

Italy to create a professional army

Carola Kleinert, Andy Niklaus
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On September 3, during the first meeting of the cabinet following the summer break, the Italian government passed a new law which will, by the year 2005, abolish compulsory military service in favour of the creation of a professional army.

The transformation into a professional army is to take place in two stages. The first step is to increase the number of regular soldiers from 30,000 to 42,000 over the next three years. At the same time the number of compulsory soldiers is to be reduced and military service is to be opened up to women. The efficiency and costs of the military are to be evaluated as a basis for further changes. At the end of the second step, in 2005, the number of soldiers is to be reduced from 289,000 to 190,000.

In order to bypass the Italian constitution, which says that each male citizen must serve the fatherland, the new law includes a clause declaring, "In case of a war or a substantial crisis compulsory military service can be restored immediately".

It is being stressed that what is being introduced is only a suspension, not abolition of compulsory military service. The conservative defence minister Carlo Scognamiglio praised the project as "one of the greatest reforms in the history of Italy and a historical turning point for our country".

In the ruling five-party government headed by Prime Minister D'Alema (Left Democrats) it was only the old-line Stalinists of Cossutis's PCI who opposed the abolition of compulsory military service. Their only argument was that the end of compulsory service would have repercussions for community services and cause an emergency in the social sector.

The creation of a professional army is also supported by the opposition coalition lead by Berlusconi. The German daily paper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented that the change was "a necessary adaptation to new requirements within the framework of the Alliance",

following the Kosovo War and the new orientation of NATO.

In abolishing compulsory military service Italy is following the European trend. Up until 1996 compulsory military service existed in 10 of the 16 NATO states. France and Spain are currently undergoing the transformation to professional armies. The Netherlands abolished compulsory military service three years ago. In Germany the debate on the necessity of such a step is already taking place: the Green party demands a professional army, while a majority of the SPD favours (for the moment) the old system of recruitment.

Parallel to this process is the increasing integration of the various European armies. The aim is to increase military power and enable Europe to act, politically and militarily, independently of the United States. In June 1999 the Cologne summit decided to strengthen the mutual exterior and security policy (GASP). The summit declared that the EC must "obtain the capability to act independently, based on credible military abilities, the capacity and readiness to make the decision to go into action, in order to react to international crises, regardless of the measures taken by NATO".

The Italian head of state D'Alema underlined these aims during a meeting on closer military collaboration with his British counterpart on July 20 in London. He said, "The expenses for defence of the European states add up to 60 percent of the American outlay, but the combined efficiency is much lower. The aim must be to make good this discrepancy."

These moves to build up the military are related to sharpening tensions with the US. In recent years Italy has repeatedly found itself in conflict with Washington over its relations to northern Africa, and especially Libya. At first Rome clenched its teeth and reluctantly accepted US sanctions against Libya. In April this year,

pressed by Italy, Europe cancelled its trade embargo. The American embargo is due to last till 2001. As a result European enterprises are now aggressively expanding on the Libyan market.

On July 26 the state-owned Italian energy company (ENI) and the Libyan Oil Company signed a contract worth billions. It includes building a gas pipeline over 600 kilometres from Libya to Cap Passero in Sicily, in which the Italian side is to invest 5.5 billion dollars. This pipeline is to deliver 10 billion cubic metres of gas per year to Italy. Over US protests, Italy months before defied the trade embargo and commenced negotiations on the pipeline.

A prerequisite for the conclusion of this treaty was that Italy acknowledge crimes committed during its colonial domination of Libya. To this end in 1996 the Prodi government made the first steps towards compensation and the drafting of a peace treaty. With the conclusion of the peace treaty in 1998 the door was open for Italian investment.

The head of ENI, Renato Ruggerio, described the pipeline deal as a "historic treaty", by which "a bridge was built between Europe and Libya". He went on to say that the treaty staked out "new energy frontiers", mentioning "Northern Africa to Eastern Africa" and "the Persian Gulf and Saudi Arabia to the Caspian Sea". He also referred to an offshore project by the ENI in Brazil, where there are strong American interests.

The daily paper *Corriere della Sera* devoted a whole page to this "new strategic energy project" and reported on plans to extend the pipeline to Ravenna on the Adriatic coast. There are also plans to supply Albania (a former Italian colony). The *Corriere* underlined that "Italy was consolidating itself to lead in this sector of the Mediterranean".

In a statement to the *Wall Street Journal* Ruggerio made clear that he is not interested in collaboration with American energy companies. Asked his opinion on American plans to merge with Italian and European energy firms, he said no negotiations were under way with the ENI, and added, "We base ourselves on operative regional alliances."

The tough military stance also has its effects on the domestic climate in Italy, as can be seen in a recent incident in a barracks. On August 13, a 26-year-old soldier, Emanuele Scieri, died. He was a member of the paratroops regiment "Folgore" stationed at the Gamarra

base in Pisa. According to the Italian press the young man was driven to death by harassment.

The brigadier general responsible for the unit, Cirneco, told the police he was of the opinion that young men today were a lot "softer" and weaker than preceding generations: "Thirty years ago it was normal to do fifty knee bends, but if you order ten knee bends today it is called harassment. What do you want, paratroopers or monks? You have to decide if you want armed forces ready for immediate action or weaklings in the uniform of weaklings."

The new professional army will have no shortage of recruits in Italy. For many young men and women it presents the only chance of finding a job. The rate of unemployment of those under 25 stands at 32 percent.



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