

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/>

No. 374

Published on 15 November 2012

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane N. Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

Alessandro Brogi. "Ambassador Clare Boothe Luce and the Evolution of Psychological Warfare in Italy." *Cold War History* 12:2 (May 2012): 269-294. DOI:

10.1080/14682745.2011.558611. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2011.558611>

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR374.pdf>

Review by **Mark I. Choate**, Brigham Young University

Alessandro Brogi, Professor of History at the University of Arkansas, has contributed a fascinating article on the high-profile role of an American ambassador to Italy in the 1950s. Clare Boothe Luce, the wife of publishing mogul Henry Luce, was an enthusiastic Cold Warrior eager to fight communism worldwide, and she garnered widespread press coverage and interest in both Italy and the U.S. as Ambassador from 1953 to 1956. Brogi's enlightening and fascinating article explores the impact of an individual ambassador, beyond the ambassador's role as personal representative of the President or Secretary of State, factotum of semi-anonymous government agencies, or agent of the interests of the United States in more abstract terms. What did Luce contribute as herself, not as part of a general trend?

Brogi argues persuasively that Clare Boothe Luce was an effective diplomat, even though she embodied some stereotypes of American arrogance and an overly moralizing crusader instinct in the 1950s. Although she deliberately offended the Italian Communists, and drew much unfavorable publicity and outrage, her private correspondence with President Eisenhower shows a nuanced and flexible approach, drawing upon the Cold War policy understandings of the late 1940s and changing significantly over time. Luce increased mutual understanding between Italy and the United States, with concrete success in promoting NATO ties and resolving Italy's international borders (278-280). Brogi successfully dilutes the partisan image of Luce as a Republican hack, fomented by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (285), by building his arguments between the early Cold War, under Truman, and the 1960s Kennedy Administration, with the initially unthinkable but ultimately desirable "opening to the left." The Christian Democrat's coalition with the Italian Socialist Party in 1963, formally peeling away the Socialists from their former allies in the Communist party, is here given an American context in a continuity of policy. Other key events of the period, including Trieste joining Italy rather than Yugoslavia, and the failure of the European Defense Community, are also given an Italian and American

international context. To accomplish these feats, Brogi draws upon an extensive secondary bibliography, and thorough archival work in the U.S. National Archives, both the Truman and Eisenhower Presidential Libraries, the Italian Foreign Affairs Archive, and the Italian Communist Party archive at the Istituto Gramsci.

Brogi's engaging questions and inherently interesting material make this article suitable for a wide audience, including graduate and undergraduate students. Clare Boothe Luce was only the fifth female ambassador to represent the United States, and the first at a major capital; her predecessors in the 1930s and 1940s were chiefs of the U.S. missions in Denmark, Norway, and Luxembourg. Brogi credits Luce's arrival with the creation of a new word in Italian official language, *ambasciatrice* (in place of the masculine noun *ambasciatore*). Luce's credentials were political and literary rather than professional. Her lack of diplomatic tact inflamed U.S. relations with the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the largest Communist organization in Western Europe. Yet her strong relationship with President Eisenhower, her media connections, and her dedication and work ethic made her a successful ambassador, bringing Italy's needs and interests to the forefront of American discussions, and strengthening the relationships between the governments of Italy and the United States.

Brogi ties in his analysis of Luce's ambassadorship to the U.S. practice of "psychological warfare" and "total cold war" (270-272). After countless bombs and bullets scattered across battlefields through 1945, world conflict had shifted to questions of loyalty, goals, and the danger of subversion from the Soviet Union. The United States had to remain vigilant at home, and keep its allies awake and active. The Truman and Eisenhower administrations aimed to accomplish this through a series of bureaucracies: the United States Information Agency, supplanting the United States Information Service, coordinated by a Psychological Strategy Board, and later by an Operations Coordinating Board, with Nelson Rockefeller as the Special Assistant to the President for Psychological Warfare. In Italy, the term "psy-war" seems to have embraced a Gramscian 'war of position' against the Italian Communists' hegemony in popular and elite culture. Although it is unclear if the U.S. representatives used Gramsci's own terms and analysis, essentially the Americans were 'fighting' on the same terrain of broad influence and popular momentum as were the Italian Communists.

As Brogi documents, the vagueness of terms like "psy-war" and "total cold war" raised persistent questions about what were the policy goals and what was out of bounds. Such ethical problems for non-combat operations have never really disappeared. Recently, for example, the U.S. Army abandoned the term "Psychological Operations" in favor of the more general and impersonal term, "Military Information Support Operations." Other countries in Europe continue to call their military use of leaflets, broadcasts, and loudspeakers "Psychological Operations," and do not automatically associate 'propaganda' with malicious intent, as do many Americans or British. *Propaganda Fide*, for example, is the Roman Catholic missionary body, charged with spreading the gospel rather than evil manipulation. The missionary impulse from the U.S. during the Cold War, however, seems to have stumbled. Much of the Eisenhower administration's problems with psy-war seem

to have come from unclear assumptions, followed by flawed conclusions, as to what the administration should and ought to accomplish.

As a bureaucratic term, “psy-war” remains inherently vague and inconclusive, but Clare Boothe Luce in Brogi’s treatment serves as an outstanding example of an individual’s role in these much larger international developments. Brogi gives clear and compelling citations on these debates from Luce’s correspondence. As one example, she noted with bitterness, “What’s the “American way of life” to a foreigner who can’t get an immigrant visa; or the “free enterprise system” to a foreign businessman who can’t trade with America?” (281). Her acerbic letters and speeches hold much more interest than do faceless bureaucracies creating propaganda policies which had little discernible effect. As the wife of media mogul Henry Luce, Ambassador Luce understood contemporary international media better than most; as a former Republican Congresswoman representing Connecticut, she also understood American politics and government. Her brilliant wit made her an unlikely but effective diplomat, with a style captured in her famous aphorism (not quoted by Brogi), “no good deed goes unpunished.”¹]

Brogi does not discuss in detail Luce’s accomplishments outside of her ambassadorship. As Clare Boothe, before her marriage to Luce, she wrote the play *The Women*, with an all-female cast, that opened in 1936 and ran for 657 performances on Broadway. The movie version in 1939, directed by George Cukor and starring Joan Crawford, again featured an all-female cast and was a huge success. The movie was remade as a musical in 1956, and again in 2008 with another all-star, all-female cast. The play version also was revived in 1973 and 2001. Henry Luce pursued Clare, a divorcée, while still married, in what was a scandal for the time. Henry and Clare married in 1935, the second marriage for both parties, and remained married for 32 years until Henry Luce died.²

Luce changed her life dramatically after the untimely death of her daughter in an automobile accident, becoming seriously religious, and converted to Roman Catholicism in 1946. She brought a devout urgency to her crusade against Communism during her ambassadorship. Booth’s later plays also became more spiritual, with overt moral themes. Brogi does not combine his analysis of Cold War diplomacy with a literary analysis, but Luce’s body of literature, including her notorious and her less successful plays, lend themselves to a textual analysis together with her letters and other written communications. Her concerns with European perceptions of the “most marketed and shallow aspects of the American way of life” (282) might be compared with her husband’s more and more frivolous publishing ventures, from *Time* (1923), to *Life* (1936), to *Sports Illustrated* (1954).

¹ Source of attribution, among others: Hayden Herrera, *Frida* (2d ed., London: Bloomsbury, 2003), p. 478.

² For a biography of Luce, see, among others, Wilfrid Sheed, *Clare Boothe Luce* (New York: Dutton, 1982); Stephen C. Shadegg, *Clare Boothe Luce: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970); and Sylvia Morris, *Rage for Fame: The Ascent of Clare Boothe Luce* (New York: Random House, 1997).

This article is very useful as a concrete and accessible example, of considerable human interest, that illuminates general trends and developments in the international “psychological” Cold War of the 1950s. As noted briefly by Brogi, the gender issues raised by Luce throughout her career bring further relevance to the history of one of the United States’ first women ambassadors. Brogi’s greatest contribution here is his focus on the concrete and specific battles that Luce waged, in public speeches and in private diplomatic correspondence, regarding America’s international standing, official and semi-official cultural exports, and simmering conflict with Communism.

In writing or teaching a historical narrative of the Cold War, or in a scholarly discussion of ‘psychological warfare,’ the vague and bureaucratic peacetime machinations of government too easily slide into a Kantian or Hegelian ‘spirit of the times.’ Brogi avoids this trap. The role of individuals acting in their context could hardly be better illustrated than in this short and illuminating article.

Mark I. Choate (Yale Ph.D., 2002) has been a history professor at Brigham Young University since September 2001. He has published articles in *International Migration Review*, *French Colonial History*, and *Modern Italy*; his book *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad* (Harvard University Press, 2008; Italian translation, Oscar Mondadori, 2013) was awarded the Council for European Studies Book Award, and the Marraro Prize. He is completing forthcoming books on scientific racism and international restrictions on emigration and immigration; and the British-Italian-Ethiopian war against Mohammed Abdullah Hassan, 1899-1920. Mark is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, London, and is a major in the U.S. Army Reserve. The views expressed in this review are those of the author alone, and do not represent the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Copyright © 2012 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.