

## For Italy or For the West?: the Italian General Election of 1948

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*In the years following World War II, the western world dreaded Red domination over democracy and capitalism. As the last democracy of Eastern Europe fell in Czechoslovakia, the United States feared for the cradle of western civilization - Italy. After a swing to the political far right under Mussolini, Italy appeared on the precipice of a leftist dive under the charismatic leadership of Palmiro Togliatti, leader of Italy's Communist Party. This was intolerable for the United States and the newly formed Central Intelligence Agency. Thus, the CIA commenced its first large-scale operation to influence the Italian general election of 1948. The coup in Czechoslovakia, Togliatti's powerful personality and influence, and the potential for further Soviet intervention, all contributed to the CIA's interference in the Italian general election of 1948 to aid the right-wing parties headed up by the Christian Democratic Party.*

The first line of the *Communist Manifesto* written in 1848, “A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of communism” continued to reverberate around the world in the years following World War II.<sup>1</sup> The red giant of the Soviet Union seemed to threaten capitalism and democracy all over the western world right down to its historical cradle—Italy. Following the years under the violently fascist Mussolini, the Italian people seemed receptive to the idea of a leftist government. The western Allies, now at odds with the Soviet Union and its idea of modernity based on the communist ideology, found this incomprehensible and sought a way to remove the communist threat that was looming over Italy.

Founded in 1947, the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) undertook its first large-scale covert operation, in the Italian general election of 1948 to prevent a communist victory. The coup in Czechoslovakia, the powerful personality and influence of Palmiro Togliatti (the leader of the Italian Communist Party), and the potential for further Russian intervention all contributed to the CIA's pre-emptive interference in the Italian general election of 1948 to aid the right-wing parties headed up by the Christian Democratic Party.

Following the end of World War II, the European continent was left with destruction, devastation, and despair. Italy specifically was reeling from a horrible experience with fascism under Benito Mussolini. As the political pendulum swung, it appeared that the Italians might choose communism rather than its traditional alignment with the west.<sup>2</sup> As the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) emerged as a super power following its victory over Nazi Germany and as its relationship with the United States and Great Britain began to deteriorate, the spread of communism not only in eastern but western Europe became a reality and a threat to capitalism.<sup>3</sup> As the Cold War enveloped the European continent, most vividly in divided Germany,

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Signet Classics, 2011), 61.

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Wohl, “Palmiro Togliatti: Italian Master of Maneuver,” in *Leaders of the Communist World*, ed. Rodger Swearingen, (New York: The Free Press, 1971), 17.

<sup>3</sup> “Italian and French Struggle Against Communism,” CIA Memorandum, May 26, 1947, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/ciacase/EXK.pdf>.

the prominence of communists in the Italian government following the demise of Mussolini began to gradually dominate the political landscape of Italy.<sup>4</sup> In order to avoid any possibility of communist victory in the Italian general election, the United States government began to support the right-wing parties, specifically the Christian Democratic Party, as anything else was deemed catastrophic.<sup>5</sup> As a result of the post-World War II climate, the Italian general election marked the beginning of an American trend of interfering with foreign elections for the alleged betterment of the West as a whole.

One of the first catalysts of CIA interference in Italy can be traced to the coup in Czechoslovakia in early 1948. A previously democratic nation since the end of World War I, the communist party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) engineered a coup d'état with the aid of the Soviet Union to bring Czechoslovakia in the Soviet sphere of influence. The coup was ordered in October 1947 at the first Cominform meeting.<sup>6</sup> The coup was a direct result of the lure of the Marshall Plan in Europe. As the Western allies—particularly the United States—began offering aid to those nations struggling after World War II, the Communist party in Czechoslovakia justly perceived that its role was threatened.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Soviets ordered and organized a takeover to be completed before the May elections in 1948.<sup>8</sup> While the KSČ was the most widely supported communist party of Europe during free elections—38% of the vote in the election of 1946—both domestic and foreign communists feared a loss of power as a result of the lure of the Marshall Plan.<sup>9</sup> Thus the Soviets began encouraging the acceleration of a revolution in Czechoslovakia. This push for revolution was actually connected to the Italian Communist Party (PCI). The PCI was losing its supporters with the West seeking to cement its hold on Italy as its next elections were fast approaching. Fearing an Italian loss, the Cominform pressed for an assured communist victory in Czechoslovakia.<sup>10</sup> While the Czechoslovak government contained many parties, the non-communist members engaged in bitter conflict with the communist politicians in the weeks leading up to the coup. As a result, one of the pro-communist ministers named Nosek attempted to remove all non-communist features from the Czechoslovakian police force.<sup>11</sup> The right-wing politicians realized that the government was slowly being turned into arms of the KSČ. When the non-communist leaders demanded punishment for these subversive actions by the communists, they received no answer. President Edvard Beneš remained wary of a physical Soviet invasion and thus offered no immediate retaliatory actions against the communist leaders.

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<sup>4</sup> “Interview with Yuri Ivanovich Modin,” CIA Transcript, January 31, 1996, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/coldwar/interviews/episode-3/sum3.html>.

<sup>5</sup> “Italian and French Struggle Against Communism,” May 26, 1947.

<sup>6</sup> “Interview with Yuri Ivanovich Modin,” January 31, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> “Italian and French Struggle Against Communism,” May 26, 1947.

<sup>8</sup> “Interview with Yuri Ivanovich Modin,” January 31, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> “Interview with Dr. Harold Brown,” CIA Transcript, December 13, 1998, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/coldwar/interviews/episode-12/brown1.html>.

<sup>10</sup> “Interview with Yuri Ivanovich Modin,” January 31, 1996.

<sup>11</sup> “Interview with Dr. Harold Brown,” December 13, 1998.

The consequences of this inaction by Beneš were far-reaching. As a result of his neutrality, the KSČ was able to form a communist government with the help of the Soviet deputy foreign minister Valerian Zorin.<sup>12</sup> As the non-communist ministers were removed from their positions, the communist infiltration was completed. President Beneš fully capitulated to the communists and accepted a new government dominated by the KSČ.<sup>13</sup> While still a coalition government in name, the majority of the political parties involved in the Czechoslovak government had been commandeered by communist sympathizers.

The fall of the last democracy in Eastern Europe stunned the world. As the Soviet Union began to solidify its “Iron Curtain” across the continent, many American and British leaders like Truman and Churchill feared for the survival of democracy throughout the entirety of Europe. The removal of democratic freedom at the hands of a communist dictatorship cemented the monolithic communist bloc but the Soviets, unsatisfied, wished to add another notch to their belt in the form of Italy.<sup>14</sup> After watching Czechoslovakia fall to Communism, the West united against communist infiltration and the CIA began to make plans to keep the PCI in the minority as a result of the 1948 general election.

However, the communist coup in Czechoslovakia was not the only catalyst for CIA interference in Italy. The success and personality of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) leader Palmiro Togliatti presented a formidable opposition to democracy and its sustainability in Italy. As a wounded veteran from World War I and a lawyer, Togliatti developed into an intimidating force for the PCI during its years of fascism and immediately following World War II.<sup>15</sup> Once the Italian communists broke away from the Italian Socialists in 1921, Togliatti became the de facto leader of the PCI after his Italian Bolshevik rivals “were all eliminated either by the vigilance of the Fascist police or by the moral and political dilemmas posed by the struggle for power within the Russian leadership.”<sup>16</sup> In the 1930s, Italian communists experienced severe persecution under Mussolini and his fascist compatriots in Italy. As a result, nearly all of the leaders of the PCI were arrested except for Togliatti.<sup>17</sup> By the late 1940s, Togliatti was one of the last members of the old guard remaining. Even in his exile, Togliatti and the PCI’s main goal was to overthrow Mussolini and fascism.<sup>18</sup>

Togliatti also weathered fascism out in the Soviet Union managing to survive Stalin’s two waves of purges.<sup>19</sup> This experience allowed Togliatti to become more adaptable regarding his

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> “Interview with Yuri Ivanovich Modin,” January 31, 1996.

<sup>14</sup> “CIA Covert Aid to Italy Averaged \$5 Million Annually from Late 1940s to Early 1960s, Study Finds,” ed. Ronald Landa, *National Security Archive*: February 7, 2017, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB579-Defense-Department-draft-history-on-Clare-Boothe-Luce-and-US-diplomatic-intelligence-and-military-activities-in-Italy-in-1950s/>.

<sup>15</sup> “Palmiro Togliatti,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 5, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Palmiro-Togliatti>.

<sup>16</sup> Wohl, “Palmiro Togliatti: Italian Master of Maneuver,” 22.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>19</sup> “Palmiro Togliatti,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

tactics of implementing communism, unlike Stalin. As a result, in his push for a communist-dominated government in Italy, he did not necessarily include state-sponsored atheism.<sup>20</sup> As Rome was (and is) the capital of Catholicism, in order to be truly successful, Togliatti and the PCI had to skillfully navigate the pitfalls of a relationship with the Catholic Church. Togliatti focused the PCI's approach on a democratically and nationalistic point rather than trying to direct it internationally.<sup>21</sup> He was unique in comparison to other communist leaders around the world. As Robert Wohl put it, "No other communist leader in a non-communist country managed so successfully to maintain his standing in Moscow and yet at the same time to preserve his independence of viewpoints."<sup>22</sup> Yet the Soviet Union still held him in such high esteem that they renamed Stavropol "Tolyatti" after him.<sup>23</sup> Togliatti's close alliance also shaped his trajectory of the PCI. Instead of fomenting a communist revolt in direct defiance to the new government, Togliatti stressed the importance of coming alongside the new government of Italy.<sup>24</sup> This was largely influenced by Stalin's decision to formally recognize the new Italian government.<sup>25</sup> Stalin generally accepted coalition governments in countries that had the potential for alliances with the Soviet Union. Rather than pushing for transformations similar to the one experienced by Russia in the early twentieth century, Stalin advocated for a gradual communist takeover instead of one driven by violence. This decision capitalized on the groundwork laid by Togliatti during World War II as he mediated between the anti-fascist parties and the post-fascist parties in order to defeat Nazi Germany.<sup>26</sup>

Known as *Il Migliore* "The Best", Togliatti was the face of Italian communism as he strove to keep the PCI a part of the new Italian government post-World War II.<sup>27</sup> He continually sent out PCI members on the ground to convince Italians to vote for the PCI in the coming elections of 1948. His steadfast belief in a communist Italy alienated the West and caused it to take notice. A research study done by the CIA in 1976 examined the measure of Togliatti's success in Italy and the measures the CIA took in response to his achievement.<sup>28</sup> Togliatti was almost fruitful in creating a communist-dominated government in Italy if it had not been for the intervention of the CIA.

Another impetus for CIA involvement in the Italian general election of 1948 was the high probability for Soviet interference. As the communist superpower, the Soviet Union generally was the backer of international communist movements. However, Stalin only involved Soviet resources and manpower when the event or movement would positively affect the Soviet Union. The

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<sup>20</sup> Wohl, "Palmiro Togliatti: Italian Master of Maneuver," 19.

<sup>21</sup> "Palmiro Togliatti," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

<sup>22</sup> Wohl, "Palmiro Togliatti: Italian Master of Maneuver," 17.

<sup>23</sup> "Palmiro Togliatti," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

<sup>24</sup> Silvio Pons, "Stalin, Togliatti, and the Origins of the Cold War in Europe," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2001), 3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Gene Wicklund, "Soviet Policy and European Communism," Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, Office of Political Research (October 1976), 13.

communist takeover of a Western European country would give the Soviet Union a foothold in the part of Europe influenced by the United States. Thus, funding an Italian communist movement would give Stalin the advantage in the Cold War competition with the U.S. This is why the Soviet Union funded the PCI in the years following World War II.<sup>29</sup> While scholars disagree on what the exact amounts of Soviet aid were, there is evidence that funding came directly from Moscow.<sup>30</sup>

Even if Italy may not have been a main actor in the early Cold War, the Italian general election of 1948 provides an excellent example of the reactionary foreign policies of the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>31</sup> The United States sought to contain communism with programs like the Marshall Plan after World War II. While this approach was mostly successful, the Soviet Union managed to have vestiges of power in western European countries by dominating their communist parties. In fact, one of the prerequisites for Soviet aid was the complete subordination of self-interests to those of the Soviet Union.<sup>32</sup> However, this did not necessarily mean that Stalin wanted to dominate all of Europe as most would assume. Rather, as some historians have noted, Stalin seemed to prefer a “divided and docile Europe, rather than a communist one” in which the various communist parties were a part.<sup>33</sup> However, Soviet control over Italian communists quickly weakened in the years to come.

As the known Stalinist pattern of splitting over matters of foreign policy indicated, Togliatti and Stalin’s partnership deteriorated swiftly. Togliatti and Stalin’s relationship suffered as a result of a Yugoslav-Italian conflict over the city of Trieste.<sup>34</sup> As a result, Togliatti began to stray from the Moscow line. This, accompanied by the removal of communists from the governments of both France and Italy following the deterioration of the Allied relationship, caused Stalin to seek a tighter hold over the communist parties in western Europe, specifically the PCI.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, the lure of the Marshall Plan escalated Soviet fears of Western influence. Announced in June 1947, the aid program exacerbated the already tense situation in Europe. Tensions were further inflated by the PCI’s initial positive reaction to the potential implementation of the Marshall Plan in Italy. However, it was merely another sign of Togliatti’s adaptability for the sake of public opinion.<sup>36</sup> Italy was still suffering the effects of the Nazi invasion in northern Italy as well as the economic fallout from the Mussolini regime and its downfall. In the face of all of this, the Soviet Union remained opposed to the Marshall Plan without offering much of a relief program of their own.<sup>37</sup> The impossible task of balancing between Italian public opinion and Moscow’s directives marked the beginning of the end for the moderate success the PCI had enjoyed in post-Mussolini’s Italy.

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<sup>29</sup> Brogi, *Confronting America*, 109.

<sup>30</sup> James Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War: US Policy, Intelligence and CIA Operations* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 41-45.

<sup>31</sup> Pons, “Origins of the Cold War,” 5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Vojtech Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 21.

<sup>34</sup> Pons, “Origins of the Cold War,” 15.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

The CIA decided to speed the pace of the PCI's ruin with some help of its own.<sup>38</sup> CIA intervention would hammer the proverbial nail in the coffin of the hopes for a PCI-dominated government in Italy.

As a result of the communist coup in Czechoslovakia, the dominant personality and role of Togliatti in the PCI, and the potential for further Soviet interference in the Italian general parliamentary election of 1948, the United States decided to intervene to prevent a PCI victory. Still a relatively new organization, the CIA undertook a massive operation to disrupt the efforts of the PCI prior to the Italian election.<sup>39</sup> CIA documents, recently released by the National Security Archives, show that covert aid to Italy reached highs of roughly \$5 million a year into the 1960s.<sup>40</sup> In 1948, the CIA admitted to funding the centrist parties of Italy at around \$1 million.<sup>41</sup> In addition to funding, the United States government advised the members of its Italian-American communities to write home urging their families to vote against the PCI in the coming elections. The United States viewed this letter-writing campaign as a "part of the battle between communist and non-communist forces in Italy".<sup>42</sup> In order to be truly persuasive, these Italian Americans had to believe in the superiority of democracy over communism. Many believed that what they wrote would be the saving grace of their families in Italy. An owner of a New York-based Italian newspaper *Generoso Pope* said, "I knew that the only way to beat the communists was to have the people of Italy know the truth."<sup>43</sup> Another prominent Italian American Vincent Anfuso alleged, "The communists in Italy were taking advantage of the starving Italians by promising them the 'best' provided they voted on the communistic ticket".<sup>44</sup> The United States government officials and the CIA realized that an emotional appeal to the Italian people could be incredibly effective. Italian Americans took this idea and ran with it. Thousands wrote their brethren in their home country writing statements like, "For your good and for those who want to live in peace, throw off the threat of communism!"<sup>45</sup> Dramatic language abounded in these letters like, "By Voting for the communists, on April 18, you make yourselves slaves of Russia, which looks for the destruction of Religion, the Fatherland, and the family".<sup>46</sup> By appealing to historic Italian values like the Catholic Church and family, the Italian Americans seemed to have succeeded in their efforts to sway their families back in Italy. However, it is still challenging for historians to establish the level of influence the letter-writing campaign had on the outcome of the general election because there has been no study that indicates who was voting communist before the letter-writing campaign and specifies that they changed their vote. The CIA also allegedly implemented more subversive

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<sup>38</sup> Wicklund, "Soviet Policy and European Communism," 13.

<sup>39</sup> Tim Weiner, "F. Mark Wyatt, 86, C.I.A. Officer, Is Dead," *The New York Times*, July 6, 2006.

<sup>40</sup> "CIA Covert Aid to Italy," ed. Robert Landa.

<sup>41</sup> "CIA memorandum to the Forty Committee (National Security Council)," *CIA – The Pike Report* (Nottingham, England, 1977), 204-205.

<sup>42</sup> C. Edda Martinez and Edward A. Suchman, "Letters from America and the 1948 Elections in Italy," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1950), 111.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

forms of influencing the elections. They were accused of forging letters to discredit leaders of the PCI.<sup>47</sup> The media also joined the efforts of the CIA. *Time Magazine* supported the efforts of the CIA and the letter-writing campaign in a cover story on the leader of the Christian Democrat Party and Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi in April 1948 detailing the costs of a communist victory in Italy.<sup>48</sup>

Through the CIA's efforts to influence the election, the Christian Democratic Party and De Gasperi ultimately defeated the PCI and Togliatti. Winning the Chamber and the Senate with 48%, the vote cemented the centrist parties' hold on the Italian government.<sup>49</sup> The election ultimately came down to issues of foreign policy and the existential issue of identity between the East and the West.<sup>50</sup> The ideological conflict in Italy was drawn onto the world stage by Soviet and US involvement. Other global events like the coup in Czechoslovakia caused the US to intervene. People like Palmiro Togliatti threatened the natural conservative bent of Italy. Finally, the potential for further Soviet immersion catapulted the United States and the CIA to meddle in Italy. All of these factors culminated at the beginning of a decades-long trend of CIA interference in foreign elections. However, there is no definitive proof that the Central Intelligence Agency engaged in tactics similar to the Soviets by actually rigging the results of the elections. This test of CIA power proved to be successful in the policy of covert containment. In the end, Italy chose the side of Western democracy and stood in defiance against Eastern communism in its general election of 1948.

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<sup>47</sup> "CNN Cold War Episode 3: Marshall Plan. Interview with F. Mark Wyatt, former CIA operative in Italy during the election," CNN.com, 1998–1999, archived from the original on August 31, 2001, retrieved July 17, 2006.

<sup>48</sup> "How to Hang On," *TIME Magazine*, April 19, 1948.

<sup>49</sup> MKG, "The Italian General Election and its Consequences," *The World Today* 9, no. 8 (1953): 332-333.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.