



KNIR
ROYAL NETHERLANDS
INSTITUTE IN ROME

Trame di Pace: Italian Peace Advocacy and the Decolonizing World

09:30 Opening and Welcome

Maria Bonaria Urban, Carolien Stolte, Daniele Paolini

09:45 Panel 1: Italian Pacifism in/and Africa

Discussant: Daniel Laqua, Northumbria University

“Making the Mediterranean a Sea of Peace”: Maghribi-Italian Peace Advocacy in the Atomic Age

Daniele Paolini, Leiden University

The Contribution of Catholic Missionary Networks to Pacifism in Italy: The Somali Case (c. 1950–1980)

Sara Ercolani, University of Pisa

11:15 Break

11:30 Panel 2: Catholic Engagements with Nonviolence and Anti-War Campaigns

Discussant: Maria Bonaria Urban, Royal Netherlands Institute Rome

Peace Is not Pacifism: Italian Catholics during the Vietnam War Years

Laura Ciglioni, University of Rome La Sapienza

Apostle of Ahimsa: Lanza del Vasto and World-Ordering at the End of Empire, 1936-1963

Carolien Stolte, Leiden University

13:00 Lunch

14:00 Panel 3: Women’s Visions of Peace

Discussant: Khushi Singh Rathore, European University Institute Florence

Development as the Fabric of Peace: Maria Luisa Paronetto Valier and Italian Advocacy in the Decolonizing World

Flavia De Lucia Lumeno, Niccolò Cusano University

We Accuse! Transnational Women's Mobilization and Decolonial Politics from Asia to Italy (1945–1954)

Rossella Roncati, Ca' Foscari University of Venice

15:30 Break

15:45 Panel 4: Youth Internationalism

Discussant: Shivangi Jaiswal, Ca' Foscari University of Venice

Reframing Peace after Stalin: Bruno Bernini, the WFDY, and the Decolonizing World (1953-1959)

Vincenzo Colaprice, University of Turin

Youth, Peace Advocacy, and Transnational Socialist Networks: Italian Communist Activists and China in the early Cold War

Sofia Graziani, University of Trento

17:15 Break



17:30 Public Keynote by Laura Ciglioni

Chair and discussant: Lucia Bonfreschi, Roma Tre

Advocating for Peace in Post-War Italy: Activism, Political Cultures and Mass Movements

19:00 Drinks and Pizza

Abstracts

“Making the Mediterranean a Sea of Peace”: Maghribi-Italian Peace Advocacy in the Atomic Age

Daniele Paolini, Leiden University

In July 1964, some 200 peace workers from more than thirty countries travelled to Algiers to discuss the future of peace and nuclear disarmament across the Mediterranean. This paper examines the networks of activists and organizations behind the Conference for the Denuclearization of the Mediterranean Basin both at Sea and on Land (CDM), held in the Algerian capital between 5 and 9 July 1964. Drawing on archives of peace organizations and personal collections of peace workers, it seeks to recover the conference as an important site of postcolonial peace networking linking the Maghrib to Europe and Algeria to Italy in particular. Tracing the genealogies of the idea of a conference for a denuclearized Mediterranean, the paper shows how Algiers and Rome emerged as the centerpieces of Mediterranean anti-nuclear advocacy, shaped through the mobility of peace workers and by the intertwining of anti-fascist and anti-colonial solidarities. The paper poses the following questions: What does the CDM reveal about the relationship between peace internationalism and decolonization? Why did Italy come to be viewed by the Algerian Peace Movement as the most attractive interlocutor in the making of Mediterranean peace advocacy? Which other networks sustained the conference, and what understanding of peace internationalism emerges when examined from the vantage point of the decolonizing world and *its* interactions with both the Global North and the Global South? In answering these questions, this paper seeks to shed new light on the rich landscape of Cold War-era peace internationalism, showing how the Algiers conference served as a platform to denounce nuclear militarization but also to connect Italy to the Maghrib and the Mediterranean to wider Afro-Asian worlds.

The Contribution of Catholic Missionary Networks to Pacifism in Italy: The Somali Case (c. 1950–1980)

Sara Ercolani, University of Pisa

Beginning in the 1950s, the encounter in Italy between the missionary networks and the Catholic laity fostered the circulation of pacifist and solidarity-based ideas directed toward the so-called Third World. The synergy between missionary institutes and committed young laypeople contributed to transforming Italian Catholicism into a force critical of the status quo, fostering a ‘shift to the left.’ Through an analysis of the primary Italian missionary institutes, an examination of the parliamentary debate on the law concerning civil service in the Third World, and a study of Catholic lay actions in Somalia during the period immediately following the end of the Trust Territory of Somaliland under Italian Administration (AFIS), this paper reconstructs the genesis of a Catholic pacifism of missionary origin. The contribution proposes a reinterpretation of Catholic peace advocacy not only as a domestic phenomenon of Italian politics, but as a product of transnational dynamics linked to decolonisation: the development of solidarity practices in mission lands acted as both a mirror and a driving force for the growth of lay activism within Italian missionary circles. The Somali case highlights how, in the name of solidarity with the local population, Italian nuns and friars operated during the frictions of the nationalisation phase, collaborating within a Marxist ideological framework. The appeals emanating from the missions were taken up and reformulated in Italy by Catholic youth movements, which

promoted peace marches, cultural initiatives, and public mobilisations, as evidenced by an analysis of the archives of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME).

The intense exchange between decolonised contexts and Italy thus contributed to the formation of a cultural movement capable of influencing public opinion and participating in a broader process of 'decolonizing' the Italian mindset. Ultimately, this process redefined the relationship between Catholicism, peace, and decolonisation within a transnational perspective. The quest for a world of peace and brotherhood represented a central element in the historical evolution of missionary institutes within the context of decolonisation. The transfer to Italy of experiences gained in African missions, such as the Somali case, contributed to the formation of new political and cultural sensibilities within Italian Catholic lay associations. This process, which remains to be fully explored by historiography, offers a new perspective for understanding the relationship between Catholicism, peace, and decolonisation in post-war Italy.

Peace Is not Pacifism: Italian Catholics during the Vietnam War Years

Laura Ciglioni, University of Rome La Sapienza

The Vietnam war played a relevant role in the cycle of mobilization that erupted in Italy since the mid-1960s and culminated in 1968-1969, both in spurring activism and shaping collective imagination. In a country where, after 1945, peace and anti-war campaigns were often structured as mass, single-issue movements, strongly entwined with Cold War tensions and affiliations, the war in Vietnam had the potential to acting as a catalyst, highlighting the multifold tensions, and transformations, characterizing the postwar “fight for peace” in Italy, especially in a phase of détente and decolonization (and in years of rapid modernization and shifting political equilibriums for the country).

Yet, Italian campaigns and peace activists’ efforts against the Vietnam war are still a relatively unexplored field of historical investigation, though an initial body of research has become available (see, for example, Saresella, 2004; Taviani, 2011; Lomellini, 2019; Ghezzi, 2019; Formigoni, 2025). Building on this historiography, my paper aims to contribute to this field of research, focusing in particular on the Italian Catholic world’s engagement with the Vietnam war in the late 1960s. My attention will be directed, specifically, at the Azione Cattolica Italiana – then experiencing some decline in membership, but still a relevant Catholic mass organization – as well as other groups and actors, from Pax Christi to Ernesto Balducci’s Testimonianze, including the varied archipelago of realities that participated in the ecclesiastical ferment preceding and following the years of the Second Vatican Council. While a broader net will be cast in terms of periodization, special attention will be paid to the 1965-1968 years, with a particular focus on 1968, as an excellent vantage point to explore this terrain.

Through the analysis of available archives (such as that of the Azione Cattolica) and especially the Catholic press, my goal is to investigate, in the first place, the reactions of the Italian Catholic world to the war in Vietnam during the peak of the crisis: did Catholic groups and organizations view it as a decolonization war, a Cold War conflict, an anti-imperialistic effort? Secondly, the paper aims to contextualize the activities of such groups within the backdrop of significant, far-reaching transformations, namely the Roman Church’s evolving stance on peace issues and Third World countries during and after the Second Vatican

Council. Thirdly, Catholics' attitudes and actions will be situated within the broader mobilization and reactions against the Vietnam war in Italy.

Apostle of *Ahimsa*: Lanza del Vasto and World-Ordering at the End of Empire, 1936-1963

Carolien Stolte, Leiden University

“What no foreign conqueror has succeeded in inflicting on your country, such as breaking its traditions, flouting its faith, destroying its purpose in life, striking at its very soul, is what you seem to be doing your utmost to achieve, my young friends. You want independence for India, greatness and glory. If you have your way, in ten years' time there will be no India at all.”¹

In 1936, Lanza del Vasto travelled to India in order to avoid becoming entangled with the Second Italo-Abyssinian War. Over the eighteen months that followed, his views on the building blocks of a moral social and political order expanded as he studied with Gandhi at Sevagram as well as at other ashrams throughout India. Contrary to the standard image of the spiritual “seeker”, the experience caused Del Vasto to deepen his Catholicism, strengthening his conviction that *ahimsa* (nonviolence) was a crucial point of commensurability across religious traditions. At the same time, he was deeply critical of Indian Catholics and of modernizing forces in the Indian nationalist movement. As a result, he developed a vision of world order that rejected European imperialism, but sat uneasy with the anticolonial movements of his time.

Upon his return to Europe, Del Vasto committed to implementing Gandhian methods towards a peaceful world order. A large part of this effort was to “Indianize” Europe and the Church by reading *ahimsa* back into the Catholic tradition. The Gandhian communities he established, and their social and political advocacy, earned him the epithets “apostle of peace” and *shantidas* (servant of peace). His ideas and action on decolonization, however, have not received the same attention. This paper aims read Del Vasto's lifelong relationship with India and Gandhism against his complex views on peace and decolonization in a rapidly changing world order: his actions to end the Algeria War in France, his participation in the founding of a World Peace Brigade for decolonization in Lebanon, and his fast for world peace during Vatican II in Rome.

Development as the Fabric of Peace: Maria Luisa Paronetto Valier and Italian Advocacy in the Decolonizing World

Flavia De Lucia Lumeno, Niccolò Cusano University

This paper examines the cultural and political action of Maria Luisa Paronetto Valier, a central figure in Italian internationalism and Catholic intellectual circles. As Secretary-General of the Italian National Commission for UNESCO from 1959 to 1993, Paronetto Valier occupied a unique position at the intersection of Italian diplomacy, religious peace advocacy, and global decolonization efforts. Drawing on her personal conviction that the horrors of World War II required a “nobler, higher” effort to restore the foundations of peace, she viewed UNESCO as an institution born primarily to maintain global peace.

¹ Lanza del Vasto, *Return to the Source* (Schocken Books, 1943), 209.

The core of this study focuses on her programmatic thesis that “there’s no decolonization without development”. In the context of the 1960 “year of decolonization,” she argued that peace could not be a mere “sociological concept” or a state of “good neighborliness” (*bon voisinage*)—a term she criticized as technically vague and insufficient for the needs of newly independent nations. Instead, she advocated for a logically indissoluble link between peace, human rights, and development. For Paronetto Valier, development was a multidimensional requirement—cultural, educational, and social—that served as a prerequisite for meaningful sovereignty and lasting peace.

The paper analyzes how Paronetto Valier navigated particularly the tension between Western models and the cultural identity of newly independent states. She viewed the affirmation of cultural identity not as a rejection of global unity, but as a “really revolutionary attitude” that challenged colonial institutional models and required a radical conversion of mentality in both Africa and Europe. Her work specifically addressed the elites of newly independent countries, organizing seminars in West Africa and participating in the 1968 Nairobi Conference of African Ministers of Education to build practical networks of solidarity.

The research draws on extensive archival work at the Luigi Sturzo Institute in Rome, which houses the documentary heritage donated by the Paronetto Valier family. By analyzing over 200 publications and previously unorganized personal notes, this study evaluates how an Italian woman intellectual influenced international policies on development as a primary “precondition for peace” during the height of the Cold War and the decolonization era.

We Accuse! Transnational Women’s Mobilization and Decolonial Politics from Asia to Italy (1945–1954)

Rossella Roncati, Ca’ Foscari University of Venice

The paper examines the translocal dynamics of Italian left-wing women’s movements’ engagement with Asian decolonial struggles during the early Cold War, from the immediate postwar years to the Geneva Conference. In this period, Italy’s largest leftist mass women’s organization, the Union of Italian Women (UDI), in collaboration with national and transnational peace organizations – including Partigiani per la pace, the World Peace Council, and the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) – promoted peace campaigns that highlighted the colonial entanglements of major global powers in Asia. The analysis focuses on mobilizations related to three key conflicts: the Indonesian War of Independence (1945–1949), the First Indochina War (1946–1954), and the Korean War (1950–1953). Situated within the historiography of *Global Socialist Feminism*, the paper foregrounds the crucial role played by women’s federations from colonized or formerly colonized countries in fostering transnational anticolonial mobilization, a dynamic clearly visible at the Asian Women’s Conference in Beijing in 1949, as noted by Elizabeth Armstrong (2023). In Italy, the appeal to decolonial struggle intersected with gendered and social claims articulated through UDI protests and demonstrations at national and local levels. The study draws on sources from the UDI National Archive and local UDI archives, press sources – particularly the magazine *Noi Donne* – and coeval documents produced by the WIDF, and the All-China Women’s Democratic Federation. Overall, the paper contributes to challenging the bipolar paradigm that continues to structure interpretations of the Cold War by recovering actors and political imaginaries marginalized in dominant historiography and by interrogating the persistence of colonial epistemologies in historical narratives.

Reframing Peace after Stalin: Bruno Bernini, the WFDY, and the Decolonizing World (1953-1959)

Vincenzo Colaprice, University of Turin

This paper examines the presidency of the Italian communist Bruno Bernini at the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY) between 1953 and 1959, situating his leadership within the broader transformation of socialist international organizations during the post-Stalin era. Founded in 1945 in the context of the antifascist alliance, the WFDY brought together youth organizations from different political backgrounds before the polarization of the early Cold War reshaped it into a body largely aligned with the Soviet Union. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the organization adopted a political culture strongly influenced by the Cominform framework, presenting the struggle for peace primarily through the lens of the confrontation between opposing camps.

Bernini assumed the presidency at a moment when this framework was increasingly questioned. The death of Stalin, the emergence of the doctrine of peaceful coexistence, and the rapid expansion of decolonization profoundly transformed the international context. At the same time, the rise of newly independent states and the debates surrounding the Bandung Conference (1955) brought new political actors onto the global stage, reshaping discussions about peace and international cooperation.

Within this changing context, the leadership of the WFDY began to consider the need for a political and organizational reform capable of adapting the federation to the new international climate. While this process was encouraged by Soviet initiatives connected to the broader reorientation of the socialist camp, it also generated debates about the future identity of the organization. As president, Bernini played an active role in these discussions and contributed to pushing the reformist agenda further than some of its original promoters had envisaged.

Drawing on archival sources from the WFDY archives in Budapest, the archives of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), and Bernini's personal memoir, the paper reconstructs its role in the debates surrounding the reform of the organization during the mid-1950s. Particular attention is given to the ways in which Bernini sought support among youth organizations from Global South countries. In several instances, these actors proved receptive to proposals aimed at redefining the WFDY as a broader platform for cooperation among youth movements, while at the same time tensions emerged with several organizations from socialist countries, especially the Soviet Komsomol.

The positions advanced by Bernini were closely connected to the international outlook of the PCI in the mid-1950s and were influenced by Palmiro Togliatti's reflections on polycentrism and the gradual overcoming of rigid bloc divisions within the international communist movement. In this perspective, the reform of the WFDY envisioned by Bernini reflected an attempt to link the politics of peaceful coexistence with the aspirations of newly independent countries and youth movements emerging from ongoing processes of decolonization.

The paper forms part of a broader research project on the twenty-eight years of Italian leadership of the WFDY (1950–1978) and contributes to the ongoing reassessment of the historiography on the wider network of international democratic organizations, which have often been interpreted in Cold War scholarship as mere Soviet fronts.

Youth, peace advocacy, and transnational socialist networks: Italian communist activists and China in the early Cold War

Sofia Graziani, University of Trento

This paper examines the role of Italian communist youth in China-Italy relations through engagement with soviet-sponsored transnational socialist organizations that emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War and contributed to the creation of a shared space for peace advocacy and political and cultural exchange.

These socialist networks provided concrete opportunities for contact and circulation of ideas, becoming particularly crucial in the early years of the People's Republic of China. In a context marked by China's international isolation, such platforms functioned as privileged channels for the new socialist state's international projection and for the construction of transnational networks.

The paper focuses on the activism of Italian communist youth in engaging with China mainly through participation in the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY). By examining selected key actors involvement in these activities, the paper explores Italian youth activists' perceptions of China and situates them within the broader context of China-Italy relations and international peace advocacy between the late 1940s and the mid-1950s.