

Valledolmo in the farmers' movement of Sicily

The English historian Dennis Mack Smith, examining in depth of the social-economic situation Sicily created after the abolition of feudalism decreed in July 1812 by the Bourbon King Ferdinando IV of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, came to this bitter conclusion, “ The Freedom invoked in 1812 did not mean freedom for the farmers to the earn their means of subsistence, it meant instead liberty for the landowners to transform their heavily mortgaged properties into true marketable property or the freedom to spread a veil over the usurpation of common property. In any case, the end of feudalism, to the extent which it promised public, not private, benefits, was more of a general provision of law than a practical transformation; it was never specified what was actually abolished, nor the way abolition should take place. The latifundi continued to be called feudi, the feudal owners called proprietors, and the farmers ‘villani’ until the twentieth century, and not without reason.” The Sicilian historian Francesco Renda, accepting the truthfulness of the Englishman’s conclusions, added that, “The disappointment of the barons was severe when they noticed that the English General, Lord Bentinck, who was sent to garrison Sicily against the threat of Napoleon, and as author of the new democratic line, placed men without social standing (that is without noble titles) in charge of all government departments. Their discontent with the law of universal suffrage and for the illegal nationalization of baronial lands was apparent; all things that predicted violent popular revolution.” At the end of the Napoleonic domination and the departure of the Bourbon king of Sicily the dreaded storms were dispelled and everything remained agitated as before. You will have to come to the first years of Italian unification to reach the materialization and intensification of the ancient problem of the “land of the farmer.” In fact, the first leagues of resistance, the first agricultural societies, the first strikes, that is, the first organized struggles that proposed to modify and improve the working conditions and the life of the mass of the island’s farmers represents a phenomenon after national unification and from that date and until that date no changes occurred: it is known, in fact, that the wise laws of Garibaldi to reform farming remained in the limbo of good intentions, unfortunately, the brave boys remained

hungry for land until the last decade of the 19th century. “The mission of Nino Bixio against the peasant masses of Bronte and of Francavilla”, wrote Renda.” with the shootings without trial, the Sicilian peasant revolt quelled in blood, at the same time advocated for a democratic revolution in the countryside.” The myths of the earth, also advocated by the clergy for other reasons than the redemption of the proletariat, began to ignite and mobilize their souls during the tremendous economic crisis of 1889-1889 that, through the work of socialists, will lead to the foundation of fascism in almost all the municipalities of the island. But already in almost all of these communities, before the fascists, had already arisen the company of workers and farmers, and Valledolmo was no less involved than Corleone, than Polizzi, than Termini, than Chiusa Sclafani, than Caccamo, than Alia, than Montemaggiore, than Alta Villa Milicia, than Aliminusa, Than Roccapalumba, than Viccari and many others that would be tiresome to cite. In fact, thanks to Doctor Giuseppe Mendola, in 1884, who was born in Valledolmo organized the Workers Society of Mutual Aid which, like all her sister organizations, was performing a task that was not simply limited to mutual aid, but encroached into politics (electoral purposes) and in certain cases in the fight for real improvement and changing the employment agreements. These societies were – according to Renda – part of the program pursued by the Fasci which will add to it the more specifically political and trade union activity, and the government minister Sonnino mentions the same “the farming unions of Alia and Valledolmo, that had for their purpose to prevent affiliates from accepting harsh agrarian pacts from the gabelloti and the landowners. The same minister kept a record of the strikes “of larger proportions, strikes in the autumn of 1875 in Villalba, in Vallelinga, in Santa Caterina and Resuttano, lasting about a month and propagated in Alia and Valledolmo where the agricultural unions sprung up, that more precisely were called “agrarian institutes.” The same Renda, to demonstrate the legal behavior of such, reports for example “the case of the Farmer’s Society of Mutual Aid, founded in Valledolmo on February 1, 1893, and so he writes; “The president who was a landlord of the country, **that is** Giuseppe Arnao, in assuming the office felt compelled to inform the

delegate of P.S.* with this declaration ‘As for the purposes for which this company is about to be formed and on the basis of which I accepted the Presidency, I can tell you that they are absolutely peaceful, alien to every politically subversive idea.’” In support of such peaceful assurances part (2) of the article of the by-laws said that “the actions of the association will only occur in peaceful relations between the landowners and the farm workers for their mutual benefit. Any political and administrative action, any idea of party, remains excluded; it is strictly forbidden to any member to express political opinions and to interfere in the administrative action in the name of the same association. Whoever breaks this rule is absolutely deleted from the membership list, remaining personally responsible for his actions. However, this did not stop a protest in October 1893, of a sharecropping deal entered into by the “the golden lion tamarin” (This expression is contained in a report of the Lieutenant Colonel of the C.C. RR.di Palermo al Prefetto†) by members of the association who staged a public manifestation through the streets with the tricolor flags on their heads, in order to demonstrate to the landowners the numerical size of the association, able to impose even with violence the just demands of the peasants. The good intentions, as often happens, were overwhelmed by events and the members of “Brotherhood and Work” of Valledolmo, under the relentless pressure of the socialist Bernardo Verro, together with the peasants of Corleone and the Madonie, ended up together with the general movement “Fasci of Workers.” The idea, in fact, of changing the agrarian contracts – says Renda – was in all the Sicilian communities acting as a spring that triggered the masses of peasants from their decades of inertia and pushed them to join the local Fasci. Therefore, many landowners, frightened by the strikes and the signs of Fasci action in other communities, decided to come to agreement on less inhuman terms, and there, where this did not happen, led to serious bloody acts, such as the assassination of the leaders of the Fasci, Verro at Corleone, Lorenzo Panepinto at Santo Stefano, of Quisquina and of 92 simple peasants, of which 13 were at Caltavuturo and 11 at Lercara Friddi, while law enforcement killed only one soldier. Anyway the fierce crackdowns ordered

* P. S. = Pubblica Sicurezza, Public Security

† Regal Carabinieri

by Crispi, head of the government and the Mafia until 1896, and by Giolotti under pressure from the mayors and of the elected heads of the honored society, the peasants, the strong support of the working class and the socialist movement, then presented themselves as the main protagonists in the history of the island. Then, after Giovanni Giolotti, the upheaval of the First World War with new occupations of lands and with new victims, came fascism with a new agrarian reform and with the battles of grain. Then after the Second World War and, and finally, the peasant movement, framed by the communist party, and the socialist and democratic parties, slowly but surely wiped out much of the abuses of manorial class, feudalism and the gabello. Large expanses of uncultivated or poorly cultivated land were, in 1946 and 1947, occupied and then assigned to Valledolmo peasantry in the measure of 1 or 2 bodies per person, the quota of the sixty and forty was conquered in the sharing of the sharecropping products, a 30% reduction of the rent is obtained, and finally it facilitated the deliverance of the land from the feudalistic obligations. Today, looking back to that convulsive period in Valledolmo history as in the other towns of the island, we imagine the times of rustic knighthood, launching the conquest of the lands of Rovitello, of Mandranova, of Carpinello, or Sciarria, or Cassara or Regaleali and of Verbumcaudo, badgered by the police, also swollen even by mothers, with red flags on their heads, we seem to relive the party of the ancient crusaders, all determined to suffer everything, to dare everything, to gain the freedom of the Holy Sepulchre. In Valledolmo, following those adventurous years, it is possible to count 855 small farm management companies, a dozen large companies in their own territory and many scattered in the Sclafani territories; of Caltavuturo, of Polizzi, and Petralia Sottana, and in everything we work passionately, fruitfully and peacefully as in the happy times of the management of Count Cutelli.

In the history of the Italian Risorgimento the village of Valledolmo does not figure as a hotbed of extreme patriotism; the population was used to working quietly and in an orderly fashion, under the civil and religious administration of the majesty of the Catholic Bourbon king, unaware of the Carbonari and of the Sanfedisti, there was little or no enthusiasm for the acts of the “Filibustiere Garibaldi.” No deep feeling of the passion of the Risorgimento was felt as in the nearby communities of Alia, Vallelunga, and

Villalba. In fact, our assertion is not supported by written documents given the inaccessibility of the town's archives, but the fact that not even the passage and stopping of Garibaldi in the country have left a memory in marble or on paper or in the memory of our ancestors, with the exception of the episode of master Ignazio Vacanti previously remembered, confirms our opinion. It is true that at the beginning the fateful year 1848 the royal surveyor of Vallelunga created even in Valledolmo by an insurrection committee, but, unfortunately, it is also true that in the days of the insurrection of all the communities of the island against the Bourbons in the country, in neither the town headquarters, nor in the tax office, nor were acts of violence or political protests perpetrated. The waters of peace were so calm that two characters of Vallelunga, arriving with fires and threats of death to the Bourbons, came to seek safe refuge within the village of Valledolmo, and they did not regret it. The failure of the insurrection, which Valledolmo ended with the condemnation of Don Giuseppe at Vallelunga Sinatra, president of the municipality and leader of the Committee of Insurrection of that place and of those of Villalba, of Valledolmo, of Mussomeli, and of Sutera, and the return of the Bourbon garrisons with proud intentions of ruthless repression, convinced the lukewarm patriots of Valledolmo of the errors of others and of their own wisdom. Giuseppe Cipolla, author of the history of Vallelunga, commenting on the failure of the insurrection in this town has written, "with [quiet outward calm restored by] the Bourbon restoration, the souls of the people remained indomitable, preparing for the revenge of 1860. Even the euphoria and the enthusiasm for the fortunate deeds of the Thousand for the expulsion of the Bourbon oppressors from the grounds of the island, in 1860, the following electrifying crusade of 1862 of the same Garibaldi shouting "Rome or death" for the conquest of the eternal city did not arouse manifestations of joy in Valledolmo. When he, in fact, moved from the woods of Ficuzza with his troops for Catania with the enthusiastic Alia, passed by Valledolmo, no welcome was signaled, so much so that not a single gravestone was walled up to commemorate the event on the façade of the Palazzo Castellana, where the hero refreshed himself and rested before moving on the water path of Signora Cutelli towards the enthusiastic Vallelunga. The political conduct of the Valledolmesi which, in 1848, had aroused anger and contempt in the

souls of the inhabitants of Vallelunga and what had upset them even more was Garibaldi's lukewarm reception in 1862 which had raised uncontrollable disdain among them, and culminated in a furious and bloody brawl between the two sides in the district of Manca, on the border of the former fiefdom of Regaleali. This temporarily interrupted battle threatened to dangerously aggravate both sides; it took the intervention of an authoritative patriot of Lercara Friddi, Don Agostino Rotolo, to appease the spirits and bring the two very close communities to peace. To confirm this we refer to the episode as it is narrated by the Valledolmo citizen Cipolla. Rotolo in the fall of '60 goes to Villalba and requires the contest of the National Guard and marches toward Vallelunga. There are warm words so that peace may unite the Sicilians at a time when the hated Bourbons still undermined the unity of Italy. The speech was applauded by the nobles of this community, established by Rotolo, at the head of the National Guard of Villalba, marching towards Valledolmo. They welcomed the new greeting and the speech of Rotolo. After a few hours of rest, the march of the National Guard of Valledolmo resumed. They arrived in the former fief of Regaleali in front of the house of Count Tasca, at two o'clock and the National Guard is lined up and armed with the National Guard of Vallelunga. The show is moving. The national guard of Villalba shouts "Peace! Peace!" The three guards join together forming a circle with white pieces of each side. Rotolo, finally moved to tears, said the beautiful patriot words, and peace was concluded. Villalba received the profound gratitude of Vallelunga and Valledolmo. The spot where this fight took place is still called "*lu Chianu di la quistioni*" ‡

To justify the behavior of the Valledolmo Insurrection Committee is not hard if one takes a look the local situation of the period. The average person completely ignored the political events that took place in the big cities and committees of the island; the liberal propaganda of the fellow citizen Valentino Martina had been deconsecrated by his violent death, considered well-deserved, civilians who had joined the committee of Insurrection had not been moved by the daring feeling of freedom, but only not to pass as convinced revolutionaries, the clergy was also of strict

‡ This Sicilian phrase is difficult to translate. It means something like "The place where we talked with each other".

Bourbon observance and in full agreement with the constituted authorities. To rise, therefore, to burn the town hall of the tax collection was worth the same as to give oneself the foot, to go against one's best interests, upsetting a situation of privilege to find another one of uncertainty and full of risks. That being the case the 20 or so civilians who mattered in one village and administered it, having joined the committee, spent the decisive hours of the struggle preferring to stay and watch and pay attention, without compromise, the conclusion of events. An excess of prudence? Incapable of doing anything? Distrust of the new order that was intended to achieve controversial improvements in the classes? It seems to us that we do not get too far from the truth if we say that the aforementioned behavior has combined together these factors more or less as having the same weight.