascisti italiani in Tunisia tra le due guerre* (Roma: Carocci, 2014), 62.

26 The *Fides* lodge was inaugurated in 1907 with a Masonic celebration attended by the *Veritas*, *Mazzini*, *Nouvelle Carthage* and *Volonté* lodges. The speaker of the new atelier delivered a speech focusing on the duties and purposes of Italian Freemasonry in the Regency, placing special emphasis on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity.

27 *Rivista della Massoneria Italiana*, "La loggia Fides a Tunisi" (1901), 64.

the anniversary of Giuseppe Garibaldi's death. Members honored with the rank of comrade were Algieri, Bellino, Bensasson, Enrico Calò, Salvatore Calò, Campisi, Catalanotti, Cicala, Cioni, D'Amico, D'Angelo, Giuseppe Finzi, Floriddia, L. Funaro, Gallico, G. Grammatico, O. Lilla, Ulisse Lilla, Lumbroso, Maglitto, Guido Montefiore, Mostacci, Ortona, Rossi, Ruggiero, Scalera, Scialom, Scialom, Serra, Vaiani, Urbinati and Nicolò Grammatico.

Throughout World War I the lodge sustained its activities, with many initiations and increases in rank amid its members and, at the end of the conflict, Herdenberg was elected Worshipful Master, this confirming that affairs did not languish during the war.

The scenario changed with the advent of fascism and with the arrival, as early as 1922, of its envoys²⁸ in Tunisia, they did their utmost, even in the most remote villages, to establish sections of the party²⁹ whose goals conflicted with masonic principles. This wide-ranging action was aimed at controlling the population, especially the European one, spreading fascist demands and strengthening Italian influence in Tunisia. The *Concordia* lodge was also hit by this wave, and many brethren, overwhelmed by the new political and cultural climate, ended up joining fascism. But not all of them, and this created serious internal disagreements that somewhat undermined its stability. Those who remained in the atelier did their utmost not to perish in the repressive wave of the regime.

In 1920 and 1921 Salvatore Calò was Worshipful Master; in 1924 the Concordia lodge attended the founding of the new lodge Pensiero e Azione, which was solemnly built on October 17. Partaking in the constitution were Domenico Scalera, Ferdinando Mostacci Speranza, Leonardo Gallo, Nicolò Grammatico, Carmelo Alfano, Eugenio Busacca, Emilio Bracero, Giovanni Caracci, Stefano Catalanotti, Tommaso Cavassino, Francesco Grammatico, Salvatore Lopresti, Giovanni Mongelli, Pietro Polizzi, Giuseppe Ruggiero, Arturo Amato, Giovanni Losarno, Nunzio Scifo, Rosario Lopresti, Salvatore Nolfo and Giacomo Valenza. Several foreign Masons—particularly French—attended the installment ceremony for the offices of the new lodge. Enrico Calò was also appointed first Worshipful Master, though Domenico Scalera replaced him almost immediately. The lodge minutes of October 24, 1924 showed Scalera as Worshipful Master, Bonomo as First Warden, Catalanotti as Second Warden, Chimenti as Orator, and Campisi as Secretary. Reports on *Pensiero e Azione* cease in 1925, when the lodge organized with Concordia celebrations and a conference in honor of Giuseppe Garibaldi. In November 1925 the workshop went into hiding, the work was officially suspended; it was decided, however, to meet as possible in secret form³⁰. After this reference, the traces of the workshop were lost.

Concordia meanwhile was in trouble because of Fascist propaganda, only a very few adherents of freemasonry did not join Fascism, and in 1925 they decided to continue masonic work undercover, founding in 1926—after the promulgation of the act banning freemasonry—the *Mazzini-Garibaldi* lodge, also with the contribution of some members of the Italian Consulate.

28 For an in-depth look at the arrival of fascism in Tunisia see Martino Oppizzi, “‘L’assalto alla diligenza’: la penetrazione del fascismo nella comunità italiana di Tunisia negli anni Venti”, *Italia Contemporanea* 290 (2019).

29 *Rivista massonica*, “Ricordi della R.L. Mazzini-Garibaldi fondata nel 1926, nella valle del Medjerdah, all’oriente di Tunisi, all’obb. del G.O.I. in esilio” (1977), 356.

30 Minutes of the lodge Thought and Action [Verbale di loggia Pensiero e Azione], November 21, 1925, Tunis, ASGOI.

The founders were Giulio Barresi, Carlo Wuttenberg, Nicola Gramatico, Isacco Adeasi, Roberto Zigliani, Gino Cerri, Vittorio Timsist, Giuseppe Nicosia, Edmond Timsit and Giovanni Cerri.

Established therefore after the constitution of the Grand Orient of Italy in exile, according to an authoritative French scholar it was born from the merger of the *Giuseppe Mazzini* and *Garibaldi e Patria* lodges³¹. The newly formed *Mazzini-Garibaldi* was in constant turmoil, with activity also consisting of the clandestine entry into Italy of anti-fascist propaganda leaflets that arrived through the Freemason Sante Zammito, a merchant navy officer who traveled frequently on the Tunis-Palermo route.

The *Giustizia e Libertà* lodge, which the Tunisian lodge was in constant contact with, printed the pamphlets in France. The very establishment of the workshop was, moreover, a challenge to Fascism, and among the founders were Giulio Barresi³² and Enrico Forti. Barresi—born in 1885 in Tunisia but a native of Trapani—was a cargo inspector in the port of Tunis. He was a prominent member of the Italian community, the oriundo Sicilian and Calabrian people who recognized themselves in the anarchist thought of Nicolò Converti³³. He headed the lodge for many years, and for his masonic merits in 1938 he was elevated to the 33rd degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite.

The Italian-born freemasonry did not restrict itself to founding and running workshops, it went further, establishing a Supreme Council of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite with authority over Tunisia. The constitutive meeting was held on May 2, 1881. The masons present were already members of the Supreme Council of Italy, such as Nicolò Stresino Cassanello, Cosimo Burlizzi, Edoardo Nurri, Ernest Irénée Gardelle, Jean Baptiste Bonrepaux, Giuseppe Rombi, Angelo Colosio, Isacco Salvatore Sierra and Vincent Mazurkiewicz³⁴.

Once the opening rites were concluded, the election of dignitaries proceeded, which resulted in:

31 Michel Khayat, “Storia della Massoneria in Tunisia”, *Delta Rassegna di cultura massonica* (2005), 59.

32 Giulio Barresi He was born in Goletta (Tunis) on June 19, 1885, to Alberto and Clelia Benedetti. A native of Trapani, he was reported as an anarchist sympathizer by the Tunis police in May 1908. In fact, he frequented at that time the anarchist colony in Tunis, animated by Nicolò Converti. An anti-fascist, Freemason and anarchist, he was secretary of the LIDU in Tunis. He was initiated into the Concordia lodge before 1919, the year he became Master. A recent archival survey showed that he was also enrolled in a lodge of the Grand Lodge of Italy, based in Tunis. “Barresi, Giulio Cesare,” *Biblioteca Franco Serantini*, page accessed on June 18, 2022, <https://www.bfscollezionidigitali.org/entita/12977-barresi-giulio-cesare>

33 Niccolò Converti was born in Calabria in 1858. A physician by profession, he opened an outpatient clinic in which he devoted an hour a day to the free cares of the indigent. In 1885 he was sentenced to twenty-two months in prison for subversive activity, and after an escape through Corsica, Nice and Marseille he arrived in Tunis on January 10, 1887. A founder of the Tunis Hospital, he would always pair professional activity with political engagement. His first revolutionary newspaper, “The Worker,” came out in 1887, a few months after his arrival in Tunisia. Guilty for its revolutionary content, he had to quit the newspaper a year later. In the interwar period he focused mainly on his profession while advocating anti-fascism and died in 1939.

34 Nicolò Alessandro Stresino Cassanello, born in Tunis in 1846, was a physician and professor of natural history and was initiated into Freemasonry in 1867. Cosimo Burlizzi, born in Taviano in 1844, was a medical surgeon and was initiated in 1873. Edoardo Nurri, born in Susa in 1843, was Chief Secretary of the Chancery of the Italian consular Court and was initiated in 1878. Ernest Irénée Gandelle, born in Mallemort in 1836, was a shopkeeper and landowner and was initiated in 1856. Jean Baptiste Bonrepaux, born in Tunis in 1848 and initiated into Freemasonry in 1877, was also a shopkeeper; Giuseppe Rombi, born in Bardo in 1834, was an intendant in the court of Muscir Mohamed el Sadek, Bey of Tunis, and was initiated in 1859; Angelo Colosio, born in Brescia in 1828, was a landowner and was initiated in 1861; Isacco Salvatore Sierra, born in Livorno in 1815, was a stockbroker and was initiated in 1838. Vincent Mazurkiewicz, born in Lublin in 1827, was an industrialist and was initiated in 1857. Supremo Consiglio del 33° Grado, *Bollettino Ufficiale per la Tunisia*, Tunis (1881), 5.

Cosimo Burlizzi, Senior Warden;

Edward Nurri, Secretary General;

Ernest Irénée Gardelle, Treasurer almoner;

Jean Baptiste Bonrepaux, Grand Orator;

Joseph Rombi, Master of ceremonies;

Angelo Colosio, Grand Sword Bearer;

Isaac Salvatore Sierra, Grand Banner Bearer;

Vincent Mazurkiewicz, Captain of the guards.

Thereafter, another meeting took place to discuss two essential topics for the nascent masonic body: recognition with all regular masonic powers and the creation of a single freemason family for all brethren operating in Tunisia³⁵. In September of the same year, the founder and Worshipful Master Nicolò Stresino Cassanello resigned and delivered a speech exhorting to continue the work of the institution. He referred to the social conditions in Tunisia and how urgent the charitable activities were, though—no matter how great they were—regrettably they would not be able to relieve the population of all its hardship.

Pending new elections, Burlizzi assumed the provisional leadership of the Supreme Council³⁶. This Masonic body is still reported to have been active in 1949, when it promoted the constitution of the Sovereign Rosicrucian Chapter in Medgerda; after this date all traces of any possible activity on its part are lost.

At the first opening meeting—held on April 9, 1949—masons Giacomo Cittanova, Jules Levis, Nicolò Grammativo, Maurice Hayat, Humbert Saava, Giacomo Bocca and others, after checking the legitimacy of the titles they held, decided to set themselves under the governance of the Italian Obedience³⁷. At the second meeting—held a few days later – they stated to call *Tanit* the new Sovereign Chapter; on that assembly the offices were appointed. In addition, a committee was formed for the purpose of procuring stamps, books and whatever was required for the proper running of the new Chapter. On May 6, 1949, the Masons received the seal and license for the founding of the Rosicrucian Chapter³⁸.

This concludes the description of the history of Italian Freemasonry in Tunisia. After independence from France, the Masonic institution was banned in the North African country.

35 *Circolare n. 2 del Supremo Consiglio del 33° Grado, R.S.A.A.* (Tunis: 1881), 33, United Gran Lodge of England Historical Archive (UGLEHA), London.

36 *Circolare n. 14 del Supremo Consiglio del 33° Grado, R.S.A.A.* (Tunis: 1882), 219, UGLEHA.

37 Minutes of the meeting of April 9, 1949, Supreme Council of 33 for Italy and its Colonies [Supremo Consiglio dei 33 per l'Italia e le sue Colonies], Archivio Storico Centro Ricerche Storiche sulla Libera-Muratoria (ASCRSL-M), Turin.

38 Annotation in the register of the Supreme Council, signed by Giacomo Cittanova, 1949, ASCRSL-M.

Archives

Archivio Storico Grande Oriente d'Italia [Grand Orient of Italy Historical Archives], Rome, Italy.

Archivio Storico Centro Ricerche Storiche sulla Libera-Muratoria [Historical Archive of the Historical Research Center on Freemasonry], Turin, Italy.

United Gran Lodge of England Historical Archive, London, England.

Bibliography

Brondino, Michele. *La stampa italiana in Tunisia. Storia e società, 1838-1956*. Milan: Jaca Book, 1998.

Broadley, Alexandre M. *The History of Freemasonry in the District of Malta: from the year 1800 up to the present*. U.S.A.: Nabu Public Domain Reprints, 2008.

Cardone, Paolo Emilio. "La popolazione coloniale italiana nelle "non colonie": il caso della Tunisia". *Per una storia della popolazione italiana nel Novecento*, edited by Alessio Formasin, Claudio Lorenzini. Udine: Forum, 2016.

Circolare n. 2 del Supremo Consiglio del 33° grado, R.S.A.A. Tunisia: 1881.

Circolare n. 14 del Supremo Consiglio del 33° Grado, R.S.A.A. Tunisia: 1882.

El Houssi, Leyla. *L'urlo contro il regime. Gli antifascisti italiani in Tunisia tra le due guerre*. Rome: Carocci, 2014.

Gianturco, Giovanna, Claudia Zaccai. *Italiani in Tunisia. Passato e presente di un'emigrazione*. Milan: Guerini Scientifica, 2004.

Khayat, Michel. "Storia della Massoneria in Tunisia", *Delta Rassegna di cultura massonica* (2005).

Melfa, Daniela. *Migrando a sud. Coloni italiani in Tunisia (1881-1939)*. Rome: Aracne, 2008.

Oppizzi, Martino. "L'assalto alla diligenza": la penetrazione del fascismo nella comunità italiana di Tunisia negli anni Venti", *Italia Contemporanea* 290 (2019).

Pendola, Marinette. *Gli italiani di Tunisia. Storia di una comunità (XIX-XX secolo)*. Foligno: Editoriale Umbra, 2007.

Speziale, Salvatore. *Oltre la peste, sanità, popolazione e società in Tunisia e nel Maghreb (XVIII-XX secolo)*. Cosenza: Luigi Pellegrini Editore, 1997.

Rivista della Massoneria Italiana. “Libro d’oro della massoneria italiana, loggia Il Risorgimento, Tunisi” (1882).

Rivista della Massoneria Italiana. “Lettera del Gran Segretario al G. M. della R. L. Il Risorgimento, Mallesopulo” (1882).

Rivista della Massoneria Italiana. “La loggia Fides a Tunisi” (1901).

Rivista della Massoneria Italiana. “Tunisi, Inaugurazione del tempio della Rispett. L. Veritas” (1901).

Rivista della Massoneria Italiana. “La loggia Veritas” (1900).

Rivista massonica, “Ricordi della R.L. Mazzini-Garibaldi fondata nel 1926, nella valle del Medjerdah, all’oriente di Tunisi, all’obb. del G.O.I. in esilio” (1977).

Supremo Consiglio del 33° Grado. *Bollettino Ufficiale per la Tunisia*, Tunis (1881).

Online references

Biblioteca Franco Serantini. <https://www.bfscollezionidigitali.org>

Treccani. Enciclopedia. <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/>