

Birth of the Italian Republic: Nenni, Togliatti, De Gasperi

By

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Fascism and World War II left Italy a troubled legacy. Not only had the war been lost in an inglorious manner, but the country's participation in the conflict had no moral or diplomatic justification. In addition, the Resistance confirmed the aspects of civil warfare initiated by the Fascist regime in 1922. This situation set up the tension for regime change even before the fighting ended. Revolutionary forces on the left hoped for establishment of a social republic while their conservative opponents aimed to retain the monarchy because, they believed, it would preserve their political and social privileges.

However, the debate about Italy's future made for strange bedfellows. For example, the Italian Communists (PCI), who had a reputation for being the most radical proponents of institutional change, played an essentially conservative role under their leader Palmiro Togliatti. The Communists (probably spurred by Stalin rather than Togliatti) considered that since Italy was in the American sphere of influence it would make more sense to ally with conservative forces such as the Church in the hope that they could win control of Italy by democratic means. This strategy meant that they should not be as radical as their reputation. Thus, as soon as Togliatti returned to Italy in March 1944, he announced in the famous "Svolta di Salerno" that the Communists would postpone the issue of whether the monarchy should be eliminated as punishment for its past collaboration with Fascism and that they would join the Badoglio cabinet in the name of expelling the Germans from Italy.

This position angered Socialist leader Pietro Nenni. Ministers had to swear allegiance to Humbert, named by his father Victor Emanuel III as “Lieutenant General of the Realm” in a desperate attempt to disassociate the monarchy from its collaboration with Mussolini. In addition, although not a Fascist, Pietro Badoglio had cooperated fully with the regime. Nenni insisted that a law establishing a Constituent Assembly must be passed immediately and that an anti-Fascist civilian must take over the War Ministry. Nenni’s adamant opposition brought about Badoglio’s replacement by Ivanoe Bonomi, an old former Socialist turned moderate. It was not the solution Nenni wanted and Bonomi, in fact, favored the moderate forces in Italian society by refusing to purge Fascists from the administration (something that, later, Togliatti as Minister of Justice would abandon) or to punish war profiteers. The result was the fall of Bonomi and his replacement by Christian Democrat Alcide De Gasperi. The real issue here was which institution had the supreme authority in Italy: the Committee of National Liberation (CLN), which had led the Resistance, or the monarchy in the form of Humbert. Naming De Gasperi meant that the monarchy had won out—and had done so with the help of the Communists because Togliatti supported the Christian Democratic leader against Nenni’s opposition. Togliatti argued that Nenni lacked “realism” and he himself carefully refrained from frightening the political system into which he so fervently hoped to insert himself. Nenni could not risk isolation from leftist forces and eventually the Socialists were forced by the Communist attitude to joined government after refusing to do so.

This conservative victory survived the “second wind” that final victory in the North provided those who demanded major change, as elaborated by the program of Ferruccio Parri’s government. Conservative and Allied opposition to Parri proved too strong, but despite the defeat of Parri, Nenni succeeded in establishing a date for national

elections (which, after postponement, became June 2, 1946). The Socialists had initially opposed a popular referendum on the monarchy because they wished to leave the question of whether Italy should be a republic to the Constituent Assembly. The major reason was fear of Church intervention in a national referendum on the monarchy. Pushed by the Liberals who favored a monarchy, however, a popular referendum on the question won out—an irony of history.

The participation of two Socialists in De Gasperi's government proved decisive for the republic's fortunes: Nenni as Vice Premier and Minister for the Constituent Assembly and Giuseppe Romita as Minister of the Interior. The impulsive Sandro Pertini, future President of Italy, initially mentioned as Interior Minister, took himself out of the running by ignoring Nenni's injunction to "be good, keep quiet" and by publicly stating that should Humbert come to Milan there would be a "Piazzale Loreto also for him." (Piazzale Loreto was where Mussolini's body was hung.) When Humbert did show up, Pertini took a squad of leaders to his residence and machine gunned the windows during dinner, provoking the lieutenant general's hasty exit from the city. Humbert's absence during the referendum greatly damaged the monarchists.

De Gasperi, pulled one way by his republican sympathies and the other by the monarchical preferences of the Vatican and large segments of the DC, steered a neutral course. Togliatti, the Justice Minister, played harmful role by making extreme statements at an inopportune time when the referendum loomed: he denounced Victor Emanuel's abdication in favor of Humbert as an attempt to influence the referendum and made a veiled threat of violence should the monarchists win the vote. Togliatti had to beat a hasty retreat from both statements. On February 26, 1946 a lively cabinet session resolved all the outstanding issues holding up the elections for a Constituent Assembly

and a referendum. “Tonight the battle for the Constituent Assembly has been won!” a jubilant Nenni confided to his diary. A decree embodying the agreements and reluctantly signed by Humbert reached Nenni in Milan, where this peasant son of Italy proudly affixed his signature below that of the Prince of the House of Savoy. Nenni felt certain that his signature had sealed the dynasty’s fate.

Able seconding Nenni, Socialist Interior Minister Giuseppe Romita devoted himself to eliminating the banditry and political violence that plagued the country in the wake of World War II and rebuilt the country’s police forces on a democratic basis. Acting as neutral as possible in a situation in which he faced constant temptation to influence a republican outcome to the voting, Romita pacified the country in time for the scheduled elections and referendum. His success prevented conservatives from exploiting unrest as a basis for postponing or voiding the elections. Romita helped the republican cause in another way. When in February the cabinet had settled the outstanding issues regarding national elections for the Constituent Assembly and the referendum, it had also scheduled local elections—considered as a dress rehearsal for the national balloting to be held on June 2. Romita enhanced the chances for those favoring a republic by choosing cities with large republican and leftist voting blocs to be the first to hold the local elections. The spectacular results earned Romita a rebuke from conservative cabinet members. Forces favoring the republic won 44, 614 seats in 2, 336 localities while those supporting the monarchy won only 6, 472 seats in 318 localities. “I have the republic in my desk drawer,” said a confident Romita when he received the results.

On June 1, 1946, Nenni asked De Gasperi how he would vote the next day. “The ballot is secret,” De Gasperi answered, “but I’m willing to bet that my ‘black’ Trentino

will give the republic more votes than your 'red' Romagna." The wily De Gasperi won the bet.

June 2, 1946 was a calm, boring day. Counting the votes, however, Romita had a very exciting time as the results seesawed. In the end, the republic won by a close but decisive 12,717,928 votes to 10,769,284 (1,498,138 ballots were declared void).

King Humbert took his defeat badly, sounding out the British (Churchill supported the monarchy) on Allied reaction to a possible monarchist coup d'etat and delaying his departure into exile. When the Allies gave him an unfavorable answer and the Court of Cassation ratified the referendum's results, the king published a petulant proclamation and left Ciampino airport for Portuguese exile at 4:00 P.M. on June 13, 1946.

In a free regime, however, the old disputes returned. The Socialists, did extremely well in the Constituent Assembly elections but refused to abandon their alliance with the Communists—Nenni's greatest mistake—and declined in influence. The Communists, with financial help from the Soviet Union, and the Christian Democrats bolstered by the Americans fought it out in an Italy that quickly became a major Cold War battleground. With the help of the contending international forces, these parties quickly secured dominance over their allies and the Italian political system became frozen.

Perhaps Pietro Nenni had a presentiment of this future. As he took his seat in the Constituent Assembly he exclaimed: "How beautiful the republic appeared when viewed from the vantage point of the empire!"

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