

# Altiero Spinelli

## His Life and Work

Altiero Spinelli (1907-1986) promoted the foundation of the Movimento Federalista Europeo (European Federalist Movement) on 27-28th August 1943 in Milan. He had joined the Italian Communist Party at a very early age, and participated in the clandestine struggle against fascism. Arrested in 1927, he spent ten years in prison and six in confinement. During his confinement at Ventotene, he studied the texts of Anglo-Saxon federalists, which led him to abandon communism and embrace federalism. Along with Ernesto Rossi and Eugenio Colorni, he drew up the *Ventotene Manifesto* in 1941. Spinelli soon realised that the battle for the European federation required the creation of a new type of political organisation, immune to national fetishes and the limitations of traditional ideologies.

In the early fifties, the campaigning of

### THE VENTOTENE MANIFESTO

*"The dividing line between progressive and reactionary parties no longer coincides with the formal lines of more or less democracy, or the pursuit of more or less socialism, but the division falls along a very new and substantial line: those who conceive the essential purpose and goal of struggle as being the ancient one, the conquest of national political power, and who, albeit involuntarily, play into the hands of reactionary forces, letting the incandescent lava of popular passions set in the old moulds, and thus allowing old absurdities to arise once again, and those who see the main purpose as the creation of a solid international State, who will direct popular forces towards this goal, and who, even if they were to win national power, would use it first and foremost as an instrument for achieving international unity".*

FOR A FREE AND UNITED EUROPE - A DRAFT MANIFESTO, VENTOTENE, 1941

Spinelli and the MFE toward the Italian government proved decisive in making

### THE BIRTH OF THE MFE (1943)

*"We rejected the project, discussed by some, of establishing a simple centre of study and of diffusion of ideas. We definitively dropped the idea of a federalist party, realising that the attempt to set it up and win for it a significant place alongside the democratic parties which we had seen rise from their ashes with unexpected and vigorous continuity would in all probability be fruitless and would in any case stop us gathering under one banner all the consensus that certainly existed in every political force. The need to compete with other parties would have obliged us to give a complete manifesto for national government, and would inevitably have distracted us therefore from our chosen priority of concentrating on building Europe.*

*We would therefore be a movement which would rally all those prepared to fight for the federation, and hence open to members of the various anti-fascist parties which were forming, but determined to remain autonomous of the same."*

COME HO TENTATO DI DIVENTARE SAGGIO - LA GOCCIA E LA ROCCIA (HOW I TRIED TO BECOME WISE - THE DROP AND THE ROCK), 1987

the European constituent question the central issue in the intergovernmental negotiations for the creation of the European Defence Community (EDC). It was thanks to this campaigning that the ad hoc Assembly (the enlarged assembly of the ECSC) was given the task of drawing up the statute of the European Political Community, the political body to be charged with controlling the European army. The Assembly fulfilled its mandate by drawing up a constitution text, but its work was frustrated by France's refusal to ratify the EDC in 1954.

Despite this setback, between 1954 and 1960 Spinelli and the MFE relaunched the federalist struggle, working to mobilise the by then widespread Europeanism into a growing popular protest (the Congress of the European People) directed against the very legitimacy of the nation-states.

After abandoning the MFE in the sixties, he was nominated a member of the EEC's Executive Commission in 1970. From 1976 to 1986 he was a member of the European Parliament, becoming President of its Institutional Commission in 1984. It was in the European Parliament that Spinelli had a second opportunity to start a constitutional campaign, promoting in the now directly elected European Parliament the elaboration of a

Draft Treaty establishing the European Union (approved by a huge majority on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1984). This initiative was blocked and shelved by the national governments, which in 1985 passed the less ambitious Single European Act. This nevertheless marked the entrance of the European Parliament onto the European scene as a new political actor in the process of democratising the Community's institutions. Spinelli died in Rome on 23rd May 1986.

### Spinelli's Work and Federalism as a New Political Behaviour

Spinelli's attitude differed from that of federalists before him, who limited themselves to denouncing the historical crisis of the nation-state and setting the achievement of the European federation at some indeterminate future time. Such federalists, unlike Spinelli, had not set themselves the objective of drawing up a precise plan of action, and had not renounced being involved first and foremost in liberal, socialist or democratic struggles. Spinelli, on the other hand, convinced that following the Second World War the European federation would become the concrete objective of political struggle, realised that an opportunity had opened up for the federalist struggle. Spinelli therefore unhesitatingly de-

## SPINELLI, THE MFE AND DE GASPERI

"Our encounter with De Gasperi was not easy. When we began to form our little movement, with its uncompromising stance and commitment to battle, since Sforza, Minister for Foreign Affairs, and De Gasperi had an anti-nationalist attitude, we tried to make contact with them. In 1950 we made, in agreement with federalists in other countries as well, a campaign in the form of a petition, in which we asked our governments, and in particular we asked our Italian government, to take an initiative to make a federal pact with the other countries. We prepared the text of the petition on which to collect signatures, and then looked for a few authoritative signatories whose support would facilitate the collection. One of the first steps which we had to think of was De Gasperi. De Gasperi received us, read this text and said that, yes, he was prepared to support it on condition that we changed that overabstract formula a little: we should have to say that we invited the Italian government to take an initiative to promote peace in Europe.

At this we said that our movement arose precisely in contrast to this way of looking at things, this kind of European politics, and that therefore, we would not comply. And so we parted coldly: he saying that in that case he was not interested in the matter, and we finding ourselves in a rather difficult situation, because we were starting out with the head of government in this hostile situation. However we decided to go ahead anyway. And in the course of a year we gathered half a million signatures and at the end, in 1951, we held a large demonstration at the Elisee theatre, in Rome, attended by Einaudi, President of the Republic - Einaudi was the one who had always supported us silently and, as guest speakers, there were also Sforza and De Gasperi. (...) Then we had De Gasperi's first declaration in our favour, because he too signed the petition and he declared that the Italian government would accept this undertaking and act accordingly. Well, I must say that De Gasperi was true to this undertaking and there was a great initiative of the Italian government.

This man, De Gasperi, who was basically a moderate, did so in no mean revolutionary spirit, conquering resistance in Italy, in the Italian administration, and conquering resistance in the other countries."

FROM A RADIO INTERVIEW, 1985

nounced the limits of the functionalist approach to European unification, and the Europeanists' illusion of being able to achieve federation without the states renouncing their national sovereignty. From the outset he aimed to exploit the contradictions which emerged when the various national policies were pooled at the international level. In contrast to the community method followed by Jean Monnet, Spinelli opposed the constituent method, conscious of the fact that if on the one hand it was necessary to make the states accept a treaty according to which they declared themselves ready to cede a part of their sovereignty in favour of a supra-national government, on the other hand it was necessary for the European people to participate in defining a constitution that

established the form and responsibilities of this new union between the states. In 1984 Spinelli succeeded in bringing the entire European Parliament round to this position, which he had defended and maintained throughout his life.

This same Parliament is now called on to complete the constituent battle started by Spinelli.

## THE CONSTITUENT POWER OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

"This exclusive political right of the European Parliament, unwritten but valid because founded on solid democratic custom, must be resolutely claimed by Parliament against every attempt to transfer the drafting to wise men, to diplomats, to ministers or others. If the European Parliament gives way on this point, if it accepts that its work has only been preparatory, destined to be remanipulated by others, it reduces itself to the level of little more than a talking shop, and spontaneously renounces its status as representative of the citizens of the Community, i.e. it denies the very aim for which the elections have taken place. Many voices will be raised against this claim of the European Parliament – of that we may be certain – but let it understand that this position cannot be abandoned without the entire frontline of its battle for the Union collapsing."

SPEECH GIVEN TO THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE OF FLORENCE, 13<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 1983.

## THE WORK TO BE COMPLETED

"You have all read the novel by Hemingway about an old fisherman who, after catching the largest fish of his life, tries to bring it ashore. But sharks devour it little by little, and when he arrives in port, all that remains is the fish-bone. When it votes in a few minutes, Parliament will have captured the biggest fish of its life, but it will have to bring it ashore, because there will always be sharks trying to devour it. Let us try not to come back to port with only a fish-bone."

ADDRESS TO EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, 14<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 1983.

"Having reached the end of one chapter and at the beginning of a new chapter which will probably be completed by others, and reflecting on the work which I have tried to do here, I must say that, if the ideas contained in this text and in the resolution had not existed in the minds of the great majority of this Parliament, I would never have succeeded in putting them there. Like Socrates, I have limited myself to practising the maieutic art. I have been the obstetrician who helped Parliament give birth to this child. Now we must make it live."

ADDRESS TO EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, 14<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 1984.