

# The 18 April 1948 Italian election: Seventy years on



*Italy's election on 4 March was far from the first Italian election campaign to have generated high levels of interest across the rest of Europe. [Effie G. H. Pedaliu](#) writes on the seventieth anniversary of one of Italy's most significant and controversial elections: the 1948 Italian general election, which pitted the country's Christian Democrats against the Popular Democratic Front in which the Italian Communist Party, the largest communist party outside the Soviet Union, was the dominant partner.*

The sound and fury unleashed by the populist onslaught in Italy's recent general election on 4 March 2018 may obscure the seventieth anniversary of one of the country's most significant, controversial and decisive general elections, that of 18 April 1948.

The 1948 election was the first general election since Mussolini's 'march on Rome' in 1922 and Italians were going to the ballot box not just to elect a government, but also to determine the political orientation of their country. The result would not only shape the future of Italy, but it was also considered to be critical to the survival of the West and the post WWII liberal democratic order.

Italians faced a straight choice: to vote either for Alcide de Gasperi's Christian Democrats or Palmiro Togliatti's and Pietro Nenni's Popular Democratic Front in which the Italian Communist Party, the largest communist party outside the Soviet Union, was the dominant partner. A political slogan of the time encapsulated the dramatic and binary nature of the choice facing Italians: 'o con cristo o contro cristo' (either with Christ or against Christ).

In collective memory, the 18 April 1948 election has been associated with the massive levels of foreign intervention in Italy's domestic affairs to ensure the defeat of the PCI. The arrival of Cold War bipolarity had turned Italy into a major prize and to Washington and London, it appeared that the immediate future of the West hinged upon the election result. A rejection at the ballot box of the Christian Democrats, the party that identified with Italy's post WWII western orientation, would mean an overt rejection of the Western liberal democratic model, since from the moment of its liberation, Italy had been under the tutelage of the British and the Americans. An electoral victory by the PCI, though, would signify that the Western ideal had been found wanting and that countries could turn Communist through the ballot box rather than through force, Red Army invasions or the use of internal subversion. Such a result would amount to nothing less than a huge propaganda coup for the Soviet Union that could have strengthened the appeal of Communism everywhere.

The Americans decided to avert a Communist victory 'by all feasible means' and by '[taking off the gloves](#)'. The newly established institutions of the US National Security State apparatus, the National Security Council (NSC) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) were deployed to assess the risks and to elaborate action plans to damage electoral prospects of the Communists. The Truman Administration's well-documented intervention in Italy was so extensive and intrusive that in Paul Ginsborg's [opinion](#), it was 'breath-taking in its contempt for any principle of "non intervention" in the internal affairs of an independent country'.

In their fight against Italian communism, the US utilised unrestricted psychological and political warfare, incorporating among other means, black propaganda, meddling in trade union politics, suitcases of money changing hands in some of Rome's most exclusive and elegant hotels, letter writing campaigns by the Italian-American community, red, white and blue 'friendship trains' distributing gifts that had been sent from the US and Hollywood with Frank Sinatra and Gary Cooper even playing their part.

Many contemporary commentators and historians have credited the US for swinging the result in the favour of Christian Democracy. The Truman administration itself reached the same conclusion. It came to believe in the efficiency of its methods and its confidence grew. Indeed, the methods used in 1948 Italy would form the blueprint for similar American interventions in the domestic politics of countries that, as Henry Kissinger put it in the 1970s, could 'go communist due to the irresponsibility of [their] people'.



**Alcide De Gasperi and Palmiro Togliatti, Credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#) / Presidenza Del Consiglio Dei Ministri (Public Domain)**

Although British intervention was lower key, it was no less spectacular nor less invasive. The Attlee government employed tactics that aimed to 'win votes for the Christian Democrats and spike the Communist gun.' By this stage, British influence in Italian affairs had waned, especially after the announcements of the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan and the delivery of US Interim Aid to Italy during 1947. Yet, Britain was still uniquely placed to influence the result.

If Palmiro Togliatti's Communists were to win they could do so only with Pietro Nenni's Socialists as the two parties of the Left were contesting the election under the joint banner of the Popular Democratic Front. The Labour government through its Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, had direct links with the organised Italian Labour movement and especially with the PSI. The Labour Party tried to convince Nenni to ditch the 'fusion pact' or failing this, to weaken the PSI. This was in line with Bevin's determination that Britain ought to offer support to all democratic anti-communist elements in Europe to resist the spread of communism westwards. In his view, British social democracy offered to Europeans a more attractive ideological alternative to communism than American style capitalism ever could. He sought to exploit his belief by turning 'London into the Mecca for social democracy in Europe' and therefore, maintaining British influence in the post WWII world.

Bevin was unimpressed by America's blatant methods insisting on a more understated approach. He advised the Americans to be more cautious and resisted their pressure for the British to adopt more visible tactics. The British [intervened](#) in the internal politics of the Italian labour movement both at the party political and at the trade union levels. Morgan Phillips (Secretary of the Labour Party) and Denis Healey (Secretary of the International Department of the Labour Party) were instrumental in all the developments taking place within the Italian Socialist Party from before the Palazzo Barberini split onwards and they provided guidance to the secessionist factions of Ivan Matteo Lombardo and Giuseppe Saragat as well as securing their recognition by the international labour movement.

The British also took steps to manipulate food supplies, made naval visits to Italian ports, looked into solutions for Italy's surplus population problem, proposed Franco-Italian border adjustments in favour of Italy, participated in the Tripartite Declaration on the future of Trieste and waived off all western claims for the extradition of alleged Italian war criminals. Finally, they exploited the high reputation of the BBC among Italians to communicate anti-communist messages put together by the Information Research Department of the Foreign Office.

In reality, however, probably the most influential factor in this election was not the 'frank and open' foreign intervention, but the fight the Vatican, Christian Democracy and the Italian state put up. The Minister of the Interior, Mario Scelba reinforced and kitted out the Italian police with the most up to date equipment and empowered it to use any amount of violence it judged necessary to break up demonstrations by workers and peasants. Police morale was boosted and its attempts to disarm the North turned quickly into an anti-communist purge. Hundreds of arrests were made and many arms caches were uncovered.

The Vatican also entered the fray directly through the clergy and indirectly through its collateral organisations such as Catholic Action. They engaged in the 'poster war', even venturing into newsreel and propounding the message 'In the secrecy of the voting booth, God can see you, Stalin cannot'. The Italian clergy undertook the task of demolishing Togliatti's claim that voting communist was not incompatible with being 'a good Catholic'. The Church refused the sacraments to known Communists and Socialists and acted as the Christian Democratic party's electoral machine to bring the vote out. Also, as David Ellwood has [put it](#), 'only the Vatican could have commanded the Virgin Mary to participate in processions through every town and village with the maximum of devotional rites for the salvation of Italy'. Indeed, a Marian frenzy overtook the country 'with weeping Madonnas, bleeding Madonnas and luminous Madonnas' appearing to young and old alike. The events at Gimigliano are well documented and offer an insight into some of the emotive religiosity that the election whipped up and how the pro Christian Democrat media manipulated it.

The Christian Democrats also mastered the art of film-making in order to attract votes. Cinema was the most popular pastime in Italy at this time and film became had become an important medium in influencing public opinion. Giulio Andreotti, the minister responsible for cinema, used public finances to fund newsreels that projected a pro-American message, focusing on reconstruction and urging people to put the war behind them by hinting of a better future provided people voted responsibly and the right result was delivered at the ballot box. Ernst Lubitsch's *Ninotska*, a 1939 anti-communist movie starring Greta Garbo, was shown non-stop in many Italian movie theatres. Complementing all this, the Christian Democrats monopolised the airwaves in a country where half the household had access to radio receivers and refused their opponents access to the radio.

The Communists proved to be less adept at embracing new methods of communication to propound their message. They depended on the printed word to spread their message using heavy evidence based arguments and theoretical analyses rather than something more easily digestible. They were also behind the times when it came to targeting and reaching their voters by over-relying on public meetings, mass rallies and festivals. By the time they did decide to invest in film the Christian Democrats had already won that war. Indeed, Luchino Visconti's neo-realist masterpiece *La Terra Trema* (Golden Lion Prize Winner, Venice Film Festival, 1948) began life as a documentary financed by the PCI to be shown during the pre-election campaign and to highlight the misery of poverty. However, Visconti's artistic temperament produced a moody three hour-long film rather than a propaganda documentary. As Andreotti had already realised, people preferred 'more legs, less rags'.

In retrospect, it appears that the communist message had probably been 'spiked' even earlier by the 'exclusion crisis' of May 1947, when the PCI and PSI were thrown out of government and probably too, at the time of De Gasperi's return to Italy in January 1947 from his trip to the US. Since 1943, the Italians had endured defeat, 'liberation', occupation, low level civil war, hunger, uncertainty, impoverishment, unemployment and social unrest. They yearned for stability and prosperity. Their country neighboured Greece, a country in the throes of a civil war and France where after the 'exclusion crisis', the French Communist Party had adopted violent protest as a means of reversing the political situation. The events in France and Greece influenced Italian public opinion negatively as did the divisive message coming from the Cominform.

The activities of the Soviet Union in the run up to the Italian election harmed rather than enhanced the prospects of the PCI and reflected the ambiguity surrounding Soviet policy towards Western Europe in general and towards Italy, in particular. Stalin's main preoccupation was how to consolidate the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and to avoid outside interference. Therefore, he [seemed to prefer](#) a 'divided and docile Europe'. In February 1948, just two months before the Italian election, there was a coup in Czechoslovakia. Then, in March, Jan Masaryk, the Czech Foreign Minister who had been in favour of the Marshall Plan, died in mysterious circumstances.

Over Trieste, Stalin did not wish to alienate Marshall Tito's Yugoslavia by leaning towards Italy and declined to support the Tripartite Declaration. Unlike Britain and the US, the USSR did not renounce its share of the Italian Fleet. Furthermore, the Soviets vetoed Italian membership of the UN for the third time. The only inducements to Italians they were willing to offer was to announce that they were willing to support Italy to secure trusteeship over its ex-colonies for a fixed period of time. This was not something that was likely to catch the Italian imagination in view of the Soviet disdain of Italian aspirations for international rehabilitation, events in Eastern Europe and the daily negative publicity aimed at the Soviet Union.

In this climate, Togliatti was unable to please Stalin and at the same time present the PCI as a purely Italian party that was not prepared to put the interests of a foreign power above the national interest. Their exclusion from power, after having shared it for three years, convinced the PCI that the only way back into government was to intimidate De Gasperi and persuade him he could not govern without the support of the Communists. This high-risk tactic meant that the PCI needed to try to balance, perfectly, between the consensual principles of 'la svolta di Salerno' on the one hand and on the other, to threaten violence and clandestine activity. The scare tactics of 'doppiezza' (duplicity) aimed at presenting the PCI as a revolutionary party when it had [already decided](#) that it would not 'turn Italy into another Greece'. *Doppiezza* proved difficult to get right.

Togliatti's posturing speech in Parma, in September 1947, presented Italians with the possibility of the PCI mobilising its 30,000-armed men against the government. This was followed by a wave of strikes in late 1947, action that had been foisted on the PCI by the Cominform in order to sabotage the chances of the Marshall Plan. *Doppiezza* failed to make De Gasperi relent, but succeeded instead in stirring up a multitude of fears in an already fear-ridden electorate making the PCI appear to be serving Soviet interests and offering Italians yet more turmoil at a moment when the prospect of economic recovery was becoming discernible. In Ennio di Nolfo's [words](#) '[fear] came from down below and would last long, since in the months running up to the elections the most basic emotions had been stirred'.

In such an environment, whoever offered hope would win the election and the PCI appeared as bent on 'killing hope'. As Leo Valliani [remarked](#), the choice facing Italians was to pick one of two patrons: the Soviet Union that offered 'bleakness and harshness' or 'the West that not only promised but had already offered largesse and had also the support of the ministers of God'. The choice was easy and the result, when it came, was clear.

The Christian Democrats polled 48.51% of the vote with the combined ticket of the PCI and PSI getting 30.98%. Indeed, many Italians voted for the Christian Democrats despite being liberals, socialists and social democrats because they did not wish to let the PCI win a majority and drag Italy closer to the Soviet Union. In the 1948 election, the electorate used its vote to deliver a clear result on the future direction of the country.

In the most recent Italian election of 4 March 2018, voters opted to prolong indecision. In contrast, the 1948 election was typified by the coalescence of votes around the major parties, to such an extent, that in certain areas of northern Italy small parties almost disappeared with the Mezzogiorno remaining the only part of the country where they were able to survive.

Obviously, the combination of circumstances and events surrounding the general elections of 1948 and 2018 are materially different. However, in both elections the emotions of fear and anger were prevalent. Unfortunately, in the most recent Italian election the message of hope and the worth of Western values were drowned out by voters' fears over the weak Italian economy, their fears over high unemployment (well above the EU average) and fears over the huge public debt (the Bank of Italy revealed recently that the country owes approximately 2.3 trillion euros). Beset by such fears, the general election of 2018 allowed demagogic Italian politicians to whip up an extravagant anti-EU and anti-migrant frenzy.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author



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