


Interview with Bino Olivi: Italy and the Rome Treaties (Sanem, 4 April 2007)

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[Christian Lekl] This year we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Rome Treaties. What were the most important points in these treaties for the Italian government?

[Bino Olivi] I should start by saying that I did not represent the Italian government in the negotiations for the Rome Treaties. I did not take part, but I can tell you exactly which points were most important for the Italian government. You know, in those days Italy was much poorer than it is now: the boom in industrial development had not yet started, though the first signs were beginning to appear ... but our main concerns were social. First of all the free circulation of workers, because Italy was still a country of emigration. Secondly, customs tariffs for the goods that were most sensitive for the Italian economy, in other words goods for which Italy was, either for technical reasons or as a result of climatic factors and the shortage of farm land, in a relatively weak position compared with other participants in the negotiations. Thirdly, social concerns, which covered a whole range of social and political considerations in a country with serious unemployment — the highest rate of unemployment in the Community. I believe that between 10 % and 12 % of the working population were unemployed, and there were still large numbers migrating abroad. In the 1950s, you may recall, people were migrating to Belgium, there was the Marcinelle mining disaster ... it was still a recent memory. Those, then, were the main concerns: the social fund, free circulation and all that could be done to develop the Mezzogiorno, and the recognition of what the government was doing in favour of that region's development.

[Christian Lekl] Were there any particular difficulties in gaining acceptance for the Rome Treaties among Italian politicians and public opinion?

[Bino Olivi] Fewer difficulties than for the treaty on the European Defence Community, certainly. And what was the reason for this? We should bear in mind that in the meantime there had been the events in Budapest ... what happened in Budapest in the autumn of 1956 came as a serious shock to Italian politicians. It put an end to the Popular Front, in other words it broke up the alliance between the Communists and the Socialists which had run against the Christian Democrats in the 1948 election and had been beaten by the Christian Democrats led by De Gasperi. And ultimately the events in Budapest had prompted a major crisis in the Communist Party. Part of its leadership had left the party, making a public statement that they would no longer stand for the Soviet repression of the Budapest uprising, the unconditional alliance between the Italian Communist Party and its Soviet counterpart, and the continuing support for the Soviet Union that this implied. A substantial part of the Communist Party leadership left the party, which was a serious blow to those who remained. As a result, when the time came to ratify the Rome Treaties, the Socialist Party voted in favour of Euratom and abstained on the Treaty on the European Economic Community. It was a bit of a political mystery, because at the time people thought that the energy crisis and the economic problems, which had been triggered by the Suez crisis ... because that was what gave some impetus to the negotiations, it was the Suez crisis and the need to settle the Euratom treaty as soon as possible to be able to use nuclear energy for peaceful ends. That did not actually come to much ... but for the treaty on the Common Market there was more or less widespread scepticism ...