

***Less Poletti and More Spaghetti:***  
**Charles Poletti and the Clash of Cultures and Priorities within the**  
**Allied Military Government, 1943–45**

Kimber M. Quinney\*

*This article will examine the role of Italian Americans in the shaping and implementing of U.S. foreign policy toward occupied Italy through the case of Charles Poletti. Appointed regional commissioner of the Allied Military Government (AMG) in occupied Italy in 1943, Poletti was a seasoned and effective public servant, expected to be able to impose order amid postwar chaos and deliver Allied goals. A proud and well-connected Italian American, Poletti was thought likely to win the hearts of Italians. But (as archives in Rome, London, and Washington attest) Poletti's determination to do things his way and pursue his own priorities infuriated his bureaucratic bosses while both captivating and disappointing local people. Poletti, who had been the first Italian American to become governor of a U.S. state, was tasked by the AMG with providing food, transportation, electricity, and other essential services to war-torn areas of Italy. At the same time, however, he prioritized purging Fascists. "From industrialists to journalists," as well as government officials, Poletti was ruthless. This angered Anglo-American military planners at Allied Headquarters, who wanted at best a half-hearted purge, believing some Fascist officials would be useful to Italy's reconstruction and Allied anti-Communist ambitions. Poletti's go-for-broke approach quickly earned him a reputation of "giving his own orders." Among Italians, Poletti's reputation was also mixed. Perhaps because he was identified as "one of us," Italians were quick to criticize him when services faltered or collapsed. In early 1945, placards throughout Rome read "Less Poletti, More Spaghetti!" and Italians sang songs ridiculing his ineffectiveness. And yet, when he left office later that year, the new Italian government commissioned a bronze bust of him and he was made an honorary citizen of Naples, Rome, and Milan.*

\* California State University San Marcos

## Introduction

Historians of American foreign relations continue to debate the impact of domestic politics on the making of foreign policy but for the most part they conclude that the impact is minimal.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, however, historians have shown growing interest in assessing the influence of immigrant communities on U.S. foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> The impact of domestic politics and ethnicity on American foreign relations converge in any discussion of Italian Americans. In the case of U.S. policy toward fascist Italy during World War II, there is little question that the existence of nearly six million Italian Americans living in the United States had a tremendous impact on the creation, shaping, and advancement of that policy.

Even before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Italian Americans stepped up (or were asked to do so by the U.S. government) to influence their Italian families and friends to fight fascism in Italy. Famous Italian Americans — such as New York City mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, sculptor Attilio Piccirilli, bandleader Guy Lombardo, and singer Frank Sinatra — had been highlighted in the Department of Justice’s prewar radio program, «I’m an American».<sup>3</sup> Many of the same

---

<sup>1</sup> Important exceptions exist, of course. Among the most notable is Melvin Small, *Public Opinion*, in Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991; M. Small, *Democracy and Diplomacy: The Impact of Domestic Politics in U.S. Foreign Policy, 1789-1994*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995; M. Small, *At the Water’s Edge: American Politics and the Vietnam War* (2006). See also Ralph Levering, «Is Domestic Politics being Slighted as an Interpretive Framework»? *SHAFR Newsletter*, March 1994; and Fredrik Logevall, *Party Politics*, in Alexander DeConde, Richard Dean Burns, and Fredrik Logevall, eds., *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*. New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2002, pp. 99-111.

<sup>2</sup> The relationship between ethnicity and foreign policy is relatively new area of study in the history of American foreign relations. Early analyses include Robert Tucker, et al., *Immigration and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Routledge 1990); Godfrey Hodgson, «Immigrants and Frontiersmen: Two Traditions in American Foreign Policy», *Diplomatic History* Vol. 23, No. 3 (Summer 1999), pp. 525-537. More recently, in the case of World War II, Scott McConnell asserts that «ethnicity was an obvious subject» in the making of U.S. foreign policy. Scott McConnell, «Not so huddled masses: multiculturalism and foreign policy», *World Affairs* Vol. 171, No. 4. Spring 2009, pp. 39-50; and Stefano Luconi, «World War II and Italian-Americans Contested Loyalties», *Italian Americana*, Vol. 30 No. 4 (2012): 151-167.

<sup>3</sup> Overall there were more than 60 broadcasts of the radio show and eventually «I’m an American Day» was established (now Citizenship Day, September 17). <https://blogs.loc.gov/now-see-hear/2018/11/im-an-american/>

personalities were called upon after 1941 by the War Department to urge listeners to show sympathy for the Italian people.<sup>4</sup> Thousands of less well-known Italian Americans participated in community letter-writing campaigns to both servicemen in Italy as well as to Italian family and friends, persuading the intended recipients to stand courageously with the Anglo-American Allies to defeat Mussolini and Fascism during the war.<sup>5</sup>

Because of their familiarity with the culture, the language, and in many cases the Italian towns and villages themselves, approximately 1.2 million Americans of Italian descent enlisted in the armed forces. The foreign propaganda section of the Office of War Information (OWI) capitalized on this fact. A case in point is of a leaflet produced by the OWI that was dropped by the thousands among Italian troops. Urging the Italian soldiers to surrender, it warned that Americans of Italian descent were «at Italy's gates». The leaflet went on to reassure the Italian troops that upon surrender, they could use the pamphlet as a safe-conduct passport and would be well taken care of by the Italian American forces.<sup>6</sup>

The Office of Strategic Services (OSS, precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency) hand-picked a select number of Italian American intelligence officers, who were among the first to be dropped behind enemy lines prior to the 1943 invasion. By gaining the trust and loyalty of members of the Italian resistance through common language and culture, these OSS officers managed to initiate a strong front against the Italian Fascist forces even before the Anglo-American troops launched their assault at Salerno.<sup>7</sup>

With regard to the Anglo-American Allied occupation of Italy, the Italian American to have the single most sweeping and direct impact on the Allied effort to defeat fascism and return Italy to a

---

<sup>4</sup> Salvatore LaGumina. *The Humble and the Heroic. Wartime Italian Americans*, New York, Cambria Press, pp. 172-74.

<sup>5</sup> Octavia Capuzzi Locke, «My Mamma's Letters», *Reader's Digest*, Vol. 140. June 1992, pp. 125-127, and «Mammas Letter Writing», *Johns Hopkins Magazine*, June 1987, pp. 17-19. LaGumina, pp. 147-51.

<sup>6</sup> *The Cash Value of a Mysterious Operation*, "New York Times", July 6, 1943.

<sup>7</sup> Max Corvo, *The O.S.S. in Italy, 1942-1945: A Personal Memoir*, New York: Praeger, 1990.

democracy was undoubtedly Lieutenant Colonel Charles Poletti.<sup>8</sup> In his three years of service as *governatore* of the Allied Military Government in Naples, Rome, and Milan, Poletti carried out a uniquely crafted American foreign policy toward Italy that was unmistakably shaped by his own ethnic identity and familiarity with the Italian people and culture.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, perhaps, Poletti's impact was felt more strongly still because of his stubborn refusal to toe the military line, and his insistence to rely instead upon his own judgment, his own legal and political training, and, ultimately, his own commitment to democracy.

### **Charles Poletti's Early Influence on U.S. Foreign Policy toward Italy**

Although he himself was born in Barre, Vermont, both of Poletti's parents were Italian-born immigrants. As a boy, he had planned to manage a bakery after high school but was persuaded to apply to college. He won a scholarship to Harvard and graduated Phi Beta Kappa; he then went on to Harvard Law School graduating in 1928. He recalled having taken a course on administrative law taught by Felix Frankfurter to which he credited much of his expertise in legal administration—both in the United States and, as it turned out, in Italy. Poletti spoke fluent Italian, and spent many summers in Italy, visiting relatives.<sup>10</sup> He also studied at the University of Rome and the University of Madrid.

---

<sup>8</sup> John P. Diggins is critical of the AMG's efforts to purge Italy of fascists, but praises Charles Poletti for his «honest and industrious» nature and for winning the respect of Italians. John P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America*, Princeton Press, 1972, pp. 424-25.

<sup>9</sup> Many insightful analyses turn the spotlight on the establishment and administration of the Allied Military Government in Italy. Among the most notable are Norman Kogan, *Italy and the Allies*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1956; C. R. S. Harris, *Allied Military Administration of Italy, 1943-1945*, London, HM Stationery Office, 1957; Harry L. Coles and Albert K. Weinberg, *Civil Affairs: Soldiers Become Governors*, Vol. 8, Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1964; David W. Ellwood, *Italy 1943-45*, Holmes & Meier, 1985. In general, however, these works pay little or no attention to ethnic identity as a factor in the Allied effort to dismantle fascism in Italy.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Poletti, Oral History Interview with William B. Liebmann conducted in 1978. *Reminiscences of Charles Poletti: Oral History 1978*, Columbia University Oral History Research Office Collection, New York (hereafter,

Poletti's commitment to democratic principles began with regard to democracy — and the shortcomings of democracy — in the United States. In particular, Poletti was keen to research the dire economic and social conditions of African Americans, especially communities in the South. In his interest to expose the relationship between race relations and American democracy, Poletti was most certainly ahead of his time.<sup>11</sup> In 1926, he and his Harvard classmate, Corliss Lamont, decided to embark on a “voyage of discovery” to research the social and economic ills across parts of the United States. They began in New Jersey, traveled to Washington, D.C., but spent most of their time in the deep South, documenting the economic injustices that prevented African Americans from fully experiencing the benefits of a democratic society.

Poletti's concern for civil rights guided his career. Before pursuing a career in law, he served as treasurer of the National Urban League. Founded in 1910 and headquartered in New York City, the League defines itself as «a historic civil rights organization dedicated to economic empowerment, equality, and social justice. » Carving a successful career as a prominent lawyer in New York City, Poletti went on to serve on the New York State Supreme Court and became active in Democratic Party politics. He campaigned «tirelessly» on the 1928 presidential campaign of Al Smith — former governor of New York, and one of Poletti's personal heroes.<sup>12</sup> Four years later, he served as lead counsel to the Democratic National Committee, actively supporting Franklin Delano Roosevelt's bid for the presidency. In 1939, Poletti was elected to the Board of Directors for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples.<sup>13</sup> In 1940, in his capacity as Lieutenant Governor of New York, Poletti tossed out the first ball at the

---

Poletti and Liebmann. *Reminiscences of Charles Poletti*).

<sup>11</sup> Gunnar Myrdal's treatise *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* would not be published until 1944. Poletti explained that when he was studying in Europe, he was struck by the fact that his non-American peers knew more about the civil rights of Black Americans than he did. This realization prompted Poletti and Lamont to undertake their “discovery tour” of the United States.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Poletti, Oral History Interview with Joseph Wall conducted in 1957. *Reminiscences of Charles Poletti: Oral History 1957*, Herbert H. Lehman Project.

<sup>13</sup> *Poletti and Roosevelt Elected to NAACP Board*, “The Crisis” February 1939.

game between the New York Black Yankees and the New York Cubans. To the crowd of 12,000, Poletti praised the quality of play by the Black players and wished for the day when barriers to access and success for African American athletes would be removed.<sup>14</sup>

Poletti's commitment to civil rights and democracy at home would very much shape his attitudes toward Italy and Italians during World War II. As many scholars have documented, when Mussolini assumed power, many Italian Americans celebrated the regime and, in the first few years of the war, the majority of Italian Americans were not opposed to fascism.<sup>15</sup> But Poletti did not belong to this group. Within days following the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, and Italy's subsequent declaration of war on the United States, Poletti was one of many prominent Italian Americans who expressed their firm and unwavering allegiance to the United States. The *prominenti* (literally, "the prominent ones"), politically active community and labor leaders in urban Italian neighborhoods, led the way by returning their medals and decorations to the fascist government.<sup>16</sup> The *prominenti* often acted as intermediaries between immigrant communities and the political machines to which they were connected, and so they were in a position to wield influence among other Italian Americans.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> *Negro Nines Break Even*, "New York Times", May 20, 1940.

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, antifascism did not gain much of a following among Italian-Americans until the late 1930s, and after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. See, John P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America*, Princeton University Press, 1972; David F. Schmitz, *The United States and Fascist Italy, 1922-1940*, University of North Carolina Press, 1988; and most recently, Katy Hull, *The Machine Has a Soul: American Sympathy with Italian Fascism*, Princeton University Press, 2021. See also Stefano Luconi, *La "Diplomazia Parallela": Il regime fascista e la mobilitazione politica degli italo-americani*, Milano: Franco-Angeli, 2000. In a different analysis, Luconi makes a provocative argument suggesting that Italian-Americans were not disaffected by Mussolini's anti-Semitic policies; on the contrary, the majority shared Mussolini's anti-Semitic sentiments. Stefano Luconi, "The Response of Italian-Americans to Fascist Anti-Semitism," *Patterns of Prejudice* Vol. 35, no. 3 (July 2001), pp. 3-23.

<sup>16</sup> J. P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, 351.

<sup>17</sup> According to historian Philip Cannistraro, the *prominenti* "assumed self-appointed roles of defender and advocate of immigrant interests." See: Philip Cannistraro, "The Duce and the Prominenti: Fascism and the Crisis of Italian American Leadership," in *Altretalia* (July-December 2005), p. 81. Stefano Luconi, who has written extensively on Italian American voting behaviors asserts that the political influence by *prominenti* has been exaggerated. His article on the "symbolic leadership" of John Torquato, Jr., in the Pittsburgh area in the 1930s is indicative. See Stefano Luconi, "The Machine Boss as Symbolic Leader," in *The Oral History Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1. (Winter - Spring, 1999), pp. 45-66.

Charles Poletti served as the Executive Director of the Legion for American Unity, a «national organization of naturalized and first generation American citizens dedicated to the cause of freedom». Founded prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the organization boasted a membership list of politicians, judges, scientists, artists, and other professionals—many of whom were Italian— who had been immigrants to the United States.<sup>18</sup> In June 1940, the United Italian American League, with affiliations with other Italian American associations, and thus with a collective membership of over 100,000 members, pledged to meet to draft a statement in response to a claim that Italians in the United States supported the Fascist regime. According to the chairman of the organization, “The only ism to which Italo-Americans and Italians residing in this country adhere is Americanism.”<sup>19</sup>

Immediately following the attack on Pearl Harbor, most Americans of Italian descent—including Poletti—expressed their loyalty to the United States in explicit terms with newspaper editorials calling on the millions of Italians living in the United States to support the war effort.<sup>20</sup> The Mazzini society and the United Italian American League, Inc. — two high profile, politically active organizations based in New York City — sent telegrams directly to President Franklin D. Roosevelt stating the support of the Italian American community. Italian American labor organizations rallied with the slogan «America’s Victory is Italy’s Freedom». A group of influential Italian Americans established a nation-wide organization, the American Committee for Italian Democracy, to unify all Italian Americans in support of the U.S. policy to «eliminate Italy

---

<sup>18</sup> Lehman, Herbert H. (Herbert Henry). Letter: 1941 November 24. Correspondence. 1941 November 24. Columbia Digital Library Collections [Columbia University Libraries]. Accessed 22 March 2021. <https://dlc.library.columbia.edu/catalog/ldpd:164741>

<sup>19</sup> *U.S. Loyalty Rally Called*, “New York Times”, June 14, 1940.

<sup>20</sup> LaGumina, *The Humble and the Heroic*, pp. 120-21; John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1976 p. 152; *Full Aid Pledged by Foreign Born*, “New York Times”, December 9, 1941; *More Groups Give All-Out Support: Americans of Wide Range of Racial Descent Pledge Full Aid in the War*, “New York Times”, December 13, 1941; *Italo-Americans Rally to U.S. Aid*, “New York Times”, December 21, 1941.

from the Axis» and help Italians to restore democracy.<sup>21</sup> Poletti was actively involved in these efforts.

From 1939 to 1942 Poletti served as Lieutenant Governor of New York. In his capacity as lieutenant governor, Poletti's name was often identified among a select few of influential Italian Americans by the Office of War Information. For example, in the summer of 1942, Poletti was identified among a «special group of less than a dozen people» all of whom were prominent Italian Americans, to be a signatory to a manifesto drafted under the guidance of the Office of War Information which was described as a «double call to both the people of Italy and the American people of Italian descent to throw off the yoke of fascism once and for all and join in the democratic way of life».<sup>22</sup>

In early December 1942, Governor Herbert Lehman stepped down to direct American war-relief efforts in Europe, and Poletti stepped up into the vacant position as governor; although he would only serve for only one month in the role, he was the first full Italian American governor in the United States.<sup>23</sup> On December 27, 1942, four days before Poletti's leaving his post as governor, and six months prior to the Anglo-American invasion of Sicily, the Office of War Information issued a radio address to the Italian people, urging them to «throw out both Hitler and Mussolini». The Roosevelt administration chose Charles Poletti to give the address. The speech marked an important evolution in U.S. foreign policy toward Italy because it made a clear distinction between Allied policy toward the Italian people and policy toward Italy's Fascist

---

<sup>21</sup> *Group Here to Aid Italian Democracy*, "New York Times", July 27, 1943 and *Group Named to Aid Democracy in Italy*, "New York Times", August 6, 1943. The Office of War Information sought out a select group of Italian Americans to serve on a «Victory Council» to garner support as well. "New York Times", January 19, 1943.

<sup>22</sup> David Karr, Office of War Information to George L. Quilici, July 9, 1942; and August 13, 1942. Quilici, Anti-Fascism, Italian-American Victory Council, 1942-45, Box 2, Immigration History Research Center Archives, University of Minnesota.

<sup>23</sup> Although three state governors prior to Poletti were of partial Italian descent, because both of Poletti's parents were born in Italy, he is frequently recognized as the first Italian American governor. Frank Cavaoli, «Italian-American Governors», *Italian Americana*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2007).



government. «We appreciate and sympathize with the predicament of the Italian people», Poletti reassured his listeners. And then we went on to parlay his ethnic heritage.

From the days of Columbus, men and women of Italian birth or extraction have played a notable part in the building of our great democracy.... In [New York] state alone we have nearly half a million who were born in Italy. American freedom has given me and many others whose parents came from Italy the opportunity of achieving high public office.... So I send to the people of Italy a message from America. It is a message of encouragement and hope for their release from bondage. America is the true friend and will always act as the friend of liberty-loving Italians.<sup>24</sup>

Charles Poletti was deliberately chosen to give the address. Italians, so calculated the Office of War Information, would listen proudly and attentively to what Poletti had to say. For the duration of the campaign, Poletti's Italian ethnicity would remain an essential component in his ability to craft and carry out American foreign policy toward Italy.

### **Poletti's Commitment to Democracy in Allied-Occupied Italy**

In January 1943 Poletti was appointed as special assistant to the War Secretary Henry L. Stimson. Three months later he received an Army commission; he landed in Sicily with a detachment of the Seventh Army in July 1943. He was appointed as Senior Civil Affairs Officer (SCAO) in the British-led Allied Military Government of Occupied Territory (AMGOT [later simply AMG]). This special appointment did not escape controversy. New York City Mayor

---

<sup>24</sup> *Throw Out Hitler and Mussolini, Poletti Urges Italians by Radio*, "New York Times", December 28, 1942.

Fiorello La Guardia had coveted the position and had been considered by the War Department for it as well. Both men spoke fluent Italian and had equal familiarity with the Italians. In the end, the War Department considered Poletti to possess «the more equable and adaptable temperament» for the job. Poletti was also regarded as «better fitted by training» than La Guardia for «dealing with a liberated people».<sup>25</sup>

In many ways the Italian campaign served as a test case, and set a precedent for American liberation campaigns of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>26</sup> The establishment of an Allied Military Government became central to the policy of liberating Italy. The original mission of AMG was to provide for the necessary subsistence to the liberated civilian population and to reestablish law and order, local administration, sanitation, and public health services. In other words, although a branch of military operation, the AMG assumed responsibility for every aspect of civil administration, including the printing and circulation of AMG-issued postage stamps and AMG currency.

The AMG *lira*, printed and issued by the United States, was a case in point. Intended as an international currency to be used in other countries as well, the wording on the currency was in English and included Roosevelt's Four Freedoms on the reverse.<sup>27</sup> As it turns out, the Four Freedoms were misconstrued among Italians. The word *freedom* in English conveys both positive freedoms or liberty *to act* (freedom *of* speech, freedom *of* worship) and protections *from harm* (freedom *from* fear, freedom *from* want). Because Italians would not use the word *freedom*

---

<sup>25</sup> *Poletti Serving as Civil Affairs Officer in Italy*, "Los Angeles Times", July 18, 1943. Poletti himself recounts the way in which Stimson deliberately finagled Poletti's appointment over LaGuardia's by claiming to send Poletti for six months military training, when in fact Poletti was sent for only a brief stay. Poletti and Liebmann. *Reminiscences of Charles Poletti*.

<sup>26</sup> Special Correspondent Herbert L. Matthews claimed that AMGOT in Sicily was «an Allied proving ground for theories and practices which in time will be widely extended» throughout the rest of Europe in *We Test a Plan for Governing Europe*, "New York Times Magazine", August 22, 1943. For a more recent argument, see also *How America Learned to Liberate: The Campaign to free Italy foreshadowed battles to come, from Berlin to Fallujah*, "Newsweek", October 8, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Allied\\_Military\\_Currency\\_for\\_Italy\\_\(Series\\_1943A\)](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Allied_Military_Currency_for_Italy_(Series_1943A))

in the same ways, the AMG *lira* created confusion.<sup>28</sup> Poletti was opposed to the idea from the start and claims to have persuaded the Roosevelt administration to stop printing the money.<sup>29</sup> Thus this marriage of military and civil operations posed challenges, to be sure. In order to establish civil functionality, military law was necessarily imposed. The influence of the Allied Military Government as an extension of American foreign policy toward Italy was profound, and Poletti recognized — and seized upon — an opportunity to make his own mark on it.

In his official capacity as Senior Civil Affairs Officer of AMG, Poletti was responsible for carrying out joint Anglo-American Allied policy toward Italy. But he did so in an unprecedented and unpredictable manner. First of all, he was not a military man. He had been brought into the army by the Roosevelt administration (Henry Stimson, in particular) to assume this role. Before the invasion, Poletti was invited to enter the army as a full colonel, but he refused, assuming he would start as lieutenant colonel and be promoted. He later regretted this decision, citing the bureaucratic loopholes required to push paperwork, and noting «The Italians always thought it was peculiar that a man with the responsibility I was carrying should be a lieutenant colonel instead of a higher officer. The table of organization called for a general».<sup>30</sup>

His fellow officers showed a prejudice toward Poletti as an inferior officer, and in many instances did not deem him fully trained or capable of the demands of the position.<sup>31</sup> And it was mutual: Poletti did not respect the military orders in the same way that a properly trained military officer

---

<sup>28</sup> Herbert L. Matthews, *We Test a Plan for Governing Europe*, “New York Times”, August 22, 1943.

<sup>29</sup> Poletti and Liebmann. *Reminiscences of Charles Poletti*.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>31</sup> Before he accepted the appointment in the War Department, Henry Stimson had warned Poletti not to go into uniform «because you’ll be dealing with major generals and lieutenant generals and they’ll pull rank on you». Poletti and Liebmann. *Reminiscences of Charles Poletti*. The tensions between military and civilian officers in AMG operations in Italy is well documented in Thomas R. Fisher, «Allied Military Government in Italy», *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 267, Military Government (January 1950), pp. 114-122. For a strong argument in favor of civilians, such as Poletti, being in command of AMG operations rather than the Army, see Maurice F. Neufeld, «The Failure of AMG in Italy», *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Spring, 1946), pp. 137-148.

would have.<sup>32</sup> Second, Poletti's expertise was in civil law and civil administration; in more cases than not, the lieutenant colonel expressed more faith in — and would thus rely upon — his own talents and expertise, as well as his cultural familiarity with Italy, rather than on the military orders handed down to him.

In his dual capacity as a high-ranking officer in the Allied military occupation of Italy, and *governatore* of the liberated Italian people, the former governor of New York practiced a unique version of U.S. foreign policy toward Italy and the Italian people which was inevitably shaped by his identity as an Italian American. He was intimately familiar with the civil laws; indeed, he was largely responsible for the creation, announcement, and enforcement of those laws. But he was also sensitive to the vulnerability of the rule of law and the extent to which it would be followed in the context of a military occupation in Italy. He was convinced that laws could only be enforced in a manner that the Italian people themselves found politically and culturally sensible; otherwise, civil order was untenable. And so he sought to define his role and his authority as *governatore* of the AMG as distinct from that defined by the Anglo-American Allied authorities to whom he reported.

### **Naples 1943**

As the designated head of the Allied Military Government following the invasion of Sicily, Poletti was initially responsible for the civil administration of Palermo, until he was officially appointed as Regional Commissioner of the entire province. The Lieut. Colonel's ability to relate to the locals provided a unique opportunity to carry out Allied policy. The allegiances forged between Poletti and the Italians with whom he sympathized created a situation in which the AMG

---

<sup>32</sup> Poletti and Liebmann. *Reminiscences of Charles Poletti*.

officer often improvised upon or rejected out-right the directives and policies issued by the Allied authorities to whom he reported. He later described his role as defined by mitigation and triage. «We had a plethora of problems... It meant constant work, many decisions.... But we never had time to deliberate — you had to improvise, improvise and get ahead, get cracking, get pushing».<sup>33</sup>

One of the most telling examples was Poletti's public expression of sympathy with the Sicilians regarding the post-Mussolini government. Once Mussolini was forced from office, King Victor Emmanuel immediately placed the Italian government in the hands of Marshal Pietro Badoglio. Badoglio had a long record of military service and was a good friend of the king, but he was not an effective political leader. The Allies found they had no viable alternatives for head of state. The problem, however, was that the Italians — and the anti-Fascist parties in particular — associated the King and Badoglio with the fascist regime, and Poletti shared their concerns. So, wherever and whenever possible, Poletti sought to include the anti-fascists in the democratization of Italy, to help them gain control of government.

The *governatore* was the official representative of Allied policy in Italy, but he chose to work actively and persistently with the Italian people to create that policy. The most urgent problem facing the Italians — and thus the AMG's ability to impose order — was the shortage of food. From the military point of view, the economic crisis was a positive factor contributing toward a swift defeat of the Fascist government.<sup>34</sup> But from Poletti's point of view, from the perspective of civil government, the economic crisis was a severe problem and an obvious obstacle to bringing democracy to the nation — matched only by the fascists themselves. Poletti later explained, «Although AMG must solve all problems of government proper, such as relief, public

---

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>34</sup> *Economic Crisis Said to Grip Italy: Shortages of Food, Coal and Labor Are Speeding Defeat*, "New York Times", June 9, 1943.

health, finance, postal service and public works in addition to operating all public utilities and supervising the industrial economy, the central problems are always Fascists and food».<sup>35</sup>

The Allied authorities were adamant that they possessed «record stocks» of wheat, so that Italians need not worry.<sup>36</sup> Poletti continued to reassure the Italian population that the Allies «had the food situation well in hand» But he had to be persuasive: in one instance, he was the only American left in a town captured but then passed by Allied troops, and he found himself surrounded by underfed, incensed Sicilians. He gave a speech in Italian to the hungry Italians, reassuring them of the benefits of the Allied Military Government and of an improved standard of living. He managed to convince the Italian people of the benefits of Allied liberation in a moment when they were highly dubious; this practice became a true talent.<sup>37</sup> In the style of FDR's fireside chats, from Naples, the *governatore* began to deliver fifteen-minute weekly radio addresses, assuring the Italians of more food and better living conditions. «Whether it was the shortage of pasta and spaghetti or whatever the problem was» recalled Poletti, «I'd try to explain why, and also our hopes for improvement. . . . That was not in the directive — I just hit upon that myself as something that I believed would be helpful».<sup>38</sup>

Poletti developed creative policies with respect to the food shortages. For example, the country was suffering from a severe shortage of olive oil. Under the Fascist regime, olive oil had been rationed, and there was never enough of it. So, Poletti improvised. He did away with the ration system and introduced a free market system of production and distribution of the oil. In a matter of days, according to Poletti, there was an abundance of olive oil throughout Sicily. In another instance, a very young Navy man by the name of Claiborne Pell (who would eventually become a

---

<sup>35</sup> *Bread, Spaghetti, But No Fascisti: Colonel Poletti Tells How the AMG is Retraining Italians for democracy*, "New York Times Magazine", July 16, 1944.

<sup>36</sup> *Allies Prepared to Feed Italians*, "New York Times", July 26, 1943.

<sup>37</sup> *Charles Poletti Dies at 99; Aided War-Ravaged Italy*, "New York Times", August 10, 2002.

<sup>38</sup> Poletti and Liebmann. *Reminiscences of Charles Poletti*.

highly influential U.S. senator) was attached to Poletti's staff «with nothing to do». Poletti decided that because Pell was a navy man, he would be put in charge of fisheries. His superiors questioned the order, but Poletti stood his ground. In the end, under Poletti's direction, Pell did a superb job at administering the Sicilian fishing industry during the war.<sup>39</sup>

The total elimination of fascism from Italian life was conceived as an integral part of the AMG's mission, but the objective was hard to achieve and progress was difficult to measure. The Allies referred to this procedure using the cumbersome word *defascistization* or *epuration*, translated directly from the Italian *epurazione*, which Poletti himself defined as a «cleaning, a scraping, a purification».<sup>40</sup> From his very first days in Naples, Poletti played an essential role in developing Allied epuration procedures that would be instituted throughout the campaign. Indeed, the proclamations and decrees issued by the AMG were more commonly referred to by the Italian population as «Poletti's laws».

The Allied Military governor quickly earned a reputation for pursuing an agenda of epuration that differed not only from that of the acting Italian government, but also from his superiors in the AMG, as well as in London and in Washington. In some cases, Poletti acted without authority to restore property and employment to those who had been removed from office. For example, Poletti was quick to restore expropriated property to the Jewish Italians. On one occasion, he took it upon himself to reinstate anti-fascist intellectual Max Ascoli to the University of Palermo and established a commission of Italians to examine expropriated property.<sup>41</sup> The response from Allied Force Headquarters (AFHQ) was quick. Poletti recalled, «Well, I got holy hell from AFHQ ... that I was doing this and nobody had authorized it in Washington». An angry Poletti

---

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>41</sup> Poletti and Ascoli were both national committee members of the Legion for American Unity. Lehman, Herbert H. (Herbert Henry). «Clipping: 1941 May 28. » Ephemera. 1941 May 28. Columbia Digital Library Collections [Columbia University Libraries]. Accessed 22 March 2021. <https://dlc.library.columbia.edu/catalog/ldpd:164823>

insisted on the restoration of the property, and an equally perturbed AFHQ ordered the Regional Commissioner to rescind the policy. Poletti explains what happened next, «I said, ‘Rescind it?’ You people are out of your mind. What happens to my position as military government? I put out an order doing this, it’s something that the Sicilians want, they are happy to see justice done and now you guys ask me to rescind it?» Poletti refused to rescind the order, Washington eventually approved it, and from that point forward, the practice was employed as the AMG moved north.<sup>42</sup>

In other cases, Poletti pushed for the unprecedented removal of Fascists from office. In Naples, for example, the Badoglio government had removed twenty fascist officials; another forty left before the Allied forces had arrived. But by the end of 1943, acting under the authority of the Allied Regional Order issued January 1, 1944, Poletti removed 385 suspected fascists from local administrative organizations. In March, Poletti began to purge industry. He ordered four directors of a major cotton supplier in Naples to be removed and two others to be arrested.<sup>43</sup> Thus, Poletti quickly gained a reputation for conducting a thorough sweep of the Fascist regime in a manner that was lauded by the Italian resistance movement as well as by the American and British press. But his method of purging suspected fascists in such a dramatic fashion posed other problems. The purge of all Fascist officials in administrative and civil functions meant a lack of civil and administrative functionality; that is, no one was there to carry out the jobs and Sicilians suffered tremendously. The consequence of Poletti’s decision to thoroughly and to a large extent indiscriminately purge Naples resulted in a power vacuum that was filled almost immediately by a movement equally as conservative and as reactionary as the previous fascist movement: the rise of the Sicilian separatist movement with the support of the mafia.

---

<sup>42</sup> Poletti and Liebmann. *Reminiscences of Charles Poletti*.

<sup>43</sup> *Industrial Fascists’ Removed by Poletti*, “New York Times”, March 21, 1944.



One of the most controversial aspects of Allied intervention in Sicily was the purported Allied reliance on the Sicilian mafia during the war and the consequential resurgence of its influence in Italian political, economic and social life after the war. The role of Charles «Lucky» Luciano in the resurgence of the Italian mafia in Sicily is almost legendary. According to one account, on July 15, 1943, a U.S. fighter plane flying a yellow banner with a black letter «L» dropped a small nylon bag in the plaza of Villalba, Sicily. The intended recipient was «Uncle Calò» — Don Calogero Vizzini, the recognized chief of Italy's mafia. In the bag was a gold handkerchief belonging to gangster Charles «Lucky» Luciano, a clear sign that Lucky was seeking the support of the Italian mafiosi in the Allied war effort.<sup>44</sup> Luciano, a native of Sicily, became a powerful Italian American mafioso in the 1920s. In 1936, he was found guilty of prostitution racketeering by an enterprising young New York prosecutor, Thomas E. Dewey; Luciano was given a thirty-to-fifty-year sentence.

In the early 1940s, Luciano was reportedly approached by U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence with a deal: in exchange for Lucky's aid in enlisting the mafia to support the Allied war effort against Mussolini, the gangster would face a foreshortened sentence, and be repatriated upon his release.<sup>45</sup> In 1946, Luciano, along with a handful of other powerful mafiosi, was pardoned and repatriated to Italy by none other than the former prosecutor on the case, and governor of New York, Thomas E. Dewey. With respect to the turn of events in Sicily, the legend gets yet more legendary: The story goes that when three U.S. tanks rolled into town three days later, Vizzini climbed into one of them, and directed a joint Allied-mafiosi operation. The Allies repaid Vizzini

---

<sup>44</sup> For a detailed account of the event, see Michele Pantaleone, *The Mafia and Politics*, Coward-McCann, 1966, chapter 5: «Lucky Luciano's Foulard Handkerchief», pp. 54-66.

<sup>45</sup> Corroborating evidence for Luciano's role in the Allied occupation of Italy, and especially of Sicily, is hard to find. The most convincing evidence is provided by Rodney Campbell who obtained FBI documents via the Freedom of Information Act confirming Luciano was indeed contacted by the ONI. Campbell, *The Luciano Project: The Secret Wartime Collaboration of the Mafia and the U.S. Navy*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1977. The strongest argument against such collusion is in Tim Newark, *Mafia Allies: The True Story of America's Secret Alliance with the Mob in World War II*, St. Paul, Minnesota, Zenith Press, 2007.

and the mafiosi by selecting mafia to replace purged Fascist mayors of Allied occupied towns; Vizzini was appointed mayor of Villalba.<sup>46</sup>

The collusion between the U.S. military and mafia is relevant to Poletti's diplomacy in Italy, because in 1943 one of Luciano's men in Sicily, Vito Genovese — and father of one of the most dangerous criminal networks in American history — was officially appointed as an AMG liaison officer at Nola, east of Naples. According to some accounts, he acted as interpreter, driver, and *consigliere* to Poletti, although no archival evidence exists to demonstrate this relationship. On numerous occasions, however, the *New York Times* reported Genovese's apparent association with the Allied Military Government.<sup>47</sup> After the war ended, Poletti denied any association with the mobster, insisting he had no personal acquaintance with Genovese and was adamant that the gangster had not worked for him.<sup>48</sup>

Genovese had a long history of organized crime in the United States; to avoid arrest for murder he fled to Sicily in 1937 and befriended Mussolini.<sup>49</sup> Genovese launched one of the largest and most lucrative black markets in southern Italy during the war. The immediate challenge of food shortage was aided with the help of the mafiosi who distributed food in trucks granted to them by the AMG authorities. But, of course, the same system was perhaps to blame for the ineffective distribution of food heavily reported in the media. Although the extent of Poletti's personal relationship to Genovese is debatable, there is no question that Genovese had been employed by the AMG as an interpreter. In the summer of 1944, he was apprehended by a young officer, Orange C. Dickey, of the Criminal Investigation Division of the U.S. Army, and brought back to

---

<sup>46</sup> M. Pantaleone, *The Mafia and Politics*, p. 61.

<sup>47</sup> «Prisoner's Story 'Breaks' 4 Murders by Brooklyn Ring», *New York Times*, August 9, 1944; and «AMG Aide in Italy Held in Murder Here; Army to Send Interpreter Back for Trial», *New York Times*, November 25, 1944.

<sup>48</sup> Poletti and Liebmann. *Reminiscences of Charles Poletti*, *op. cit.*; «Genovese Link Denied: Poletti Says He Did Not Have Gangster as Interpreter», *New York Times*, December 2, 1952.

<sup>49</sup> *King of the Underworld: Vito Genovese*, "New York Times", September 28, 1963.

the United States to face trial on the murder charge for which Genovese had originally fled for Sicily. The mobster was ultimately found not guilty for lack of evidence.<sup>50</sup>

The impact of Allied policy on the mafia is highly debated. Much more evidence, however, exists to indicate that the Separatist movement in Sicily benefitted tremendously from Poletti's purge of Fascist officials. Poletti appointed one of the chief leaders of the movement, Lucio Tasca, as Mayor of Palermo.<sup>51</sup> He also promoted Francesco Musotto, a Separatist who was accused of having ties to the mafia, as first High Commissioner of Sicily.<sup>52</sup> Partly as a result of Poletti's policies of defascistization, but also because of growing resentment and discontentment among Sicilians as power was transitioned in southern Italy from the Allies to Badoglio and the King, the Separatist movement gained popularity. From the point of view of both Washington, D.C. and London, the movement posed a serious threat to stability in wartime Italy.

Poletti professed a sympathy for the Sicilians and their capacity for self-rule that the Allied authorities found troubling. In January 1944, Poletti explained to British Allied Commissioner Harold Macmillan — at the time the most important Allied political figure in all of the Mediterranean, let alone in Italy — that he believed the transfer of control from the Allies to an Italian administration was overdue and should be achieved as soon as possible. Poletti had a plan to appease the Separatists by appointing a coalition of anti-Fascists to government, and he made his proposal to Macmillan. This was going too far too quickly from the British point of view, especially. On one occasion, Macmillan made reference to a «Tammany Hall» style of government practiced by Poletti on the island of Sicily.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> *Genovese is Freed of Murder Charge*, "New York Times", June 11, 1946. For a more detailed description of Dickey's efforts to arrest Genovese in Italy, see T. Newark, *Mafia Allies*, chapter fourteen: «The Persistent Sergeant Dickey», pp. 215-26.

<sup>51</sup> Nine months later, authorities in Rome removed Tasca from office. *Separatist Crisis in Sicily is Acute*, "New York Times", February 9, 1945.

<sup>52</sup> T. Newark, *Mafia Allies*, p. 218.

<sup>53</sup> «Resident Minister, Algiers, to Foreign Office», January 16, 1944. The National Archives of the United Kingdom

Poletti's policies toward Sicily and the style with which he implemented them caused the British Chief of Civil Affairs for the AMG in Italy, Major General Francis James Rennell Rodd, to assert his reluctance to approve Poletti's appointment to mainland Italy. «I have already expressed my views about the proposed appointment of Colonel Poletti to the Headquarters of the Allied Commission of Control as Administrative Director. I consider him unsuitable for this appointment».<sup>54</sup> In spite of the British opposition, in June 1944, Poletti was promoted as Regional Commissioner to administer the combined Regions III and IV and to act as Chief Commissioner in the Civil Affairs Division of the Allied Control Commission in Rome. According to later reports, although outranked, the most notable advantage that Poletti held over his British counterparts was his Italian descent.<sup>55</sup>

## **Rome 1944**

Initially, the Roman citizens welcomed Poletti as the «new broom» to sweep out Fascism and sweep in a sense of normalcy in daily civil life.<sup>56</sup> But Germans had cleared out nearly all of the supplies and provisions from the city, and the shortage of food became an immediate problem for the AMG and the more than one and a half million inhabitants of Rome.<sup>57</sup> Lack of transportation was a huge problem, because the military trucks were being used in the war effort to the north.<sup>58</sup> In addition to food shortages, Rome faced a series of similar shortages of electricity, water, gas, and communication — especially telephone. The public health situation was alarming. The infant mortality rate, for example, was climbing at an astronomical pace: In Rome, for children in their first year, the infant mortality rate was 287 per 1,000 in June 1943; 393 in June 1944; and in

---

(henceforward, TNAUK) FO 371/43918.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>55</sup> Herbert Mitgant, «Postwar Rule by the Allies», *New York Times*, May 10, 1985.

<sup>56</sup> Herbert L. Matthews, *Poletti Cleanses Rome of Fascists*, “*New York Times*”, June 24, 1944.

<sup>57</sup> Fiorenza Fiorentino, *La Roma di Charles Poletti: giugno 1944-aprile 1945*, Roma, Bonacci editore, 1986, p. 18.

<sup>58</sup> As Poletti later explained, «It was always a constant problem—the shortage and the deterioration of the trucks». Poletti and Liebmann. *Reminiscences of Charles Poletti*.

July 1944, 438 or nearly 50%. Citing these statistics, the *New York Times* reported that «the figures are so terrifying that they can be allowed to speak for themselves».<sup>59</sup> The Tuberculosis death rate was also on the rise in Rome — about 200 per 1,000. The conditions became so poor that Romans were said to have claimed to be better off under the German occupation. The American authorities were rightly concerned «that the whole test of whether we can give an example in Italy of the American way of life is in jeopardy».<sup>60</sup>

In the first few days upon his arrival in Rome, Poletti pledged his commitment to do what he could to correct the problems. According to one report, Poletti was greeted like a «*fresh breeze*» by the Italians. In his first full day of services, he took bold steps to improve the food situation, battle the black markets, control prices and assess wage levels, and «purify Italian administrative ranks and encourage former underground anti-Fascists».<sup>61</sup> He continued his practice of delivering weekly radio addresses in which he reported on the problems in the Eternal City, reassuring Romans that bread rations were due to increase, that electricity and transportation would be restored. Unfortunately, however, in spite of Poletti's reassurances, conditions worsened through the summer and fall, making for a most difficult winter.

In Rome, as in Naples, Poletti once again pursued his own interpretation of Allied *epurazione*. He communicated his «strong feelings» that the only means to a thorough «housecleaning job», was to «replace all key Fascist personnel as soon as possible».<sup>62</sup> To the dismay of authorities in both London and Washington, Poletti took no time in inviting the anti-Fascist parties in Rome to join him in collaborating in this process. The Committee of National Liberation (CLN) — representing a coalition of six political parties opposed to Fascism — had been appointed a three-

---

<sup>59</sup> *O'Dwyer Returning to Ask Aid to Italy*, "New York Times", September 5, 1944.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>61</sup> *A.M.G.'s Chief in Rome Ousts Fascist Officials*, "New York Times", June 23, 1944.

<sup>62</sup> *AMG Learns Much from Naples Rule: Poletti Believes in Rooting Out All Fascist Officeholders, Regardless of Difficulty*, "New York Times", March 27, 1944.

man delegation to coordinate with and support the AMG to develop policy, but to a large extent the CLN's recommendations had been ignored. Until Poletti's arrival, that is.

Poletti made a point of meeting personally with the top CLN leaders in Rome, including Carlo Sforza, Pietro Nenni, and Rodolfo Morandi.<sup>63</sup> He issued a public statement indicating the unequivocal position of the AMG and its relationship to the anti-Fascist parties. The CLN, he assured the residents in Rome, «will now be used to the full, and so will anyone else who can be helpful. I gave order to the Mayor [Prince Filippo Doria] to throw out the heads of all agencies of government, even if efficient. We can find and train anti-Fascists who are capable and have moral stamina . . . . All Fascists and all who collaborated with the Germans must go».<sup>64</sup>

The resulting decree included an «exhaustive list of persons who [were] to be immediately expelled from their offices», including all who held senior appointments during the Fascist regime, directors of banks, public utility services, industry, as well as corporate leaders and writers for Fascist newspapers.<sup>65</sup> An estimated thirty thousand suspected Fascists were affected by the decrees. Within the first two days of having issued the order, 3,750 Italians were removed from their offices, and 198 people were arrested. Poletti's actions were met with mixed reaction. On the one hand, the demands by many Romans for a thorough purge was being met, and Poletti was consulting the Italians — especially the CLN — in the process. On the other hand, he was not always heeding the line handed down by the Allied authorities. Poletti was clearly setting out his own rules. According to one report, «As far as Rome is concerned, Colonel Poletti is giving his own orders».<sup>66</sup>

Poletti took it one step further by declaring the application of Regional Order No. 1 as the law of the land. The *governatore* identified the Italian defascistization legislation, Decree No. 159

---

<sup>63</sup> Poletti and Liebmann. *Reminiscences of Charles Poletti*.

<sup>64</sup> *A.M.G.'s Chief in Rome Ousts Fascist Officials*, "Los Angeles Times", June 23, 1944.

<sup>65</sup> *Rome Purge of Fascists: Cleansing the Italian Administration*, "London Times", June 29, 1944.

<sup>66</sup> *Poletti Arrests 198, Ousts 3,750 As Purge of Rome Fascists Begins*, "New York Times", June 28, 1944

(DLL 159), as a mere supplement to the American colonel's blueprint for *epurazione* in Rome. Poletti was opposed to following DLL 159 alone, for fear that it focused too narrowly on the removal of fascist officials from public and semi-public positions. Thus, in mid-July, Poletti's Rome Commission for the Purging of Fascism controversially extended its parameters to form a much wider net. On July 14, the Commission issued an amendment empowering it to «adopt appropriate measures concerning all those who, during the Fascist regime and the Fascist Republican regime, carried on activities in any field whatsoever that were directed toward sustaining, defending, or realizing the idea and results of Fascism or Republican Fascism».<sup>67</sup>

The amendment offended the Italian public because of its indiscriminate nature: Poletti extended the classifications of those who were to be considered as «prima facie Fascists» to all persons with the qualification of Corporal of Honor of the Fascist Militia; all Ministers of State named during the fascist regime; all Prefects, Questores, Diplomatic Representatives and Consuls; all Chiefs of Cabinet and private secretaries of ministers and sub-secretaries; and all who took any part in the work of the fascist secret police.<sup>68</sup> But the Italians reacted most strongly to deep pocket removals of fascists from universities, newspaper and publishing houses, and libraries.

The epuration procedures in Rome resulted in «unforeseen and curious» consequences. Poletti's purge of twenty-five Fascist professors of Rome University had obvious consequences for the university students, many of whom were anti-Fascist.<sup>69</sup> The majority were unable to attain their diplomas because students of Italian politics or economics, for example, no longer had advising professors with whom they could pass their examinations. «Confusion, uncertainty, exasperation, and hopelessness» from this aspect of the political process of epuration resulted in serious doubts

---

<sup>67</sup> «Fascist Purge Extended to Journalists», Rome, July 15, 1944. National Archives and Records Administration (henceforward Nara), Record Group 331: Records of Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, Allied Control Commission, Italy, Headquarters, Records of the Chief Commissioner, file 327.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>69</sup> *25 Rome Professors Suspended: Weeding Out the Fascists*, "London Times", July 5, 1944.

by a young generation of impressionable Italians.<sup>70</sup> Coming to the conclusion that a «strict application of rules», such as that pushed forth by Poletti, would leave no one to run Italy, the Italian government issued its own law on July 30, 1944. Poletti was frustrated with the legislation, accusing the Italian government of having less desire than the Allies to purge Italy. His popularity in Rome began to plummet.<sup>71</sup>

By early 1945 responsibility for the city's provisions had fallen back to the Italian government, but the inhabitants of Rome tended to blame the Allies for the continued lack of resources and poor standard of living.<sup>72</sup> Indicative of the ill-feeling toward Poletti in particular, was the following refrain from a song included in one of the theatrical reviews in Rome: *Charley Poletti, Charley Poletti, meno ciarle e più spaghetti*.<sup>73</sup> Living conditions were dire, indeed. After returning from a tour of Italy, Republican Representative Clare Boothe Luce — and, later, the first American woman to serve as Ambassador to Italy — urged Congress to note the desperate state of affairs in Italy. The Italian people, she warned, are «literally dying of cold and starvation before your eyes by the thousands». She did not hide her criticism of the Roosevelt administration's policies, nor of the AMG. She was particularly critical about Poletti's role. Explaining that she too had seen the placards *Less Poletti and More Spaghetti*, Luce insisted that Charles Poletti had become «a symbol of broken promises and an embittered people».<sup>74</sup> But Poletti's reputation was mixed. In spite of the Romans' frustration with his mismanagement of the city's occupation, upon Poletti's departure, the mayor awarded the *governatore* a special medal «in recognition of services rendered to the eternal city».

---

<sup>70</sup> F. Fiorentino, *La Roma di Charles Poletti*, p. 73.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 167.

<sup>72</sup> The Roman newspapers were considerably more generous in their sympathy for the American occupying forces than for the British.

<sup>73</sup> C. R. S. Harris, *Allied Military Administration of Italy*, p. 170.

<sup>74</sup> *Mrs. Luce Tells of Italy's Plight*, "New York Times", January 4, 1945.



## Milan 1945

Although his popularity was waning in Italy and in the United States, Poletti went on to serve with the Allied Military Government in Milan from April to September 1945. In Milan, Poletti discovered that the full-throttle approach to *epurazione* that he had practiced so boldly in Naples and in Rome created new difficulties as it was carried out in the industrial north. It was in this city in 1919 that Benito Mussolini founded *Fasci di Combattimento* and it was in this city that Mussolini met his brutal demise. In April 1945, Mussolini and his mistress Clara Petacci and a few other close associates were sighted while trying to cross the border into Switzerland. They were captured and killed in the Lecco district near Lake Como. Also killed were former General Secretary of the Fascist Party Roberto Farinacci and former Secretary Carlo Scorza. Their bodies were taken back to Milan and put on display «with ghastly promiscuity» in the Piazzale Loreto, where partisans fired shots into their dead bodies. One woman reportedly fired five shots into Mussolini's body and shouted, «Five shots for my five assassinated sons!» Other passers-by spat on the bodies.<sup>75</sup> The corpses were eventually hanged by their feet on display in the piazza. Colonel Valerio (Walter Audisio), a Communist partisan leader, and other anti-Fascist partisans, claimed responsibility for Mussolini's slaying. Years later, Audisio would assert that Poletti had approved the execution.<sup>76</sup> Poletti avowed that he arrived to Milan *before* the American forces (which created other problems for the Lieut. Colonel), but *after* Mussolini had been assassinated. Whether he had any knowledge of Mussolini's apprehension is unclear. Poletti was witness, however, to the execution of Lieutenant General Achille Starace, former Secretary General of the Fascist Party.<sup>77</sup> By his own account, he did nothing to stop the killing. After watching the mobs

---

<sup>75</sup> *Italian Partisans Kill Mussolini*, "BBC News", April 28, 1945.

<sup>76</sup> *Mussolini's Executioner 'Teases' Crowd*, "Los Angeles Times", March 31, 1947.

<sup>77</sup> *Mussolini's End: Statement by National Liberation Committee*, "London Times", April 30, 1944.

put Starace against the wall, shoot him, and then string him up, Poletti recalled saying to his next-in-command, «Look, we'd better get out of here and get out fast. We are supposed to preserve law and order as part of my job as military government, and here we are watching this aberration of human behavior. Let's get out»!<sup>78</sup> The mob violence exhibited by the partisans was «understandable» in Poletti's view, given what the people had endured under Fascist rule.<sup>79</sup> Whether justified or not, from the official point of view of the AMG, the radical and violent acts by the increasingly powerful partisan forces was an indication of a growing threat posed to the authority of the Allied Military Government in Milan.

This threat was felt keenly in Milan's industrial sector. Factory owners, including internationally recognized industrialists of Fiat, Marelli (the nationally known electrical firm), and other major industries had been identified as «Fascists» or «collaborators» by their own employees. The top executives had either been purged from office and were awaiting trial or were forced into hiding. In all, approximately 30 percent of the technical and administrative staffs of Milan's industrial sector was affected by this «social revolution» by the *comitato aziendale*.<sup>80</sup> The result was that hundreds of firms were placed under the control of technically qualified yet severely inexperienced administrators.

Policymakers in both Washington, D.C. and London recognized a «Soviet style of industrial management» that concerned them greatly. Facing this new challenge in Milan, Poletti once again improvised. Using his background in law, Poletti sought to checkmate the social revolutionaries by organizing the affected industries into a receivership by AMG order, and

---

<sup>78</sup> Poletti and Liebmann. *Reminiscences of Charles Poletti*.

<sup>79</sup> According to another description of events that day, at an evening reception in Poletti's honor, he is said to have declared: «We went for a walk in Milan, we found order and discipline. We were also at Piazzale Loreto. We express our satisfaction to the CLNAI [Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale dell'Alta Italia] and to the partisans for the magnificent work done». William A. Lessa, *Spearhead Governatore: Remembrances of the Campaign in Italy*, Malibu, California, Undena Publications, 1985, p. 224.

<sup>80</sup> *Industrial Italy: Social Revolution in the Northern Cities*, "London Times", June 12, 1945.

appointing a receiver (*commissario*) provided by the CLN. In this way, the communists could no longer claim that the heads of industry were «collaborators».<sup>81</sup> Poletti was absolutely convinced that legality was crucial to civil order. The *governatore* laid down the law in explicit terms: liberation, he explained, by unauthorized «liberation committees» would not stand as law unless formally endorsed by the Allied Military Government in Milan.<sup>82</sup> Poletti played an active role in negotiating the return of the Fiat corporate leaders and the other high-level industrialists.

In Milan, Poletti was forced to recognize new dangers faced by the Allies were they to witness the *epurazione* of Italy through social revolution. But Poletti insisted on having *l'ultima parola*.<sup>83</sup>

In late June, Poletti laid down his final order as head of the AMG in Italy in which he reiterated the Allied Military Government as the sole source of authority in northern Italy. Poletti was relieved of his position in Milan in the fall of 1945 and retired from the Allied Military Government. After his posting in Milan, the Italian government organized the creation of a marble bust of Poletti by the sculptress Marquesa Olga Maria Albasini Spano, for a ceremony honoring the Lieut. Colonel's service to Italy.<sup>84</sup> The government's help in locating and donating 150 kilograms of bronze — a highly prized commodity during the war — for the statue, made it more than merely a symbolic gesture. In 1947, the bust was presented to Poletti at his home in New York.<sup>85</sup> Poletti also explained that the anti-Fascists extended mementos in a much less ceremonious manner: he was offered one of the prosthetic arms of the General Secretary of the

---

<sup>81</sup> Poletti and Liebmann. *Reminiscences of Charles Poletti*.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>83</sup> Even as a boy, Poletti's father used to get «very exasperated» because Poletti always had to have the last word, or what he called *l'ultima parola*. *Reminiscences of Charles Poletti*.

<sup>84</sup> Sculptress Olga Maria Albasini to the Prime Minister, June 8, 1945; and Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Prime Minister, «Busto del Col. Charles Poletti», Rome, June 19, 1945. Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 1944-47, 1.1.5 10098-10 busta 3218.

<sup>85</sup> *Poletti Bust in Marble*, "New York Times", June 19, 1947.

Fascist party, Farinacci, as well as a suitcase of Mussolini's belongings on the day il Duce was assassinated. Apparently, Poletti rejected both «gifts».<sup>86</sup>

Writing in the spring of 1945, after the war in Europe had ended, *New York Times* Special Correspondent in Italy Herbert L. Matthews was disheartened with respect to the AMG's policies to eliminate fascism; the result, he asserted, was a «dismal failure». Matthews was especially critical of Poletti's efforts to purge Italy of fascism by merely «using rules». These rules, he insisted, are «the outer trappings, the framework, the structure, the instruments of fascism, and we can — and doubtless will, in time — destroy them». But «the heart of fascism», he went on to assert,

“does not lie in such externals and it will beat on.... We have won the war in Europe that fascism started, but we have not thereby destroyed fascism itself, for it will merely go underground to feed on the evil sources of its deep-rooted strength.”<sup>87</sup>

But Poletti was far more optimistic. He may not have defeated fascism for eternity, but he was convinced he had done what he could to defeat fascism in the Eternal City. He possessed a genuine faith in democracy and in the Italian people's capability to embrace it.<sup>88</sup> He believed that the ultimate triumph of democratic ideals and principles over the «evil sources» of fascism was only possible with rule of law. Rules and laws, from Poletti's point of view, were all-important because they could be reinstated in such a way as to return confidence in the Italians' faith in democracy. The task of the AMG, explained Poletti, was «to show all Italians that their obligation now, in preparing to rule themselves, is to respect the law, the basis of all democratic

---

<sup>86</sup> Poletti and Liebmann. *Reminiscences of Charles Poletti*.

<sup>87</sup> Herbert L. Matthews, *Fascists Die, But Fascism Still Lives*, “New York Times”, May 27, 1945.

<sup>88</sup> Milton Bracker, *Poletti Discounts Revolts in Italy: AMG Officer Expresses Faith in People as He Leaves for Home*, “New York Times”, October 2, 1945.

government». <sup>89</sup> The role of the AMG was to enforce those laws by relying on the Italian people. Poletti thus identified the transfer of responsibility for Italian democracy to the Italian people as a priority. «The cardinal principle of administration in the three regions I have headed — Sicily, Naples and Rome» reflected Poletti, «has been turning over responsibility to anti-Fascist Italians as soon as possible». <sup>90</sup> The Anglo-American commanders to whom he reported were skeptical of passing authority back to Italians in such haste. But Poletti's Italian American identity led him to be convinced otherwise. The result was that Poletti often refuted orders, and continued to include the CLN and other anti-Fascist forces in the restructuring and rehabilitation of local Italian government in defiance of the Allied command.

Charles Poletti did not always do what he was told by the Allied Military authorities. Instead, he did what he deemed was best for the Italian people, and what he could to deliver the most valuable benefit of Allied liberation of Italy: democracy. He later recalled

“Looking back over the experience of a year, the record of AMG, despite shortcomings, stands on its own. When the history of this period of human evolution is written AMG will present more clearly than any other contemporary experience the desires of democratic peoples to treat fairly and honestly with all other peoples of the world.”<sup>91</sup>

To the extent that Poletti was successful in paving the way for democracy in postwar Italy, it was largely because he wholeheartedly believed in its benefits. Charles Poletti provides historians of American foreign policy with a colorful example of the role of Italian Americans in the shaping and implementing of U.S. foreign policy toward occupied Italy. Poletti possessed a robust, if not contentious, style of diplomacy that, in this case, was markedly shaped by his ethnic identity.

---

<sup>89</sup> Poletti, *Bread, Spaghetti, but No Fascisti*.

<sup>90</sup> Poletti and Liebmann. *Reminiscences of Charles Poletti*.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibidem*