
Between distancing and competition: the cultural policies of West Germany and East Germany in Italy during the Cold War (1947–68)

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This article examines the cultural policies developed by the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in Italy during the Cold War, from the initial contact established after the Second World War until the end of the 1960s. An important transformation occurred during this period. Although initial exchanges were limited, both states began to actively pursue cultural policies in the mid-1950s. This gradually turned into open competition, particularly during the 1960s, which is reflected in the relationship between the two most influential German institutions based in Rome: the Deutsche Bibliothek, overseen by the West German embassy and the West German Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and the Thomas Mann Centre, led by Italian intellectuals and supported by the GDR and the Italian Communist Party. The article will focus on the activities of the two institutions, drawing on a variety of German and Italian sources, ranging from the respective foreign ministries to those of the institutions themselves.

Key words: Cold War, cultural policies, Federal Republic of Germany, German Democratic Republic, cultural competition

Introduction

In 2023, the German government decided to close the Goethe Institut in Turin, the first of its kind in Italy when it was opened in 1954.¹ The decision also affected the institutes in Genoa and Trieste, and was primarily driven by strategic considerations, namely the need to reduce the institutes' resources in order to prioritise investments outside of Western Europe. Founded in 1952 in Munich, the Goethe Institut is currently the world's leading institution for the dissemination of German language and culture. During the Cold War, it was

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¹ Diego Molino, *Chiude dopo settant'anni il Goethe Institut, la protesta dei dipendenti a Palazzo Civico*, “La Stampa”, 23 October 2023.

one of the key players in the West German state's *Auswärtige Kulturpolitik* (foreign cultural policy).²

If culture can be considered as 'a particular space in which dialogue and exchange took place, both in terms of state agendas (cultural diplomacy) and inter-personal interactions (cultural relations)',³ the definition of 'cultural policy' allows us to explore the role of institutions as formal actors and a broad range of cultural relations, which include a variety of actors (e.g. schools, universities, associations, individuals) and media (e.g. literature, theatre, musical and film productions, translations). Furthermore, it sheds light on the choices made by institutional actors (e.g. the government, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Culture), bringing together both cultural diplomacy as a means of building bilateral and multilateral relations and national self-representation. The field of institutions should not be treated as a monolithic entity; different orientations, divergences and conflicts coexist within and between them. Similarly, the institutional level should not be considered isolated or closed, but in relation to that of society, from which questions and demands arise, sometimes leading institutions to change their direction.

If we take the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR), we can see that Italian historiography has devoted more consistent and comprehensive attention to West Germany. One reason for this disparity lies in the different relationships that Italy established with the two countries. Thus, the FRG was an important economic and commercial partner of Italy, its international ally in NATO and co-founder of the nascent European Community. It was precisely this international context, as well as the priority given to relations with the FRG (which also promoted the Hallstein Doctrine⁴), that resulted in a lack of official relations with the GDR, which neither Italy nor other Western countries recognised as a sovereign state. Its status changed between 1973 and 1974, after West Germany had recognised the GDR as part of Chancellor Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*.⁵ It subsequently

² For a history of the Goethe Institut, see Steffen R. Kathe, *Kulturpolitik um jeden Preis. Die Geschichte des Goethe-Institut von 1951 bis 1990*, Munich, Martin Meidenbauer, 2005.

³ Simo Mikkonen, Jari Parkkinen, Giles Scott-Smith, *Exploring Culture in and of the Cold War*, in Idd. (eds.), *Entangled East and West. Cultural Diplomacy and Artistic Interaction during the Cold War*, Oldenbourg, De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 1–11, here p. 7.

⁴ The Hallstein Doctrine was formulated by Walter Hallstein, the Secretary of State of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It provided for the termination of diplomatic relations with those states that recognised the GDR, in accordance with the principle of *Alleinvertretungsanspruch* (exclusive representation of the German nation) claimed by the FRG; see Werner Kilian, *Die Hallstein-Doktrin. Der diplomatische Krieg zwischen der BRD und der DDR (1955–1973)*, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 2001.

⁵ Relations between the FRG and the GDR were governed by the *Grundlagenvertrag* (Basic Treaty) in 1972, which followed the agreement between the FRG and the Soviet Union and Poland (1970). Some of the most recent publications on *Ostpolitik* include: Benedikt Schoenborn, *Reconciliation road: Willy Brandt, Ostpolitik and the quest for European peace*, Copyright © FrancoAngeli.

managed to establish official relations with other European states and the US, with the Italian government recognising the GDR in January 1973. In previous decades, relations between the two countries had been promoted and supported by other actors, primarily the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI) and later also the socialist parties (i.e. the Italian Socialist Party and the Italian Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity).

It should be noted that conducting historiographical research within the GDR was more challenging than in the FRG. Although some significant work had been carried out previously,⁶ a real expansion of studies only occurred after 1989, when the socialist state collapsed and its archives became accessible. In the early 2000s, more comprehensive studies aimed at reconstructing the complex political, economic and cultural relations between Italy and the GDR were published in Germany.⁷ This renewal was echoed in Italian historiography, which devoted new studies to specific aspects of the East German state and its relations with Italy,⁸ particularly in the cultural sphere.⁹ The latter were highly significant at least until the GDR was officially recognised by Italy in 1973, and they remain a fruitful area of research.¹⁰

On the other hand, histories of interactions between Italy and the FRG focused on the recovery of relations in the post-war period, emphasising political and economic issues. Topics of interest included the parallel processes of democratic reconstruction following the collapse of the Nazi-Fascist regimes;¹¹ the diplomatic action that rebuilt relations between the two

New York, Berghahn, 2020; Tetsuji Senoo, *Ein Irrweg zur deutschen Einheit? Egon Bahrs Konzeptionen, die Ostpolitik und die KSZE 1963-1975*, Frankfurt a. M., Peter Lang, 2011.

⁶ See, in particular, Enzo Collotti, *Storia delle due Germanie (1945-1968)*, Turin, Einaudi, 1968.

⁷ Charis Pöthig, *Italien und die DDR. Die politischen, ökonomischen und kulturellen Beziehungen von 1949 bis 1980*, Frankfurt a. M., Peter Lang, 2000; Johannes Lill, *Völkerfreundschaft im Kalten Krieg? Die politischen, kulturellen und ökonomischen Beziehungen der DDR zu Italien 1943-1973*, Frankfurt a. M., Peter Lang, 2001.

⁸ See, for an overview, Sara Lorenzini, *La storiografia italiana e la Rdt*, in Magda Martini, Thomas Schaarschmidt (eds.), *Riflessioni sulla DDR. Prospettive internazionali e interdisciplinari vent'anni dopo*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2011, pp. 77-95; Monica Fioravanzo, *A trent'anni dalla caduta del Muro. Nuovi orientamenti di ricerca in Italia sulla DDR*, "Storia e problemi contemporanei", 2021, n. 87, pp. 5-10.

⁹ Marco Paolino, *Intellettuali e politica nel periodo della "Guerra fredda": i rapporti culturali fra il Pci e la Rdt*, in Sandro Rogari (ed.), *Partiti e movimenti politici fra Otto e Novecento. Studi in onore di Luigi Lotti*, vol. II, Florence, Centro editoriale toscano, 2004, pp. 999-1018; Magda Martini, *La cultura all'ombra del Muro. Le relazioni culturali fra Italia e Rdt (1949-1989)*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2007.

¹⁰ Thomas Bremer, Daniel Winkler (eds.), *Italien und die DDR*, "Zibaldone. Zeitschrift für italienische Kultur der Gegenwart", 2023, n. 76; Costanza Calabretta, Marialuisa Lucia Sergio (eds.), *Italia-DDR. Nuove prospettive di ricerca*, Rome, Studi Germanici, 2023.

¹¹ Cfr. Hans Woller (ed.), *La nascita di due Repubbliche: Italia e Germania dal 1943 al 1955*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 1993.

countries;¹² and the deep understanding between Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi, united by their membership of the Christian Democratic family.¹³ Less attention has been paid to the area of cultural relations, even though it has attracted growing interest since the 2000s. In fact, German historiography has closely examined the FRG's cultural policy, also in relation to Italy, questioning its (dis)continuity after the Second World War and paying particular attention to the history of the German research and cultural institutes in Rome (the Deutsche Archeologische Institut, the Deutsche Historische Institut, the Hertziana Library and Villa Massimo).¹⁴ So far, Italian historians have shown little interest in the subject.¹⁵

To sum up, the two German states and their connection to Italy have been studied separately, and there is virtually no research connecting the two cases beyond the narrow confines of bilateralism. However, relations between the FRG and the GDR have been marked by a peculiar dynamic made up of observation, antagonism, competition and distancing. One of the new directions taken by German historiography in the 1990s was to make this inter-German dynamic a research theme, overcoming a divided and segmented representation that sometimes depicted the two republics as two *Halbgeschichten* (half-stories). This idea was launched by Christoph Kleßmann, a historian who suggested looking at the two German histories as 'parallel histories intertwined in an asymmetrical way'.¹⁶ His approach was widely discussed and adapted to suit different perspectives.¹⁷ It proved fruitful, provided that a 'mechanical

¹² Cfr. Christoph Vordermann, *Deutschland-Italien 1949-1961. Die Diplomatische Beziehungen*, Frankfurt a. M., Peter Lang, 1994; Maddalena Guiotto, Johannes Lill, *Italia Germania, Deutschland Italien (1948-1958). Riavvicinamenti Wiederannäherungen*, Florence, Olschki, 1997; Federico Niglia, *Fattore Bonn. La diplomazia italiana e la Germania di Adenauer (1945-1963)*, Florence, Le Lettere, 2010; Filippo Triola, *L'alleato naturale. I rapporti tra Italia e Germania occidentale dopo la Seconda guerra mondiale (1945-1955)*, Florence, Le Monnier, 2017.

¹³ Cfr. Tiziana Di Maio, *Alcide De Gasperi e Konrad Adenauer. Tra superamento del passato e processo di integrazione europea (1945-1954)*, Turin, Giappichelli, 2004.

¹⁴ Bernd Roeck et al. (eds.), *Deutsche Kulturpolitik in Italien. Entwicklungen, Instrumente, Perspektiven*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 2002; Michael Matheus (ed.), *Deutsche Forschungs- und Kulturinstitute in Rom in der Nachkriegszeit*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 2007; Andreas Hindrichs, "Teutonen" in Arkadien. *Deutsche auswärtige Kulturpolitik und Kulturvermittlung in Italien von 1949-1970 zwischen Steuerungsversuch und dem Wunsch nach Anerkennung*, Munich, Martin Meidenbauer, 2010.

¹⁵ However, there are a few studies that focus on unresolved issues of the post-war period: Francesca Cavarocchi, *Ricerche e restituzioni delle opere d'arte sottratte dai nazisti: il caso italiano (1945-1950)*, "Contemporanea", 2018, n. 4, pp. 559-586; Ead., *L'accordo culturale del 1956 fra Italia e Repubblica federale tedesca*, "Passato e Presente", 2019, n. 106, pp. 48-72.

¹⁶ Christoph Kleßmann, *Verflechtung und Abgrenzung. Aspekte der geteilten und zusammengehörigen deutschen Nachkriegsgeschichte*, "Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte", 1993, n. 29-30, pp. 30-41.

¹⁷ For an example of the debate, see *Getrennte Vergangenheit — Gemeinsame Geschichte? Protokoll einer Podiumsdiskussion vom 29. Mai 1999*, "Potsdamer Bulletin für Zeithistorische Studien", 1999, n. 15, pp. 13-46.

comparison' was avoided, since this could obscure the differences between the two systems, that is, between a democracy and a dictatorship, between a federal state and a centralist state, of which the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED) was the vital nerve centre.¹⁸ In recent decades, comprehensive and wide-ranging studies offering an updated view of post-war German history¹⁹ have been accompanied by works focusing on more specific topics, including the *Auswärtige Kulturpolitik* of both the FRG and the GDR. In addition to research on the role of figurative art in the GDR's cultural policy,²⁰ there have been studies on the relations and competition between the two German states in European countries that remained neutral during the Cold War, such as Sweden and Finland.²¹

Although Italy's position on the international stage differed from that of other European nations, the peninsula was nevertheless a key transit point: a crossroads in cultural relations between the East and the West, where the two German states observed each other and adjusted their cultural policies in relation to one another, in a sort of mirror game. As we will see, the German cultural institutions based in Rome — the Deutsche Bibliothek (FRG) and the Thomas Mann Centre (GDR) — influenced each other in terms of initiatives and the promotion of authors and works, also in response to the preferences of the Italian public. The recent past linked to the Second World War and the German occupation played an important role in this exchange. Despite the governmental collaboration between Italy and the FRG, prejudices and negative representations of Germans persisted among sectors of public opinion. At the same time, a public memory was constructed that failed to address the legacy of Fascism, instead attributing all the blame exclusively to Nazism.²² In the post-war period, an anti-fascist paradigm prevailed, albeit not without political conflicts and contrasts. It emphasised the memory of the anti-fascist Resistance and described the war of liberation as a patriotic war with anti-German over-

¹⁸ Konrad H. Jarausch, "Die Teile als Ganzes erkennen": zur Integration der beiden deutschen Nachkriegsgeschichten, "Historical Social Research", 2012, n. 24, pp. 292–312, here p. 296.

¹⁹ Cfr. Petra Weber, *Getrennt und doch vereint. Deutsch-deutsche Geschichte 1945-1989/90*, Berlin, Metropol, 2020; Gunilla Budde, *So fern, so nah. Die beiden deutschen Gesellschaften (1949-1989)*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 2023.

²⁰ Cfr. Christian Saehrendt, *Kunst als Botschafter einer künstlichen Nation. Studien zur Rolle der bildenden Kunst in der Auswärtigen Kulturpolitik der DDR*, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner, 2009; Id., *Kunst im Kampf für das "Sozialistische Weltsystem". Auswärtige Kulturpolitik der DDR in Afrika und Nahost*, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner, 2017.

²¹ Cfr. Alexander Muschik, *Die beiden deutschen Staaten und das neutrale Schweden. Eine Dreiecksbeziehungen im Schatten der offenen Deutschlandfrage 1949-1972*, Münster, LIT, 2005; Olivia Griese, *Auswärtige Kulturpolitik und Kalter Krieg. Die Konkurrenz von Bundesrepublik und DDR in Finnland 1949-1973*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2006.

²² Cfr. Filippo Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano. La rimozione delle colpe della Seconda guerra mondiale*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2013. For an analysis that focuses on Europe, see Tony Judt, *Postwar. La nostra storia 1945-2005*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2005, pp. 989–1023.

tones. The GDR fitted into this climate perfectly, presenting itself as a new, anti-fascist, pacifist and progressive Germany that was free from any ties to the Nazi regime.

This article aims to establish a connection between the histories of the FRG and the GDR, integrating them without ignoring their fundamental differences. By highlighting their commonalities, it is possible to establish a multi-perspective approach that will enable a triangular analysis and provide insight into the dynamics that developed between the two German states and the Italian Republic during the Cold War period. Although the main purpose of the analysis is to understand the relations between the GDR and the FRG, the article also seeks to shed light on the relationship between the two countries and Italy, albeit from the perspective of cultural policies. More precisely, it examines the 20-year period from the immediate post-war era to the end of the 1960s, when significant changes occurred in the cultural policies and relations of the two German states. In central Europe, inter-German detente was indeed part of a broader context of transformation on a European and global scale, which softened their bipolar antagonism.

This interpretative approach draws on German historiography, which invites us to connect the histories of the FRG and the GDR, and cultural Cold War studies. Since the late 1990s, the broadening of perspectives has made it possible to better define the role of culture, seen not as 'a passive reflection of Cold War policies, but an active contributor to the East–West confrontation'.²³ In other words, culture was a space for both ideological confrontation and rapprochement between the two blocs. Furthermore, the greater focus on social and cultural representations has permitted an examination of the specificity of international cultural relations without reducing them to an exclusively diplomatic dimension.²⁴ In fact, cultural relations retain their specific characteristics and follow a potentially different timeline to diplomatic relations, revealing a continuity that is less affected by sometimes rapid political changes.

Finally, one last preliminary note should be made regarding the sources. These are drawn from the following German and Italian archives: the Politische Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts in Berlin, which holds the documents of the FRG's Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Historical Diplomatic Archives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome; the Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv, which holds documents from the parties and organisations of the GDR; the archive of the

²³ Konrad H. Jarausch, Christian F. Ostermann, Andreas Etges, *Rethinking, Representing and Remembering the Cold War: Some Cultural Perspectives*, in Idd. (eds.), *The Cold War. Historiography, Memory, Representation*, Oldenbourg, De Gruyter, 2017, pp. 1–18, here p. 7.

²⁴ See, for an overview, Emanuela Costantini et al., *Introduzione*, in Idd. (eds.), *Le relazioni culturali Est-Ovest durante la Guerra fredda. Diplomazia, propaganda e reti personali in Italia e nel mondo*, "Mondo contemporaneo", 2020, n. 2–3, pp. 7–18.

Italian Institute of German Studies, which contains the Thomas Mann Centre collection; the State Archives of Siena, which holds the Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli collection, named after the Centre's first president; and, finally, the Gramsci Foundation in Rome, where the historical archives of the PCI are located. The documents relating to the Thomas Mann Centre in the archive of the Italian Institute of German Studies, which have only recently been sorted and made available for research, have given me access to an almost unexplored source that is particularly useful for gaining a deeper understanding of relations between Italy and the GDR.

The first cultural contacts

In the complex international context of the post-war period, Italian foreign policy — developed mainly by Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi and Foreign Minister Carlo Sforza — was in favour of the rehabilitation of West Germany and its integration into the European political context, driven above all by the need for a rapid recovery of economic and trade relations.²⁵ Between 1947 and 1948, Italy opened its first diplomatic representation in Frankfurt, a commercial office in Hamburg and a consulate, which had other offices in Munich and Baden-Baden. In turn, Federal Germany, opened its first diplomatic representation in Rome in December 1950. It was elevated to embassy status and entrusted to Clemens von Brentano in May 1951, after the Allied powers had revised the Occupation Statute to allow the reconstitution of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose cultural department — responsible for the *Auswärtige Kulturpolitik* — also resumed operations. Also in 1951, Chancellor Adenauer made his first state visit outside Germany, travelling to Rome; the following year, De Gasperi made a reciprocal visit. Even on a symbolic level, the two meetings represented the happy resumption of Italo-German relations at a time when the countries were in complete alignment.

However, the USSR did not recognise the GDR's sovereignty until 1955. Only after this point was the East German state able to develop its own foreign policy, albeit within the confines of the Soviet bloc. Seeking to overcome its diplomatic isolation, it developed contacts and relations with Western European countries (mainly France, Britain and Italy) on an informal level, since official relations were forbidden until the 1970s.²⁶ This is why it assigned a very important role to cultural relations, making the *Auswärtige Kulturpolitik* a sort of 'surrogate for state relations'.²⁷ The support of the communist parties was deci-

²⁵ On this theme, see F. Triola, *L'alleato naturale*, cit., pp. 69–79.

²⁶ Hermann Wentker, *Außenpolitik in engen Grenzen. Die DDR im internationalen System 1949–1989*, Munich, Oldenbourg, 2007, pp. 179–187.

²⁷ C. Pöthig, *Italien und die DDR*, cit., pp. 145–147.

sive, which in Italy expressed itself in the form of a dialogue between the PCI and the SED. The Italian party never wavered in its solidarity and commitment to the international recognition of the GDR; after all, this was part of a general policy of European stabilisation. Even in the face of some dramatic moments, such as the protests in factories and cities in the GDR in 1953 (repressed with Soviet intervention) or the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the PCI avoided criticising East German policy. However, there was never any deep harmony between the two parties, due to differences in political culture and ideological approach, to the extent that there were several moments of friction, especially from the second half of the 1960s onwards.²⁸

In the first years of the post-war period, cultural contacts between West Germany and Italy were sparse and sporadic, overshadowed by the many unresolved issues inherited from the war (e.g. the return of internees, war cemeteries, German state and private property in Italy and vice versa, war crimes, etc.). The first initiative to resume contact came from the German side. In 1947, the University of Tübingen requested to re-establish relations with Italian universities,²⁹ while the Staatsbibliothek asked the Central National Library of Florence to recommence the exchange of publications and bibliographic material, which had been interrupted by the war.³⁰ The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported both requests, and the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale was released from seizure that same year. However, Italy remained aloof, seemingly less interested in resuming cultural relations. Between 1948 and 1949, the consul in Hamburg repeatedly urged the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to accept and support requests from universities and academies in Düsseldorf, Cologne and Dortmund to organise conferences or student trips in collaboration with their Italian counterparts. The consul noted that while there was 'German interest' in Italy, the latter had to align itself 'with the active action of other countries' and follow the examples of Great Britain and France, which were already very active.³¹

On the occasion of the celebrations for the bicentenary of Goethe's birth (1749), Italian institutions began to pay more attention to the cultural situa-

²⁸ Cfr. Francesco Di Palma, *Die Sed, die Pci und der Eurokommunismus* and Fiammetta Balestracci, *Zwischen ideologischer Diversifikation und politisch-kulturellem Pragmatismus*, in Arnd Bauerkämper, Francesco di Palma (eds.), *Bruderparteien jenseits des Eisernen Vorhangs. Die Beziehung der Sed zu den kommunistischen Parteien West- und Sudeuropas*, Berlin, Links, 2011, pp. 149–166 and pp. 167–185.

²⁹ Memo, Directorate-General for Cultural Relations to Directorate-General for Political Affairs, 27 July 1947, in Archivio storico diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari esteri (hereafter Asd-MAE), Affari politici 1946–1950, Germania occidentale, envelope 10, folder 7.

³⁰ Memo, Directorate-General for Cultural Relations to Directorate-General for Political Affairs, 2 August 1947, in Ivi.

³¹ Telespresso form no. 00987, Italian Consulate in Hamburg to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 28 January 1949, in Asd-MAE, Affari politici 1946–1950, Germania occidentale, envelope 30, folder 7.

tion in West Germany. Italy took part in the events with a number of delegations, and this participation was seen as an important 'necessity' in view of 'the resumption of our cultural relations with Germany' in the context of European cooperation.³² The Italian consul in Frankfurt, Vitale Gallina,³³ wrote a detailed account of the celebrations, adopting a tone that alternated between admiration and fear. In fact, he observed that the difficult economic, political and moral circumstances did not stop the anniversary from being a great success in many parts of the FRG, and that this demonstrated 'the reaffirmation before the whole world of the intrinsic value of German culture'.³⁴

Goethe was also a prominent figure in the cultural landscape of the GDR. The latter sought to position itself within the tradition of classical German humanism, of which the poet was one of the earliest exponents,³⁵ and it organised bicentenary celebrations in Weimar, the East German *Kulturstadt* where Goethe had lived for many years. The event was also attended by Italian delegations, but little is documented about this. A few months later, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave its first negative opinion on representatives of Italian universities participating in the 250th anniversary celebrations of the founding of the German Academy of Sciences in Berlin, organised by the GDR.³⁶ Travel was only permitted as private citizens, a policy that remained in force even afterwards. On the other hand, East German citizens were only allowed to enter Italy if they had the approval of the Allied Travel Office in West Berlin, and if they were not representing East German institutions in an official capacity. In other cases, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not authorise travel, denying visas or delaying their allocation. These provisions were only relaxed in the second half of the 1960s and had a particularly negative impact on the cultural sector, hindering exchanges. Two events that occurred in 1954 illustrate Italy's closed attitudes towards the GDR: the unfavourable opinion given to the request for tours by the Dresden Philharmonic Orchestra and the Thomanerchor, and the refusal to allow the Italian Film Week to be held in

³² Draft response to Senator Ciasca's inquiry addressed to the ministers of Education and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (cabinet), 20 January 1950, in Asd-MAE, *Affari politici 1946-1950, Germania occ.*, envelope 43, folder 8.

³³ A diplomatic officer who had already served during the Fascist period, Gallina arrived in Frankfurt in January 1947 as a secretary of the embassy of the first Italian representation in Germany. On his mission, see M. Guiotto, J. Lill, *Italia Germania*, cit., pp. 33–47.

³⁴ Telespresso form no. 10666, Consulate General of Italy in Frankfurt to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 4 September 1949, in Asd-MAE, *Affari politici 1946-1950, Germania occ.*, envelope 30, folder 7.

³⁵ Cfr. Andreas Heyer, *Der gereimte Genosse. Goethe in der SBZ/DDR*, Baden-Baden, Tectum, 2017.

³⁶ Memo, Directorate-General for Political Affairs to Directorate-General for Cultural Relations, 16 May 1950, in Asd-MAE, *Affari politici 1946-1950, Germania occidentale*, envelope 43, folder 8.

East Berlin.³⁷ In this case, the Directorate General for Cultural Relations at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs retracted its previous favourable opinion; the USSR had, in the meantime, recognised the GDR's sovereignty, and the event could have been 'mistakenly interpreted as a kind of hasty recognition' of this act.³⁸

At the time, the Italian government was not very interested in relations with the GDR, especially cultural relations, and they were easily subordinated to the Atlantic international order and relations with the FRG. In fact, the latter made it clear — through its ambassador — that it would never recognise the East German government, urging Italy to support it in this decision, preventing the GDR from establishing its own diplomatic and consular representations, and asking to be informed of any trade missions.³⁹ A few weeks later, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs opposed an award in honour of Thomas Mann so as not to 'give rise to discordant impressions in Germany'.⁴⁰ Despite his undoubted literary merits, the writer was viewed with a certain mistrust by the FRG as a result of certain choices he had made, including his decision not to reacquire German citizenship and to participate in the bicentenary of Goethe in the GDR, as well as his pacifist positions.

However, the first cultural exchanges between Italy and the FRG gradually shifted towards a conscious and organised reconstruction of relations. In what was otherwise a rapid normalisation of relations between the two countries, priority was given to the economy and diplomacy on both sides. As Christof Dipper noted, the 'official and political form' of culture was the area that developed most slowly.⁴¹ The German historian identifies two main causes: reservations about the young Federal Republic and the preference of many Italian intellectuals for the GDR ('the better Germany'), and the divisive issue of South Tyrol. With regard to the *Auswärtige Kulturpolitik*, it should be noted that the FRG's ability to plan deliberate action in this field developed only gradually and was preceded by the reorganisation of its bureaucratic and administrative apparatus.

³⁷ Memo, Directorate-General for Political Affairs to Directorate-General for Cultural Relations, 26 November 1954, in Asd-MAE, *Affari politici 1951-1957*, Germania orientale, envelope 1242, folder 4.

³⁸ Report: project for an 'Italian Film Week in East Berlin', Directorate-General for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries to Directorate-General for Political Affairs, 2 April 1954, in Ivi.

³⁹ Talks between HE the Minister and the German Ambassador Brentano, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 9 April 1954, in Asd-MAE, *Affari politici 1951-1975*, envelope 264, folder 1/2.1 *Rapporti politici*.

⁴⁰ Telespresso form no. 5-1203: Thomas Mann — award, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7 May 1954, in Asd-MAE, *Affari politici 1951-1957*, envelope 264, folder 1/2.3 *Rapporti culturali*.

⁴¹ Christof Dipper, *Deutsche und Italiener in der Nachkriegszeit*, in M. Matheus (ed.), *Deutsche Forschungs-und Kulturinstitute in Rom in der Nachkriegszeit*, cit., pp. 1–20, here p. 19.

The establishment of the Deutsche Bibliothek and the Thomas Mann Centre

During the early stages of the Cold War, the greater autonomy in foreign policy of the two German states became more evident in the cultural sector, at a time when their ideological opposition was intensifying in the context. In the mid-1950s, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the West German Embassy founded the Deutsche Bibliothek in Rome; almost at the same time, East Germany and the PCI established the Thomas Mann Centre. Although they were different in origin, structure and functioning, the Deutsche Bibliothek and the Thomas Mann Centre had to perform similar tasks: to promote German culture and bring the local media and public closer together. The aim was to convey a positive image of the country of reference.

The idea for the Deutsche Bibliothek was first proposed by Rudolf Salat, director of the cultural department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Dieter Sattler, a cultural attaché at the embassy in Rome.⁴² The two began discussing the project in 1952, driven by the realisation that, although the capital hosted many specialist institutions (e.g. the Archeologische Institut, the Deutsche Historische Institut, etc.), it lacked a non-specialist institution that could accommodate a wider audience and offer both a library and a hall for conferences, presentations and concerts.⁴³ The idea was also supported by the difficulty encountered in starting cultural activities in Italy. According to Salat, the latter was burdened by the ‘mortgage of the past’: the old supporters of Fascism felt they were ‘special friends of Germany’, while their opponents still viewed the FRG with mistrust.⁴⁴ Hence, the most influential political and cultural groups were distrustful of Bonn, while neo-fascist sympathies had a negative impact on the country’s public image.

The ambassador to the Federal Republic, the aforementioned Clemens von Brentano (1951–57), did not immediately approve a cultural institution of the kind proposed by Sattler and Salat. Financial considerations appear to have been the main reason for his desire to locate the library in Villa Massimo, the academy founded in 1913 along Via Nomentana to host and promote German artists.⁴⁵ Furthermore, he did not believe that the institution designed by Sattler — an official at his own embassy — would be attractive enough for German

⁴² On Sattler, see Ulrike Stoll, *Kulturpolitik als Beruf. Dieter Sattler (1906-1968) in München, Bonn und Rom*, Paderborn, Ferdinand Schöningh, 2005.

⁴³ On the opening of the Deutsche Bibliothek, see Ulrike Stoll, *Die Gründung der Deutschen Bibliothek in Rom (1955)*, in M. Matheus (ed.), *Deutsche Forschungs- und Kulturinstitute in Rom in der Nachkriegszeit*, cit., pp. 235–252.

⁴⁴ Protokoll über die Besprechung mit den Kulturreferenten verschiedener Auslandsmissionen, R. Salat, 25–27. November 1955, in Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amts (hereafter PAAA), envelope 11, ref. 3/962, f. 30.

⁴⁵ Bericht: Deutsche Bibliothek in Rom, Botschaft der BRD an das Auswärtige Amt, 7. Oktober 1954, in PAAA, envelope 90, ref. 6/92, f. 44–47.

intellectuals and the Roman public. However, Brentano felt it was important for the FRG to have a dedicated space for representative events or concerts. In 1954, he even wrote that ‘the days when the representatives of the Federal Republic had to deliberately hold back are finally over’,⁴⁶ hinting at the possibility of benefiting from a new scope for initiative.

The Deutsche Bibliothek, a name chosen for its neutral connotation ('Cultural Institute' would have evoked memories of the Third Reich⁴⁷), was eventually located in the centre of Rome, in Palazzo Bonaparte in Piazza Venezia, as Sattler had wished. Reinhard Raffalt, Vatican correspondent for a Bavarian newspaper and organist at the German community's Catholic church (Santa Maria dell'Anima), was chosen as its first director. After a delay of a few months, the library was inaugurated in March 1955 with a concert featuring works by Georg Friedrich Händel (1685–1759). The event was attended by more than six hundred people.⁴⁸ In addition to Raffalt, Brentano also gave a speech, in which he emphasised the Bibliothek's task of imparting knowledge about German literature and intellectual life in order to ‘contribute to strengthening the bonds of friendship between the two peoples’.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, cultural relations between the two countries were improving. After lengthy negotiations, the German research and cultural institutes in Italy that had been seized by the Allies during the war were returned to the FRG in 1953 (except for Villa Massimo, which had to wait until 1956), while negotiations were underway on a bilateral cultural agreement — eventually signed in 1956 — to regulate the activities of institutes, schools and associations, which allowed for greater exchange. The Bibliothek's debut on the Roman scene also seemed positive; both the library and the German language courses were well attended, and presentations and concerts were held regularly (approximately one or two per month). However, it was the musical programme that mainly made the library famous, thanks in part to Raffalt's efforts in founding the Bach Gesellschaft, an association dedicated to promoting the Baroque composer and musician.

A different process led to the establishment of the Thomas Mann Centre, which began in 1954 at the initiative of Paolo Robotti, a PCI member responsible for foreign affairs. During a conversation with his partner Keller, secretary of the Gesellschaft für kulturelle Verbindungen mit dem Ausland (GKV), an organisation dealing with the *Auswärtige Kulturpolitik*, Robotti proposed

⁴⁶ Bericht: Deutsche Bibliothek in Rom, Botschaft der BRD an das Auswärtige Amt, 12. Februar 1954, in Ivi, f. 121.

⁴⁷ Aufzeichnung: Deutsche Bibliothek in Rom, D. Sattler, 12. Februar 1954, in PAAA, envelope 90, ref. 6/92, f. 134.

⁴⁸ Tagesbericht 1266/55, Botschaft der BRD im Rom, 18. März 1955, in PAAA, envelope 24 ref. 204/248, f. 354.

⁴⁹ Deutsche Übersetzung der Rede des Herrn Botschafters, in Asd-MAE, Affari politici 1951-1957, envelope 341, folder 1/2-3, f. 356-357.

the creation of a sort of study committee on the GDR.⁵⁰ As with the Deutsche Bibliothek, the idea arose from the realisation that something was missing: a friendship association with the GDR, like those between Italy and the USSR and between Italy and other countries of the socialist bloc, with which regular diplomatic relations were maintained. The aim was to 'raise awareness of the reconstruction, cultural life and peace policy of the German Democratic Republic',⁵¹ thus normalising the country's image and facilitating its international recognition. For the PCI, the initiative made it possible to re-establish relations with the SED and promote the stabilisation of the GDR.⁵² For the latter, the idea of the Centre presented an excellent political opportunity, enabling it to exploit the trust of a section of the Italian population in the PCI and its interest in improving relations with socialist countries.⁵³

The project did not see the light of day until 1957, a year after the Hungarian crisis had been resolved, with the formation of the first initiative committee. It was composed of cultural figures linked to the PCI and the Italian Socialist Party, as well as independent actors, all of whom were united by a common anti-fascist background. The first members were the philosophers Antonio Banfi, Galvano della Volpe, Remo Cantoni and Mazzino Montinari; the Germanist Paolo Chiarini; and a journalist, Fausto Codino. Over the years, they were joined by the historian Enzo Collotti, the Germanist Cesare Cases, the philologist Angelo Monteverde and translator Lavina Mazzucchetti. The first president was archaeologist Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, a PCI member and director of the Gramsci Institute. The Centre was initially based in Via San Pantaleo, near Piazza Navona, not far from the Deutsche Bibliothek.

The Thomas Mann Centre operated differently from its West German counterpart, as it depended on cooperation with and mediation through East German institutions, which provided funding, materials and contacts. However, the institution was mostly animated by Italian intellectuals, who carved out spaces of relative autonomy in which they followed guidelines that did not always coincide with the needs of the SED. In fact, there were moments of tension and conflict, as well as periods during which the Centre's activities decreased. The first clash with the GDR partners occurred just two years after it opened. During conversations with Sergio Segre, a correspondent for the PCI's newspaper *l'Unità* in East Berlin, and Giuliano Pajetta, a representative of the PCI's foreign affairs department, GKV secretary Herbert Meyer attrib-

⁵⁰ Unterredung zwischen Robotti und Keller, 9. Februar 1954, in Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv (SAPMO-BArch), DY 30/96999.

⁵¹ Robotti to Keilson, 6 December 1955, in SAPMO-BArch, DY 30/96999.

⁵² Francesco Leone, *Die italienische Kommunistische Partei und die Deutsche Frage 1947-1973*, Berlin, Peter Lang, 2022, pp. 136-138.

⁵³ Arbeitsbericht 1956 Italien, 8. Januar 1957, in SAPMO-BArch, DY 13/75.

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uted the clash to the overly apolitical nature of the Centre's activities.⁵⁴ The latter adopted a predominantly cultural approach, with political issues present but in an indirect way. In fact, in 1961, the Centre even set up a dedicated political and economic relations committee, composed of socialist and communist parliamentarians.

While a neutral name was chosen for the Deutsche Bibliothek, the Centre was named after Thomas Mann, whose 'unifying and non-divisive value' for the German people was emphasised.⁵⁵ In reality, as we have seen, the West's relations with the writer were not so straightforward. The Centre sought to offer 'a unified vision of the German nation and culture',⁵⁶ a goal that was more propaganda than anything else, aimed at attracting independent figures and avoiding possible censorship by the state authorities, given that it dealt exclusively with the GDR.

This aspect did not go unnoticed. The West German press described the opening of the Thomas Mann Centre as a cultural offensive by the Soviet zone, which used Thomas Mann's name as a 'banner' to mislead the Italian public with 'this veiled propaganda from Pankow'.⁵⁷ The West German embassy also viewed the Centre's initiatives with suspicion, especially after it had established partnerships with major publishing houses such as Mondadori, and requested the intervention of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which approached its Italian counterpart. For the FRG, the activities of the Thomas Mann Centre represented a clear political problem and were seen as an attempt to enable the GDR and the USSR to penetrate Western Europe. Such an initiative could have had damaging effects on relations between the Federal Republic and Italy, the West German Ministry of Foreign Affairs warned. It therefore asked the government to take all measures deemed appropriate 'to ensure that the activities of the Thomas Mann Centre were substantially restricted or — if possible — prevented',⁵⁸ also referring to the importance of supporting anti-communist action. The Italians promised to keep a close eye on the Centre, especially regarding requests for authorisation of events or initiatives,⁵⁹ but as the Thomas Mann Centre was formally a private Italian association, no concrete measures

⁵⁴ Report on the trip to East Berlin, Sergio Segre, 6 March 1959, in Fondazione Gramsci Archivio storico del Pci (FG APci), Rdt, envelope 0465, f. 0153-4; Notes on conversations held in Berlin, Giuliano Pajetta, 2 November 1959, in *ivi*, f. 0203.

⁵⁵ Programmatic statement, February 1957, in Archivio dell'Istituto Italiano di Studi Germanici (hereafter AIISG), Centro Thomas Mann, series 1, envelope 1, folder 1.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ Carlo G. Mundt, *Da Thomas Mann a Villa Massimo*, "Rheinischer Merkur", 1 November 1957, in Asd-MAE, Direzione generale affari politici 1945-1960, envelope 64.

⁵⁸ Bericht: "Centro Thomas Mann" in Rom, Auswärtige Amt an Botschaft der BRD Rom, 9. September 1957, in PAAA, envelope 24 ref. 204/247, f. 240.

⁵⁹ Telespresso form no. 36A/1173/10: "Centro Thomas Mann", Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 29 April 1957, in Asd-MAE, Direzione generale affari politici 1945-1960, envelope 64.

were ever taken to prevent its activities. Nevertheless, it was obstructed in a more indirect way other decisions, such as the refusal to grant visas to artists, theatre companies and music groups from the GDR, which led to the cancellation of tours and performances that had sometimes already been organised.

The opening of the Thomas Mann Centre drew the attention of the West German press to the Deutsche Bibliothek, whose activities were considered unsystematic and unrepresentative of 'all German spiritual trends',⁶⁰ given that most of its initiatives focused on chamber music. Even before 1957, some journalists accused Bonn of not having a clear idea of the Deutsche Bibliothek's remit; they deemed its programme incapable of attracting the Roman public, as the 'elegant' receptions reserved for diplomats did not seem particularly useful for promoting the FRG.⁶¹ The activities were based on classical German heritage, revolving mainly around Goethe, Schiller, Winckelmann, Bach and Beethoven. The presentations, which were rather conventional, were entrusted to people close to Raffalt and Sattler, or to members of German intellectual circles. This elitist attitude prevented the Deutsche Bibliothek from reaching a wider audience or exploiting the full potential of newspapers.

In the meantime, the FRG's *Auswärtige Kulturpolitik* began to receive greater attention in the Bundestag. More funding and a new direction were primarily solicited by the deputies from the Social Democratic Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD), including the head of cultural policy, Georg Kahn-Ackermann. During a lengthy debate with the Foreign Affairs Minister, Heinrich von Brentano (1955–61), Kahn-Ackermann cited the case of Italy, complaining that no knowledge of German cultural life had been disseminated in the peninsula since 1945.⁶² In a similar vein, Sattler acknowledged the disorientation of West Germany and the difficulty of providing clear cultural references in the contemporary world: 'Following emigration, war, denazification and the division of Germany, it is difficult for outside observers to know how important, for example, Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht, Carl Zuckmayer, Hermann Hesse or Hans Carossa, Ernst Jünger and Heidegger are in the intellectual life of the Federal Republic.'⁶³

⁶⁰ Joachim Schilling, *Sonno beato a Roma. L'offensiva culturale di Pankow in Italia trova un appoggio nella passività della Repubblica federale*, "Welt der Arbeit", 5 April 1957, in Asd-MAE, Direzione generale affari politici 1945-1960, envelope 64. Similar arguments can be found in Josef Schmitz van Vorst, *Musica barocca e luce di candela. In merito all'orientamento della politica culturale tedesca in Italia*, "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung", 4 December 1957, in Ivi.

⁶¹ Friedrich Meichsner, *Come lavora la diplomazia culturale tedesca?*, "Die Welt", 5 February 1957, in Ivi.

⁶² Georg Kahn-Ackermann, in *Verhandlung des Deutschen Bundestags*, 2. WP, 150. Sitzung, 20. Juni 1956, p. 8019.

⁶³ D. Sattler, cited in U. Stoll, *Die Gründung der Deutschen Bibliothek*, in M. Matheus (ed.), *Deutsche Forschungs-und Kulturinstitute in Rom in der Nachkriegszeit*, cit., pp. 235–252, here p. 247.

Kahn-Ackermann returned to the Italian case in a subsequent parliamentary debate, after pointing out that ‘the cultural department was a sort of stepchild’ of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,⁶⁴ poorly supported and inefficient. The opening of the Thomas Mann Centre reflected the desire for a fresh approach to cultural offerings more than ever before, taking into account the presence in Rome of ‘a very international, very modern, very liberal public opinion’,⁶⁵ who wanted to learn more about German avant-garde art than the authors presented up to that point. This marked the beginning of a clash between conservatives and social democrats over the role and content of foreign cultural policies. In response to the criticism, the Deutsche Bibliothek emphasised that its activities were not intended as an ‘immediate counter-reaction to the manifestations of the Thomas Mann Centre, with its explicitly political aims’; instead, it reiterated that it had managed to gain respect among foreign cultural institutions in Rome ‘thanks to initiatives that were entirely apolitical and far removed from everyday events’.⁶⁶

The trends in the FRG’s *Auswärtige Kulturpolitik* in relation to the Italian case were no exception. This initial phase was characterised by the lack of a clear concept of cultural policy and an attitude of restraint, reserve and moderation (*Zurückhaltung*).⁶⁷ The decision not to propose initiatives linked to current issues or with political content seems to highlight embarrassment and unease in confronting the present and the recent past. German cultural tradition, untainted by the Third Reich, thus provided an easy refuge from the difficult confrontation with modernity.

Cultural and ideological competition

Neither the Deutsche Bibliothek nor the possibility of a cultural competition with it is mentioned anywhere in the documents relating to the establishment of the Thomas Mann Centre. This could be explained by the fact that the Centre’s founders primarily aimed to support the Democratic Republic. Additionally, the Deutsche Bibliothek was perhaps not perceived as a real adversary, given the criticism that it received from the West German press. Filling the void left by the FRG, the Thomas Mann Centre was able to exploit particularly fertile

⁶⁴ G. Kahn-Ackermann, in *Verhandlung des Deutschen Bundestags*, 2. WP, 208. Sitzung, 9. Mai 1957, p. 11988.

⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 11990.

⁶⁶ Tätigkeitsbereich der Deutschen Bibliothek Rom, Botschaft der BRD Rom an das Auswärtige Amt, 12. Februar 1960, in PAAA, envelope 96, ref. 606/38.

⁶⁷ Cfr. Eckard Michels, *Zwischen Zurückhaltung, Tradition und Reform: Anfänge Westdeutscher Auswärtiger Kulturpolitik in den 1950er Jahren am Beispiel der Kulturinstitute*, in Johannes Paulmann (ed.), *Auswärtige Repräsentationen. Deutsche Kulturdiplomatie nach 1945*, Cologne, Böhlau, 2005, pp. 241–258, here pp. 246–249.

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ground: the Italian intellectual world, which was dominated by left-wing intellectuals, with whom the FRG failed to establish contact. The Centre's cultural offerings also compensated for the shortcomings of the Deutsche Bibliothek. The first author to be presented to the Italian public was the poet Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), through a travelling exhibition and a series of conferences and concerts to mark the centenary of his death. He was chosen partly because he had been a friend of Marx and Engels, partly because he represented the 'democratic strand of German culture'.⁶⁸ The authors presented by the Centre in agreement with the GDR, which provided the materials for the exhibitions, were part of a political framework, even if they were not used for overt propaganda purposes. Furthermore, the Centre neglected German classicism, to which it only devoted space from the 1970s onwards.⁶⁹ Instead, it focused on modern and contemporary authors, such as the expressionist painter and sculptor Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945), a socialist and pacifist to whom the Centre dedicated numerous exhibitions.

One of the most recurrent names in the activities promoted by the Thomas Mann Centre was that of Bertold Brecht (1898–1956). The Germanists Cesare Cases and Paolo Chiarini held conferences on his works, whereas exhibitions on his theatre company, the Berliner Ensemble, were staged for decades in various cities throughout Italy. Recitals of his lyrics and ballads, also broadcast on radio and television, were so frequent that they were even included in the celebrations for the Centre's tenth anniversary in 1967.⁷⁰ There was a fortunate convergence of interest in Brecht among important Italian intellectuals, especially the film director Giorgio Strehler and Paolo Grassi, the director of the Piccolo Teatro in Milan. Through numerous productions of his plays, they facilitated their successful reception in Italy.⁷¹ While emphasising the political nature of Brecht's work, the intellectuals associated with the Thomas Mann Centre never presented him as an 'artist of the GDR': his figure 'exceeded' the narrow confines of the socialist state. Nevertheless, the GDR tried to use Brecht as a form of cultural capital in its relations with Western Europe, even though the playwright's relationship with the SED regime was more complex and contentious than was publicly acknowledged.⁷² On the other hand, the FRG

⁶⁸ Draft of the programmatic statement, no date, in AIISG, Centro Thomas Mann, series 1, envelope 1, folder 1.

⁶⁹ For the overall history of the Thomas Mann Centre, see Costanza Calabretta, *Il Centro Thomas Mann: un'istituzione culturale della Guerra fredda*, in Ead., M.L. Sergio (eds.), *Italia-DDR*, cit., pp. 89–111.

⁷⁰ For the anniversary, Gisella May from the Berliner Ensemble gave a concert at the Olympic Stadium, accompanied by the Rome Philharmonic Orchestra. See the Programme agreed between the Thomas Mann Centre and the FRG–Italy Association, no date, in AIISG, Centro Thomas Mann, series 1, envelope 19, folder 175.

⁷¹ Cfr. Paola Barbon, 'Il signor B. B.'. *Wege und Umwege der italienischen Brecht-Rezeption*, Bonn, Bouvier, 1987.

⁷² Cfr. Werner Hecht, *Die Mühlen der Ebenen. Brecht und die DDR*, Berlin, Aufbau, 2013.

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attempted to censor Brecht, as well as the playwright Franz Wedekind (1864–1918), by prohibiting any performances of their work abroad, as they were not considered worthy representatives of German culture. Kahn-Ackermann again denounced this action, calling it a sign of ‘intolerance and petty-bourgeois political blindness’.⁷³

Exploited by the Democratic Republic and opposed by the Federal Republic, Brecht became a pawn in the cultural conflict of the Cold War. Although his work was not censored in Italy, his company was prevented from touring there until the mid-1960s. In fact, since the Allied Travel Office had not given its approval, the Italian government denied visas to the Berliner Ensemble, causing the cancellation of performances already scheduled as part of the Venice Biennale (1961, 1962) and at the Maggio Fiorentino theatre (1964). These refusals triggered reactions from the Thomas Mann Centre and left-wing parties, who denounced the policies of the Italian government and the Federal Republic. In 1961, a protest letter accusing the government of damaging both the Biennale and Italy’s cultural prestige, signed by around 70 intellectuals and artists, was published in *Avanti!* and *l’Unità*.⁷⁴ A satirical cartoon targeting the Minister of the Interior, Mario Scelba, drew a comparison between the measures preventing the Berliner Ensemble from entering Italy and the tolerance shown towards South Tyrolean extremist groups, who were believed to be supported by the FRG.⁷⁵ The issue of the denied visas even reached the Chamber of Deputies, where Raffaele De Grada (PCI) presented a parliamentary inquiry, speaking of a ‘McCarthyist attitude’ that was damaging the Venice Biennale, whose international character made ‘the ban on the entry of a company that honours Europe even more odious’.⁷⁶ The arrival of the Berliner Ensemble took on symbolic significance; thanks in part to a change in the Travel Office’s regulations, it received wide press coverage. The company’s participation in the 25th Venice International Theatre Festival in 1966, which brought Helene Weigel (Brecht’s collaborator and widow) to Italy, was a triumphant moment for the Thomas Mann Centre, which had worked towards it for a long time.

During the 1960s, the Federal Republic’s attitude towards Brecht softened and the ban on presenting the author abroad was lifted. This was partly because the political climate had changed. To mark the 70th anniversary of

⁷³ G. Kahn-Ackermann, in *Verhandlung des Deutschen Bundestags*, 2. WP, 208. Sitzung, 9. Mai 1957, p. 11990.

⁷⁴ *Vibrata protesta di intellettuali per il voto al ‘Berliner Ensemble’*, “Avanti!”, 17 September 1961.

⁷⁵ *Vigilanza di Scelba alla frontiera*, “l’Unità”, 13 September 1961. In the night between 11 and 12 June 1961, the Befreiungsausschuss Südtirol launched a series of bomb attacks on the city of Bolzano and the surrounding province.

⁷⁶ Summary report, Chamber of Deputies, 25 September 1962, in AIISG, Centro Thomas Mann, series 1, envelope 9, folder 89.

the playwright's birth in 1968, the Deutsche Bibliothek organised a four-day event with conferences, round-table discussions and a photography exhibition. One of the invited speakers was the Germanist Paolo Chiarini, director of the Italian Institute of German Studies and one of the most loyal and long-time collaborators of the Thomas Mann Centre. This decision annoyed Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, the president of the Thomas Mann Centre, who expressed his concern about the FRG's activities in Italy to Paul Wandel, president of the Liga für Völkerfreundschaft (an organisation that replaced the GKV). While the Thomas Mann Centre had introduced Brecht to Italy and done 'pioneering' work, the Deutsche Bibliothek was now copying its initiatives and presenting itself as the sole representative of Germany, even from a cultural point of view. The days when the Federal Republic's action was 'not palpable' and 'completely passive' towards the Centre's initiatives seemed to have ended. Bianchi Bandinelli took the opportunity to express his regret to the GDR's institutions, which were unable to update their cultural offering:

For ten years, we have always presented only Brecht and Kollwitz, time and time again! Contemporary literature and art, science and culture in the GDR remain excluded from our activities and are practically unknown to us, as we have not established any direct contact with writers, artists and scientists, despite our requests.⁷⁷

Bianchi Bandinelli also observed that this shortcoming not only limited the Centre's activities but also caused a certain dissatisfaction and frustration among its members and those who were genuinely interested in the GDR.

While the Deutsche Bibliothek was once criticised for its traditional programme and closed mindset towards contemporary issues, completely outclassed by the Thomas Mann Centre's more widely appealing initiatives, the tables had now turned. Despite having promoted very lively activities in the previous years, the Centre was on the defensive and lagging behind. In fact, the first half of the 1960s was a period of significant activism: important collaborations were established with publishing houses such as Einaudi and Mondadori; relationships were forged with various cultural institutions, from the Teatro Eliseo to the Casa della Cultura in Milan; and numerous initiatives were promoted throughout Italy. Moreover, the Centre adopted a clear line of action, prioritising events that emphasised its close ties with the GDR in the name of anti-fascism. This was what brought East Germany closer to both intellectuals — even those who were critical of Marxism or communism — and ordinary citizens, especially left-wing activists who were interested in the country and the campaign for its recognition. While progress was observed and appreciated in some areas of social organisation, such as urban planning, (preventive)

⁷⁷ Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli to Paul Wandel, 23. Februar 1968, in Archivio di Stato di Siena (hereafter ASS), Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, envelope 56, folder 285.

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healthcare and education, it was the fact that the GDR presented itself as ‘the first anti-fascist state born on German soil’ that determined the support of part of the Italian population.

Anti-fascism represented a kind of ‘founding myth’,⁷⁸ which mainly served to legitimise the East German state and nation. After all, these were born with an initial lack of legitimacy and an identity yet to be built.⁷⁹ As Martin Sabrow points out, anti-fascism was not ‘just one belief among others, but a political paradigm of absolute value’,⁸⁰ pervasive and endowed with its own discursive force. Furthermore, anti-fascism allowed the GDR to promote a self-absolving interpretation of the past, absolving itself of any responsibility for Nazism and its crimes. Instead, this responsibility was attributed exclusively to the Federal Republic, which was accused of not having freed itself from Fascism, based on the persistence of a capitalist and monopolistic economic system associated with reactionary forces; rearmament, which was linked to German militarism; its failure to recognise the borders with Poland, which was considered a sign of revanchism; limited denazification; and continued presence of Fascist personnel in the state and administrative apparatus. Furthermore, the Federal Republic’s attempts at dealing with the past in the 1950s — under liberal-conservative governments — had proved rather limited and reticent, which reinforced criticism of the country.⁸¹ Anti-fascism was, then, used as a dividing line, allowing the GDR to distance itself from Bonn, discrediting the FRG’s image and simultaneously strengthening its own at a time when the East German state was not yet recognised internationally.

The PCI agreed with this interpretation not only because of its ideological proximity to East Berlin or the anti-German sentiment inherited from the partisan Resistance, but also because attacking the FRG for its lingering Fascism and militarism strengthened opposition to West German rearmament and NATO. Furthermore, from the late 1950s onwards, memories of anti-fascism and, especially, the Resistance became firmly established in the Italian

⁷⁸ Cfr. Herfried Münkler, *Antifaschismus und antifaschistischer Widerstand als politischer Gründungsmythos der DDR*, “Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte”, 1998, n. 45, pp. 16–29.

⁷⁹ Cfr. Edoardo Lombardi, *Uno Stato senza nazione. L’elaborazione del passato nella Germania comunista (1945–1953)*, Milan, Unicopli, 2022.

⁸⁰ Martin Sabrow, *Antifascismo e identità nella Repubblica democratica tedesca*, in Alberto De Bernardi, Paolo Ferrari (eds.), *Antifascismo e identità europea*, Rome, Carocci, 2004, pp. 255–268, here p. 263.

⁸¹ Cfr. Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik: die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit*, Munich, C. H. Beck, 1996. A wealth of literature exists on the different ways in which the past was reinterpreted in the two German states, including: Peter Reichel, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Deutschland. Die Auseinandersetzung mit der NS-Diktatur von 1945 bis heute*, Munich, C. H. Beck, 2001; Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory. The Nazi Past in the two Germanys*, Cambridge (MA) - London, Harvard University Press, 1997; Jürgen Danyel (ed.), *Die geteilte Vergangenheit: zum Umgang mit Nationalsozialismus und Widerstand in beiden deutschen Staaten*, Berlin, Akademische Verlag, 1995.

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collective consciousness, generating effective political mobilisation. In this context, the Thomas Mann Centre organised initiatives focused on the memory of the anti-Nazi Resistance, receiving widespread approval. It also embraced the interpretation developed by the GDR, which emphasised its differences with the Federal Republic and discredited the latter for its alleged authoritarian tendencies.⁸² This interpretation became a popular argumentative device, used at both cultural and political events. For example, the book *Die Weiße Rose* (The White Rose) by Inge Scholl, the sister of two German students and opponents of Nazism who were killed in 1943, was presented in Rome in 1959. A lively debate involving the writer Joyce Lussu, the politician and journalist Achille Battaglia and Ferruccio Parri highlighted the differences in the educational programmes of the two Germanys. While young people in the GDR were 'educated in the spirit of democracy' and made aware of the true nature of Nazism, oblivion prevailed in the FRG, where anti-fascist fighters were 'forgotten or even vilified'.⁸³ In February 1961, again in Rome, Erich Kuby's book *Das ist der Deutschen Vaterland* (This is the German Fatherland) and a special issue of the magazine *Nuovi argomenti* on the German right were presented, with Cesare Cases, Roberto Battaglia and Sergio Segre among the invited speakers. On this occasion, criticism was directed at the FRG's foreign policy and decision to rearm, as well as its educational policy, which was viewed as a continuation and a restoration of the past. Cases spoke of a 'state of hibernation' in which Bonn had lived, when it had set aside problems such as 'the survival of the Nazi legacy, anti-Semitism and nationalism' in the face of those of the 'so-called economic miracle, that is, in the face of this kind of intoxication with prosperity that had struck the Germans'.⁸⁴ This was another recurring theme, which associated the failure to come to terms with the past with uncontrolled adherence to American-style consumerist models.

While the Thomas Mann Centre launched this cultural and ideological offensive against the Federal Republic (of which I have only given two examples), the Deutsche Bibliothek was reorganised; as happened with the German cultural institutions in Milan and Trieste, it was absorbed by the Goethe Institut, which was expanding globally. Between 1961 and 1963, it opened branches in Naples, Genoa and Palermo, bringing the total number in Italy to seven, including the one in Turin. Although the Deutsche Bibliothek retained its name for several years, perhaps to mark its unique history, it was effectively integrated into the growing network of the Goethe Institut.

⁸² Cfr. Antonio Missiroli, *Un rapporto ambivalente. Le due Germanie viste dall'Italia 1945-1989*, "Storia e Memoria", 1996, n. 1, pp. 99-112.

⁸³ Presentation of Inge Scholl's monograph *La rosa bianca* (The white rose), 30 November 1959, in AIISG, Centro Thomas Mann, series 1, envelope 5, folder 57.

⁸⁴ Conference/discussion 'The German Right'. Typed transcript, December 1960-February 1961, in AIISG, Centro Thomas Mann, series 1, envelope 8, folder 77.

The Deutsche Bibliothek enjoyed greater recognition among Italian intellectuals. This is demonstrated by the presence of writers such as Ignazio Silone, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Carlo Emilio Gadda, Aldo Palazzeschi and Giorgio Bassani at the opening of an exhibition on the Piper publishing house in Munich in 1961. In response to past criticism, it began to reflect on how to raise awareness among the Italian public of 'current German life and cultural issues',⁸⁵ without resorting to propaganda or ideology, but no longer shying away from confronting the present. The cultural offering gradually began to modernise, attracting a younger audience, as with the concert by composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, held in 1961 at the Teatro Eliseo.

Struggling to compete with the Thomas Mann Centre in cultural and ideological terms, the Deutsche Bibliothek also started to address the theme of the anti-Nazi Resistance, no longer leaving it solely to the Centre. However, the first conference, entitled 'The German Resistance — yesterday, today and tomorrow' (1960), was poorly attended, demonstrating the difficulty of attracting new audiences. The Deutsche Bibliothek continued its efforts, as demonstrated by the 1963 conference on the White Rose group. Bianchi Bandinelli, the president of the Thomas Mann Centre, was also invited but declined. In doing so, he reminded the director of the Deutsche Bibliothek, Freiherr Marschall von Bieberstein, of the Centre's pioneering work in this area, having organised a presentation on the subject as early as 1959.⁸⁶ Two years later, when he was invited to visit the 'Germans against Hitler' exhibition organised by the Deutsche Bibliothek, he wrote an even more scathing note to Marschall von Bieberstein:

I hope that the exhibition may fit into a general movement to re-evaluate the Resistance against National Socialism and Fascism, and that this movement is strong enough in Germany to make the circles responsible in the FRG think twice when the next decision is taken on the statute of limitations for crimes against humanity committed during Hitler's regime. Were this not the case, the tribute to the Resistance will not have much value; indeed, it could seem like a cover for a completely different political agenda!⁸⁷

The controversial note referred to a parliamentary debate on the statute of limitations for Nazi crimes punishable by life imprisonment, which, after a long debate, was extended until the end of the 1960s. As with the anniversary of Brecht's birth in 1968, Bianchi Bandinelli's words seem to reveal a claim also to moral primacy, according to which only the Thomas Mann Centre was the legitimate repository of the Resistance.

⁸⁵ Bericht: Die Tätigkeit der Deutschen Bibliothek in Rom in Haushaltsjahr 1960, Botschaft der BRD Rom an das Auswärtige Amt, 23 März 1961, in PAAA, B. 96 Ref. 606/38.

⁸⁶ Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli to Freiherr Marschall von Bieberstein, 16 May 1963, in ASS, Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, envelope 55, folder 270.

⁸⁷ Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli to F. Marschall von Bieberstein, 4 March 1965, in Ivi.

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A new phase began in the second half of the 1960s. While the Deutsche Bibliothek broadened its cultural offerings and received a positive response from the public, the Thomas Mann Centre prioritised initiatives that recognised the GDR, which were more politically oriented. Cultural events began to lose momentum, becoming repetitive and lacking innovation, and the antagonism towards the FRG that had characterised the previous years gradually softened. Although the Centre did not abandon the theme of anti-fascism, it no longer sought to compete with and distance itself from the FRG. Several factors can explain this change, including a changed attitude towards the East German state. Intellectual dissent, as exemplified by Robert Havemann's case,⁸⁸ and participation in the repression of the Prague Spring led to growing disillusionment with the socialist state, especially among intellectuals. Following the events in Czechoslovakia, Bianchi Bandinelli resigned and the Thomas Mann Centre entered a period of crisis, even if it continued its activities. The same issues had widened the gap between the PCI and the SED, exacerbating the differences regarding the Italian party's decision to adopt a 'national road to socialism' and then to enter into dialogue with West German social democracy. While the SED remained impervious to change, the East German institutions maintained an unchanged approach, even with regard to cultural policy. Conversely, in the Federal Republic, the SPD's entry into government drew attention to the *Auswärtige Kulturpolitik*, which was reconsidered both in its organisational and concept.⁸⁹

Many observers identify 1969 as the beginning of a new phase, in which the focus shifted from German tradition — which was considered immaculate and eternal — to 'the pluralism and varied contradictions of contemporary culture'; in this climate of detente, the dimension of cultural exchange was emphasised over competition between systems.⁹⁰ In this evolution, even the Deutsche Bibliothek in Rome was able to offer a new cultural programme, ranging from dodecaphonic to electronic music, film screenings by directors such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Werner Herzog, and initiatives with authors such as Günther Grass, Max Horkheimer and Hans-Georg Gadamer. In the 1970s, the Deutsche Bibliothek — like the other Italian branches of the Goethe Institut — entered its most intense and positive phase of activity,⁹¹ to

⁸⁸ Between 1964 and 1966, the chemist was dismissed from Humboldt University and the Akademie der Wissenschaften for his criticism of the dogmatism of the SED.

⁸⁹ Cfr. Karl-Sebastian Schulte, *Auswärtige Kulturpolitik im politischen System der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Berlin, Verlag für Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2000, pp. 48–55.

⁹⁰ Jörg Lau, *Bildungsroman Bundesrepublik: das Goethe-Institut und die Entwicklung der BRD*, in Goethe Institut (ed.), *Murnau, Manila, Minsk: 50 Jahre Goethe-Institut*, Munich, Beck, 2001, pp. 39–47, here p. 42.

⁹¹ On the Italian case, see Gian Enrico Rusconi, *Etappen einer Erfolgsgeschichte. Ein halbes Jahrhundert Goethe-Institute in Italien*, in Goethe Institut (ed.), *Murnau, Manila, Minsk: 50 Jahre Goethe-Institut*, cit., pp. 49–60.

which the Thomas Mann Centre no longer responded with the determination of the previous decade.

Conclusion

This article has examined the extent to which the cultural policies of the Federal Republic and the Democratic Republic were implemented in Italy from the early post-war years until the end of the 1960s. It took a decade for the two German states to gain sovereignty in foreign policy and launch an effective cultural strategy following the first limited contacts established at the end of the Second World War. The analysis of the Deutsche Bibliothek and the Thomas Mann Centre revealed the interplay of typical Cold War dynamics. In fact, the two leading German institutions in Rome adopted similar attitudes, including a desire to differentiate themselves from each other and emphasise the distance between the two German states. The Deutsche Bibliothek avoided referring to political content, which was considered an example of GDR ideological propaganda, whereas the Thomas Mann Centre used the theme of anti-fascism to propose a contrasting representation of the GDR and the FRG. Competition and antagonism flared up especially between the late 1950s and the first half of the 1960s. The clear orientation and use of anti-fascism, the initiatives on contemporary authors and the support of intellectuals willing to actively mobilise gave the Thomas Mann Centre a leading role. Its competition prompted the Deutsche Bibliothek to reconsider its cultural offerings, even before Willy Brandt's SPD government introduced more radical changes to the FRG's *Auswärtige Kulturpolitik*.

The historian Johannes Lill has highlighted the uniqueness of the Italian case, writing that Italy was the only NATO country in which 'the image of communist Germany [could] be presented in such an influential and penetrating way [...], without the GDR's direct presence'.⁹² This uniqueness requires further examination, but it seems at least partly confirmed by the fact that the structural disparity in relations between the two German states and Italy was counterbalanced by intellectual and left-wing political support for the GDR. Thanks mainly to the Democratic Republic's emphasis on anti-fascism, left-wing parties and intellectuals in Italy were able to mobilise a section of Italian society that expressed solidarity with the socialist state. Things were different at the institutional level. Although the Italian governments were reluctant to close the Thomas Mann Centre, they were loyal allies of the Federal Republic and wanted to prevent possible conflicts (as with the refusal to award Thomas Mann an honour). Even in a country that was not neutral during the Cold

⁹² J. Lill, *Völkerfreundschaft im kaltem Krieg*, cit., p. 301.

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War, dynamics of distancing and competition emerged, making Italy a unique terrain for confrontation and conflict between East and West.

Furthermore, the article has confirmed the role of culture in constructing national self-representation, as well as in the inter-German and inter-bloc confrontations of the Cold War era. Finally, it touched on other themes at the heart of the cultural policies of the two states, including the public use of the Third Reich's past. The GDR used the latter to delegitimise the FRG, while the FRG used it to present itself in a positive light through its anti-Nazi initiatives. The two institutions also approached political and current affairs issues differently. Although the activities promoted by the Thomas Mann Centre were mainly cultural (despite the wishes of the SED), they did not shy away from political content, even if this was presented in an indirect manner to avoid overly propagandistic tones. The Deutsche Bibliothek, by contrast, initially ignored political and current affairs topics. For example, it avoided promoting debates on issues such as German division or dual statehood, whereas the Thomas Mann Centre addressed these with the aim of promoting recognition of the GDR. Furthermore, while the Centre had no qualms about tackling modern authors, the Deutsche Bibliothek took refuge in German tradition. With regard to these two aspects (openness to current or past political affairs and engagement with modernity), the Deutsche Bibliothek was undoubtedly prompted to abandon its more traditional and conservative orientation by competition with the Thomas Mann Centre. By the end of the 1960s, the situation had reversed: the Deutsche Bibliothek was showcasing contemporary German authors and themes, while the Thomas Mann Centre remained focused on Brecht and Kollwitz.

There are several avenues for further research that cannot be explored here. These include widening the chronological scope by analysing the development of cultural policies in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as studying the dynamics between the GDR and the FRG during this period. The reception of cultural events also merits closer examination, as this could provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the two states' cultural policies. Finally, the scope of the investigation could be widened to include other European countries in order to better determine whether the Italian case was truly unique, or if similar dynamics of distancing and competition with the Federal Republic also developed in other NATO countries, such as France, Great Britain or the Netherlands. These were countries that the GDR considered relevant to its foreign policy before 1973, and where it found room for manoeuvre.

Translated by Andrea Hajek

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