Introduction

The sense of optimism was palpable as polls closed on the first national election of the nascent Italian Republic. All the participants, who had fought an intense campaign, appeared confident of victory on the sunny spring morning after election day. The mouthpiece of the Italian communist party (PCI), which had formed a Popular Democratic Front with the socialists, was particularly bullish as results slowly filtered in. Pointing to a high voter turnout, *L'Unità* boldly proclaimed a 'strong affirmation of the Front across the country'. The newspaper correctly identified that Italians had turned out in force on 18 April 1948: more than 92 per cent of the eligible electorate and almost 27 million people by the final count, many casting a ballot for the first time.[1] Yet the Marxist left's sense of excitement would prove altogether misplaced.

During the previous months Italians had been the subject of a remarkable battle over who should lead the country's recovery after the collapse of fascism. Nominally voters were choosing a new government on 18 April. Yet the vote had transcended the political arena to become a broader symbol of Italy's path in the post-war era. Beyond the mass rallies, speeches, propaganda wars, and polemics, it assumed cultural and ideological significance, involving everyone from the pope to philosophers such as Benedetto Croce. The election defined what the nation represented and aspired to be, at home and abroad. When the final result arrived, the electorate had placed their trust in the Christian Democrats (DC), who received more than 48 per cent of the ballots cast and, moreover, gained control of both houses of the Italian parliament. It was a clear statement. With early optimism having faded to despair, PCI chief Palmiro Togliatti claimed the outcome proved that the election had been 'neither free nor democratic'. Furthermore, he pointed an accusatory finger at external interference.[2]

Togliatti was not the only one to declare that outside involvement had swung the outcome away from the Marxist left and towards the DC. Nor was he alone in suggesting the United States had played a critical role in tipping the electoral scales. Yet while the PCI leader deplored this

intervention, thousands of miles away across the Atlantic Ocean, American policy-makers and commentators lined up to cheer it. Republican Party foreign policy stalwart John Foster Dulles considered the result a vindication for a hard-line US stance against communism. Esteemed *New York Times* columnist Arthur Krock – well known for his reporting on the Washington policy scene – similarly praised the work of the Truman administration. 'American aid was an enormous factor', remarked fellow *NYT* editorialist Anne O'Hare McCormick, as 'the Italian majority voted for freedom'.

The DC's triumph was labelled an American success amidst a burgeoning cold war. The US government had supported non-communist groups in a myriad of overt and covert ways. Political and economic assistance was accompanied by large publicity schemes extolling the virtues of American aid. A vast propaganda offensive of short films, documentaries, TV and radio broadcasts, and letter-writing campaigns targeted the Marxist left. Clandestine efforts to fund and arm the DC and its allies – in ways that could not, in theory, be attributed to the Truman administration – were also launched. According to Dulles, the corollary to the Italian campaign was more US intervention abroad. In a less imperious tone, McCormick noted its lessons for the wider conflict with communism. The legacy of Italy should, she suggested, 'confirm our policy of backing [western] recovery and make Congress and the people more than ever convinced that if we use every political, economic and moral weapon we have, we can win the greatest political battle of all time without a shooting war'.[3]

This book explores how the 1948 Italian election became an allegory of the cold war in American minds and why this early cold war flashpoint had profound ramifications for both countries. Delighted by the defeat of the Marxist left in Italy, politicians and opinion-makers suggested that its true significance transcended the local context. Unlike previous US battles on the Italian peninsula, 18 April did not entail military conflict nor did it seriously risk triggering one. The election represented a unique way to fight abroad without firing a gun or dropping a bomb. For the first time, the United States had waged a war short of actual war.

Political warfare

The wider implications of the Italian episode for a cold war with communism were clarified by the office of US planner George F. Kennan. The American effort, noted the Policy Planning Staff (PPS), marked the 'inauguration of organized political warfare'. It explained:

> In broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures (as E[uropean] R[ecovery] P[rogram]), and 'white' propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of 'friendly' foreign elements, 'black' psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states . . . This Government has, of course, in part consciously and in part unconsciously, been conducting political warfare. Aggressive Soviet political warfare has driven us overtly first to the Truman Doctrine, next to ERP, then to sponsorship of Western Union, and finally into the covert activities in which we engaged during the Italian elections.[4]

As an approach to international affairs, it was not a distinctly American enterprise. The emergence and success of world powers such as the British Empire had relied on an 'understanding and application of the principles of political warfare'. Identifying the approach in a broader historical arc, Kennan argued that the United States could achieve its post-war objectives without provoking World War III. Against the Soviet Union, 'it is certain that we cannot undertake a war of destruction', he reflected. Notions of war and peace were not meaningless but were no longer meaningful in the traditional sense. Instead, 'we must wage a political war, a war of attrition for limited objectives'. In fact, it was essential given that 'the Kremlin's conduct of political warfare has become the most refined and effective of any in history'.[5]

The Italian election marked a crucial moment in the development and organisation of American political warfare. The US campaign had been conducted below the level of total military conflict and the fact that Italians had rejected communism appeared to be tangible proof that the approach could meet the broader Soviet challenge. The dilemma now facing policy-makers was how to build on the inaugural success. The first challenge was conceptual: recognising the contemporary nature of foreign affairs. Resolution of international tension would not be through toe-to-toe military conflict but, instead, through political warfare. Secondly, there was the practical matter of expanding and integrating covert measures short of war. The Italian operation had involved several ad hoc clandestine initiatives that were not entirely in tune with overt schemes. Kennan was consumed by the two issues in the post-war era, especially at the height of his policy influence. Rather than in outlining a grand strategy, his key contribution lay in defining the contours of a cold war and identifying the appropriate way to wage it.[6] The Italian election was a key catalyst in this broader conversation.

Amidst the enthusiasm surrounding political warfare there were glaring omissions. The critical role of Italian political and social actors drew

little comment. Nor was much attention paid to a host of transnational religious, labour, civic, and business protagonists, or to the European nations the Truman administration had collaborated with. In the aftermath of World War II, American relations with Italy were largely shaped by interaction between indigenous, regional, and non-state actors. Moreover, these disparate groups jostled to influence the direction of post-war reconstruction in their own visions, briefly banding together to defeat the Marxist left on 18 April.

Italian prime minister and DC leader Alcide De Gasperi represented the pivotal local interlocutor for the United States. While eager for political ties and material assistance from Washington, he also sought to temper excessive American interference and safeguard national sovereignty. Straddling a notoriously difficult line, Italian officials nevertheless looked to ensure their interests were not subsumed by bipolar cold war considerations. Identifying his country as the birthplace of western civilisation and spirituality, De Gasperi declared before election day, 'we serve and defend Italian civilisation' and – referencing Dante's *Divine Comedy* – 'that true Rome, wherein Christ dwells a Roman'. Italy's unique cultural heritage was a source of influence. 'We defend the Italian nation', he added, 'a population of workers, navigators, discoverers, colonizers, guiding lights of the universe including the American continents'.[7] Even allowing for electoral hyperbole, De Gasperi was asserting Italian autonomy and insisting that the country did not follow a strict cold war dichotomy of free-market capitalist democracy vs collectivist state communism. Its experience in the twentieth century to that point testified to the failures of liberal democracy and authoritarianism. The 1948 election was a watershed for Italy. It was also more than an American success story.

Questions and arguments

While American policy-making in the early cold war and US–Italian relations have attracted wide scholarly attention, this study goes beyond existing debates by systematically exploring the intersecting narratives of American political warfare and the multi-faceted US–Italian relationship between the military conflicts of World War II and Korea. It analyses a critical moment in twentieth-century history when 'hot war' was considered undesirable and impractical, especially given the advent of a nuclear age. The book explores how a cold war shaped American attitudes towards Italy and how Italy influenced the US conceptualisation of that cold war. In so doing, it addresses two inter-related questions: why Italy, a peripheral concern for the Truman administration in 1945,

became a seminal front in the post-war struggle against communism; and how the lessons the case seemingly provided could help successfully wage a cold war.

In answering these questions, three key arguments are put forward. Firstly, Italy was never important in and of itself for American policy-makers although its fate was critical in a wider sense. An unstable Italy undermined broader post-war plans. In particular, defeating the Italian Marxists in 1948 was central to America's conceptualisation and prosecution of a cold war. This book examines the origin and definition of the cold war as a concept – hence its appearance as a noun in small capitals – and how it was fought through political warfare. In so doing, it explores why the United States, as Anders Stephanson notes, 'was able in peacetime to enter into the world of international politics on a global scale in the name of conducting a war short of actual war'.[8]

Secondly, while the cold war perturbed countless American officials and commentators, a bipolar clash was less rigid and considered more flexible by Italians and private and transnational actors. They emphasised alternative visions related to their own priorities – from national sovereignty, to pan-Catholic political and spiritual unity, to apolitical global trade unionism – which existed alongside, overlapping and intersecting with, the narrative of cold war. Such outlooks could never disregard the growing bipolar competition between the United States and Soviet Union but were nevertheless present, ebbing and flowing in the years under investigation. The selective lessons extracted from 18 April were rooted in American officials' viewing the episode through a narrow cold war prism that was not shared by their partners. It testified to the reality that alliances between the Truman administration, De Gasperi, the Vatican, trade unions, and other non-state actors represented a series of marriages of convenience.

Finally, the crucial legacy of the Italian election was the emergence of a perception of success in American circles. Here the objective is not to critique ideological dispositions as flawed or make normative claims as to what constitutes success. Such enterprises are tangential in this context. Personal opinions will no doubt be evident (as a disclaimer, my take is that the perception of success was largely ungrounded), yet they are, in many respects, irrelevant. The notion that American efforts had succeeded in Italy was unequivocal; one can dispute whether this was accurate but it was indisputably prominent in the minds of policy-makers and commentators. The crux is to understand *how* a perception of success came about – rather than the prosaic and ineffectual question of *whether* it was true – and, furthermore, consider its tangible consequences. This book reveals how it emerged and fuelled a problematic

future for US–Italian relations and American political warfare around Europe and, soon after, the world.

Historical lacunae

There was a remarkable parallel to American debates on Italy and foreign relations generally between 1945 and 1950. The specific and broad issues regularly intertwined. Italy was the top agenda item at the inaugural meeting of the National Security Council (NSC), the subject of the first directive issued by the Council, and the first instance of cold war interventionism. The NSC revisited the country as the Truman administration produced its first comprehensive blueprint for the cold war, NSC 68, in 1950. This was not just coincidental. The study bridges a surprising gap between two large literatures on US–Italian relations and early cold war American policy-making. By revealing how particular events and broad approaches overlapped, it addresses several historiographical themes and debates: the significance of power alongside that of concepts and ideas; the actions of superpowers and the agency of smaller partners; the importance of structures and bureaucracies as well as contingency and personalities; the cultural roots of policy and culture reflecting and reinforcing meanings and values; the local as well as the international and transnational cold war.[9]

Beginning in the 1980s, historians of US–Italian relations produced informative works on the political, economic, and military dimensions of post-war reconstruction. Focusing on specific aspects of recovery, the key studies in English were written primarily from the perspective of Washington. Uncovering the motives of local political actors was limited given the scarcity of Italian documentary sources. Moreover, these works did not analyse how the Italian case interacted with wider American decision-making. James Miller acknowledged that the 1948 election provided a launch pad for US covert operations but failed to explain why 18 April informed the expansion debate.[10] Drawing on openings in Italian archives, recent scholarship has paid closer attention to the actions of local protagonists, especially vis-à-vis international powers, and to how indigenous social and cultural dynamics shaped the 1948 election.[11]

This work offers a more complete account of post-war US–Italian relations by examining the words and actions of state and private actors on both sides of the Atlantic. Utilising new records and reassessing older sources from both countries, it explores America's role in Italy and Italian encouragement and restraint of US power. In particular, it highlights how a transnational network of religious, civic, labour, and business groups aided and abetted US–Italian relations. It builds on studies analysing these interactions as bilateral relationships.[12] Private actors introduced

new possibilities for the American and Italian states in the international arena, with both keenly collaborating with the Vatican, the American Federation of Labor, bankers and industrialists, and Italian-American trade unions and civic leaders. Yet such heterogeneous partnerships carried seeds of discontent that undermined the future potential of state–private alliances.

Analysing the overlap between specific cases and broad strategic discussions fosters an understanding of both. Existing work on the mechanics of American foreign relations has identified the Truman administration's efforts in Italy as part of a series of 'countermeasures' to undermine communism. The election represented a 'testing ground' for the rollback of Soviet influence, an offensive in which covert means 'would be an effective instrument in defeating the communist threat'. However, such discussions are brief and cursory.[13] Based entirely on US government planning records, the treatment of the Italian operation is superficial, with little consideration of intervention in practice, the challenges faced, or interactions with local and private groups. The election is merely the backdrop for the application of American cold war strategic thought. Overlooking the improvised nature of quotidian decision-making, it ignores the fact that policy was often pragmatic.

American involvement has also been reduced to a simplistic tale about the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Tracing the lineage of cold war interventions, Italy is depicted as a springboard for bigger and bolder Agency covert actions, those secret operations to influence events abroad in a manner that cannot be traced to the US government. 'America's political warriors had won their first engagement on the battlefield of the Cold War' by swinging the vote in Italy, suggest intelligence scholars, 'provoking CIA aspirations to omnipotence in political warfare'.[14] On occasions, this has fuelled crude interpretations of Agency manipulation of democracy and human rights in Italy and beyond. American intervention relied on joint initiatives with local actors, others suggest, without explaining the latter's motives, while the notion that Italians, or anyone else, constituted 'architects' of American policy is false.[15] In contrast, this book argues that CIA efforts were not pivotal to the election outcome and, furthermore, represented a bone of contention for senior US policy-makers. The subsequent battle to organise covert political warfare was rooted in profound dissatisfaction with the Agency. Another tangible legacy of 18 April was the creation of a new, permanent covert operations agency – the first in American peacetime history – that bypassed the CIA.

Attempts to define the machinations of American foreign relations in the early cold war have also blurred concepts and ideas. Terms such as political warfare, psychological warfare, and propaganda – while used

somewhat interchangeably for a brief moment in the immediate aftermath of World War II – were not synonymous. Planners such as Kennan repeatedly stressed the differences to colleagues in outlining the nature of the cold war challenge. Political warfare represented an integrated approach, utilising overt and covert means, to realise international objectives. It was both a conceptual approach to understanding foreign relations and a practical way to organise the tactics used therein. As Kennan noted, Italy was part of the 'inauguration of organized political warfare' and an example of covert political warfare in action. Psychological warfare tools – radio, information programmes, propaganda – came under the rubric of political warfare.[16]

Linking two large but separate bodies of work provides a fuller picture of the inaugural case of political warfare. It also enables a more reflexive discussion of success and the lessons the past teaches. To date they have yielded largely normative conclusions for scholars, despite the unconventional nature of warfare after 1945 not being conducive to clear-cut success stories. Until the middle of the twentieth century, conflict had been relatively straightforward to conceptualise and adjudicate as military forces clashed on the battlefield or at sea.[17] A struggle below the level of full-blown war presented complications. Select early cold war episodes lent themselves more readily to proclaiming success. Indeed, historians of post-war US–Italian relations succumbed to prescriptive conclusions: America did or did not succeed.[18]

The $12.3 billion aid programme for Europe through the Marshall Plan presented a prominent success story. Considered an unqualified triumph in both popular and scholarly commentary of the day, it has since been through several spins of the historiographical washer. The accomplishments of the ERP have been debated on political, economic, and psychological grounds, and even recast as an American coming-of-age tale. Yet the notion of the Marshall Plan's success exercised a powerful force on policy-making, from the political–psychological fillip it provided to anxious Europeans and Americans at the time to contemporary calls for modern-day equivalents.[19] In short, the perception of success around the ERP has been as significant as its financial value. It was far from coincidental that narratives of success began to crumble as warfare proved markedly more hot than cold, most prominently with America's 'Vietnam War' – the yin to the yang of Vietnam's 'American War'.[20] The shadowy world of clandestine warfare remained harder to classify. Yet when CIA covert operations that had destabilised governments deemed unacceptable to Washington proved to have long-term costs, the concept of 'blowback' inverted success narratives.[21]

The notion of success nonetheless returned with vigour following the collapse of the Soviet regime and cold war itself. With the emergence of

triumphalist narratives and the declaration of a teleological end of history, the aphorism of the past as written by victors rarely appeared more appropriate. Western Europe's transformation from the horrors of World War II to prosperity and stability produced a bout of self-congratulatory tales from commentators and political leaders that were popular and satisfying but, as Tony Judt noted, 'it leaves out a lot'. Challenging cold war triumphalism and the selective use of historical analogies, several historians refuted simplistic constructs of success and the appropriation of the past for distinctly political ends. They warned against the misuse and abuse of history.[22]

Historical precision and tales of success also concerned political scientists, albeit for different reasons. Their objective was to distil lessons in treatises that could guide current and budding policy-makers. Historical analogies were not exclusively used to justify policy decisions and personal preferences, it was argued, but could be categorised as successes and failures from which lessons could be identified.[23] This was linked to work on perceptions, specifically how the past informs and conditions policy choices, with cognitive psychology theories popular in understanding threats and constructing responses. Robert Jervis noted that perceptions and misperceptions were identifiable patterns in the behaviour of states, which scholars employed in studies on cold war decision-making.[24]

Discussions of success and perceptions have nonetheless proved static and limited to analyses of state elites. Yet success need not be a normative formula or a category to glean lessons from the past. Equally, perception does not have to be an analytical tool to explain the difficult task facing superpower leaders. A starting point is to acknowledge that success lies in the eye of the beholder. Psychologists and sociologists have demonstrated that perceptions of success and bias are dependent on one's environment and interaction with others.[25] While that is not a call for historians to adopt phenomenological inquiries, closer attention to the context in which success is defined can help move beyond normative readings through considerations of how and why beliefs form and endure. Taking up John Maynard Keynes's notion that the ideas of economists and political philosophers carry great weight whether 'right' or 'wrong', scholars have demonstrated the transnational influence of Keynesianism. Rather than assess the success of the economic theory, a comparative approach accounts for its wide appeal in policy-making circles across nations.[26]

Analysing the way success narratives were constructed as well as their broader ramifications provides opportunities for historians beyond debunking assertions of success and critiquing erroneous perceptions. This study considers how a perception of success emerged around US

intervention in Italy and why state and private figures such as Kennan, Secretary of Defense James Forrestal, and covert operations expert Allen Dulles repeatedly cited the 1948 election in making the case for organised political warfare. In so doing, it weaves the specific and broad, and government and non-state protagonists, into the narrative of the inaugural war short of actual war. Before outlining the key themes permeating the book I shall establish the context of post-war relations between the United States and Italy.

The spectre of fascism

The latter half of the twentieth century may have been marked by the clash between democracy and communism, although it was the third major ideology of the century that initially presented most problems for the two countries.[27] Americans had at first welcomed Italian fascism in the belief that Benito Mussolini ensured order as Europe confronted economic instability and the Bolshevik threat following World War I. Il Duce's ventures into Africa gradually eroded American conceptions of his 'moderate' fascism, credentials that were blown apart by his declaration of war on Britain and France in 1940.[28] Italy's liberation from fascism was a two-pronged effort. As domestic strikes and protests against the regime spread, especially in the industrial north, Allied armies launched an invasion of Sicily in July 1943. Swiftly pushing up the peninsula, British and American troops oversaw Italy's formal surrender in September, although the process of liberation proved to be prolonged. With the Allies entrenched in the south and the remnants of Mussolini's regime in the Salò Republic – a puppet regime controlled by the Wehrmacht – in the north, the country was divided. It would take nearly two more years before the entire peninsula was liberated, albeit with Allied armies remaining in situ until 1947.[29]

Italy's Janus-faced wartime experience gave rise to a number of dilemmas. A defeated Axis collaborator that finished on the side of the Allies, it represented a co-belligerent that was both vanquished and victor. The primary challenge was to agree a peace treaty, which had international and domestic ramifications for American policy-makers. On the one hand, officials had to negotiate a treaty with British, French, and Soviet counterparts seeking significant concessions from the enemy-ally. Crafting the document would prove an exhausting process that contributed to the disintegration of the wartime anti-fascist alliance and beginnings of the cold war. They also had to identify Italian leadership, untarnished by fascism, to tackle economic instability and a powerful Marxist movement possessing a mass base and significant paramilitary force. On the other