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Atlantic Community and Europe **1**

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Introduction

**How Italy became Atlantic:
Henry Luce, Life, and the
construction of the Atlantic
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Marco Mariano

In a memorandum to President Truman in early March 1949, Dean Acheson listed a number of arguments for and against the inclusion of Italy in the North Atlantic Treaty. Alongside concerns over Western security, the attitudes of others towards Italy, and more importantly the need to bolster the weak leadership of De Gasperi and the Christian Democrats, Acheson wrote: “Italy is by race, tradition, and civilization a *natural* member of the Western European community.”¹ A few months earlier John Hickerson of the State Department’s Western European Desk, a key player in the negotiations which eventually led to the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty, had written to George Kennan that “the North Atlantic ‘area’ is construed...as including Italy...Italy must be included. I would consider that Italy (don’t forget Columbus and millions of his descendants in this country), Sweden and Germany were *natural* members of the Atlantic community.”²

Scholars have produced a sizeable amount of studies on the foundation of the Atlantic political and security system. However, most of them have taken for granted the views of policymakers like Acheson and Hickerson about a supposedly “natural” definition of the Atlantic world, and consequently they have paid little attention to the cultural and ideological underpinnings of the notion of Atlantic community. This notion, as well as the role played by Italy in it, cannot be fully understood if we overlook its ideological contours. Ideology here is taken in value-free terms as “an inter-related set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggests appropriate ways of dealing with that reality.”³

The aim here is firstly to show how Henry Luce and *Life* magazine came to be major players in the popularization of the idea of Atlantic community and made it the “natural” framework for American power and influence in the 1940s, and secondly to focus on how, within this discursive strategy, Italy became Atlantic. It is the contention here that Italy’s ambiguous

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place in the Atlantic community cannot be fully understood purely in terms of ‘power’, ‘interests’, or any other approach that overlooks the cultural dimension of international history.⁴

Selling and Naturalizing the Atlantic Community: Henry R. Luce and “Life” Magazine

Several reasons account for choosing to study *Life* magazine as a major vehicle for the construction and popularization of the Atlantic Community. *Life* was “America’s favourite magazine” in the golden age of magazines. Its circulation grew dramatically in the war years and after, from 2.86 million in 1940 to 5.45 in 1948; as the magazine with the highest “pass-along factor,” in the late 1940s it reached more than 22 million people—around 21 percent of the American population over ten years old.⁵

Other factors made *Life* unique at that time, putting it forward as a revealing source for a study on the ideology of US foreign policy. “America’s favourite magazine” was first and foremost a picture magazine. Its editors believed that pictures had the power to inform, entertain, impress, and convey to the American public the new sense of direction that they deemed necessary in times of national crisis and international turmoil. In 1936 Luce envisioned the mission of the coming new magazine in the following, characteristically high-sounding prose: To see life, to see the world; to eyewitness great events; to watch the faces of the poor and the gestures of the proud; to see strange things—machines, armies, multitudes, shadows in the jungle and on the moon; to see man’s work—his paintings, towers, and discoveries; to see things thousand of miles away, things hidden behind walls and within rooms, things dangerous to come to; the women that men love and many children; *to see and take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed.*⁶

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Based on the findings of recent studies on the reception of visual sources, we can safely assume that Luce and his editors were a bit naïve in their assumptions about the straightforward, univocal messages that images conveyed to readers and how readers responded to them. However, both *Time Inc.* editors and the readers shared the assumption that photographs were to be considered as truthful and objective depictions of reality, a legacy established in previous decades by government agencies and social reformers who relied on photography as ‘evidence’ for purposes of documentation.⁷ Scholars like Roland Barthes have pointed out that the power of photography in shaping ideology lies exactly in its ability to naturalize what is indeed historical, and to construct as inevitable what is artificially created within a given social and political context. The mechanical nature of photography seems to provide a guarantee of objectivity, resulting in “the myth of photographic naturalness”⁸ which packages highly emotional material, like photo-essays from the war fronts, with an aura of unquestionable objectivity.

The reading of visual material raises crucial methodological issues. Whether or not and to what extent images can be considered a language comparable to written text and studied as such is an open question. In photojournalism, however, photographs have a high degree of intentionality; they are deliberately intended to convey a message to the public unlike, for example, photographs destined for family albums, whose main function (personal memory, family ties) are limited to the private sphere. Since the 1960s semiologists like Barthes have studied photography in journalism and advertising as a form of communication which utilizes the same rhetorical mechanisms as the written text. Barthes has emphasized that, for all the autonomous communicative power of visual sources, the understanding of the relation between image and text is vital: “At the level of mass communications it appears that the linguistic message is indeed present in every image: as title, caption, accompanying press article, film dialogue, comic strip balloon... The text directs the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others.”⁹

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According to Barthes' semiotic approach, the text guides the reader through both the denotative, or descriptive, and the connotative, or symbolic, meaning of the image. Here, as is often the case in picture magazines, the relationship between the text and the image is one of *anchorage*, as it directs the viewer toward one of the many possible meanings of the photograph.

In terms of visual impact, maps were at least as important as pictures. At a time when the popular interest in geography strongly increased, magazines were among the major suppliers of maps and atlases which, while claiming to be 'true' and 'honest', deliberately sought to distance themselves from the aura of objectivity of academic and official cartography. These maps allowed magazines to convey specific visions of the place of the US in the world war and to encourage a new 'geographic imagination' among the American public. They show how World War II was literally and metaphorically recasting the place of the United States in the world by putting an end to its hemispheric isolation and relative lack of responsibility in the world order.¹⁰

Finally, what makes *Life* and *Time Inc.* more interesting than most media corporations of that time is Luce himself, who as publisher and editor articulated his own vision of America as a world power and pursued his own agenda through both his media organization and his personal influence in Washington. Through *Time Inc.*, Luce and his associate C.D. Jackson built an influential internationalist network ranging from Walter Lippmann to John Foster Dulles, and gained access to the White House: Luce and Roosevelt were at odds virtually over everything, except the need to shape an internationalist consensus on the home front.¹¹

For all his exceptionalism, Luce was sensitive to the idea of America as the leader, benefactor, prophet, and warrior of 'the West'. He wrote in 'The American Century' that "in addition to ideals and notions which are especially American we are the inheritors of all the great principles of Western civilization." These ideals were often presented in *Life* as a common legacy

shared by Americans and Western Europeans through lavishly illustrated, serialized histories of European history and art, like 'The History of Western Culture' by Columbia historian Jacques Barzun which was presented a few days before the announcement of the Truman doctrine in March 1947. Its introduction stated that: the spirit of this series will be the spirit which has moved American universities more and more to teach history not in narrow courses but in comprehensive surveys of civilization...Our modern civilization, which owes much to classical Greece and Rome, had its roots in the Middle Ages and grew most directly out of the Renaissance...In this way *Life* will try to give Americans a perspective on History. Americans need perspective on *their* past so that they can determine *their* future.¹²

Luce was certainly not inclined to think in terms of the traditional spheres of influence of European power politics. As one commentator has put it, "despite his ostensible universalism and his confidence in the global expansion of American business and way of life, most readers during this period would have understood Luce's confidence in the civilizing project of the 'West' as constituting a distinct political and cultural identity."¹³

Defining the Atlantic community: Walter Lippmann

Life magazine as an instrument of hegemony aiming at a broad national consensus put forth not a systematic doctrine, but a wide array of different voices sharing the basic view of the US as the coming global power and leader of the West. Walter Lippmann's advocacy for American activism in the framework of what he had defined since 1917 as the 'Atlantic Community' was the most effective of these voices.¹⁴ His *Life* articles were part of the effort to educate the American public to the challenges and responsibilities of world affairs that he had been carrying on for years, mostly through his *Herald Tribune* column

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‘Today and Tomorrow’. The rise of the Atlantic Community framework in the early 1940s helped Americans to situate the US on the world map as the leader of a transatlantic space including North America, Western Europe, and the white settler dominions of the Southern Hemisphere, as all of them supposedly shared political and economic principles and institutions (liberal democracy, individual rights and the rule of law, free market and free trade), cultural traditions (Christianity and, more generally, the legacy of ‘Western civilization’), and national interests.

Lippmann outlined a path to intervention in world affairs that was able to blend visions of American greatness with balance-of-power realism. America was called to fulfil its hegemonic destiny within the civilized world without falling prey to the naïve global illusions nurtured by Woodrow Wilson. By redefining the West as a geographically and historically situated ‘community’ as early as in 1939, Lippmann’s efforts demonstrate that the construction of an ‘Atlantic community’ cannot be dismissed as mere cold war rhetoric. “What Rome was to the ancient world, what Great Britain has been to the modern world, America is to be to the world of tomorrow...the geographic and the economic and the political centre of the Occident” wrote the leading Washington pundit in a *Life* article aptly entitled ‘The American Destiny’. Again in 1944 he defined the Atlantic Community as “the extension of Western or Latin Christendom from the Western Mediterranean into the whole basin of the Atlantic Ocean...Beyond the Atlantic Community lies a world which is still the heir of Byzantium. Beyond them both lie the Moslem, the Hindu, and the Chinese communities.”¹⁵

Such references to history, geography, and religion by Lippmann in *Life* magazine came to be both interwoven with similar comments in Luce’s and others’ editorials, and reinforced by the rich visual apparatus provided by the *Time Inc.* all-star staff of photographers, including Margareth Bourke-White, Eugene Smith, Alfred Eisenstaedt, and Robert Capa. The outcome

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was a lavishly illustrated version of the Atlantic community which appealed to the readers' need to visualize this region, to locate it in time and space and, finally, to be initiated in its myths and symbols. Italy's past provided an excellent repository for such tokens.

Life goes to Rome: Religion and the Atlantic Community

Christianity was certainly a major element of the Western identity as it was shaped in the 1940s, and this is oddly overlooked in the current literature about the so-called culture of the cold war. It was also crucial in making Italy a full member of the Atlantic Community, that is in making the inclusion of Italy palatable to elites and public opinion throughout Western Europe and North America.

Luce and *Life* are a revealing case-study in this respect. Luce, the son of a missionary, was a committed Presbyterian who firmly believed that a 'spiritual rebirth' was crucial to both the restoration of the confidence of America in its mission and the ability of the West to resist the external threats of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. As for *Life*, during and after World War II the coverage of religious matters acquired a tangible political connotation: Christianity was frequently associated with patriotism and singled out as the moral foundation of America and the West, with Protestantism mostly treated in a national context, while Catholicism was usually framed in an international setting, opposing Nazi-Fascism and Communism in Europe.¹⁶

Life was a strong advocate of Christian unity against "the scandal of divided Christendom" *vis-à-vis* the threat that Nazi atheism posed to Western civilization. An editorial for the Christmas issue of 1943 stated that "of all the institutions of Europe, [the Catholic and Protestant Churches] alone have survived unamended and uncompromised."

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Among *Life's* frequent contributors, a strong advocate for an American spiritual revival was John Foster Dulles, the chairman of the Commission to Study the Bases of a Just and Durable Peace set up by the Federal Council of Churches in 1941 and, like Luce, a Republican, an internationalist, and a fervent Presbyterian. Dulles, notwithstanding his exceptionalist faith in America's peculiar political and moral mission, during the war came to see Christianity from a transatlantic perspective as the ultimate foundation of the international leadership exerted by France, Britain, and later the US since the 18th century: "We were great because our three peoples were imbued with and radiated great faiths," he wrote in an essay for the issue of Christmas 1942.¹⁷

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At a time when an unprecedented shift in the relations between America and the Catholic world was underway 1939 thanks to the appointment of Myron Taylor as Roosevelt's "personal representative" in the Vatican in 1939, *Life* often featured Pope Pious XII as a spokesman for traditional values and an ally in world politics. The pompous ceremonies in St. Peter's were featured in photo-essays which magnified the Vatican's *grandeur* as well as its increasing openness to America and the Anglo-Saxon world. Star photo-reporter Margareth Bourke-White was assigned to cover the 1944 Christmas mass in St. Peter's basilica; in March 1946 a story on the creation of new cardinals opened with a picture of Pious XII hearing "the pleas to canonize new saints, including Mother Cabrini of Chicago," while the text informed that the ceremony "was given modern staging amid Renaissance grandeur" through a "triple microphone" and "dazzling floodlight." A frequent protagonist of *Life* stories was Cardinal Spellman of New York, a key figure in the shaping of an ethnic/ideological cold war coalition in post-war America.¹⁸ Indeed, the Roman Catholic Church was emerging in *Life* as one of the pillars of the emerging Atlantic world as well as of the internationalist, anti-Communist consensus at home.

While the role to be played by Catholicism was seen as relevant in a transnational perspective, it had obvious implications within the Italian scenario and for clarifying the place of Italy in the international arena during and after the war. In September 1944 Luce's picture magazine published 'The World from Rome', a long article by William Bullitt, former US ambassador to the Soviet Union and France and a long-time critic of US cooperation with Stalin. The article purportedly outlined the unofficial views of the Catholic hierarchy—although Bullitt referred to “the Romans”—on the unfolding of the war. It was also a major attack against Roosevelt, as it denounced American naïveté *vis-à-vis* Soviet expansionism.¹⁹ Pious XII was presented as the only leader Italians could count on in order to escape the fate of Russian domination, the same domination that would extend to Eastern Europe if the US continued to be soft with Moscow. Appealing to deep-rooted Western fears regarding the barbarian Orient, Bullitt wrote that “today, when the moral unity of Western civilization has been shattered by the crimes of the Germans... Rome sees again approaching from the East a wave of conquerors.” The influence of the Catholic Church was crucial in the Italian context, but clearly not just limited to Italy. As the cold war reconfigured and dramatized the centuries-old East-West divide, “Rome”—whatever that meant—was hailed again as a constitutive element of “the West,” except that the latter was now a transatlantic entity under American leadership.

With American troops fighting on the Italian front after July 1943, feature stories about Rome as the capital of Catholicism were often intertwined with references to ancient Rome, which had always an antecedent role as a useable past for the American republic. News from the Italian front gained an attention that was disproportionate to their military relevance in the context of World War II. This is especially true in early June 1944, when the liberation of the “caput mundi” almost overshadowed D-Day. *Life* editors were careful not to frame the analogy between ancient Rome and the US in

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imperial terms, but they did package the liberation of the city as a crucial step towards the shaping of the Atlantic Community and the realisation of the global mission of the US.

An editorial stated in June 1944 that Americans, “heirs of the Roman law,” had to build on that ancient legacy in order to secure for all mankind “the idea of freedom as a natural right of all men.” Just like Caesar’s Rome had ruled over the Mediterranean world, after World War II, “the ‘Atlantic Community’ may be similarly united under the sway of Great Britain and the US, which are at least as akin as Greece and Rome. As Rome transmitted Greek culture to the barbarians of Europe, so may America be destined to be the bridge between Europe and the emerging civilizations of Asia.”²⁰

Finally, The analogy between the Italian past and the American present relied on the Renaissance as well. The first instalment of the ambitious series on the ‘History of Western Culture’ focused on Italy and specifically on Silvio Piccolomini (pope Pius II) as a successful self-made man comparable to present-day Americans: “Like many a successful American businessman who bequeaths public libraries or school buildings to the places where he lived and worked, Piccolomini, after he became Pope, took pride in beautifying Pienza...and Siena.”²¹ Analogies were found everywhere, so much so that “some of Italy looks like home to US soldiers.” A June 1944 photo-essay, intent on showing that various New York landmarks had been inspired by masterpieces of Italian architecture, went so far as to couple New York’s skyline with San Gimignano.²²

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Reporting from the Frontier of the Atlantic Community: “Life” and Italy in the 1940s

However, all these references to Caesar and the Vatican contrasted with the political vacuum of wartime and post-war Italy. Ancient Rome, the Renaissance, and the Catholic Church were assets in the creation of an Atlantic Community representing the latest development in the evolution of Western civilization. On the other hand, Italy in the 1940s provided a bleak picture of military failure, lack of strong leadership, political instability and imminent subversion—hardly a free pass to the Atlantic club. Eventually, *Life*'s emphasis on the Italian past as a source of Western/Atlantic values ended up highlighting Italy's weakness during and after the war and, consequently, the ambiguity of Italy's Atlantic status.

In March 1946 a *Life* editorial denouncing Soviet “aggression” quoted senator Vandenberg wondering: “What is Russia up to now? . . . We ask it in Manchuria, we ask it in Eastern Europe and the Dardanelles. We ask it in Italy . . . We ask it in Iran. We ask it in Tripolitania. We ask it in the Baltic and the Balkans. We ask it in Poland . . . We ask it in Japan.”²³ Comments on political instability and economic backwardness concurred to locate Italy outside the Atlantic Community in American mental maps. In the late 1940s the cold war was waged with economic as well as ideological weapons. *Time Inc.* had been an outspoken advocate of the Marshall Plan, and frequently displayed a typically Republican, pro-business tinge to its internationalism. Investments of American corporations abroad were seen as the best way to generate jobs, create growth and stop Communist influence. In another *Life* editorial, Italy seemed to belong to an extra-European space of developing nations suited for semi-colonial development policies. The comment praised American investments in the Milan-based chemical plant Snia Viscosa for reducing unemployment and the danger of subversion (“maybe there are a few less Commies in Snia Viscosa today”), then went on to illustrate the potential for American

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business in such countries as Venezuela and Liberia, and finally concluded on a blatantly paternalistic note: “Our businessmen are following the trail blazed by American colonial policy at its best, as in the Philippines—tutelage, not domination. Let us cheer them on and pray they have time to spread wealth wherever wealth is wanted.”²⁴

Paternalism, not exactly a blueprint for relations among the members of the liberal-democratic and industrial West, was indeed of some use in the Italian case. Writer John Hersey, reporting from Sicily where the Allied troops had landed in July 1943, wrote of the American mayor of Licata “bringing some American democracy,” like many other Americans had done in the past to other areas of the world. Hersey emphasized “American idealism and generosity bordering on sentimentality, the innate sympathy of common blood that so many Americans have to offer over here.” Here Italian-Americans’ “blood” provides the grounds for a “special relationship” which is of course much different from the Anglo-American one. Meanwhile, in the same issue, the photographs of Robert Capa offered images of American hegemony and benevolence, both in the public and in the private sphere. American troops are shown in the streets of Palermo amidst the “tumultuous” welcome offered by the cheering crowd. The only full-page picture of the photo-essay portrayed two American soldiers, one standing with his right arm around the shoulders of an Italian girl, the other smiling at the camera while an old Italian man is at his knees, shining his shoes.²⁵

Accounts of Italians’ subaltern status were complemented by stories pointing to the lack of leadership in modern Italy. In a August 1943 photo-essay, aerial photographs presented six Italian cities as the “world’s best stage set for great and sad deeds,” while the caption underscored that these stages “had notably failed to inspire greatness in modern Italy.”²⁶ Three years later, the referendum ousting the monarchy offered the opportunity for an unequivocal historical appraisal. Blaming the Savoy for making Italy a “third

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class empire” and precipitating the nation into “moral, military and economic collapse,” *Life* stressed that “despite bullying tactics, the army of the House of Savoy invariably bit the dust: Adowa (1896), Caporetto (1917), Guadalajara (1937), Greece (1940), Africa and Sicily (1940-43)”²⁷ in words which anticipated Acheson’s 1949 remark on the flawed Italian military record as an argument against Italy’s inclusion as a signatory of the North Atlantic Treaty.

In 1948 the lack of ‘greatness’ among Italian leaders was still there. An alarmed ‘Pre-Election Report on Italy’ of April 1948 dedicated two very small photographs to rival leaders Palmiro Togliatti (PCI) and Alcide DeGasperi (DC), and described the latter as “utterly honest and sincere, painfully humourless and uninspiring... A shrewd party leader, a weak orator and a fair parliamentarian, his appeal to the Italian people is essentially negative, based on the fear of alternatives to his victory.” By contrast, the story carried a huge picture of Pope Pius XII on the balcony on Easter Sunday, while the text made clear that, notwithstanding “superstition” and Madonnas popping up almost everywhere before the election, “there remains only one faith and force in Italy powerful enough—perhaps—to deny Nenni and Togliatti their Roman triumph. This is the Catholic Church.”

The defeat of the communist-socialist coalition in the elections of April 1948 did not dispel American doubts and fears. *Life*’s report on the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty located Italy on the borders of the Atlantic space. The story was based on two photographs, one showing the statesman-like posture of the foreign ministers of Luxemburg, Holland, Belgium, Norway, France, Canada, and Britain, with Acheson at centre stage; no reference was made here to Italy, or to Denmark, Iceland, and Portugal, all of them original signatories of the treaty. The other, bigger photograph showed street violence in Rome where, the caption explained, “Communist reaction... was sharpest... Reds provoked riots outside parliament building while their leaders filibustered inside in an effort to prevent Italy from joining the Treaty.”²⁸

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In the end, Italy was admitted to the Atlantic club precisely because of its internal weakness. Its anchorage within the Atlantic alliance seemed necessary to the Western nations and to Italian conservatives alike in order to stabilize the hold of De Gasperi on a struggling and divided country. After all, as Acheson had reminded Truman in his March 1949 memorandum on the admission of Italy to the Atlantic alliance, “Italy is not physically on the North Atlantic Ocean...In two world wars Italy has shown herself to be an ineffectual and undependable ally having switched sides in both wars... In 1940 Italy stabbed France and the UK in the back.”

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Conclusion

In the summer of 1943 a *Life* editorial had hailed the end of the Fascist regime. It foresaw a chance for “the Italian people...to become themselves once more... For indeed the world has almost forgotten what Italian are really like—a loveable, laughing people...They are not warriors...They are people of the sun... and this makes them also the children of the arts - and, above all, of songs... They sing them under the bright Mediterranean stars, when the night is warm and heavy with blossoms...Song is to them as natural as life itself.”

Six years later, at a time when the Atlantic Community was becoming not just an ideological but also an institutional and military framework for the defence of the West, Italians were still seen by American (let alone British) media and policymakers—president Harry Truman among them—as “not warriors,” that is problematic allies whose contribution to the political and military effectiveness of the Atlantic alliance was to be questionable to say the least.²⁹ However, any discussion of the peculiar, ambiguous place of Italy in an Atlantic context must take into account how Italian history and culture were instrumental in shaping the ideology of the Atlantic community.

The relevance of this for the transatlantic relationship in the 1940s can hardly be overestimated. On the one hand, US participation in an “entangling alliance” with Western Europe required that the foreign policy establishment sell this unprecedented involvement in European affairs convincingly to the American public. A notion of an Atlantic Community provided the positive rationale for a long-term American commitment in Europe which anti-communism alone could hardly offer. On the other hand, the idea of Atlantic Community was also instrumental in relation to the interests of its European members, as it allowed Western European countries to frame the American political, economic, and cultural hegemony in a consensual pattern based on shared values, traditions, and histories.

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1 Memorandum by the Secretary of State, March 2 1949, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*), Vol. IV, Western Europe, 1949, Washington, Government Printing Office (emphasis added).

2 Quoted in E. Timothy Smith, “The Fear of Subversion: The United States and the Inclusion of Italy in the North Atlantic Treaty”, *Diplomatic History*, 7(2), Spring 1983, 152 (emphasis added).

3 M. Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1987, xi.

4 See the insightful remarks on the false dichotomy between “power” and “culture” in the study of international history by Frank Ninkovich, “Interests and Discourse in Diplomatic History,” *Diplomatic History*, 13(2), Spring 1989.

5 The pass-along rate indicates the number of people who browsed a single copy of the magazine in addition to the subscriber, see E. Doss, “Looking at *Life*: Rethinking America’s Favourite Magazine, 1936-1972” in Doss (ed.), *Looking at Life Magazine*,

Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001, pp. 2-3. On *Life* readership see J. L. Baughman, “Who Read *Life*? The Circulation of America’s Favourite Magazine” in the same volume.

6 Quoted in Doss, op. cit., p. 2 (emphasis added).

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