

The decisive role played by Cavour, Victor Emanuel II, and the political leadership in Turin in the campaign to unify Italy, however, does not mean that there was anything preordained or inevitable about what they accomplished. On the contrary, this campaign was an extremely contingent and unpredictable process that could have been easily derailed on a number of occasions. Cavour's real genius lay less in his long-range planning than in his talent for exploiting opportunities and improvising in the face of unforeseen international and domestic challenges and constraints that confronted him after 1855. While he agreed with most other moderates in the early 1850s that Italian independence from Austria was a desirable goal and that Piedmont needed allies among the Great Powers, he had little knowledge or experience in foreign affairs. During his first years in government, he showed scant interest in foreign policy, generally, and seemed to have no strong feelings about either the rest of Italy or Italian unification. On the whole, he was reluctant to confront Austria in the first half of the decade and did so only in response to pressure from influential émigrés or to neutralize the initiatives of democratic radicals. When the Austrian government seized the property of Lombard refugees residing in Turin, for instance, the prime minister immediately lodged an official protest with the Great Powers and had parliament set aside a special fund to help compensate the victims. Cavour was also a late and reluctant convert to the idea of Piedmontese participation in the Crimean War of 1855. When his government joined the anti-Russian coalition, it did so not in pursuit of national objectives but out of fear that a Franco-Austrian alliance would leave Piedmont encircled and isolated. Even after the war ended in the winter of 1855-56, Cavour remained a reluctant nationalist, who went to the peace conference in Paris with little enthusiasm and modest territorial demands that were in any case rejected by the Great Powers.

Nonetheless, the Crimean War did elevate the prestige of Turin and the Savoyard state on the peninsula and encouraged fundamental changes in Cavour's thinking about the Italian question from the spring of 1856 onwards. The hostilities left in shambles the conservative bloc of Austria, Russia, and Prussia that had previously guaranteed the territorial status quo in Italy. The defeat of Russia, in particular, transformed one of the staunchest defenders of the old order into a revisionist power alongside the French emperor, Napoleon III, who aimed to exploit national sentiment in Italy to redraw the map of Europe and enhance the influence of France. As a result, Austria emerged from the war as the sole defender of the diplomatic status quo of 1815. The breakdown of the old Concert System created opportunities for Cavour to exploit dif-