

How to cite this paper:

Motti, F. (2024). Evolution of Rail Policies in Italy: From Post-War Reconstruction to the Birth of the Republic. *Perspective Politice*. Pages [131-139].

<https://doi.org/10.25019/perspol/24.17.0.13>

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Article

Evolution of Rail Policies in Italy: From Post-War Reconstruction to the Birth of the Republic

Abstract: *This contribution explores the role of political institutions in shaping railway policies in Italy between the war years and the early years of the Italian Republic. During this transitional period, Italy was faced with the need to rebuild and modernise its railway system after the devastating effects of the Second World War. The policies implemented reflected a commitment to upgrading existing infrastructure and building new railway lines in order to*

improve the connectivity and mobility of people and goods on a national and international scale. Railway policies adopted have contributed significantly to Italy's socio-economic development, providing an important impetus for the modernisation and growth of the national railway system. However, much work remains to be done to address current and future challenges and to ensure that rail transport continues to play a central role in the country's future sustainable development.

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Keywords: *infrastructure modernization; post-war reconstruction; rail policies; rail transport; socio-economic development.*

1. Introduction

During the war years and the early years of the Italian Republic, the policies in favour of the railway sector implemented by the Italian institutional system played a fundamental role in the country's reconstruction and modernisation process. After the chaos and devastation of the Second World War, Italy was faced with the need to reorganise its railway system to meet the needs of a rapidly changing society and to promote economic development.

The railway policies adopted during this period reflected a combination of objectives, including upgrading the existing infrastructure, introducing more advanced technologies, modernising management practices and promoting international cooperation in the transport sec-

tor. This period was characterised by a strong commitment to rehabilitating and upgrading existing railway lines, as well as promoting the construction of new infrastructure to improve national and international connectivity.

Political and railway institutions, such as Ferrovie dello Stato (FS), played a central role in the planning, management and modernisation of Italy's railway system. During the early republican years, the Italian railways worked closely with the government and other key players to meet the challenges of post-war reconstruction and to promote the country's economic development through rail transport.

Parallel to the reconstruction and modernisation policies, discussions and debates also emerged concerning the role of rail transport in Italian society, including issues such as equity of access to rail services, safety and efficiency of the system, and the environmental sustainability of rail operations.

In summary, the period between the war years and the early years of the Italian Republic was characterised by intense political and institutional activity in the railway sector, aimed at promoting the economic, social and territorial development of the country through the strengthening and modernisation of the national railway system.

2. The difficult starting condition

At the time of the entry into the war, Italy had a railway system that was managed for 16,967 km by the Ferrovie dello Stato administration; this included both standard- and narrow-gauge lines. The remaining 6,000 km were, on the other hand, managed under the concession system. The first timid intervention to deal with the conflict took place on state-operated lines at the end of 1942 when a decree was issued to make military transport a priority. With the escalation of the war, the railway system underwent various changes, not only administrative. During the Second World War, the railway service was mainly used to transport supplies as the sea was controlled by the Allies. During these years, 194,000 passengers and 65 million tonnes of goods were transported. To meet wartime requirements, major electrification work was also carried out, such as on the line from Bologna to Verona and Trento (Maggi, 2017). Rail transport was heavily used especially between 1942 and 1943 when it began to be favoured over other modes of transport due to the disappearance of petroleum fuels (Maggi, 2017).

When the war began to become bloodier, Italy was attacked by numerous bombardments aimed at destroying the railway system as it was created. The various powers involved in the conflict were perfectly aware of the potential of the railway system, so damaging the structures that allowed connections meant weakening the country. The Italian railway system was not only damaged through bombing; the Germans also acted by dismantling entire railway sections using special 'harrow wagons' (Maggi, 2017). Most railway lines therefore ceased to function during these years. As the conflict escalated, Italy also had to deal with internal political turmoil.

In July 1943, Mussolini, as one of his last political acts, appointed Giuseppe Peverelli¹ as Minister of Communications, a position he was only able to hold for a few days as Mussolini was dismissed on 25 July of the same year. To lead the Italian government at this delicate moment, Marshal Badoglio (Coletti, 1985) was called in with Federico Amoroso² as Minister of Communications. On 3 September, Badoglio signed the Cassibile armistice with his allies, which was announced on the 8th of September. On 8 September, Badoglio announced on the

radio: 'the Italian government, recognising the impossibility of continuing the unequal struggle against the overwhelming adversary power, in order to spare the Nation further and more serious disasters, has requested an armistice from General Eisenhower, commander-in-chief of the Allied Anglo-American forces. The request was granted. Consequently, all acts of hostility against the Anglo-American forces must cease by the Italian forces everywhere. They will, however, react to any attacks from any other source' (Speech delivered at Eiar microphones, 8 September 1943).

Following the armistice, Nazi troops occupied the northern part of the country, where the Republican Fascist Party founded the Italian Social Republic of Salò controlled by Nazi Germany; in the southern part of the country, Anglo-American troops landed in Salerno and began the liberation. Italy from this moment on was therefore divided into two territorial parts. This new arrangement also affected the management of the railways: in the northern area, under German control, the Railway Directorate based in Verona was taken over; a large number of managers who had previously been employed at the general directorate in Rome were transferred here (Jannattoni, 1975). The railways in the south of the country were, on the other hand, entrusted to the management of the Salerno Directorate with an administrative structure run by the undersecretary for Communications, a role held by Giovanni Di Raimondo (Coletti, 1985).

The railways were placed under complete subjection to the management of the Allies as stipulated in Article 14a of the Armistice, according to which all transport and port facilities were to be at the disposal of the United Nations. During these years, the railway convoys were used to the point of exhaustion; the trains travelled overloaded and given the reduction in passenger transport, the goods trains were also stormed. On 7 December 1943, with the situation at an end, Di Raimondo expressed his concern about the overcrowding of the trains by civilians and military personnel, as well as the non-payment of tickets linked to the absence of controls. Di Raimondo managed, in difficult times, to implement an impeccable management of the railway system, the first in southern Italy. During these difficult years, characterised by continuous social and political changes, the management of the national railway network, which was once again beginning to be a divided network, was not homogenous throughout Italy and this led to many difficulties in coordinating policies. In an attempt, however, to provide some sort of continuity in the way the railway system was managed, Royal Decree No. 2 of January 1944 (Regio Decreto, n. 2, 1944) by the government of the South sought to centralise the management of both railway directions under the control of the Ministry of Communications. To achieve this, the same decree established the suspension of the Board of Directors and the General Manager of the FS, which were reinstated a year later.

Meanwhile, as the conflict progressed, in June 1944, King Victor Emmanuel II renounced the throne, leaving it to his son Umberto I, who formed the first Italian Provisional Government headed by Bonomi with the support of the CLN. The Bonomi government, with regard to the management of the railway sector, immediately intervened by re-allocating the functions due to the Director General, which had been taken away by a previous decree. Another important change that Bonomi made was the abolition of the Ministry of Communications. Its functions were divided between the Ministry of Transport, which took over the administration of the railway system, and the Ministry of Postal Services. Cerbona was placed at the head of the new Ministry of Transport (Coletti, 1985). This transformation was brought about by Decree No. 413 of 1944 (Luogotenenziale Decree, n. 423, 1944), which officially ended the fascist administration of the Italian railway network.

The fact is that, despite the efforts made to administer this sector, the railways were completely destroyed by the Second World War. Statistical data from the spring of 1945 (Perinetti, 1974) show that 60 per cent of Italy's railway infrastructure at the end of the conflict was completely destroyed and in need of immediate modernisation. Specifically, Italy lost 25 per cent of its tracks, 28 per cent of bridges, 7 per cent of tunnels, 90 per cent of overhead contact wire, 89 per cent of electrified lines, 78 per cent of passenger carriages and 52 per cent of freight cars (Briano, 1977).

Once peace had returned, it would be necessary to start again with structural measures for the rail transport sector.

3. The Italian railway system in the republican institutional set-up

At the end of the Second World War, Italy found itself having to reorganise its institutional-governmental structure. The political changes that took place during these years led to the constitution of the Republic in 1946. The political process that determined the choice of the Republic, and what ensued, cannot be reconstructed in detail here for reasons of treatment; what is of interest here is how such a profound institutional change affected the management and development of the Italian and European railway system. However, it is important, in broad outline, to define the historical-institutional context in which we are moving.

With the proclamation of the Republic, as established in the Constituent Assembly, Italian citizens were called to the ballot box to vote and decide, for the first time, on the parliamentary composition that would govern in the following years. With 48.5 per cent of the vote, the majority was won by the Christian Democrats. By contrast, the Popular Front, consisting of Socialists and Communists, only managed to achieve 35% of the votes. At the head of the first government of the first legislature was the Honourable De Gasperi who, among the various ministries, given the delicacy and importance of the sector for Italy's development, invested Guido Corbellini³, a figure of great professionalism and long-standing experience in the railway sector, with the post of Minister of Transport. Corbellini, however, was to be much criticised for his actions, considered excessively hasty, during the years of railway reconstruction. The Minister of Transport, in implementing the plan to rebuild the railways, found himself collaborating with the then director of the Italian railway administration, Giovanni Di Raimondo, who had held the position since 1945. The combination of these two expert personalities turned out to be decisive: Corbellini's operativeness, combined with Di Raimondo's experience, enabled important results to be achieved in a short time.

The project for the rehabilitation of the railways, which had already begun in 1945, envisaged massive and immediate action to repair the main routes, without which Italy would have remained disconnected and isolated from other territories. Only when the main railways would be functional again, in fact, would it be possible to move on to the modernisation of the locomotive fleet and other infrastructure necessary for the operation of the trains. Corbellini, in order to finance railway reconstruction operations without placing an excessive burden on the state coffers, drew on the Marshall Plan, with which the reconstruction of major works such as bridges and tunnels were financed. The resources made available by the Marshall Plan and the desire to make the country united and competitive pushed the Italian institutions to plan aid works for the territory in difficulty. The new context allowed the implementation of

the Plan for the Development of Southern Italy edited by Svimez, an organisation set up thanks to the support of the Italian financial and business worlds.

The most important innovation of the 1950s was undoubtedly the creation of the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno, an autonomous body, operating outside the state budget, conceived by Governor Donato Menichella to implement development policy measures aimed at improving conditions in southern Italy and eliminating the North-South divide. The work of this body, thanks also to the skill of the technicians selected, was to be considered extraordinary. In the 1950s, the interventions implemented allowed the South of Italy, for the first and perhaps the only time in its history, to reach levels of income growth and development similar to those of the regions of Central and Northern Italy. Among the planned infrastructural interventions was also, and necessarily, the strengthening of the railway network. In the 1960s, transport infrastructure received 75.1% of the total appropriations (2,108 billion lire).

Specifically, for the railways, the doubling of the Battipaglia-Reggio Calabria line and the electrification and modernisation of the Tyrrhenian section were planned. However, the development triggered during the early stages of the new authority's operation was interrupted at the beginning of the 1990s, when the funds earmarked for 'extraordinary' interventions began to be used as substitutes for ordinary interventions and no longer as add-ons. The railway structure of southern Italy therefore underwent few changes. Basilicata continued to remain de facto without railway lines and a mobility service within the region.

While, at the end of the Second World War, the countries that had taken part in it were engaged in internal reconstruction, the foundations were laid for creating European communities capable of maintaining peace. Within the founding treaties, one of the various aims was the creation of a European transport system through the development of rail transport infrastructure within the individual territories. Specifically, Article 3 of the EEC Treaty stipulated that in order to ensure the achievement of the objectives set out in Article 2, 'the activities of the Community shall include, on the conditions and at the pace laid down in this Treaty, the establishment of a common transport policy'. This policy was to be common to all Member States, capable of efficiently connecting the different territories and having a decisive impact on the implementation and functioning of the common market by creating a free-market framework and fair conditions of competition for all types of transport.

Furthermore, an entire title was dedicated to transport within the treaty to ensure the definition and implementation of specific rules and procedures applicable by the European community and individual states. In this regard, in 1957, TEE (Trans Europe Express) trains started running, connecting the then most important international economic centres from France, Germany, Italy, Benelux and Switzerland (Maggi, 2017).

These were also years in which the political class was called upon to make important choices for the management and reconstruction of the secondary lines. While the state spent large sums of money on the rehabilitation of the core system, the less utilised sections were neglected. When deciding how to act and how much money to allocate to the secondary railway lines, it was decided to take stock of the costs and benefits.

This led the political class of the time to decide that, for areas where the demand for transport was low, it was not useful to invest in railway reconstruction, thus leaving many lines in a state of decay and contributing to the marginalisation of the suburbs. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that during the railway reconstruction, it was decided at the political level to implement the policy of 'cutting out deadwood' for the first, but not the only time. All railway lines

that, according to the balance sheet of Ferrovie dello Stato, represented an excessive expenditure of money without a real economic return should have been decommissioned. This policy was implemented without really thinking about what it would have meant to leave certain territories, generally the more inland ones, without railway networks. As early as the 1950s, differences in territorial development across the entire peninsula began to occur in this way.

The years from 1952 to 1962, the date of the first Railway Master Plan, saw a succession of tireless interventions aimed at the technological improvement of the railways. These interventions succeeded, with great success, in improving the quality of the service offered by the railways and in completing all the work necessary for the reconstruction of the system following the serious losses suffered as a result of the war. In 1952, an extraordinary programme for the reconstruction and upgrading of the railway network and the various transport facilities was implemented with funding coming directly from the Credit Consortium for Public Works. From this macro-programme came the plan to upgrade the southern lines. The interventions in this part of Italy were, however, to be financed, as mentioned, by the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno. Thanks to the funds made available in 1955, improvements were made on the Reggio Calabria-Taranto-Bari line. On the other hand, Law No. 297 of April 1953 (Law No. 297, 1953) allocated four billion lire for the construction of Naples' central station. In 1957, a further 15 billion lire were granted for the electrification of the Adriatic line and for the construction of ferries to later start service to Sardinia.

The 1950s represented an important historical moment for the reconstruction of the railway system. During these years, however, the train had to come to terms, increasingly heavily, with an old enemy: wheeled transport, which was beginning to be the population's favourite as it was often autonomous. The political attentions of these years, despite the desire to rehabilitate the railway system, shifted towards the construction of roads across the country (Giuntini, 1994). It began to be considered more useful to invest in road transport at the expense of rail transport. The 1950s saw the start of work on the construction of a motorway to connect the territories from Milan to Naples and make travelling by wheel easier. With the completion of the work in 1964, the Autostrada del Sole radically changed the face of Italy.

These were the years in which we began to realise how society was changing profoundly and the various political institutions tried to adapt to these changes, even in terms of economic choices. The administrative structure of the State Railways, on the other hand, remained unchanged, failing to grasp the new social needs. Although the new administrative classes were oriented towards the renewal of action and investment strategies. The railways were recognised as having played a fundamental role in achieving the economic, political and social unification of the territory (Coletti, 1985).

4. The First Attempts at Revitalising the Rail Sector

The history of the development of Italy's railways has been characterised by the inability of the railway administration and the political institutions in charge to plan long-term interventions capable of building a railway system capable of responding efficiently to transport needs. Actions aimed at modernising and revitalising the railways have, in fact, almost always resulted from moments of crisis.

After World War II, rail transport came to a standstill and became an increasingly less used means of transport. As Stefano Maggi points out in his text 'Le Ferrovie' (The Railways), the

general lack of interest in rail transport in these years was well shown by the graphic representation of the Italian territory. Comparing 20th century Italian maps, it was possible to see that in the early years of the century the Italian territory was mainly drawn along the main railway routes, while from the middle of the 20th century the Italian road layout began to be taken into account. Railways began to be no longer shown or only marked with a slight line in transparency. Another issue was the failure to develop a city rail transport system in Italy. While metropolitan systems were already in operation in European metropolises – the first underground railway in London dates back to 1863, the one in Paris to 1900 and the one in Madrid to 1919 – Italy remained without one until 1955 when the first timid sections concentrated in the city of Rome began to emerge, and in 1965 those in Milan. At the end of the 1950s, in order to revitalise the railway system, which was becoming increasingly important at a European level, the importance of long-term planning capable of responding with foresight to the needs of the present was understood. The then Director General Saverio Rissone⁴ called loudly for the renewal of the sector, which had to be able to support and boost the development of the entire country. According to the railway administration, the political class of the time, which was focused on the development of the road system, did not attach the right importance to the railway sector and, consequently, had not implemented measures over the years to build a solid and modern railway system. This situation had led Italy to be a country that was about ten years behind in development compared to other European territories. A delay that, unfortunately, would increase over the years.

In an attempt to remedy this situation, 350 billion lire were allocated in March 1958 for the modernisation of the Italian railway system through the first five-year railway plan. The funds made available were used to increase the electrification of 1,300 km of railway lines and to double the track for 400 km. In 1962, however, what will go down in history as the first Ten-Year Plan (Perinetti, 1974) was implemented, financed by Law No. 211 of April 1962 (Law No. 211, 1962), which allocated no less than 1,500 billion lire to which a further 2,000 billion lire were added in the second five-year period of the Ten-Year Plan. This plan authorised the railway company to study and implement a project to restore the installations and various railway structures. With the substantial funds available, structural measures were implemented to improve traffic flow and offer more efficient freight/passenger transport services. One of the first interventions was to upgrade the railway facilities to allow the passage of heavier trains, capable of transporting greater quantities of goods. To achieve this, the old rails were replaced with longer and heavier tracks. The abundance of available funds also made it possible to plan interventions aimed at restoring railway lines that had been destroyed in World War II and, due to political and economic choices, had been left unused up to this point (Briano, 1977).

Measures were also taken to manage train traffic. The aim was to make train circulation as lean and fast as possible through the centralisation of control equipment in the central stations. Thought was also given to improving safety during circulation through the introduction of new track spacing, fixed light signals for running, etc.

Particular attention was given to passenger transport. To this end, in addition to equipping the railway system with more comfortable and higher-capacity trains, a number of express trains were introduced that could connect the north of the country with the south without making any changes during the journey. To achieve this goal, work began in June 1970 (Jannatoni, 1975) on the line connecting Florence with Rome in a direct way. Among the measures introduced were those dedicated to the continuous electrification of the railway network.

However, the implementation of the railway renewal plans was not so easy due to the progressive currency devaluation, which led to a change in the value of the funds made available for the renewal of the railway fleet. The various renovation projects failed to trigger a development process capable of remedying the great economic deficit in which the railway company found itself. This was the condition that accompanied the railways until the 1970s, years in which, also due to the upheaval brought about by the oil crisis, the use of the train as a means of transport was revalued.

Notes

1. During the twenty-year period, he served as president of the National Marble Federation from 1928 to 1934 and was a member of the board of Confindustria from 1934 to 1943. On 24 July 1943, the order of King Victor Emmanuel III meant that his ministerial term only lasted two days.

2. A uniformed general from the first of January 1942, and then from the 1st of May of the same year, he took command of the Second Army Corps of Engineers in Fiume. After the fall of the fascist regime, he served as the first Secretary of State and Minister of Communications, from 27 July 1943 to 11 February 1944, within the first Badoglio government.

3. From the year 1914, he worked as an engineer in the Material and Traction Service of the National Railways, where he dedicated himself to conducting experimental tests on traction vehicles, maintaining this position until 1932. As of 1938, he assumed the position of Director of the Locomotive Research Office of the Material and Traction Service. From 1942, he held positions of responsibility as Head of Service, while from 1945 to 1949 he was Director of the Service.

4. He was Director General of the State Railways from October 1956 to November 1962.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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