



ARTICLE

Noble-Bourgeois Elites in an Age of Revolutions, c. 1790–1850

Amerigo Caruso 

Department of History, University of Bonn, Bonn, Germany
Email: acaruso@uni-bonn.de

Abstract

This article focuses on the shift toward post-revolutionary politics supported by reform-minded aristocratic clans and their bourgeois allies. Using the example of the Balbo family – one of the leading aristocratic families in Sardinia-Piedmont – I will argue that the quest for stability and pragmatism is crucial to understanding the political, cultural, and ideological reorientations within the noble-bourgeois elites in the first age of global revolutions. Family history is a lens through which it is possible to look afresh at this vital period of social transformations, state expansion, and political modernization. The article explores the Balbos' family history across generations and genders, not only in the revolutionary and Napoleonic period, but also in the decades after the Congress of Vienna. In doing so, it sheds new light on the course of state-building processes, constitutional reforms, and the formation of a new, composite elite, which would largely dominate European politics until the end of the nineteenth century.

The Seven Years' War (1756–63) and the revolutions in British America, Haiti, and France marked the threshold of a series of crises that lasted in varying degrees of intensity until the 1840s. This era of 'converging revolutions' shook established views of the future and led to an alarming increase in uncertainty.¹ The revolutionary wave affected every social stratum, but although the more vulnerable social groups were carrying the main burden of war and the hunger crises, the impact of perceptions of insecurity and fears of social disintegration on the European nobility cannot be underestimated. It was not only the echo of revolutionary events that aroused a feeling of profound upheaval and loss of orientation. More fundamental processes, such as state

¹ See Christopher A. Bayly, *The birth of the modern world, 1780–1914* (Malden, MA, 2004), ch. 3. On global revolutionary waves, see also David Motadel, 'Global revolutions', in David Motadel, ed., *Revolutionary world: global upheaval in the modern age* (Cambridge, 2021), pp. 1–37.

expansion, social differentiation, the emergence of a market economy, and secularization, were also gaining momentum and making the return of the old order appear increasingly illusory.

Despite the intensified ideological conflicts and periods of heightened political violence, it was rare for the entire social system to be destroyed along with the political order (this was only the case in French Saint-Domingue). The ‘unfinished’ and temporary character of revolutionary regime changes paved the way for new expectations for reconciliation and gradual political modernization, which went hand in hand with the ongoing experience of crisis.² Against this background, reform-minded nobles began to signal their greater willingness to compromise on sociopolitical modernization and to shape the development of the bureaucratic state – an attitude that had already become apparent in the late Enlightenment.³ The ‘counter-revolutionary’ ideas of these moderate elites were not aimed at restoring the status quo ante.⁴ Rather, the deficiencies of the pre-revolutionary monarchical order came into focus: eliminating the legitimacy deficit of the Old Regime through cautious political and social reforms was seen as the ideal way to overcome the revolution. The shift toward post-revolutionary politics, supported by reform-minded aristocrats and bourgeoisie, is crucial to understanding the relative stability of Napoleonic Europe and, beyond that, the course of state-building processes and constitutional reforms in the nineteenth century.

Using the example of the Balbo family – one of the leading aristocratic families in the kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont and later in Napoleonic Europe – I will argue that post-revolutionary pragmatism and the search for stability are crucial factors in understanding political and ideological reorientations within the aristocratic-bourgeois elites in the ‘Age of Revolutions’.⁵ Family

² See Jürgen Osterhammel, *The transformation of the world: a global history of the nineteenth century* (Princeton, NJ, 2014), ch. 10.

³ On the process of state-building and elite transformation in early modern Europe, see Wolfgang Reinhard, ‘Power elites, civil servants, ruling classes, and the growth of state power’, in Wolfgang Reinhard, ed., *Power elites and state building* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 1–18; Hillyar Zmora, *Monarchy, aristocracy and the state in Europe, 1300–1800* (London, 2000); Robert von Friedeburg and John Morrill, eds., *Monarchy transformed: princes and their elites in early modern western Europe* (Cambridge, 2017).

⁴ On moderation as a post-revolutionary ‘virtue’ and its growing importance, not only in Britain but also in the continental political discourse, see Aurelian Craiutu, *A virtue for courageous minds: moderation in French political thought, 1748–1830* (Princeton, NJ, 2012); Matthijs Lok, ‘The extremes set the tone: counter-revolutionary moderation in continental conservatism (ca. 1795–1835)’, in Ido de Haan and Matthijs Lok, eds., *The politics of moderation in modern European history* (Basingstoke, 2019), pp. 67–88. For a critical reassessment of the notion of ‘counter-revolution’, see Friedemann Pestel, ‘Counterrevolution: semantic investigations of a counter-concept during the French Revolution’, *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 12 (2017), pp. 50–75.

⁵ The term ‘Age of Revolutions’ had already been used by contemporaries in the period it describes, but became a broadly accepted ‘period marker’ after the classic works of R. R. Palmer and Eric Hobsbawm in the 1960s. More recently, historians have criticized the paradigm of the ‘Age of Revolutions’, stressing the need for more open chronological boundaries and a new sensibility to the heterogeneity of global developments. See David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ‘Introduction: the Age of Revolutions, c. 1760–1840 – global causation, connections,

history is a lens through which it is possible to look afresh at the European elites' survival strategies, and more generally at the web of continuity and change in the transitional period between the collapse of the Old Regime and the turbulent post-revolutionary decades.⁶ Looking at female family members, this article will also highlight the ability of women to act in times of crisis, and their role as advisers and 'network brokers'.

I begin this article by looking at the Balbo family's initial situation in late Old Regime Sardinia-Piedmont, focusing in particular on education and networking among the noble-bourgeois elites, which was the basis of the Balbos' reformist attitude. The second section examines Count Prospero Balbo's political activism in the 1790s, particularly as a 'crisis manager' in Paris during the revolutionary years. New, moderate liberal, modernizing ideas and projects emerged throughout this phase, some of which it was possible to implement during the period of French rule over Piedmont; these are discussed in the third section. The subsequent sections analyse the growing importance of public discourse and the political role played by female family members after the fall of Napoleon and in the aftermath of the 1821 revolution. The sources examined for this article are the memoranda, letters, private documents, and newspaper articles from the Balbo family's extensive archive.⁷

I

Prospero Balbo was born in 1762 in Chieri, near Turin, and grew up in one of the most prestigious and powerful families of the small kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont in northern Italy.⁸ A protégé of his foster father, Giovanni Battista Lorenzo Bogino, a former minister of Charles Emmanuel III, he began his career in the service of the state in 1782. Bogino, a man of bourgeois origins, had implemented anti-feudal reforms and modernized the monarchy in the spirit of the late Enlightenment.⁹ After their parents' death in 1765, Prospero and his brother Gaetano were taken in by Bogino's family, gaining access at the same time to the successful statesman's valuable contacts, and thus

and comparison', in David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *The Age of Revolutions in global context, c. 1760–1840* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. xii–xxxii.

⁶ On family history, see the pioneering studies by Francesca Trivellato, *The familiarity of strangers: the Sephardic diaspora, Livorno, and cross-cultural trade in the early modern period* (New Haven, CT, 2009), and Emma Rothschild, *An infinite history: the story of a family in France over three centuries* (Princeton, NJ, 2021).

⁷ The family archive is held at the State Archives of Turin (Archivio di Stato di Torino, Archivio Balbo (henceforth AST, AB)).

⁸ On the Savoyard state (army, nobility, politics) before 1789, see Christopher Storrs, *War, diplomacy and the rise of Savoy, 1690–1720* (Cambridge, 2009). On the crisis in the decades around 1800, see Michael Broers, 'Transformation and discontinuity from the old order to the modern state in the Piedmontese and Ligurian départements of Napoleonic Italy', in Guido Braun, Gabriele B. Clemens, Lutz Klinkhammer, and Alexander Koller, eds., *Napoleonische Expansionspolitik. Okkupation oder Integration?* (Berlin, 2013), pp. 41–52.

⁹ See Gian Paolo Romagnani, *Prospero Balbo, intellettuale e uomo di stato. Il tramonto dell'antico regime in Piemonte, 1762–1800* (Turin, 1988), p. 173.

combining their own noble family tradition with the ideals and expertise of the bureaucratic elite.

Prospero Balbo's degree in law from the University of Turin in 1780, and his career as a high administrative official proved to be important resources, especially during the Napoleonic period and particularly because he was one of the first Piedmontese nobles to complete such a course of study. In pre-revolutionary Sardinia-Piedmont, this distinction was recognized by the bourgeois educated elites, and established Balbo's status as a scholarly, well-educated, transnationally active *grand seigneur*.¹⁰ This image would remain permanently central to his reputation. Reports from Austrian diplomats in Turin after 1815, praising Balbo as a 'highly cultured person' and 'the most distinguished man in the country', confirm this portrayal.¹¹ Following a trend of the late Enlightenment to establish private learned societies, Prospero and six other noblemen founded the Patria Società Letteraria in 1782, which became a forum for discussion and a means of networking among reform-minded elites.¹² The Balbo-Bogino family was establishing itself even before the emergence of the power of the notables in Napoleonic Europe, in the sense of an extended ruling class that combined the status and social standing of the nobility with the prestige of educated bourgeois groups and the power of the bureaucratic elite and the propertied classes.¹³

Prospero's younger brother, Gaetano, had been in the service of the House of Savoy since early childhood and moved in the highest circles of the court.¹⁴ His presence as a representative of his family gave not only Gaetano but also his relatives access to privileged information and networks. Their closeness to the ruling dynasty and their ethos of state service sustained the self-assertion and self-perception of the Balbo family. In his work on the Piedmontese nobility, Anthony L. Cardoza noted that, in the first half of the nineteenth century, social and symbolic capital in noble networks still played a crucial role in advancing careers in the monarchical state.¹⁵ However, a successful career in state service was no longer determined solely on aristocratic origins, but also increasingly on education, reputation, and merit.¹⁶ By moving in both

¹⁰ Patrizia Delpiano, *Il trono e la cattedra. Istruzione e formazione dell'élite nel Piemonte del Settecento* (Turin, 1997), p. 88.

¹¹ Narciso Nada, *Le relazioni diplomatiche fra l'Austria e il Regno di Sardegna, 1814–1830*, vol. II: 23 luglio 1820–3 agosto 1822 (Rome, 1968), pp. 228, 339. These and following quotations have been translated from the French.

¹² For example, Balbo was in contact with important representatives of the intellectual elite such as the historian Carlo Denina and the physicist Giambattista Beccaria.

¹³ On the formation of composite elites in the 'long' nineteenth century, see, among others, Martin Kohlrausch, Peter Heyrman, and Jan de Maeyer, 'Elites and leisure: arenas of encounter in Europe, 1815–1914', in Martin Kohlrausch, Peter Heyrman, and Jan de Maeyer, eds., *Leisure and elite formation: arenas of encounter in continental Europe, 1815–1914* (Berlin, 2020), pp. 1–18.

¹⁴ Understanding court society is essential to understanding how the nobility constructed status, reputation, and identity through active participation in political communication and decision-making processes. See John Adamson, *The princely courts of Europe, 1500–1750* (London, 1999).

¹⁵ Anthony L. Cardoza, *Aristocrats in bourgeois Italy: the Piedmontese nobility, 1861–1930* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 34.

¹⁶ See Jay M. Smith, *The culture of merit: nobility, royal service, and the making of absolute monarchy in France, 1600–1789* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1996).

social spheres – the exclusive social relations of the nobility and the rising intellectual and administrative elites – Prospero consolidated multiple resources of resilience in terms of social and material capital, which, as we will see in greater detail below, the family were able to maintain across generations and genders. Like other reform-minded elites, such as the *monarchiens* in France, the Balbo family not only embraced rapprochement with the upper middle classes, but also had a disposition toward change in that, while not completely questioning the monarchical system, they were nonetheless increasingly critical of its deficiencies with regard to reform and legitimacy.¹⁷

II

Prospero rose quickly up the career ladder and was appointed mayor of Turin in 1789, at only twenty-seven years of age. In 1796, he entered the arena of high politics as the Sardinian ambassador in Paris. When he took up this new post, the Savoyard state was in the worst possible position. Having lost the war against the French, in the ensuing treaty of Paris (1796) the kingdom was forced to cede Savoy and Nice to France and to limit its sovereignty by handing over its fortresses to the French army and allowing them free passage through Piedmont.¹⁸ The treaty was a profound humiliation for the monarchy and ushered in a period of upheaval and great political instability in Piedmont. Victor Amadeus III and his successor, Charles Emmanuel IV, were faced with an almost ungovernable kingdom, paralysed by ailing state finances and the French military presence, and repeatedly shaken by uprisings in the provincial towns and revolutionary movements in the countryside.¹⁹

The signing of the peace treaty allowed diplomatic relations with France to be resumed, making it necessary to send a new ambassador to Paris. In consultation with his new foreign minister, Damiano Priocca, Victor Amadeus III chose the diplomatically inexperienced Prospero Balbo. He arrived in Paris on 17 November 1796, carrying in his luggage the *istruzioni* he had received from Priocca, which contained information for the future ambassador on the strategy to be followed and how to conduct affairs in keeping with the monarch's foreign policy.²⁰ Balbo was loyal to the Savoyard monarchy but, having been educated after the fashion of a broad elite of noble-bourgeois civil servants and intellectuals, he was better suited to the heterogenous and unstable Parisian society than old-school diplomats. This new Parisian high society consisted primarily of revolutionary politicians, successful military

¹⁷ Friedemann Pestel, *Kosmopoliten wider Willen. Die 'monarchiens' als Revolutionsemigranten* (Berlin, 2015), p. 66.

¹⁸ Sardinia-Piedmont entered the anti-French coalition in 1792 (War of the First Coalition).

¹⁹ Michael Broers, 'The imperial departments of Napoleonic Italy: resistance and collaboration', in Michael Broers, Peter Hicks, and Agustín Guimerá, eds., *The Napoleonic empire and the new European political culture* (Basingstoke, 2012), pp. 216–26.

²⁰ On the changes in diplomatic practices after the French Revolution, see Linda Frey and Marsha Frey, "'The reign of the charlatans is over": the French revolutionary attack on diplomatic practices', *Journal of Modern History*, 65 (1993), pp. 706–44.

officers, *nouveaux riches*, *salonières*, artists, and *hommes de lettres*.²¹ Balbo had over the years maintained his contacts with French academics, which, in addition to furthering his education and language skills, legitimized him as a member of the emerging administrative and intellectual elite in French-dominated western Europe. Even before his appointment as ambassador, 'Citoyen Balbe' was a member of the Institut National des Sciences et des Arts, established in 1795 by the French government after the dissolution of the Académie Royale.²²

Upon his arrival in Paris, Balbo's most pressing task was to negotiate a Franco-Piedmontese alliance, which was seen in Turin as the only chance of survival for the weakened monarchy. To convince the Directory, Piedmontese diplomacy insisted on the importance of their having a loyal ally in northern Italy to continue the war against the Habsburg monarchy with any chance of success. Events, however, took an unexpected and unfavourable turn: on 18 April 1797 Napoleon signed the treaty of Leoben with Austria, leaving Balbo without a rationale for a Franco-Piedmontese alliance. Faced with this predicament, he acted with greater autonomy and, constrained by his now severely limited scope for action, nonetheless endeavoured to communicate the need for a Franco-Piedmontese alliance. On 26 April he had a confidential meeting with the French foreign minister, Charles-François Delacroix, in which he stressed that Sardinia-Piedmont was 'the French Republic's natural ally'.²³

From the summer of 1797 onwards, the role of adviser and decision-maker fell increasingly to Balbo – responsibilities that more properly belonged to the sphere of competence of a foreign minister than a diplomat.²⁴ This emerges with particular clarity in a memorandum of 2 June 1797, which the monarch had personally requested from Balbo. The extensive text reveals Balbo's ideas on sociopolitical modernization and on European security policy. First, Balbo stressed the inevitability of a pro-French course. He then drew up a comprehensive programme in which he presented the king with the domestic measures that were necessary to protect the monarchical state from ruin. The monarch would have to modernize his financial administration, the army, and the judiciary – in short, the entire state. The aristocratic elites, aware of the current threat and willing to implement reforms, would need to join forces with the 'good' bourgeoisie and the propertied classes behind a strong government.²⁵ It is remarkable how Balbo's strategy, even before 1800, included changes to the structure of the elite, moderate reform, and society-stabilizing policies in terms of *amalgame* and *ralliement*. Under the Directory, and in

²¹ Georges Lefebvre, *La France sous le directoire, 1795–1799* (Paris, 1977), p. 537.

²² Balbo's membership card of the Institut National des Sciences et des Arts is held in the family archive at AST, AB, unnumbered.

²³ Prospero Balbo to Charles-François Delacroix, 26 Apr. 1797, quoted in Romagnani, *Prospero Balbo*, p. 316.

²⁴ On diplomats as 'policy-makers', see Mark Jarret, 'Diplomats as power brokers', in Beatrice de Graaf, Ido de Haan, and Brian Vick, eds., *Securing Europe after Napoleon: 1815 and the new European security culture* (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 271–87.

²⁵ Balbo to Damiano Priocca, 2 June 1797, quoted in Romagnani, *Prospero Balbo*, p. 326.

particular under Napoleon, the dual policies of *ralliement* and *amalgame* characterized the course of reconciliation aimed at gaining the active – or at least passive – support of former enemies of the revolution and of the local elites in the territories annexed to imperial France.²⁶

In November 1797, Foreign Minister Priocca portrayed the ambassador as the saviour of the state, even though the threats to Piedmont had by no means been overcome.²⁷ At the beginning of 1798, their communications increasingly revolved around insecurity, with the Jacobin agitation in the Cisalpine and Ligurian republics, in particular, discussed as an immediate threat.²⁸ In February of that year, Balbo set out his strategy in detail in negotiations with Talleyrand. The goal was again to secure recognition of the kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont. The cornerstones of this strategy foresaw the construction of the European security system – which Talleyrand and Balbo would help shape after 1814.²⁹ What is remarkable, however, is that Balbo was already advocating a European balance of power and stabilization of the Italian peninsula, supposedly guaranteed by the existence of the Sardinian monarchy.³⁰

Balbo's crisis management in Paris can be divided into two phases. First, he sought to consolidate Sardinia-Piedmont's precarious independence and to present the kingdom as a solid, well-organized partner in both Paris and Turin. Balbo achieved this not only by combating immediate threats, but also by addressing the resilience of the entire political system, when, for example, he referred to the need for modernization measures. While this strategy was still relatively successful in the first year after his arrival in Paris, it was definitely not so after the summer of 1798 – when the hawks in Directory France, who had 'evil intentions' towards Sardinia-Piedmont, seemed to gain the upper hand.³¹ When preventing the crisis seemed increasingly utopian, Balbo strove to reduce its negative effects – and thus began the second phase of his crisis policy. It was now a matter of saving the reputation of the Savoyard state and its ruling classes. In the event of an imminent collapse of the monarchy, they were to stand as loyal, honourable, and competent actors. In his letters to Priocca in May 1798, Balbo was frank in this regard: 'if we defend ourselves courageously, we will be better regarded and respected, and will gain the time we need to see us through to less unhappy times'.³²

This approach also enhanced Balbo's own reputation, and in this sense it was successful, because, after the definitive annexation of Piedmont to

²⁶ See Michael Broers, 'The quest for a juste milieu: the restoration as a silver age?', in Reinhard Stauber, ed., *Mächtepolitik und Friedenssicherung. Zur politischen Kultur Europas im Zeichen des Wiener Kongresses* (Berlin, 2014), pp. 33–46.

²⁷ Priocca to Balbo, n.d., AST, AB, mazzo 26, Carteggio diplomatico, no. 26.

²⁸ Balbo to Priocca, 14 Feb. 1798, AST, AB, mazzo 26, Carteggio diplomatico, no. 243. Based on information from a French secret agent monitoring the Jacobins, Balbo was able to inform Priocca of a plot against the king.

²⁹ See, for example, de Graaf, de Haan, and Vick, eds., *Securing Europe after Napoleon*.

³⁰ Balbo to Priocca, 2 Feb. 1798, AST, AB, mazzo 26, Carteggio diplomatico, no. 237.

³¹ Balbo to Priocca, 9 Feb. 1798, AST, AB, mazzo 26, Carteggio diplomatico, no. 303.

³² Balbo to Priocca, 4 May 1798, AST, AB, mazzo 26, Carteggio diplomatico, no. 297.

France in 1801, his experience and skills remained in demand. When the French occupied Piedmont, they assumed they would find a well-educated, professional elite on whose support they could depend to build the rapidly expanding French state and administer the empire.³³ Indeed, Balbo was offered important positions not only by the Savoyard monarchy in exile, the Austro-Russian coalition, and the electorate of Bavaria, but also by republican and, later, Napoleonic France.³⁴ The existence of multiple loyalties in post-revolutionary Europe explains the willingness of Balbo and countless other Piedmontese, German, and Belgian-Dutch notables to serve the Napoleonic empire. In times of crisis, a variety of threatened orders (family, social organization, monarchy, nation, religion, international politics) had to be consolidated and, if necessary, the most vulnerable levels had to be abandoned. Around 1800, this was undoubtedly the pre-revolutionary monarchical order. However, even keeping a distance from the old monarchy, as we will see below, was by no means a radical break.

III

After Charles Emmanuel IV went into exile on 6 December 1798, and the French seized power in Turin, not only was Balbo no longer needed in Paris, but the mere fact of his remaining there was dangerous. On the same day that Charles Emmanuel left Piedmont, Balbo was placed under house arrest by order of the French minister of police, and the embassy was searched. After only two days, intervention by the Spanish and Prussian ambassadors, and a personal letter from Balbo to Talleyrand, brought a quick end to his house arrest, an official apology from Reubell on behalf of the Directory, and a promise of the necessary papers to leave the country.³⁵ In this period of great uncertainty, the fact that Balbo was well integrated into Parisian society was of enormous importance. This was especially evident in his marriage to Catherine des Isnards, the daughter of Count Henri Joseph des Isnards, which took place in Paris on 21 December 1798.³⁶

Even after his term as ambassador had officially ended, Balbo remained in close contact with his monarch, first notifying him of his marriage to Catherine in a letter dated 23 January 1799.³⁷ His brother's presence at the Savoyard court in exile ensured Prospero's continuing connection with the dynasty.³⁸ Relying on Gaetano as his intermediary with the king, he planned his next steps: with his wife and his children from a previous marriage, he wanted to join Charles Emmanuel IV, who had embarked for Sardinia from

³³ Michael Broers, *The Napoleonic Mediterranean: enlightenment, revolution and empire* (London, 2017), p. 224.

³⁴ Balbo to Charles Emmanuel IV, 23 Apr. 1799, AST, AB, mazzo 29 (unnumbered).

³⁵ Romagnani, *Prospero Balbo*, p. 476.

³⁶ See marriage certificate in AST, AB, mazzo 13, fasc. 5.

³⁷ Mentioned in Prospero Balbo to Gaetano Balbo, Livorno, 23 Feb. 1799, AST, AB, mazzo 33, fasc. 4.

³⁸ Romagnani, *Prospero Balbo*, p. 486.

Livorno at the end of February.³⁹ When the Austro-Russian army, supported by irregular militias with Catholic reactionary tendencies, briefly ousted the French forces from the Italian peninsula, hopes grew for an early return of the Savoyard monarchy to Turin.⁴⁰ Charles Emmanuel IV did indeed return to the mainland after a six-month exile in Sardinia, but was prevented by the Austrians from reassuming his throne in Turin and had to retreat to Florence.⁴¹ Together with other Piedmontese exiles, Balbo travelled via Menorca to Livorno, then on to Florence to await the king's arrival. Balancing a possible *ralliement* with French rule and loyalty to the exiled monarch was typical not only of Balbo but also of other prominent members of the Piedmontese nobility, such as Filippo Antonio Asinari di San Marzano, who was able to continue his career in the First Empire as Napoleon's ambassador to Berlin, and, after 1814, as the restored Savoyard monarchy's minister of war. Ferdinando Dal Pozzo, who, like Balbo, came from a leading family among the old Piedmontese nobility, also held a series of influential posts under Napoleon.⁴²

Balbo benefited from the good reputation of the Piedmontese elites, but also from his existing contacts with both the decision-makers in Paris and the European powers fighting France in the War of the Second Coalition. When Turin was reconquered by the Austro-Russian army in 1799, Balbo became a member of Piedmont's provisional government. As minister of finance in the interim government, he tried again to bring about a political readjustment of the monarchical system, as he had done during his early years in Paris. In December 1799, Balbo sent the king a memorandum on the situation in Piedmont, which, like his Paris memorandum, advocated a comprehensive programme of reforms at home and a pro-French foreign policy. However, the pro-Habsburg faction at the court in exile prevented circulation of the memorandum and application of the proposals it contained, so that Balbo was only able to distribute it himself privately.⁴³ For Balbo, loyalty to the monarchy went hand in hand with the implementation of modernizing reforms, and he held this stance throughout the political turmoil that took place in northern Italy in the late 1790s. The 1799 memorandum and the measures he took as minister of finance attest to his belief in the crisis being an opportunity to demonstrate the need for reform.

³⁹ Gaetano Balbo to Prospero Balbo, 16 Mar. 1799, AST, AB, mazzo 33, fasc. 4.

⁴⁰ On Catholic counter-revolutionary movements in the late 1790s, see Glauco Schettini, 'Eighteenth-century crusaders: the war against France and the Catholic counterrevolution, 1789–99', in Matthijs Lok, Friedemann Pestel, and Juliette Reboul, eds., *Cosmopolitan conservatism: counter-revolution in transnational networks, ideas, and movements, c.1700–1930* (Leiden, 2021), pp. 152–73.

⁴¹ Balbo to Filippo Antonio Asinari di San Marzano, 15 Oct. 1799, AST, AB, mazzo 33, fasc. 2.

⁴² Dal Pozzo's influence helped numerous other Piedmontese lawyers and judges educated under the old monarchy to pursue brilliant careers, holding key positions in the judicial administration of the empire's Italian departments, and even at the court of cassation in Paris. See Broers, *Napoleonic Mediterranean*, pp. 223–39.

⁴³ This memorandum has been published in Eugenio Passamonti, 'Un memoriale inedito di Prospero Balbo nel dicembre del 1799', *Atti della Reale Accademia delle Scienze di Torino*, 49 (1913), pp. 939–51. See also Romagnani, *Prospero Balbo*, p. 512.

With Austria, as the occupying power, and the Savoy court in exile making little effort to allow the provisional government in Turin to rehabilitate its economy, halt the raging inflation of paper money, or combat the severe famine, Balbo threatened to resign.⁴⁴ On 22 March 1800 he informed the Regency Council of his decision. Just a few weeks later, the French regained the upper hand in northern Italy and a period of relative stability followed, lasting until 1814. While Prospero and the rest of the family had returned to Turin in 1802, Gaetano remained continuously in the service of the court in exile until 1815. This fact was explicitly recognized by the royal family and would play a decisive role after the restoration of 1814, as demonstrated by a letter to Catherine Balbo written by the politically very active Queen Marie Clotilde of Sardinia-Piedmont, sister of Louis XVI of France.⁴⁵

Although Piedmont was not formally annexed until the late summer of 1802, French power had long since ceased to be provisional, and, since June 1800, had brought a degree of stability to the kingdom, which had been lacking in previous years. With a decree of August 1802, Napoleon ordered all Piedmontese emigrants to return and threatened to confiscate their property if they did not do so within three months. Prospero Balbo, too, returned to Turin from his Tuscan exile. He initially withdrew from political life and dedicated himself to the education of his children. In 1804, he founded the Società dei Concordi, a learned society for the sons of the nobility. Members and students included his son Cesare Balbo, Roberto d'Azeglio, and Santorre di Santa Rosa, who later became key figures of liberalism and in the national movement in the age of the Risorgimento.⁴⁶

Prospero did not initially hold political office under French rule, but he did not turn his back completely on political affairs, as his correspondence with General Jacques-François Menou, governor general of Piedmont from 1803, shows.⁴⁷ In any case, Balbo's retreat into private life did not last long. In 1805 he was appointed rector of the University of Turin, which was the model for Napoleon's newly founded Université Impériale in Paris.⁴⁸ In this new position, Balbo played a central mediating role between the French government and the Piedmontese intellectual elite.⁴⁹

In the French period, Prospero's older son became increasingly important in the family's survival strategy. Cesare grew up under Napoleon, and it was during this period that he gained his first experiences in politics. In 1808, he accompanied Menou to Florence as secretary general to the governor. His relationship with Menou – one of the few French nobles who were able to continue

⁴⁴ Balbo to San Marzano, 12 Mar. 1800, AST, AB, mazzo 15 (unnumbered).

⁴⁵ Queen Maria Clotilde to Catherine Balbo, Naples, 17 Mar. 1801, AST, AB, mazzo 11, fasc. 46.

⁴⁶ Maurizio Isabella, 'Aristocratic liberalism and Risorgimento: Cesare Balbo and Piedmontese political thought after 1848', *History of European Ideas*, 39 (2013), pp. 835–57.

⁴⁷ Jacques-François Menou to Balbo, 14 Aug. 1804, AST, AB, mazzo 33, fasc. 11.

⁴⁸ Balbo's position as rector of the University of Turin is mentioned also in his electoral identity card of 1806, which is held in AST, AB (unnumbered). On the University of Turin in the Napoleonic period, see Broers, *Napoleonic Mediterranean*, p. 223.

⁴⁹ See Antonio De Francesco, *L'Italia di Bonaparte. Politica, statualità e nazione nella penisola tra due rivoluzioni, 1796–1821* (Milan, 2011), p. 101.

their military careers without interruption after the revolution – is indicative of the Balbos' close ties with the Napoleonic ruling system. After serving alongside Menou in Florence, Cesare's career took off. With the annexation of the Papal States in 1809, at only twenty years of age he was catapulted to the top of the French administration in Rome. He continued his career as a top official in the Conseil d'État in Paris, with an interlude in the administration of the Illyrian provinces in Ljubljana. Meanwhile, Prospero's younger son, Ferdinando, served in the Napoleonic army and died during the retreat from Russia in 1813.

Recent historiography has stressed continuities between the Napoleonic era and its aftermath, criticizing the concept of 'restoration' and its periodization, which tends to overemphasize the dichotomy of revolution and restoration. Beatrice de Graaf has pointed out that the 'hybrid combination of traditional symbolism and innovation' was a key aspect of the post-Napoleonic period.⁵⁰ The positive reassessment of the Vienna system, however, is not entirely convincing in the case of Sardinia-Piedmont, where restorative measures were more far-reaching than in most other European monarchies. After Napoleon's abdication at Fontainebleau, the Balbo clan prepared for another major political change. In principle, the family had no objections to a monarchical restoration. However, they had hoped for a 'teachable' monarchy, which, to begin with, was by no means the case with the Savoyard royals.

IV

Cesare Balbo adjusted to the regime change in a timely manner by turning down any further assignments for the empire after the treaty of Fontainebleau, which sent Napoleon into exile on Elba. In particular, he declined a mission to Savoy, which, as he was well aware, would have especially angered the restored monarch, Victor Emmanuel I, and his ultraconservative entourage. Cesare may have also had in mind the reactivation of his father's political career.⁵¹ Meanwhile, Prospero was admitted to the ranks of the Regency Council in Turin, established on 25 April 1814 to govern the country provisionally after the withdrawal of the French. However, the hopes of Balbo and the other members of the Council for an orderly transition that would see the Napoleonic reforms transferred to the restored system (as was the case, for example, in the Netherlands and the Rhineland) were bitterly crushed.

The decree of 21 May 1814, issued by Victor Emmanuel I shortly after his return, almost entirely reversed fifteen years of French legislation and state-building.⁵² The Regency Council was quickly abolished in this restoration

⁵⁰ Beatrice de Graaf, *Fighting terror after Napoleon: how Europe became secure after 1815* (Cambridge, 2020), p. 446. See also Ambrogio A. Caiani and Michael Broers, eds., *A history of the European restorations: governments, states and monarchy* (Cambridge, 2019). For Italy, in particular, see Miroslav Šedivy, *Si vis pacem, para bellum: the Italian response to international insecurity, 1830-1848* (Vienna, 2021).

⁵¹ See Cesare Balbo, 'Autobiografia', in Ercole Ricotti, ed., *Della vita e degli scritti del Conte Cesare Balbo* (Florence, 1856), pp. 331-79, at p. 354.

⁵² Narciso Nada and Paola Notario, *Il Piemonte sabauda. Dal periodo napoleonico al Risorgimento* (Turin, 1993), pp. 97-105.

frenzy, and the government and supreme administration were purged of people who had been active under the Napoleonic regime. Piedmont is therefore unusual compared with the rest of Europe, as other restored monarchies adopted a 'policy of silence' on the past, retaining all or some of the reforms of the Napoleonic period.⁵³

With the return of Victor Emmanuel I, Prospero lost his temporary position, and it was only Gaetano's long-standing presence at the court in exile (he had died in the meantime) that saved the family from completely falling out of favour with the Savoyard monarchy. Between May and July 1815, Prospero wrote two memoranda to the restored monarch defending his reputation. The first was written during the Hundred Days' War, as Napoleon was returning from exile and when Prospero was acutely aware of his family's precarious situation.⁵⁴ He focuses throughout not on his political thinking, nor on his plans for rebuilding the monarchy into a more progressive institution, but rather on his own character, and, more importantly, his reputation. He grounds his reasoning in the elite-based discourse of honour, loyalty, and the ethos of service.

In the second memorandum, written after Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo, Prospero offered his monarch a resumé of his services to the kingdom. As evidence of loyalty, he cites not only his having accepted a position in the legation to Paris in 1796 in time of greatest need, and his role as minister of finance in the transitional government in 1799, but also, and in particular, his family's continued support for the court in exile. He lists these accomplishments to assure the monarch of his family's unconditional loyalty, while pushing into the background their involvement with the First French Empire. Prospero explains that the only position he accepted from Napoleon was that of rector of the University of Turin, a 'modest' post that he agreed to take merely to prevent it being filled by a revolutionary-minded public official; by doing so, he had succeeded in protecting the Piedmontese youth from harm and had given them hope for the return of their rightful ruler.

These passages seem at first sight to be a prime example of opportunism. Yet this monocausal explanation is too simplistic. After all, Balbo had never explicitly distanced himself from the Savoyard monarchy, even under Napoleon's rule, and he does little here, for all his justification, to distance himself from his French past. As in his Paris memorandum and that of 1799, he does not shy away from criticizing the legitimacy deficit of the Old Regime monarchy and the reactionary policies of Victor Emmanuel I and his entourage. In Balbo's view, the severe steps taken by the restored monarch were based on false information about Napoleonic Piedmont that had reached the court in exile in Sardinia.

⁵³ See Matthijs Lok, *Windvanen. Napoleontische bestuurders in de Nederlandse en de Franse Restauratie, 1813–1820* (*Weathervanes: Napoleonic administrators in the Dutch and French Restoration, 1813–1820*) (Amsterdam, 2009). On constitutionalism as a means to foster integration in post-Napoleonic Europe, see Fabian Rausch, 'Constitutional fever? Constitutional integration in post-revolutionary France, Great Britain and Germany, 1814–1835', *Journal of Modern European History*, 15 (2017), pp. 221–42.

⁵⁴ The memorandum of May 1815 is held at AST, AB, mazzo 32, fasc. 1.

In analysing seemingly opportunistic careers in the ‘Age of Revolutions’, it is important to bear in mind the importance and prestige of moderate ideas of sociopolitical modernization.⁵⁵ Indeed, the radical revolutionary or reactionary course, as taken in France in the early 1790s or in Piedmont after 1814, was the exception: centrist coalitions and middle-way approaches dominated European politics, as they often appeared to be the best way to achieve continuity through change.⁵⁶ Moreover, to understand Balbo’s ‘opportunism’, it is important to reflect on the concept of loyalty. As recent contributions to the growing field of transnational intellectual history have shown, multiple cultural and political affiliations, as well as dual national belonging and imperial ideologies, continued to exist in an age of growing nationalism.⁵⁷ Loyalties were thus multiple and multi-faceted, nurtured by multiple spheres of experience and feelings of belonging – family, milieu of origin, religion, state, cultural nation – and could therefore be transferred after regime changes.⁵⁸

Balbo’s attempt to construct a continuity of honour, loyalty, reputation, and service across political and institutional caesurae was ultimately successful. In 1815, just one year after the restoration, Prospero Balbo again featured prominently in European court almanacs, as Victor Emmanuel I’s new ambassador to Spain. On 25 August 1818, he was appointed minister of the interior, so returned from Madrid to Turin. Balbo’s appointment was welcomed by public opinion in Piedmont and the rest of Europe as a sign of a pro-reformist turn. Yet around 1820 – just as in the 1790s and under the Napoleonic empire – he stood as a moderate liberal and respected statesman. Austrian diplomats representing the new dominant power in Italy, for example, had few concerns over Balbo’s intended political reforms, for they knew that they in no way ran counter to the European security system that had emerged after the Congress of Vienna. The Austrian emissary Ludwig von Starhemberg wrote to Metternich on several occasions in this regard, emphasizing that, in accordance with the conservative security system, the new minister placed ‘justice and good discernment’ above his liberal ‘party spirit’.⁵⁹

V

Beginning in January 1820 with the *pronunciamiento* of Cabezas de San Juan, a small town south of Seville, a new revolutionary wave swept the Portuguese

⁵⁵ See Pierre Serna, *La République des girouettes (1789-1815 et au-delà). Une anomalie politique: la France de l'extrême centre* (Seysssel, 2005); Craiutu, *Virtue for courageous minds*.

⁵⁶ Amerigo Caruso, ‘In medio stat virtus? The adaptability of the moderate project of politics in mid-nineteenth-century Europe (1830–1870)’, in de Haan and Lok, eds., *Politics of moderation*, pp. 109–27. On the political culture of Italian moderates and the rise of constitutional moderatism in Sardinia-Piedmont, see also Roberto Romani, *Sensibilities of the Risorgimento: reason and passion in political thought* (Leiden, 2018), ch. 4.

⁵⁷ See, among others, Konstantina Zanou, *Transnational patriotism in the Mediterranean, 1800–1850: stammering the nation* (Oxford, 2018).

⁵⁸ Ute Planert, ‘Fragmented nations: navigating the plurality of identity constructions in nineteenth-century Germany and Italy’, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 25 (2020), pp. 457–68.

⁵⁹ See the letters of Starhemberg to Metternich, 29 Aug. 1818 and 9 Jan. 1819, in Nada, *Relazioni diplomatiche*, p. 395.

empire, south-eastern Europe, Naples, and eventually Sardinia-Piedmont.⁶⁰ Cesare Balbo's peripheral involvement in the 1821 revolution, and the accusations against his father of having encouraged the liberal constitutional efforts and, ultimately, the outbreak of the riots, again greatly increased the vulnerability of the entire family. Prospero and Cesare, in common with a large part of Turin's noble society, did indeed have connections to the key players in the uprisings. But in the intense phase of the movement, both father and son were concerned with preventing an open rupture and averting a revolution. In Prospero's eyes, violent action would have constituted a decisive setback to the progress of the cautious modernization of the state, with its moderate constitutional aspirations. Cesare expressed himself accordingly in his observations on the state of Piedmont in January 1821.⁶¹ Overall, there was scepticism among the Piedmontese *moderati* over the Spanish constitution demanded by the radical liberals around Santorre di Santa Rosa.

When the revolution, largely supported by noble officers, broke out on 10 March, Prospero Balbo rushed to the royal palace, having a little earlier instructed his assistant to adapt the Sicilian constitution of 1812 (drawn up when the island was de facto under British control) to Piedmontese conditions.⁶² This improvised constitutional draft was approved by the majority of the ministers in Turin, who had gathered for an emergency meeting. Balbo's constitutional project ultimately failed, however, as a result of the intervention of the foreign minister, San Marzano, who had returned from the great power conference at Laibach (Ljubljana) shortly before the breakthrough in the moderate charter. San Marzano announced that the Holy Alliance would maintain its strict stance and would resolutely suppress not only any revolutionary uprisings but also any constitutional aspirations within the Italian states. Caught in the crossfire between the positions taken by the continental powers on the one hand, and internal Piedmontese revolts on the other, Victor Emmanuel I abdicated on 13 March. Prospero, who resigned along with the other ministers, retired to France to his wife's relatives.

A little later, Cesare would follow his father to France. On 5 April he resigned from the army and went into exile. An important characteristic of the Piedmontese revolution of 1821 is evident here: the departure of revolutionaries, and those perceived as such, like Cesare, was tolerated and even actively encouraged by the authorities.⁶³ Thus, temporary refuge or long-term exile became a widespread phenomenon among the ranks of the liberal elites,

⁶⁰ On liberal revolutions in southern Europe, see John A. Davis, *Naples and Napoleon: southern Italy and the European revolutions, 1780-1860* (Oxford, 2006); Richard Stites, *The four horsemen: riding to liberty in post-Napoleonic Europe* (Oxford, 2014); Maurizio Isabella, *Southern Europe in the Age of Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ, 2023).

⁶¹ See Jens Späth, *Revolution in Europa 1820-23. Verfassung und Verfassungskultur in den Königreichen Spanien, beider Sizilien und Sardinien-Piemont* (Cologne, 2012), p. 269.

⁶² On constitutional models and their transnational circulation, see Kerstin Singer, *Konstitutionalismus auf Italienisch. Italiens politische und soziale Führungsschichten und die oktroyierten Verfassungen von 1848* (Tübingen, 2008), pp. 35-130.

⁶³ See Giuseppe Parlato, *Dizionario dei piemontesi compromessi nei moti del 1821* (Turin, 1982), pp. 44-7.

and this was to play a major role in shaping the liberal reforms and nation-building processes of the 1840s and 1850s.⁶⁴ Faced again with increasing vulnerability, which affected both the father and the elder son in exile, the Balbos nevertheless found they still had room for manoeuvre. In particular, the actions of female family members, the family's connections to European centres of power and culture, and, not least, political communication through pamphlets and newspaper articles became important for the family's resilience.

The extent to which women were able to exercise political influence through their own networks has attracted much scholarly attention in recent years.⁶⁵ However, many questions about the 'sociopolitical' relationship of the sexes, as well as the link between the exclusion of women from formal political life and the attribution of 'influence' to women over male decision-making, remain unexplored.⁶⁶ The role played by Prospero's second wife, Catherine, reveals much, not only about possibilities for women's political agency and the interplay between sociability and diplomacy in the first half of the nineteenth century, but also about the expanded ability of women to act in times of crisis.

While the local field of political action in Turin temporarily closed for Prospero and Cesare after the failed revolution of 1821, a new one opened up for Catherine as the Balbos' representative in Turin. As Prospero's grandmother, Teresa Beraudo di Pralormo, had done during her grandson's long periods of absence from Turin around 1800, Catherine maintained the family's social relations, gathered and passed on information, and actively sought to restore the reputation of exiled relatives. In doing so, she moved in a certain protective space created by women's presumed political incapacity, a gender ascription that arose as the public sphere became increasingly politicized during the first half of the nineteenth century.⁶⁷ Because of her supposed biological incapacity for politics she was less under threat of punishment and exile than the male members of the family. Catherine's letters to Cesare are characterized not only by their consolatory character – consistent with gender

⁶⁴ On exile in nineteenth-century Europe, see Maurizio Isabella, *Risorgimento in exile: Italian émigrés and the liberal international in the post-Napoleonic era* (Oxford, 2009); Delphine Diaz, 'From exile to refugee: toward a transnational history of refuge in early nineteenth-century Europe', *Yearbook of Transnational History*, 4 (2021), pp. 1–25. On exile in general, see Peter Burke, *Exiles and expatriates in the history of knowledge, 1500–2000* (Waltham, MA, 2017).

⁶⁵ See especially Glenda Sluga, 'Women, diplomacy and international politics, before and after the Congress of Vienna', in Glenda Sluga and Carolyn James, eds., *Women, diplomacy and international politics since 1500* (London, 2016), pp. 120–36. On the role played by aristocratic women in the field of politics and diplomacy, see also Steven D. Kale, 'Women, salons, and the state in the aftermath of the French Revolution', *Journal of Women's History*, 13 (2002), pp. 54–80; Brian E. Vick, *The Congress of Vienna: power and politics after Napoleon* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), pp. 112–52; Kristine Dyrmann, 'Spa diplomacy: Charlotte Schimmelmann at Bad Pyrmont, 1789–94', *International History Review*, 44 (2022), pp. 1035–47.

⁶⁶ See Karen M. Offen, *The woman question in France, 1400–1870* (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 1–22.

⁶⁷ See Rüdiger Hachtmann, "'...nicht die Volksherrschaft auch noch durch Weiberherrschaft trüben': der männliche Blick auf die Frauen in der Revolution von 1848", *Werkstatt Geschichte*, 20 (1998), pp. 5–30.

attribution – but also by her strategic and thoroughly political observations.⁶⁸ This is reinforced by her correspondence with the lawyer Ludovico Boncompagni on the progress of the Congress of Vienna, which reveals how she actively followed current political events even before 1821.⁶⁹

In a letter written in October 1821, Catherine, with a clear grasp of the political situation in post-revolutionary Piedmont, remarked that, given the numerous noble families involved in the spring riots, no one was going to be very comfortable with having their closet searched for skeletons.⁷⁰ Her communications with Cesare deal mainly with influential contacts who might intercede on his behalf. On 5 November 1821, for example, she reported that she maintained frequent contact with the wife of the French ambassador.⁷¹ The Austrian ambassador, Starhemberg, was also a frequent guest in Countess Balbo's salon, even though her husband and son had gone into exile as a result of Metternich's policies; this, too, should make us wary of attaching too rigid a meaning to terms like revolution, restoration, and reaction.⁷²

In response to the accusation by the conservative press that they had at least indirectly abetted the revolt, Prospero and Cesare Balbo wrote an open letter to the *Journal des Débats*, which was widely read in Europe.⁷³ Here, too, the concepts previously tested in earlier crisis situations are invoked: a sense of duty and public service, honour, loyalty, and international reputation. Publication of the letter in one of the most internationally influential newspapers was a journalistic triumph that was due to Cesare's active position in exile in Paris. Another success for the family was the publication of Prospero's memoirs of the events of 1821 as an appendix to Alphonse de Beauchamp's two-volume *Histoire de la révolution du Piémont*.⁷⁴ The association with Beauchamp, whose historical works were highly respected, meant that Balbo's interpretation reached the public in the form of a historiographical reconstruction. What is remarkable here, is that Prospero, Catherine, and Cesare Balbo all recognized the growing importance of the press and political journalism, and they successfully exploited these modern media instead of relying solely on old forms of communication, such as the memoranda that Prospero had extensively used during former crises.

Although the crisis of 1821 very severely destabilized the family, they were again able to reduce its negative impact by drawing on new resources of resilience from exile, the agency of female family members, and the emerging

⁶⁸ See, for example, Catherine Balbo to Cesare Balbo, 30 Mar. 1822, AST, AB, mazzo 59, fasc. 8, no. 19.

⁶⁹ Catherine Balbo to Ludovico Boncompagni, 17 Jan. 1815, AST, AB, mazzo 33, fasc. 21 (unnumbered).

⁷⁰ Catherine Balbo to Cesare Balbo, 19 Oct. 1821, AST, AB, mazzo 59, fasc. 8, no. 1.

⁷¹ Catherine Balbo to Cesare Balbo, 5 Nov. 1821, AST, AB, mazzo 59, fasc. 8, no. 12.

⁷² Starhemberg to Metternich, 29 July 1815, in Narciso Nada, *Le relazioni diplomatiche fra l'Austria e il regno di Sardegna, 1814–1830*, vol. 1: 24 aprile 1814–17 luglio 1817 (Rome 1964), p. 119.

⁷³ *Journal des Débats*, 1 Mar. 1822, p. 2.

⁷⁴ Alphonse de Beauchamps, *Histoire de la révolution du Piémont, et de ses rapports avec les autres parties de l'Italie et avec la France* (Paris, 1821).

political press. Slowly, the situation improved. After Charles Albert's accession to the throne in 1831, Prospero was finally readmitted to the civil service and was appointed section president in the council of state. Cesare returned from exile in 1824 and was initially placed under house arrest, during which time he devoted himself to his studies, wrote the political bestseller *Delle speranze d'Italia* (*The hopes of Italy*, 1844), and with Camillo Benso, count of Cavour, founded the newspaper *il Risorgimento* in 1847. In 1848, he became the first constitutional prime minister of Piedmont; this was the sixth regime under which one or more members of the family served, occupying prominent positions from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century.⁷⁵

VI

The list of visitors received at the Balbo family residence in Turin in the late 1840s is emblematic of the multiple resources they were able to draw on in their search for security. These were not only reputation, modern education, and access to privileged information, but also, and probably more importantly, participation in international networks and affiliation to an extended ruling class that shared moderate liberal ideas and that included the 'old' nobility, the bureaucratic elite, and educated bourgeois groups. The names of 180 people who visited the family, probably between 1843 and 1848, appear on the list, which is held – like many other sources consulted for this article – in the family archive at the State Archives of Turin.⁷⁶ A significant number of these visitors were prominent exiled liberals, such as the economist Giovanni Arrivabene and the poet Giovanni Berchet, or envoys of the provisional governments established in other Italian states after the revolutions of 1848. However, the appearance on the list of visitors from abroad is also remarkable: fifteen from France and seven from Britain, including the Whig politician Gilbert Elliot-Murray-Kynynmound, second earl of Minto. Prominent visitors also came from Germany, such as the famous lawyer and Heidelberg professor Carl Joseph Anton Mittermaier, while other guests were from the Swiss Confederation, Poland, Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Brazil, and the United States. Several European and American diplomats,

⁷⁵ In the aftermath of 1789, Prospero, Gaetano, and Cesare Balbo served under the Old Regime monarchy, the Russian provisional administration of Piedmont in 1799, the exiled Savoyard monarchy, the Napoleonic empire, the restored Savoy monarchy, and the constitutional government after 1848. The history of post-1848 Sardinia-Piedmont has received much scholarly attention. See, for example, Maurizio Isabella, 'The political thought of a new constitutional monarchy: Piedmont after 1848', in Douglas Moggach and Gareth Stedman Jones, eds., *The 1848 revolutions and European political thought* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 383–404; Amerigo Caruso, *Nationalstaat als Telos? Der konservative Diskurs in Preußen und Sardinien-Piemont 1840–1870* (Berlin, 2017).

⁷⁶ The list (entitled 'Nome dei forestieri venuti a casa') is undated, although a closer look at the foreign diplomats who visited the Balbo residence allows it to be reliably dated to between 1843 and early 1848. Mentioned on the list are, for example, the Bavarian envoys Maximilian von Marogna, accredited to Sardinia-Piedmont between 1843 and 1847, and Karl August Abel, his successor from late 1847. On the Bavarian envoys in Turin, see Tobias C. Bringmann, *Handbuch der Diplomatie 1815–1963. Auswärtige Missionschefs in Deutschland und deutsche Missionschefs im Ausland* (Munich, 2001), p. 46.

along with Catholic prelates and university professors, also visited the Balbo home in the late 1840s.

The list of visitors shows that the Balbos were at the core of a moderate liberal, aristocratic-bourgeois, and internationally connected elite when the new revolutionary wave of 1848 began. With Cesare Balbo heading the Savoyard government (Prospero died in 1837), another chapter in the search for security began, in a period during which constitutional reforms, modern state-building, the national movement, and the Savoyard state's active foreign policy would pave the way for the Piedmont-led unification of Italy in 1861. As noted by Stephan Malinowski, European noble families in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were 'peerless masters of memory who can spin tales that unflinchingly put them in an advantageous light'.⁷⁷ The example of the Balbo family in the Age of Revolutions sheds more light on the reasons why nobles remained masters of public relations, networking, political communication, and self-portrayal in the modern world.

This article has shown that the Balbos were able to reorganize themselves after major ruptures such as those in 1798, 1814, 1821, and 1848. Political institutional crises and revolutions are difficult to predict, and preventing them is equally problematic. The importance of a productive approach to uncertainty can be seen, on the one hand, in Prospero Balbo's crisis communication in Paris at the end of the 1790s. Balbo advocated a comprehensive programme of reforms at home and a European balance of power as early as 1798. His aim was to consolidate Sardinia-Piedmont's precarious independence, however, when preventing the collapse of the Savoyard monarchy seemed increasingly utopian, and he successfully represented the immediate interests of the class to which he belonged – a composite elite of aristocracy and middle-class notables. Balbo benefited not only from the good reputation of the Piedmontese elites – one that he had contributed to creating – but also from the participation in transnational networks and the cosmopolitan habitus he cultivated during his years in Paris.

The Balbo clan intensified its political networking and public presence after the upheavals of 1814, 1821, and 1848. Instead of focusing on preventing what might have been an imminent regime change, Prospero, Gaetano, Catherine, and Cesare Balbo concentrated on limiting the negative effects of the crises on the Savoyard state and on their family. To do so, they persistently evoked moderate reformism, service ethos, and reputation, and they adapted to the demands of the changing situation. This enabled them to see crisis as an opportunity, and drove them to find direction in confusing times, to participate in the European transfer of ideas, and to play a major role in shaping the modernization of political institutions in Piedmont. Above all, however, the Balbos supported the formation of a new elite of reform-minded nobility and 'good' bourgeoisie, which would largely dominate European politics until the end of the nineteenth century.

⁷⁷ Stephan Malinowski, *Nazis and nobles: the history of a misalliance* (Oxford, 2020), p. 108.

Funding statement. Research for this article was supported by the German Research Foundation (Project number 386400968, 'Resilient in Adversity. The European Nobility in the Age of Revolution 1760-1830').

Cite this article: Caruso A (2023). Noble-Bourgeois Elites in an Age of Revolutions, c. 1790–1850. *The Historical Journal* **66**, 1034–1052. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X23000389>