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**Between trust in science and Cold War ideologies:  
Polio prevention through the lenses of the Italian  
press in the 1950s and the 1960s**

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## Introduction

The overwhelming media coverage on COVID-19 has induced me to reflect upon the connections between mass immunization drives and their related media narratives. Over the last two years, COVID-19 pandemic catalysed the attention of both mass media and the public audience. Means of communication constantly and systematically divulged information about clinical data, sanitary and governmental measures to control the spread of the virus, and, of course, vaccines.<sup>1</sup> In addition, they widely documented the debate on the best treatment to be used, comparing and arguing both in favour and against the various serums developed in different countries.<sup>2</sup> For instance, Western nations decided to introduce Pfizer-BioNTech, AstraZeneca, Moderna and sometimes Johnson & Johnson vaccines, developed in England and the USA, but they turned down the Russian serum Sputnik V.<sup>3</sup> This dispute seems to have been shaped not only by scientific data and evidence, but also by political and cultural assumptions.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, I wondered if this kind of entanglement had already occurred in the past and eventually in which ways. Therefore, in my final project I will investigate the complex intertwining and mutual influence between vaccination campaigns and means of communication during health crises. My research arose from the urgency to gain some insights to critically inquire and interpret some aspects of the current pandemic, as well as of any other potential health crisis that might occur in the future.

The most representative example of a disease which received massive media coverage is probably poliomyelitis, generally considered as one of the most

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<sup>1</sup> William Poirier et al., *(Un)covering the COVID-19 Pandemic: Framing Analysis of the Crisis in Canada*, *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 53, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2020, p. 365.

<sup>2</sup> Tara Parker Pope et al., *Questions about Getting Vaccinated for Covid-19*, *The New York Times*, New York, 18<sup>th</sup> October 2021 [online edition].

<sup>3</sup> Cristina Marrone, *Il vaccino russo contro il coronavirus: "Registrato violando le regole scientifiche"*, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 11th August 2020 [online edition].

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan D. Moreno, *The Vaccination Cold War*, *Hastings Center Report*, Vol. 51, No. 5, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, 2021, pp. 14-15.

endemic viruses of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> The terrible notoriety surrounding it was enforced by the fact that this disease spread extremely easily, that it generally struck people indiscriminately, and most relevantly, principally affected children, the most vulnerable subjects in society, usually leaving them permanently crippled.<sup>6</sup> In consequence of similar rooted worries, poliomyelitis attracted considerable attention and elicited great sensation in the most part of the world, a characteristic that made it especially suitable for the project I wanted to develop.

In particular, I opted for zooming in on a specific case study. Therefore, I will analyse the articles on polio prevention in Italy in the 1950s and the 1960s, published by two Italian newspapers of that time, the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità*. My work aims at better understanding several aspects of the media communication surrounding large-scale immunization drives by examining this especially representative example.

Basing on the observation of the presence of a complex intertwining between scientific, political-economic and ideological implications characterising polio mass immunization drives in Italy, I realized that the newspapers under scrutiny were attempting to mediate among all these diverse factors and forces at stake. My assumption is primarily that the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* were divided between their own trust in science and in polio vaccines, and their ideological partisanship. The latter also influenced their positions and reactions to the decisions and the measures introduced by the Italian administration to handle the polio crisis. In fact, these papers were respectively a liberal-conservative newspaper and a communist one. As a result, I came up with the following research question: how did the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* mediate between science, economic power, politics and ideology within the public debate on polio prevention during the 1950s and the 1960s?

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<sup>5</sup> Agnese Collino, *La Malattia da 10 Centesimi: Storia della polio e di come ha cambiato la nostra società*, Codice Edizioni, Turin, 2021, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen E. Mawdsley, *Selling Science: Polio and the Promise of Gamma Globulin*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2016, p. 2; Jennifer A. Reich, *Calling the shots: why parents reject vaccines*, New York University Press, New York, 2016, p. 41.

While carrying out my research, I hope to contribute to the inquiry on the interdependence between means of communication and vaccine prophylaxis. Actually, my assumption is that, on the one hand, the contents spread by mass media are highly shaped by immunization drives, since a great deal of news on vaccines is usually reported in order to make scoops and to keep citizens updated on the latest scientific information and governmental decisions. On the other hand, the management and the immunization drives are apparently conditioned, to a certain extent, by the reportage which have elicited either trust or, on the contrary, scepticism in the general audience towards serums and the sanitary authorities.

Secondly, my Master project offers several opportunities for reflection upon the strategies and the attitudes adopted by mass media to portray large-scale and international-in-scope immunization drives, and upon the political-ideological mechanisms they trigger. As some patterns identified in my work may be generalizable, this examination could benefit and complement other investigations on analogous cases.

Last but not least, my analysis fills a gap in the academic literature on the history of polio vaccination campaigns in Italy. This topic has been sparsely studied by scholars and it apparently started to receive attention only recently. Consequently, only a small amount of literature is available on this matter.<sup>7</sup> Hence, my study provides an account of a specific aspect of the complex history of polio prevention in Italy, which may be valuable to contribute to provide a more global reconstruction of this issue.

## **I. Why newspapers, and the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* in particular**

Considering the centrality of mass media in the history of polio prevention and the afore mentioned scarcity of literature on this subject, I decided to focus on a particular means of communication, through which information passed: the press. There are mainly two motivations behind this choice.

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<sup>7</sup> Collino, pp. 13-14.

Above all, although their sales slightly dropped during the second half of the 1900s, newspapers still played a relevant role in the Italian habits of that time.<sup>8</sup> Actually, while radio and television gained increasing popularity, they were still extremely expensive and not every family could afford them.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, they had a less capillary coverage compared with dailies, although they considerably contributed to the propaganda in favour of polio vaccines.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, this focus on the press offers me the opportunity to indirectly reflect upon the social role of journalists during health crises. As highlighted by the examination of the *l'Unità* and the *Corriere della Sera*, columnists are not only reporters who thoroughly document facts, but also agents actively engaged with the socio-political events. In fact, since they convey specific interpretations, they are also able to condition the sanitary policies introduced by governments. This observation sheds some light on a specific aspect of the circular relation connecting mass vaccination campaigns and mass media, fostering also a deeper comprehension of the journalists' attitude underlying the newspaper articles under scrutiny. Furthermore, this consideration also applies to the recent newspaper articles related to health crises, so it could further help to investigate and comprehend the present and eventually some analogous events that might take place in the future.

As mentioned at the beginning of the Introduction, in my Master thesis I will analyse exclusively the articles published on the Italian newspapers the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* from 1953 to 1966. This choice is based on the fact that those are two of the oldest Italian dailies, and that they actually widely portrayed the public debate on polio vaccines. Most importantly, these newspapers are highly representative of the two contrasting models, respectively American- and Soviet-oriented, around which Italian politics and society polarised in the 1950s and 1960s.

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<sup>8</sup> Giovanni Gozzini, *Storia del Giornalismo*, Mondadori, Milan, 2000, p. 270.

<sup>9</sup> Emanuela Scarpellini, *L'Italia dei Consumi: Dalla Belle Epoque al Nuovo Millennio*, Editori Laterza, Bari, 2008, pp. 187-189; Paolo Scrivano, *Signs of Americanization in Italian Domestic Life: Italy's Postwar Conversion to Consumerism*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.40, No.2, SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, 2005, p. 326.

<sup>10</sup> "Vaccinazione obbligatoria contro la poliomielite?", *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 15th April 1959, p. 2.



## **II. The background underlying the articles on polio prevention in the newspapers under scrutiny**

In order to fully understand the contents of the articles of the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità*, it is relevant to provide some information on the context in which these pieces should be located. In particular, I will deal with three significant aspects of such background in my thesis: the Cold War framework, the discoveries and the early mass trials on Salk and Sabin serums in the Soviet bloc and in the USA, and Italian domestic politics, society and culture.

The discovery of polio vaccines and, consequently, the related prophylaxis campaigns took place in America and in Europe during the 1950s and the 1960s, in the midst of the Cold War. Polio immunization drives and the associated media narratives are inextricably connected to such historical-political background and cannot be investigated separately, as the scientific and public debate on this topic and the related policies introduced seem to have been shaped by the historic period and its ideologically motivated patterns. Therefore, focusing on this context resulted in being a natural choice. In addition, the Cold War period is characterised by the contrast between a deep trust in science and in technical progress, and the political-ideological tensions of that age.<sup>11</sup> Hence, the analysis of the impact of such framework on the discoveries and commercialization of polio serums seems to me highly compelling.

In addition, another intriguing consequence of locating my examination within the context of the Cold War is the chance to ponder two opposite tendencies characterising the international history of polio prevention. On the one hand, this story is marked by several tensions, as the dispute on this issue was strictly linked to the contrasting ideological stances of the Cold War, which impacted on the political struggles and divisions of that time.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, it was shaped by the

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<sup>11</sup> Franco della Peruta, *Il Novecento: Dalla "grande guerra" ai giorni nostri*, Mondadori Education S.P.A, Milan, 2019, pp. 238-239; Stuart Blume, *Immunization: How Vaccines Became Controversial*, Reaktion Books, London, 2017, p. 15 .

<sup>12</sup> della Peruta, pp. 238-239.

opposition between two contrasting scientific views, embodied by the race between Salk and Sabin treatments.

However, on the other hand, Stuart Blume, Professor of Anthropology of Health, Care and the Body, maintains that polio serums promoted also international scientific cooperation between the West and the East, by overcoming the political barriers between them.<sup>13</sup> This hypothesis is supported by the American scientist Peter J. Hotez, who points out that polio epidemics were regarded as so threatening and dreadful that Soviets virologists were forced to “break their Cold War silence in 1956” and to begin to cooperate with American scientists to develop a vaccine containing live but attenuated viruses.<sup>14</sup> In line with these considerations, Hotez stresses the concept that science and vaccines could be valuable means to overcome conflicts and to promote peace by stating that “the sciences are never at war” and describing vaccines as “peacetime inventions” and “powerful agents of conflict resolution”.<sup>15</sup>

I decided to analyse the Italian case precisely because of my fascination for the Cold War frame. Actually, Italy held a peculiar position within that geopolitical scenario. On the one hand, after the Second World War it formally allied with the USA by adhering to the Marshall Plan and to the NATO. On the other hand, there were many sympathisers of the USSR in Italy and the local communist party was one of the largest in Europe.<sup>16</sup> As a result of such inner polarization, during the polio crisis the USA and the USSR started to be viewed not as two opposite cultural, ideological and socio-political reference points, but also as conflicting health care models with regard to polio crisis by the Italian general public.<sup>17</sup> In a nutshell, the case of Italy can be viewed as especially meaningful, because it perfectly illustrates, at a “micro level”, the web of powers operating on a macro level during the Post-War period.

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<sup>13</sup> Blume, p. 155.

<sup>14</sup> Peter J. Hotez, *Vaccine Diplomacy: The multinational effort to eliminate disease might not only save lives but prevent conflict*, *Foreign Policy*, No.124, Slate Group LLC, Washington, 2001, p. 68.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> della Peruta, pp. 244, 249 and 382; Mario del Pero and Federico Romero, *The United States, Italy and the Cold War: Interpreting and Periodising a Contradictory and Complicated Relationship*, in Antonio Varsori and Benedetto Zaccaria, *Italy in the International System from Détente to the End of the Cold War*, Palgrave MacMillan, London, 2017, p.15.

<sup>17</sup> Eugenia Tognotti, *Vaccinare i bambini tra obbligo e persuasione: tre secoli di controversie*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 2020, pp. 181 and 192; Varsori and Zaccaria, p. 19.

As a result, the connections among Italy, the USA and the Soviet bloc are worth examining in order to get a comprehensive overview and a full understanding of the public discussion on poliomyelitis in Italy, of the intricate political considerations underlying it and of the narration provided by the press.

Furthermore, zooming in on Italy allows me to study the history of polio prevention within a nation other than the USA. Since polio vaccines were discovered by two American scientists, historiographers have long attributed a key part to the USA in the fight against this disease. For instance, the historian David Oshinsky supported and adopted this line of interpretation. In 2005 he titled his most famous book *Polio: An American Story*, pointing out that violent polio outbreaks repeatedly struck the USA and, at the same time, that

“The polio crusade [...] remains one of the most significant and culturally revealing triumphs in American medical history”.<sup>18</sup>

However, Oshinsky’s focus on American contribution to tackle this illness is now regarded as a limited and restrictive perspective by some historians. This is the case of Dora Vargha, who claims that

“Polio represented a threat to societies all over the world and the news of an effective prevention spread fast”.

As a result, she maintains that “polio could clearly no longer be defined as ‘an American story’”.<sup>19</sup>

Hence, I regard the Italian case study as an opportunity to reconstruct polio vaccination campaigns and their mechanisms in an ideologically divided country within the Cold War context in an exemplary way.

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<sup>18</sup> David M. Oshinsky, *Polio: An American Story*, Oxford University Press USA, New York, 2005, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Dora Vargha, *Polio Across the Iron Curtain: Hungary’s Cold War with an Epidemic*, Cambridge University Press, New York, pp. 79 and 147.

### III. The theoretical framework

To carry out my project, I drew inspiration from other studies accounting for the interrelation between mass media and medicine. In particular, I consider the work by the historian Gareth Millward as extremely inspirational. In his paper '*A matter of commonsense*': *the Coventry poliomyelitis epidemic 1957 and the British public*, Millward deals with the public debate over polio outbreak in Coventry in 1957 and the related problem of vaccine supply by focalising on the rhetorical uses of the concept of common sense in political discourse.<sup>20</sup> As it highlights the considerable impact of such dialectic strategies on politics and on the general audience, this example gave me the idea to apply a peculiar and well-defined perspective to my research, by zooming in on the impact of Cold War rhetoric on media narratives on polio prevention in Italy. Adding this view is especially fruitful to better frame and conceptualise my analysis.

Therefore, I have decided to adopt a specific theoretical framework for my study, based on considering dailies as a part of what may be defined *Cold War media complex*. Using this term, I will hint to the relevant function performed by mass media in building an ideological mindset, thus further contributing to spread several arguments and tropes typical of the Cold War. Such view is supported by the historian Giovanni Gozzini, and by the scholar John Jenks, who maintain that in the 1950s reports already used to be both reactive and proactive, because they documented events, but also provided an interpretative framework of the reality.<sup>21</sup>

On the one hand, professional journalism was perceived as objective and became highly appreciated for this supposed feature. Newspapers met the human need to be constantly updated on what was really happening inside the country and all over the world, thus gaining remarkable credibility.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, such claim of complete factuality was not fully grounded, as they also provided specific and

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<sup>20</sup> Gareth Millward, '*A matter of commonsense*': *the Coventry poliomyelitis epidemic 1957 and the British public*, *Contemporary British History*, Vol.31, No.3, Taylor & Francis Group, Milton Park, 2016, pp. 384 and 386.

<sup>21</sup> Gozzini, p. 243.

<sup>22</sup> John Jenks, *British Propaganda and News Media in the Cold War*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2006, p. 1.

ideologically focused narrations of deeds and events, “which can be important for gaining and maintaining hegemony, both domestic and international”.<sup>23</sup>

#### **IV. Research Methodology**

With regard to my research methodology, I started from the reports published by the *l’Unità* and the *Corriere della Sera*. This practice is quite common within the field of media studies and many researchers have used newspaper articles as a reference point for their studies. For instance, Millward tapped into several journals, with different political stances and levels of circulation, as well as into many internal files of the British Ministry of Health to write his paper.<sup>24</sup>

Hence, I firstly consulted all the pieces related to polio prevention available in the archives of the afore mentioned daily newspapers. By scanning them, I found several recurring themes, like numerous references to the respective roles played by the USA and Soviet countries in developing and testing polio serums, and many reflections upon Italian domestic health policies and management of polio immunization drives. In addition, the debate on Salk and Sabin vaccines and their implications took the spotlight.

Basing on the identification of these recurring topics, I sorted newspaper articles into four main categories that I used as reference points to write the three research chapters of my work. The first category includes accounts of the dispute on the most valid vaccine to be administered, by especially referring to either the Salk or Sabin one. The second encompasses reports on the foreign policies and stances adopted by both Western and Eastern European countries. Chapter Three is based on the articles enclosed in both these groups. The third group presents the considerations on Italian internal sanitary politics and economic implications related to polio serums published by the two newspapers under scrutiny. Such pieces laid the grounds on which I wrote Chapter Four. The fourth and last category includes

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<sup>23</sup> Ibidem; Gozzini, p. 243.

<sup>24</sup> Millward, pp. 386-387.

accurate reportage on polio treatments and on the setting of the vaccination campaigns, which have been relevant to write Chapter Five.

In addition to their practical usefulness in organizing the contents of the thesis in an organic and consistent way, these categories also considerably helped me to deal with and to answer my research question. In fact, thanks to them, I could analyse how the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* mediate among the various factors and forces influencing their narratives in a more schematic, immediate and analytical way.

## **V. Secondary Literature**

In order to integrate my primary sources, I used digitised papers and books included in the catalogues of the libraries of Utrecht University, of Università degli Studi in Milan, and of Università La Sapienza in Rome. Since I decided to briefly present the historical background about the discoveries of polio serums and their mass testing in the USA and in Eastern Europe, as well as to provide some information on Italian politics, society and culture at that time, I selected several historical-oriented sources. I relied on literature by both academic historians, like David Oshinsky and Dora Vargha, and science and history writers, such as Agnese Collino and David Elwood, whose works are closely interrelated in the reconstruction of the history of poliomyelitis.

In fact, although science communicators who write about the history of poliomyelitis tend to use emphatic tones in their inquiries, their contribution is regarded as particularly meaningful, to the extent that their texts are included in the collection of university libraries and sometimes are even published by university publishers.

In addition, I complemented historiographical sources with specialised articles, published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, the *British Medical Journal* and the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* in the 1950s and the 1960s. I decided to use also these sources for my inquiry because they offer many insights on experts' opinions about polio vaccines and on the related international debate on

polio prophylaxis as they happened. This choice turned out to be especially fruitful, since it helped me to better understand and account for several aspects of such dispute.

## **VI. Thesis structure**

To present the various aspects of the problem at stake, I will divide my thesis into five chapters. In Chapter 1, I will reconstruct the history of polio vaccines in the USA and in Eastern Europe, by outlining the facts that both newspapers under scrutiny extensively accounted for. In Chapter 2, I will describe the Italian historical background, paying particular attention to the local politics, society, culture and the role of the press during the Cold War. These aspects are essential to fully understand the framework in which the articles examined should be placed. In Chapter 3, I will investigate the contrasting reactions of these newspapers to foreign policies about vaccines and the different positions they took in the discussion that opposed the supporters of the Salk vaccine to those of the Sabin one. Moreover, in this section I will briefly illustrate the main stylistic features which characterised the articles published in these papers. In Chapter 4, I will present the divergent attitudes of these newspapers towards inner politics and the economic implications of the commercialization and distribution of polio serums. In Chapter 5 I will highlight how the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* respectively presented the discoveries of polio serums and the related immunization drives, by pointing out that both of them shared a common trust in polio vaccines and campaigned in favour of polio immunization. Finally, I will draw my conclusions.

## Chapter One

### **The discoveries of and mass trials on Salk and Sabin vaccines in the USA and in the Soviet bloc**

As already pointed out in the Introduction, polio was and still is generally considered as one of the most aggressive and feared viruses of the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> Although several nations carried out mass immunization drives, historiographers have long attributed a key part to the USA in the fight against such disease, because both Salk and Sabin serums were discovered by American scientists.

However, I support the afore mentioned Vargha's idea, according to which the exclusive focus on the history of polio treatments in the USA may be a simplistic and limited perspective. In fact, polio cannot be rightfully considered exclusively an "American story", since this disease largely struck also Europe, forcing the governmental and sanitary authorities of many countries to struggle to limit and prevent its spread.<sup>26</sup>

In line with this view, in this chapter I will briefly outline the history of polio vaccines not only in the USA, but also in the USSR and in some Eastern European countries, chiefly Hungary and Czechoslovakia, which played a significant role in testing the Sabin serum. Differently, I will not thoroughly account for the history of polio prevention in other Western European countries than Italy, but rather I will concisely make reference to some of its aspects in Chapter Three. The reason underlying this choice is that I resolved to focus mainly on the international cases that had a considerable and reiterated echo in the articles published by the Italian press and that are therefore likely to have influenced also the sanitary decisions made by the Italian administration.

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<sup>25</sup> Collino, pp. 6 and 14.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem; Blume, p. 160.



Hence, the peculiar cases of the USA and the Soviet bloc are worth being analysed because of the strong leverage they apparently exerted on the narrations of polio prevention divulged by the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità*, as I am going to highlight in the next chapters of the thesis. Actually, the measures introduced and the course of polio immunization drives in those countries were routinely monitored and systematically documented by the newspapers under scrutiny. In my opinion, it is also extremely likely that such reportage contributed to present these nations as valuable models to draw inspiration from to shape polio vaccination campaigns and policy-making processes in Italy. Therefore, the examination of such scenarios is essential to reconstruct a specific aspect of the context in which the articles in question should be located and to which they made reference.

In particular, I will deal with the race between Salk and Sabin treatments in the 1950s and the 1960s, by highlighting also the impact of international cooperation, whose underlying dynamics and implications considerably shaped the outcomes of such competition. As I will explain in detail in the next paragraphs, the results of the mass trial on Sabin vaccine carried out in Eastern Europe tipped the scales in favour of the oral serum and even induced American authorities to dispel their doubts and to replace Salk preparation with it. Such choice had consequences not only for the struggle against polio in the USA, but also at an international level, since several nations, including Italy, started to use this new treatment based on the American example.

## **1.1 The United States of America and the struggle against polio**

In order to gain some knowledge on the mass immunization drives in the USA within the period ranging from the 1950s and the 1960s, I will focalise on its two main cores: the discovery of Salk inactivated vaccine and the studies on oral serums containing live, attenuated viruses. I will analyse them in two separate subparagraphs, relating such events to the articles published in the Italian newspapers under scrutiny, which reported them on a regular basis. This examination will be useful, because it will contribute to gain a better understanding of the arguments and the data underlying the scientific and ideological debate on

polio prevention occurred in Italy. Furthermore, it will provide the opportunity to present the crucial issue of the race between the Salk and Sabin serums.

### **1.1.1 The first step towards polio eradication: Salk inactivated vaccine**

Italian press widely documented the research on polio prevention from the USA, by eagerly looking for all the available information on the topic, also describing technical details and accurately using scientific language. Particularly in the early 1950s journalists paid considerable attention to the studies carried out by Jonas Salk, a virologist of Pittsburgh University.<sup>27</sup>

Since the very beginning of his work within the field of poliomyelitis, Salk had considerably been supported by the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis (NFIP), a charity founded by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1938. The association aimed at collecting money through crowdfunding events and activities to pay for medical care in favour of polio survivors, by financially assisting their families, and to support the research on polio.<sup>28</sup>

In 1947 Salk accepted the assignment of carrying out polio viruses typing, offered by the organization itself. The study lasted three years and involved the participation of five labs simultaneously, all working full-time. It cost approximately 1.3 million dollars and required tests on 200.000 monkeys, a datum that the *Corriere della Sera* largely stressed. Finally, in 1951 Salk published his conclusions: there were exclusively three types of polioviruses, respectively named *Brunhilde*, *Lansing*, and *Leo*.<sup>29</sup>

In 1950, while the typing project was almost complete, Salk started to perform experiments aimed at synthesizing a serum containing inactivated polioviruses. The procedures he developed were definitely original and innovative, as the traditional

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<sup>27</sup> Mario Musella, “Un nuovo vaccino contro la paralisi infantile”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 4th April 1953, p. 5; Dick Stewart, “I primi risultati del vaccino contro la paralisi infantile”, *l’Unità*, Rome, 13th April 1955, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Reich, p. 41.

<sup>29</sup> Milton W. Taylor, *Viruses and Man: A History of Interactions*, Springer International Publishing Switzerland, Cham, 2014 pp. 224-225.

methods were being applied to produce vaccines with live, attenuated viruses.<sup>30</sup> He selected three different strains to immunize against every poliovirus identified: he opted for Mahoney, MEF-1 and Saukett strains to respectively protect from types 1, 2 and 3. The choice of using Mahoney could be regarded as hazardous, as it was an extremely aggressive and infective strain: on the one hand, it could induce a strong immune response; on the other hand, it required to be carefully inactivated with formaldehyde because of its high potential dangerousness.<sup>31</sup> Despite the difficulties, Salk and his colleagues succeeded in creating an effective and safe serum, which passed several security checks on monkeys.<sup>32</sup>

After having carried out further tests that confirmed the serum safety and effectiveness, in 1953 Salk informed the NFIP-experts' committee about his study and the relative outcomes. This announcement caused a deep rift within the board: some members cheered, while others voiced doubts and criticisms.<sup>33</sup> Despite such differences of opinion, NFIP pushed for a mass field trial and leaked information about this project to the press, putting a spotlight on Salk. Actually, reports of a polio vaccine under development rapidly became a popular story and Salk turned into a public figure.<sup>34</sup>

Several exponents of the scientific community blamed Salk's media exposure and prominent attitude, also because he divulged the results of his study before publishing them on an academic journal, as it was customary.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the National Institute of Health (NIH) and the NFIP were animated by a heated debate on the setting of such large-scale study, as there was no agreement also on organisational matters.<sup>36</sup> After numerous discussions and polemics, the panels

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<sup>30</sup> Bernard Seytre and Mary Shaffer, *The Death of a Disease: A History of the Eradication of Poliomyelitis*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2005, p. 68.

<sup>31</sup> Collino, pp. 92-94.

<sup>32</sup> Taylor, p. 225.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>34</sup> Collino, pp. 98-102; David M. Oshinsky, *Polio* in Andrew W. Artenstein, *Vaccines: A Biography*, Springer, New York, 2010, p. 207.

<sup>35</sup> Taylor, p. 226.

<sup>36</sup> Reich, p. 43.

finally opted for a randomized double-blind clinical trial, which started on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1954 and involved 1.9 million children in 122 counties within 44 states.<sup>37</sup>

Such study became memorable because of the extraordinary coordination and cooperation among schools, health care authorities and the local communities, and of the high number of both unpaid volunteers and participants involved.<sup>38</sup> It was and still is viewed as remarkable to such an extent that the historians Bernard Seytre and Mary Shaffer, as well as the sociologist Jennifer Reich, define it as “the largest medical experiment in history”.<sup>39</sup> Analogously, science writers such as Agnese Collino and Charlotte Decroes Jacobs emphasise the importance of this study.<sup>40</sup>

On the contrary, Oshinsky describes the 1954 trial as “the largest medical experiment in American history”, while he defines the 1959 trial on Sabin oral vaccine performed in the USSR “as the largest medical experiment in world history”.<sup>41</sup>

The news about the ongoing test rapidly attracted the attention of the entire world and mass media regularly and meticulously monitored it.<sup>42</sup> Thanks to the intense press and media coverage, it soon became a matter of public interest also in Italy. As I will show in Chapter 5, the Italian audience even looked more forward to being informed about the results of the study, wishing that they would turn out to be promising. Hopes and expectations were finally fulfilled in spring 1955. On 12<sup>th</sup> April a press conference was, in fact, held at the Rackham Hall of Michigan University, located at Ann Arbor, in order to present the positive outcomes of the massive test. The announcement provoked enthusiastic and joyful reactions throughout the USA. Salk’s popularity further increased and he became a real celebrity, acclaimed by a large audience. On 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1955 he was even welcomed

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<sup>37</sup> Oshinsky, p. 149; Seytre and Shaffer, p. 65.

<sup>38</sup> Seytre and Shaffer, p. 66.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 65; Reich, p. 43.

<sup>40</sup> Collino, p. 109.

<sup>41</sup> Oshinsky, p. 149.

<sup>42</sup> Seytre and Shaffer, pp. 68-69.

and celebrated at the White House: on that occasion President Dwight Eisenhower warmly thanked him for his work.<sup>43</sup>

Meanwhile, the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare licensed the vaccine to start inoculations. Consequently, different stakeholders were involved in organizing the mass vaccination campaign: sanitary authorities, pharma companies, scientists, governmental institutions, and charities, especially the NFIP, played a crucial role in its setting, but also faced some initial coordination and organizational difficulties: firstly, availability was extremely scarce, surely not enough to inject a considerable number of children before summer. In addition, the administration totally lacked a clear plan to face the organization of the mass immunization drive.<sup>44</sup>

Oshinsky shows how in the American context health policies and polio vaccination campaigns were shaped by Cold War ideology. In fact, he maintains that the interrelated problems of vaccine shortage and disorganization of governmental and sanitary authorities derived directly from Eisenhower's fiscal conservative stance. Eisenhower firmly believed that the government should not interfere with issues that simply did not belong to it, like national health insurance and the distribution of vaccines and drugs. Accordingly, he considered these tasks as a prerogative of pharma companies and rejected any form of *socialized medicine*.<sup>45</sup> This term was applicable to describe universal sanitary systems, which included medical and health care for all the citizens thanks to governmental regulation and subsidies derived from taxes. Since it was negatively associated to socialism and communism, such wording was used disparagingly in the American political debate.<sup>46</sup>

In coherence with such ideological stance and his personal convictions, Eisenhower expected "the process [of vaccine production and distribution] to remain in private hands, with the vaccine going from the manufacturer to the wholesaler to the

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<sup>43</sup> Artenstein, p. 207.

<sup>44</sup> Reich, p.44.

<sup>45</sup> Oshinsky, pp. 171-172; Collino, p. 128.

<sup>46</sup> The American Heritage Medical Dictionary, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company; Dorothy Porter, *Health, Civilization and the State: A History of Public Health from Ancient to Modern Times*, Routledge, London, 1999, p. 252.

druggist to the local doctor” and behaved consequently.<sup>47</sup> Obviously, drug manufacturers openly supported such a view and their spokesmen claimed that “Salk vaccine belonged to them” and that “if it were ‘socialised’, they would have no incentive to develop new products, which would be harmful to the country”.<sup>48</sup> However, popular discontent with the government’s actions induced the President to rethink this strategy and change course, with the result of the government’s direct involvement in the management of the crisis and in polio prevention.<sup>49</sup>

The year 1955 was also marked by the Cutter Incident, which can be considered, in the words of Reich, as one of the worst pharmaceutical disasters in American history.<sup>50</sup> These dramatical circumstances proved how experimental these technologies were. It immediately became a significant matter of discussion for journalists and TV reports, not only in the USA, but also in Europe and beyond.<sup>51</sup> On 25<sup>th</sup> April a one-year-old infant was reported to have contracted paralytic polio after having been inoculated with Salk vaccine eight days before. This news travelled all around the world.<sup>52</sup> This was the first of a long series of analogous cases. All the infected kids had received the serum produced by Cutter Laboratories. Such alarming phenomenon induced the Surgeon General, Leonard Scheele, to withdraw from the market the vaccine produced by Cutter Laboratories.<sup>53</sup>

After investigations, the Incident resulted in having been caused by faulty filters that allowed clusters of viruses, some of which still live and harmful, to pass through the preparation.<sup>54</sup> In addition, Collino highlights that another causative factor may be the so-called Salk’s “straight line theory”, a mathematical model designed to estimate how long the inactivation procedure with formaldehyde should last. It was adopted by vaccine manufacturers to make the serum under Salk’s

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<sup>47</sup> Oshinsky, pp. 171-172; Collino, p. 128.

<sup>48</sup> Reich, p. 45.

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>50</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>51</sup> Dora Vargha, *Between East and West: Polio Vaccination across the Iron Curtain in Cold War Hungary*, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, Vol. 88, No. 2, The John Hopkins University Press, Charles Village, 2014, p. 325; Artenstein, p. 218; Collino, p. 140.

<sup>52</sup> Paul A. Offit, *The Cutter Incident: How America’s First Polio Vaccine Led to the Growing Vaccine Crisis*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2005 [digital edition], position 758.

<sup>53</sup> Offit, position 821.

<sup>54</sup> Ibidem, positions 1196-1204.

suggestion. Even though such analytical operation effectively worked with limited quantities of vaccine, which Salk synthesised in his lab, it did not perform well with the large volumes of chemicals used in industrial process. Therefore, it probably undermined the production flow and contributed to provoke the Incident.<sup>55</sup>

Such event revealed safety checks to be inadequate; hence, health authorities were compelled to modify and enforce them. In this regard, the paediatrician Paul Offit points out that, in consequence of this episode, security controls became a responsibility of the NIH's new Division of Biological Standard rather than of the Biological Control Laboratory.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, according to Seytre and Shaffer, another effect of the Cutter Incident was the formation of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), permanent surveillance units to track polio outbursts.<sup>57</sup> After having made the necessary and appropriate changes, Salk vaccine proved to be safe and continued to be produced and distributed by two other pharma companies, Parke-Davis and Ely Lilly & Co.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, the mass immunization drive continued and largely contributed to reduce polio rates from 30.000 cases in 1953 to 7000 by 1957.<sup>59</sup>

### **1.1.2 Live, attenuated vaccines as an alternative to Salk serum: the research of Hilary Koprowski and Herald Cox, and the competition with Albert Sabin**

As both the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* repeatedly reported, an inactivated polio vaccine represented neither the only available option nor the most popular among experts. Actually, the great majority of the scientific community generally agreed that a preparation containing live but attenuated polioviruses could be particularly promising and effective in protecting against the infection; some attempts to synthesise it had already been made since the mid-1940s.<sup>60</sup>

In 1945 Hilary Koprowski, a virologist and immunologist employed at the private company Lederle Laboratories, started to work on a new polio research project,

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<sup>55</sup> Collino, pp. 138-139.

<sup>56</sup> Offit, positions 2072-2075.

<sup>57</sup> Seytre and Shaffer, p. 75.

<sup>58</sup> Offit, positions 2071-2072.

<sup>59</sup> Oshinsky, p. 200.

<sup>60</sup> Taylor, p. 224.

aimed at discovering a live-virus serum. Koprowski made his vaccine beginning with mice's brain matter infected with a strain of type 2 poliovirus and subsequently attenuated. In 1956 he was offered the chance to perform a mass trial on children with his serum in Belfast, thanks to an agreement with the local Queen's University. Nonetheless, some problems immediately occurred: the exams of the kids' stools showed that the samples contained polioviruses less attenuated than expected. Further analyses also revealed that the excreted particles could cause paralysis.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, the experiment was immediately interrupted. Koprowski tried to resume his studies later, but his vaccine would not be massively distributed in the USA due to safety concerns.<sup>62</sup>

Analogously, Cox serum was rejected for similar reasons. In 1960 Cox ran a vaccine trial in Desda County, Florida. His work elicited particular interest, since he alone developed a trivalent serum, and the outcomes of the study were eagerly awaited. Unfortunately, they turned out to be controversial: the preparation seemed effective, but six subjects contracted polio. Although a direct correlation between immunization and these cases could not be proved, authorities stopped the experiment as a precautionary measure and Cox treatment was discarded.<sup>63</sup>

On the contrary, Albert Sabin successfully synthesised a vaccine containing live but attenuated polioviruses. During the 1950s, while Salk and his preparation achieved great visibility, Sabin was developing a live-virus vaccine to be administered orally. His treatment was advantageous because it passed through the gastro-intestinal tract, where the poliovirus multiplied without causing an infection; therefore, it was supposed to grant a higher protection against the disease.<sup>64</sup> In 1954 he performed a first study on some inmates of the Chillicothe Federal Penitentiary in Ohio.<sup>65</sup> Even though excellent results were achieved, the NFIP had no intention to fund a mass trial with Sabin vaccine. Actually, after the Cutter Incident, the Foundation was extremely reluctant to sponsor another large clinical test. Moreover, this project was

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<sup>61</sup> Seytre and Shaffer, pp. 81-82; Collino, p. 88.

<sup>62</sup> Oshinsky, pp. 195 and 205-206.

<sup>63</sup> Reich, p. 47.

<sup>64</sup> Offit, positions 1427-1430 and 1436-1442.

<sup>65</sup> Taylor, p. 227.



further undermined by logistic hurdles. In fact, a large-scale study required the involvement of a considerable number of subjects devoid of polio antibodies, but they were hard to find, since most children had been injected with Salk vaccine in the USA.<sup>66</sup>

After having perfected his product, Sabin got his great opportunity in 1956. In January that year, he was informed by the Public Health Service that some Russian scientists were going to visit the USA, in order to gain knowledge about polio research and the production of Salk vaccine. Sabin immediately made contact with the Soviet delegation, as he grasped the potential of a cooperation.<sup>67</sup> His intuition proved to be correct: following these fruitful meetings, he was formally invited by the Russian Ministry of Health to the Soviet Union. When he received the permission from both the American Department of Health and the FBI, Sabin flew to Leningrad. These trips laid the groundwork for an international collaboration, which led to the mass trial with Sabin oral vaccine in the USSR in 1959 (see the next section).<sup>68</sup>

After the outstanding outcomes of the research performed in Eastern European countries had been divulged and ratified by the WHO, Sabin serum was approved for trial manufacture in the USA and some pharma companies started to produce it in 1964.<sup>69</sup> There were many opponents to this project, though: several American health officials equated free mass vaccination campaigns with Sabin treatment carried out in the Warsaw bloc with socialised medicine, one of the most ominous symbols of the Red Menace, as well as the greatest Cold War-bogey.<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile, the American Medical Association (AMA) formally announced its intention to replace Salk preparation with Sabin treatment.<sup>71</sup> Such decision had considerable repercussions not exclusively for polio prevention in the USA, but even overseas. In fact, following the American example, several Western European countries, among which Italy, registered and began to commercialise Sabin vaccine.

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<sup>66</sup> Reich, p. 47.

<sup>67</sup> Blume, p. 163.

<sup>68</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>69</sup> Offit, position 1452.

<sup>70</sup> Vargha, pp. 108 and 175.

<sup>71</sup> Collino, p. 166.

The AMA's resolution caused Salk's disappointment and raised a heated controversy, which opposed the scientist to the Association. Actually, Salk accused the AMA of being biased against killed-virus vaccines and insinuated that "polio would have been eliminated already had the AMA shown as much enthusiasm for the Salk vaccine as it now displayed for a product 'not yet in existence'".<sup>72</sup> The AMA energetically rejected such charges and blamed Salk for his behaviour.<sup>73</sup> Both Oshinsky and Collino reconstruct and analyse this debate, and seem to reach analogous conclusions: although the AMA's preference for Sabin serum was surely supported by experts' opinions and justified by scientific evidence, it was no less influenced by a clear bias towards Salk vaccine. Collino even mentions the fact that Sabin had personal connections with several people involved in the final decision and that he was informed of every progress made in real time.<sup>74</sup>

Despite the dispute between Salk and Sabin vaccine, the course of events had already been determined and was not going to be modified: Sabin treatment was considered as more effective than the inactivated one and therefore was exclusively distributed in the USA. Polio was eradicated from the country in 1979 and Sabin vaccine remained in use in the country until 2000, when Salk treatment was resumed.<sup>75</sup>

## **1.2 The fight against poliomyelitis in the USSR and in Eastern European countries**

As I have already hinted at in paragraph 1.1, the USA did not exclusively form a stage for developing polio and testing the vaccine, since also the Warsaw bloc played a crucial role in the struggle against such illness. In fact, during the mass trial first and later during the immunization drives Sabin vaccine was so widely distributed in Eastern Europe that, according to Vargha, it "has been incorporated into Eastern European identity".<sup>76</sup> The ideal connection with such polio treatment

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<sup>72</sup> Oshinsky, p. 208.

<sup>73</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>74</sup> Ibidem; Collino, pp. 166-167.

<sup>75</sup> Offit, position 1454; Oshinsky, p. 218.

<sup>76</sup> Vargha, p. 178.

is deeply rooted in the Eastern European mindset, to the extent that several people raised in Soviet countries during the communist era firmly believed Albert Sabin to be Russian.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, it is meaningful and compelling to examine the history of polio immunization drives on that side of the Iron Curtain, outlining the incidence of communist ideology and of “socialized medicine” on the setting and the outcomes of these vaccination campaigns.

In this section I will deal with the history of the mass vaccination campaigns in the USSR and in its satellite countries, Czechoslovakia and Hungary in particular. In addition to their relevance in trying out Sabin serum, these specific case studies can be regarded as significant because they are well documented compared to the immunization drives carried out in other Eastern European nations. Actually, Vargha points out that the sources related to poliomyelitis within the Soviet bloc are extremely limited.<sup>78</sup>

Above all, I will briefly outline the Soviet health care system and its implications for the fight against polio; then, I will describe the local immunization campaigns with Salk and subsequently Sabin vaccines.

### **1.2.1 Mass immunization campaigns in the Soviet bloc: applying Soviet approach to Western vaccines**

As in the rest of Europe and in America, poliomyelitis also violently struck the USSR and its satellite countries during the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>79</sup> An insight into the communist views on health care and on infectious diseases is relevant in order to contextualise and better get into the mass vaccination campaigns and their underlying mechanisms within the Soviet bloc. Furthermore, this examination aims at rethinking the opposite, but equally ideologically oriented American scenario, described in the previous paragraph. By indirectly comparing it to the totalitarian regimes in the East, where ideological patterns were more

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<sup>77</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>78</sup> Vargha, pp. 3-4.

<sup>79</sup> Dora Vargha, *Vaccination and the Communist State: Polio in Eastern Europe* in Christine Holmberg et al., *The Politics of Vaccination. A Global History*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2017, p. 80.

evident and visible, especially from a Western perspective, I will highlight that the West was also not immune to analogous but probably more nuanced dynamics.

Several polio epidemics hit Eastern Europe during the early 1950s. In Romania the first severe outbreaks began around 1949 and they reached their apex in 1957, with an incidence rate of 42.5 cases per 100.000 inhabitants. In Poland the most violent outburst was recorded in 1951 and contagions amounted to 12.7 every 100.000 people. In Hungary the first epidemic was registered in 1952, but virulence increased throughout the following years and peaked in 1957, when 23.8 individuals out of 100.000 got infected. In 1957 poliomyelitis was particularly aggressive in Bulgaria too, as 13.8 people every 100.000 contracted the disease. Although the illness started spreading in Czechoslovakia very early in 1939, the morbidity rate escalated in the following two decades, from 1.52 in the 1930s to 10.3 cases every 100.000 inhabitants in the 1950s.<sup>80</sup>

Due to a series of extended polio outbreaks recorded in the 1950s, the Soviet governments needed to handle the epidemic crises and to find a solution, since the traditional measures to limit the spread of the virus had proved to be ineffective in many places of the world.<sup>81</sup> Therefore, discovering a vaccine became especially urgent and was prioritised in the allocation of research funds to start the mass immunization drive in a very short time.<sup>82</sup> This necessity was shared by both Western and Eastern countries, basing on different ideological premises and stances, though.<sup>83</sup> Actually, the Warsaw bloc set its primary sanitary goals in line with the communist view and the Soviet model of public health. In this scenario, prophylactic treatments and disease prevention were regarded as particularly pressing among the governmental tasks.<sup>84</sup> Firstly, what Vargha considers to be the paternalistic State typical of the East was supposed to grant free medical assistance to workers and polio was considered as an extremely sensitive issue, due to its debilitating effects.<sup>85</sup> The communist state approach to health totally contrasted

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<sup>80</sup> Holmberg et al., p. 80.

<sup>81</sup> Ibidem, p.80; Collino, pp. 9-10.

<sup>82</sup> Holmberg et al., p. 81.

<sup>83</sup> Blume, pp. 162-163.

<sup>84</sup> Holmberg et al., pp. 80-81.

<sup>85</sup> Ibidem.

with American rejection of “socialized medicine”.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, poliomyelitis was considerably feared because it affected children, so an immediate solution was promptly demanded.<sup>87</sup>

### 1.2.2 The straightforward acceptance of Salk vaccine in the Warsaw bloc

The serums produced and distributed in Eastern Europe were developed in the USA. Although the tests and the mass vaccination campaigns with Sabin vaccine are probably better-known, the immunization drives with the inactivated treatment were equally relevant. Moreover, as I will show in the next chapters, they were highly praised by the international press, the *l’Unità* included, for their considerable efficiency and good organization.

The first treatment to be widely used in the Soviet bloc was the Salk one. The decision to register it was almost immediate and straightforward because the proposal to use this serum did not elicit any heated popular or professional debate.<sup>88</sup> Czechoslovakia, for instance, was very quick to adopt Salk inactivated vaccine. Czechoslovakian authorities started the domestic production of the treatment in 1957. Such preparation was, meanwhile, imported from the Canadian Connaught Laboratories and the immunization drive began the same year, also thanks to the aid of local physicians and of the Red Cross volunteers.<sup>89</sup> They used the so-called *Danish method*, consisting of injecting low doses of Salk vaccine intradermally (approximately amounting to 0.2 millilitres). This approach enabled the saving of a considerable quantity of serum, as “the vaccine needed to immunise one child could be reduced by up to 20 per cent of the original dose”.<sup>90</sup> In consequence of the encouraging results obtained, in 1958 the government announced that the immunization campaign would keep going with a nationally produced preparation.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Oshinsky, pp. 171-172.

<sup>87</sup> Vargha, p. 81.

<sup>88</sup> Holmberg et al., p. 82.

<sup>89</sup> Ibidem, p. 83.

<sup>90</sup> Vargha, p. 109.

<sup>91</sup> Ibidem.

Analogously, Salk vaccine was introduced in Hungary. Although the country manufacture of the serum was supposed to begin in 1956, it was delayed by a couple of years, due to the chaos and the devastation caused by the revolution.<sup>92</sup> As a result, the vaccine was imported from the USA and Canada through a long and tortuous path crossing Europe.<sup>93</sup> Salk treatment started to be domestically produced in Hungary in 1958. However, State experts all around the Soviet bloc soon expressed interest in Sabin's research and urged to test it in that vast area.<sup>94</sup>

### **1.2.3 The making of an Eastern European countermodel**

The communist States got under the spotlight between the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s since they first adopted the Sabin vaccine on a large scale. As the trials and the mass immunization were driven with the oral serum, they resulted successful and were performed extremely efficiently in those nations, thus attracting remarkable attention from the press all over the world. In Italy, the *l'Unità* widely celebrated the Sabin treatment and the Eastern European models (see Chapter Three).

The mass trial with Sabin treatment which took place in the USSR marked a significant turning point in the history of polio vaccine on the East side of the Iron Curtain. At first the USSR introduced Salk serum, but its outcomes and effects turned out to be controversial. In fact, on the one hand, it played a relevant role in reducing the number of polio cases in the Soviet Union; on the other hand, it was highly expensive and difficult to administer.<sup>95</sup> Due to those difficulties and the wavering nature of the Salk serum, Sabin treatment represented a good option for the USSR.<sup>96</sup>

Chumakov's trip to the USA and his visit to Sabin's lab laid the foundations for the following cooperation.<sup>97</sup> However, the final decision between Salk and Sabin

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<sup>92</sup> Ibidem, pp. 54-71 and 114.

<sup>93</sup> Ibidem, p. 80.

<sup>94</sup> Holmberg et al., p. 83.

<sup>95</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>96</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>97</sup> Seytre and Shaffer, p. 86.

treatments was made on the basis of the interest the two scientists showed in the cooperation with Russian colleagues. Actually, Chumakov invited both the American physicians to visit the Soviet Union, but only Sabin accepted. These circumstances favoured and strengthened the relationship between Sabin and Chumakov, with the consequence that Russians finally opted for the oral treatment based on live but attenuated viruses.<sup>98</sup> As a result, in 1959 Sabin vaccine was being tested on a massive scale in the USSR.<sup>99</sup>

As Oshinsky points out, this trial was completely different from the one performed in the USA in 1954. This is a key point that needs to be emphasised, since these discrepancies are deeply connected to the diverse types of statehood and the related mindsets embodied by the USA and the USSR. As a result, they probably contributed to enforce the thesis of many detractors of Sabin vaccine in the USA, according to whom that treatment should be regarded as a threatening example of socialised medicine, as already hinted at. First of all, Russian authorities decided not to adopt the double-blind model used in America. This meant that there were no control groups, and no placebos were administered to the subjects. Hence, all the children involved in the study, who were approximately 10 million, were immunized with Sabin treatment.<sup>100</sup> Chumakov stressed that eradicating polio from the country was the main goal to pursue, thus putting aside the debates on the setting of the experiment.<sup>101</sup>

Secondly, the vaccination drive was arranged with so much rigour to resemble a military campaign. Several buildings, like schools, clinics, factories and nurseries, turned into vaccination centres. Parents were supposed to bring their kids to a specific spot at a given date and time. Such information was provided directly by governmental agencies and local officials were assigned to every centre and instructed to check that all the children on the list would show up. The immunization procedure was processed by physicians, who administered the vaccine to their patients by a dropper or in the form of a candy. The data related to

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>99</sup> Taylor, p. 227.

<sup>100</sup> Artenstein, p. 219.

<sup>101</sup> Oshinsky, p. 197.

every patient were carefully recorded. Such perfect and meticulous organization was made possible thanks to Chumakov's efforts, a strict planning and the coercive power of the State police.<sup>102</sup>

Meanwhile, two smaller but equally relevant studies were carried out in Czechoslovakia and Hungary.<sup>103</sup> In Czechoslovakia the trial began between 1958 and 1959 and involved approximately 140.000 children, whose age ranged from 2 to 6 years. The positive results brought to a real mass vaccination campaign in 1960, by which 93 per cent of infantile population in the country was immunized. Similarly, Hungary turned to Sabin vaccine in 1959, following the Soviet Union trial.<sup>104</sup> The choice put "Hungary on the frontline of polio vaccination along with the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia".<sup>105</sup> The first massive immunization drive started in 1960.<sup>106</sup> The process led to the definitive eradication of poliomyelitis from the nation in 1960, although the disease had already been weakened through Salk vaccine, which had previously been used.<sup>107</sup> Vargha's narration of the making of an Eastern European countermodel in polio prevention is confirmed also by Western stakeholders, like the *l'Unità*, which presented and praised the Warsaw bloc and the USSR as valuable models.<sup>108</sup>

The test on oral vaccine in the USSR bore fruits beyond any expectations. Chumakov enthusiastically announced to Sabin that his treatment proved to be so effective that the Soviet government was going to immunize approximately 77 million people, corresponding to all population under the age of twenty years. The decision was made in consequence of the great advantages deriving from the introduction of such prophylactic treatment.<sup>109</sup>

Despite these incredible and encouraging results, Western nations remained suspicious of such definitive findings and questioned their credibility. As a matter

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<sup>102</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>103</sup> Vargha, p. 156.

<sup>104</sup> Ibidem, p. 144.

<sup>105</sup> Ibidem, p. 147.

<sup>106</sup> Ibidem, p. 169.

<sup>107</sup> Ibidem, pp. 2 and 144.

<sup>108</sup> Aldo Palumbo, "Oltre due milioni di bambini vaccinati contro la "polio" in Cecoslovacchia", *l'Unità*, Rome, 2nd June 1957, p. 9.

<sup>109</sup> Vargha, pp. 2 and 144.



of fact, the Soviet emphasis on the successful outcomes of the mass vaccination could be easily interpreted as an example of roaring propaganda. Hence, it was necessary to bring a third party into play to provide an objective and reliable opinion on the vaccine.<sup>110</sup>

The perfect candidate was the WHO, as it was above parties and had significant credibility and trust. For these reasons it was assigned this task. The organization chose one of its most respected members, the epidemiologist Dorothy Horstmann. Even though she had already expressed the conviction that the attenuated serum was the most effective means to fight poliomyelitis, she was also well-known for her integrity and fairness; so, she was asked to write an objective and impartial evaluation. Consequently, Horstmann flew to the USSR to make her assessment. As Oshinsky and Collino highlight, she believed that the oral treatment would need some further tests and research to be accurately evaluated; however, her final report, based on the available evidence, corroborated Russian claims on the superiority of the Sabin preparation over the Salk one and on the efficacy of the treatment.<sup>111</sup> The conclusions were divulged during the Second International Conference on Live Poliovirus Vaccines in Washington and paved the way to the licensing of Sabin vaccine in the USA and then in Western European countries.<sup>112</sup>

### **1.3 Conclusive Remarks: the USA and the Soviet bloc as two closed systems interacting in an open system**

The above sections present the history of polio immunization drives and the race between Salk and Sabin vaccines in the USA and in communist countries, paving the way to relate them to the articles on polio prevention published by the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità*. In fact, this information will integrate the analysis carried out in Chapters Three, Four and Five, because it will foster a deeper understanding of several events which the articles under scrutiny make reference to, as well as the background in which they are located.

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<sup>110</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>111</sup> Collino, pp. 162-163; Ibidem.

<sup>112</sup> Oshinsky, pp. 197-198.

This examination supports Vargha's theory, according to which poliomyelitis cannot be considered exclusively an "American story" any longer, as it represented a global threat involving most of the countries all over the world. I will try to further strengthen this thesis by investigating the Italian case study in the next sections of my thesis.

Furthermore, this analysis suggests an alternative view of the relation between the USA and the Soviet bloc. According to common sense, they are generally thought to have been two isolated realities during the Cold War period. However, the common struggle against poliomyelitis and the consequent cooperation aimed at developing Sabin serum apparently debunked this idea. In the light of these considerations, it is probably more correct to consider the United States, the USSR and its satellite countries as two opposite political and health care models, which still interacted with each other and, to a certain extent, were interdependent.

I will then show how the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* portrayed and reacted to these scenarios in the following chapters. By analysing the issue of polio prevention through the lens of the Italian press, it will become more evident that the international struggle against this disease was imbued with Cold War values and ideologies, which clearly influenced the sanitary policies and strategies adopted in inner polarised countries like Italy. However, I will also highlight that these two newspapers mediated between their opposite views and their trust in science and in vaccines. Although the opinions they voiced were surely shaped by their political stances, under several occasions they also overcame such partisanship to pursue the goal to campaign in favour of polio vaccines and of governmental sanitary guidelines, as I will show in Chapter 5.

## Chapter Two

### **The Italian historical background: a glance at politics, society, culture and press in the 1950s and the 1960s**

As already hinted at in the Introduction to this thesis, Italy could be regarded as a particular case within the Cold War scenario, because it was considerably affected by the two competing forces of the USA and of the USSR and its satellite countries, being a member of the NATO though.<sup>113</sup>

Actually, after the Second World War Italy had occupied a peculiar position within the geopolitical chessboard. On the one hand, it was formally allied with the United States of America; on the other hand, the Italian Communist Party was one of the largest in Europe and was extremely grounded in the country, forging strong bonds with the Soviet Union.<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, Italian society and culture underwent two simultaneous but opposite processes of Americanization and anti-Americanization, which derived from the Cold War struggles and enforced the inner ideological tensions.<sup>115</sup>

In order to better understand and contextualise the debate on polio prevention thoroughly illustrated by the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità*, in this chapter I will shortly describe the Italian historical context in the 1950s and 1960s.

Firstly, I will outline the concept of *Cold War media complex*, which is useful to better frame the analysis of the articles of the newspapers under scrutiny presented in the next sections. Then, I will deal with Italian politics, society, culture and press of that time. While carrying out this examination, I will highlight the social and political mechanisms that played a relevant role in promoting American values and,

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<sup>113</sup> della Peruta, pp. 376-377 and 383-386.

<sup>114</sup> Ibidem, p. 376.

<sup>115</sup> Stephen Gundle, *Between Hollywood and Moscow: The Italian Communists and the Challenge of Mass Culture, 1941-1991*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2000, [kindle edition], positions 637-769.

at the same time and paradoxically, in limiting their dissemination and preserving several aspects of traditional Italian culture.

Nonetheless, considering Italy exclusively as a polarised nation during the Cold War period is too reductive. On the contrary, due to the multiplicity of instances and issues at stake, its society and culture were endowed with far greater complexity, which I will account for in the next paragraphs.

## 2.1 The Cold War Media Complex

As already mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, I applied a theoretical framework to my research, according to which the articles of the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* should be regarded as a part of what may be called the *Cold War media complex*. This term hints at the idea that mass media contributed to build an ideological mindset by spreading several arguments and notions typical of Cold War rhetoric.

Such system was based on the close intertwining among politics, society and mass media.<sup>116</sup> In fact, Italian society was influenced by means of communication as tools of a peculiar form of power, also called *spread power*. This definition is based on two aspects: firstly, the newest means of communication became deeply rooted in everyday life; secondly, they were apparently free from any political connotation, so their messages were usually not perceived as an immediate and direct threat to the political and social authorities, or as merely propagandistic issuers.<sup>117</sup> However, the messages conveyed by mass media were generally not neutral, but rather subtly endowed with political and ideological connotations.<sup>118</sup>

The Italian case study is especially significant with respect to the *Cold War media complex* because Italian society was divided between the fascination with American

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<sup>116</sup> Nicola Tranfaglia, *L'evoluzione dei "Mass-media" e le peculiarità del sistema politico nell'Italia repubblicana*, *Studi Storici*, Vol. 29, No. 1, Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Rome, 1988, p. 56.

<sup>117</sup> Victoria De Grazia and Paola Di Stefano, *La Sfida dello "Star System": L'Americanismo Nella Formazione della Cultura di Massa in Europa, 1920-1965*, *Quaderni Storici*, Vol.20, No.58, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1985, p. 96.

<sup>118</sup> Mauro Forno, *Informazione e Potere: Storia del Giornalismo Italiano*, Laterza, Bari, 2012, pp. 16.

lifestyle and loyalty and attachment to the traditions after the Second World war. In addition, mass media contributed to the politically- and ideologically-oriented goal of moulding Italian culture through the message they conveyed.<sup>119</sup> To support this view, the historians Victoria De Grazia and Paola Di Stefano clearly explain that the means of communication played a key role in the struggle to find a balance between the opposite tendencies to Americanism and anti-Americanism in the country.<sup>120</sup> A good example of such mediation process was the TV programme *Lascia o Raddoppia?*, which, according to the historian John Foot, was evidently a “Mix of the old and the new, of the paternalistic ethos of the Christian Democrats towards the Italian people and certain consumerist ideologies especially linked to the American dream”.<sup>121</sup>

I will further articulate this issue in section 2.3 of this chapter.

However, the *Cold War media complex* did not exclusively apply to political matters, but also to other subjects like the scientific ones. Such entanglement is worth being examined within the Cold War Italian context, where “science-popularization” began to emerge in the 1950s.<sup>122</sup> Such journalistic genre mainly focused on the research within the field of biomedical sciences, portrayed as “straightforward, consensual, and bringing improvement to people’s lives”.<sup>123</sup> In 17.1 percent of the cases, similar articles were written by scientists and doctors, while the rest was signed by journalists and commentators.<sup>124</sup> As “science-popularization” was a novelty in Italy at that time, it is extremely compelling to investigate the first developments of the relationship between Italian media and medicine. The examination of the articles on polio prevention published by the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l’Unità*, which I will carry out in the next chapters, will

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<sup>119</sup> Stephen Gundle and Marco Guani, *L’Americanizzazione del Quotidiano. Televisione e Consumismo nell’Italia degli Anni Cinquanta*, *Quaderni Storici*, Vol.25, No.62, Il Mulino, Bologne, 1986, pp. 561-562; Gundle, position 1303.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>121</sup> John M. Foot, *Mass Cultures, Popular Cultures and the Working Class in Milan, 1950-70*, *Social History*, Vol.24, No.2, Taylor & Francis Ltd., New York, 1999F, p. 150.

<sup>122</sup> Massimiano Bucchi and Renato G. Mazzolini, *Big Science, little news: science coverage in the Italian daily press, 1946-1997*, *Public Understanding of Science*, Vol.12, No.1, SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, 2003, p. 7.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

give me the chance to reconstruct an aspect of such interrelation in an exemplary way.

By applying the theoretical framework of the *Cold War media complex*, I will better connect my research to the historical and ideological context in which it is placed. As I will show in the next sections of my thesis, the pieces on polio prophylaxis in both newspapers were impacted by both their political views and science, as they combined objective information and data with ideological interpretations and stances. The concept of *Cold War media complex* explains and gives an account of such attitude performed by these two dailies.

## 2.2 Politics

As already hinted at, the disputes on polio treatments and on the decisions made on mass vaccination campaigns were not exclusively shaped by scientific considerations, but also by governmental motives and interests. Since both the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* paid considerable attention to the political aspects of such controversies, it is useful to account for the Italian political background they referred to.

After the end of the Second World War, the Italian political landscape was dominated by two main factions.<sup>125</sup>

On the one hand the left-wing coalition was led by the Italian Communist Party (PCI). The PCI was deeply rooted in Italian society and popular among factory workers, farmers and liberal exponents of the middle class. By 1946 it had already counted one million and a half party members.<sup>126</sup>

On the other hand, the outstanding force within the liberal-conservative spectrum was the Christian Democracy (DC), an inter-classist party that drew several values and lines of thought from the Catholic social doctrine and defended the concept of private property. As a result, the DC was supported by the business world and the moderate middle class, as well as by the allies, especially the Americans, since it

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<sup>125</sup> della Peruta, p. 376.

<sup>126</sup> Ibidem.

represented the only possible bulwark against the Left, which was one of the primary international goals and issues of the USA.<sup>127</sup>

After the Second World War, the United States had begun to strengthen ties with Europe, aimed at exerting political and economic control over as many countries as possible. As the historians Federico Romero and Franco del Pero point out, American interest in extending power over Italy was due to three key geopolitical reasons. Firstly, they aimed at securing a reliable ally against the Soviet Union. Italy was a crucial country in the European arena for many reasons, including its symbolic value. It had, in fact, one of the largest communist and pro-Soviet parties in Europe and a potential electoral success of the PCI was not regarded as unrealistic. Moreover, losing influence over Italy in favour of the USSR was extremely likely to cause a domino effect in Western and Southern Europe. Therefore, it was necessary to take countermeasures to prevent this from happening.<sup>128</sup> Secondly, the Americans wanted Italy to join the Western military coalition they were forming by way of its strategic position. Finally, they wished to involve Italy into a Western economic network of *embedded liberalism*, a

“Liberal order based on the gold/dollar standard, and the unusual compromise between a gradual [...] liberalisation of trade on one hand and a high degree of state intervention on the other”.<sup>129</sup>

These two latter goals were achieved when Italy adhered to the Marshall Plan and to the NATO by signing the Atlantic Pact, respectively in 1948 and 1949.<sup>130</sup>

The last aspiration of the USA regarding Italy seemed to be fulfilled when the DC won the elections in 1948.<sup>131</sup> The new government explicitly proposed itself as the defender of the established public order against the communist threat and promoted the economic recovery by turning to a capitalist model. These events marked the apex of a gradual but inexorable exclusion of the Left from the power.<sup>132</sup> However,

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<sup>127</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>128</sup> Varsori and Zaccaria, pp. 15 and 19.

<sup>129</sup> Ibidem, p.19.

<sup>130</sup> della Peruta, pp. 244, 249 and 382.

<sup>131</sup> Ibidem, pp. 382-383.

<sup>132</sup> Ibidem.

the relationship with Washington was not so straightforward as it might seem. In fact, in the words of Romero and del Pero

“The convergence between the US and the Italian government was slow to develop, impaired as it was by mutual suspicion, reciprocal stereotypes, frequent misunderstandings”.<sup>133</sup>

Actually, the newly elected Italian Prime Minister, Alcide de Gasperi, had no intention to rigidly conform to American plans and directives. By allying with the USA, de Gasperi succeeded in preventing Italy from falling into the USSR sphere of influence and simultaneously obtained American financial help and military support. After having achieved these results, he tried to consolidate them, “while minimising the commitments, the cost and the obligations” associated to the inclusion within the Western bloc.<sup>134</sup>

The USA, from its part, portrayed the positive results of the Italian elections as its own success in the fight against communism, but was not particularly enthusiastic with the excessive clericalism and conservatism of the DC.<sup>135</sup>

The DC remained in power through the entire 1950s. Only in 1962 such one-party government fell and was replaced by a centre-left-wing coalition.<sup>136</sup> Italian ambiguous attitude towards Atlanticism and the USA continued throughout the 1950s and even enforced from the beginning of the 1960s on.<sup>137</sup> Nonetheless, the country never became completely immune to the fascination of communist ideas.<sup>138</sup> Such peculiar attitude of the Italian foreign politics was likely to have also had a strong impact on the culture and society of that time and on the introjection of the American model.

## 2.3 Society and Culture

The public debate on polio vaccines and on the national-scale immunization drive followed by the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* indirectly intertwined with

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<sup>133</sup> Varsori and Zaccaria, p.19.

<sup>134</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>135</sup> Ibidem, p.20.

<sup>136</sup> della Peruta, p. 389.

<sup>137</sup> Varsori and Zaccaria, p. 25.

<sup>138</sup> Ibidem, pp. 26-28.



several ongoing changes and tensions in Italian society and culture during the 1950s and the 1960s. To further contextualise the dispute on polio prevention and to gain some insight into the audience the two newspapers addressed to, I will account for some aspects of these topics.

Still in 1949-1950 Italy was a predominantly agricultural country, with generally very low salaries and higher unemployment rates compared to the rest of Europe. However, the historian Stephen Gundle and the history writer David Elwood highlight that, at the same time, in the early 1950s the groundwork was laid in order to foster the development of the industry, also thanks to American financial aids.<sup>139</sup> This process paved the way for the economic boom of the late 1950s and early 1960s, also known as “the economic miracle”.<sup>140</sup>

Meanwhile, the welfare system became more solid, and wages grew, slower than productivity though. As a consequence of the economic growth, urbanisation increased, especially in the North.<sup>141</sup> According to statistics, approximately 10 million workers migrated from Southern rural villages to Northern cities, like Turin and Milan, looking for better job opportunities. Within that context of rising economic wealth, consumptions increased by 5-6 per cent every year.<sup>142</sup> As a result, Italians started to spend money in excess on summer holidays at the seaside, or to save money to buy a private means of transport.<sup>143</sup> In addition, many new household electric appliances, like fridges, washing machines and dishwashers, entered Italians’ houses, revolutionising their lifestyle.<sup>144</sup>

In parallel with these changes, Italian culture underwent a considerable transformation, which influenced every level of society, but especially the working class.<sup>145</sup> In fact, the 1950s marked the beginning of a gradual shift from the *working-*

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<sup>139</sup> Gundle, positions 1385-1393; David Ellwood, *Containing Modernity, Domesticating America in Italy*, in Alexander Stephan, *The Americanization of Europe: culture, diplomacy, and anti-Americanism after 1945*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2006, p. 261.

<sup>140</sup> Gundle, position 19; Stephan, p. 261.

<sup>141</sup> Stephan, p. 261.

<sup>142</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>143</sup> Foot, pp. 134-135.

<sup>144</sup> Scarpellini, pp. 155-159.

<sup>145</sup> Foot, pp. 135-136.

*class* or *popular culture* to *mass culture*. To outline such concepts, I will rely on the definition provided by Foot.

Foot uses the expression *working-class culture* to refer to all “the forms of culture specific of the industrial proletariat”.<sup>146</sup> They included a specific, traditional set of values and beliefs: sense of sacrifice and hard work, political buy-in to socialism and communism, diffidence towards the State and the Church, austerity, honesty and solidarity. Moreover, the typical representatives of such social group were endowed with a strong sense of class belonging and identity.<sup>147</sup>

The term *mass culture* encompassed all the novelties brought by the economic boom, including some elements of *consumer* and *commercial cultures*, instead. It was largely inspired by the American model.<sup>148</sup> It happened that that cultural pattern rapidly gained ground all around the Western world during the twentieth century, deeply intertwining with and modifying local customs and habits. It was regarded as particularly appealing, since it represented the best example of a fully integrated and apparently egalitarian capitalist economy and society, as well as of potential social mobility.<sup>149</sup> These factors played a vital role in ensuring the international success of some goods and products, which embodied and symbolised the American values and lifestyle, like Coca-Cola, Levi’s jeans and hamburgers.<sup>150</sup> Italians’ fascination for the overseas culture could be further inferred from the passion for Hollywood movies, film magazines and comics.<sup>151</sup>

Nevertheless, Italy did not completely adhere to the American model, as the historians Stephen Gundle and Marco Guani clearly demonstrate. Actually, they maintain that, despite the direct influence exerted by the USA on this country, several aspects of Italian popular culture had never been fully uprooted and supplanted by the Americanization trend.<sup>152</sup> Additionally, Americanism, cultural homologation and the consumeristic attitude were criticized by the Church, by

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<sup>146</sup> Ibidem, p. 136.

<sup>147</sup> Ibidem, p. 141.

<sup>148</sup> Ibidem, p. 136.

<sup>149</sup> Gundle and Guani, p. 562.

<sup>150</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>151</sup> Gundle, positions 648-672.

<sup>152</sup> Ibidem, positions 677-682.

traditional elites and by the Left.<sup>153</sup> Catholics tried to combine the new means of communication, like radio and television, and some elements of the novel course of life with the pre-existent socio-political background, but without fully adhering to American values and influence.<sup>154</sup> The PCI was obviously more critical and lamented that Italy was being damaged and oppressed by American imperialism, which aimed at turning the country into a colony.<sup>155</sup> In addition, Foot suggests that several intellectuals, like Pier Paolo Pasolini, Roberto Rossellini and Alberto Moravia did not hesitate to condemn the transformation of Italy into an “American-style mass society”.<sup>156</sup>

As a result, although American values had largely spread in Italy since the 1950s, they could not foster radical changes within the society and the common belief system because political forces strove to moderate that influence in several ways, among the other by either engaging or rejecting mass media.<sup>157</sup>

## 2.4 The press in Italy during the 1950s and the 1960s

To pave the way to my analysis of the articles of the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità*, it is fruitful to reflect upon the complicated informative role of print media in the 1950s and 1960s. Even though a depoliticization process had been going on during those years, still many papers showed a clear ideological connotation.<sup>158</sup> For instance, while the *La Voce*, the *l'Avanti!* and the *l'Unità* proposed themselves as left-wing dailies, the *Roma* and the *Il Secolo d'Italia* evidently held extreme right-wing positions. The *Popolo* was the DC's party newspaper and matched Catholics' political views, instead.<sup>159</sup>

However, the most widely spread ones tended to adopt a new journalistic approach, the so-called *pastone*, which consisted of summarising the principal declarations and ideas of the main political parties and institutions. Even the *Corriere della Sera*

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<sup>153</sup> Gundle and Guani, p. 562.

<sup>154</sup> Ibidem, p. 592.

<sup>155</sup> Ibidem, p. 569.

<sup>156</sup> Foot, p. 137-139; Gundle, position 1473.

<sup>157</sup> Gundle and Guani, pp. 563 and 566; Gundle, position 1584.

<sup>158</sup> Gozzini, pp. 269-273.

<sup>159</sup> Forno, p. 161.

proved to be no exception.<sup>160</sup> From 1945 on, it adopted a liberal conservative stance, rejecting any forms of political extremism. For this reason, it soon became an unofficial governmental means: it was “the organ of the conservative establishment and [...] pro-NATO in its editorial views”.<sup>161</sup> Moreover, it formed strong bonds with Confindustria, the General Confederation of Italian Industry, to such an extent that the daily was regarded as “the mouthpiece of the north Italian industrial bourgeoisie”.<sup>162</sup>

On the contrary, the *l'Unità* was directly supported by the Communist Party, founded by the Italian politician and intellectual Antonio Gramsci in 1924 and performed this function until 1991.<sup>163</sup> It headquartered firstly in Milan and then in Rome. These two originally separate editorial offices were unified in 1962.<sup>164</sup>

During the 1950s and the 1960s the *l'Unità* had a circulation of 250.000 copies, which was relatively high compared to the 370.000 ones of the *Corriere della Sera*, the most widely read paper in the country, and its distribution was mainly carried out by its militant grassroots.<sup>165</sup>

After the Second World War, Italian daily press was endowed with two peculiar characteristics: first of all, the readers' market was considerably limited, equal to about one third or one fourth of other European countries, according to estimates; secondly, it escaped the bipartition between elitist and popular publications in use abroad, since it mixed the features of both genres. Nevertheless, the number of media outlets significantly increased after 1945: actually, while they were 80 in 1936, they rose to 150 in 1946.<sup>166</sup>

During the 1950s the circulation of dailies gradually but systematically decreased. This decline was due to the introduction of radio broadcasting and later of television

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<sup>160</sup> Gozzini, p. 269; Forno, p. 160.

<sup>161</sup> Luigi Bruti Liberati, *Witch-hunts and Corriere della Sera. A conservative perception of American political values in Cold War Italy: The 1950s*, *Cold War History*, Vol.11, No.1, Routledge, New York, 2011, p. 71.

<sup>162</sup> Glauco Licata, *Storia del Corriere della Sera*, Rizzoli Editore, Milan, 1976, p. 433-434; *Ibidem*.

<sup>163</sup> Treccani Encyclopedia, Online Historical Dictionary, 2011.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>165</sup> Gozzini, p. 270.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 269.

programmes from 1954 onwards.<sup>167</sup> Otherwise, weekly magazines had great success, since they were the closest option to popular press, largely missing from the Italian scene until then. The best-known was the *La Domenica del Corriere*, whose sale rates reached the top of approximately 950.000 copies in 1957.<sup>168</sup>

The crisis of newspapers was further enhanced by capillary TV news broadcasting during the 1960s.<sup>169</sup> During this period, the publishing market remained considerably limited, since newspaper sales barely exceeded 5 million copies, and suffered from a general shortage of financial resources.<sup>170</sup> Furthermore, a significant number of dailies was being controlled by external forces, like big industrial groups, state-like institutions, banks, Catholic associations, and parties.<sup>171</sup> Finally, since newspapers still played a relevant role in political clashes in those years, they were strictly monitored by the government. As a result, they were harshly blamed by the exponents of protest movements, who accused them of serving the authorities and of disregarding the interests of the lower classes.<sup>172</sup>

## **2.5 Conclusive remarks: the many lines of tension pervading Italy during the Cold War**

During the 1950s and the 1960s Italian society was animated by two opposite tendencies: on the one hand, there was a rooted fascination towards American values and lifestyle; on the other hand, the Left, the bourgeoisie, and several intellectuals strongly opposed the diffusion of consumerism and Americanism.

Additionally, a further binary opposition can be identified within the Italian social tissue at that time: actually, there were two marked tensions, respectively towards transformation and change, and, simultaneously, towards conservatism and stability. With regard to the first trend, it took the form of a fascination for both the capitalist and the socialist model, which represented the new stances. The second

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<sup>167</sup> Ibidem, p. 270; Forno, p. 158.

<sup>168</sup> Gozzini, p. 270.

<sup>169</sup> Forno, p. 173.

<sup>170</sup> Gozzini, p. 272.

<sup>171</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>172</sup> Forno, pp. 173 and 177.

inclination aimed at preserving traditional values and at resisting to cultural homologation, instead. Furthermore, it concurrently belonged to Conservatives and to left-wing intellectuals.

The debate on polio vaccines should be located in this specific socio-political, cultural and economic scenario. After having provided this background, I am going to analyse in depth how the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* portrayed the scientific dispute and the mass vaccination campaign in the next three chapters.

Especially, in the following section, I will further articulate the diversities between the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità*, by highlighting their opposite stylistic features and their different positions with regard to international policies to tackle the spread of polio and to the dispute between Salk and Sabin serums.

## Chapter Three

### **The stances of the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* with respect to foreign policies on polio prevention and to the dispute on Salk and Sabin serums**

As already highlighted in the previous chapters, the international debate on polio prophylaxis was strictly connected to and shaped by Cold War ideas, thanks also to the narrations vehiculated by the *Cold War media complex*. The *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* fit into this mechanism. As pointed out in Chapter 2, these dailies held opposed ideological stances, which clearly influenced the perspectives and the opinions they expressed about foreign policies on vaccines and the prophylaxis campaign. Moreover, the dispute on which vaccine was to be produced and commercialised in Italy was closely connected to and oriented by political sympathies and issues.

To better outline how the contrasting views of the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* impacted on their positions with respect to the international dispute on polio vaccines and on the measure to tackle the spread of this disease, I will divide this chapter into three paragraphs. Firstly, I will examine the different stylistic features of the dailies, which were probably shaped by their political positions and by the message they wanted to communicate. This paragraph aims at providing a detailed framework and laying the grounds for the further investigation carried out in the following parts of this section.

Secondly, I will describe the attitude of both the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* towards the management of polio epidemics and the measures introduced to fight the disease in other countries, with particular regard to the USA and to Eastern Europe.

Finally, I will briefly account for the dispute that opposed the supporters of Salk and Sabin serums, pointing out that the newspapers under scrutiny, took sides in this controversy by arguing in favour of either the first or the second treatment. In

addition, I will try to point out that such preferences were inspired not only by scientific considerations but also by political ones.

### 3.1 The writing styles of the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità*

The *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* clearly presented distinct styles of writing, to such an extent that they can be regarded as two different models of journalism. The comparative analysis of these peculiarities will help to recognise these diversities, which will be applied to the specific context of the polio vaccines and analysed in the following, more analytical sections of this chapter.

As already mentioned in Chapter 2, the *Corriere della Sera* was a liberal-conservative publication, supporting moderate stances and usually acting as government spokesperson.<sup>173</sup> Due to such views, the attitude towards the government in charge, predominantly led by the DC, was substantially mild.

Moreover, the *Corriere della Sera* published several examples of *pastone* (see Chapter 2).<sup>174</sup> The adherence to this journalistic approach reverberated and influenced the writing style. In line with the idea that the articles accounted for the positions expressed by the different political parties and simply provided an overall picture of daily events, the tone was supposed to be as impartial as possible. With respect to polio prevention, this resulted in publishing several solid overviews on vaccine production, clinical effects, and the related immunization drive, aimed at presenting facts as they really had happened. As an example, the daily comprehensively reported the conclusions by Doctor Thomas Francis, researcher at Michigan University and Jonas Salk's mentor, who had personally analysed the data derived from the trial on Salk serum performed at Ann Arbor in 1955. This piece thoroughly presented experts' opinions on the scientific findings of the experimentation and also provided some minute details to give the readers the idea that the content was precise, reliable and credible.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Bruti Liberati, p. 71.

<sup>174</sup> Forno, p. 160.

<sup>175</sup> "Il vaccino è efficace dall'80 al 90 per cento dei casi", *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 12th/13th April 1955, p. 1.



Furthermore, scientific terminology widely contributed to enforce the impression of an objective attitude in narrating the events. Words like “formaldehyde”, “ultraviolet rays”, “gamma globulin” and “antibodies” were frequently used, as well as numerical data and percentages. This was the case of an article of 20<sup>th</sup> May 1959, which was rich of specific technical vocabulary and references. However, it was also extremely clear and accessible to the general audience as concepts were outlined and explained in a plain and straightforward way.<sup>176</sup> This entry was not an isolated one, since the *Corriere della Sera* used to publish many similar pieces.

As a result, the style of these articles can be regarded as apparently impersonal and detached, since the journalists refrained from taking any stances on the topic under scrutiny and carefully ascribed every piece of information to the scholars and researchers involved in the debate on polio vaccines. Therefore, these papers quoted the most prominent scientists’ declarations, such as the virologist Thomas Francis’s optimistic claim that Salk serum was safe and effective, and Cox’s scepticism towards inactivated vaccines.<sup>177</sup>

Analogously, some preliminary insights into the safety of Salk vaccine were inferred from a summary of a reportage divulged by the World Health Organization and published in the night-edition between 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1956. The WHO declared that millions of children had already been vaccinated without any inconvenience or side effect in the USA. The only exceptions had been 200 unfortunate, unsuccessful cases, one of which deadly, whose causes were unknown. As a result, basing on such data, the WHO concluded that Salk vaccine was extremely likely to be safe.<sup>178</sup>

Such an article resulted considerably relevant, since it offered a balanced perspective on the vaccine safety, highlighting both the reassuring evidence derived from the studies performed in several countries and, on the other hand, the eventual

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<sup>176</sup> V.C., “Salk illustra l’efficacia del suo vaccino antipolio”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 20th/21st May 1959, p. 2.

<sup>177</sup> “Il vaccino è efficace dall’80 al 90 per cento dei casi”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 12th/13th April 1955, p. 1; Ms, “Resta ancora molto da fare per vincere la poliomielite”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 7th September 1954, p. 5.

<sup>178</sup> V.R., “I vaccini antipolio danno buoni risultati”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 22nd/23rd February 1956, p. 8.

unclear points. According to other countries' statistics, it illustrated that the serum proved to be generally effective for six to ten-year-old children. Furthermore, it considerably contributed to reduce the incidence of paralytic polio in the USA.<sup>179</sup>

On the contrary, the *l'Unità* was a communist paper (see Chapter 2), and it was deeply critic of the DC government, whose policies it constantly and harshly opposed. It was the perfect example of politically oriented journalism, which championed its own goals and projects within an ideological perspective. This attitude also influenced the formal way of writing: even though the columnists made wide use of technical vocabulary and of an impersonal style while dealing with scientific issues, they adopted, at the same time, a passionate, vivid and vibrant language on several occasions to match facts with ideology.

These two aspects were combined in an exemplary way in some pieces relating to the studies on Sabin serum. The research on oral vaccines containing alive but attenuated viruses was presented as if it was an epic narration, using an emphatic tone. Similarly, in line with the newspaper's vision, Sabin's journey to Russia was solemnly described, emphasising in particular how the American virologist was fraternally welcomed by Soviet colleagues.<sup>180</sup> Additionally, this article magnified the international cooperation which led to this relevant scientific success.<sup>181</sup>

Moreover, as I will clarify with the progress of the analysis, journalists of the *l'Unità* did not refrain from adopting highly polemic accents, which even escalated into heavy criticism against some political and economic choices made by the government. These reactions were elicited by the price setting of American imported vaccines, which appeared to be regarded as considerably and inappropriately high by the newspaper's editorial staff.<sup>182</sup> Consequently, Italian authorities were called to shed light on this supposedly unfair business whose costs the consumers would bear.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>180</sup> Giuseppe Garritano, "Vaccino per bocca contro la polio per 4 milioni di bambini sovietici", *l'Unità*, Rome, 2nd July 1959, p. 7.

<sup>181</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>182</sup> "Medicinali: sempre nuove speculazioni sulla salute pubblica", *l'Unità*, Rome, 23rd April 1955, p. 7.

<sup>183</sup> Ibidem.

Likewise, they harshly blamed the parliament's decision to have introduced Sabin vaccine into the country too late. They wrote in an impassioned article that governmental actions could be regarded as questionable on reasonable grounds. Moreover, they lamented that 10.000 children and youngsters could have been immunized against polio if the mass vaccination campaign had not started ignominiously late in Italy.<sup>184</sup>

The above analysis will be extremely useful for the following inquiry on the reportage of the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità*, since the different writing styles were probably closely connected to their ideological stances and to the associated messages they attempted to pass, as I will show in the next sections.

### **3.2 The opinions of the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* with regard to foreign policies on polio prevention**

With respect to polio prevention, the Italian government was extremely cautious towards vaccines and adopted a wait-and-see position any time new studies on prophylaxis measures meant to stop the spread of the disease were announced. In fact, the decisions regarding the use of specific serums or treatments were made after an analysis of data related to the outcomes of first trials carried out abroad. As a consequence of this prudent attitude, Italy was one of the latest countries to start mass vaccination campaigns and was highly influenced by the example of other nations.<sup>185</sup> This happened despite the disappointment of a part of the public audience, several members of the scientific community and of the press, voiced mainly by left-wing journals.<sup>186</sup>

On this point, the close attention paid to the policies regarding polio vaccines in other countries raised an issue on which the two mentioned newspapers took divergent lines. In fact, both of them widely reported the sanitary situation and the measures taken abroad, but they regarded different countries as reference points in

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<sup>184</sup> E.R., "Perché il Sabin in Italia fu adottato dopo sei anni?", *l'Unità*, Rome, 29th December 1965, p. 2.

<sup>185</sup> Collino, pp. 171 and 179.

<sup>186</sup> Tognotti, pp. 192-193 and 198.

the struggle to face the epidemic and to eradicate poliovirus. Such disagreement resulted in an authentic political polarization within the context of the Cold War, since they respectively referred to the United States and the Soviet Union and their own satellite countries.

In this paragraph I will examine and compare how these newspapers managed their communication strategy, since it is relevant for the complex interrelation between the scientific dispute on polio vaccines and the political and ideological scenario of the 1950s and 1960s. For this purpose, I will divide this section into three subparagraphs. Firstly, I will present the opinions of such dailies on health care policies introduced in the USA. Secondly, I am going to examine some of their accounts of the debate on polio vaccines in Western European countries. Finally, I will outline their positions with respect to polio prophylaxis in the USSR and in the Warsaw bloc.

### **3.2.1 The USA as a reference point for the Italian debate on polio prevention**

According to the historian Luigi Bruti Liberati, the most prominent foreign affairs commentators of the *Corriere della Sera* were not uncritical supporters of American lifestyle and values. On the contrary, in this respect, their attitude was dual: on the one hand, they used to sympathise with Americans, who were regarded as the main allies in the struggle against communism; on the other hand, many columnists lacked enthusiasm towards certain aspects of American society and politics.<sup>187</sup>

With regard to the specific topic of polio prevention, this newspaper, however, seemed to consider the USA as the most reliable reference point, since it published several articles on scientific research and mass vaccination campaigns in that country. In 1955 it eagerly followed all the news on Salk vaccines and the related trials, and largely documented the scientific debate upon this study. It optimistically announced Salk's discovery and its potential benefits and praised the scientist's resolution not to patent the serum.<sup>188</sup> Furthermore, it highlighted that this resolution

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<sup>187</sup> Bruti Liberati, p. 71.

<sup>188</sup> "Una fiala antipoliomielitica giunta in aereo dall'America", *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 19th April 1955, p. 2.

caused some doses of Salk vaccine to be sent all around the world and counselling would be provided, so that fellow researchers could learn how to synthesise it and could produce and rapidly distribute it everywhere. The news that a vial of this preparation was also sent to Italy and kept in Milan made great sensation.<sup>189</sup>

Likewise, also the *l'Unità* reported the ongoing events in the USA, less widely and glowingly, though. In fact, it contested several aspects of both the research and production of polio vaccines overseas. As an example, the columnist Dick Stewart blamed the pressure put on scientists by pharma companies in the USA by describing a dangerous and outrageous publicity stunt, revealed, and denounced by the Republican deputy Hugh Scott. The launch of Salk vaccine took place on the same date as the anniversary of President Roosevelt's death. This decision was considered as highly symbolic and of great impact, since Roosevelt himself had severely been affected by poliomyelitis and had significantly been engaged in sensitising and fund-raising campaigns against such disease. However, this marketing ploy was carried out at the public safety expense since production times were rushed. Stewart explained the facts on the following terms: when the triumphal announcement of the effectiveness of Salk serum and of the imminent start of the mass vaccination campaign was given at Ann Arbor, pharma labs still did not have enough vaccine supplies. This situation caused several irregularities and considerable confusion, whose consequences significantly impacted on the immunization drive.<sup>190</sup> In retrospect, such line of interpretation and the related conclusions turned out to be extremely significant, and they are now supported by several historical reconstructions, like the ones by Oshinsky and Reich.<sup>191</sup>

Stewart was also extremely critical of the USA government, blaming it for having supported the questionable advertising manoeuvre designed by pharma laboratories and for being responsible for the tragic consequences of this unwise plan, which also contributed to undermine public trust towards polio serums within the American general audience and to decrease the percentage of turnout at vaccination

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<sup>189</sup> “è dunque un simbolo degli aiuti americani e degli intenti umanitari da cui gli Stati Uniti sono animati”. Ibidem.

<sup>190</sup> Dick Stewart, “Il deputato americano Hugh Scott denuncia la manovra pubblicitaria sul vaccino Salk”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 24th May 1955, p. 8.

<sup>191</sup> Oshinsky, p. 172; Reich, p. 44.

centres. Stewart moved these serious accusations by pointing out that pharma companies rushed to commercialise the vaccine, with the connivance of the government, which was also charged with having refused to develop a reliable system of control to check both the production and the administration of the serum. Such flawed system also favoured the occurrence of several cases of “*vaccine black market*”.<sup>192</sup>

Analogously, the journalist A.M. Cavallotti argued for more researchers’ autonomy, which could be achieved only if scientists were not exposed to the pressure of commercial forces and if drugs and medications of such relevance were manufactured only by the State or under the direct control of the State. This was exactly the opposite of what happened in the USA.<sup>193</sup> Furthermore, Cavallotti directly connected such distortion of the scientific practice to the dramatic Cutter Incident. This piece was included into a long series of articles accounting for this tragical event and for its impact both on the immunization drive itself and on the international attitude towards Salk serum.

Most of these articles proved to be particularly relevant as they were surely factual. For instance, the communist daily documented the USA government’s measure to withdraw vaccines produced at Cutter Laboratories from the market and to closely monitor other pharma companies, like the Ely Lilli & Co. It pointed out that, before the beginning of the Salk trial in 1954, several problems with the industrial production of the inactivated vaccine had already been reported. In fact, according to Offit, four out of the first six lots of vaccine produced by Eli Lilly & Co. and by Parke-Davis contained some particles of live poliovirus. Such finding raised several worries, because live viruses might be present also in other lots that had already passed safety tests. Health care authorities were informed about such hurdles in the production, but, after a long debate and difficult negotiations, experts set some further conditions to ensure vaccine security and the trial could start.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>193</sup> A.M. Cavallotti, “Tre ipotesi sul mistero del vaccino antipoliomielitico”, *l’Unità*, Rome, 14th May 1955, p. 3.

<sup>194</sup> Offit, positions 566-578.

However, Ely Lilly & Co. got in the public eye in Italy after some polio cases registered among inoculated children in Georgia, who had not received the vaccine produced by Cutter Laboratories. The news clearly caused some concerns in the Italian public opinion and induced the *l'Unità* to mention a reassuring statement by the High Commissioner for Hygiene and Public Health about the strictness and the carefulness of the security control that Italian sanitary authorities had performed on polio vaccine, in accordance with the seriousness of the situation coming from the USA.<sup>195</sup> Similarly, the *l'Unità* published the announcement that the American Public Health Service authorized the resumption of inoculations, using Salk preparation synthesised by Parke-Davis Laboratories, and, besides, pointed out that safety checks would be enforced to prevent any further inconvenience.<sup>196</sup>

However, the journalists of the *l'Unità* did not limit themselves to report facts, but expressed their opinion and provided their interpretation about the real causes underlying the Cutter Incident. In this respect, Cavallotti supported the hypothesis according to which such event was probably caused by a sudden reactivation of the viruses already present in polio patients' bodies, which, before they were injected, were innocuous. He described this kind of people as "*healthy carriers*", since they carried the virus without getting ill. Cavallotti supposed that immunization was dangerous for these individuals, as it could foster its activation and therefore cause the onset of the disease.<sup>197</sup>

If such hypothesis had been true, there would have been some medical and practical implications. First of all, vaccinating doctors and nurses should have been particularly careful in inoculating healthy carriers, in order to immunize them without accidentally harming them. Such further precautions depended on the chance to develop a reliable, scientific system to recognize healthy carriers among immunized children. Secondly, Cavallotti believed that American authorities were right to stop distributing vaccines under such conditions of uncertainty and,

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<sup>195</sup> "Altri bambini americani colpiti dalla poliomielite", *l'Unità*, Rome, 30th April 1955, p. 8; A.M. Cavallotti, "Tre ipotesi sul mistero del vaccino antipoliomielitico", *l'Unità*, Rome, 14th May 1955, p. 3.

<sup>196</sup> "Autorizzata la ripresa della vaccinazione antipolio", *l'Unità*, Rome, 14th May 1955, p. 3.

<sup>197</sup> A.M. Cavallotti, "Tre ipotesi sul mistero del vaccino antipoliomielitico", *l'Unità*, Rome, 14th May 1955, p. 3.

furthermore, advocated for more carefulness in carrying out massive immunization drives.<sup>198</sup>

Analogously, despite its interest towards the American achievements, the *Corriere della Sera* wrote about the Cutter Incident, too. Differently from the *l'Unità*, this daily portrayed it and its effects in the detached and apparently objective tone described in the previous paragraph. The announcement was released in the Italian daily on 28<sup>th</sup> April 1955. The newspaper reported that, although American scientists and health authorities were immediately consulted to determine the best step to take in the USA, the discussion turned out to be inconclusive and therefore the final decision was made by Leonard Scheele. Since Scheele considered recalling Cutter's lots as the best option available, he got in touch with Cutter Laboratories. Actually, no pharma company could be forced to stop selling an already licensed vaccine, but should voluntarily withdraw it from the market. Cutter Laboratories agreed and therefore their serum was recalled.<sup>199</sup> Nevertheless, this piece also reported the reassuring declarations by Scheele, who specified that no direct correlation between these specific polio cases and the Salk treatment had been established and that its withdrawal from the market should be regarded simply as a cautionary measure. Moreover, he stressed that there was no good reason to prevent parents from having their children injected.<sup>200</sup>

In contrast with the *l'Unità*, which turned to document the mass trials with Sabin serum carried out in several Eastern European countries (see subparagraph 3.2.1), still in the 1960s the focus of the *Corriere della Sera* largely remained on the USA and this had a significant impact on the subsequent choices made with regard to the immunization drive and to the registration and distribution of Sabin vaccine. For instance, the steps taken overseas in the evaluation of the safety and effectiveness of Sabin serum were accurately monitored. Consequently, considerable attention was paid to the communication that the AMA gave, while authorizing the use of polio vaccines based on live and attenuated viruses, as well as to the following

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<sup>198</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>199</sup> Offit, positions 806 and 815-821.

<sup>200</sup> Mario Musella, "Il nuovo vaccino contro la poliomielite efficace nell'80-90 per cento dei casi", *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 13th April 1955, p. 5; "Ritirata dal commercio in America parte del vaccino antipoliomielitico Salk", *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 28th April 1955, p. 7.



polemic that opposed Salk respectively to the AMA and to Sabin.<sup>201</sup> Salk accused the AMA of being biased towards his inactivated serum and of “having blood on its hands”, since poliomyelitis would have been eradicated in the USA a long time before, if only the association had not favoured a product that was not adequately tested. The AMA vehemently reacted to Salk’s charges, telling him that his behaviour was against “good taste or good ethics” and then systematically refused to keep Salk updated on its plans and later to revise its position.<sup>202</sup> The announcement of the AMA was probably crucial in overcoming some resistances and doubts about oral preparations and paved the way for the mass vaccination campaign with Sabin vaccine in Italy, which started in 1964.<sup>203</sup>

### **3.2.2 A window on the debate on polio prevention in Western Europe**

The *Corriere della Sera* did not exclusively focus on the USA, but also accounted for the policies and scientific progress made in other Western European countries. These articles are worth examining because they really represent a “window” on Western European management of the polio crisis, by providing a global overview of the state of foreign policies to fight polio. Furthermore, they also mirrored the supposedly objective and balanced attitude adopted by this newspaper through the genre of *pastone*.

In particular, significant attention was paid to the wavering attitude of the British government towards Salk vaccine. Such pieces are especially relevant and intriguing since they portrayed the steps that led to what later became a rooted trust in Salk vaccine, which persisted in Great Britain even after the introduction of the Sabin one in many countries all over the world.

The *Corriere della Sera* reported that the British government proved initially very cautious and even sceptical about such polio treatment, especially compared with the Danish, the Swedish and the Norwegian authorities, which in 1955 enthusiastically planned to finance a mass vaccination campaign with Salk

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<sup>201</sup> Mario Musella, “La polemica fra Salk e l’AMA non deve confondere le idee”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 23rd July 1961, p. 5.

<sup>202</sup> Oshinsky, p. 208.

<sup>203</sup> Tognotti, p. 193.

preparation.<sup>204</sup> In consequence of this perplexity, the British researchers developed their own vaccine, which was a variation of the Salk one. In this regard, the Minister of Public Health, R.H. Turton, explained that British children would be immunized for free using this new treatment, which was supposed to be especially effective against polio.<sup>205</sup> In addition, Turton praised this preparation, explaining that, although it was a derivation from Salk vaccine, it had been highly improved and perfected compared to the American one.<sup>206</sup>

However, the British government, meanwhile, decided to import Salk vaccine from Canada and the USA and to address it to the paediatric population. This decision matched with the change of mind of the British Vice-Minister of Public Health, Vaughan Morgan, who, at first, had publicly claimed that the Salk vaccine was ineffective, but then expressed his complete trust in this preparation, to the extent that he declared he was ready to have his two children immunised with it.<sup>207</sup>

In addition, at the peak of this trend of increasing confidence in polio serums, more than a ton of this serum, approximately corresponding to three hundred thousand shots, was imported to Great Britain directly from the USA in 1959, as an emotional reaction after the death of Jeff Hall, a famous football player, due to poliomyelitis, which raised public alarm.<sup>208</sup>

Analogously, the *Corriere della Sera* accounted for the situation related to polio prevention in France. The French scientist Pierre Lepine was reported to have developed an anti-polio serum, which had been synthesised according to the same principles of the Salk one, but differed from it just in some aspects of the formulation, so that it was more effective against European poliomyelitis, which differed from the type of polio spread in the USA.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> “La poliomielite non è ancora vinta ma un grande progresso è stato fatto”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 14th April 1955, p. 5.

<sup>205</sup> “Nuovo vaccino antipolio prodotto nei laboratori inglesi”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 20th January 1956, page 3.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>207</sup> “Per tutti i bimbi inglesi vaccinazione antipolio”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 12th/13th September 1957, p. 12.

<sup>208</sup> “Una tonnellata di vaccino giunta in aereo a Londra”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 28th April 1959, p. 5.

<sup>209</sup> L.C., “Prodotto anche in Francia un siero contro la paralisi infantile”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 13th April 1955, p. 5.

Lepine also underlined the relevance of international cooperation and the fruitful exchange of ideas with Salk to discover his own vaccine. However, unlike his American colleague, he was not favourable to a mass vaccination in his nation.<sup>210</sup> Such position was not exclusive of Lepine and many doubts were cast and shared among French scientists. In 1957 France was struck by a violent epidemic and consequently a heated debate around the use of vaccines burst within the French scientific community. This controversy was well summarized by the journalist Lorenzo Bocchi: meanwhile Pasteur Institute was definitely favourable to polio vaccines, several French doctors opposed them, backed up by some powerful associations, which claimed to aim at safeguarding children from the so-called “ministerial vaccines-mania”.<sup>211</sup>

It is interesting to see that, contrary to the *Corriere della Sera*, the *l'Unità* apparently showed scarce interest in monitoring the state of the debate on polio prevention in Western European countries. One of the rare articles of this kind published by the communist newspaper was dated 6<sup>th</sup> April 1957 and stated that 200.000 British children had been immunised with Salk vaccine and that the most part of Danish kids had already been immunised. Furthermore, it mentioned that France was rapidly producing enough Salk serum to meet its internal needs.<sup>212</sup>

As I will show in the next subparagraph, this daily was especially focused on documenting and positively commenting upon the management of polio epidemics in the USSR and in the Warsaw bloc, about which it published plenty of articles.

### **3.2.3 The alternative reference point for polio prophylaxis: the Soviet countermodel**

As mentioned above, the *l'Unità* meticulously documented the events occurring in the USSR and in the Soviet bloc countries, which were taken as a model in dealing with polio epidemic. Similar reportage is extremely worth being analysed, since it portrayed Eastern European countries as the best model to follow to correctly and

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<sup>210</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>211</sup> Lorenzo Bocchi, “Preoccupante offensiva estiva della poliomielite in Francia”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 23rd June 1957, p. 9.

<sup>212</sup> “L’operazione antipolio illustrata da Tessitori”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 6th April 1957, p. 7.

successfully deal with polio crisis. In fact, the daily enthusiastically emphasised their remarkable organization and efficiency in managing the mass vaccination campaign and their wise decision to turn to use Sabin vaccine at a very early stage. It actually insisted on the primacy of the USSR, since it was the first country to produce and largely employ Sabin vaccine. As reported by Shaffer and Seytre, for this reason and to Sabin's disappointment it was often defined as the "communist vaccine" in the West.<sup>213</sup>

Such label mirrors and echoes the American rooted worries against socialised medicine and anti-communist feelings. However, in my opinion, it should be regarded more as a part of the American propaganda than as a realistic definition: although Sabin serum was deeply associated with the Eastern side of the Iron Curtain, it was introduced and used also in Western Europe and in the USA. Hence, it is too simplistic and reductive to present it exclusively as the "communist vaccine".

Additionally, the *l'Unità* highlighted that the decision to introduce Sabin treatment was supported by the greater economic and practical convenience of adopting oral vaccines, which, combined with their effectiveness and safety, made them particularly suitable for meeting the needs of the Soviet enormous population. Sabin serum was described as way easier than the Salk one to be prepared and injected and therefore it allowed the USSR to reduce costs and to produce many more doses. Furthermore, it could be administered rapidly, as it was added to a sugar cube to be ingested.<sup>214</sup>

Similarly, the *Corriere della Sera* also provided some accounts of the related occurrences in the Soviet Union and in the Warsaw bloc, to a very limited extent, though. This is the case of the reportage on the outcomes of the mass vaccination campaign with Sabin vaccine carried out in the USSR, whose Minister of Health, Sergei Kurasciov, described as beyond any expectations. The daily highlighted that this treatment was regarded as especially promising by Soviet experts, who

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<sup>213</sup> Seytre and Shaffer, p. 86.

<sup>214</sup> Giuseppe Garritano, "Vaccino per bocca contro la polio per 4 milioni di bambini sovietici", *l'Unità*, Rome, 2nd July 1959, p. 8.

optimistically predicted that they would totally eradicate poliomyelitis by administering it.<sup>215</sup> Such news made a particular sensation, since the Soviet Union adopted Sabin vaccine on a mass scale well before the United States.

However, differently from the *l'Unità*, the *Corriere della Sera* questioned the reliability of the Russians' claims about the outcomes of the mass trial they carried out, by explaining that the American decision to stall oral vaccines containing live but attenuated viruses was due to a security issue. Local health care authorities required stricter trials and controls before distributing the new serum all around the country.<sup>216</sup> Such hesitation was not exclusive of the USA, as also some experts from all around the world cast certain doubts on the real safety and efficacy of Sabin treatment. For example, Charles Mérieux, a French leading pharmaceutical industrialist who followed thoroughly the developments on polio vaccines, expressed scepticism towards Sabin serum and lamented that almost no information on the Russian trial was available. Therefore, when Sabin asked him to produce his vaccine on a large scale, Mérieux turned the researcher down, because he regarded the outcomes of the Soviet experimentation as inadequate.<sup>217</sup> Despite these uncertainties, the massive utilization of Sabin preparation in Eastern Europe established it internationally.<sup>218</sup>

On the contrary, the *l'Unità* further stressed the idea that communist nations were to be considered as valuable models to emulate in order to deal with polio crisis by largely documenting the course of the epidemic and of the immunization drive in each USSR satellite country, which all adopted Sabin preparation. This is the case of Romania, where poliomyelitis widely spread at the beginning of the 1960s, to such an extent that the country's sanitary authorities planned to adopt the vaccination emergency programme, which included individuals up to the age of

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<sup>215</sup> Arrigo Levi, "L'URSS spera di liquidare in pochi anni la poliomielite", *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 2nd November 1960, p. 5.

<sup>216</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>217</sup> Seytre and Shaffer, p. 87.

<sup>218</sup> Ibidem.

thirty. Its administration was lauded for the excellent planning and for the associated propaganda.<sup>219</sup>

Within the Soviet bloc, Czechoslovakia was also recognized by the *l'Unità* as especially successful in fighting the disease and consequently was highly praised. According to that newspaper, such positive result was secured by a capillary organization, a solid training of medical staff and by some witty strategies to raise public awareness. The Czechoslovak administration started the immunization campaign by vaccinating the children of the medical staff working at Bolovka Hospital in Prague. Both parents and children involved were encouraged to spread the word about this initiative. As a result, other parents started to complain, because the doctors' and nurses' kids were receiving a special treatment, and demanded their children to be injected, too.<sup>220</sup> Meanwhile, clinics and vaccination centres, including mobile ones, were equipped and healthcare professionals were trained to correctly perform the inoculations, in order not to waste a single drop of the serum.<sup>221</sup>

Such positive trend continued over the years and even increased, according to the pieces published in this newspaper. Consequently, thanks to a prompt mobilization of all the health care institutions and to an extensive immunization campaign based on Sabin vaccine, no polio cases were registered in the country in the period ranging between July 1960 and July 1961.<sup>222</sup>

The USSR and its allies were also portrayed by the *l'Unità* as animated by generous and humanitarian intentions while offering help to other countries violently affected by polio outbreaks. For example, the German Democratic Republic delivered three million doses of Sabin-Chumakov vaccine to the German Federal Republic, struck by a terrible epidemic in the areas of Westphalia and the Ruhr in 1961.<sup>223</sup> Likewise,

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<sup>219</sup> G.G., "Vaccinati contro la polio i rumeni sino ai 30 anni", *l'Unità*, Rome, 31st January 1961, p. 10.

<sup>220</sup> Aldo Palumbo, "Oltre due milioni di bambini vaccinati contro la 'polio' in Cecoslovacchia", *l'Unità*, Rome, 2nd June 1957, p. 9.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>222</sup> Orazio Pizzigoni, "Nessun caso di poliomielite da un anno in Cecoslovacchia", *l'Unità*, Rome, 27th July 1961, p. 9.

<sup>223</sup> "Antipolio della RDT offerto a Bonn", *l'Unità*, Rome, 1st July 1961, p. 10.

a Soviet representative gave one hundred thousand doses of vaccine to the Indian Minister of Health, as a gift from the USSR to the Indian population.<sup>224</sup>

### **3.3 The scientific and ideological dimensions of the dispute over Salk and Sabin vaccines**

The debate on polio vaccines remained vivid not only because of its technical and scientific relevance, but also for the political meaningfulness underlying it. The *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* actively participated and contributed to this dispute and their attitudes on this topic were influenced by their ideological stances. This idea can be inferred from the above-mentioned attention towards foreign sanitary policies and the emphatic and enthusiastic portrayals of the countries they wanted Italy to draw inspiration from. In addition, even the choice concerning what type of vaccine to use, specifically either the Salk or Sabin one, was basically influenced by different assumed views. Since the late 1950s every country had been supposed to make decisions in this regard, not being devoid of ideological implications. Analogously, that should be valid for journalists who dealt with these points.

This consideration can be deduced and strengthened by a brief passage of an article written by the columnist Silvano Villani in the *Corriere della Sera* dated 1957, which exactly aimed at removing any ideological interpretation from his words. Villani highlighted that the use of vaccines containing inactivated polioviruses were generally supported by the Conservatives, while the registration of preparations based on live but attenuated viruses was promoted by the Left. However, he pointed out that this ideal political connotation attributed to polio treatments was more apparent than factual. On the one hand, Salk's work was lauded also by the Russians. On the other hand, serums made with live but attenuated viruses were studied by American scientists, like Sabin and Koprowski, and originally were not employed in Soviet countries.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> "L'URSS darà all'India 100.000 dosi di vaccino antipolio", *l'Unità*, Rome, 7th July 1961, p. 10.

<sup>225</sup> Silvano Villani, "Polemica fra due tendenze al congresso della poliomielite", *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 11th July 1957, p. 5.

To thoroughly account for the positions of the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* with regard to the public discussion on which treatment was the best, either Salk or Sabin, I will separately analyse and compare the opinions voiced by these dailies respectively in two different subparagraphs.

### **3.3.1 The *l'Unità* and the campaign in favour of Sabin vaccine**

Differently from the *Corriere della Sera* (see the next subparagraph), regarding the controversy of what kind of vaccine should be used in Italy, the *l'Unità* took quite an evident position. From the late 1950s onwards, when the first trials were performed, it widely showed favour to oral serums containing live but attenuated viruses, and for Sabin vaccine, in particular. This position would be expressed even in a more decisive way over the epidemic course. The main reasons underlying this opinion were scientific in nature, since in the early 1960s experts reached the conclusion that Sabin serum was more effective and safer than the Salk one: the first treatment was assumed to grant a more long-lasting and comprehensive immunization against the disease, compared to the second, because it protected not only the nervous system, but also the intestine, where poliovirus largely multiplied.<sup>226</sup> In addition, its greater practicality was considered as a crucial element to make it preferable to the Salk one: it was easier to be administered and granted a quicker production of antibodies against poliomyelitis.<sup>227</sup>

Similar articles can be regarded as particularly meaningful, since they perfectly matched some considerations made by the virologist Peter Olitsky, who commented upon the dispute on Salk and Sabin treatments. In this respect, Olitsky debunked the widespread idea that there was a race for polio vaccines between Jonas Salk and Albert Sabin. In fact, he claimed that “Sabin’s work on polio, spanning twenty years, had been anything but a hurried pursuit”.<sup>228</sup> Rather, he described the relationship between the two scientists as characterised by bitter rivalry and competition.<sup>229</sup> This interpretation seems to be supported by Collino, who points

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<sup>226</sup>“Il Sabin immunizza per 10 anni”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 23rd September 1962, p. 6.

<sup>227</sup> “Perché solo oggi l’uso in Italia del vaccino Sabin”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 30th July 1962, p. 2.

<sup>228</sup> Oshinsky, p. 190.

<sup>229</sup> Ibidem.



out that Sabin carried out long and accurate studies to develop his serum, carefully collecting insights from other colleagues' research, Salk's one included.<sup>230</sup>

Furthermore, the daily carried out a lively propaganda in favour of Sabin vaccine, trying to overcome the hesitations of the authorities. Actually, still in 1961, the Minister of Health confirmed that Italy would keep using Salk vaccine, in line with the suggestions provided by President Kennedy and American scientists. He justified this decision by maintaining that serums based on live viruses were still being tested and therefore their safety had not been completely proved yet, despite the evidence collected in several countries.<sup>231</sup>

In contrast with the *Corriere della Sera* (see the next subparagraph), the *l'Unità* was extremely critical of this resolution, since it was determined by excessive caution, not demonstrated scientifically, and considered even potentially dangerous, since those worries were preventing Italian children from receiving the best prophylaxis treatment available.<sup>232</sup>

As a reaction to the sceptical attitude rooted in the country, Sabin himself held a meeting with the executives of the High Institute of Health, also known as ISS. During this event, he harshly blamed Italian authorities for their wait-and-see policies and accused them of being responsible for exposing Italian children to a preventable risk. In response to such speech, ISS's managers simply stood up and left the hall before Sabin even finished talking.<sup>233</sup> As a result of this definite refusal to adopt the oral vaccine, the *l'Unità* published several articles of complaints, thus advocating for starting a national production of Sabin serum, as well as its capillary distribution and systemic administration to the Italian population.

Furthermore, it largely insisted on the necessity to extensively carry out a mass vaccination campaign. It reported that, according to Sabin himself, a wide-scale immunization drive would considerably limit any possible inconvenience caused

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<sup>230</sup> Collino, p. 158.

<sup>231</sup> "Il ministro Giardina sostiene che il vaccino Salk è innocuo", *l'Unità*, Rome, 1st June 1961, p. 2.

<sup>232</sup> F.S., "Hanno sulla coscienza diecimila poliomielitici", *l'Unità*, Rome, 7th November 1963, p. 13.

<sup>233</sup> Collino, p. 178.

by some other viruses, like Cocksachie and Echo, which especially spread in warm-climate places and could inhibit the efficacy of his own preparation. The journalist Francesco Sabatelli maintained that this goal could be genuinely reached only by making the immunization mandatory, an action that the Italian government seemed not ready to take.<sup>234</sup> Through similar pieces, the *l'Unità* took up a clear stance within the debate on the constitutionality and civil liability of making polio vaccination compulsory, which, according to the historian Eugenia Tognotti, represented one of the most controversial topics of that period.<sup>235</sup>

Sabin vaccine proved to be effective and was consequently lauded in several pieces published in the *l'Unità*. In fact, after the serum had been made available on an extensive scale in Italy, the number of registered cases decreased relevantly. The world's data on the polio trend in 1965 were particularly striking, but in Italy a noticeable reduction of contagions was to be highlighted: during the second decade of August, only 3 polio cases were registered in the nation, compared to 9 in 1964 and to the 86 in 1963 reported in the same period of the year. Most people who caught poliomyelitis did not either receive any prophylaxis treatment or complete the vaccination series.<sup>236</sup>

Although the *l'Unità* largely focused on the benefits of Sabin vaccine and repeatedly claimed for its use, it was not hostile to Salk preparation either. The editorial board of this daily seemed to be animated by trust in science, thus following the expert directives, and by the conviction that vaccination was essential to eradicate poliomyelitis. Consequently, it was equally favourable to Salk serum and encouraged people to be inoculated with it, as long as research findings suggested that it was the best serum available. In conformity with these beliefs, in 1955 it described Salk vaccine as “an effective measure to fight against a terrible disease”.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Francesco Sabatelli, *Vaccino Sabin e inoculazione obbligatoria*, *l'Unità*, Rome, 12th February 1964, p. 6.

<sup>235</sup> Tognotti, p. 180.

<sup>236</sup> *13 casi di polio in un mese contro i 39 dell'anno scorso*, *l'Unità*, Rome, 15th September 1965, p. 2.

<sup>237</sup> “un mezzo efficace nella lotta contro un male terribile”. “L'A.C.I.S. e il vaccino Salk”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 23rd April 1955, p. 7.

However, contrary to the *Corriere della Sera* (see subparagraph 3.3.2), such openness and optimism towards Salk vaccine faded progressively when the first trials on Sabin preparation started to be performed in Eastern Europe, and journalists started to account for the superiority of the latter. The explicit preference for Sabin over Salk treatments was mainly based on scientific reasons, but ideological motives were supposed to play an important role in determining it.

In fact, the emphasis on the advantages of Sabin vaccine seemed to be strictly associated with some reportage describing the policies related to vaccination in the USSR and in its satellite countries. On the one hand, the Soviet bloc countries were praised and regarded as a point of reference because they were successfully dealing with mass immunization drives and so they limited the number of polio infections. The decision of using Sabin preparation was included among the wisest and winning resolutions made by Soviet authorities, therefore worth being eulogized. In addition, Sabin vaccine was likely to be held in high regard not only due to scientific motives, but also because it had been adopted by the USSR. Legitimising Sabin serum and its usage could be seen as an attempt to ratify communist health policies. Clearly this may have given rise to a sort of circular process that self-sustained itself.

### **3.3.2 The wavering attitude of the *Corriere della Sera*: from the support to Salk treatment to the praise of Sabin vaccine**

As opposed to the *l'Unità*, the *Corriere della Sera* did not take a definite and homogenous stance with regard to the dispute on polio vaccines. Therefore, it is useful to analyse several articles published in that daily, in order to get the most comprehensive view of its complex and unsystematic position.

On the one hand, this newspaper largely accounted for experts' opinions and reported their interest and favour towards the hypothesis of developing a vaccine with live but attenuated viruses since the late 1950s. Moreover, it thoroughly portrayed the race to develop an oral vaccine of this kind among diverse competing teams, with particular regard to the one led by Koprowski of the Wistar Institute in Philadelphia and the one led by Sabin of Children's Hospital Research Foundation

in Cincinnati.<sup>238</sup> In fact, in 1956 Koprowski's treatment, which had to be used in combination with Salk serum, was regarded as extremely promising, probably not entirely free from risks, though.<sup>239</sup> Sabin vaccine, for its part, resulted to be attractive as potentially more effectful and surely easier to be administered than the Salk one.<sup>240</sup> It is interesting to notice that the *Corriere della Sera* placed the emphasis on the idea of a "race" among the scientists developing polio treatments, in contrast with the *l'Unità*, which did not adopt this line of interpretation, as showed in subparagraph 3.3.1.

Progressively, when Salk preparation proved to be less effective than initially expected, the Italian general audience and the scientific community started to consider oral vaccines containing live polioviruses as a valuable alternative to immunise the population.<sup>241</sup> However, the newspaper urged to be prudent with this new serum, since there were no guarantees that it was completely harmless and more tests were needed. This suggestion was also based on the previous tragic experience with Salk vaccines, which led to the Cutter Incident.<sup>242</sup> Such concerns fully mirrored the uncertainties surrounding the new polio treatment in the USA and the consequent prudent attitude adopted by the NFIP towards the possibility of sponsoring another mass trial for oral polio serum in the country.<sup>243</sup>

For the above-mentioned reasons, the contribution of the *Corriere della Sera* to the debate was quite minimal, since it never took any specific position concerning the debate on what type of vaccine was the most effective to be administered and just reported and sometimes even justified the government decisions on public health issues. Accordingly, the sanitary policies introduced by the Ministry of Public Health were generally presented as in line with experts' opinions. For example, while reporting about the Congress on Poliomyelitis held in Geneva in 1957, Villani summarised the results of the discussion in the conference on what type of vaccine

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<sup>238</sup> Seytre and Shaffer, p. 79.

<sup>239</sup> Mario Musella, "A che punto siamo con il famoso vaccino Salk?", *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 9th September 1956, p. 5.

<sup>240</sup> "Antipolio", *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 8th October 1957, p. 2.

<sup>241</sup> Tognotti, p. 192.

<sup>242</sup> Mario Musella, "L'angoscia di uno scienziato che ha infettato il suo bambino", *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 3rd February 1957.

<sup>243</sup> Oshinsky, p. 193.

should be the most effective. He explained that the right-wing, conservative tendencies that favoured Salk vaccine still prevailed, but that the participants seemed also more open to Sabin serum, pondering the possibility to distribute it at a later time.<sup>244</sup> This statement, together with the specification that no country had already introduced vaccines made of live but attenuated viruses, indirectly explained the reasons why only “dead vaccines” were being used in Italy.

Analogously, during the 27<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Italian Paediatric Society the daily gave voice to the cautious and wait-and-see view of Italian authorities towards Sabin preparation, justified by the fact that the serum was still in the experimental phase and that more data were needed to assess its safety. Furthermore, it reported a contextual declaration of the Minister of Health, who claimed that, until the end of the trials, Italian children would not be administered the new preparation, since they would not be used as test subjects.<sup>245</sup>

The *Corriere della Sera* highlighted that such announcement surprised and even disappointed many paediatricians, who were attracted by the possibility of benefitting from the new oral treatment, especially after having attended the persuasive and exciting lecture about it given by Sabin in Milan.<sup>246</sup> However, Mario Musella, author of this reportage, agreed with the stances expressed by the Minister of Health, as attested by the conclusion he drew at the very end of his piece: he maintained that further safety tests and confirmative results on both Koprowski and Sabin serums were needed. Only in that way Italian authorities could serenely decide to distribute an oral vaccine containing attenuated polioviruses on a large scale, as it happened with the Salk one.<sup>247</sup>

Hence, in contrast with the *l'Unità*, the *Corriere della Sera* described the decision made by the Italian government to keep using Salk treatment for so long as justifiable, because of its higher security, compared with the Sabin one. In fact, as it contained exclusively inactivated polioviruses, it could not supposedly cause the

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<sup>244</sup> Silvano Villani, “Polemica fra due tendenze al congresso della poliomielite”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 11th July 1957, p. 5.

<sup>245</sup> Mario Musella, “Perché il vaccino con ‘virus’ vivi non sarà ora usato per la polio”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 11th October 1960, p. 5.

<sup>246</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>247</sup> Ibidem.

disease.<sup>248</sup> On the basis of similar remarks and comments, this daily mostly tended to accept and divulge the government guidelines, ratifying and providing motives for them. Additionally, it gave them priority over scientists' trust in vaccines containing live, attenuated viruses, until the authorities formally registered Sabin serum.

The newspaper radically changed its attitude towards Sabin serum in 1962, when the vaccine was officially registered and commercialized in Italy, after health authorities' approval. It presumably set aside any reservations and expressed full support to Sabin preparation: it dealt with all the advantages its introduction and use might have brought to Italy, especially in comparison with the Salk one. Furthermore, Sabin oral vaccine was presented as extremely promising in eradicating polio and was approved by the most prominent Italian hygienists, who based their optimistic views on the findings of the trials carried out abroad.<sup>249</sup> However, such direct references to researchers' judgements and declarations seemed to be apparently irrelevant since the experts had already voiced their interest and endorsement in using vaccines made of live but attenuated viruses for a long time, generally relying on scientific data and knowledge.<sup>250</sup>

The arguments presented above, whose significance had initially been underestimated, were then worth writing and analysing by the *Corriere della Sera* to enforce the positive effects of Sabin serum and, consequently, to reassure the population of its safety after a long and intricate public dispute.

### **3.4 Conclusive remarks: how ideologies influenced the positions held by the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* within the debate on polio prevention**

In this chapter I investigated and compared the stylistic features of the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità*, as well as their attitudes towards foreign policies related

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<sup>248</sup> F. Pi., "In vendita le caramelle antipolio", *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 6th/7th September 1962, p. 1.

<sup>249</sup> Ibidem; "Operazione "antipolio" prevista per febbraio", *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 23rd September 1962, p. 4.

<sup>250</sup> Collino, p. 157.

to the polio mass vaccination campaign. Moreover, I examined the political and ideological issues which, in addition to scientific considerations, influenced the dispute that opposed Salk and Sabin treatments.

By closely examining the articles, I highlighted that the newspapers under scrutiny adopted two different writing styles. On the one hand, the *Corriere della Sera* portrayed facts in an apparently detached tone, trying to result as objective as possible. In contrast, the *l'Unità* tended to use a more vibrant and passionate language, which often escalated in polemical accents. Such contrastive stylistic features were connected to the ideological messages these dailies aimed at vehiculating within the specific context of polio prevention. This analysis is useful to familiarise with the rhetoric and the tones adopted by these newspapers while dealing with polio prophylaxis.

In paragraph 3.2 I mainly concentrated on the articles focusing on the policies and measures taken abroad in order to tackle the spread of poliomyelitis published by both newspapers. From them it can be inferred that the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* identified two main healthcare and political reference points from which to draw inspiration while handling polio epidemics, respectively the USA, and the USSR and the Warsaw bloc. Moreover, they seemed to suggest which of these divergent models the Italian government should follow.

In addition, both newspapers widely contributed to the international debate on polio prevention by expressing their opinions about which was the best vaccine to use between Salk and Sabin serums. In this respect, the *Corriere della Sera* did not hold a clear position and apparently simply sided with and supported every decision made by the Italian authorities. Therefore, it widely propagandised in favour of Salk vaccine, which was associated to the USA, until the government turned to Sabin one. From then on, it started to support the new treatment. On the contrary, although it never hindered the commercialization and the usage of Salk preparation, the *l'Unità* firmly advocated for licensing and distributing Sabin oral serum, so ideally connected to communist countries to be known as “the communist vaccine” in the West. While performing this investigation, I briefly hinted at some criticisms

brought forward by the *l'Unità* to the Italian government, thus already introducing and clarifying some of the issues dealt with in the next sections.

The inquiry carried out in this chapter points out that the positions held by the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* within the public debate on polio mass immunization drives were shaped by their ideologies. This fact clearly suggests that the dispute on polio prophylaxis was influenced by political considerations. However, the stances taken by these dailies with respect to the topic at stake were also impacted by scientific evidence and data, as it can be inferred by the articles investigated. I will further articulate this point in Chapter Five. Hence, the opinions expressed by these newspapers should be regarded as the result of a complex and subtle mediation between science and ideologies, as their attitudes were influenced, from time to time, by each of these factors.

The above examination paves the way to the analysis performed in Chapter Four, by providing the foreign background in which the discussions on polio prevention in Italy should be located. In fact, the debate on the measures and actions taken by the Italian administration and the economic issues related to the production and distribution of polio serums were closely connected to the international discourse on this topic. So, the Italian public dispute about polio vaccines can be fully understood only in the light of such framework.



## Chapter Four

### **For or against the Italian government and its sanitary policies: the opinions voiced by the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità***

As highlighted above, the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* largely portrayed the international disputes on the best vaccine to be used, as well as on the measures to be introduced to successfully manage polio prevention campaigns. Italy proved to be not immune to the debate, too; on the contrary, according to the findings reported in the previous chapter, these topics were extensively discussed by Italian public opinion and considerably intertwined with political and ideological matters.

The foreign, “macro” debate on polio prevention, presented in its various respects in Chapter Three, influenced also the domestic debate on governmental actions and decisions taken in Italy to limit the spread of poliomyelitis and to effectively immunize the population. In the current chapter, I am going to zoom in on the peculiar public discussion about the management of polio prophylaxis campaigns and their economic implications underlying the commercialization of vaccines in Italy. In particular, I will outline and compare how the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* commented upon and assessed the policies introduced and the choices made by the Italian government to handle the polio crisis.

To examine in detail these aspects of the narratives offered by the two newspapers under scrutiny, I will divide this section into two parts. Firstly, I will focus on the reactions of both newspapers to government’s deliberations issued to minimise the illness spread and eventually to eradicate it from the country. Secondly, I will deal with the economic repercussions of the mass-scale production and distribution of polio serums in Italy, paying particular attention to some scandals surrounding the vaccine price setting.

#### **4.1 The reactions of the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* to the sanitary policies introduced by the Italian administration and their economic implications**

Before starting with my analysis, I will provide some details on the Italian health care system and the main institutions involved in the struggle against polio, in order to clarify the background to which the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* made reference. Italy did not establish a Ministry of Health until 1958. Consequently, public health matters fell within the competence of the Ministry of the Internal Affairs and were mainly administered by prefects, instead of by health officials. After the Second World War, however, a separate Department was created: Alto Commissariato per l'Igiene e la Sanità pubblica (ACIS) was especially meant for handling sanitary issues. It became the headquarters of the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS), an organ that, for its part, monitored the activity of several important agencies like the Red Cross, the Opera Nazionale della Maternità ed Infanzia (ONMI), a welfare office deputed to mothers' and children's material and healthcare protection.<sup>251</sup> Such information is necessary to understand which institutions were involved in polio mass vaccination campaigns and which role they specifically played, in order to get some insights into the context in which polio prevention occurred.

With regard to vaccines and the immunization drives, the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* not only widely documented the events occurred and the decisions made abroad, but also paid considerable attention to internal politics. As their ideological stances were extremely likely to influence their publishing on the management of both the sanitary emergency and the mass vaccination campaign, it will be relevant to closely analyse and compare the articles that dealt with this subject, thus demonstrating such hypothesis.

For the purposes of such examination, I will divide this section into four subparagraphs. Firstly, I will present respectively the general attitudes of the

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<sup>251</sup> Collino, pp. 169 and 172.

newspapers under scrutiny towards the sanitary measures introduced by the government. Secondly, I will outline their reactions to vaccine scarcity. Then, I will highlight how these dailies portrayed the problem of lack of suitable refrigerators to conserve Sabin serum. Finally, I am going to describe their contrastive stances with regard to the issue of mandatory vaccination.

#### **4.1.1 The attitudes of the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* towards the management of polio crisis of the DC administration**

In line with what I pointed out in Chapters Two and Three, the *Corriere della Sera* adopted a mild and moderate attitude towards the DC administration and tended not to be critical with it. Under specific circumstances, it even highlighted some factors for mitigating possible mistakes made by the authorities in dealing with the epidemic and apparently aimed at reassuring the public on the validity of both the preventive and therapeutic measures taken.

This is the case of an article written by Mario Musella in 1958, which attempted to reassure the readers about a polio outbreak in Naples. The journalist clarified that there was no evidence of a real ongoing epidemic in that city, although poliomyelitis had become an endemic disease in Italy, and especially in the South, due to the mild climate. In addition, he emphasized that all the vaccines registered had carefully been tested on monkeys and that all patients affected by the disease were being treated adequately. Health care facilities would receive funds to upgrade the technical equipment.<sup>252</sup>

Conversely, the *l'Unità* was extremely critical with many decisions made by the DC administration, the Ministry of Health and local health care institutions. As far as the sanitary policies and the management of the emergency were concerned, it blamed, at first, an excessive cautiousness, and the wait-and-see attitude of the Italian authorities during all the stages of polio eradication campaign. Such tendency turned out to be far from unproblematic in many ways. For example, it caused a lag in the real start of the immunization drive in Italy, displeasing the

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<sup>252</sup> Mario Musella, “Non c’è oggi in Italia epidemia di poliomielite”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 13th September 1958, p. 7.

executives of both the Italian Istituti Sieroterapici in Milan and in Naples, where the serum production was decided to carry on in any case. In this respect, the *l'Unità* shared and voiced this disappointment, by commenting succinctly that the ACIS should dismiss an excessively prudent attitude and finally use the 100-million-lire funding it had received to import Salk vaccine from abroad.<sup>253</sup>

Analogously, the newspaper reported the harsh words of the Councillor for Hygiene of the City of Milan, Lionello Beltramini, who, during a press conference, attacked the several officials of the Ministry of Health, accusing them of being responsible for at least 10.000 polio contagions due to their hesitations and demanding their resignation.<sup>254</sup> This vehement statement was caused by the experts' disappointment due to the decision of registering and using Sabin vaccine in Italy, which would be delayed. According to Beltramini, this procrastination also negatively affected the trials on the serum carried out in Milan, which encountered many difficulties.<sup>255</sup>

In addition, the *l'Unità* accounted for the insufficiency of the measures taken by the sanitary and governmental authorities to contain and fight poliomyelitis outbreaks in the South, where the disease had dramatically spread. San Fratello, a small village near Messina, was struck by a violent polio outburst in 1966. Vaccines had not been delivered there and children could not be immunized.<sup>256</sup> The problem of infectious illnesses in Southern Italy had been worsened by factors like the deeply rooted poverty and the terrible hygienic conditions characterising this area. This is the case of the small Sicilian town of Leonforte, whose situation was described by the journalist Dante Angelini in the following passage:

“The town of Leonforte totally mirrors its inhabitants' poverty. Except for the main street, the city centre is just a cluster of slouchy huts, where people live together with animals. Water supply is an old wreck. Sewers are missing in entire areas of the town and people are practically forced to get rid

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<sup>253</sup> “I fatti della settimana”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1956, p. 8.

<sup>254</sup> F.S., “Hanno sulla coscienza diecimila poliomieltici”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 7th November 1963, p. 13; E.R., “Perché il Sabin in Italia fu adottato dopo sei anni?”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 29th December 1965, p. 2.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>256</sup> Sante di Paola, “Il Sabin non giunge in tempo nel paese colpito dalla polio”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 4th December 1966, page 5.

of waste by throwing them out of the window [...]. As a result of this complete lack of hygiene, Leonforte is particularly struck by epidemics”.<sup>257</sup>

A similar situation happened in San Fratello. People could not use tap water regularly, since the local aqueduct did not work properly, and the small town usually had access to hydric resources just for thirty minutes every three days. Moreover, sewers were malfunctioning, and their stability and efficiency were threatened through episodic landslides. No wonder that infections had been proliferating effortlessly in such untidy environment.<sup>258</sup>

However, degradation did not exclusively concern Southern Italy. Actually, the *l'Unità* denounced also the confusion, the chaos and the dirty state of the clinic of the Department of Health in Rome, where children were being administered vaccines.<sup>259</sup>

#### **4.1.2 The problem of vaccine scarcity**

The *Corriere della Sera* considered some other controversial aspects of the mass vaccination campaign, and reported the steps taken by the government to deal with them, including the issue related to the supply. At the beginning of 1959 the quantities of serum available were significantly scarce and getting these goods from abroad was challenging. As a result, in some moments vaccines were almost missing and this caused popular discontent. The situation worsened and difficulties further derived from the government's alarmed reactions to the Cutter Incident, after which Italian authorities decided not to buy Salk serum from the USA, but to start a national production, also forecasting that imported vaccine would be sufficient to immunise all the population. However, this endeavour turned out to be

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<sup>257</sup> “L'abitato di Leonforte riflette in pieno la povertà della popolazione. A parte il corso centrale, il resto del centro si riduce ad un agglomerato di catapecchie cadenti nelle quali convivono uomini ed animali. La rete idrica è ridotta ad un vecchio rottame. Le fogne non esistono in intere zone dell'abitato e la gente è praticamente costretta a sbarazzarsi dei rifiuti buttandoli dalla finestra. [...]. Questa assoluta mancanza di igiene ha fatto sì che Leonforte sia uno dei centri più bersagliati dalle epidemie”. Dante Angelini, “Leonforte sotto l'incubo della polio”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 28<sup>th</sup> August 1962, p. 3.

<sup>258</sup> Sante di Paola, “Il Sabin non giunge in tempo nel paese colpito dalla polio”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 4<sup>th</sup> December 1966, p. 5.

<sup>259</sup> “Caos per le vaccinazioni contro la poliomielite”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1962, p. 4.

harder than expected, as only in 1957 the Istituto Sieroterapico Italiano (ISI) in Naples reported having developed a safe and effective version of the inactivated vaccine. In addition, the ISI could not synthesise enough preparation to meet the domestic demand. As a result, Italy was still forced to import Salk serum from the USA.<sup>260</sup>

Nonetheless, the newspaper placed the emphasis on the comforting declaration made by the Minister of Health of that time, Vincenzo Monaldi, upon the problem of the scarcity of the vaccine, who assessed that the problem of vaccine scarcity was going to be totally solved soon, since the government was going to import large supplies from America, Switzerland and Belgium.<sup>261</sup>

As opposed to the *Corriere della Sera*, which attempted to defuse the public audience, the *l'Unità* largely echoed and fuelled the complaints about the exiguity of Salk serum. It pointed out that in 1958 vaccines were evidently insufficient to meet the needs of the Italian population and pharmacists in Naples and Rome repeatedly lamented their shortage, which caused alarm among the general public.<sup>262</sup> One hypothesis which circulated about the causes underlying that situation, referred by the daily, was the following: somebody was supposed to have hidden or hoarded vials imported from the USA and Switzerland in order to benefit domestic industries and to facilitate speculations. Due to its scarce availability, Salk vaccine became a highly precious good and was largely traded on the black market in Naples.<sup>263</sup> The situation escalated so much that polio treatment began to be considered as a “class privilege”, since its shortage led to a dizzying increase of its price.<sup>264</sup>

In addition, the *l'Unità* placed the responsibility of such hurdles to the DC administration, by portraying the many attempts the authorities made, but defining

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<sup>260</sup> Collino, pp. 170-171.

<sup>261</sup> “Entro gennaio saranno vaccinati quasi tutti i bambini fino ai tre anni”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 15th January 1959, p. 7.

<sup>262</sup> “I farmacisti napoletani protestano per la mancanza di vaccino antipolio”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 4th October 1958, page 2; “Napoli ha urgente bisogno di 50 mila dosi di antipolio!”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 12th December 1958, p. 1; “Nuova denuncia dei farmacisti sulla scomparsa dell’antipolio”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 30th December 1958, p. 4.

<sup>263</sup> “Imboscato l’antipolio!”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 11th December 1958, p. 1.

<sup>264</sup> Tognotti, p. 179.

them as inadequate and expressing scepticism about the government commitment to properly supply municipal clinics and pharmacies. Moreover, it insinuated that such doubts were legitimated by the questionable management of the crisis by the Minister of Health Monaldi and by the DC administration.<sup>265</sup> To a certain extent, similar articles gave insights that complemented the narration offered by the *Corriere della Sera*. As a result, their specular examination becomes highly fruitful in order to gain a global overview on the Italian situation and the reactions of the public audience.

#### **4.1.3 The lack of suitable refrigerators to preserve Sabin serum**

When the Italian sanitary authorities turned to the use of Sabin treatment, new obstacles arose. One of them was related to the need of suitable fridges to properly preserve vaccine vials, which resulted to be insufficient in number, thus causing a delay in the immunization drive. As the preservation of vaccines resulted particularly difficult and interfered with the course of the immunization drive, the reactions of the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* to such inconvenience is especially worth being analysed.

On this purpose, the *Corriere della Sera* seemed to support the explanation provided by the Minister of Health, Giacomo Mancini: as refrigerators were extremely hard to find, an intense negotiation between the government and manufacturers was taking place to get them, so the vaccination campaign was going on slower than expected.<sup>266</sup> According to Collino, Mancini's intervention proved to be crucial to solve that problem: firstly, he bought some common kitchen fridges to provide the vaccination centres with a basic equipment; meanwhile, he got in touch with the owner of Ignis, a manufacturer of household appliances, and ordered 300 portable fridges.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> “Evasivo impegno di Monaldi per il vaccino antipoliomielitico”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 1<sup>st</sup> January 1959, p. 2.

<sup>266</sup> “La vaccinazione antipoliomielitica”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 2nd February 1964, page 2; “L'attuale stagione è la più adatta per la vaccinazione antipoliomielitica”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 2nd October 1958, p. 7.

<sup>267</sup> Collino, pp. 180-181.

While the *Corriere della Sera* emphasised the endeavours made by sanitary and governmental officials in order to solve the problem of the exiguity of refrigerators, the *l'Unità* protested against the many practical inconveniences associated with this issue, which could undermine the course of Sabin vaccinations.<sup>268</sup> The distribution of the new serum on a mass scale was hindered because municipalities and vaccination centres completely lacked or had inadequate refrigerators to properly preserve it. Such failure in providing the necessary equipment was largely deplored by the daily, as it was not caused by sudden and unexpected contingencies, but by governmental mismanagement.<sup>269</sup> These public shortcomings, occurred in many Italian regions, were particularly evident compared with the extraordinary efficiency of the City Council of Milan, which dealt with the same hurdle and easily and rapidly overcame it.<sup>270</sup>

Additionally, the journalist Elisabetta Bonucci pointed out that finding suitable fridges for that specific purpose was easier and less expensive than the government stated it was. Actually, she reported that several companies had already offered these appliances at an affordable price, as revealed from a quick investigation.<sup>271</sup>

#### **4.1.4 In favour or against mandatory vaccination**

The columnists of both the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* dealt with another relevant element of the Italian dispute on polio prophylaxis, which was the issue of compulsory immunization, a legislative design animatedly discussed and evaluated for a long time. This point is especially relevant since it was one of the most debated political issues on which the government and the left-wing opposition confronted.<sup>272</sup>

In this respect, Musella, from the *Corriere della Sera*, justified the choice not to make polio vaccination mandatory by referring to the many reasons provided by

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<sup>268</sup> Ibidem, p. 176.

<sup>269</sup> “Ostacoli alla vaccinazione con il ‘Sabin’”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 21st January 1964, p. 3.

<sup>270</sup> “La salute in frigo”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 22nd January 1964, p. 3.

<sup>271</sup> Elisabetta Bonucci, “Chi blocca il vaccino Sabin?”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 28th January 1964, p. 7.

<sup>272</sup> Tognotti, p. 183.



the government.<sup>273</sup> First of all, he maintained that that proposal was unreasonable, because the serum had not been sufficiently tested and introducing such measure would be too risky.<sup>274</sup> Secondly, he argued that this action would not bring any benefits, since it would not induce more people to spontaneously follow the prevention measures. Rather, he claimed that it would be more fruitful to further implement the favourable propaganda on this kind of treatment, to persuade people of its safety and effectiveness.<sup>275</sup>

The idea that the widespread concerns about polio serums negatively affected the final governmental resolution on the mandatory vaccination draft law seems to be supported by Collino. Actually, in her reconstruction, the science writer reports a declaration by the High Commissioner Tito Tessitori, who stated that, since the polio incidence was relatively low, there was no need of making prevention compulsory and that parents should still take a decision on voluntary basis.<sup>276</sup> However, in contrast with this view, Tognotti points out that nearly all Italian citizens adhered to the prophylaxis campaign, in consequence of the increasing fear of contracting the disease. Furthermore, she highlights that, in this specific case, prevention was not perceived as either a constraint imposed by the State or as a limitation of individual freedom; on the contrary, it was considered as an essential right to be claimed.<sup>277</sup>

On the other hand, mandatory vaccination was reclaimed by left-wing parties and their news outlets. Apparently, the government reacted to this parliamentary question by drawing a draft law for the so-called “full” polio vaccination.<sup>278</sup> The *l'Unità* opposed this provision, by arguing that it did not achieve the goals it had been set for. This draft legislation did not make the vaccination neither mandatory nor “integral”, because it simply introduced the requirement for children up to six years to have a vaccination certificate to join municipal facilities. Furthermore,

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<sup>273</sup> A.B., “Antipolio obbligatoria annuncia il ministro”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 28th May 1965, p. 3.

<sup>274</sup> F.D.S., “Integrale non obbligatoria la vaccinazione antipoliomielitica”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 14th June 1959, p. 11

<sup>275</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>276</sup> Collino, p. 174.

<sup>277</sup> Tognotti, p. 179.

<sup>278</sup> Collino, pp. 173-175; “Il governo rifiuta la vaccinazione obbligatoria”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 17<sup>th</sup> July 1959, p. 2.

parents could easily bypass such measure, simply replacing the certificate with another attesting non-vaccination, without having to provide any reasons.<sup>279</sup>

As Tognotti pointed out, compulsory treatment for polio would be essential in Southern Italy, where people were particularly reluctant to have their children immunized. Many parents believed that prophylaxis was not necessary: if it had been, the State would have made it mandatory. In addition, they resulted to be excessively individualist, and their scepticism was strengthened by a considerable lack either of trust in medicine and science or of information on the disease and how to prevent it. Consequently, expecting their voluntary participation to the campaign was simply unrealistic. Therefore, compulsory vaccination was the best option to eradicate polio from this less-developed territory. Furthermore, such measure would be beneficial also in the North, preventing many no-vax parents from asking for their children's exemption.<sup>280</sup>

## **2.Vaccines, money and economic interest**

Another significant, controversial aspect of Italian internal affairs was of an economic nature, because there were enormous business interests at stake in the production, distribution and commercialization of polio serums. As explained in the previous paragraph, domestically produced vaccines were not sufficient to fully meet the needs of the Italian population and, for this reason, the government had to import them from abroad. Moreover, polio vaccines were not only administered for free on orders of the Ministry of Health but could also be bought by private individuals at pharmacies.<sup>281</sup>

The economic implications of the commercialization phase are worth being analysed, since this double channel of distribution and sales probably contributed to stoke popular dissatisfaction. In the late 1950s institutional guidelines related to the mass immunization drive were extremely confusing. All that time it was clearly known that there were just 1 million polio vials available, evidently not enough to

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<sup>279</sup> “Il governo rifiuta la vaccinazione obbligatoria”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 17<sup>th</sup> July 1959, p. 2.

<sup>280</sup> Tognotti, p. 191.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 185-186.

immunize all children aged between 3 months and 3 years, approximately corresponding to 3 million. These circumstances favoured the speculation on vaccines by manufacturers, exporters and wholesalers, which consequently triggered popular anger. The Left based its political opposition to the DC administration on this specific point.<sup>282</sup>

Due to these circumstances, the costs of both imported and home-produced vials were under the spotlight, since an excessive price directly affected the immunization trend. In this respect, the *l'Unità* shouted at the scandal, claiming that Italian parents usually did not go to pharmacies to buy vaccines, because they were simply unaffordable.<sup>283</sup>

The newspaper largely focused on this issue, usually in critical and provocative terms, since it accused pharma companies of speculating at the expense of the Italian citizens, without any governmental opposition and control. In 1955 it was reported that boxes of Salk vaccine containing three or six shots cost respectively 6.000 and 15.000 Italian lire. The prices were twice as expensive as in the USA, where the same packs were sold at 3.000 and 8.900 lire, which corresponded to 6 and 15 dollars. Since there was no good reason for such discrepancy, this overcharge was defined as an outrageous profiteering to the detriment of children's public health.<sup>284</sup>

The communist party opposed this policy so firmly that it obtained a price cut equal to the 20 percent from the Comitato interministeriale dei prezzi (Cip). Therefore, the cost of a single injection was reduced from 1.500 to 1.200 lire.<sup>285</sup> However, it remained still extraordinarily high: some investigations proved that the fair price for polio vaccines was around 200 lire. Therefore, a reduction by just 300 lire was ridiculed and the government was harshly called to take its responsibility.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>283</sup> "Scaricabarile tra governo e industriali sullo scandaloso prezzo dell'antipolio", *l'Unità*, Roma, 31st October 1959, p. 2.

<sup>284</sup> "L'A.C.I.S. e il vaccino Salk", *l'Unità*, Rome, 23rd April 1955, p. 7.

<sup>285</sup> "Il vaccino antipolio ridotto del 20 per cento", *l'Unità*, Rome, 27th September 1958, p. 2.

<sup>286</sup> "Costa trecento lire la fiala antipolio che gli italiani pagano invece 1200", *l'Unità*, Rome, 19th October 1958, p. 2.

Moreover, as Tognotti highlights, such initiative, which apparently succeeded in toning down polemics, confirmed the rumours on illegal speculations.<sup>287</sup>

In addition, the government was suspected to be non-conciliatory and even to obstruct investigations, especially after the exposé published on the weekly *Vie Nuove*.<sup>288</sup> As inquiries progressed, the *l'Unità* got even more critical of the government and pharma companies: actually, it argued that they connived at speculating on citizens' health and therefore labelled them as "health pirates". Moreover, it esteemed the overall profit of such venture to be around 600 million lire, as the gain for each vial originally corresponded approximately to 1200 lire.<sup>289</sup>

The daily even accused the ISI to play a role in the withholding of vaccines, which were nearly completely missing from pharmacies in Rome and Naples at the end of 1958. This charge was fuelled by the considerable involvement of the ISI in the production of polio serums, of which it had the almost total monopoly.<sup>290</sup> Additionally, such claim was grounded on the following theory:

"The Istituto Sieroterapico did not accept the decision to cut the price to 850 lire for each vial, made by Cip under the pressure of the scandal. The lack of vaccines from pharmacies and the increase in price play its game. The higher the price of polio vaccine is on the black market, the longer based is the hope of the Istituto to get a favourable reprising".<sup>291</sup>

Pharma companies and political authorities got under the spotlight also because of the controversial timing of the introduction of Sabin vaccine. The government was charged with the allegation of delaying the registration and commercialization of Sabin vaccine to serve the interests of pharma industries involved in the production. In this regard, Elisabetta Bonucci, from the *l'Unità*, vehemently wrote that the decision to postpone the registration of Sabin treatment in Italy was strategic,

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<sup>287</sup> Tognotti, p. 186.

<sup>288</sup> "I deputati comunisti chiedono al governo una congrua riduzione al prezzo dell'antipolio", *l'Unità*, Rome, 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1958, p. 2.

<sup>289</sup> "600 milioni già guadagnati dai produttori dell'antipolio", *l'Unità*, Rome, 26<sup>th</sup> October 1958, p. 2.

<sup>290</sup> Tognotti, p. 186.

<sup>291</sup> "L'Istituto Sieroterapico non ha accettato la riduzione del prezzo a 850 lire la fiala, decisa dal CIP sotto l'ondata dello scandalo. [...] La sparizione del vaccino dalle farmacie e l'aumento del prezzo fanno quindi il suo gioco. Più alto è il prezzo dell'antipolio alla borsa nera, più fondata è la speranza dell'Istituto di ottenere una revisione del prezzo ufficiale a suo favore". "Imboscato l'antipolio!", *l'Unità*, Rome, 11<sup>th</sup> December 1958, p. 6.

because it was meant to allow the manufacturers of Salk serum to dispose of their stocks, thus having massive profits for granted.<sup>292</sup>

These claims were probably not entirely unfounded, considering the ambiguous attitude of the authorities towards any polio prophylaxis. For example, in 1962 the Minister of Health of that time, Angelo Raffaele Jervolino, appointed a committee to do an assessment on the available Sabin vaccine data in order to get it registered. Meanwhile, the Minister of Health had already bought 25 million shots of Salk serum at a cost of 5 billion lire. This choice was regarded as somewhat obscure by the general audience and therefore was highly questioned.<sup>293</sup>

In addition, another scandal related to polio vaccines involved the Association of Italian Polio Survivors. Non-profit fundraising initiatives, also defined as *public and private assistance*, began to take hold in Italy after the end of the Second World War. Charities were assumed to fill a gap in Italian society and in the welfare system and eventually became real health institutions and facilities. Therefore, they played a crucial role in the recovery of the country.<sup>294</sup> For this reason, the news of the outrageous affair related to the Association of Italian Polio Survivors considerably lurked within the general audience. The president, Countess Angela Traverso Rattaggi and her stepson, Libero Rattaggi, were arrested with the accusation of fraud: they had stolen a conspicuous amount of money destined to polio survivors from the vaults of the Association.<sup>295</sup>

Contrary to the *l'Unità*, which largely dealt with the economic implications of vaccines and the mass immunization drive by publishing several pieces, the *Corriere della Sera* seemed not to particularly care about this aspect and made no reference to the phases concerning polio treatment and its commercialization. However, the apparent scarcity of similar accounts seems highly interesting, since it clearly reveals the attitude of this newspaper towards governmental decisions and the related ideological messages it tried to pass.

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<sup>292</sup> Elisabetta Bonucci, "Chi blocca il vaccino Sabin?", *l'Unità*, Rome, 28th January 1964, p. 7.

<sup>293</sup> Collino, p. 179.

<sup>294</sup> Ibidem, p. 44.

<sup>295</sup> "La contessa dell'operazione polio' arrestata con il figliastro a Torino", *l'Unità*, Rome, 17th December 1956, p. 8.

Basing on the articles available in the archives, it denied any price speculation, by referring to the declaration made in 1959 by the Minister of Health Camillo Giardina, who negated any price profiteering and stressed that the government would intervene promptly and energetically to eliminate any eventual irregularity.<sup>296</sup>

Moreover, when data about commercial prices and serum costs of production were illustrated, they were supposed to be divulged just for informative purposes, so that parents could know how much they had to pay for vaccines at the pharmacy. This was the case of a piece announcing the imminent start of the distribution of Salk preparation in Turin in 1955, which also notified that the treatment would initially be quite expensive, since it consisted of three doses and each of them would cost between 3.000 and 5.000 lire.<sup>297</sup>

The same approach was applied to illustrate the actions taken by the government to solve the problem of the vaccine overcharge.<sup>298</sup> The daily reported the public announcement of a series of price reductions disclosed by the official state agencies.<sup>299</sup> In particular, it accounted for the governmental decisions to respectively reduce vaccination price to 3.000 lire for the entire course and to send 10 million lire to the hospital in Naples to tackle a violent poliomyelitis outburst that was taking its toll in the city.<sup>300</sup>

Additional accounts about the economic aspects involved in the mass vaccination campaign were highlighted within the context of the parliamentary debates on the legislative proposal for “integral vaccination” presented by Senator Giardina in 1959. The *Corriere della Sera* analytically dealt with the draft law and especially with the part explaining in which cases vaccines were going to be free-of-charge. In fact, Salk treatment would not be distributed for free to all Italian children, but

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<sup>296</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>297</sup> “Le vaccinazioni Salk presto iniziate a Torino,” *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 16th April 1955, p. 1.

<sup>298</sup> Tognotti, p. 179.

<sup>299</sup> “L’attuale stagione è la più adatta per la vaccinazione antipoliomielitica”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 2nd October 1958, p. 7; “I casi di poliomielite scesi a novanta in marzo”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 29th April 1959, p. 2.

<sup>300</sup> “Vaccinazione antipolio per i bambini di Napoli”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 19th September 1958, p. 2.

only to those whose parents proved that they could not afford it, because they were not supported by any governmental agencies or health insurance funds.<sup>301</sup> Moreover, the document also made reference to a possible further vaccine price reduction thus introducing some specific measures like the abolishing of the customs duty on imported polio serums, whose rate was formerly around the 18 per cent.<sup>302</sup>

Finally, the newspaper recalled the sanitary balance sheet presented by Senator Giardina during a Senate session. The politician argued that investments for public health had been increasing comparing to the past, by specifically recalling two of them: they respectively corresponded to 30 billion lire for new sanitary equipment and to 20 billion lire to build new hospitals in depressed areas in the South. Moreover, the Council of Ministers approved two draft laws, which authorised to additionally finance 3 billion lire for maternity and infancy, and to allocate 1 billion lire to assist polio survivors.<sup>303</sup>

#### **4.3 Conclusive remarks: how the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* commented upon Italian domestic healthcare policies and their economic implications**

In this chapter, I focused on the reportage by the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* about Italian inner politics and economics and how they influenced polio mass immunization campaign. However, their stances were often contradictory while dealing with these topics.

The *Corriere della Sera*, for its part, was moderate while commenting upon the policies introduced and polio containment strategies adopted by the DC administration. Actually, it did not openly question or criticise any decisions made by the government, even when evidently disputable. On the contrary, it systematically tried to explain and justify institutional actions and measures.

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<sup>301</sup> F.D.S., “Integrale non obbligatoria la vaccinazione antipoliomielitica”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 14th June 1959, p. 11.

<sup>302</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>303</sup> “Giardina annuncia l’istituzione del libretto sanitario obbligatorio”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1961, p. 11.

The *l'Unità* was significantly polemical in this respect, instead. It repeatedly criticised several aspects of the management of the vaccination drive and emphasised many of its issues. In particular, it harshly blamed the delay in licensing and then commercialising Sabin vaccine, and strongly advocated for making polio prevention mandatory.

With regard to the economic implications of large-scale vaccination campaigns, the *l'Unità* widely portrayed the financial scandals and the illegal profiting surrounding the production and distribution of polio vaccines. Conversely, the *Corriere della Sera* did not extensively account for this aspect and almost never commented on such episodes. Such observations clearly suggest that, despite the apparent objective and detached stance adopted by the *Corriere della Sera*, both the dailies under scrutiny were equally ideological in their narratives about polio prevention. In fact, they both wilfully ignored, selected and insistently stressed specific information about the reality thus conveying their own interpretation of it.

After having outlined the ideological, political and economic dimensions underlying the debate on polio vaccines, I will consider another aspect that influenced the contributions of the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* towards such controversy. In Chapter Five, I will investigate the commitment of these newspapers to scientific knowledge and how it shaped their stances about polio prophylaxis.



## Chapter Five

### **The deep trust in science and the campaigns in favour of polio mass immunization drives**

The outburst of poliomyelitis all around the world gave rise to several concerns and considerably attracted the public interest.<sup>304</sup> Journalists carefully reported all details about the discovery of the polio vaccine and precisely documented the vaccination campaign and every decision made by policymakers in this respect. Accordingly, the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* published many articles on these topics, too.

Both the newspapers paid remarkable attention to the scientific and technical aspects and terminology related to the synthesis and production of polio serums. Furthermore, they warned the citizens against the possible risks for those who rejected any form of prevention, by presenting immunization against polio as necessary and completely safe, encouraging them to be vaccinated for their own and other's wellbeing.

Both these aspects supposedly aimed at promoting and enforcing public trust in medicine and in polio prophylaxis, which was essential to induce the largest possible number of people to be immunised. This is closely linked to the crucial part carried out by non-specialised media in shaping the core of the scientific debate, as well as to the rooted confidence in science and in technical progress typical of that age.<sup>305</sup>

In line with the theoretical framework of the Cold War media complex and Gozzini's theses, I maintain that, while dealing with polio vaccines, the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* performed two functions, which I respectively term as *informative* and *awareness-raising functions*.

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<sup>304</sup> Vargha, pp. 79 and 147.

<sup>305</sup> Bucchi and Mazzolini, p. 8; Blume, p. 155.

The *informative function* consisted of providing accurate information on the discoveries and developments of polio serums, as well as on the setting and management of polio immunization drives, so that citizens would be always updated and could get access to all the most relevant data. Moreover, it aimed at eliciting trust in medical progress.

In addition and complementarily, the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* carried out an *awareness-raising function* by campaigning in favour of polio prophylaxis and constantly encouraging people to be vaccinated and to have their kids vaccinated. To this end, they debunked all the unjustified worries about polio serums, stressing their safety and effectiveness in order to reassure the public audience and to induce it not to be afraid of any treatments approved by the government health system.

In this chapter I will carefully investigate these functions, basing on a close analysis of the articles they published. Thanks to this examination, I will show that the trust in science and in vaccines held by these dailies played an essential role in their narrations about polio prophylaxis, often conflicting with their ideological stances and sometimes even overcoming them.

## **5.1 The informative function**

In this section, I am going to highlight what the informative function played by both the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* exactly was, by examining the different aspects it consisted of. While reading closely and analytically the pieces published in these dailies, I identified three main, recurrent topics associated to such function: a careful reporting of data related to polio spread and of scientific-based information on polio vaccines, a thoroughly monitoring of the mass immunization campaigns and a reiterated accounting of the effectiveness and safety of polio treatments.

### 5.1.1 Polio spread and scientific-based accounts on polio vaccines

As already mentioned in Chapter Two, during the 1950s “science-popularization” gained a foothold in Italy and several dailies started to publish this kind of pieces.<sup>306</sup> In this context, polio outbreaks increased and therefore such illness conquered the public scene, much later than in the USA, though.<sup>307</sup> Since poliomyelitis was regarded as a particularly dangerous disease, the public became extremely worried and eagerly looked for information about it and the possible treatments either to cure it or to be immunized against it.<sup>308</sup> Both the newspapers under scrutiny tried to satisfy the corresponding demand for news. Similar reports are worth being analysed, since they mirrored the deep trust in science that characterised both these papers and perfectly represented the informative function, they aimed at performing.

As a result, both the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* introduced a daily space dedicated to illustrating the trend of the poliomyelitis spread, by regularly pointing out the number of the notified new polio cases in the country and sometimes even in each Italian region.<sup>309</sup> By doing so, they probably aimed not only at keeping the audience updated on the epidemic crisis in Italy, but also at fostering emotional responses. From this perspective, the announcement that the number of cases significantly decreased in the first half of 1960 compared to the previous years, stabilizing around 150 infections a month, probably inspired hope and optimism.<sup>310</sup> On the contrary, the piece titled “3.137 casi di poliomielite registrati nel '61 in Italia” (“3.137 polio cases registered in Italy in 1961”), published in the *l'Unità*, was likely to aim at raising the public awareness of the seriousness of Italian health situation. This short article dramatically highlighted that Italy registered the highest amount of polio infections in Europe in 1961, about 69 contagions out of a million inhabitants.<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> Bucchi and Mazzolini, p. 7.

<sup>307</sup> Collino, p. 44.

<sup>308</sup> Ibidem, pp. 13-14 and 169.

<sup>309</sup> “I casi di polio in Italia”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 4th June 1959, p. 1.

<sup>310</sup> “I casi di polio ridotti a centocinquanta al mese”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 2nd June 1960, p. 5.

<sup>311</sup> “3.137 casi di poliomielite registrati nel '61 in Italia”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 15th January 1962, p. 7.

Additionally, all the progress made in the research on polio treatments was anxiously monitored in Italy in the 1950s.<sup>312</sup> As a result, these two newspapers largely provided scientific accounts and data about polio vaccines, in order to clarify to the general audience how the serums were produced and that they worked efficaciously. For instance, Mario Musella from the *Corriere della Sera* reported many technical details related to Jonas Salk's discovery of polio vaccine.

Firstly, he explained that the American scientist obtained his serum from monkeys' kidney tissue and that he could also produce the so-called "mixture 199", a sort of lab-synthesised jelly where polioviruses could abundantly proliferate. Thanks to such synthetic blend, Salk predicted that it would be possible to produce considerable amounts of vaccine.<sup>313</sup>

Secondly, Musella clarified that Salk treatment did not contain killed polioviruses, but rather viruses physically or chemically inactivated with formaldehyde. Such procedure aimed at eliciting a high immune response by triggering a considerable production of antibodies.<sup>314</sup>

The latter statement matched the information divulged directly by Jonas Salk in scientific journals. In May 1954, Salk published his findings in the prestigious *American Journal of Public Health*, reporting that formaldehyde could destroy the infectivity of polioviruses at a constant rate, under constant, extremely specific conditions.<sup>315</sup> In particular, they included a concentration of free formaldehyde determined on the basis of a 1:4000 formalin solution, a temperature of 36°-37° Centigrade and pH 7. Time for inactivation differed depending on the concentration of virus in the initial preparation, instead.<sup>316</sup>

Analogously, Dick Stewart from the *l'Unità* pointed out that Salk vaccine could immunize against all the three viral strains causing infantile paralysis, which were

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<sup>312</sup> Collino, p. 169.

<sup>313</sup> Mario Musella, "Un nuovo vaccino contro la paralisi infantile", *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 4th April 1953, p. 5.

<sup>314</sup> Mario Musella, "Il vaccino antipoliomielitico a migliaia di bimbi americani", *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 11th November 1953, p. 5.

<sup>315</sup> Jonas E. Salk et al., *Formaldehyde Treatment and Safety Testing of Experimental Poliomyelitis Vaccine*, *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol.44, No.5, American Public Health Association Inc., Washington, 1954, p. 563.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 564.

Brunhilde, Lansing and Leo. However, its effectiveness considerably varied on the type of virus considered: 68 percent for the first, 100 percent for the second and 92 percent for the last one.<sup>317</sup>

The significant interest in the hard science involved in the development of vaccines can be further inferred by the fact that both dailies accurately reported the progress in the medical field, like the insulation of the interferon achieved in the Soviet Union, which was regarded as a possible valuable means to fight and even eradicate infectious diseases.<sup>318</sup> They also presented many scientific theories accounting for some peculiar phenomena associated to polio infections, such as the seasonality of resurgence, which usually took place during warm weather, to such an extent that summer was even defined as “*polio season*”.<sup>319</sup> In this respect, the *Corriere della Sera* made precise reference to the explanation proposed by the researcher G.W. Dick, who suggested that individuals and populations could be classified as members of either “hot” or “cold” families.<sup>320</sup>

Moreover, in order to keep people updated about the latest medical findings in the cure and prevention of such illness, both the *Corriere della Sera* e the *l'Unità* closely followed the developments of the scientific debate on the disease and its prevention. In this respect, the yearly International Congress on Poliomyelitis, held in Rome and joined by the most prominent experts from all around the world, was considered especially relevant and therefore accurately monitored by the press. Indisputably, it was described as a fruitful opportunity for scientists to exchange ideas, reciprocate their findings and promote their own views and suggestions, trying also to influence the sanitary policymaking process. In this context, Salk, for example, claimed that a fourth shot of the vaccine he had developed was necessary

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<sup>317</sup> Dick Stewart, “I primi risultati del vaccino contro la paralisi infantile”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 13th April 1955, p. 2.

<sup>318</sup> “Isolato virus antivirale”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 5th May 1963, p. 6.

<sup>319</sup> Mawdsley, p. 2.

<sup>320</sup> Individuals can be classified as members of either “hot” or “cold” families basing on their susceptibility to contract the most dangerous form of polio, the paralytic one. In fact, polio virus can easily nest and proliferate in the intestine of people belonging to the first group, while meets resistance when infects subjects belonging to the second one. Mario Musella, “Il dottor Salk alle prese con gli avvocati del diavolo”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 19th May 1959, p. 7.

to get an almost complete immunization from poliovirus.<sup>321</sup> However, such conviction was not shared by the scientific community as a whole: in fact, in March 1959 Sabin debunked this theory by pointing out that multiple doses of Salk vaccine usually failed to produce an adequate antibody response in the injected subject.<sup>322</sup>

However, the international meetings that took place in Rome also revealed that the disease and the related vaccines were far from being straightforward and unproblematic. Having to face a highly chaotic and alarming scenario, the medical community initially tended to fragment and struggled to find realistic and concrete solutions. Sometimes these divergences of opinions even degenerated in inconclusive controversies, such as the lively dispute that opposed Salk to Cox during the Congress in Rome in 1954.<sup>323</sup> Such episode was probably connected to the ongoing dispute between the supporters of the inactivated vaccine against its detractors in the USA in 1953 and 1954.<sup>324</sup> The *Corriere della Sera* thoroughly documented this event and also portrayed its confusing and ineffectual side, describing it disappointedly as “demonstrative and scientifically polemical” and substantially inconclusive, since it did not add anything new or concrete to the discussion in progress, not even proposing any specific potential treatment for the illness.<sup>325</sup>

### 5.1.2 Information on the mass immunization campaign

In addition to scientific and technical data related to polio serums, the informative function performed by both the *Corriere della Sera* e the *l'Unità* also concerned the vaccination procedures and the subsequent results. Such pieces mainly aimed at providing news about the state of the mass vaccination campaigns, as well as details about where and how children should be immunised. Such articles were likely to

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<sup>321</sup> “‘È necessaria la quarta iniezione antipolio’ dichiara il Professor Salk in un convegno a Roma”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 19th May 1959, p. 2.

<sup>322</sup> Albert B. Sabin, *Present Position of Immunization Against Poliomyelitis with Live Virus Vaccines*, *British Medical Journal*, BMJ, London, 1959, p. 679.

<sup>323</sup> Ms, “Resta ancora molto da fare per vincere la poliomielite”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 7th September 1954, p. 5.

<sup>324</sup> Collino, pp. 94-98.

<sup>325</sup> “dimostrativo e scientificamente polemico”. Ibidem; Ms, “Purtroppo nulla di nuovo al Congresso della poliomielite”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 12th September 1954, p. 5.

contribute to build “vaccination consciousness” by giving considerable media visibility to the topic of polio prevention. Furthermore, they made all the practical information to receive polio treatments easily accessible to the general audience, so that everybody potentially knew how to get it.

Firstly, many articles of this kind disclosed some knowledge about vaccine production, distribution and logistics. The *Corriere della Sera* advised that vaccines would be produced by the Istituto Sieroterapico Italiano in Naples and that they would be distributed exclusively during wintertime due to safety reasons. Furthermore, articles pointed out that security controls on vaccines, both imported and made in Italy, were being carried out by the National Institute of Health.<sup>326</sup>

Meanwhile, in the field of prevention, journalists from the *l'Unità* wrote long and comprehensive articles, thus providing several practical instructions so that individuals at risk could be immunized.<sup>327</sup> Furthermore, they widely accounted for the organization and the development of the vaccination campaign in Rome. They comprehensively documented the situation in the capital, which was likely to be representative of the general state in the most part of the country. Especially, they paid attention to the location and the amount of vaccination centres in the city, which were only 9 in 1962, although the goal was to turn soon all the 82 medical studios into consulting rooms, at least, basically equipped.<sup>328</sup> Furthermore, the importance of cooperating with schools, educational authorities, general practitioners and school-doctors was stressed regularly.<sup>329</sup>

As health care services were significantly lacking in the suburbs of Rome, the municipality organized some mobile vaccination centres, in order to reach and immunize children who lived in depressed areas, where they were largely exposed to contagion.<sup>330</sup> Such measures were introduced to match the criterium according

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<sup>326</sup> “Comincerà nel prossimo inverno la vaccinazione antipolio in Italia”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 17th July 1956, p. 6.

<sup>327</sup> Elisabetta Bonucci, “Seguite queste indicazioni”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 23rd February 1964, page 3.

<sup>328</sup> “Polio, ottanta casi durante nove mesi”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 3rd October 1962, p. 4.

<sup>329</sup> “Il vaccino antipolio”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 17th September 1958, p. 5.

<sup>330</sup> “Polio: da oggi Sabin nelle borgate”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 18th March 1964, p. 4.

to which the decision to get immunized was influenced by several factors, including the so-called *convenience*. This term encompassed many elements, like

“The distance one has to travel to obtain vaccination, the hours at which it is available, the cost of vaccination, and the acceptability of the facilities in which the vaccination is performed”.<sup>331</sup>

Moreover, these newspapers widely reported data about the course of the immunization drive, exactly as they did with contagion rates. For example, the *Corriere della Sera* referred that at the beginning of 1959, 2.242.323 people received, at least, one shot of vaccine, and accounted for the precise distribution of immunised citizens in the various regions.<sup>332</sup>

Similarly, the daily pointed out that, differently from the USA, where second-grade volunteer students were injected first, children ranging from four months to three years of age were regarded as the main target of the Italian vaccination campaign. Therefore, their immunization was prioritised in Italy and they were supposed to be inoculated before the end of January 1959.<sup>333</sup>

Two years later, the newspaper excitedly announced that the municipality of Milan registered 220.000 children out of the 240.000 living in the city as having shown up at vaccination centres. Therefore, almost all infantile population between three months and fifteen years of age was extremely likely to have been immunized.<sup>334</sup>

Analogously, in 1966 the *l'Unità* enthusiastically praised the positive trend of vaccination, portraying it as a successful and effective tool to limit the spread of the virus, and highlighting that 9.841.193 Italian children had already been immunised against poliomyelitis with Sabin oral vaccine.<sup>335</sup>

In addition, in the papers it was largely illustrated what vaccine prophylaxis exactly was. This kind of reports should be examined to carry out a thorough investigation on how the two newspapers dealt with medicine, since they played an important

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<sup>331</sup> Irwin M. Rosenstock et al., *Why People Fail to Seek Poliomyelitis Vaccination*, *Public Health Reports*, Vol.74, No.2, Public Health Service, Washington, 1959, pp. 101-102.

<sup>332</sup> “Entro gennaio saranno vaccinati quasi tutti i bimbi fino a tre anni”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 15th January 1959, p. 7.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibidem*; Oshinsky, pp. 147-148.

<sup>334</sup> F. Pi., “Già vaccinati col Sabin duecentoventimila bambini”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 26th March 1964, p. 4.

<sup>335</sup> “Continua a diminuire la polio in Italia”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 15th June 1966, p. 6.



part in overcoming doubts and reluctances widespread among the population. Regarding the treatment based on Salk vaccines, it was explained that it consisted of two subdermal injections, which should be taken at a distance of, at least, four weeks one from the other. Experts also recommended receiving a third shot about six months after the second one, in order to ulteriorly strengthen immunization.<sup>336</sup> In addition, they stressed that vaccination was not mandatory but, in any case, meant to be on a mass scale and that children would receive it for free at paediatric clinics.<sup>337</sup>

The same applied to Sabin vaccine. Journalists pointed out that, differently from the Salk ones, Sabin vaccines were made of live but attenuated viruses.<sup>338</sup> They also explained that there were three kinds of these monovalent vaccines, respectively identified as type 1, type 2 and type 3. Children usually received type 1 at first so that they could be immunized against the most dangerous form of paralytic polio. Then, in the following steps, they would get type 2 and type 3, which contained less harmful strains. They were administered two drops of each of them. Later in the early 1960s, a fourth serum was synthesised, the so-called *trivalent vaccine*, which contained all the three strains, generally used as a booster in Italy.<sup>339</sup>

### 5.1.3 Stressing the safety and the effectiveness of polio vaccines

Another similarity between the dailies under scrutiny is their contribution to promote the effectiveness and safety of polio vaccines. This further commonality enforces the idea that both the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* shared a common trust in vaccines and attempted to elicit it also in the general audience.

As far as the efficacy of Salk vaccine was concerned, in the late 1950s these dailies made analysis and wrote about what was going on all around the world, because the

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<sup>336</sup> “Anche in Italia la vaccinazione antipolio”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 30th March 1957, p. 2; “Migliaia di scimmie sono morte per i nostri bambini”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 9th May 1957, p. 8.

<sup>337</sup> “Sarà ripresa in autunno la distribuzione del siero antipolio”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 9th August 1957, p. 6; Ibidem.

<sup>338</sup> Federico Pizzetti, “Presto anche a Milano si produrrà l'antipolio”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 27th/28th February 1963, p. 5; Francesco Sabatelli, “Come si prepara il vaccino ‘vivente’”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 18th March 1964, p. 6.

<sup>339</sup> “Sabin: seconda fase da ieri”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 3rd April 1964, p. 4; Mario Musella, “Su una fetta di torta il nuovo ‘anti-polio’”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 28th August 1963, p. 5.

serum had already been registered and used in many countries when it still was not in Italy.<sup>340</sup> To support the campaign, the *l'Unità* reported the outcomes of the first trials and observations on the serum and its impact in the USA, with particular regard to the information published by the *Detroit Times*. The American journal claimed that Salk vaccine resulted to be effective in 90 percent of the cases and the *l'Unità* further gave visibility to such news.<sup>341</sup>

This enthusiasm was shared also by many American researchers and physicians. For instance, in 1957 the epidemiologists Milford G. Wyman, W. Dean Lindgren and Robert Magoffin compared the severity and the incidence of polio paralysis in vaccinated and non-vaccinated patients of similar age. Starting from these observations, they concluded that injected children usually caught slight, or no paralysis and they eventually recovered better than non-immunized ones. However, they documented that in the USA Salk treatment decreased the incidence of paralytic poliomyelitis by 60 to 80 percent rather than to 90 percent.<sup>342</sup>

In the following years further options were taken into account. In 1962 some research was developed to compare and evaluate the efficacy and the convenience of the combination of a triple vaccine against diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus and a monovalent shot of Salk treatment, or, respectively, of a quadruple vaccine immunizing against all four illnesses. According to this study, the second alternative turned out to be preferable since it elicited a stronger response for all three polio types.<sup>343</sup>

In the 1960s the effectiveness of Sabin vaccine was highly recognized and maintained as opposed to the alleged ineffectiveness of Salk vaccine, also supported by the reportage of the mass-scale trial in the USSR by Chumakov, who magnified

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<sup>340</sup> Collino, pp. 171 and 179.

<sup>341</sup> “Oggi saranno annunciati i risultati degli esperimenti con il vaccino ‘Salk’”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 12th April 1955, p. 8.

<sup>342</sup> Milford G. Wyman et al., *Poliomyelitis: Effect of Salk Vaccine on Severity of Paralysis*, *California Medicine*, Vol.87, No.1, California Medical Association, Sacramento, 1957, pp. 1 and 7.

<sup>343</sup> Irene B. Hillary, *Antibody Response in Infants to the Poliomyelitis Component of a Quadruple Vaccine*, *British Medical Journal*, BMJ, London, 1962, pp. 1098 and 1101.

such treatment.<sup>344</sup> The *l'Unità* defined Sabin vaccine as the best serum available in the struggle against poliomyelitis, since it was supposed to grant complete immunization against the disease, while the Salk one resulted in being successful only in 75 percent of the cases and its effects expired quite rapidly.<sup>345</sup> Similarly, the *Corriere della Sera* magnified Sabin vaccine by presenting it as the only treatment that could protect from the so-called “wild” polio viruses, which especially spread in Italy.<sup>346</sup>

With respect to the safety issue and to ensure that both imported and domestically produced preparations were not harmful, the two dailies announced that Parliament passed a law which requested the companies involved in vaccine production to submit a precise filing. It consisted of certified clinical reports and the results of internal security checks they had carried out, as well as of vaccine samples to be analysed which had to be finally approved by the National Institute of Health.<sup>347</sup> On several occasions medical authorities reiterated that polio serums were harmless. For example, the *Corriere della Sera* quoted a declaration made during an interview dated 1958 by Domenico Marotta, director of the National Institute of Health, who claimed that Salk vaccine was meticulously tested on monkeys before being put into circulation. Moreover, Marotta reassured that the vaccines imported from abroad were rigorously checked and needed a Certificate of Guarantee before entering the market.<sup>348</sup>

Likewise, the daily pointed out that Sabin publicly argued that his discovery was safe, grounding such claim on the data collected from countries which had inoculated children on a massive scale with live attenuated vaccines for some years, like Russia, Czechoslovakia, Congo and the United States of America. He pointed

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<sup>344</sup> Michail P. Chumakov, *Some Results of the Work on Mass Immunization in the Soviet Union with Live Poliovirus Vaccine Prepared from Sabin Strains*, *Bulletin of World Health Organization*, 1961, p. 90.

<sup>345</sup> Elisabetta Bonucci, “Chi blocca il vaccino Sabin?”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 28th January 1964, p. 7; “Perché solo oggi l'uso in Italia del vaccino Sabin”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 30th July 1962, p. 2.

<sup>346</sup> Mario Musella, “Come e chi vaccinare con il nuovo antipolio”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 17th March 1963, p. 5.

<sup>347</sup> “Quest'inverno in Italia vaccinazione anti-polio”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 17th July 1956, page 2; Federico Pizzetti, “Presto anche a Milano si produrrà l'antipolio”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 27th/28th February 1963, p. 5.

<sup>348</sup> Mario Musella, “Non c'è oggi in Italia epidemia di poliomielite”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan 13th September 1958, page 7.

out that among about 250 million people who had been immunized with his oral serum until 1963 no case of polio due to vaccination had ever occurred.<sup>349</sup>

## 5.2 The awareness-raising function

In this paragraph I will examine the other key role performed by the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità*, the *awareness-raising function*. Complementarily to the *informative function*, which consisted of providing scientific data and practical information to make knowledge about polio vaccines easily accessible and to strengthen trust in medical progress, the *awareness-raising function* aimed at sensitising the public about the necessity of adhering to mass vaccination against poliomyelitis. Both newspapers pursued this goal by adopting several strategies in the attempt to prevent irrational behaviour and mass psychoses. They often used a specific rhetoric language by comparing the struggle to eradicate that illness to a war and by addressing parents, especially mothers, in order to call them to their duties.

### 5.2.1 Preventing irrationality and mass psychoses

The emphasis on the effectiveness and safety of both Salk and Sabin vaccines was strictly connected to the social function performed by the dailies under scrutiny in writing about mass vaccinations, in the form of propaganda in favour of them. Journalists of both newspapers similarly committed themselves to raising public awareness in several ways, trying to blow away worries and doubts about the treatments involved in preventing polio and, meanwhile, by stressing their importance. For this purpose, in line with the Cold War concept of rationality, they adopted several rationalisation strategies, which acknowledged and dealt with the uncertainties and the subjective impressions of the public.<sup>350</sup> With regard to this specific issue, in my view, the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* also attempted

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<sup>349</sup> Mario Musella, “Come e chi vaccinare con il nuovo antipolio”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 17th March 1963, p. 5.

<sup>350</sup> Paul Erickson et al., *How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind: The Strange Career of Cold War Rationality*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2013, p. 9.

to eradicate inconsistencies derived from what people believed about vaccines and scientific facts.

Above all, journalists of both dailies put remarkable efforts into making people realize the seriousness of the disease and the extent to which it had been spreading in Italy. In 1957 the *l'Unità* reported that 7 out of 100.000 inhabitants got infected by poliomyelitis and pointed out that such datum was alarming for two main motives. Firstly, not all suspicious cases were being reported to the competent offices. Secondly, basing on medical knowledge of that time, it was extremely difficult to make an exact diagnosis of the illness, because the virus remained in a latent state on several occasions and its presence usually became recognizable in its more severe stages.<sup>351</sup>

Likewise, many articles published by the *Corriere della Sera* clearly aimed at disproving irrational and unsubstantiated ideas that had circulated among the population and, meanwhile, at preventing mass psychoses. It was particularly indicative the journalists' understanding that

“Behaviour is determined more by one's beliefs about reality than by reality itself, and that people vary markedly in their interpretations of reality”.<sup>352</sup>

For example, some studies suggested that people's willingness to be immunized was considerably influenced by their belief about their own susceptibility to contract poliomyelitis, about the disease severity and finally about vaccination and its implications.<sup>353</sup> Therefore, basing on the data provided by the High Commission of Health, in August 1957 the *Corriere della Sera* debunked the idea that the number of polio cases had been increasing in Italy for the last two years, so that the potential dangerousness of such illness did not have to be underestimated.<sup>354</sup>

Moreover, the newspaper pointed out that the government decided to stop the vaccination campaign during the summer, not only because it was safer, but also for a psychological reason: authorities suspended the distribution of vaccines in the

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<sup>351</sup> “Migliaia di scimmie sono morte per i nostri bambini”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 9th May 1957, p. 8.

<sup>352</sup> Rosenstock et al., p. 99.

<sup>353</sup> Ibidem, p. 102.

<sup>354</sup> “Sarà ripresa in autunno la distribuzione del siero antipolio”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 9th August 1957, p. 6.

warm season, to avoid the misunderstanding that some spontaneous polio infections could be erroneously considered as side effects of vaccination. This would enormously undermine the course of the immunization drive.<sup>355</sup>

Similarly, in autumn 1958, the *l'Unità* denounced a sort of “polio psychosis”, most certainly unjustified, due to the number of occurred cases and further fuelled by the sudden decision to postpone school opening and by the sanitary authorities’ confusing declarations.<sup>356</sup> Consequently, some articles were published to reassure concerned citizens, explaining that a resurgence was underway. It was not an epidemic outburst, though.<sup>357</sup>

In 1959, when the use of Salk vaccine had already been widely legitimized, there were still several reservations about it and the debate on the pros and cons of vaccination became heated. In that respect, Mario Musella noted two opposite tensions or, as he termed them, “psychoses” in the Italian society of that time. On the one hand, people voiced worries about the possible side-effects of polio vaccines; on the other hand, citizens feared that polio serums would not be distributed in time to face a hypothetical, sudden polio epidemic of world-encompassing breadth.<sup>358</sup>

Analogously, the same mistrust recurred with Sabin vaccine, especially because of the rooted and unjustified fear that live attenuated viruses could become virulent again when transmitted from an individual to another, thus causing paralytic polio.<sup>359</sup> Similar articles are worth being examined because of the message they wanted to pass. Actually, setting aside their ideological stances, in the early 1960s both dailies highlighted the problem of overcoming such diffidence and repeatedly stressed that the serum was safe and highly controlled, because it had been rigorously tested on monkeys before being placed on the market and the people

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<sup>355</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>356</sup> “Occorre la vaccinazione obbligatoria e gratuita”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 2nd October 1958, p. 4.

<sup>357</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>358</sup> Mario Musella, “Il dottor Salk alle prese con gli avvocati del diavolo”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 19th May 1959, p. 7.

<sup>359</sup> Francesco Sabatelli, “Il virus attenuato ha la meglio su quello ‘selvaggio’”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 1st April 1964, p. 6.

involved in its synthesis had been carefully isolated.<sup>360</sup> In fact, Sabin performed several experiments on spinal and cerebral neurotropism of viruses excreted by vaccinated monkeys and also monitored the possibility of contagion due to contact among the immunized subjects. As a result of this study, he concluded that there was no significant risk of a return of virulence and of paralysis as a side-effect of the treatment. Such findings were published in the *British Medical Journal* in 1959.<sup>361</sup>

These attempts to eradicate unjustified worries and the resulting manifestations of mass hysteria were associated to incitements to immunize children. As reported by the *l'Unità*, the Minister of Health drew the attention to the need to continuously and carefully monitor the trend of the vaccination campaign, which would continue smoothly, especially close to the “polio season”.<sup>362</sup> Sanitary authorities systematically spoke in favour of polio prevention and routinely stressed its relevance for public health. When interviewed about the tragical deaths of two unvaccinated children affected by poliomyelitis and hospitalised at *Bambin Gesù* in Rome, Camillo Ungari, director of the clinic, declared that it was essential to rapidly vaccinate all children. Sabin serum was highly recommended, since it proved extremely effective.<sup>363</sup>

According to the *l'Unità*, Sabin himself commented upon the Italian immunization drive by underlining how low the vaccination percentage was in the South. As a result, he claimed that polio prophylaxis should be intensified in these specific areas, so that more children would be protected.<sup>364</sup>

Analogously, the *Corriere della Sera* documented the opinion of the State Secretary of Public Health, Natale Santero, who argued for the governmental choice to

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<sup>360</sup> Ibidem; “Tutte le mamme invitate a far vaccinare i bimbi”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 20th February 1964, p. 5.

<sup>361</sup> Sabin, pp. 663-673 and 679.

<sup>362</sup> “Necessaria per la polio la quarta iniezione”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 21st May 1960, p. 2.

<sup>363</sup> “Non vaccinati i due bambini uccisi dalla polio”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 1st May 1962, p. 4.

<sup>364</sup> Elisabetta Bonucci, “Sabin ci ha detto: Dobbiamo debellare la poliomielite insistendo sulle zone più arretrate”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 14th November 1964, p. 3.

register, check and use Sabin vaccine and encouraged citizens to overcome their resistance towards it.<sup>365</sup>

### 5.2.2 The “war metaphor” and rhetoric strategies to elicit emotional responses

To persuade citizens to be immunized, these newspapers used common tropes and similar communication strategies, since both of them widely employed metaphors and expressions recalling the military semantic area. This peculiar choice considerably struck me, as the same rhetorical strategy has been widely used by Italian mass media to narrate the current COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>366</sup>

For instance, both the *l'Unità* and the *Corriere della Sera* presented vaccines as the only weapons available in the struggle against poliomyelitis and therefore renovated the encouragement to be immunized.<sup>367</sup> In the same spirit, in 1964 the Undersecretary for Public Health Dante Graziosi described vaccinations with Sabin serum as a “battle” of incalculable relevance: not only had it considerable ethical and human implications, but it also impacted on social and economic matters.<sup>368</sup>

The same framework was also applied to the immunization drive in other countries. A good example is given by the most representative initiative of the NFIP, the so-called *March of Dimes*. It was an extremely capillary crowdfunding campaign, based on the idea that every citizen in the USA could contribute to the battle against poliomyelitis by donating the paltry sum of one dime so that they could show their personal and practical support to their President.<sup>369</sup> In fact, such fundraising activity was presented as American people’s heroic endeavour and contribution to eradicate infantile paralysis.<sup>370</sup>

Analogously, the announcement of the outcomes of the trial carried out on Salk vaccine was impatiently expected and the fixed date was described as a potential

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<sup>365</sup> “La lotta anti-polio sarà facilitata dal vaccino Sabin”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 13th/14th September 1962, p. 2.

<sup>366</sup> Francesca Piazza, *Metafore di guerra e guerra alle metafore. Sull’uso del lessico militare per parlare della pandemia di Covid 19*, DNA, Vol.1, No.2, ABIS-AlmaDL, Boulogne, 2020, p. 88.

<sup>367</sup> “Vaccinare i bambini contro la poliomielite”, *l'Unità*, 5th July 1961, p. 4.

<sup>368</sup> “Per la vaccinazione antipolio appello alla coscienza dei genitori”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 2nd March 1964, p. 4.

<sup>369</sup> Oshinsky, p. 49.

<sup>370</sup> “Migliaia di scimmie sono morte per i nostri bimbi”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 9th May 1957, p. 8.



“victory day” in the long-lasting and worldwide struggle against infantile paralysis.<sup>371</sup>

Moreover, when reporting on the Conference held in Moscow in 1961 on the opportunity to use vaccines containing live attenuated viruses, the journalist Giuseppe Garritano resorted certain terms, like “lotta contro la poliomielite” (“fight against poliomyelitis), “combattere” (“to fight”), “debellare” (“to eradicate”), “annientare” (“to annihilate”) and “distruggere” (“to destroy”). Again, he defined polio as a scourge against which the whole of humanity was fighting.<sup>372</sup>

Furthermore, both newspapers attempted to sensitise the public by eliciting an emotional response in the general audience with varied strategies. Hence, they added sensationalistic titles and occasionally pictures with a sentimental approach to their own pieces. This is the case of the article published in the *l'Unità* on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1957, headed “Migliaia di scimmie sono morte per i nostri bambini” (“Thousands of monkeys died for our children”). The associated illustration was equally impactful, as it portrayed a child while being injected with a Salk shot. The young boy was held by a nurse and fearfully averted his eyes from the vaccinating doctor. A woman, supposedly the child’s mother, stood next to the nurse, watching the scene with an anxious and concerned expression.<sup>373</sup>

The *Corriere della Sera* did not differ on this point, because journalists often opted for emphatic headings. This is the case of Giuseppe Dal Monte, who entitled his story published in the late-night edition on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1957 “Coraggio mamme!” (“Be brave, mothers!”). Apparently, more than one third (approximately 35.4 percent) of the articles published in this paper were complemented with some illustrations, most of which were pictures.<sup>374</sup> The images that accompanied pieces on polio topic were as powerful as the ones published in the *l'Unità*. A photograph of a lovely

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<sup>371</sup> “Martedì sapremo se la poliomielite è stata vinta dal nuovo vaccino”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> April 1955, p. 10.

<sup>372</sup> Giuseppe Garritano, “La eliminazione definitiva della “polio” preannunciata in un convegno a Mosca”, *l'Unità*, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1960, p. 9.

<sup>373</sup> *l'Unità*, 9<sup>th</sup> May 1957, p. 8.

<sup>374</sup> Bucchi and Mazzolini, p. 9.

lady holding a smiling baby was printed on the paper dated the evening between 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> April 1955 and it inspired a feeling of tenderness and care.<sup>375</sup>

Such kind of visual communication may follow the concept of *poster child*, invented and used by the NFIP in the USA for the first time: on the one hand this means of advertisement made people sensitive of the terrible impact that disease had on children's lives and their families; on the other hand, it showed the significant improvements achieved thanks to grants and raise funding. Infants were usually depicted as vulnerable and needy, as well as vital and grateful for any help received.<sup>376</sup> The pictures published in the *Corriere della Sera* and in the *l'Unità* elicited analogous feelings of tenderness and enforced the desire to especially protect this category from the infection.

### 5.2.3 Calling parents to their responsibilities

Despite scientific evidence attesting the safety and the effectiveness of polio treatments, many parents were still sceptical towards them and therefore reluctant to have their children immunised.<sup>377</sup> A study performed by Irwin Rosenstock, Mayhew Derryberry and Barbara Carriger, members of the Division of General Health Services of the American Public Health Service, proved that social pressure strongly shaped the decision to seek vaccination. Especially, they found out that people were extremely sensitive to the guidance of authority figures such as teachers and physicians.<sup>378</sup> It is likely that the press also relevantly influenced parents' beliefs, because it was recognized as reliable and trustworthy.<sup>379</sup>

Therefore, in addition to other communicative strategies in favour of polio prevention, both newspapers subtly made parents aware of their personal responsibility. This choice is closely associated to the peculiar position held by the family institution within Cold War Western societies. Actually, nuclear families were regarded as a traditionalist bulwark against the spread of communism, and, at

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<sup>375</sup> *Corriere della Sera*, 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> April 1955, p. 5.

<sup>376</sup> Oshinsky, p. 70.

<sup>377</sup> Tognotti, p. 191.

<sup>378</sup> Rosenstock et al., pp. 100-101.

<sup>379</sup> Jenks, p. 1.

the same time, as one of the social structures in which a particularly close intertwining between the private and the public spheres occurred.<sup>380</sup> In conformity with these ideas, it seems quite natural and logical that the *Corriere della Sera* directly turned to families and parents. However, surprisingly, a communist journal like the *l'Unità* did the same.

The *Corriere della Sera*, for its part, maintained that no one should take the risk to potentially expose their children to contagion by not immunizing them.<sup>381</sup> Similarly, the *l'Unità* claimed that Sabin oral treatment was extremely effective against polioviruses, to the extent that it could be even considered as a promising means to eradicate polio from Italy once and for all. However, the daily stressed that, to reach this goal, citizens should cooperate with the sanitary officials, so that children did not slip through the net avoiding simple and safe vaccination procedures.<sup>382</sup>

Sometimes analogous comments were referred to peculiar contexts and geographical areas, like Milan, which was regarded as an important landmark to evaluate the trend of the related campaign. In this respect, journalists of the *Corriere della Sera* expressed worries, because several parents did not care or did not want to immunize their little ones against polio, despite all the promoting propaganda they had been exposed to.<sup>383</sup>

Furthermore, the dailies under scrutiny regularly reported the appeals by the National League Against Poliomyelitis and especially addressed parents “so that they immediately immunize all the children”, by spreading slogans such as “parents, vaccinate your children against polio, until their twentieth year of age”.<sup>384</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> Federico Romero, *Indivisibilità della guerra fredda. La guerra totale simbolica, Studi Storici*, Vol. 38, No. 4, Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Rome, 1997, p. 938.

<sup>381</sup> “Illustrati dal ministro Giardina gli scopi della legge antipolio”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 17th July 1959, p. 2.

<sup>382</sup> Federico Pizzetti, “Tocca anche ai genitori una parte determinante”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 7th/8th November 1963, p. 3.

<sup>383</sup> “Nessun allarme a Milano per la poliomielite”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 1st July 1961, p. 4.

<sup>384</sup> “affinché facciano vaccinare senza indugio tutti i bambini”; “Genitori, vaccinate i vostri figli, fino al ventesimo anno, contro la poliomielite!”. “Vaccinati finora il 96 per cento dei bimbi”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 21st December 1966, p. 8; “Vaccinare i bambini contro la poliomielite”, *l'Unità*, Rome, 5th July 1961, p. 4.

Accordingly, to implement its outreach activities, this association sent letters to seven million Italian mothers to invite them to immunize their children.<sup>385</sup>

Within this scenario, mothers were regarded as the primary target to reassure and persuade, in line with the ordering and moralising role typically attributed to women during the Cold War. According to the set of Cold War values, women took a central position within the family, becoming the material and symbolic cornerstones around which the society united.<sup>386</sup>

Furthermore, they were supposed to be extremely sensitive regarding their children's health. This conviction could be inferred by a series of interviews on parents' attitudes towards vaccines trials, carried out by the sociologists John Clausen and Leila Deasy, and by the psychologist Morton Seidenfeld, in the USA in 1954. Their conclusions suggested that parents with higher educational levels and socioeconomic status were more likely to have their kids immunised than the less educated and less wealthy ones. Furthermore, mothers who gave consent to let their children join the experimentation were generally more informed on the test setting and on vaccines, having read medical and nonmedical sources to form a personal opinion on the topic. In addition, most of them also attended orientation meetings offered by schools and had already been willing to take measures to protect their kids against polio well before preventive treatment became available.<sup>387</sup>

In line with this view, both the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* enforced their raising-awareness role by adopting a further rhetorical strategy which consisted of frequent recalls to the Italian mothers. About the news dated spring 1955, according to which Italian doctors would have Salk serum available soon, the dailies wrote

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<sup>385</sup> "Non sono state inutili le vaccinazioni col 'Salk'", *Corriere della Sera*, 20th February 1964, p. 5.

<sup>386</sup> Romero, p. 938.

<sup>387</sup> John Clausen et al., *Parent Attitudes Toward Participation of Their Children in Polio Vaccine Trials*, *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol.44, American Public Health Association Inc., Washington, 1954, p. 1536.

that “a great hope expands millions of Italian mothers’ hearts” and that “mums will have one less reason to worry about the future and the health of their kids”.<sup>388</sup>

The same strategy was applied to the propaganda in favour of Sabin vaccine. To overcome the deeply rooted social mistrust concerning serums synthesised with live attenuated viruses, the two dailies stressed that mothers should not worry about the potential side effects of polio treatments, since they had proved to be totally safe. In addition, they tried to make mothers realise that the vaccination campaigns would be successful only if carried out on a mass scale, and that they should consequently have their children immunised for the sake of public health.<sup>389</sup> Therefore, mothers were called to do their own parental duty and were incited to have their kids vaccinated.<sup>390</sup>

### **5.3 Conclusive Remarks: the shared trust in vaccines and the common efforts to induce Italian citizens to be immunised**

The above analysis suggests that, regardless of all the ideological differences mentioned in the previous chapters, the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l’Unità* shared a common trust in science, as well as the same aim of promoting polio vaccines and inducing as many people as possible to be immunised. For this purpose, the two dailies performed what I called the *informative* and *awareness-raising functions* and adopted similar strategies to pursue these goals.

In fact, both of them supported and divulged scientific knowledge and experts’ opinions. By doing so, they mirrored the climate of trust in progress, science and in public health care, which had already led to reduce the incidence or even to

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<sup>388</sup> “una grande speranza allarga il cuore di milioni di mamme”; “le mamme avranno un motivo di meno per stare in pensiero sull’avvenire e sulla salute dei loro figli” “Presto in tutta Italia il vaccino antipoliomielite”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 19th/20th April 1955, p. 2; “Migliaia di scimmie sono morte per i nostri bambini”, *l’Unità*, 9th May 1957, p. 8.

<sup>389</sup> “Non sono state inutili le vaccinazioni con il ‘Salk’”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 20th February 1964, p. 5; Felice Piersanti, “Come si fa la vaccinazione antipolio”, *l’Unità*, Rome, 23rd February 1964, p. 3.

<sup>390</sup> Giuseppe Dal Monte, “Coraggio mamme!”, *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, 4th/5th April 1957, p. 7.

eradicate several infectious illnesses, like malaria, typhus and gastro-intestinal diseases.<sup>391</sup>

Secondly, they analogously committed themselves to debunk baseless doubts and unsubstantiated worries and to make propaganda in favour of vaccines. So, they addressed parents, and especially mothers, to persuade them of the necessity of immunising their children as soon as possible. To make their audience aware of the importance of being vaccinated, journalists also adopted some rhetorical strategies, aimed at eliciting strong emotional responses and at increasing feelings of the danger of polio consequences by comparing it to a war.

In my view, while carrying out these two crucial functions, the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* set aside their own political stances to perform a social and public service, by matching the government guidelines with sanitary policies. This consideration further supports the idea that the international debate on polio prevention was shaped by a complex mediation between scientific and political-ideological stances.

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<sup>391</sup> Tognotti, p. 177

## Conclusions

In this Master thesis I investigated how the Italian newspapers the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* documented the debate on polio mass immunization campaigns in Italy in the 1950s and the 1960s. Therefore, while carrying out my inquiry, I examined how these two papers mediated among politics, ideologies, business matters and science during the Cold War.

In compliance with such research question and aims, I argue that such narrations were influenced by several socio-political factors and by the ideological stances of that age. In fact, I noted that the articles published on the newspapers under scrutiny were deeply connected to the historical-political background of the Cold War: on the one hand, they mirrored the complex intertwining and tensions of the ideological positions of that time. On the other hand, they were remarkably shaped by these contrasting views and by the political clash and divisions rooted within Italian society of that time. Such entanglement between the press, politics and ideologies can be inferred from some topics repeatedly dealt with by the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità*.

Actually, these dailies also followed what was happening in the international context, by widely documenting the measures introduced to limit the spread of poliovirus and the course of the immunization drives abroad. In particular, they respectively identified the USA and the Soviet bloc as the two reference points from which the Italian government should draw inspiration to handle the epidemic. The *Corriere della Sera* mainly focused on the USA and on Western nations, meanwhile the *l'Unità* widely lauded the good management of polio crisis in the USSR and in its satellite countries.

As a result of such adherence to opposite political and sanitary models and the consequent internal polarization, the dispute on the best vaccine to be used resulted extremely ideological. This divergence seemed not only to exclusively concern Italy but also many other European States, as it can be deduced by the reports on Great Britain and France published by both dailies, analysed in Chapter Three. Although none of them opposed the registration and the distribution of a specific

vaccine, the two newspapers, more or less explicitly and openly, took a stand in the public debate on Salk and Sabin treatments. In this respect, the *Corriere della Sera* placed trust in the Salk serum, whereas it was extremely cautious towards Sabin preparation. On the contrary, the *l'Unità* considerably praised the advantages of Sabin vaccine compared to the Salk one, to which the paper gave little space.

These distinct positions were strictly linked to the opposite line-up of these newspapers towards Italian inner politics, government decisions and measures related to polio immunization drives. For its part, the *Corriere della Sera* proved to be significantly indulgent with the DC administration: actually, it never criticised the government healthcare choices and even tried to justify them, when they seemed controversial. In contrast, the *l'Unità* was highly polemical with the political asset of that time and with the managing of the sanitary emergency, by criticising many of the strategies adopted to carry out the mass vaccination campaigns. In addition to several complaints about the scarcity of vials and about many delays in the distribution of the serum, it even accused the authorities of a financial speculation at the citizens' expense to benefit the pharma companies manufacturing Salk vaccine. The charge was to have increased the price of polio treatments for no good reason. Conversely, the *Corriere della Sera* denied any economic scandal. When the daily made reference to the price of the serums, it did it only for informational purposes.

However, despite their ideological contrasting views, both the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* manifested equal trust in vaccines and in medicine in general. Such confidence in science and technical progress was typical of the historical context of the 1950s and the 1960s.<sup>392</sup> In line with such beliefs, both the newspapers widely campaigned in favour of polio immunization, trying to persuade citizens, and parents in particular, of the importance of vaccination. Similar optimistic attitudes led, consequently, the columnists of these papers to perform two distinct roles, respectively the informative and the awareness-raising function described in Chapter Five.

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<sup>392</sup> Blume, p. 155.



Like most projects of this kind, my Master thesis has some strengths and limits, which are worth being briefly outlined in this conclusive section. By highlighting the limitations of this study, I hope to provide some inputs for further research, which I will present below.

Firstly, this examination contributes to reconstruct a specific issue related to the history of poliomyelitis in Italy, which is how the *Corriere della Sera* and the *l'Unità* portrayed both the international and domestic debates on polio prevention. The choice to exclusively focus on the Italian case in the 1950s and 1960s allowed me to inquire the impact of the complex power relations operating on the international arena on a highly inner, politically polarised country. Therefore, this investigation can be used as an example for analogous research on other nations where similar ideological barriers arose after the end of the Second World War.

However, I am well-aware that my work does not thoroughly account for every aspect of the complex story of polio prophylaxis in Italy. As already pointed out in the Introduction, that shortcoming is because the history of this disease in Italy was not largely studied by scholars until now. Therefore, several data and details about it have been lost or are still hard-to-reach. Only a small amount of literature on this topic is available, which has, however, been slowly and slightly increasing in number of publications over the last two years, probably in consequence of the current pandemic.<sup>393</sup> My hope is that similar studies will increase in the coming years, in order to fully reconstruct the genesis, the consequences of poliomyelitis and how the prevention campaign was carried out in the Italian context in the 1950s and the 1960s.

Furthermore, my investigation is related to the European and American setting and to the specific timeframe of the twentieth century, in line with most of the international sources on poliomyelitis. This choice seemed natural, since those were the countries and the period in which polio treatments were developed and distributed on a mass scale. There is evidence that this disease has probably existed since the beginning of the history of mankind, though.<sup>394</sup> Apparently, only rarely

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<sup>393</sup> Collino, p. 14.

<sup>394</sup> Taylor, p. 212.

scholars provide accounts of polio epidemics occurred in ancient times. In my view, it may be valuable to learn more about this point, to better understand how such disease and the measure to limit its spread eventually changed and evolved over the centuries.

Moreover, while it is now eradicated in America and Europe, several cases of poliomyelitis still have been reported in Africa, Asia and the Middle East in recent years.<sup>395</sup> I believe that these outbreaks should be carefully monitored and analysed to compare the management of these epidemics with the strategies used in the past.

Finally, in compliance with the scopes and the aims of my thesis, I largely dealt with the ideological tensions pervading the Cold War scenario, which underlay and, at the same time, influenced the public and the media debate on polio prevention. Nevertheless, as I tried to highlight in my work, the research on polio vaccines also promoted international scientific cooperation. In particular, it fostered a fruitful collaboration between American and Soviet experts aimed at developing and testing Sabin vaccine.

In fact, while carrying out my research, I specifically realise that, despite the political and ideological divisions opposing them, the USA and the USSR were not two hermetically closed systems, but they also used to interact one with another and to influence each other during the Cold War. Hence, my claim is that they should be regarded as two closed systems interacting in an open system. In this respect, it is fruitful to deepen the analysis of such cooperation and to place more emphasis on it in future studies, in order to strengthen the idea that the USA and the USSR were more interconnected and interdependent than it is usually thought.

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<sup>395</sup> Artenstein, p. 219; Collino, pp. 250-253.

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