

Report from Rome by Rosanna Impiccini

Drug consumption is up

If some Italian politicians are turning a blind eye, look for the answer in the 'New Yalta' negotiations.

At the beginning of 1988 the cry of alarm went up in Italy: Deaths attributable to illegal drugs had doubled over the previous year, and so had overdose cases—i.e., persons saved by the skin of their teeth in hospitals. Unfortunately, such figures have stopped surprising us since the war on drugs became a routine matter, where a few pushers—more than 19,000 in 1987—are arrested, a certain amount of heroin is seized, and a few bills are introduced into parliament, where they go moldy due to the lack of a government.

When drug deaths in Italy in 1986 numbered 262, substantially below the previous year, the experts rushed to declare that the phenomenon was on the decline, and that fear of AIDS was putting a brake on addiction. Then came 1987's figures: 440 official deaths from drugs, double the year before. But in 1987, police seized 323 kg of heroin, as opposed to 333 kg the year before; and 13,022 kg of hashish, compared to 16,039 kg in 1986. Somehow, the consumption figures skyrocketed, while seizures remained stable. It was as if the drug mafia, absurdly, calculated each year how much dope to set aside to keep law enforcement busy.

Cocaine tells a different story. In 1987, 326 kg were seized instead of the 126 kg in 1986, reflecting both the setbacks in the anti-drug fight in Ibero-America, especially Colombia, and the success of the campaign to push cocaine as the drug of the elite. Official statistics also belied the existence of the "Saturday night drug user." An

increase in drug users in the 22-27 age group, according to experts, shows that the week-end druggie has become a habitual addict.

Meanwhile, a complacent attitude toward countries implicated in the international drug trade has gained ground, and this is clearly a result of the "New Yalta" deals afoot between Reagan and Gorbachov.

On Sept. 11, 1986, the U.S. administration announced the end of economic boycott measures against Syria. American firms would no longer be forbidden to do business with the Damascus government. Yet various investigations have shown that Syria is deeply involved in financing terrorist groups and aiding the drug traffic.

The Italian government (when it exists) and Foreign Minister Giulio Andreotti (who is a standard fixture), have never made a mystery of their "special relations" with Syria's Assad regime. Hence, the Italian intelligence services have learned from our politicians to turn a blind eye on Syria.

A year and a half ago, several drug traffickers were arrested at Rome's Fiumicino airport, among them a high-ranking Syrian official and a Pugliese, Semeraro. The trail implicated then-Undersecretary to the Finance Minister Giuseppe Caroli, the head of Foreign Minister Andreotti's faction in the region of Puglia. Caroli had written a letter to the Syrian ambassador in Rome, recommending Semeraro and asking for help in setting up an Italo-Syrian friendship society.

Caroli was freed, due to the good

offices of Andreotti, even though the story did cost him reelection.

In September 1987, the Tax Police in Bari seized the Lebanese cargo ship *Boustany I*, with a weapons cargo probably headed for Islamic terrorists in Europe, 2 kg of heroin, and 23 kg of hashish: The drugs were also destined for financing terrorists, particularly, it was said, the "Abu Nidal" group controlled by Syria. The investigation brought out the fact that the traffic in illegal weapons sold to Iran goes through Spain and then through Syria.

The seizure of the *Boustany I* and the ensuing probe brought out the role of the Trapani (Sicily) mafia group led by the Minore clan. When it was pieced together with other cases, it turned out that mafia boss Antonino Minore and his cronies Felice Carrao and Guido Coduri had been charged with mafia-style criminal association, for having manipulated votes in the Trapani area in favor of the Radical Party, the parliamentary party which has led the way in liberalizing laws on abortion, drugs, and homosexuality.

In August 1987, Radical Party secretary Marco Pannella relaunched his proposal for legalizing drugs. It seems that the Radicals received a large number of votes from prisoners, particularly at Poggioreale Jail in Naples, where Radical congressmen have paid assiduous "courtesy visits."

Even more interesting, Pannella seeks the abolition of the La Torre-Rognoni law, which permits investigation into bank deposits. Although rarely applied, the law has given the magistrates one more tool to use against "Dope, Inc." Yet Pannella would like to go back to the old system of control by the Bank of Italy, through that sanctuary of monetary speculation, which is totally independent of all governmental institutions.