

Alcide De Gasperi: an inspired mediator for democracy and freedom in Europe



Alcide De Gasperi 1881 - 1954

From 1945 to 1953, in his roles as Italian Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister, Alcide De Gasperi forged the path of the country's destiny in the post-war years.

He was born in the region of Trentino-Alto Adige (South Tyrol) which, until 1918, belonged to Austria. Along with other exceptional statesmen of his time, he campaigned actively for European unity. His experiences of fascism and war — he was imprisoned between 1927 and 1929 before finding asylum in the Vatican — led to his conviction that only the union of Europe could prevent their recurrence.

Time and time again he promoted initiatives aimed at the fusion of Western Europe, working on the realisation of the Marshall Plan and creating close economic ties with other European countries, in particular France. Furthermore, he supported the Schuman Plan for the foundation of the European Coal and Steel Community, and helped develop the idea of the common European defence policy.

Early life

Alcide De Gasperi was born on 3 April 1881. His father was a policeman with limited means. He grew up in the Trento region which, at that time, was one of the Italian-speaking areas within the large multinational and multicultural grouping of nations and peoples of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As there were no Italian universities that he could attend with a study grant, he went to Vienna in 1900 to study Philology. There he became active in the Catholic student movement. It was during these student years that he was able to hone the mediating skills that would later become so essential during his politically active years. He was, for example, able to understand that finding solutions to problems was more important than holding grudges and believed that substance was important, not form. When he graduated in 1905, he returned to Trentino where he became a reporter for the newspaper *La Voce Cattolica*. At this time he also became politically active in the

Unione Politica Popolare del Trentino and was elected in 1911 to represent Trentino in the Austrian House of Representatives. He used this position to campaign for the improvement of rights for the Italian minority.

First World War experiences and the 'Idee Ricostruttive'

Although De Gasperi remained politically neutral during the First World War, he did however sympathise with the Vatican's efforts to end the war. When the First World War ended in 1918, De Gasperi's home region became a part of Italy. One year later, he co-founded the Italian People's Party (*Partito Popolare Italiano* – PPI) and became one of their parliamentarians in 1921. As the fascist powers in the Italian government under

Mussolini's leadership grew in strength, openly using violence and intimidation against the PPI, the party was outlawed and dissolved in 1926. De Gasperi himself was arrested in 1927 and sentenced to four years in prison. With the help of the Vatican he was freed after 18 months. He was given asylum within the walls of the Vatican, where he worked for 14 years as a librarian. During the Second World War he wrote the 'Idee ricostruttive' (Ideas for reconstruction) which would form the manifesto of the Christian Democratic Party, secretly founded in 1943. After the collapse of fascism, De Gasperi stood at the helm of the party and served as Prime Minister from 1945 to 1953 in eight consecutive governments. To this day, this record of political longevity in the history of Italian democracy remains unsurpassed.

Role in European integration

During this so-called 'De Gasperi era' Italy was rebuilt by establishing a republican Constitution, consolidating internal democracy and taking the first steps towards economic reconstruction. De Gasperi was an enthusiastic proponent of international cooperation. As the man responsible for most of Italy's post-war reconstruction, he was convinced that Italy needed to restore its role on the international stage. To this end he worked to set up the Council of Europe, persuaded Italy to be part of the American Marshall Plan and to join NATO. His strong cooperation with the United States took place at the same time as Italy had one of the largest communist parties in Western Europe.

Democracy, agreement and freedom

De Gasperi believed that the Second World War taught all Europeans the following lesson: "the future will not be built through force, nor the desire to conquer, but by the patient application of the democratic method, the constructive spirit of agreement, and by respect for freedom". This is what he said when he accepted the Charlemagne prize for his pro-European commitment in 1952. This vision explains his swift response to Robert Schuman's call on 9 May 1950 for an integrated Europe, which led to the foundation of the European Coal and Steel Community

(ECSC) a year later. He became the first President of the ECSC Parliamentary Assembly in 1954. And although the project ultimately failed, De Gasperi was a defendant and proponent of the common European defence policy.

European Economic Community

During these first steps towards European integration De Gasperi's role has been described as that of a mediator between Germany and France, which had been divided by almost a century of war. During the final years of his life he was also an inspiring force behind the creation of the European Economic Community. Although he would not live to see this come to fruition - he died in August 1954 - his role was widely acknowledged when the treaties of Rome were signed in 1957.

His background, his wartime experiences, living under fascism and being part of a minority made Alcide De Gasperi very much aware that European unity was necessary to heal the wounds of two world wars and to help prevent the atrocities of the past from ever happening again. He was motivated by a clear vision of a Union of Europe that would not replace individual states, but would allow for them to complement each other.



De Gasperi shaking hands with German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer in 1953 in Rome.