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The “Al di là”¹ exhibition as an episode of propaganda Cold War in Italy in 1953

Zarys treści: Apogium zimnej wojny w Europie początków lat 50. XX wieku objawiało się nie tylko zamrożeniem kontaktów politycznych i gospodarczych między krajami pozostającymi po obu stronach „żelaznej kurtyny”. Oznaczało ono również konfrontację obejmującą relacje na polu kultury, która coraz częściej była podporządkowana „wielkiej polityce”. Epizodem tej zimnej wojny jest sprawa wystawy „Al di là”, otwartej w 1953 r. we Włoszech i wzbudzającej kontrowersje nie tylko w polityce wewnętrznej tego kraju, jak też w stosunkach Rzymu z krajami bloku wschodniego, w tym z Polską. Niniejszy artykuł skupia się na tych wewnątrz włoskich kontekstach oraz na roli wystawy w relacjach polsko-włoskich.

Content outline: The climax of the Cold War in Europe at the beginning of the 1950s was manifested by more than just the suspension of political and economic contacts between countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain. It also involved a confrontation in the field of culture, which was increasingly subordinated to “great politics.” One of the incidents of this cold war was the exhibition “Al di là,” which opened in Italy in 1953 and brought controversy not only to the country’s internal politics, but also to Rome’s relations with the countries of the Eastern Bloc, including Poland. The present article focuses on these internal Italian contexts and the role of the exhibition in Polish-Italian relations.

Słowa kluczowe: zimna wojna, stosunki polsko-włoskie w latach 50. XX wieku, wystawa Al di là, komunizm, propaganda kulturalna

Keywords: Cold War, Polish-Italian relations in the 1950s. Al di là, communism, cultural propaganda

¹ “Al di là” has a figurative meaning, it is synonymous with the afterlife; *aldilà*: “from beyond” [here: beyond the Iron Curtain].

Contexts

In order to place the exhibition in a broader context of relations between Warsaw and Rome, it is necessary to go back to the period freshly after the war. The establishment of Polish-Italian cultural relations in the post-war period was a tedious and lengthy process. This was due not only to the geographical distance between the two countries, but also to the fact that they were not a priority for either Warsaw or Rome. Economic contacts were considered much more important due to the necessity of regulating matters resulting from the war and from post-war political changes in Poland, as well as the hope of increasing economic exchange.²

The situation was aggravated by Italy's admission to NATO in the spring of 1949, interpreted by the Eastern Bloc as a violation of existing peace treaties. This prompted an avalanche of criticism in the Polish press, which reported about alleged "mass demonstrations" in Italy.³ In a note dated 12 March 1952, Poland, in line with the position of the "socialist world," reiterated its negative attitude towards Italy's participation in the "aggressive Atlantic bloc" directed against them.⁴ The Polish-Italian relations suffered a blow due to the speeches delivered by Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi on 26 April 1953 in Milan and then on 1 May 1953 in Turin, in which he reminded that "the definitive shape of Poland's western border will be determined in a later peace treaty with Germany." He also spoke of "temporary Polish administration over the lands around the Oder and Nysa rivers."⁵

The Sovietisation of Polish cultural life and artistic creativity, which progressed during the Stalinist period, caused scientific and artistic exchange to be meticulously regulated by both sides. The Italian authorities, particularly the Christian Democrats who were in power at the time, were opposed to the display in Italy of works of art and to the organisation of cultural events with a clear pro-communist agenda (as in the case of the Polish poster exhibition in Turin on 15–20 October 1950).⁶

In some cases, various cultural manifestations (lectures by Polish speakers in Italy, exhibitions, or even concerts) that were accompanied by the distribution of

² M. Pasztor, D. Jarosz, *Nie tylko Fiat. Z dziejów stosunków polsko-włoskich 1945–1989*, Warszawa, 2018, pp. 83–131ff.

³ "Masowe demonstracje we Włoszech przeciwko Paktowi atlantyckiemu," *Trybuna Ludu*, 1949, no. 73 (1559), p. 2.

⁴ Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereinafter: AMSZ), fond 8, m. 32, v. 415, La réponse à la note de l'Ambassade d'Italie du 8 décembre 1951, Varsovie, le 11 mars 1951.

⁵ A. De Gasperi, "Discorso di Milano, 26 aprile 1953," in: *Scritti e discorsi politici*, vol. 2, ed. S. Lorenzini, B. Taverni, Bologna, 1981, pp. 1821–1822. On the eve of Labour Day Prime Minister J. Cyrankiewicz spoke about "the struggle of the Italian people against the betrayal of national interests by the Italian government." See: M. Pasztor, D. Jarosz, *Skazani na podległość. Z dziejów stosunków polsko-włoskich w latach 1945–1958*, Warszawa, 2013, p. 79.

⁶ M. Pasztor, D. Jarosz, *Nie tylko Fiat...*, pp. 138–139.

propaganda brochures,⁷ usually organised under the auspices of the Italian-Polish Friendship Society dominated by communists, led to tensions and conflicts between the authorities of both countries.

However, the exhibition also had a significant domestic context. Namely, the Italian parliamentary elections, which were to take place on 7 June 1953, led to an exacerbation of political tensions and propaganda. The leader of the Christian Democrats and Prime Minister, Alcide De Gasperi, wishing to secure a strong majority for his party in the parliament, decided to revise the electoral law by introducing the principle that the party or block that wins more than 50% of the votes will receive 65% of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies. This amendment, referred to as a “scam law” (*leggetruffa*), not only caused a split among the parties in coalition with the Christian Democrats (liberals, republicans, and social democrats), but also caused an increase in tension on the internal political scene. The pre-electoral campaign took place in an exceptionally tense climate, characterised by an increase in political divisions among the governing coalition and antagonisms between the right and left side (socialists and communists) of the political scene.⁸

Hence, exhibitions served as an important instrument not only in the relations between Rome and Warsaw, but were also organised on Italian soil in attempts of “winning the hearts and minds” made by both the Christian Democrat government and the Italian Communist Party, which acquired considerable political influence after the war and enjoyed great support and popularity among the electorate. It seems that this type of visual influence was the most effective in reaching the wide public of the Apennine Peninsula and constituted an important element of propaganda.

An exhibition in the centre of political confrontation

The fierce electoral campaign conducted since 1952⁹ was to be crowned by an exhibition opened at the initiative of the Italian government (with the participation of émigré communities from the Eastern Bloc): “On the other side [of the Iron Curtain]” (*mostra “Al di là”*), dedicated to the life of the citizens of the countries behind the Iron Curtain. Its formal organiser was an agency of the Catholic Action, the Social Documentation Committee (*Comitato per la documentazione popolare*),

⁷ This includes the dissemination of brochures on the “Polish Constitution” and issues of *Polonia di Oggi*, a periodical published by the Embassy of the People’s Republic of Poland in Rome, during a concert of Chopin’s works organised in Turin in April 1953. For more on this subject, see: M. Pasztor, D. Jarosz, *Nie tylko Fiat...*, pp. 144–146.

⁸ G. Mammarella, *L’Italia contemporanea 1943–2007*, Bologna, 1974, pp. 177–182; J. A. Gierowski, *Historia Włoch*, Wrocław, 1985, p. 649.

⁹ In 1951 and 1952 administrative elections were held in Italy, in which the Christian Democrats lost a large part of their votes in favour of right-wing parties. See: M.S. Piretti, *Le elezioni politiche in Italia dal 1848 ad oggi*, Roma–Bari, 1995, p. 245.

which supported the Christian Democrats.¹⁰ By demonstrating the disastrous living conditions of the societies of the Eastern Bloc, the terror that prevailed there, and the lack of democratic liberties, the organisers sought to effectively dissuade people from voting for the left. Its political message was intended to be explicit and to leave no choice to average Italian citizens, alerting them that voting for the left, and especially for the Italian Communist Party would not only threaten democracy, but would also worsen the living conditions for large masses of Italian society.

The exhibition apparently belonged to a broader series of similar events organised and supported by the Italian government, such as the “Month of Polish-Italian Fraternity,” protested by the Polish Embassy in Rome on 14 April 1953.¹¹

The correspondence of the Council of Ministers and the Prime Minister proves that “Al di là” had been prepared since at least 1952, when Paolo Emilio Taviani, undersecretary to De Gasperi at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, instructed Italian institutions in the states behind the Iron Curtain to “find material suitable for the exhibition,” stressing that the “costs of purchases” made in these countries would be reimbursed by the competent governmental authorities, in accordance with the procedures in force.”¹²

It seems that from the very beginning the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was hardly enthusiastic about the project, showing a clear lack of commitment to the task. Particularly since obtaining materials for the exhibition was not an easy task, it consumed a lot of energy and required the involvement of the diplomatic personnel exceeding their regular duties. This is evidenced by the comment of Giorgio Tupini, Undersecretary of State at the Prime Minister’s Office and head of propaganda of the Christian Democracy, who in his memo of November 1952 addressed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that although “the materials

¹⁰ W-k, “Wystawa premiera de Gasperi. Antypolska i antywłoska,” *Życie Warszawy*, no. 113 (2977) of 13 May 1953.

¹¹ *Dokumentacja Prasowa*, 1953, p. 415. The aforementioned event was organised (from 14 April to 16 May 1953) by the Association of Polish War Veterans in Italy and supported by official agencies. According to the Embassy of the People’s Republic of Poland in Rome, the publication accompanying the event allegedly contained “insulting and slanderous statements directed at Poland and its government.” The honorary committee of the event included, among others, members of the Italian government: Minister of Education Antonio Segni, Minister of Public Works Aldisio Salvatore, Deputy Minister of Education Raffaele Resta, as well as Alfisio Marras, Chief of Staff of the Italian Army, and Aldo Urbani, Chief of Staff of the Italian Air Force. The event was covered by a correspondent of *Trybuna Ludu*. See: B. Z., “Pana De Gasperiego wyczynów ciąg dalszy,” *Trybuna Ludu*, no. 133 (1559) of 14 May 1953, p. 2 and “Protest PRL w Rzymie przeciwko członkom rządu włoskiego a antypolskiej imprezie,” *Trybuna Ludu*, no. 135 (1661) of 16 May 1953, p. 2; PAL, “Kampania nienawiści pana de Gasperiego,” *Życie Warszawy* no. 114 (2978) of 14 May 1953, p. 2.

¹² Archivio Centrale dello Stato (hereinafter: ACS), Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 51–54 (1860–2000) (hereinafter: PCM’51–54), Gabinetto, sign. 14.1/51895, s. nl. Giorgio Tupini al sottosegretario di stato agli Affari Esteri, Giorgio Tupini al legazione in: Berlino, Budapest, Praga, Sofia, Bucarest, Varsavia, Sofia, telespresso Roma 4 ottobre, 1952, s. nl.

have already been **partially** [highlighted – MP] found, purchased and delivered by these posts but for [the remaining] part he awaits consent [of the Prime Minister] for the purchase which is and would be most desirable."¹³ The repeated reminders sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by the officials of the Council of Ministers at the turn of 1952 and 1953 concerning the shipment of materials seem to speak in favour of the theory that the Italian diplomats were at least unenthusiastic about this initiative. The repeated (ex post) reminders by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs addressed to the Central Administration about the need to "reimburse the costs incurred" for this event indicate that the fears of the ministries were fully justified.

All the more so as the costs incurred by the various Italian posts in the countries behind the Iron Curtain seriously eroded the budget allocated to their regular operation.¹⁴ For example, the Italian mission to Budapest spent more than 4 million Ft (or £63,932) for this purpose, in Prague over 189 thousand krone (£2,378,630), in Sofia over 1,544 leva (£161,709), in Bucharest 4,144 million lei (£235,042), in Warsaw 3,609 million zł (£565,983), in Berlin 3,311 DM (£494,185), which gave the total amount of £3,899,481.¹⁵

Meanwhile, despite the large-scale measures, their effect seemed not to satisfy the expectations of the organisers. However, the propaganda benefits of discrediting the communist ideology and the Italian Communist Party seemed so promising to the Christian Democrats in power that they decided to carry out the project as planned.

The involvement of the government administration (prefects) in the organisation and the creation of an appropriate setting, as well as their care for the large number of visitors, seems to confirm the importance that the central authorities attached to this exhibition, which was to be presented in the cities and towns of Northern and Central Italy, apparently in order to discourage at least part of the electorate from voting for the left, and especially for the ICP.

The exhibition "Al di là" was inaugurated between 16 and 22 April in Piacenza (in the region of Emilia Romagna in Northern Italy) and this was no coincidence, as left-wing parties enjoyed considerable popularity in the industrialised Northern and Central Italy, especially among the working class. Surviving documents, as well as the further developments seem to suggest that the obvious haste and the

¹³ ACS, PCM'51-54, Gabinetto, sign. 14.1/51895, s. nl, Il sottosegretario di stato alla Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, Giorgio Tupini al sottosegretario di stato agli Affari Esteri, Giorgio Tupini, Roma 7 novembre 1952. Tupini addressed a particular message of gratitude through the intermediary of Taviani to the Italian Consulate General in Rome for: "a particularly swift, smart and valuable cooperation" [...] (*in particolare vorrei segnalarti la pronta, intelligente, preziosa collaborazione del Consolato Generale d'Italia a Berlino*).

¹⁴ ACS, PCM'51-54, Gabinetto, sign. 14.1/51895, s. nl, Copia. Appunto del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Roma 10 luglio 1956.

¹⁵ Ibid. Only the reimbursement of costs incurred by the Italian Embassy in Moscow was mentioned (the amount was not indicated).

decision to display the “Al di là” exhibition immediately before the elections may have surprised the political opponents of the Christian Democrats and may constitute an additional argument in favour of the claim that there was no alternative to this party’s rule. The opening of the exhibition one month before the elections was supposed to make it impossible for the left-wing milieus (especially the ICP) to verify its veracity and to gather any counter-arguments (in such a short period of time).

In order to attract as many visitors as possible, the local authorities resorted to promotional tricks, often combining the exhibition with events of great interest to the residents. Such a “strategy” was applied in Piacenza, where the exhibition was organised in an automobile showroom. It was located in such a way that it appeared to the visitors as a continuation of the car exhibition. No wonder that the head of the local administration informed the Ministry of Interior in Rome of the “significant success” of the exhibition, which had been visited by some 30,000 people, and of “generally very favourable comments that it had evoked.” This positive mood, at least according to the prefect, was not spoiled even by an unspecified “secret attempt to disturb the event” by ICP activists, “immediately thwarted by the police authorities.” The police intervention ensured that “since then no incident has disrupted the success of the exhibition.”¹⁶

The same exposition was held in Turin (Piedmont) from 23 April to 3 May 1953,¹⁷ and then in Ancona (Marche region in Central Italy).¹⁸ Although no “major incidents” occurred at the exposition in these last two cities, they remained nonetheless, according to the prefect, “under vigilant observation by the bodies of the Socialist Party and the Italian Communist Party,” as activists of the latter “were distributing leaflets to the visitors of the exhibition in Ancona titled ‘The lies of the “Al di là” exhibition and the truth about our fatherland’ [*Le menzogne della mostra ‘Al di là’ e la verità di ‘Casa nostra’*].”

The authors of the pamphlet, while denying the veracity of the data relating to the reconstruction and development of the Eastern Bloc countries (the USSR in particular), would focus mainly on the situation of the “working class” in Italy, pointing to its ruthless exploitation and the wave of repressions that swept through the country between 1948 and 1952 as a result of strikes in both the industrial and agricultural sectors. It resulted in the death of 68 workers and agricultural labourers, as well as numerous arrests (which exceeded 136 thousand people, of which over 16 thousand were sentenced to prison). In conclusion, it was emphasised that this “was not an ordinary exhibition, but rather an electoral propaganda

¹⁶ ACS, PCM’51-54, Gabinetto, sign. 14.1/51895, s. nl, Prefettura di Piacenza, il Prefetto, R. Onsniaia alla Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri –al Ministro dell’Interno, Piacenza 17 aprile 1953.

¹⁷ ACS, PCM’51-54, Gabinetto, sign. 14.1/51895, s. nl, Prefettura di Torino, il Prefetto [illegible signature] al. Ministro dell’Interno, Torino, 28 aprile 1953.

¹⁸ ACS, PCM’51-54, Gabinetto, sign. 14.1/51895, s. nl, Prefettura di Ancona, il Prefetto A. Donadu al Ministro dell’Interno, Torino, 3 maggio 1953.

circus (*carozzoni*) of The Christian Democracy for state money,” “a lie (*frottolo*), whose aim was to terrorize the voters.” Finally, while denouncing the slanderous claims made by the party whose principle goal was to “stay at the manger” (that is the Christian Democracy, which was described as the party of cushy jobs, *partito della greppia*),” the pamphlet called for voting for the Communist Party in the June elections (*votate uniti per il Partito Comunista Italiano!*).¹⁹ Flyers of similar content were also distributed in other cities where the exhibition took place.

Apparently the “success” of the exhibition in smaller towns of Northern Italy (Emilia Romagna), as can be inferred from the reports by the prefects of these administrative districts,²⁰ encouraged the central authorities to open it in Rome on 6 May 1953, with the participation of representatives of the Italian government and the émigré milieus from Eastern Bloc countries. Apparently hoping for a rapid propaganda effect in the forthcoming elections, the central administration seemed not to attach much importance either to the verification of the materials or to their credibility, as shown by further developments. This large-scale exhibition, covering an area of 1,600 square meters, was located in the underground spaces of the central station in Rome (Termini), which was frequented by thousands of travellers (including those commuting to work in the capital of the entire region). The press organ of Christian Democracy, *Il Popolo*, appeared to be in the right when stating that due to the nature and meaning of the collected material, the exhibition should rather be entitled “a journey to the afterlife” (implicitly: to hell) (*viaggio nell'al dilà*). And although the exhibition was devoted to “oppressed nations,” as the editor-in-chief of *Il Popolo* noted while encouraging “everyone” to see it, this was not supposed to be an “act of propaganda.” The intention of its organisers was to gather “documentation of the standard of living of nations that exist in the orbit of Moscow[’s influence].” Despite the declared lack of political motives, the publication stated that its aim was “not only to encourage Italians to reflect on the fate of the nations subjugated to red terrorism, but also to open the eyes of Italian society to the temptations of false and deceptive [communist] propaganda.”

Press descriptions facilitating the reconstruction of key elements of the exhibition

The visitors began their visit by watching a film depicting the process, stages and methods of taking over power by communists in Eastern Europe. The next stage of the tour was a presentation of selected elements (such as cultural life and education)

¹⁹ ACS, PCM’51-54, Gabinetto, sign. 14.1/51895, s. nl., Prefettura di Ancona..., un volantino „Le menzogne della Mostra Al di là.”

²⁰ G. Mammarella, op. cit., p. 189.

of social life in individual countries subjected to ideologisation and strict control of the state. For a telling example of censorship, the list of 96 books banned in Hungary and other countries of the Bloc was quoted (including *Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi, 'Grimms' Fairy Tales, *The Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchausen* by Rudolf Erich Raspe, *The Citadel* by A. J. Cronin, *Heart* by Edmondo De Amicis, as well as books by Mark Twain and even those of Charles Dickens). The uniformisation of education was emphasised, stressing that in all countries from behind the Iron Curtain "school children are taught to spy and report on their parents." The audience was particularly interested in the presentation of everyday objects with their prices in relation to the average wage of a worker from the country of origin and the salary of a worker in Italy and the number of working hours they had to work in order to buy them. The organisers also pointed out the disastrous quality of these objects in the countries of real socialism. The fact considered particularly scandalous by the journalists of *Il Popolo* was that a worker in Poland had to work 40 hours in order to afford an ugly cap made of the poorest material (as compared to one hour in Italy). The claim regarding the exploitation of female workers was supported by emphasising the fact of their employment in agriculture and heavy industry. Giving women arduous jobs within these sectors (photographs of women as tractor drivers or employed in mining and construction) was seen as a proof of their "enslavement" and "exploitation" rather than emancipation. The visitors were dismayed by the socialist rivalry of labour, the strict discipline introduced in industrial enterprises and the "possibility of citizens being sent to carry out forced labour in uranium mines for political reasons."²¹

The popularity of the exhibition and the wide press coverage made it difficult for not only Italian communists but also the Eastern Bloc missions in Italy to remain indifferent to this issue. The Embassy of the People's Republic of Poland in Rome reported on the event just a few days after its opening. "It is organised at a huge cost, it is supposed to stimulate the imagination of the viewer and present our countries, including Poland, as one big prison and an area of exploitation on the part of the Soviet Union. This is achieved through appropriate decorations and directing: semi-darkness, barbed wire, chain doors, manipulated photographs, maps with marked 'concentration camps,' lists of 'victims of murder,' photographs of watchful eyes, etc. The loudspeakers are constantly repeating in a dull voice: 'you are being watched,' '90 million slaves,' 'the same could happen in Italy.' All sorts of articles of everyday use are shown on a conveyor belt, with prices converted into lira to demonstrate the cost of living. Two cameras simultaneously display defamatory, purposefully edited short films. One of them shows Bolesław Bierut accompanied by children during his visit to Wilhelm Pieck. The commentary mentions 'schools as prisons' and the 'popularisation of communist leaders.' 18 telephone sets allow us to hear the testimony of 'political refugees'

²¹ R. Arata, "La mostra 'All'dila,'" *Il Popolo*, no. 126 of 7 May 1953.

about the persecution 'behind the Iron Curtain.' At the exit there are the following inscriptions: "This exhibition is dedicated to the oppressed nations and is targeted at the persecutors: your vote can save you."²² In one of the rooms there was an unsigned photograph of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Stanisław Skrzyszewski with the inscription "the communists always promise but never keep their word." In another room, in turn, as reported by the second secretary of the Polish Embassy in Rome, there were large photos of "eliminated individuals" [sic] including Edward Osóbka-Morawski, Michał Rola-Żymierski and Marian Spychalski. Placed separately was a photograph of Władysław Gomułka (without mentioning his name) with his eyes covered. Its caption was in no way not connected to him. The visitors leaving the exhibition were given leaflets and postcards on which they could describe their impressions.²³ The photo of laughing Polish children was captioned with the inscription "schools as prisons."²⁴

In the face of such a powerful propaganda offensive by the government, the ICP decided to react by calling upon all the Friendship Societies of the Eastern Bloc countries, which collectively prepared a poster disseminated in 10 thousand copies.

In the next step in this propaganda war, the organisations sent "a protest letter signed by personalities of the democratic world to all their members." The direct response to the "Christian Democracy's event" was the announced opening of an exhibition on "people's democracies" near the Termini station. It appears, however, that these measures, limited to left-wing sympathisers, did not bring any spectacular effects since, as the Polish diplomat reported, the "Al di là" exhibition "was visited by crowds of people" (especially because it was free of charge), although "it was guarded by a large number of undercover officers and policemen."²⁵ No wonder then that the Secretary General of the Communist Party, Palmiro Togliatti, in an interview with diplomatic representatives of states constituting people's democracies, expressed the opinion that "this exhibition should be protested against, demanding its closure."²⁶ These actions were to be complemented by a propaganda campaign against the event carried out in the countries of the Eastern Bloc. Especially since, as the Polish mission in Rome reported, "[our] friends [i.e. the ICP – MP] had nothing against the campaign on the radio and in the press."²⁷

In view of the considerable publicity of the exhibition and, presumably, due to Togliatti's demands, Minister Stefan Wierbłowski summoned the Italian

²² AMSZ, Wire Copy Department (hereinafter: ZD), in. 36, v. 437, szyfrogram nr 4963 z Rzymu nadany 10 V 1953, fol. 452.

²³ AMSZ, fond 8, v. 513, m. 39, T. Wiśniewski (2 sekretarz ambasady RP) do MSZ w Warszawie, Rzym 9 V 1953.

²⁴ W-k, op. cit.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ AMSZ, fond 8, v. 513, m. 39, wyciąg koresp. nr 49, J. Frankowski do S. Gajewskiego, Mencla i Wierbłowskiego, Rzym 10 V 1953.

²⁷ AMSZ, fond 8, v. 513, m. 39, wyciąg koresp. nr 5138, J. Frankowski do S. Gajewskiego, Rzym 15 V 1953.

Ambassador, Giovanni Guarnaschelli, to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 11 May 1953, to whom he declared that “the exhibition was directed against Poland and contained slanderous and shameless lies” and demanded its closure. Wierbłowski not only protested “categorically against the exhibition” but also considered it “an insult to Poland.” In a conversation that turned into a dispute, he also rejected the Italian diplomat’s arguments, which amounted to the conclusion that it was “opened as part of the election campaign.” Neither was the Polish side convinced by the explanation that the location of the exhibition “did not prove anything, since the Italian railway company rented its exhibition premises to various committees.”

Guarnaschelli’s attempt to downplay the entire event and his assertion that the exhibition was not offensive to Poland only contributed to escalating the tension. It was further exacerbated by the Italian diplomat’s mention of a display at the corner of the streets Nowy Świat and Aleje Jerozolimskie—made available to Warsaw residents on the occasion of Palmiro Togliatti’s 60th birthday—which contained photographs of, as the ambassador put it, “alleged misery in Italy,” as well as pictures illustrating “the alleged occupation of Italy by American troops” as part of the exhibition “This is America.”²⁸ The attempt by the Italian ambassador to assume initiative by referring to excerpts from a speech by Józef Cyrankiewicz (on the eve of the 1953 Labour Day)²⁹ in which he spoke of “the fight of the Italian nation against betrayal of national interests by the Italian government” excluded the possibility of any agreement on this matter in the eyes of the Polish side.³⁰

The Polish minister therefore announced the submission of a protest note, which was sent to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.³¹ The conversation itself, as Ambassador Stanisław Gajewski reported as a witness in his memo, “ended in a frigid atmosphere.”³²

²⁸ The exhibition “This is America” was inaugurated on 14 January 1953 in Warsaw. He was referring to the inscription on the display stating that Italy was occupied by American troops. For more on this subject, see: Z. Romek, “Walka z ‘amerykańskim zagrożeniem’ w okresie stalinowskim,” in: *Polska 1944/45–1989. Studia i materiały*, vol. 5: *Życie codzienne w Polsce 1945–1955*, Warszawa, 2001, pp. 173–208.

²⁹ Cyrankiewicz’s speech on 30 April 1953 at the First May Academy in Warsaw. “In Italy, the Deputy Prime Minister said, under Togliatti’s leadership, the resistance of the masses struggling against the policy of selling Italy to the imperialists, against the policy of growing unemployment, against the misery of the broadest masses and war, is on the rise, and the unity of the Italian working class is consolidated through the policies of Togliatti and Nenni, a guarantee of their triumph.” *Trybuna Ludu*, no. 120 (1346) of 1 May 1953, p. 3.

³⁰ AMSZ, fond 8, v. 501, m. 38, Notatka służbowa St. Gajewskiego, [no date]; ZD, v. 437, m. 36, szyfr. Nr 384/SG, błyskawica, 11 V 1953, fol. 16.

³¹ AMSZ, ZD, v. 437, m. 36, szyfr. 4704 do Rzymu, 11 V, fol. 17,

³² AMSZ, fond 8, v. 501, m. 38, Notatka służbowa St. Gajewskiego, [no date]; (PAP), “Protest rządu polskiego przeciw antypolskim poczynaniom rządu włoskiego,” *Trybuna Ludu*, no. 131 (1557) of 12 May 1953, p. 1.

On 13 May the Italian Press Agency, ANSA, published a press release of the Italian government in reaction to the Polish memo, which "ruled out any response to the protest of the Polish government." With reference to the arguments presented in the conversation between Ambassador Guarnaschelli and Minister Wierbłowski, it was stated that the "unpleasant reaction of the Polish government in this matter" was proof that it had "hit the nail on the head." The communiqué also stressed that "the exhibition is not directed against Poland, but its aim is to illustrate the real living conditions in communist countries." The situation was made even worse by the interview given by Minister Umberto Tupini to the Christian Democrat periodical *Il Popolo*, in which he pointed to the authenticity of the documents on display and suggested the appointment of an impartial investigative body to establish "what life is really like in the European countries behind the Iron Curtain."³³

The exhibition's inaccuracies

The ICP's official journal *L'Unità* reported that the pictures of the "alleged victims of the communist persecution" shown at the exhibition were photographs of Italian citizens who, unaware of the purpose of these images, gave permission to the photographer Meldolesi to depict them as "representatives of different strata of the population." The fake pictures that were later assembled from these photographs were displayed in the exhibition as images of "oppressed citizens of people's democracies." The aforementioned photographer, in a letter to the editorial office of the ICP bulletin, protested against "jeopardising his reputation" and declared that not only did he have nothing to do with the falsification of his photographs (he was misled by the Social Documentation Committee, which had ordered photographs of "characteristic types" of Italian society), but he ordered his lawyer to take legal action against the organisers of the exhibition. The journal published the statements of two residents of Rome who had recognised themselves as "oppressed citizens of people's democracies" during their visit to the exhibition. According to the newspaper, the photograph of a bricklayer from Azerbaijan deserved special attention, as the person in question turned out to be Giovanni Battista Arista, newsspeaker at the Rome radio station.³⁴

The socialist periodical *Avanti* wrote that "during the peak of the election campaign there occurred one of the most blatant propaganda falsifications on the part of the clericalists [i.e. Christian Democrats – MP], which brought ridicule and shame onto the actions of governing circles." Their aim, according to the newspaper, was to intimidate the voters "with the red threat" (*pericolo rosso*) and to

³³ The communiqué of the Italian government was in published in *Il Popolo*, no. 132 of 13 May 1953. See also: AMSZ, fond 8, v. 501, m. 38, wyciąg koresp. Nr 277, [J.] Frankowski do S. Wierbłowskiego, Rzym, 13 maja 1953.

³⁴ "Una volga retruffa organizzata da impresari senza scropoli," *L'Unità*, no. 135 of 14 May 1953.

divert their attention from the tragic Italian reality marred by “hunger, poverty, and unemployment” that would not withstand confrontation with the situation in the countries of the Eastern Bloc. According to the journal, the entire documentation and photographs were entirely made up (*inventati di sana pianta*), as evidenced by the representation of... two residents of Rome (whose names were made public) in the capacity of “slaves of communism.” The two men in question not only recognised themselves as the alleged “victims of communism from behind the Iron Curtain,” but also revealed the circumstances in which the photographs were taken. The first one, a clerk at a photographic agency, was asked to pose for a picture depicting the “type of an average socialist” (*un tipo socialista*). The second one, who was offered (in exchange for money) to pose for a photograph supposedly intended for journalistic purposes, discovered his own image at the exhibition as a “representative of 90 million slaves” and a “representative of the middle class” (*il ceto medio*) of the countries of the Eastern Bloc. As for the third man, who was portrayed as a “bricklayer from behind the Iron Curtain,” he turned out to be a well-known speaker of radio news, as first noticed by the communist *L’Unità*. In this situation, according to *Avanti*, “the propaganda nature of the exhibition, its fraudulent character” and its primary objective of “dissuading citizens from voting for progressive parties” seemed unquestionable.³⁵

Even right-wing newspapers proved critical of the exhibition. *Il Popolo di Roma* reported on “manipulations” and “lack of professionalism” in the following words: “This is a heavy blow to the anti-communist cause. The entire city is laughing. Tomorrow the rest of Italy will be laughing. It is a great day for the communists.”³⁶ In the same vein, the monarchist daily *Roma* reported in the article “The unimaginable blunder by the DC leads to speculation by the Reds” (*La Grande gaffedella DC facilita le speculazioni dei ‘rossi’*) about “serious confusion in the Christian Democracy camp” and “the slanderous goals of the event.” Relying on rumours, the newspaper anticipated the “imminent closure of the exhibition and the punishment of the culprits.”³⁷ Even the Turin-based liberal and capitalist *La Stampa* did not hide its bitterness by stating that the falsification of documents and Tupini’s declaration “ended up working in favour of the communists.”³⁸

The pro-government press and the Christian Democrat milieus were unable to provide the public with a rational explanation of the facts revealed by the opposition, limiting themselves to “ridiculous excuses” consisting of short statements

³⁵ “I falsidella Mostra ‘Aldilà,’” *Avanti*, no. 151 of 15 May 1953.

³⁶ *Il Popolo di Roma*, no. 127 of 15 May 1953.

³⁷ “La Grande gaffedella DC facilita le speculazioni dei ‘rossi,’” *Roma*, no. 132 of 16 May 1953.

³⁸ *La Stampa*, no. 131 of 15 May 1953. See also: AMSZ, fond 8, v. 501, m. 39, p. 14, wyciąg koresp. nr 5223, Frankowski do S. Wierbłowskiego, Rzym, 16 V 1953. This was confirmed by the Embassy of the People’s Republic of Poland in Rome, which reported that “the extreme right-wing press is taking up the arguments of the left and stating that the exhibition will turn against the Christian Democrats.”

stating that "mistakes and omissions were due to haste rather than malicious intentions of the organisers," as stressed by Minister Tupini in his letter to the editorial office of *Avanti*.³⁹ The affair surrounding the exhibition, the protests of the Romanian, Hungarian and Polish governments, which drew attention to the "inaccuracy of some references to words and images relating to current life in Poland" (*inesattezza di alcuni riferimenti, con parole ed immagini, all'attuale vita in Polonia*) undoubtedly contributed to the popularisation of the exhibition among the inhabitants of Rome, as evidenced by the large number of visitors (within 10 days the exhibition was seen by 50 thousand people).⁴⁰

In the following days, the previously mentioned *La Stampa* attempted to minimise the damage, stressing that the photographs discussed above, which were undoubtedly photomontage, resulted from the intensifying pre-election rivalry and were a response to the increasing communist propaganda. According to the editorial staff, however, this did not weaken the message of the exhibition, based at least "in part on authentic documentation," as evidenced by the ever-increasing number of refugees from Eastern Europe who were risking their lives to flee to the West. *La Stampa's* editors, however, did not withhold the opinion that the "recklessness and superficiality of the organisers" had been proven and carefully used by the organ of the Italian communist Party (*L'Unità*), making it easier for the communists to undermine the credibility of government agencies. This was evidenced, at least according to the authors of the article, by the popularity of two documentary films shown in some cinemas and promoted by the communists. The first one, entitled *The Northwest Road* (*La strada del nord-o vest*), was about Poland, the second one was entitled *Life on the Other Side* (*La vità dell' al dilà*) and was supposed to depict the lives of Soviet citizens. In conclusion, the newspaper found it regrettable that the exhibition had provided communist agitators with an excuse to promote communist ideology and the slogan "touch to believe, comrades" (*toccare per credere, compagni*).⁴¹ The right-wing press agency "Informitalia" was very critical of the exhibition and wrote that "Italian public opinion is deeply shocked by this incident. [...] And fraud must be considered a serious matter."⁴²

Pro-government press articles, such as the one in *Il Popolo*, which tried to convince the readers that "the manipulation was committed for decorative reasons," seemed to be isolated cases.⁴³

It is therefore no wonder that the discovery of the falsifications caused, as the representatives of the Polish Embassy in Rome reported, "wild embarrassment."

³⁹ "Mostra dell'Al di là," *Avanti*, no. 153 of 17 May 1953; "Mostra Al di là a Roma," *Il Messaggero*, no. 169 of 17 May 1953.

⁴⁰ "Mostra..."

⁴¹ "Polemiche e strascichi sulla 'Mostra Al di là,'" *La Stampa*, no. 115 of 15 May 1953.

⁴² Informitalia, "I falsi della 'Mostra Al di là,'" *La Stampa* no. 116 of 16 May 1953.

⁴³ "Tutta vera la Mostra dell'Al di là. Contro i falsi comunisti la dura realtà dei fatti," *Il Popolo*, no. 141 of 22 May 1953.

Especially since the facts revealed by *L'Unità*, evidencing the fraudulent actions of the organisers, which boiled down to “photographing people in Rome posing as slaves from behind the Iron Curtain,” were true. In this situation, the dispute with the communists undertaken by the *Comitato per la documentazione popolare* and their attempts to explain that the photographs were of a symbolic nature did not seem to have helped much. Neither did the removal of these pictures with the following inscription left instead: “Photographs removed in recognition of the democratic rights of citizens.” The same applies to “painting over the photographs of people displayed at the entrance, depicting the types of slaves behind the Iron Curtain: a worker, a woman, a children, a member of the intelligentsia, a priest, so that, as the Polish Embassy in Rome reported, there would be no fear that they would be recognised as Italian citizens.” This picture was then captioned with: “The photograph was blurred due to censorship by the communist party.” According to the same report, these measures proved ineffective, as the visitors to the exhibition “laughed out loud at the sight of the photographs taken down or blurred. This behaviour of the visitors made the numerous police officers supervising the exhibition visibly angry.”⁴⁴

Meanwhile, the communist press revealed further manipulations relating this time to “Soviet reality.” The pictures of “ragged and barefooted Soviet children” turned out to be photographs of Italian children (Daniele Marabitti and Anna Zina) identified by an Italian citizen as photographs of her own son and the daughter of her neighbour. The attribution of the drawings depicting the “Soviet concentration camps” to a “Russian painter” appearing under two different names also turned out to be somewhat imprecise. Noting the bad will and irresponsibility of the Italian Government, which “weakened Italy’s position in the international arena,” *l'Unità* did not fail to add that “they were truly lucky that the governments of the people’s democracies were able distinguish unreasonable diplomats [...] from the Italian people”.⁴⁵

The counter-exhibition

Taking advantage of this situation, the Rome Committee of the ICP decided to keep up the momentum by opening on 17 May 1953, at Piazza dei Cinquecento near the Termini railway station, a counter-exhibition to serve as a response to the “shameless ‘Al di là.’” It was prepared in cooperation with the Societies of Friendship with Italy of the Eastern Bloc countries (Poland, Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Albania), all dominated by communists.⁴⁶ The exhibition consisting of 30 boards

⁴⁴ AMSZ, fond 8, v. 501, m. 39, wyciąg koresp. nr 52422, J. Frankowski do S. Wierbłowskiego, Rzym 17 V 1953 oraz wyciąg koresp. nr 5267, J. Frankowski do S. Gajewskiego, Rzym 18 V 1953.

⁴⁵ “Le mezzogne di ‘Al di là,’” *L'Unità*, no. 145 of 17 May 1953.

⁴⁶ PAP, “Protest Węgier i Rumunii przeciw oszczerczej wystawie w Rzymie,” *Życie Warszawy*, no. 118 (2982) of 19 May 1953, p. 1; PAP, “Protest rządu czechosłowackiego przeciw oszczerczej wystawie w Rzymie,” *Trybuna Ludu*, no. 122 (2986), p. 1.

was not only supposed to bring the Italian public closer to the "real life of citizens in people's democracies," but also to publicly demonstrate the falsifications of the "Al di là" exhibition. At first it seemed that the event promoted by the communists, although it was assessed as "aesthetically accomplished," could not influence the imagination of the audience as much as its antagonist. Although, according to Polish diplomats, it was "stereotypical and unconvincing," it appears to have caught on at a later stage, as the public probably wanted to compare it with "Al di là."

The organisation of the counter-exhibition was facilitated by the fact that due to its electoral character (it ended with a call to vote for the ICP), its initiators were not required (in accordance with Italian legislation) to seek permission from the police to open the exhibition. Renting the area from the Municipal Council was enough to set up the panels, treated as election posters. However, its nature was questioned by the municipal police. The latter concluded that "the content of the exhibition was not electoral in nature, and the boards had previously been exhibited by the Friendship Societies (without prior police approval), and thus appealed to the mayor of Rome." Eventually, the Department of Posters of the Municipal Board called on the ICP to remove the exhibition. The lack of reaction on the part of the communists caused its removal (on the night of 22 May) and the initiation of a lengthy court procedure.

The counter-exhibition was to be exhibited in other cities. It was to remain in each of them until the authorities ordered its closure, then it would be moved to a different city. It was supposed to be sent to Milan first. Despite the fact that the communist and rag press apparently tried to explore the propaganda effects of both events, they soon ceased to attract the attention of the central press titles in the end of May.⁴⁷

"Al di là" in the People's Republic of Poland propaganda

A special role in this operation was attributed to the press and radio campaign against the exhibition "Al di là" held in socialist countries. The Italian communists insisted that the propaganda programmes in Italian "showed that the action against us was initiated by De Gasperi's government, that it was not supported by

⁴⁷ AMSZ, fond 8, v. 513, m. 39, W. Gutt do S. Gajewskiego, wyciąg koresp. Nr 5513, Rzym 25 V 1953. In response to the removal of the exhibition, the ICP asked for the prosecutor's office to intervene. The latter, in turn, tried to elude the subject by stating that it was an administrative regulation that allegedly fell outside the scope of their duties. By the end of May 1953, the ICP's lawyer had filed a complaint with the court, demanding the sequestration of the exhibition "Al di là." The organisers of the latter organised a competition, in which the "objects" or "facts" presented at the exhibition were replaced by other "not authentic" ones. The detection of 1 out of 3 could be awarded with a prize of 50,000 lire. See: AMSZ, fond 8, v. 513, m. 39, J. Frankowski do S. Gajewskiego, wyciąg koresp. Nr 5831, Rzym 2 VI 1953.

the Italian people and was even carried out against their will.”⁴⁸ The exhibition also served as a pretext for the launch of an anti-Italian campaign in the Polish press.⁴⁹

Trybuna Ludu was reporting already on 13 May in the article “Exhibition of Hatred” on an “exhibition opened in Rome with a big bang.” Despite the fact that the correspondent of the Polish newspaper chose not to disclose its content, he reported that “it consisted of the most fantastic and nonsensical exhibits, fabricated in Italy or imported from Bonn and Washington, and provided with equally nonsensical and made up comments.” According to the newspaper, the exhibition constituted an attempt to divert the attention of Italians from the problems troubling the country in the pre-election period. In reference to the speech in Milan by Prime Minister De Gasperi, where he allegedly “supported the revisionist demands of the neo-Nazis in Bonn regarding our Western Territories,” the newspaper described the exposition as “an act of hostility towards Poland and other people’s democracies.”⁵⁰ In the recapitulative article “Tales of Signor Alcide” [De Gasperi – MP] the same newspaper called the exhibition a provocation, adding that “the difference between Mr. Alcide De Gasperi and Baron Munchausen is that Baron Munchausen’s stories evoke joy, while Mr. De Gasperi’s pesky lies evoke laughter and disgust at the same time.”⁵¹

Życie Warszawy also reported on “an exhibition slandering Poland and other people’s democracies” on 13 May, writing that “the imagination of its organisers was creatively fertilised by American comics and gangster films.”⁵² A day later, the same newspaper reported that the DC government was obstructing Polish-Italian cultural exchange, boycotting Polish films and banning Italian soloists from including “concert masterpieces of Polish music” in their repertoire.⁵³

The discovery of falsifications by the communist daily *L’Unità* led to the intensification of anti-Italian propaganda in Poland. When commenting on the mystification, *Życie Warszawy* noted on 16 May that “you cannot keep your lips sealed with impunity. Especially when the level of slandering exceeds the usual Marshallite standards and becomes too overt and blatant a fraud.”⁵⁴ The following day, the same newspaper informed its readers that the issue of the “slandorous exhibition

⁴⁸ AMSZ, fond 8, v. 501, m. 39, wyciąg koresp. nr 52422, J. Frankowski do S. Gajewskiego, Rzym 17 V 1953.

⁴⁹ Archivio del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Roma, Direzione Generale degli Affari Politici 1950–1957, Polonia, 1209, Ambasciata d’Italia a Varsavia al Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Telespresso, n. 1781/573, 20 V 1953. See also: PAL, “Haniebna kompromitacja,” *Życie Warszawy*, 1953, no. 116 (2980), p. 2; “Świadomie sfałszowane dokumenty na oszczerczej wystawie w Rzymie,” *Życie Warszawy*, 1953, no. 116 (2980), p. 1.

⁵⁰ B. Z., “Wystawa nienawiści,” *Trybuna Ludu*, no. 132 (1558) of 13 May 1953, p. 2; and id., “Pana De Gasperiego wyczynów ciąg dalszy,” *Trybuna Ludu*, no. 133 (1559) of 14 May 1953, p. 2.

⁵¹ Id., “Opowieści signora Alcide,” *Trybuna Ludu*, no. 139 (1565) of 20 May 1953, p. 2.

⁵² W-k, op. cit., p. 2.

⁵³ PAL, “Kampania...,” p. 2.

⁵⁴ Id., “Haniebna kompromitacja,” *Życie Warszawy*, 1953, no. 116 (2980), p. 2.

against socialist countries” had become a huge scandal and led to an incredible embarrassment for its organisers and inspirers.⁵⁵

“Al di là”: against all odds

The pre-election period and the fierce political struggle that characterised it prompted the Italian government not to close the exhibition, moving it to smaller centres in Central Italy where the left-wing parties (ICP and PS) enjoyed considerable popularity. And so, as reported by the Prefect of Perugia (Umbria), “despite the subversive attitude of the city’s administration, in which communists and socialists were predominant, and its explicit boycott on the part of the city authorities, the exhibition was nonetheless opened.” However, the obstructive attitude of the city authorities meant that the organisers had to settle at first for a location on the outskirts of the city, in its less frequented part. It was not until the prefect’s insistence and the threat of appointing a commissioner to check the legitimacy of the objections raised by the mayor that the city authorities agreed to change their decision and grant a more convenient place for the exhibition. Nevertheless, the “adequate precautions taken by the police prefecture to prevent possible reckless acts and damage [...] by socialist/communist elements” proved the tense atmosphere surrounding the exhibition,⁵⁶ which, according to further correspondence, was suspended after only one day of presentation (it was meant to last from 29 to 31 May). The reopening was scheduled for 31 May. This time, at least according to the prefect, despite the unfavourable weather, the exhibition was a major propaganda success (*notevole successo propagandistico*). It was visited by a “large number of people” (*un cospicuo numero di persone*). However, this did not prevent, “despite the presence of police forces watching over the installations,” the occurrence of incidents, which boiled down to the seizure by young people (according to the prefect, “probably activists of the communist and socialist party”) of prints on which the visitors were supposed to describe their impressions.⁵⁷

In some centres dominated by socialists and communists, however, the organiser failed to obtain permission from the municipal authorities to present the exhibition in convenient places, as in the case of Foligno in Umbria, where it arrived on 1 June. The left-wing government of the city adopted a tactic of delaying and postponing the decision regarding its location (until the elections), despite initial assurances that the authorities were ready to give such consent upon payment of

⁵⁵ PAP, “Organizzatori oszczerczej wystawy w Rzymie przyznają się do fałszerstwa,” *Życie Warszawy*, 1953, no. 117 (2981), p. 2.

⁵⁶ ACS, file 14.1/51895, Prefettura di Perugia [prefetto P. Rizzo] al direttore del gabinetto del Interno, nr 3778, oggetto: Mostra “Al di là, Perugia 28 maggio 1953.

⁵⁷ ACS, file 14.1/51895, Prefettura di Perugia [prefetto P. Rizzo] al direttore del gabinetto del Interno, nr 3787, oggetto: Mostra “Al di là”, Perugia, 31 maggio 1953.

an appropriate fee by the organisers. Ultimately, while refusing to grant authorisation, the communist mayor of Foligno (and ICP candidate for senator), Fittaiuoli, argued that the exhibition, due to its nature, could “exacerbate internal contradictions and deteriorate relations with other nations that enjoy the sympathy of local communities.” Another argument (or rather: additional pretext) in favour of rejection was the unwillingness to hinder traffic in sensitive areas of the city (*pregiudicherebbe la viabilità*). The complaints of the prefect, who in his report to the Italian Ministry of Interior referred to the need to subordinate local interests to great politics and argued that the mayor had exceeded his powers, did not result in a change in the decision of the municipal authorities. Fittaiuoli was however suspended by the Italian authorities.⁵⁸

Regardless of the ambiguous results of the entire project, the organisers managed to present it again in the metal industry centre Terni (Umbria) only a few days before the parliamentary elections (4–5 June), where it was visited by over 10 thousand people. According to the local prefect, it aroused the interest of visitors (*suscitando interesse e notevole impressione*) and “left a considerable impression on them.”⁵⁹ It remained in this town until 15 June, when it returned to Rome, escorted by motorised traffic police.⁶⁰

Regardless of the political effects of the exhibition, the settlements between the Office of the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the costs incurred by diplomatic missions in the countries of the Eastern Bloc in connection with the search for and purchase of “appropriate exhibits” lasted until the beginning of 1960. The Prime Minister’s office was in no hurry to reimburse the costs incurred by those institutions in the amount of £3,899,481, which was a serious burden on the budget of those institutions.⁶¹

Although it is difficult to determine whether the circumstances surrounding the exhibition had an impact on the outcome of the June parliamentary elections, they

⁵⁸ ACS, file 14.1/51895, Prefettura di Perugia [ilprefetto P. Rizzo] al direttore del gabinetto del Interno, oggetto: Mostra “Al di là”, Perugia, 30 maggio, 1 giugno 1953. The refusal by Foligno’s mayor to allow the exhibition in the city was also reported by *Trybuna Ludu* in a note from the Polish Press Agency (PAP): “Fittaiuoli has refused to allow the slanderous exhibition ‘On the other side,’ which slanders people’s democracies, into his city. He declared that the exposition constituted an insult to Italy’s friends. (PAP), “Burmistrz włoskiego miasta odmówił wpuszczenia oszczerczej wystawy,” *Trybuna Ludu*, no. 154 (1580) of 4 June 1953, p. 2.

⁵⁹ ACS, file 14.1/51895, Prefettura di Perugia [il prefetto P. Rizzo] al direttore del gabinetto del Interno, oggetto: Mostra “Al di là”, Terni 6 giugno 1953.

⁶⁰ ACS, file 14.1/51895, Prefettura di Terni [il prefetto R. Cigliese] al Ministero dell’ Interno, oggetto: Mostra “Al di là”, Terni, 15 giugno 1953.

⁶¹ ACS, file 14.1/51895, Copia, il sotto segretario di stato del Ministero degli Affari Esteri. Appunto, Roma il 10 luglio 1956; *ibidem*, Copia, il sotto segretario di stato [Badini] alla Presidenza del Consiglio dei ministri per gli Affari Esteri, Roma 23 febbraio 1957; ACS, file 14.1/51895, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri – Appunto, 7 aprile 1957; ACS, file 14.1/51895, Presidenza del Consiglio dei ministri. Gabinetto al Ufficio Cassa, 14 gennaio 1960. Eventually, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs obtained a refund of £86,715.

probably did not contribute to improving the image of the ruling coalition in the regions where the left, and the ICP in particular, traditionally gained the upper hand. The results of the election of 7 June did not meet the expectations of the Centre. The coalition obtained 49.85% of the votes, which prevented it from benefiting from the “majority bonus” and gaining an absolute majority in the Chamber of Deputies. The communists achieved a significant success with 22.6% of the votes (an improvement on the 1946 result), as did the monarchists and neo-fascists. Soon the *legget-ruffa* was repealed and the principle of proportional representation was restored.

Abstract

At the height of the Cold War, cultural relations between the socialist states and the West became an important instrument of propaganda struggle within individual countries. On the Italian ground, exhibitions became an important instrument in the political struggle between the ruling Christian Democrats and the left (Italian Communist Party and Italian Socialist Party) as an element of visual propaganda. For the Christian Democrats in power, this role was to be played by a travelling exhibition entitled “On the other side [of the curtain]” (*Mostra Al di là*) depicting the lives of citizens of the states beyond the Iron Curtain. The display of poverty prevailing among vast sections of these societies, the terror and lack of democratic freedoms was intended to discourage the electorate from voting for left-wing parties in the upcoming parliamentary elections of 7 June 1953. Due to a strong position of the left (its strongholds being Central and Northern Italy), the exhibition was presented (in the days preceding the elections) in Piacenza and then in Turin, Ancona, Rome, Perugia and Terni. The detection of numerous hoaxes by the communist periodical *L'Unità* (the citizens of the oppressed countries presented at the exhibition actually being native Italians) caused not only a scandal but also a counteroffensive by the Communist Party, which not only revealed the fraud, but also launched a successful counter-campaign against the ruling camp. Although it would be an exaggeration to say the exhibition contributed to the poor election results of the Christian Democrats, the results of the elections of 7 June indeed did not meet their expectations. The coalition obtained 49.85% of the votes, which prevented it from benefiting of the “majority bonus” and gaining an absolute majority in the Chamber of Deputies. The communists achieved a significant success with 22.6% of the votes (an improvement on the 1946 result), as did the monarchists and neo-fascists.

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Submitted 17.04.2019; accepted 5.06.2019