



PROPAGANDA

U.S. ENGAGEMENT IN THE
ITALIAN ELECTIONS OF 1948 AND 1953

LESSON PLAN

DEVELOPED SEPTEMBER 2023

GRADES | 9th - 12th

Through historical background information, document analysis and extended critical thinking activities, students will explore how the United States covert national security apparatus was utilized by President Truman with the support of members of Congress and Italian American communities as well as the Catholic Church to attempt to influence the 1948 and 1953 elections in Italy. Teachers are encouraged to use this historical scenario to engage students in broader thinking about the purpose, role, and extended history of election interference across the globe.

Background

Italy, 1947.

The country has suffered a devastating loss in the two world wars. Over a million people in this country with a population of 45 million were killed or wounded in World Wars I and II combined. In under 40 years, the government has changed in form and function from a monarchy pre-World War I to a fascist regime post World War I, to occupation post World War II and now, elections are about to be held for the new republic. Fascists have been purged and publicly embarrassed, and industry has been nearly destroyed. The world feels unstable and insecure.¹

Italians are hoping to rebuild the country, but there are many political factions, and most people are not sure who to trust. Fascism on the right of the political spectrum has been defeated but not destroyed. On the left, communists, inspired in part by the Soviets, are promising a world where workers are in charge. Meanwhile, the leader of the Christian Democracy Party, the head of the new parliament, has just returned from

the United States with \$150 million in aid. The U.S. Secretary of State is threatening to revoke the aid if communists or socialists are elected in the 1948 election.

Across the western world, the monarchs and autocrats are no longer in power. The United States, the first to develop a nuclear weapon and only country to use it, and the communist Soviet Union are the two superpowers in the world. The Soviets dominate a sphere of power throughout most of Eastern Europe. To Italy's north and east, the Soviets have just engineered a regime change in Czechoslovakia and control East Berlin and they are likely helping to fund the communist party in Italy.² The United States has declared an interest in allowing each country to maintain its sovereignty. However, President Truman is concerned about the Iron Curtain and the need for containing Soviet expansion into Western Europe

United States, 1947.

Many Americans believe that the Allies were victorious in World War II because of the engagement of the United States in the war. Citizens have sacrificed for two wars that began in Europe. There is no appetite to directly engage in yet another European conflict. However, there is significant concern about the growing threat of a dominant and expansionary Soviet Union and the ideology of communism propelling that threat. Secretary of State, George C. Marshall, has devised a plan to send millions of dollars in aid to rebuild Europe.

While the funding has the potential to gain European support for the United States, there are no official alliances established by the distribution of funds. As American leaders look towards Europe, many fear that the territorial ambitions of the fascists will be matched or even exceeded by the communists.³ In Italy, the center parties (those most resembling the United States) are the strongest, but there is growing enthusiasm for a communist regime.

Psychological Warfare

Under the circumstances described on page 2, the leaders of the newly created Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and National Security Council (NSC), under direction from the Truman Administration, began to engage in a campaign of psychological warfare – a war for hearts and minds rather than a physical war.⁴

The U.S. government began to engage in the upcoming Italian election in both an overt and largely covert manner to influence Italians to choose centrist leaders. On the overt side, the United States established open alliances with the centrist parties. On the covert side, millions of dollars were secretly provided to Italian election campaigns. In some cases, bags of money were handed over in dark lobbies of hotels. Additionally, the CIA engaged in a substantial propaganda campaign. Movies, art, radio, and other stories were developed and/or distributed by the United States and deployed in Italy in a highly skewed manner designed to quietly convince Italians that communism was evil.

Other measures included galvanizing the Italian American population to write letters to their Italian relatives convincing them to vote against communists.⁵

While it's impossible to measure the effects of this both overt and covert Italian election campaign organized to influence the outcome of the Italian election of 1948, the Christian Democrats, the party backed by the United States, was victorious.

Five years later, the American Intelligence community became concerned that the Christian Democrats were not dedicated enough to supporting U.S. interests. The Americans were nervous the communists were gaining power in Italy and wanted communism to be illegal. To Americans, De Gasperi, the Christian Democratic leader, did not go far enough towards excluding communists from public life.⁶

At this point, the new Eisenhower Administration of 1953 refueled covert actions in Italy to impact the 1953 elections. They hoped to use psychological warfare once again in Italy to achieve American objectives. This time, the administration designed a campaign managed by a loose confederation of agencies and a Psychological Strategy Board (PSB) including the Undersecretary of State, the Deputy Director of Defense and the Director of the CIA.⁷ The administration's goal was to diminish communist engagement in Italy even further and



Figure 1. Cold War military alliances.

provide the centrists with a plurality of voters. This did not happen. While the centrists maintained control, they did not gain the plurality the U.S. had hoped for and even gained support in rural areas.

Did the U.S. win the war for hearts and minds? It's very hard to say. In 1948, the outcome was cheered while the campaign of 1953 was deemed a failure of U.S. intelligence agencies. However, we will never really know if either of these campaigns genuinely influenced voters enough to impact either set of election results.⁸

Propaganda: Using Stories to sway hearts and minds in Italy 1948-1953

Because effective propaganda works to sway hearts and minds, it often is designed to appeal to values and emotions. All forms of audio and visual entertainment can be very effective methods for emotionally engaging consumers.

Movies

In 1948, Hollywood distributors made arrangements to show Italians the American film *"Ninotchka"* to influence voters' opinions of the Soviet Union and communism.⁹ In the anti-communist comedy film, the movie star Greta Garbo played a loyal, ideological Soviet worker who was sent to Paris to collect jewels from a capitalist Parisian playboy. She ultimately fell in love with the charming Frenchman and renounced communism. Audiences delighted in Garbo's portrayal and, while we will never really know its specific impact, one can imagine that some viewers were influenced away from communism just as Garbo's character Ninotchka was in the film.¹⁰

Watch the clip (linked below) and complete the propaganda analysis worksheet (page 9).



(1017) *Ninotchka* (1939) – “Comrades, you must have been smoking a lot.” (YouTube)

Comics

In 1953, only 21 percent of American households contained a television, and the percentages were even lower in Europe. Comic books were, however, an accessible story-telling medium. The years 1938-1956 are often called the “golden age” of comic books, which thrived in this era as they were cheap to produce. Additionally, during World War II, Americans loved the good v. evil themes framed in the context of the war. Examples of stories included superheroes vanquishing Nazis.

The same techniques of binary systems – good v. evil – that were used to create comic books during World War II, were utilized by American intelligence agencies to write stories designed to impact the political views of young Italians.

Il Falco Verde – The Green Falcon

Imitating the style of contemporary graphic novels, *The Green Falcon* was aimed at young Italians. Its protagonist was a young Eastern European who rebelled against the communist rulers of his country. Readers were encouraged to take matters into their own hands by posting enclosed *Green Falcon* stickers “to make your adversaries tremor.”¹¹

Readers responded enthusiastically to the *Green Falcon*. In Bari, the communist party headquarters shut down for several days after a *Green Falcon* sticker (Image 2) had been pasted on its door. While American officials praised the operation’s “decided success,” the communist newspaper *L’Unità* denounced the *Green Falcon* as a cheap election stunt.¹²



Figure 2. *Green Falcon* graphic novel cover.

Questions:

Distribute copies of *The Green Falcon* cover for students to examine. Ask students, "What do you notice?" Then ask students to answer the following questions:

1. List three adjectives to describe this comic book cover.
2. How does this comic book cover make you feel?
3. Would you like to read this comic book? Why or why not?
4. What do you think is happening in this comic book?
5. Do you think this comic book has a hero? If so, who would that be and why?
6. Does this comic book cover look like something you might see today? If so, what does it remind you of?
7. Is there anything you want to know more about?



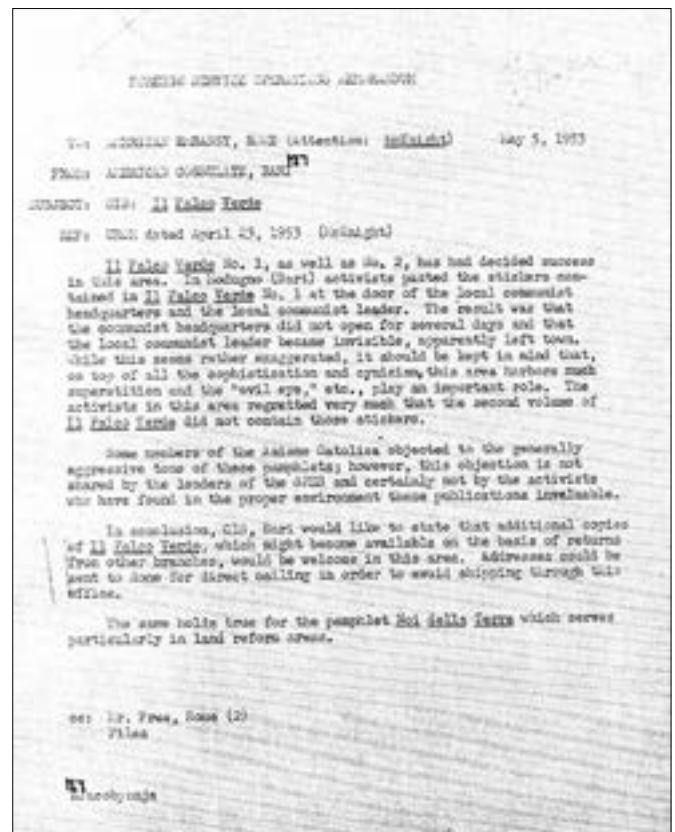
Figure 3. Green Falcon stickers.

Now have students fill out the propaganda analysis sheet and discuss their responses. Invite students to share any overall values, principles, or ideologies they recall being conveyed in comic books that they have read.

Foreign Services Memorandum

Have students examine the *Foreign Services Memorandum* and answer the following questions:

1. Answer the following question in an essay format, individually, or in group discussions:
 - a. What is the date of this document?
 - b. Where is this document from? Is this a trusted source? (Explain why or why not.)
 - c. Who is it to?
 - d. What is the subject of the memorandum?
 - e. Do you think the Memorandum's author felt that the *Il Falco Verde* comics were successful? Explain. Underline all the phrases in the memo that support your answer.
 - f. Is there anything else you want to know more about?
2. Answer the following question in an essay format, individually, or in group discussions:
 - a. Do you think *The Green Falcon* was an effective propaganda tool? Why or why not?
 - b. Can you think of a time when your political views have been influenced by movies, comic books, novels, or social media memes?



Letter Writing

In addition to other techniques being carried out, the National Security Council in a report from Washington, D.C., on March 8, 1948, called for the immediate initiation of a writing campaign by private citizens in the United States related to the political issues in Italy.¹³

Partly as a result of this initiative, the Catholic Church, whose leaders were concerned about the fate of religion under a communist regime, and organizations of Italian Americans launched a letter-writing campaign to friends and relatives in Italy in an effort to influence the Italian election.¹⁴

Document: “Alle Donne D’Italia: Cosa Preferite?”

“Alle Donne D’Italia: Cosa Preferite?” was a postcard distributed by the Committee to Aid Democracy in Italy in New York City. The title reads, “To the women of Italy: Which do you prefer?” The caption on the cartoon on the left reads, “Democracy: Peace and Happiness.” The caption on the right states, “Dictatorship: War and Crime.”¹⁵ Have students examine the postcard and fill in the propaganda analysis worksheet. As a class, compare and contrast the postcard (Figure 4) with the cover of *The Green Falcon* comic book (Figure 2). What similarities or differences do they note?

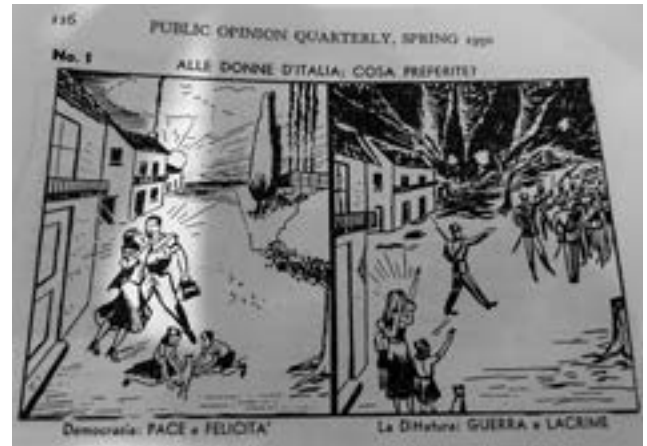


Figure 4. Postcard distributed by the Committee to Aid Democracy in Italy in New York City.

Summative Assessment Options

1. Discuss the methods used by the U.S. government and some of its citizens to engage in the post-World War II Italian elections.
 2. Explain whether the methods used by the U.S. government and some of its citizens to influence the Italian elections were effective examples of propaganda techniques? Explain.
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Extension Questions and Activities

1. Research other episodes in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries when one country has interfered in the elections of another sovereign country. Describe what happened in these instances. Does the government of one country have the right to try to influence the elections of another country?
2. Do you think intelligence agencies today would use comic books to try to persuade young people? Is there a different medium they might use instead? Provide examples of contemporary election interfering propaganda techniques.

Notes

1. "Italy Since 1945," Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d., www.britannica.com/place/Italy/Italy-since-1945.
2. James E. Miller, "Taking Off the Gloves: The United States and the Italian Elections of 1948," *Diplomatic History* 7, no 1 (Winter 1983): 46.
3. Tarek Ata, "U.S. Involvement in Italy's Elections: Covert Operation and Millions of Dollars Spent to Ensure Left-wing Groups Came to Power," Medium (October 3, 2020), <https://medium.com/history-of-yesterday/u-s-involvement-in-italys-elections-b19a84896086>.
4. Miller, "Taking Off the Gloves," 37.
5. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948, Western Europe II*, S/S-NSC Files, Lot 63D351, NSC 1 Series (March 1948).
6. Mario Del Poro, "The United States and 'Psychological Warfare' in Italy, 1948-1955," *The Journal of American History* 87, no. 4 (March 2001): 1311.
7. Del Poro, 1314-1315.
8. Del Poro.
9. Miller, "Taking Off the Gloves."
10. Effie G. Pedaliu, "LSE IDEAS," Blog (April 18, 2018).
11. Courtesy of the International Spy Museum, Gift of Arthur Reef
12. Ibid.
13. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948, Western Europe III*, S/S-NSC Files, Lot 63D351, NSC 1 Series (March 1948).
14. Pedaliu; Miller.
15. Edda C. Martinez, "Letters from America and the 1948 Elections in Italy," *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Oxford: Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, 1950).

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ACCOMPANYING WORKSHEETS

The Propaganda Analysis Worksheet

Propaganda Technique	Yes/No	If Yes, Description
Sparks Strong Emotion		
Simplifies information and ideas		
Targets audiences needs and values		
Targets audiences needs and values		