

Alcide De Gasperi

Democracy beyond borders

SUMMARY

Alcide De Gasperi was born at the end of the 19th century, and grew up in a region of the Austro-Hungarian Empire mainly populated by Italians. From his youth, he was committed to politics and journalism. He was a clear opponent of fascism, and faced strong political persecution from Mussolini's regime. After some time in prison, he found refuge in the Vatican, where he worked for 14 years.

After the Second World War, he involved himself heavily in the construction of the Italian Republic, through the Christian Democratic Party. He was President of the Council (prime minister) between 1945 and 1953. He developed a consensual method of government, trying to involve as much as possible the various Italian political parties.

In the field of foreign policies, one of his main contributions was to advocate tirelessly for the return of Germany to the concert of nations, in the face of the growing threat posed by the Soviet Union. For this reason, he also became a passionate advocate of the European Defence Community.

Therefore, in the light of his commitment, it is no surprise that the 1957 Treaties creating the European Economic Community and Euratom were signed in Rome.



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From 1881 to the Cisleithanian parliament

Alcide De Gasperi was born in 1881 in Pieve Tesino, near Trento, into a Roman Catholic family of modest means.¹ The population of the area of Trento, although it was inside the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was by a vast majority made up of Italians.

From his youth, Alcide De Gasperi felt it was possible to cultivate multiple identities, as he was Trentino, Italian and a subject of the Habsbourg Empire. To him, there was no contradiction in a European identity. Many years later he would apply the same idea to the concept of the European Communities.

His experiences in the political environment started early in 1898, when he attended a convention in Cles, near Trento, with workers and students. He decided to pursue his academic career in the University of Vienna, without forgetting his social commitments.

In other parts of the Habsbourg Empire, Italian minorities were fighting for the right to study in Italian, and De Gasperi supported this idea. The demand to establish an Italian university in Trieste faced significant opposition, especially among the German-speaking students. Eventually, the Austrian government authorised a faculty of law in Italian, in Innsbruck. Nevertheless, this decision created tensions between German- and Italian-speaking students. The situation escalated quickly leading to the intervention of the police, who arrested 134 Italians, one of whom was De Gasperi.

After graduating from the University of Vienna, he became editor of the *Vita Cattolica* (Catholic Life) newspaper, a name that would change the following year to become *Il Trentino*. At the same time he joined the political party, 'Unione politica popolare' (Popular Political Union). One of his main concerns, while starting on political engagement, was to maintain the cultural heritage and the rights of Italians in his region. Finally in 1911 he was elected to the Parliament of Cisleithania (the parliament of the Austrian part of the Empire) in Vienna in the *Collegio delle Fiemme*.

The First World War and Italian politics

At the beginning of the First World War, De Gasperi hoped for Italian neutrality. When the war started he stopped publishing the newspaper and moved to Vienna to help refugees coming from his region to obtain help from the Red Cross. Over the years, the parallels between the lives of Alcide De Gasperi, Robert Schuman and Konrad Adenauer would become apparent, looking both at events in their lives and at their thoughts on the future: they came from border regions, held different passports during their lifetime and spoke German.

On 25 October 1918, De Gasperi and other Italian members of the parliament in Vienna expressed the will of their home region to be united with Italy. That same summer he met, for the first time, Adenauer in Germany. This meeting made him believe in the possibility of cooperation between Catholics and Socialists and the chance to win against nationalism. Brotherhood and solidarity were the approaches to follow in order to achieve such a goal, but this idea was soon suffocated by the rise of authoritarian regimes.

In those years, De Gasperi re-opened his newspaper with a new name, *Il nuovo Trentino* (the New Trentino) and joined Luigi Sturzo's new-born political party 'Partito Popolare Italiano' (Italian Popular Party) or PPI. It launched strong opposition to fascism; Luigi Sturzo subsequently went into voluntary exile and De Gasperi replaced him at the head of the party, just after the 'March on Rome' in October 1922, when Mussolini's supporters took power. Earlier that year, in June 1922, De Gasperi married Francesca Romani, with whom he had four daughters. His family would be a very important pillar through the different forms of adversity he had to face in the following years.

The years of fascism

During this period, Italy was under fascist control and De Gasperi temporarily abandoned both his political and journalistic life in 1925.² While the dictatorship was settling into the country he endured

permanent threats to his safety. With the rise of fascism, De Gasperi soon had to resign from the 'Partito Popolare Italiano' (PPI). In 1927, he was arrested under false accusations of attempting a clandestine expatriation. During this period, he got ill and was sent to a clinic in July 1928, where he stayed under surveillance. He became friends with the police officers who guarded him. Some apologised for keeping him under surveillance, others would receive lessons in French, history and geography, or asked for help in writing love letters to their fiancées. At the end of the Second World War, after he became prime minister, De Gasperi asked one of those policemen to keep working for him. Even on opposing political sides, De Gasperi always thought that personal connections and friendship were the key to solving most issues.³

Thanks to the intercession of the Holy See, De Gasperi was granted clemency on probation. To support his family, he worked as a [translator](#) from German to Italian until 1929 when he was hired to work in the Vatican Library.⁴ Working there allowed him to earn enough money to support his family, and for 14 years he had the chance to observe and analyse the events happening around him, all while studying to develop his knowledge of politics and culture.

Towards the end of the dictatorship, De Gasperi re-established contact with some of his friends from the 'PPI' and the 'Young Catholics', to elaborate ideas and programmes to build a Catholic-inspired party for a secular state. This party was called 'Democrazia Cristiana' (Christian Democracy).⁵

After the Second World War: A country to rebuild



De Gasperi at the Paris Peace Conference, Luxembourg Palace, in August 1946.

Source: De Gasperi House.

The Italian prime minister spoke with tact, braveness and dignity. When he left the rostrum to go back to his place, in the very last row, he went down the centre aisle with an absolute silence around him, passing by many people who knew him. It makes much of an impression on me; it seemed to be unnecessarily cruel. As the other members, I did meet De Gasperi in London. So, when he passed by the United States delegation I shook his hand. Later on, in the afternoon, I invited him to my apartment. I wanted to give courage to this man who personally suffered because of Mussolini and now he was suffering because of the Allied nations.

J. Byrnes, delegate of the United States.

Source: Giuseppe Audisio e Alberto Chiara, I fondatori dell'Europa unita secondo il progetto di Jean Monnet: Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer, Alcide De Gasperi, Effata' Editrice, 1999, p. 184.

After the Armistice was signed in 1943, De Gasperi was recognised as leader of the now reborn PPI, which would become known as Democrazia Cristiana. He was Minister for Foreign Affairs from 1944 to 1945 in the second cabinet of Ivanoe Bonomi and in the cabinet of Ferruccio Parri. Just after the war, Italy was in a terrible situation, with endemic food shortages. De Gasperi decided to enlist the help of Fiorello La Guardia, president of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA).⁶

At the end of 1945, De Gasperi was elected prime minister and established his first government, which would last until 1953. The main goal was now to make sure that Italy would be connected to the Western world. Under De Gasperi's government, several major [decisions](#) were taken, such as the election of the Constituent Assembly and the referendum of 2 June 1946 to decide whether Italy should be a monarchy or a republic. On 18 April 1948, Democrazia Cristiana obtained a majority at the elections, and De Gasperi formed a

government with liberals, republicans and social democrats.⁷

His idea of democracy and commitment to freedom and equality, as well as social justice and solidarity, were fundamental [principles](#) that would be integrated into the constitution. Even in the Parliament, he aimed for inclusive policies that allowed for greater individual, civil, and social freedoms for all citizens.

Bringing Germany back into Europe

From 29 June until 15 October 1946 the [Paris Peace Conference](#) took place, after which De Gasperi, as were Schuman and Adenauer, was certain that European peoples shared a common heritage, both moral and spiritual. He wanted to find a solution for European integration, military defence and economic problems. Here, De Gasperi represented a country which had lost the war and was still seen as an enemy, and saw himself in some ways as a defendant:

I feel the responsibility of talking as anti-fascist democratic, as representative of a new Republic, which, by harmonising in itself Giuseppe Mazzini's humanitarian aspirations, the universalistic conceptions of Christianity and the international hopes of workers, is still now oriented to that peace you are trying to achieve and towards that cooperation within those populations that you have to establish.

He defended a balanced account of the responsibilities of the population but also the faults of the dictatorship, of which he himself was a victim, and had fought against too.⁸



Meeting between Adenauer, De Gasperi, Schuman, Dirk Stikker and Joseph Bech.

Source: European Parliament, unknown date and place.

By that time he was already aiming for a new project that would prevent wars between its members, and create a common system in order to establish a strong democratic system.⁹ As both he and Schuman believed the problem of raw materials was one of the reasons why many misunderstandings happened, raw materials needed to be accessible for everyone and this idea became the quintessence of the European Coal and Steel Community proposed by Schuman in 1950.

Indeed, on 9 May 1950, with the Schuman declaration, 'Europe' stopped being something abstract.¹⁰

In his speeches, De Gasperi insisted on the necessity to soften borders, reflecting on the

disappearance of customs barriers and merging of armed forces. He looked at the United States as a higher democratic system. The freedom of movement of goods and people were not far from his thoughts.

De Gasperi hoped to create a community which would respect local autonomies, a federal Europe that could look at Switzerland as a smaller version of it. That is why on 4 November 1950 he signed the petition for a federal state of Europe. His own experience in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and during the Wars, showed him how important local autonomies are to people living on a continent on which borders have changed so often in the past centuries. A united Europe would be a great bastion of peace between nations but also of social peace for Europeans in terms of work equality, prosperity and justice. Peace would have to be built both internally and externally.

De Gasperi also played a pivotal role in the reconciliation with Germany. Both Adenauer and he represented countries whose previous regimes had brought destruction to Europe, but had also harmed their personal lives. Therefore, for De Gasperi, no European project could develop without both Italy and Germany, despite the post-war resentment.

In 1948, France, the United Kingdom and the Benelux countries signed a defence treaty (the Treaty of Brussels) against a possible danger coming from Germany. De Gasperi opposed this idea, not wanting this nation to be marginalised. Instead, he suggested that Germany should regain its place among the democratic nations. European countries needed to overcome their post-war division and start supporting each other, from both an economic and cultural point of view. By including Germany, future conflicts might be avoided.¹¹ While returning home from Belgium he stopped in Paris where he met Schuman, who would then write to a Benedictine friend – *I have great faith in De Gasperi, he can be one of us* – on 29 January 1951.¹²

In 1951, Adenauer visited Rome. He had already met De Gasperi on a number of occasions (such as in Cologne in 1921) and his criticism of the Treaty of Brussels, made him a recognised friendly figure. During their meeting in Rome, they set the goal to defend Western culture and maintain Christian values, both of them united by their belonging to the Christian Democratic political family. The following year, De Gasperi went to Cologne and Bonn, and then mediated between France and Germany in their disagreement on the Saarland that over the years had always proved to be a difficult issue.¹³

One of the most distinctive buildings on the Luxembourg skyline is the tower built between 1960 and 1965 and named after Alcide de Gasperi. Also known as the [Tower Building](#), given its 22 storeys, it was the first skyscraper built in the city. Used by the secretariat of the [European Parliament](#) until 2001, it is now a conference centre, and hosts Council of the EU meetings in April, June and October.

A European Defence Community

In 1948, in Brussels, De Gasperi stated that *the spirit of European solidarity might create, in different sectors, different ways and instruments of protection and defence, but the first defence of peace is in the united effort which, including Germany, will eliminate the danger of a revenge war and retaliation*.¹⁴

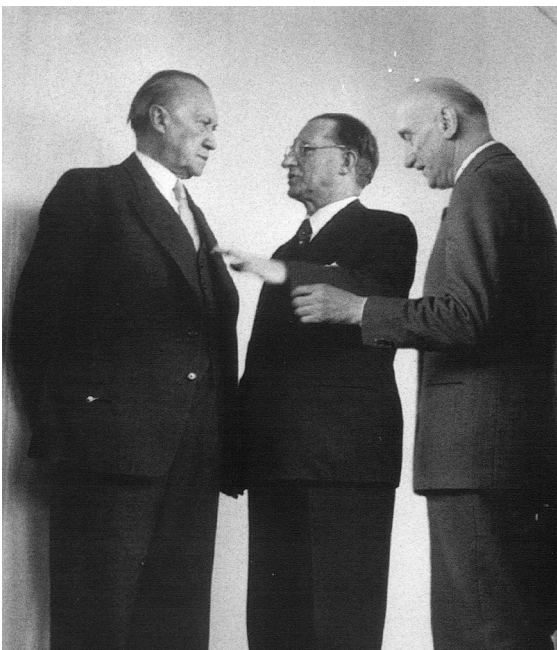
De Gasperi therefore supported the method of sectoral integration invented by Monnet, and trusted that it could be successfully applied to other domains such as defence. When the Treaty on the European Defence Community was signed on 27 May 1952, De Gasperi said there was a 'new light of hope'. Its Article 38 established an important point for the future: 'the aim of a supranational and politically integrated Europe'.¹⁵

For De Gasperi, the network of European organisations should be solid enough to avoid what he considered as failures of diplomacy, and the feeling of ineluctability of war. Already in 1913, before the beginning of the First World War, he had written on how European countries were closing themselves off to each other.

He was a man that lived on a border in the same way as Adenauer and Schuman, he knew what war meant, and that there was a need to find new methods and new ways to avoid it from happening again. He looked at democracy, not only in politics but also as something creating conditions for civil living.

He said, in Aquisgrana in 1952, that: *the future is not made with the right of strength or the spirit of conquest,*

but with the patience of the democratic method, with the constructive spirit of arrangements in the respect of freedom’.



Adenauer, De Gasperi and Schuman, 1952.

Source: De Gasperi House.

During the last days of his life, knowing that the Defence Community would not come into being, he expressed his worries to his daughter, Maria Romana De Gasperi. The Treaty was indeed signed in Paris in 1952 by France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. However before coming into effect it needed to be ratified by the different parliaments. In the French Parliament there were still very strong doubts. These worries were strongly connected with having an army that could possibly come under German control, now that that country was becoming strong again, or in the hands of other countries such as the United States (to which the French felt Italy and Germany were strongly connected).

Seeing how the EDC was to fail, De Gasperi was not sure if a united Europe would happen soon enough to avoid future wars. He was sure, however, that, if only his health would allow him, he would have been able to convince the rest of the people of the strength of the project.

On 30 July 1954, De Gasperi was back home, in his beloved mountains, in Sella di Valsugana, with his wife and the rest of his family. The first heart attack arrived on 18 August, and he died the same night, surrounded by his family.

De Gasperi saw in the community of six countries only a beginning. That would be the first step through which trying a way to build a better and wider European Union ... I got to know only a few men that had in themselves so much knowledge, skills, tact and good heart ... With his death Europe and Italy have lost a great statesman; Germany and myself a great friend.

Konrad Adenauer, *Testimony of Friendship*, Civitas, December 1954.



De Gasperi and Winston Churchill, 1953.

Source: De Gasperi House.

The project of a United Europe was very important to him, he deeply believed that being 'Europeist' would have brought peace and democracy to European countries. For a man like him, who experienced both world wars and dictatorship, these were very important points for the future of Europe. And that is where his thoughts met those of Schuman and Adenauer.

While he did not live long enough to see the full realisation of his project, it did go ahead: On 25 March 1957, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Luxembourg signed the Treaties of Rome, having agreed on both the Economic European Community (EEC) and the Community for nuclear energy (Euratom).¹⁶

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Piero Ottone, *De Gasperi*. Della Volpe Editore, Milano 1968, pp. 5 - 12
- ² Guido Gonella, *Con De Gasperi nella formazione della DC*. Edizioni cinque lune, 1978, pp.12-13
- ³ Guido Gonella, op. cit., pp.22-32
- ⁴ Guido Gonella, op. cit., pp.77-83
- ⁵ Giuseppe Audisio and Alberto Chiara, op.cit., pp. 176 -178
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- ⁷ Giuseppe Audisio and Alberto Chiara, op.cit., pp. 179- 181
- ⁸ Giuseppe Audisio and Alberto Chiara, op.cit., pp. 179- 183
- ⁹ Giuseppe Audisio and Alberto Chiara, op.cit., pp. 186-187
- ¹⁰ Giuseppe Audisio and Alberto Chiara, op.cit., pp. 198-200.
- ¹¹ Giuseppe Audisio and Alberto Chiara, op.cit., pp. 194-195
- ¹² Giuseppe Audisio and Alberto Chiara, op.cit., pp. 208-209.
- ¹³ Giuseppe Audisio and Alberto Chiara, op.cit., pp. 200-201.
- ¹⁴ Jean-Dominique Durand, *Alcide De Gasperi e la Patria Europea*. Fondazione Trentina Alcide de Gasperi.
- ¹⁵ Giuseppe Audisio and Alberto Chiara, op.cit., pp. 201-202.
- ¹⁶ Giuseppe Audisio and Alberto Chiara, op.cit., pp. 128-129.

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