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ITALIAN MASS MEDIA AND THE ATOM IN THE 1960S:
THE MEMORY OF HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI
AND THE PEACEFUL ATOM (1963-1967)

THE “ATOMIC AGE”

In the early 1960s, Italians were often regarded, both by international observers, like the US Information Agency (USIA), and by Italian ones, as not very well informed about, nor much aware of, the complexities of nuclear issues and crises – especially in comparison with the peoples of other European states, in particular the West Germans, the English and the French. A 1964 USIA survey, for example, reported that, as a whole, over 70 per cent of Italians either had wrong ideas about the Partial Test Ban Treaty or ignored its existence altogether. Even the Cuban missile crisis seemed to be known only to six out of ten interviewees, while the proportion was eight out of ten in France and in the United Kingdom, and almost nine out of ten in West Germany.¹ “Atomic awareness”, as well-known philosopher Norberto Bobbio later remarked, had yet to be built in Italy at the time, to the point that pondering over the “atomic condition” – as Bobbio himself claimed already in 1961 – should have been the main concern of philosophers themselves,² in the hope of reaching out to the men and women rightfully living submerged in the “realm” of the “everyday”, suppressing the very thought of atomic death.³

This did not mean, however, that Italians were not afraid of the bomb – in fact, USIA surveys from the same period revealed that, on the contrary, they were particularly sensitive to the issue of nuclear weapons and favored disarmament, even general and complete, in very high numbers. Nor did it mean that nuclear energy and atomic weapons were absent from the public debate in Italy during the 1960s, in mass media too and in what could be considered the “realm of the everyday” par excellence: mass-market magazines and television. As has been noted, in fact, since the second half of

1 See Laura Ciglioni, “Italian Public Opinion in the Atomic Age: Mass-market Magazines Facing Nuclear Issues (1963-1967)”, forthcoming.

2 Norberto Bobbio, *Il problema della guerra e le vie della pace* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1997), 21.

3 Bobbio, *Il problema della guerra*, 8.

the 1950s, attention and alarm for these issues had actually been growing in all sectors of Italian society, resulting in mounting anxieties, an increasing degree of mobilization, and also in a sort of “cult of the atom” taking root around its use for civilian purposes.⁴ The popular press was no exception: during the 1960s, nuclear issues were a recurring object of debate, in one form or another, in the pages of illustrated magazines, and actually the possibility of the apocalypse was repeatedly presented as the current, inescapable condition for all human beings and the unavoidable starting point of any reasoning, as historian Paolo Spriano claimed from the columns of the Communist weekly *Vie Nuove*.⁵ Mass-market magazines also echoed and amplified the discourse on the atom then developing in a variety of venues: the image of the ominous mushroom, multiplied on cinema screens by movies like *Fail-Safe* or *Dr. Strangelove*, was evoked in the popular press as the pictures themselves were widely discussed; the debate on nuclear weapons, sparked on the popular television program *Tribuna elettorale* during the electoral campaign of 1963, was then dissected in magazines. Likewise, the success of Virgilio Sabel’s documentary *Storia della bomba atomica* (History of the Atomic Bomb, broadcast in six episodes on RAI 2 in early 1963 and watched by a high number of spectators) was both announced and reviewed for magazine readers. Mass-market weeklies gave news of the correspondence between Günther Anders and Claude Eatherly being published by Einaudi, they reviewed the theatrical play on Julius Robert Oppenheimer staged in Milan in 1964, and familiarized the readers with the idea that a poetry of the atomic age was born, heralded by Edith Sitwell, while also sculptures and operas for the atomic age were being produced thanks to artists like Agenore Fabbri and Giacomo Manzoni. Even an *Encyclopedia of the Atomic Civilization*, translated into Italian from French and distributed by the publisher Il Saggiatore, was advertised in the weekly *Epoca* through a coupon valid for buying the ten volumes.⁶

Indeed, what observers and opinion makers of all political connotations seemed to agree on was precisely the fact that humankind was then living in the “atomic age”. That with the launching of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945 a new era had dawned, and that the history of mankind had irremediably changed was something often explained not only by mass-market magazines, but remarked upon as well in tel-

4 Massimo De Giuseppe, “Gli italiani e la questione atomica negli anni cinquanta”, *Ricerche di storia politica* 1 (2000): 35-44. On the early public debate, from the relative “apathy” of the mid-1940s to a wider public discussion in the late 1950s and then in the 1960s see the analysis of Matthew Evangelista, “Atomic Ambivalence: Italy’s Evolving Attitude toward Nuclear Weapons”, in *Italy’s Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century: The New Assertiveness of an Aspiring Middle Power*, ed. Giampiero Giacomello and Bertjan Verbeek (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), 119-20. On early reactions in Italy on the issue of atomic bombs see also Luigi Cortesi, ed., *1945: Hiroshima in Italia: Testimonianze di scienziati e intellettuali* (Napoli: CUEN, 1995).

5 Paolo Spriano, “Dimensione atomica”, *Vie Nuove*, March 28, 1963, 68.

6 *Epoca*, June 3, 1962.

evision programs dealing with the bomb. The program *Cronache del XX secolo: Prima di Hiroshima* (Chronicles of the Twentieth Century: Before Hiroshima), broadcast on RAI 1 at the end of July 1965, just before the twentieth anniversary of the launching of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ended on a close-up image of the Enola Gay, flying above Japan, while the voiceover recited: “The history of before Hiroshima is by now over. ... Now, as the Enola Gay approaches its target, a different history is about to begin, the history of the atomic age, with the anxieties, the fears, the anguish born on that day of August”.⁷

Even more often, though, the expression “atomic age” was employed, at the time, with no need felt for further clarification or mention of the foundational event of the new era. The phrase, already in use in the Italian press in earlier years,⁸ had in fact become a reference to the human condition in the postwar period as evocative and symbolic as the mushroom cloud itself was iconic. In fact, at that point, it implied a whole set of images and meanings, alluding not only to death and looming dangers, but also to modernity more in general, in both positive and negative ways. A cartoon published in *L'Europeo* in 1963 under the title “London: ‘H’ bomb with television camera” exemplifies these layered meanings and complex imagery related to the atomic condition. The sketch showed two men sitting in a café, one telling the other imperturbably: “They have added television to the ‘H’ bomb. It never rains, but it pours”.⁹ The atomic bomb was, after all, one of the many evils, or commodities, brought about by modernity.

Often moved by a pedagogic intent, Italian illustrated magazines felt an urge to inform the “average citizen” of “this Country of the ‘miracle’” (all absorbed in his promissory notes and bills,¹⁰ intent on dealing with the effects of the economic boom) about the atom. This over-encompassing and yet unfamiliar reality had also found its way, meanwhile, into what was then for Italians a relatively new mass media, television. This chapter investigates the representations of both fears and hopes related to the atom in the 1960s, as rendered for wide strata of Italian society by both mass-market magazines and by public television. The most culturally relevant and highly circulated illustrated magazines will be taken into consideration, as a form of journalism still extremely successful and popular at the time in Italy, which acted both as the multiplying mirror and as the molder of beliefs and sentiments widespread among public opinion. The selected magazines virtually represent the entire spectrum of Italian political cultures of the time: from the Catholic, popular weekly *Famiglia Cristiana* (the most highly-circulated with approximately 1,700,000 copies) to

7 “Prima di Hiroshima”, *Cronache del XX secolo*, July 31, 1965, ed. Andrea Barbato, Teche Rai, viewed at Istituto Centrale per i Beni Sonori ed Audiovisivi, Roma, Italia (hereafter: ICBSA).

8 De Giuseppe, “Gli italiani e la questione atomica”, 35n.

9 *L'Europeo*, September 22, 1963, 63.

10 Francesco Pistolesse, “Carta e matita agli scienziati”, *Vie Nuove*, October 31, 1963, 18.

the Communist *Vie Nuove* (the least circulated, at the time, with an average of 125,000 copies). Very popular in format and targeting a public ranging from moderate to conservative and right-wing positions were *Tempo* (dropping to 288,000) and *Oggi* (848,000), together with *Gente* (390,000) which held even more far right, anti-communist positions. *Epoca* (305,000), modeled after *Life* and *Paris Match*, had, instead, a middle-of-the-road standing combined with staunch anti-Communism. Those more cultural were *L'Europeo* (around 190,000), on moderate, lay positions, addressing an audience which stretched from the milieus close to the Social Democratic Party to the less conservative centre and to the Liberal Party, and *L'Espresso* (136,000), which gave voice to moderate leftist culture.¹¹ In addition, will be taken into consideration television programs broadcast by the two public networks existing at the time in Italy, RAI 1 and RAI 2, dealing with nuclear issues and particularly successful with the audience or significant for the broader public debate.

The analysis focuses on the period from the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis and the signing of the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty up to the beginning of the debate on the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1967. The period taken in consideration was, on the domestic front, also a time of deep transformation in Italy, both in terms of political developments (with the long-prepared inclusion of the Socialist Party into government taking place) and of relevant social and cultural changes. The fears of the atomic age are analyzed through the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, chosen as a litmus test in as much as it represents one of the privileged venues for both molding representations of the atomic bomb and negotiating fears. "Atomic hopes" are investigated, instead, by examining the emergent fascination for the peaceful uses of atomic energy then spreading, analyzed here as the catalyst for a positive perception of the atom at a time when national energy policies were experiencing a crucial turning point.

THE MEMORY OF HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI IN ITALY TWENTY YEARS LATER

In 1967, a two-page spread with an advertisement featuring a huge mushroom cloud, full-page size, appeared in mass-market magazines to promote an encyclopedia of

11 On periodicals and their circulation, reported here as it was in the late 1960s, see Nello Ajello, "Il settimanale di attualità" and Laura Lilli, "La stampa femminile", in *La stampa italiana del neocapitalismo*, ed. Valerio Castronovo and Nicola Tranfaglia (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1976), 173-311; Mario Marazziti, "Cultura di massa e valori cattolici: il modello di 'Famiglia Cristiana'", in *Pio XII*, ed. Andrea Riccardi (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1984), 307-33; *La bella addormentata: Morfologia e struttura del settimanale italiano*, intr. Arturo Quintavalle (Parma: Istituto di Storia dell'arte, 1972). For *Vie Nuove* see *Conferenza nazionale della stampa comunista. Rapporto di Emanuele Macaluso. Intervento di Luigi Longo. Risoluzione. Roma, 16-17 dicembre 1966*, Archivio Partito Comunista, Sezione stampa e propaganda, mf0530, p. 2436, Istituto Gramsci, Roma.

World War II sold in weekly installments.¹² The slogan, written over the atomic mushroom itself, and continuing across the opposite page, read: “This is how it ended. But how did it start?”. The image of the atomic explosions over Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the memory of the event that had marked the end of the recent war were, in fact, all but erased in Italian mass media. If the anniversary of 1965, in particular, provided an occasion for extensive commemorations and reports – also on television, as seen above –, dossiers promising to finally uncover the “secrets of the bomb on Hiroshima”,¹³ detailed articles, and white papers recurred over the years in the pages of mass-market magazines, not necessarily marking symbolic dates or events, like the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. Likewise, the story of how scientists, revered priests of the “atomic age”, had created the bomb, the history of the Alamogordo test, interviews with nuclear physicists or with their families kept being published in the popular press and aired on television during the decade, and actually constituted in illustrated magazines a minor genre within the broader, well present memory of World War II.

The persistence of the memory of Hiroshima, and of all the men and facts related to it – which, somehow, seemed to eclipse the memory of Nagasaki, usually mentioned but seldom at the centre of the narrative – may lie in the fact that it provided a partial possibility to give more precise outlines to a post-atomic scenario. While all sorts of nuclear fears clouded the minds of Italians and were then evoked in the public debate, they were always revolving around the unknown and the invisible – proliferation, the Chinese and French atomic bombs, Germany trying to “get a finger” on the nuclear trigger, the Vietnam War and the risk of escalation toward a nuclear World War III, contamination and pollution by nuclear waste.¹⁴ Hiroshima and Nagasaki, instead, allowed men and women of the atomic age “to look under the mushroom cloud”, at the consequences of the dreaded explosion.

American historian John W. Dower noted that directing the gaze under the atomic mushroom has often been unbearable for Americans and American culture.¹⁵ In the case of a country that, like Italy, not only had not launched the bomb, but did not even have an atomic arsenal, looking at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was probably partially easier, though not necessarily unproblematic. In the popular press, for example, while the textual descriptions of the explosions and of the consequences of the atomic bombs offered

12 See for example *L'Europeo*, October 19, 1967, 98-99; *Oggi*, October 5, 1967, 114-15.

13 Advertisement of a reportage featured in the September issue of the monthly periodical *Successo*, published in *Tempo*, September 7, 1963, 19.

14 See Cigliani, “Italian Public Opinion in the Atomic Age”.

15 John D. Dower, “Three Narratives of our Humanity”, in *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, ed. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 87.

to the Italian readers were vivid, horrific, and detailed, the visual representation of the atomic catastrophe was definitely more restrained. With the exception obviously of *Vie Nuove*,¹⁶ and especially of *Epoca* (the magazine, in fact in 1965 gave ample space to the photos of a wounded child amid ruins and of other injured, dying victims, some already published in *Life* in 1952),¹⁷ photographs available in illustrated weeklies concentrated more often on symbolic buildings and objects, like the well-known dome of Hiroshima, rather than on human victims or images of devastation. The published pictures of the *hibakusha*, for example, were usually small or not very explicit, with mutilations and scars or swollen limbs barely visible. Television programs were even less explicit and tended to focus on the moments preceding the explosion. The broadcast dedicated to the commemoration of Hiroshima in the summer of 1965, for instance, as mentioned above, ended with the Enola Gay flying over the city, just before the actual launch of the bomb took place. The program lengthily focused on the three months of war before the launch and on the decision-making process leading to it. In very much the same way, the long documentary *Storia della bomba atomica*, aired between February and March 1963 – a severe denunciation of the evils of nuclear weapons –, virtually ended its extensive narration of the history of the bomb focusing on the dramatic moments before the launch over Hiroshima, followed by images of atomic blasts and of mushroom clouds monstrously expanding in the sky. The story then swiftly moved on to interviewing the protagonists of the event about their responsibilities and eventual feelings of repentance – the scientists and General Leslie Richard Groves –, and closed with an open-ended, mildly optimistic conclusion about the disarmament talks in Geneva.¹⁸

In almost all the weeklies, moreover, the descriptions of the enduring and unspeakable sufferings not shown, but clearly described in the journalistic texts, were compensated by photos of a rebuilt, modern Hiroshima. In 1965, *Oggi* even titled one article “Hiroshima: metropolis of tourism”:¹⁹ color and black and white images of a lively and bustling city contributed to relegate the atomic bomb in the past as a very dramatic episode, but an episode after all. Quite significantly, opinion makers of all political connotations seemed compelled to end their articles on the same consoling note: the

16 See for example Enrico Bordini, “Quel giorno a Hiroshima”, *Vie Nuove*, July 22, 1965, 47.

17 See “Ricordiamo Hiroshima”, *Epoca*, August, 1, 1965, 18-25. On the photos of Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the atomic bombing see Dick van Lente, ed., *The Nuclear Age in Popular Media: A Transnational History, 1945-1965* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). For *Life* issue of September 29, 1952 see Peter Bacon Hales, “Imagining the Atomic Age: Life and the Atom”, in *Looking at Life Magazine*, ed. Erika Doss (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 103-19, esp. 112-15.

18 *Storia della bomba atomica*, episode 6, March 22, 1963, program by Virgilio Sabel, Teche Rai, ICBSA. Giuseppe Berto and Ginestra Amaldi collaborated with the program.

19 Silvio Bertoldi, “Hiroshima: metropoli del turismo”, *Oggi*, August 12, 1965, 46-52.

reassurance that the people of Hiroshima felt no hate, that they had forgiven and simply wanted their terrible experience to be a warning for the future.²⁰

This representation of Hiroshima twenty years after was accompanied in mass-market magazines by a discussion of the attitude of the younger generations of Japanese living in the city, americanized in their taste and dreams, and particularly willing to forget the painful past and move on. Such a representation mirrored, in the first place, the analogous divide perceived as increasingly wide and harsh in Italy between the generation who had lived through World War II and the children of the postwar years and of the economic boom. This was also a confrontation between the generation that had built the bomb and the one that may have to suffer from it, as very well exemplified by a 1964 interview by *Europeo's* young journalist Oriana Fallaci with Laura Fermi, wife of the Italian physicist Enrico Fermi.²¹

In the Italian public debate Hiroshima represented, first and foremost, the occasion for a straightforward condemnation of the use of the atomic bomb: it epitomized the taboo against the *use* of this weapon, for all political cultures, no space for hair-splitting distinctions or strategic considerations allowed – even if this did not necessarily imply, of course, a similar attitude toward nuclear arsenals and policies more in general. Survivors were the protagonists of this narrative in illustrated magazines: they were interviewed, photographed, and became mediators between two different eras. Paul Boyer argues that in the United States “the degree of attention accorded to Hiroshima and Nagasaki as symbols of a future to be avoided can be correlated closely over time” with the waves of increased anxiety for atomic weapons and anti-nuclear activism developing in America – from John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* written in 1946, to the activism and fears of the mid-1950s-early 1960s, up to the Reagan years in the 1980s.²² With regard to the American magazine *Life*, in particular, scholars have made the point that pictures of Hiroshima victims and a darker narrative of the bomb started to be published not only when it became technically possible, that is when “the AEC loosened its hold”, but also when the arms race and several disturbing accidents, occurred during the late 1940s-mid 1950s, made the menace the bomb posed *for Americans* impossible to ignore or silence. It thus became preferable to frame the atomic bomb in a complex narrative exploiting peo-

20 See Gabriella D’Angeli, “La visione dell’inferno le indicò la via del cielo”, *Famiglia Cristiana*, September 12, 1965, 14-17; “Le ragazze senza kimono”, *Vie Nuove*, August 27, 1964, 10-15; Ricciotti Lazzero, “Ascoltate il cuore di Hiroshima”, *Epoca*, October 18, 1964, 124-29; for a partially different view on the theme of Japanese memory of the bomb, see Rafael Steinberg, “I figli del 6 agosto”, *L’Europeo*, August 15, 1965, 42-49.

21 Oriana Fallaci, “Atomi amari”, *L’Europeo*, May 10, 1964, 42-49.

22 Paul Boyer, “Whose History is This Anyway? Memory, Politics, and Historical Scholarship”, *History Wars*, ed. Linenthal and Engelhardt, 115-39, qt. 124.

ple's fears and reasserting the "atomic sublime" at the same time.²³ Instead, for a country that, like Italy, did not have the bomb, and could therefore only eventually be a victim of it, this perspective focusing on victims and the appalling consequences of atomic explosions was probably particularly significant. Treatment of this issue was not taken as far as to shock readers, but rather aimed at reassuring while satisfying a widespread thirst for knowledge and at the same time reasserting the condemnation of the bomb.

The commemoration of Hiroshima also provided, however, the occasion for weighing responsibilities. The long chain of events and decisions leading to the flight of the *Enola Gay*, the almost random final verdict determining the targeted cities, based on meteorological considerations, were sources of uneasy questions and speculations both in the popular press and on television, and definitely constituted the other pole around which the memory of these events revolved. The main issues were the same already raised by the Franck report in 1945: the choice of bombing civilian targets and the refusal to warn the enemy with a demonstrative launch. The Franck report itself posed a problem: how much had it circulated? Had it been known at the top levels? Finally, the very necessity to drop the bomb to end the war was questioned, and, in some cases, also the tensions emerging at Potsdam were hinted at. Detailed accounts of the decision-making process were therefore at the centre of the public debate, in an attempt to determine the respective responsibilities of the military, the scientists, and politicians, especially Harry Truman. Photos and biographies of the protagonists, from the crew of the *Enola Gay* to the men of Los Alamos, peopled the pages of illustrated magazines and were replicated on television screens. The documentary *Storia della bomba atomica* put, essentially, physicists on trial – from Marie and Pierre Curie to the school of Göttingen, down to Fermi –, with Oppenheimer, whose tormented figure well epitomized collective feelings of guilt and all the contradictions of twentieth-century science, as the main accused.

The fractures of the Cold War obviously played a crucial role in determining views and attitudes toward the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan, separating the violent accusations of the Communist weekly *Vie Nuove* against the United States from other, more nuanced positions. In *Vie Nuove*, the creation of the bomb was presented, in fact, as an operation marked from the beginning by subterfuges and blatant lies, painful deaths, and immoderate personal ambition. Oppenheimer was, in this case, the embodiment of a completely negative myth: he was responsible for being exclusively allured by the "technically sweet", and represented the mistakes and cynicism of the United States in building the atomic bomb first, and then in using it on Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a form of blackmail actually aimed at the Soviet Union. In short, all the doubts and questions suggested in other narratives found in this magazine clear answers and a

23 Hales, *Imagining the Atomic Age*, 112-18.

well-identified culprit: the United States, guilty of an awful crime perpetuated solely in the pursuit of power politics. These ideas were expressed in the Communist magazine together with the reassurance that the Soviet Union – which, “luckily for her”²⁴ and for world peace, had been able to catch up and close the technological gap –, would never be the first to use nuclear weapons and actually desired a “global and simultaneous” disarmament.²⁵ Articles presented also information and photos of the anti-nuclear movement around the world, Hiroshima included.²⁶

In right-wing and moderate magazines, as well as in what may be identified as mainstream narratives, a clear hierarchy of responsibilities, instead, was not always identified: the haunting questions were just posed for readers and spectators, adding, after all, to the interest of these journalistic reconstructions, and nourishing the public’s curiosity, doubts, and probably fears. One solution proposed in this kind of narratives was to focus on the mourning for the victims, avoiding delving “into polemics” which – as *Oggi* wrote – would obscure “reality”, a reality that simply had the face of a city called Hiroshima.²⁷ This was especially the case of moderate and conservative popular magazines, in which a “neutral” memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was also framed within a broader reassuring and elegiac memory of World War II, focused on sufferings and rather oblivious to other kinds of more political considerations.²⁸ In other cases, like in *Epoca* or on television,²⁹ the public was also reminded of some of the elements of what has been defined by scholars the American “heroic narrative”:³⁰ that the bombs had probably saved thousands of lives, both American and Japanese, and ended the war. In most of these popular narratives, scientists were, in the end, presented as maybe reckless or blind to the consequences of their actions but not without scruples, the vessels of a knowledge and progress that could have hardly been stopped. The turning point was often identified, actually, in the intervention of politicians and, even more, of the military, which marked the moment in which – like Sabel’s documentary explained – “the atomic bomb [had] entered for good into the history of humankind” and physicists had left the scene.³¹ If a more unambiguous culprit was to be found in these reconstructions, it was definitely General Groves, who embodied bureaucratic militarism, the logics of war itself, and aptly personified all the most disquieting aspects of the event in what remained, after all, a relatively minor char-

24 Enrico Bordini, “Gli anni del terrore”, *Vie Nuove*, July 29, 1965, 45.

25 Enrico Bordini, “Vivere con la bomba”, *Vie Nuove*, August 5, 1965, 32-44.

26 See Bordini, “Quel giorno a Hiroshima”, 48.

27 Bertoldi, “Hiroshima”, 52.

28 See Laura Ciglioni, “Le guerre italiane nei rotocalchi degli anni Sessanta”, *Mondo Contemporaneo* 1 (2010): 141-51.

29 *Prima di Hiroshima*, ed. Barbato.

30 Dower, “Three Narratives”, 71-73.

31 *Storia della bomba atomica*, episode 6.

acter. In a few cases, such as in *Famiglia Cristiana*, the account of the frantic unrolling of events, started by modern science and accelerated toward tragedy by the intervention of the military, was combined with a clear advocacy of disarmament, viewed as the only possible path to “safety” in the face of the “apocalypse created by men”.³²

With all these attempts at rationalization and comprehension, the first bomb also remained in mass-market magazines and in television programs a source of dramatization and of very powerful narrations, which employed a series of rhetorical devices based on, and contributing to, the “atomic sublime”: the mushroom cloud was reproduced over and over in all its stunning monstrosity for a passive, awestruck audience. It was presented as both a fantastic spectacle, comparable to an uncontrollable force of nature, and one of the wonders of the modern world created by men³³ – one of the many that peopled mass-market magazines and television screens in a decade of growing consumerism and fast modernization. The fantastic, the divine, or magic are themes often associated with the atomic bomb in popular cultures, both in utopian and dystopian ways. Spencer R. Weart, in his *Nuclear Fears*, indicates *transmutation*, a concept linked to alchemy, as the main recurring narrative on the atom.³⁴ Italian mass culture was no exception, and in the narratives on the Alamogordo test and on the first bomb, references to Armageddon, to the “lapse into sin” of human beings, to the unleashing of a divine kind of force were recurrent in illustrated magazines, especially in those targeting a more popular audience. They were evoked just as much on television, where to the strength of the words of mesmerized witnesses of the event, horrified or rapt, repeated by voiceovers, the dramatic force of climaxing music and of ominous images of fires, fierce winds, boiling liquids, and clouded skies were added, to captivate the attention of the public.

THE CULT OF THE ATOM: CIVILIAN USES OF THE ATOMIC ENERGY

The atom was, indeed, also a source of deep fascination. Very often this enthrallment was tinged with rather sinister undertones, as seen above: extreme risk, power and control over nature, genius, secrecy, mystery, and a sort of arcane, rapt fear were all underlying factors contributing to this kind of interest. They were all nourished by a degree of concealment intrinsic to atomic issues, both due to military concerns and to the tremendous complexity of the subject itself.

³² See for example M. G. Bevilacqua, “Vent’anni fa scoppiava l’atomica”, *Famiglia Cristiana*, August 8, 1965, 35-41.

³³ On the atomic sublime, particularly in *Life* and in American culture, see Hales, “Imagining the Atomic Age”, 114, 118-19n.

³⁴ Spencer R. Weart, *Nuclear Fears: A History of Images* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

However, a less dark and more optimistic form of fascination for the atom was becoming increasingly present in the Italian public discourse on atomic issues during the 1960s: its catalyst was the “peaceful” atom, and it developed around the civilian uses of nuclear energy. If an initial “cult of the atom”, as seen above, had been developing in Italy in the second half of the 1950s, especially in the aftermath of the 1955 International Conference on the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy of Geneva,³⁵ a decade later these sentiments seemed to have spread in most political cultures. The appeal of the atom relied, in this case, on a vision of endless possibilities and progress, based on a reputedly infinite energy source: “our dreams won’t have limits”, announced *Epoca* in presenting a 1966 report on “The prodigious power of the atom”.³⁶ From curing illnesses to exploring the depths of the sea, to the prospect of modifying plants and animals, and even climate, mass-market magazines dreamt of a world where, by the year 2000, oil and indeed any other form of energy would be replaced by nuclear power.³⁷ The peaceful atom was widely regarded as the future of civilization; it was, again, a promise of transformation and fantastic transmutation. Also *Vie Nuove* built its own powerful narrative related to the peaceful uses of the atom: on the one hand, it was centered on its open, consistent support for a public, generously financed nuclear scientific research in Italy; on the other, it focused on the initiatives and progresses of the Soviet Union. According to the communist magazine, in fact, in the Soviet Union the most advanced research was conducted and the safest techniques implemented in the best interest of the people, without the tyranny of the market-economy and the interests of big industries to hinder or thwart progress.³⁸

In other countries a “cult of the atom” had developed also around the celebration of, and the fascination for national nuclear arsenals, usually in defensive terms, often as part of national nuclear programs more generally. In an extremely popular magazine like the American *Life*, for example, in the early 1960s atomic submarines, defense systems, and even Minuteman silos were presented as objects of beauty, technologically superb weapons and at the same time as providing a healthy and safe, challenging environment or occupation for young, brave men.³⁹ In the pages of the French *Paris Match*, the visits of

35 De Giuseppe, “Gli italiani e la questione atomica”, 43-44.

36 Franco Bertarelli, “La Prodigiosa forza dell’atomo”, *Epoca*, December 25, 1966, 43-58.

37 Portolano, “La silicosi del 2000”, *Vie Nuove*, November 21, 1963, 40. See also Mauro Calamandrei, “Ho visto nascere il mondo del futuro”, *L’Espresso*, November 6, 1966, 16-19; Calamandrei, “Le mani sull’universo”, *L’Espresso*, November 13, 1966, 16-21.

38 See for example Portolano, “Delusione atomica”, *Vie Nuove*, May 9, 1963, 44; Portolano, “L’atomo per la pace”, *Vie Nuove*, February 28, 1963, 82.

39 See *Life*: Robert Brigham, “Polaris Sub Prowls the Sea”, *Life*, March 22, 1963, 22-31; Carl Mydens, “Here the U.S. Fights the Coldest War”, *Life*, March 1, 1963, 18-29; Bill Ray and Richard B. Stolley, “How it Feels to Hold the Nuclear Trigger”, *Life*, November 6, 1964, 34-41.

de Gaulle to Pierrelatte, the “*fantassins de l’apocalypse*” (foot soldiers equipped for atomic war), the “*antiatomique*” flagship Jeanne d’Arc, the space program and its possible eventual developments were all enthusiastically presented to readers in a narrative that put the atom and atomic defense at the centre of the vision of a young, proud nation.⁴⁰ More generally, in France, as Gabrielle Hecht has brilliantly argued, a narrative presenting the atom as a way to national redemption and salvation – the “radiance of France” –, had been crafted by politicians, technologists, and journalists since the postwar years.⁴¹ In a country that, like Italy, did not have its own nuclear weapons, and would relatively soon give up building them altogether, obviously very few weeklies tried to give life to a narrative centered on nuclear weapons and the nation’s military power or pride. Attempts at it were limited to the moderate and right-oriented magazines like *Epoca*, *Tempo* or *Oggi*. The main themes of this narrative were essentially two: the first was centered on Italy being as up-to-date in technology as any other country (as shown by military anti-nuclear exercises in the North of the peninsula),⁴² and basically able to build its own atomic bombs, but too civilized to do so. The second was focused, instead, on the celebration of the Italian genius, seen at work in this field as in all others: a view well exemplified by the presentation of the cruiser Garibaldi, just equipped to launch Polaris – whose firepower was described as “four times bigger than all the bombs launched during World War II, including Hiroshima and Nagasaki” –, as a completely “Italian” effort.⁴³

As this narrative remained isolated and barely sketched, the civilian atom acted instead as catalyst for a positive perception of nuclear energy, not tinged with uneasiness, and for a modern “cult” of progress and, to a certain extent, national advancement. Research on nuclear energy was not usually portrayed as a national endeavor, not in the way it was in France,⁴⁴ and in some cases, notably in *L’Espresso*, it was actually pictured

40 See *Paris Match*: “Ce que va à être la France atomique et spatiale”, *Paris Match*, January 26, 1963, 18-21; “Il command un sous-marin atomique”, *Paris Match*, April 20, 1963, n.p.; “La Jeune Armée Française”, *Paris Match*, August 3, 1963, n.p.; Jean Durieux, Charles Courrière, and Georges Menager, “Prêt à affronter sa force de frappe”, *Paris Match*, October 5, 1963, 54-57; “C’est la Jeanne D’Arc Anti Atomique”, *Paris Match*, March 28, 1964, n.p.

41 On the promoters and opponents of this narrative, and on its diffusion over time, at the national and regional levels, see Gabrielle Hecht, *The Radiance of France: Nuclear Power and National Identity after World War II* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998). On atomic culture in France see also Beatrice Heuser, *Nuclear Mentalities? Strategies and Beliefs in Britain, France and the FRG* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).

42 “Un’atomica è caduta a Pordenone”, *Epoca*, August 9, 1964, 70-73.

43 Luigi Romersa, “La fortezza galleggiante dell’Italia”, *Tempo*, February 16, 1963, 11. See also Livio Pesce, “Andreotti: ora con i ‘Polaris’ non siamo neppure in serie B”, *Epoca*, February 24, 1963, 26-27. On the role of the *Garibaldi* in the debate on nuclear sharing within the NATO since the half of 1962 see Leopoldo Nuti, *La sfida nucleare: La politica estera italiana e le armi atomiche 1945-1991* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2007), 241-62.

44 See Hecht, *The Radiance of France*.

more as a European effort and, more generally, as an aspect of the tremendous progress then unrolling before all humankind. Nonetheless, scientific research on the civilian uses of atomic energy was at that point considered irremissible in very different milieus, and widely regarded as vital – as even a periodical like *Famiglia Cristiana* acknowledged in some measure⁴⁵ – to keep Italy on a par with other industrialized countries, or at least not lagging behind.⁴⁶ In fact, the appeal of the civilian uses of nuclear energy was so general and enthusiastic that it was also used, on the occasion of the debates on the Multi Lateral Force and, later, on the NPT, as a sort of “passkey” argument, mentioned (more or less in earnest) by all the voices stressing the possibilities and advantages that Italy may have, in the first case, gained, and in the second case, lost. Besides, the development of a nuclear energy policy was not perceived as fundamentally at odds with the artistic and historical attractions of the country: rather, the futuristic domes and the chimneys of the first nuclear plants built in the peninsula were heralded as a new “architecture of the atom”, stunning in its cold modernity.⁴⁷ Even a region “of past glories” like Salento, in Apulia, with its beautiful Baroque, was considered, in a very conservative weekly like *Gente*, not endangered by the Centre Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire synchrotron planned in the small city of Nardò, but projected instead toward a “science-fiction future” of economic recovery, flourishing agriculture, and also tourism arising from it.⁴⁸

Also on television, the peaceful atom was a multifaceted protagonist. Programs dealing with atomic energy and the atom ranged from educational broadcasts intended for students⁴⁹ to science and cultural programs offering in-depth analyses of a wide range of issues: from the principles of atomic fission and atomic fusion⁵⁰ to the wonders of space programs,⁵¹ from the problems posed by underdeveloped nations relying on nuclear energy⁵² to the growth of futuristic “atomic towns”.⁵³ The atom on television seemed to have mainly the purpose of educating and, at the same time, reassuring viewers of the safety of the modern technologies implemented in nuclear power plants and for other pacific uses. As the program *Storia dell'energia* explained to the audience of RAI 1 with the aid of graphics and models, energetic possibilities had enormously swelled

45 See for example “Grave crisi all'Euratom”, *Famiglia Cristiana*, January 17, 1965, 32.

46 See for example Adriano Buzzati-Traverso, “Lo scienziato a mezzo servizio”, *L'Espresso*, November 14, 1965, 14; Antonio Gambino, “L'Europa in bicicletta”, *L'Espresso*, December 25, 1966, 9.

47 Bertarelli, “La Prodigiosa forza dell'atomo”.

48 Mario, Gismondi, “La patria del Barocco punta sull'atomo”, *Gente*, November 15, 1967, 64-67.

49 *L'avanzamento della scienza*, May 23, 1967, Teche Rai, ICBSA.

50 “Energia nucleare”, episode 10, and “Il futuro”, episode 11, *Storia dell'energia*, July 11 and 18, 1967, ed. G. B. Zorzoli, Teche Rai, ICBSA.

51 *Finestra sull'universo*, episode 16, February 22, 1964, Teche Rai, ICBSA.

52 *La fame e la bomba*, November 30, 1964, Teche Rai, ICBSA.

53 *Il Giornale d'Europa*, episode 12, May 20, 1967, Teche Rai, ICBSA.

for humankind and there was much more than explosions and bombs to develop from the atom, including electric energy at competitive prices.⁵⁴ If mushroom clouds and references to Hiroshima often interspersed these programs, as well as concerns about proliferation and civilian nuclear programs serving as launching pads for military purposes, visions of a radiant future took shape on domestic television screens: visions of space explorations and moon-landings, of more and more satellites circling the earth, and live, simultaneous broadcasts of entertainment programs in multiple countries, all relying on nuclear energy. These programs, through relying on spectacular stock images and graphic animations, substantiated the allegedly “widely shared belief” that “human progress [would] increase along with the development of atomic energy”, as a 1964 program on Systems for Nuclear Auxiliary Power (SNAPS) stated.⁵⁵ Technicians in white coats opened the doors, for Italian television spectators, to ultra-modern plants and reactors, with their metallic stairs and control panels, and their secret, concealed core of atomic power throbbing “like an octopus” in its “metaphysic pool”. The show of “Man in control of the Atom” was on display: in the world of automation and of machines, if “men seemed weakened by the awareness of their limits and their vulnerability”, they were also “sustained by their hopes and their pride”, their eyes and their hands “attentive but not afraid”.⁵⁶

In this atmosphere of growing excitement for the peaceful uses of the atom, the “Ippolito scandal”, that concerned the management of the institute in charge of nuclear research in Italy, the Comitato Nazionale per l’Energia Nucleare (CNEN), raged on the pages of the popular press for several months, especially between 1963 and 1964. Besides being viewed simply as a case of mismanagement and corruption in a country that had become too rich too quickly, the case definitely embodied for certain circles the evils of state intervention in energy policies, and more specifically the dangers intrinsic in the political culture of the centre-left governments.⁵⁷

54 “Energia nucleare”, episode 10, *Storia dell’energia*.

55 *Finestra sull’universo*, episode 16.

56 *Il Giornale d’Europa*, episode 12.

57 See for example Giorgio Pecorini, “Le sorprese dell’atomo”, *L’Europeo*, September 8, 1963, 36-39; Ettore Della Giovanna, “Quando lo stato diventa imprenditore”, *Oggi*, September 12, 1963, 12-15. Analyzing the broader political implications of the scandal and the public debate raging over it, *L’Espresso* remarked – all considerations on Ippolito’s responsibilities aside – how a large part of the press campaign against him seemed to have been aimed above all at persuading Italians that state intervention was dangerous, that “all things touched by the State result[ed] contaminated and that, therefore, there [was] no other option but [to implement] a daring program of privatization” (*L’Espresso*, September 15, 1963, 1); in short, the goal seemed to have been discrediting both CNEN and Ente Nazionale per l’Energia Elettrica (ENEL).

CONCLUSION

On the eve of the 1963 political elections, the secretary of the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) Palmiro Togliatti devoted to the atomic threat a large portion of his final address to voters during the television program *Tribuna elettorale*. In urging Italians to reject the equilibrium of terror and the Atlantic loyalty which, through the proposed Multilateral Force, burdened Italy with the menace of the bomb, he vibrantly asked: “Why should this homeland of ours”, where “so many treasures of a great civilization are gathered, be exposed today to the risk of total destruction in the apocalyptic catastrophe of a nuclear war? [...] Our whole civilization [is] pushed to the verge of an abyss, at whose bottom total destruction may lay”.⁵⁸ If Togliatti was perhaps confident to evoke deep-seated fears, equally resonating with the audience was probably the program that, less than a year later, depicted the wonders of the peaceful atom, described as crossing the boundaries of the Earth, at that very moment, to reach for space and add “a new friend” to the stars, in order to guide human beings through seas, lands and skies.⁵⁹

Thus, “atomic fear” and “atomic hope”, in the words of *Vie Nuove*, dominated the decade,⁶⁰ and were actually perceived as two possible outcomes for human civilization. Atomic energy seemed to embody both a negative notion of modernity – an impersonal civilization of machines crushing men – and a positive one, probably rooted in the optimism of the economic boom years: the vision of a hyper-modern, technological Italy, on a par with other nations. It is to be noted, however, that fear was maybe prevailing over hope or faith in futuristic scenarios, for the moment. While anxieties were well-rooted and rather ubiquitous, the hope for the civilian atom was still blossoming at the time. It remains to be seen whether it had space to continue to grow after the end of the 1960s, in consideration of both the future developments of nuclear scientific research and energy policies in Italy, and of the new international scenario opened by the signing of the NPT.

⁵⁸ *Tribuna elettorale*, April 25, 1963, Teche Rai, ICBSA; see also *L'Unità*, April 26, 1963, 1, 12.

⁵⁹ *Finestra sull'universo*, episode 16.

⁶⁰ Portolano, “Delusione atomica”.