

# Secret Societies in Europe (1814-1850)

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## ABSTRACT

In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European political life was marked by the struggle between Restoration governments and numerous secret societies. Those organizations rarely achieved their goals, but they did contribute to keeping ideologies inherited from the Revolution alive. Despite their elitism, they also enhanced the politicization of a small portion of the working-class population. Although the various societies sometimes shared certain rites or symbols, they never constituted a centralized revolutionary organization at the trans-European level. While some of them had over 30,000 members within a single country, they never managed to sustain that level for very long, as they would run into repression, or competition from other societies. Carbonarism, the model of a revolutionary secret society for over half a century, is analyzed here, distinguishing carefully the various types and their ideologies, from constitutional liberalism to state socialism.

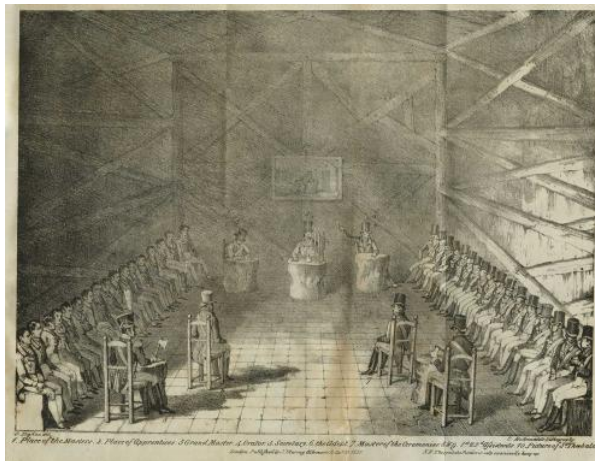


Illustration 1: A carbonari “vendita” (name given to a local section) in the Kingdom of Naples. *Memoirs of the Secret Societies of the South of Italy, Particularly the Carbonari. Translated from the original Ms, London, John Murray, 1821.*

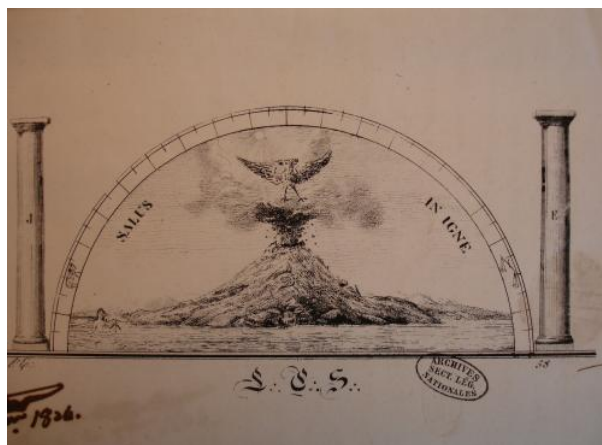


Illustration 2: Symbols of the Universal Democratic *Charbonnerie*. Source: National Archives Paris, CC575.

Secret societies were not a 19<sup>th</sup>-century invention: a century earlier, Freemasonry became the archetype of secretive new elitist forms of socializing that flaunted their cosmopolitanism, and were structured around esoteric knowledge. Other secret societies, with less elite membership, have existed, such as *compagnonnages* (brotherhood of journeymen artisans). Nonetheless, secret societies are associated with European political life in the first half of the century. The reputation of those clandestine activist groups, some of which could boast tens of thousands of affiliated members, has suffered from Marx's and especially Engels's criticism, which described them as archaic and cut off from the masses. Historians have sometimes been disconcerted by the unexpectedly religious nature of the societies' rituals. But recent research, attentive to these revolutionary players' efforts to engage with traditional practices and change their meaning, invite us to reconsider their importance.

## A Time of Plotting Against the Holy Alliance

From the very early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the struggle against the French Empire led to the birth of numerous secret societies across Europe. While some groups – like the Carbonari (literally “charcoal burners”), in the Kingdom of Naples, and the *Tugenbund*, in Prussia – fought against Napoleonic imperialism, others – like the *Chevaliers de la foi* (Knights of the Faith) in France and the Neapolitan *calderari* – defended the pre-revolutionary social order. In 1815, the latter celebrated the restoration of the traditional order, unlike the former, who had hoped to see the constitutional principle applied to national sovereignty. Liberals' engagement in secret societies was fostered by a culture of secrecy that stemmed from Freemasonry. It was justified by the firm conviction that conspiring was necessary in a moment of transition between absolutism and the reign of public opinion. Thus in 1814, in Odessa, in the Russian Empire, a friendly society working for Greek independence was organized into military or religious ranks, and took the name *Philiki Etaireia*. The failed conspiracies of 1816-1817 – in France, the Italian states, and Portugal – reflected turmoil that was threatening to those in power.

In Spain, the success of General Riego's January 1820 *pronunciamento* against Ferdinand VII's absolutism sparked an unprecedented wave of contestation. In Naples, Carbonarism prevailed, and its fame spread across Europe. The society appeared around 1809, as a reaction to the authoritarianism of King Joachim Murat and his control over

Masonry. Bringing together supporters of Italian unity, it borrowed some of its rites from a secret society that was widespread in the Jura, called the *Charbonnerie Forestière* (*charbonnerie* is the French equivalent of Carbonari). The repression that befell the Italian states did not rein in the appearance of other Carbonarisms after 1820. Metternich saw the threat of a global conspiracy in those multiple variations. In France, the *Charbonnerie* was founded by young activists who enlisted key liberal figures, including elected officials, like Deputies (members of Parliament) Lafayette, Manuel and Voyer d'Argenson. But it borrowed only superficially from its Italian predecessor. In fact, the Russian general Ypsilantis, whom the founders of the *Etaireia* chose as their leader, refused to describe his society as an imitation of Carbonarism, emphasizing its national and religious nature. In Spain, in the early 1820s, the most radical opponents of the monarchy decided to found a society of *Comuneros*, which was better suited to Spanish political culture.

The idea of a vast, Europe-wide secret society is something of a myth; but the participation from 1820 to 1823 of groups of British and French combatants in defending liberal Spain, bears witness to European networks' international cooperation. Their failure tolled the death knell on hope for revolutionary liberalism. French *carbonari* turned toward legal action. Some went off to fight in Greece. But the Decembrist revolt of 1825, which involved officers with constitutional, or even republican (i.e. in favor of a republic, therefore anti-royalist) ideas, demonstrates the fact that not even the Russian Empire was spared by the secret-society phenomenon.

## **Secret Societies, Democracy and Socialism**

When revolution broke out again, in 1830 – first with the “Three Glorious Days” (or “July Revolution”) in Paris, then in Belgium – secret societies played only a marginal role. Nonetheless, they had not disappeared entirely. Although the ultra-royalists groups that had failed to return to power in France maintained their ties with the Spanish Carlists (supporters of the elder branch of the Spanish Bourbons), liberals gave up on the idea of conspiracies. The best-structured revolutionary networks were linked to the professional conspirator Philippe Buonarroti (1761-1837). A Florentine, he had participated in the French Revolution, supported Robespierre and, along with Gracchus Babeuf, been involved in the Conspiracy of the Equals against the Directory. His societies worked to keep the memory of the Jacobine experience alive and for the survival of both republican and communist ideas. Within those groups, initiates rose through the ranks as accepted ever more egalitarian ideals. After 1832, Buonarroti tried to combine his networks (*Sublimes Maîtres Parfaits*, *Veri Italiani*, and groups of German and Polish refugees) into a universal and democratic new *Charbonnerie*. That society's rites had to have a shared esoteric language, intelligible to cosmopolitan upholders of the Enlightenment.

Buonarroti ran up against the influence of Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872), a democrat exiled first in Marseille, then in Switzerland. The former advocated for a universal, communist European Republic. The latter was in favor of a Europe in which the population of each nation was sovereign and could, thereby, accomplish its providential mission in history. Unlike Buonarroti, who ran his society from Paris, using secrecy to legitimize his power, Mazzini put himself in the spotlight and limited ritual within the organizations he developed: *Young Italy* in 1831, then other national branches within *Young Europe*, in 1834. His organization was unable to get much of a toehold in France, where republican, socialist secret societies, led in Paris by Auguste Blanqui (1805-1881) and that federated a few thousand craftsmen and workers, had established themselves as the most violent opposition to the July monarchy. Mazzini's influence dwindled in the Germanic world after he was forced to leave from Switzerland, in 1837.

Around 1840, the world of European secret societies was still fragmented. In Paris, a socialist, materialist organization, the New Seasons, was the heir to the societies of Blanqui and Barbès, who had been jailed. In the French provinces, especially Lyon and in the south of France, a *Charbonnerie réformée* was developed in a new way: while preserving certain forms borrowed from Carbonarism, it also recruited members from the working classes. In the rest of Europe, two areas were still hotbeds of plotting and conspiracies. In Polish Galicia, an uprising took place in 1846 that was supported by the Polish Democratic Society, headquartered in Paris. And finally, in Italy, and particularly in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, several insurrectionist uprisings broke out in 1847, heralding the Springtime of the Peoples, or the Revolutions of 1848.

That 1848 moment represented the high point for secret societies, several of which claimed credit for starting the revolutions, whose prestige was favored by the public's fascination for the conspirators' literary romanticism. The activists tried to continue their actions through authorized clubs or societies, but the democrats and socialists were soon suppressed in a clampdown that was sometimes validated by universal suffrage. Secret societies that withstood that reaction had to find other means of action and new ways to legitimize violent acts. It was a crisis point for a certain romantic conception of a secret society defending the idea of an elite destined to supplant or renew Ancien Régime aristocracies and establish a political power structure imbued with a new sacredness that sometimes preserved the figure of Christ, but rejected Catholicism's unsavory ties with power.

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