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## The Italian Communist Party 1921-1943

### 1. Introduction

For more than forty years, the Italian Communist Party (*Partito comunista italiano*; PCI) has been the strongest of the communist parties not in government in terms of members, number of votes and political influence, as well as being the most lively intellectually, and that with the most initiative on the international scene. The "anomaly" represented by the PCI's development after 1944 has caused rivers of ink to flow from the pens of sociologists and politologists, foreign as well as Italian. In a different way, the history of the PCI over the period in which it was a section of Comintern (1921-1943), as were the other communist parties, also contains episodes of great interest, undeniably of a specific character, and probably helps considerably to explain at least some of the features of its further development.

A periodization of these years can be traced rather easily as far as the political line is concerned: actually, it follows closely enough the stages of development of the Comintern line itself, though, as it will be explained below, with some significant differences. The most important ones are the different impact of "bolshevization" in 1924-1925, which in Italy coincides with the undertaking of the party leadership by the Gramsci-Togliatti group and with a strong revival of political initiative; and the relatively belated implementation of the "class against class" tactics, which doesn't start until late 1929. On the organizational ground, on the contrary, the PCI history is of course deeply marked by the fact that the party was outlawed in 1926 and remained in clandestinity until 1944-1945. Thus, it is possible to compare its electoral force to the ones of the other communist parties only for a short period; and it is hard to draw a parallel between its trends of growth (or decrease) in membership, and those of the legal parties. In this field, the stages of the party development correspond rather to the stages of Fascist dictatorship in Italy than to the trends of the other Comintern sections.

The 1921-1943 period has long attracted the attention of historians, and has given rise to a profusion of studies, often of a great scientific value, partly made possible by the relatively early availability of many and diverse sources.

The problem of sources is of a special importance with a party which, like the PCI, had been forced into clandestinity since 1926. Though the fact that the party's decision-making centres were mobile has inevitably meant that records have become dispersed, the particularly liberal Italian legislation regarding the use of State archives has made it possible to fill many gaps. The PCI was the only one of the communist parties to open its archives back at the beginning of the sixties (for the period up to the Second World War) to scholars from all countries and of all schools. These archives are conserved at the Gramsci Institute in Rome, and contain copies of most of the documents which were stored in Moscow, at the Comintern Office, from 1921 up to at least 1942: recovery of the records which are still missing is under way, and this has been made possible by the first hesitant opening of the Comintern Archives to non-Soviet scholars.

This source is clearly proving to be of inestimable importance: it includes the minutes of the meetings of the party leadership (Central Committee, Secretariat, Political Bureau), frequent correspondence with Comintern, communications between the party executive abroad (Paris, Moscow) and the "international centre" in Italy, etc. Other party records are in private archives. The many expulsions and splits which dot the history of the PCI have led to the creation of individual collections of papers: the most important is that of Angelo Tasca, conserved at the Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Institute in Milan;<sup>1</sup> the Jules Humbert-Droz Archives<sup>2</sup> are also very useful: he had close and frequent contact with the PCI up to the early thirties.

The second important series of sources in the reconstruction of the PCI's history during the Comintern years consists of the various police archives which are held in the Central State Archives in Rome. These records are the fruit of the infiltration of the party by spies and agents provocateurs, and concern all levels and aspects of the party's life: the information which is contained is often inaccurate, but it nevertheless makes a big contribution to understanding the situation as it existed locally and regionally.

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<sup>1</sup> Large parts of the Tasca Archives have been published in the *Annali dell'Istituto Giangiacomo Feltrinelli*, 1961, 1962, 1966 and 1968.

<sup>2</sup> The principal parts of the Archives concerning the PCI have been published in Jules Humbert-Droz, *Il contrasto tra l'Internazionale e il PCI, 1922-1928* (Milan, 1969).



Another very important source naturally lies in the records and other material published by the PCI: newspapers, reviews and brochures from both the legal and the outlawed periods. For the most part, these have been reprinted in recent years.<sup>3</sup> This very rich and wide-ranging collection of sources was made available to scholars at the beginning of the sixties. As a consequence, there was a sudden dramatic improvement in the quality of histories of the PCI. Up to then, in fact, history had been at the mercy of two sharply contrasting tendencies. On one hand, the "official" history, typical of communist history in general, emphasizing the continuity of the dominant political line and the role of the men leading the party, playing down difficulties and defeats, not to mention political mistakes: aiming, in short, to present the history of the PCI as a heroic and victorious march of an avant-garde following in the mainstream of Bolshevism. On the other hand, analysis typical of a certain sort of journalism influenced by the cold war, or else by the fact that the authors were ex-communists expelled from the party. This latter tendency effectively offered a "counterpoint" for the gaps and distortions of the "official" history which, while certainly useful, was often tendentious and untrustworthy from the scientific point of view.

The spur to change did not only come from within the PCI, but from the work of Palmiro Togliatti himself, whose most important contribution was the introductory essay to a collection of correspondence between party leaders during the formation of a new leadership in 1923-24.<sup>4</sup> In this essay, Togliatti resisted the temptation to use the records to reaffirm the party's continuity, instead providing a sufficiently objective and balanced vision - for that time at least - of the history of the PCI.

Togliatti's essay stimulated discussion about a series of general problems in the history of the party. This was the climate when, after the death of Togliatti in 1964, two works destined to become milestones in the history of the PCI came to light: the five-volume *Storia del Partito comunista italiano* by Paolo Spriano,<sup>5</sup> and the edition of the first three volumes of the *Opere* by Togliatti,<sup>6</sup> edited by Ernesto Ragionieri. These two works marked an important step forward in the history of the PCI, and in their turn they provoked further development in research, which continued without a break until more than half way through the seventies. There was thus a very wide range of works of various types on the history of the PCI: the focus was first of all on the history of the various groups of leaders and the political line, but there were also significant excursions into the "social history", with the first attempts to study the composition and the social roots of the party, its organizational structure, the geographical distribution of its electorate.<sup>7</sup> One point should be noted here: the Italian Communist Party, unlike almost all of the others, never set up a commission to undertake the task of writing the "official"

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<sup>3</sup> The Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Institute has made an important contribution here. It has collaborated with the Feltrinelli publishing house in reprinting the most important of the PCI's periodicals (*L'Ordine Nuovo*, *L'Unità*, *Il Soviet*, *Lo Stato Operaio*, to name only the most important), as well as a series of the PCI's leaflets and papers, including accounts of congresses, resolutions, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Palmiro Togliatti, "La formazione del gruppo dirigente del Partito comunista italiano del 1923-24", *Annali dell'Istituto Giangiacomi Feltrinelli*, 1960. The origins of this material, which is part of the Tasca Archives, are interesting in themselves: although Togliatti was an intrepid political adversary of Tasca's, the directors of the Feltrinelli Institute decided to entrust the task of editing the correspondence to him. The choice proved to be very apt, not least because it was one of the factors which convinced Togliatti and the leadership of the PCI to open the Party Archives.

<sup>5</sup> Paolo Spriano, *Storia del Partito comunista italiano* (Turin), Vol. I: *Da Bordiga a Gramsci* (1967); Vol. II: *Gli anni della clandestinità* (1969); Vol. III: *I fronti popolari, Stalin, la guerra* (1970); Vol. IV: *La fine del fascismo. Dalla riscossa operaia alla lotta armata* (1973); Vol. V: *La Resistenza, Togliatti e il partito nuovo* (1973).

<sup>6</sup> Palmiro Togliatti, *Opere* (Rome): Vol. I: *1917-1926* (1967); Vol. II: *1926-1929* (1972); Vol. III, 1 and 2: *1929-1935* (1973). The introductions by the editor have been collected in Ernesto Ragionieri, *Palmiro Togliatti* (Rome, 1976). After Ragionieri's death in 1975, volume IV, 1 and 2, of the *Opere* (1935-1944) was published, edited by P. Spriano and F. Andreucci (Rome, 1979), and Spriano's introduction had been reprinted in *Il campagna Ercoli. Togliatti segretario dell'Internazionale* (Rome, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> The first study of this type was by Renzo Martinelli, *Il Partito comunista d'Italia 1921-1926. Politica e organizzazione* (Rome, 1977).



history of the party. It did encourage the work of scholars who were party-members or sympathizers (both Spriano and Ragionieri were members of the Central Committee), but it did not condition them, and never at all intended to attribute an official label to their work.<sup>8</sup> Thus, although the contribution of non-communist historians has been very small up to now, the overall picture is one of lively, animated research.

It is outside the scope of this paper to draw a complete picture, but the spate of memoirs written throughout the seventies by leaders and militants deserves to be mentioned. These took the form of autobiographies, but also of comments or introductions to volumes of previously unpublished papers,<sup>9</sup> to which was added the work of historians who had conducted biographic and monographic researches.<sup>10</sup> The latter concentrated first on the years of the foundation and formation of the party (1921-1926), and only later did they tackle the following period, and then mainly in a dimension of local history. Most of this material regarding the history of the PCI up to the Second World War was published before the middle seventies, though there have been signs of a revival recently. Methodological horizons are becoming wider, and more attention is being paid to history "from below".<sup>11</sup>

## 2. The Origins and the Forming Years

The Communist Party of Italy, as it was called originally,<sup>12</sup> was one of the last to be founded in Europe, on 21 January 1921. The reason for this delay was that the PCI was an off-shoot from the root-stock of the Italian Socialist Party (*Partito socialista italiano*; PSI), which was an anomaly among European socialist parties. The PSI was anomalous in various ways, including its social composition and geographical distribution, characterized by a strong membership in the countryside. The aspect which most interests us here is the party's attitude during the war, which distinguished it from the other parties in the Second International, most of which had given up any form of opposition to the war and fully collaborated with their respective bourgeois classes. The PSI's anti-war position helped it in some measure to get round, or at least to put off more or less indefinitely, a series of

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<sup>8</sup> Although it was the work of a communist leader who was particularly sensitive towards history, Giorgio Amendola's *Storia del Partito comunista italiano 1921-1943* (Rome, 1978) never took on anything of the character of an "official history".

<sup>9</sup> For a short review of the most important works, see Franco Andreucci and Malcolm Sylvers, "The Italian Communists write their history", *Science and Society*, XL (1976), 1, pp. 28-56.

<sup>10</sup> With regard to the biographies, F. Andreucci and T. Detti (eds.), *Il movimento operaio italiano. Dizionario biografico*, 6 vols. (Rome, 1975-1979) is indispensable. There is also an extensive bibliography of works on Antonio Gramsci's life and philosophy, comprising over 6,000 entries: John M. Cammet (ed.), *Bibliografia gramsciana* (Rome, 1989). For Togliatti, Guido Liguori, "Contributo per una bibliografia degli scritti su Togliatti", *Critica marxista*, XXII (1984), 4-5, pp. 379-398 can be consulted for publications in Italian. Biographies of many important Italian communist leaders exist (in particular Bordiga's), but many others (Longo, Terracini, etc.) have yet to be studied. For monographs on the PCI, there is unfortunately still no rigorous up-to-date bibliography. Space is too limited to even list the principal ones. However, a student willing to learn more about the PCI in 1921-1943 and able to read Italian, will find a valuable basis in the works of Spriano, Ragionieri, Martinelli and Amendola quoted above and in the volume edited by Massimo Ilardi and Aris Accornero, quoted in footnote 13. For those unable to read Italian, the most useful points of departure are probably the sections devoted to the PCI by E.C. Carr, *A History of Soviet Russia* (London and Basingstoke, 1953-1978), and *The Twilight of Comintern 1930-1935* (London and Basingstoke, 1982).

<sup>11</sup> It is still too soon to say whether the (still very relative) freedom of access to the Comintern Archives will provide the stimulus for a revival of studies on the history of the PCI's institutions and politics. From a first brief examination of the part concerning the Italian section (fund 513) it would appear that new and interesting aspects may emerge, in particular regarding the history of the PCI in exile.

<sup>12</sup> This name (abbreviated as PCdI) was used at least until 1943. We have kept to the more usual abbreviation, PCI, for reasons of consistency.



political and organizational difficulties by polarizing all activities and efforts. It gave the party a revolutionary and intransigent image, which enabled it to gather under its banner all the existing rebellious movements of the lower classes against the social order. This image was confirmed both by the party's immediate adhesion to the Third International, and by the strident tones of the propaganda of the "maximalist" group which led the Party. The leadership of the Communist International, which was aware that the PSI's revolutionary talk was out of phase with its substantial lack of preparedness to organize and lead a revolution, for a long time cultivated the hope of easily conquering the great majority of the Italian party, excluding only the fringes of the declared reformists.

This expectation met with profound delusion when the Leghorn split saw little more than a quarter of the members of the PSI aligned to the twenty one conditions ratified by the International. Thus it was that the PCI, practically the last party created following a plan corresponding to the strategic hypothesis of the "imminent revolution", was the party which first put the International face to face with the dramatically anachronistic character of that hypothesis. The fact that Italy was one of the first countries where the situation was branded by the impetuous revival of reactionary violence against the workers' movement made this all the more evident. Despite itself, the PCI thus became the exemplification of the contradiction which dominated the early years of development and consolidation of the communist parties: the contradiction of instruments conceived and created to lead a revolution and instead forced to operate in a situation which was no longer revolutionary. Moves began to be made towards a first "turn" in the tactics of the Communist International, though this was not unanimously accepted, nor was its effect immediate. Not by chance was this sparked off by the Leghorn Congress, the way in which a split had been produced in it, and the criticism which the German communist Paul Levi raised about it. In a certain way the PCI bore the brunt of all this: it was the foundation for a rift with the Executive Committee of the Communist International which deeply affected the early years of the PCI's history.

Though its foundation was belated, the PCI had come through a process of genesis and maturation which was no shorter or less complex than that of most of the communist parties. Controversy surrounds the exact date of its "origins". Certain is that in Italy, as elsewhere, the October Revolution had the significance of a traumatic rupture. This, together with the defeat at Caporetto, induced a minority of Italian socialists, though an authoritative minority, to see "defending the nation in danger" in a different and benevolent light. Around the end of 1917, then, a revolutionary Left began to gather within the party; nevertheless, they did not yet pay serious attention to the possibility of a split.

But it was only after the end of the war that a completely new situation took shape. The war had radically modified both structure and fabric of Italian society: a new working class had emerged, shaped in the militarized factories, with a different organic composition, younger and more impatient than that which had gone through the great trade-union struggles of the Giolitti period. In the country-side, too, the war had deeply eroded consolidated social relations. Above all, this occurred in the share-cropping areas of Central Italy, where great strikes and agricultural agitation took place after the war, but also in some parts of Southern Italy, where the movement to occupy the land developed very swiftly, and also in those parts of the Po plain where day labourers were employed on the farms. This massive social mobilization immediately had repercussions on the PSI, which was at the same time protagonist and beneficiary of these great collective experiences of conflict. In 1920, its members were almost four times as many as they had been in 1914, and the very geographical and social make-up of the party was thereby changed; this put its organizational structures into great difficulty and showed up their inadequacy. The Italian Socialist Party was still essentially a propaganda organization. It had no direct links with the masses, which it was able to reach only through trade federations and local trade-union councils: its sections were essentially cultural circles interested in political agitation, with no regional or provincial common political line to connect them. The growing gulf between programmes and their possible application reflected an ever-more-serious crisis in the relationship between the political leadership and the mass movements.

The various components which were to go to make up the PCI were formed against this background, through a troubled and differentiated aggregation process. The first of these to move decisively towards a split was the "abstentionist" component, led by Amadeo Bordiga, who could count on a national network of adhesions, although his forces were recruited above all in Piedmont and Campania. This component had for some time represented the most intransigent criticism of reformism: at the Bologna Congress (October 1919) it appeared as an organized current within the party, presenting a motion against participating in elections. This component derived its strength from a coherent but very simplified interpretation of Marxism, hinging on the overthrow of the Bourgeois State and on the party as the only instrument and guide of the proletarian revolution. In its own way the farthest point of that same Italian maximalism which it denounced as impotent, the abstentionist component had some of the same social and territorial characteristics: the organization was relatively more important in provincial towns than in large cities, and its area of consensus, in 1919 quite widespread and



ramified, seemed to suffer the following year, when a new wave of members upset the old balance within the PSI.

Another fundamental component of the future Communist Party of Italy was focussed around the review *L'Ordine Nuovo*, edited by Antonio Gramsci, and was less organized in character. This review was published in Italy's most industrialized city, Turin, where, after the war, the factory councils movement was widespread. The "Ordine Nuovo" group was firmly convinced of the need to overcome and reform the traditional structure of the trade-unions and the party, through the instrument of workers self government. For this reason they paid great attention to the new ways in which the avant-garde working class was organizing itself. At first this prospective reform was not felt to be incompatible with continued PSI membership nor with the intention of renewing the party from within. After the political defeat of the occupation of the factories (September 1920), though, even the "Ordine Nuovo" group felt that a split was inevitable. By now their influence was considerable but hard to quantify; they certainly had considerable cultural influence, especially on specialized and educated urban working class cadres. This group's influence only extended beyond the Piedmont region because of a network of relationships between the review and its subscribers.

The split only involved a minority and if the new party had been limited to followers of the two historical leaders, it would have been rather small. Most of the 59,000 militants who voted for the communist motion at Leghorn in reality came from the ranks of the maximalists. Some of them were cadres (public administrators, trade-unionists, members of parliament) who had gained a solid experience in the PSI. Others, perhaps more numerous, came from the latest generation of recruits, who had joined the PSI in 1920. "Almost a second new party", Andreina De Clementi has written, "a heritage of collective energy, impatience and enthusiasm, but weakened by a poor level of political socialization".<sup>13</sup> These militants adhered to the PCI in great numbers, and especially in regions like Emilia and Tuscany their contribution to the new party consisted of the "old" maximalist traditions, enlivened by the social tensions of the immediate post-war period. This tradition was prevalently urban, artisan and plebeian rather than working class, often tinged with syndicalism, anarchy and in general "subversive" tendencies, which were far from being insignificant.

Another sizable contribution to the formation of the PCI came from the Young Socialist Federation, almost all of whose members (47,000 out of 53,000) joined the banner of the new party, supplying it with a sizable nucleus of lower and middle level cadres. This was another reason why the creation of the PCI took on the form of a division between generations: youth was the common factor among the first communist militants, both leaders and rank and file.

The Leghorn Congress took place in a political phase which was already dominated by the rapidly spreading Fascist action squads, and by the ebb of the social struggles which had shaken Italy in the two preceding years. A period of crisis began for all the proletarian organizations, with no exceptions. The Communist Party, too, was severely affected, losing about 30% of those who had entered its ranks with the Leghorn split. Nevertheless, it managed to put down roots throughout Italy, setting up federations in all of the provinces except for Benevento. Obviously the distribution of the members was still very uneven: almost 90% of members were concentrated in seven of the eighteen regions of Italy, and this mirrored the distribution of the Socialist Party members. In certain Northern and Central regions (Piedmont, Venezia-Giulia, Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany) there was a relatively strong rank and file, whereas in the Southern areas, Sicily and Sardinia, membership was very much weaker. This geographical distribution was very similar to that of the PSI and it also mirrored the fundamentally provincial structure. This was both the expression of roots which were deeply embedded in the Italian society of the time and an index of scarce penetration into the large cities, except for Turin. Although data available is not conclusive, a structure of this type, with branches operative especially in small and medium sized towns, seems to imply a mixed social composition, with a prevalence of the types of job commoner in the provinces (artisans, labourers, workers in small firms or services). This seems to be confirmed by the fact that the Communist Party made up a substantial minority of members of the General Confederation of Labour (*Confederazione Generale del Lavoro*; CGdL). The proportion oscillated between a quarter and a third of the CGdL's membership. It is significant that more communists belonged to the local trade-union councils (*Camere del Lavoro*) than to the union federations by craft, and that of these, the only workers' federation led by the communists was that of the wood-carvers. The split had little effect on the organized peasant masses, except for a few isolated areas (for example the Forlì area), whereas the networks of

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<sup>13</sup> Andreina De Clementi, "Radiografia del partito dopo la scissione di Livorno 1921-1926", in M. Ilardi and A. Accornero (eds.), *Il Partito comunista italiano. Struttura e storia dell'organizzazione 1921-1979* (= *Annali dell'Istituto Giangiacomo Feltrinelli*, 1981), p. 902.



cooperatives remained under socialist control, as did the great majority of "red" local governments of towns and provinces.

### 3. From Bordiga to Gramsci: a peculiar Bolshevization

The General Election of May 1921 put the new party's strength to the test. The results were not exciting: whereas the PSI kept a good following, obtaining almost 1,600,000 votes and 122 seats, the PCI did not reach 300,000 votes, and gained only 15 seats. This was a clear demonstration that the PCI had not obtained the same percentage of the proletarian electorate as it had gained from the split in its local branches.

Nevertheless, those votes were the expression of a compact and resolute revolutionary minority. Bordiga's rigid and doctrinaire ideology was in fact well adapted to the intransigent spirit of a party which had grown up in blunt contrast with tradition. The PCI boasted that discipline and efficient organization were its distinctive features, unlike the Socialist Party, which had torn by the struggle between the different tendencies. It saw the PSI as the biggest obstacle to the victory of the revolution in Italy, and considered Fascism to be nothing more than a coherent manifestation of the bourgeois reaction. Naturally, then, it encountered serious difficulties in applying the new directives of the International, which made the conquest of a majority of the working class the premise for revolutionary action. Although the PCI declared its adherence to the discipline of the International, it did not in fact make any serious attempt to apply the tactics of the "united front" in Italy. The contrast with the International became more serious when, after a further socialist split in October 1922, the Moscow Executive brought up the problem of reunion with the PSI: only a small "right-wing" minority led by Angelo Tasca and Antonio Graziadei was in favour of this project. In early 1923, the party leadership resigned amid controversy, just before the Fascists, who had now been in power for a few months, began their severe repression of the PCI. This was a difficult moment for the new party: with many of its leaders in gaol and with dramatic organizational problems, it had to defend its line against the International, which apparently intended to push the policy of fusion with the socialists, relying on Tasca's "right-wing" minority. It was Gramsci who first realized that the situation was no longer tenable. He was aware that the party could only survive if it remained loyal to the International, and began to try to build up a new leadership which would be able to head off the "right-wing" group, but also to keep its distance from Bordiga, which now appeared an inevitable step. Within a few months, Gramsci was able to bring some important leaders over to his position, many of which came from an "Ordine Nuovo" background as did Gramsci himself: Umberto Terracini, Palmiro Togliatti, Alfonso Leonetti, Mauro Scoccimarro (while others, as Ruggero Grieco, had been Bordiga's followers since the beginning). This "centre" group was still a long way from obtaining a majority consensus in the Central Committee. Its influence was felt nevertheless in the more flexible policies which the PCI adopted on the eve of the 1924 General Elections: having proposed a coalition between the two socialist parties without result, it stood as one list with the "Third Internationalists" of the PSI (*Terzi-Internazionalisti*, known also as *Terzini*). The results of this election were quite encouraging for the socialist parties, the 260,000 votes and nineteen seats in parliament could be said to be a success. A significant contribution to this success came from the *Terzini*, who were soon to join the PCI: votes were gained in those constituencies where *Terzini* stood for election. On the other hand, the communist votes were now distributed more uniformly throughout Italy, the vote having fallen slightly in Northern regions (this was moderated by the success of the "Proletarian Unity" list in the big industrial cities) and increased in other areas, such as Campania, Umbria and Sicily.

Immediately after the election, Giacomo Matteotti, a reformist socialist member of Parliament, was murdered, and this gave rise to a crisis of Fascism. This left room for the PCI to revive political initiative, which it did with more flexibility and a better sense of manoeuvre than in the past. Results in terms of collaboration with other components of the anti-Fascist opposition were not immediate. In organizational terms, though, the PCI's success was remarkable: membership had dropped below 9,000 in 1923, but numbers increased throughout 1924 to reach 18,000, thanks also to the contribution of the *Terzini*. The following year, membership reached 25,000. This was not just an increase in numbers: during this period the social composition of the membership, the organization, the political strategy - the very character of the party - underwent a profound transformation. The application of the directives of the International concerning "Bolshevization" was grafted onto the renewal process which the leadership under Gramsci had already begun, and it proved possible to translate it into forms which strengthened and extended the party's roots in society, unlike what took place in France. The point of reference on the territory - the local branch - was replaced by the reference point in production terms - the factory cell. This was fairly easy to reconcile with the "Ordine Nuovo" tradition and helped to change the construction of the working class membership of the Bordigist party: there was a relative increase in the numbers



of workers from the big factories in the large Italian cities. Alongside this, what emerged most clearly was the increase in membership in Southern Italy, Sicily and Sardinia (this was seen in 1924 in particular), and the confirmation of a larger number of members among the agricultural workers (in particular labourers and sharecroppers) in Emilia and Tuscany. Renzo Martinelli has written that in these regions "the break up of the socialist organizations, and the turn to Fascism of a considerable part of the agricultural classes, was stemmed by the fighting spirit, the spirit of sacrifice, of the Communist Party. During those years the PCI began to replace the Socialist Party as the party which traditionally dominated these areas".<sup>14</sup>

Surprising though it might seem, then, Bolshevization did not make the PCI into a more working class party. At the same time, because of the specific nature of the Italian situation, it produced a very important phenomenon: the aggregation around the party of forces of differing political origins (anarchists, republicans, as well as, naturally, socialists and even, in some rare cases, Catholics). This was the recognition of the fact that the Communist Party had become the most combative and organized adversary of Fascism.

New members joined the party: these were mainly new recruits, although some of them were militants who had returned to the fight after the severe repression of 1923. The aspects of the party changed, and this struck a serious blow to Bordiga's influence. He had continued to question the party line and to criticize the International's policies. The "shift to the Left" of the Fifth Congress of the Comintern, which seemed to mirror some of Bordiga's positions (for example the slogan "worker-peasant government" was abandoned) did not question the relationship of trust which had grown up between the Moscow Executive and the party leadership under Gramsci. The constitution of a Left faction sharpened the tones of the internal struggle within the PCI, which went on with no holds barred and with administrative methods only barely within the statutes. On the eve of the Third Party Congress, which had to be held in Lyons to ensure the delegates' safety, over 90% of the members now sided with Gramsci and Togliatti.

But the Lyons Congress (January 1926) did not only seal the marginalization of the Left: it sanctioned the party's adoption of a new method. The Lyons Theses supplanted the abstract theorization of the party as an instrument for revolution, putting in its place a rich but subtle analysis of the concrete situation in which the party was called upon to operate, of the relationships between the various social classes, of their political expression, and of the contradictions which existed in the fabric of society. The "driving forces of the Italian revolution" were seen as being, on one hand, the working class and the agricultural proletariat, on the other hand the peasants in Southern Italy. The party's job was to organize, unify and mobilize these forces through a series of partial struggles, and to bring them to insurrection and to the installation of the proletarian dictatorship.

This remarkable theoretical construction, made up of historical recognition and social and strategic analysis, did not, however, correspond to reality, being based on a political view which predicted the rapid fall of Fascism. The PCI's increased support with the respect to the total strength of the workers' movement, which was related to the dramatic fall in the importance of the Socialist Party in political and organizational terms, gave rise to a corrupted view, in which progress and "internal" changes were arbitrarily extended to the entire Italian political situation. This situation was, in fact, marked by the progressive and ever-more-rapid transformation of Fascism into open dictatorship, and by the progressive limiting of space for the opposition's initiatives. An increasingly systematic legalized State repression went hand in hand with the action of the Fascist squads; the PCI was forced into semi-clandestinity, and again, membership fell severely. For a party which had been bled in this way, the feeling of belonging to a "world revolutionary army", the Communist International, was a very strong factor of identity and cohesion. Gramsci was worried about the internal developments of the struggle within the Soviet Party, and warned its leaders of the risk of losing their function of reference point for the world proletariat by exhausting themselves in a power struggle. But Togliatti, who was a PCI delegate at the Executive in Moscow, made a more realistic evaluation of the inevitability of that conflict, and had no doubt about the need for the Italian party to side with the majority.

#### 4. *The First Years of Clandestinity*

That controversy, which took on harsh tones, was still echoing when the axe of the "exceptional decrees" of November 1926 fell on the PCI. All of the most important leaders, with Gramsci, were arrested (of the most important, only Togliatti escaped arrest because he was in Moscow), its organizations were disbanded, its press closed, thousands of its militants were denounced in a special Tribunal for the Defence of the State. For Italian

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<sup>14</sup> Martinelli, *Il Partito comunista d'Italia 1921-1926*, p. 221.



communists, a long period of clandestinity was beginning.

The wave of repression which followed the exceptional decrees struck the PCI hard. The Central Committee lost half of its members through arrest or deportation: among these Gramsci, Terracini, Scoccimarro and Giovanni Roveda were to be condemned to over twenty years' gaol by the Special Tribunal for the Defence of the State in 1928. The party leadership was reorganized on a dual basis: a foreign centre, which was quickly set up in Paris, with Togliatti as secretary, and an internal centre, initially entrusted to Camilla Ravera, which controlled clandestine activity in Italy. Although even the PCI was taken by surprise by the exceptional decrees, it was the only party which had predisposed a structure outside the law, with militants who were already in hiding and a network of links and logistic and operative bases. Thus it was able, for some months, to carry out feverish propaganda activity, in particular through the circulation of large numbers of newspapers and leaflets. It was an almost insolent burst of activity, linked to the certainty that the internal contradictions of Fascism meant it was close to the fall, and to the desire to keep a solid presence in the country at all costs. Without doubt this intense organizational effort helped the PCI to emerge as the most combative and coherent expression of the struggle against Fascism, just when the other opposition parties had practically disappeared from the Italian scene, and were reduced to groups of political exiles. But it was an effort which could not be kept up for long: in May 1927, the communists in Italy still totalled 10,000, including party members and members of the Youth Federation, most of whom were in the North; by the second half of that year, thousands of cadres had been imprisoned or interned. The internal centre, which was constituted like a network, was patiently reconstituted after each arrest, but in the end it was reduced to a handful of militants.

The existence of a substantial membership among the mass of emigrant workers, especially in France, Belgium and Switzerland, was an increasingly important element of strength for the PCI. These workers had emigrated both for economic and for political motives. A large percentage of them were highly skilled workers who had been forced to leave the country because of employers' discrimination or Fascist or police persecution. "This rank and file of workers", wrote Giorgio Amendola, "offered, with unending generosity, money, hospitality, accomodation addresses and, above all, militants ready to be called by the party to return to Italy legally, or even illegally, according to the need."<sup>15</sup>

In a situation of this type, the link with the International had a very strong influence on Italian comunists. The sense of belonging to a "world revolutionary army" was a factor of moral cohesion and an expression of trust in the future which helped them to face a very difficult phase. In addition to this, the technical equipment and the financial subsidy provided by Comintern were indispensable supports for the very survival of the party. On the political plane, the long-term disagreement between the International and the PCI seemed at last to be resolved. The Lyons Congress had laid down a line which emphasized the "popular" character of the Italian revolution, and did not rule out the party's fighting for intermediate democratic ends. This line was further clarified by the group around Togliatti, but it met a certain opposition from the Left in the shape of the Youth Federation (Luigi Longo, Pietro Secchia). It was, however, substantially in agreement with the more flexible attitude which Comintern had held under Bucharin's leadership; and in fact Togliatti and Tasca had established a particularly close relationship of collaboration with Bucharin.

At the beginning of 1929, though, the relationship between the PCI leadership and Comintern suddenly changed. When the clash between Bucharin and Stalin was transferred to the Executive Committee of the Communist International, Tasca, the PCI representative on the Committee, openly sided with Bucharin. Tasca was recalled to Paris, and his position severely criticized by the PCI: but Comintern did not feel that that was enough. At the Tenth ECCI Plenum, all the Italian leaders were indicted for failing to expel Tasca: this failure was linked to the policy which the PCI had followed since the Lyons Congress, which was more or less directly taxed with opportunism. Togliatti and Grieco defended themselves with dignity on that occasion, but the party ended up aligned under the discipline of the new Comintern directives. In September 1929 Tasca was expelled, and shortly afterwards Togliatti emphatically embraced the extreme interpretation of the theory of the "third period". He sustained that in Italy too "the elements of an acute revolutionary crisis were maturing", and extended the theory of "social fascism" to Italian social democracy and to the "Giustizia e Libertà" (justice and freedom) movement. He also rejected the hypothesis of an intermediate democratic phase between the fall of Fascism and the proletarian revolution.

In December 1929, foreseeing an accentuated radicalization of the Italian situation, Longo presented a project for the reorganization of the party. This aimed to bring not only the centre of political work, but also the "seat of organization of the direction" itself back to Italy. The plan opened a new crisis in the PCI leadership:

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<sup>15</sup> Amendola, *Storia del Partito comunista italiano 1921-1943*, p. 131.



Leonetti, Pietro Tresso and Paolo Ravazzoli opposed it and heavily attacked Togliatti who had accepted it. Shortly afterwards they were expelled for having made contact with the international Trotskyist opposition; the same thing happened to Ignazio Silone in July 1931. From gaol, Terracini and Gramsci also expressed their dealing with its opponents, and criticized a political line they felt was abstract and held no prospects. Up to that time, the PCI had been a democratic party, and internal debate had flourished; these two characteristics were now being drastically limited. The new trend in the party suffocated the capacity for political analysis of the Italian situation.

##### 5. "Class against Class" in Italy: the "Turn" of 1930 and its Effects

The "turn" (*svolta*), as the new line was called, gave new, strong, impulse to the party's clandestine activity in Italy. It did not, however, give the hoped-for results, because the two rallying cries of the general strike and the armed struggle encountered an essentially passive attitude of the masses, with only isolated episodes of exasperation. Hundreds of cadres fell into the hands of the Fascist police and ended up in gaol or interned. Nevertheless, the "turn" of 1930 was, at least in some ways, an important moment of "refounding" of Italian communism. It marked the emergence of different viewpoints and ways of thinking belonging to different generations and backgrounds, and the affirmation of a type of communist cadre no longer tied to the climate which surrounded the split, but rather to that of the day-to-day resistance against Fascism. At the same time, the party's geographical distribution altered significantly: whereas in 1927 more than half of the members were in Northern Italy, by July 1932 the core of the party's strength was concentrated in Emilia and Tuscany. This can be explained by the fact that it was less difficult to keep up some sort of network of clandestine links in the country than in the factories in the big cities where controls and surveillance were much more rigorous. It is also true, though, that Fascism had destroyed the network of the workers' organizations and established a harsh regime of exploitation and persecution. This had given new strength to the traditional subversiveness of the masses, whose oldest and deepest roots were in what were later to become the "red regions". Beyond this different geographical distribution, what strikes us is the relative stability of the PCI's membership and that of the Youth Federation which, in 1932, was still about 7,000, more or less the same as it had been at the end of 1927. In fact there was considerable fluctuation: after the "turn" 5,000 new members joined the PCI in just a year and a half. In a situation like the Italian one, where the party was outlawed, fluctuation of this order cannot simply be explained in terms of the general trend of communist parties at that time: it is also an index of a capacity for change which could only be sustained by a close relationship with the masses.

The relationship between leaders and rank and file was increasingly precarious, and hundreds of rank and file cadres and middle level leaders were going to swell the ranks of the prisoners and the internees. This gave life to a true "parallel party", and kept alive the search for cultural and political enrichment and a rigid sense of discipline, later to bear fruit. Despite all this, the communist core was a constant presence among the lower classes in Italy.

After the first undoubted successes, at least in terms of proselytism, the "turn" policy underwent a serious crisis, which coincided with the phase in which Fascism completed and perfected its organization as a reactionary mass regime. Although it did not question the general prospects in which the "turn" was based, the PCI did carefully analyse the new situation in the country. The most mature expression of this analysis were the "Lezione sul fascismo" given by Togliatti in Moscow in January 1935 to the communist cadres. But meanwhile the underlying coordinates of the policy of the international communist movement had changed.

##### 6. Popular Front and Legal Action inside Fascism

Comintern's policy change of 1934 came at a time when the PCI's clandestine activity in Italy was in great difficulty. Relations with the rank and file organizations were at an all-time low. There were still many militants or groups of militants, but these were isolated and in enforced passivity. There were no links between them, nor with the executive centre abroad (the attempt to form internal centres had by now been given up). Severely criticized by the International for the poor results of its activity, the PCI maintained a prudent approach for the first months of 1934, more or less maintaining the old sectarian positions. But the leadership in exile, with Ruggiero Grieco as head of the political bureau after Togliatti had returned to Moscow in September 1934, could not help being deeply influenced by the evolving French situation. The pact for common action between the PCF and SFIO was followed a few weeks later by a similar pact between Italian communists and socialists, signed by



Luigi Longo and Pietro Nenni. This marked the renewed dialogue and collaboration between the two parties after a long period of hostility. The reconciliation between the PCI and the PSI had positive repercussions, especially in Italy, among the young people who had not been through the lacerating experience of the split and the polemic which followed it. Among the new ranks approaching anti-Fascist politics, an awareness of the importance of the united front policy was maturing. This was reinforced by the period of popular fronts, and all of its positive effects were to come to fruit during the Resistance.

In the meantime, the PCI was becoming aware of the need to penetrate the mass organizations of Fascism, to exploit every legal space to undermine from within the consensus on which the regime was built. Over the following years, until the outbreak of the Second War, the party was occupied with the search for a united political line, which would answer equally well to the need for anti-Fascist unity in exile and to the need to join forces with the opposition to Fascism which was growing up inside the Fascist party itself. The PCI's position oscillated between making daring overtures to the new forces within Fascism and brusque returns to more intransigent positions of strict anti-Fascist unity.

The attack against Ethiopia, which united the struggle against Fascism with the struggle against the war, strengthened the ties between the PCI and the PSI, and stimulated the development of relationships with other sectors of the anti-Fascist opposition, such as the republicans and the "Giustizia e Libertà" movement: relationships which, though not easy, were fruitful. The Fascist victory and the proclamation of the Empire showed how unfounded the hopes of a crisis of the regime were, and brought the spectre of a long-term struggle to the fore again. On one hand, the PCI was induced to overestimate the possibility of reforming the regime "from within", if only for a short time. On the other, it presupposed a discontent in the Fascist rank and file which, though it existed, was disorganized and politically amorphous. Thus it went as far as to appropriate the unrealized Fascist programme of 1919 in the attempt to mobilize the mass of workers, and took up the banner of a "national reconciliation" which was not only improbable but also highly ambiguous. These tendencies were criticized in no uncertain terms by Moscow, where Togliatti was stationed, and before the end of 1936 they were seriously cut down to size. But they caused a difference of opinion with the socialists and with "Giustizia e Libertà", both among exiles and in Italy.

The PCI leadership thus made great efforts to develop a new approach, and this had lasting results. More attention was paid towards the various movements within Fascism and towards its increasingly visible contradictions, old and new. A united appeal to all those Fascist who were beginning to oppose the regime was launched, and a new language was created which exalted national values and traditions. This was the first step along the long and difficult path towards national legitimization, which was to be taken up again, this time with no uncertainties, during the Resistance.

Meanwhile the Spanish Civil War had broken out. The Italian communists made a very important contribution to the Republican cause in men and organizational capacity: over 3,000 volunteers enrolled in the International Brigades. The vast majority came from among the exiles, and most were no longer young. Having emigrated after the advent of Fascism and the last desperate battles against the Fascist squads, they had been etempered through hard experiences of struggle and were anxious to take up arms against the enemy who had defeated them. For the PCI, the Spanish Civil War was not only a very important source of cadres who were later to put their experience of political and military leadership to good use: it was also the starting point for a fresh reflection on strategy. In a very well known article in November 1936, "Sulle particolarità della rivoluzione spagnola", Togliatti described and developed the effort Dimitrov had made over those months to characterize the popular front as a transition phase to socialism. This phase would be different from the "Bolshevik model", and independent from it. Togliatti indicated that the objective of the Spanish communists was "a new type of democracy" in which the working class would have hegemony over all the other anti-Fascist groups. The foundation of this new democracy would be the destruction of the political and social roots of fascisme through a radical purge and democratization of the State machinery and the "disciplining of the entire economic life of the country".<sup>16</sup>

### 7. *The Great Purge and the Hitler-Stalin Pact*

The new pact for common action, signed by the PCI and the PSI on 26 July 1937, clearly reflected this new strategic conception. The political aim the two parties set themselves was "a democratic republic presided over

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<sup>16</sup> Togliatti, *Opere*, IV, 1, pp. 139-154.



by the working class which destroys the economic foundation for action and fascism at the roots". But the threatening shadows of Stalin's repressive clutch on the USSR were lengthening over the united anti-Fascist forces. The PCI accepted the verdicts of the sensational public trials against ex-Bolshevik leaders without reserve, and Togliatti, as a member of the Secretariat of the Communist International, excelled himself by making an implacable denouncement of the "crimes of the Trotskyist bandits". A large number of the PCI's rank and file militants were hard hit by the repression. These were workers who had emigrated to the USSR and were employed in production: at least 200 Italians, mainly communists, were killed during the Stalinist terror. But the PCI was also one of the very few outlawed communist parties whose leaders were practically untouched. This was also because, after the crisis of the early thirties, the leadership had been substantially united, with no internal divisions. This left little room for rivalry and jealousy, which might have been exploited to create a chain of suspicions and accusations. The leadership of parties such as the Polish or Hungarian ones were exposed to the repressive action of the KNVD through situations of this type. Nevertheless, the repercussions of the climate which followed the terror were very serious. Moscow accused the Party of having insufficient anti-Trotskyist vigilance, and this produced a crisis of confusion and disorientation among the leadership. In 1938, the Central Committee in office was practically dissolved and many of its leaders, such as Grieco and Giuseppe Dozza, were the targets of very harsh criticism. An "inner centre" for reorganization was set up, under the leadership of Giuseppe Berti, who had been a party delegate at the Comintern Executive until a short time previously. The negative consequences made themselves felt in many directions, and room for independent political activity became even more limited. The secretariat of the PCI suddenly retrenched on the position it had espoused immediately after the Anschluss: to defend Italy's territorial unity and national independence against Germany's tendency to expand. Relations with the other anti-Fascist parties in exile were contaminated by fresh polemic. The opportunities offered by the aggregation of new clandestine groups, often made up of young intellectuals who came from the files of the fascist opposition, were left unexploited in the climate of obsessive suspicion and dread of provocation which prevailed in the PCI.

Though the PCI had never entirely lost its links with the country, by the time the Second World War began it was seriously weakened. The German-Soviet pact of August 1939 caused alarm and a tendency to disband among Italian communists. It also had serious consequences on their relationship with other anti-Fascist forces, which had already begun to deteriorate over the last year. The position favourable to the rejection of the pact for common action prevailed in the PSI, although Nenni condemned the USSR's volte-face but remained favourable to the resumption of a unitary policy. The PCI's attempt to reconcile the approval of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact with following a policy of anti-Fascist unity (as had the PCF's during the first weeks of the War) did not last long, soon giving way to a rigid alignment with the International's new theses of "imperialist war". The Italian communists in France were forced into a sudden and difficult clandestinity, which worsened the crisis of the leadership, already deeply confused. Togliatti himself was arrested in Paris but, luckily, he was not recognized by the French authorities. After a few months in gaol he was able to reorganize the party's centre in exile in embryo. He later returned to Moscow, where the Secretariat of the Communist International, having dissolved the Central Committee and the Political Office of the PCI for good, entrusted responsibility for leadership to him alone, flanked by two secondary leaders.

Within the PCI there was no shortage of polemic and rupture. The most serious disagreement was between interned leaders, and ended with Camilla Ravera and Terracini being expelled for having rejected the thesis of equidistance between opposed imperial blocks, and for having insisted on recognizing that the war being fought by France and England was democratic. But there was never any doubt about the denunciation of Mussolini's Fascism as the main enemy of the Italian people. At the most, in the first months of the war, there was a tendency to consider Italy's entrance into either coalition as equally dangerous and ill-omened. This was because of the correction campaign which had involved all the parties in the International. Mussolini's declaration of war against France and England in June 1940 soon clarified the mystifying aspects of this prospect, and brought about a situation which objectively encouraged renewed contact with the other anti-Fascist groups. This contact in fact took place immediately after Germany's attack on the USSR and brought about the creation of a united committee with the PSI and GL at Toulouse in October 1941.

#### *8. Back to Anti-Fascist Unity*

The beginning of the war in the USSR allowed the PCI to develop its anti-German position coherently. From the end of June, Togliatti spoke to the Italian people in Radio Moscow. His speeches were strongly rhetoric exhortations, which appealed to the traditions of the Risorgimento. This was a deliberate choice, since he was



speaking to a people who had been through twenty years of political diseducation (this evaluation was to remain a constant in Togliatti's analyses). The platform he described in these speeches was substantially the same one upon which, with no great variations, Italian anti-Fascism was progressively united up to 25 July 1943. Apart from differences in interpretation or language, the general lines fixed by Togliatti were accepted by the various leadership centres of the PCI which existed in Italy, in France and in the United States. This line set two objectives: 1) the creation of broad lines of agreement, accessible to Monarchists and opposition Fascists; 2) the need to act as quickly as possible to impose a separate peace and to bring about the collapse of Fascism. The communists rejected any condition or preclusion which could limit the width of a national front to drive out Fascism, reconquer democratic freedom and organize and unite anti-Fascist political forces.

The clandestine reorganization of the PCI was neither rapid nor easy. In the second half of 1941 an internal centre, directed by Umberto Massola, had been set up again in the country. It operated in very difficult conditions, not without friction and incomprehension with the various poles around which Italian communism was organized. Its most important organizational bases were in Turin and in Piedmont, in Milan and in Lombardy, and in Emilia. But its direct or indirect links extended throughout Italy. The exact picture of the organized forces of the PCI a year before the fall of fascism is not clear. The core or more active and reliable militants, most of whom were in the factories, was only a few thousand in the entire country at the end of 1942. Alongside these, new groups were being formed by old comrades who had come out of gaol or enforced passivity, or by young students and intellectuals (as was the case in Rome in particular). After the fall of Mussolini on 25 July 1943, these groups would be linked with the Party centre, but already they formed a solid framework which allowed a "new party" to develop. During the fight for liberation, this was quickly able to gather together, not thousand, but tens, and in the end hundreds of thousands of members.

The political orientation of these groups was rather uncertain. While the party expanded and became stronger, the new members often took up revolutionary positions, very different from those expressed by the leaders. The latter often had to stress that the aims were to fight Fascism, to seek peace and democratic freedom and to constitute as wide as possible a national front, rather than socialism and the anti-capitalist revolution. Many forms of dissent were absorbed by the needs of the common struggle and by the PCI's organizational capacity. But rigidity and schematisms which had been handed down from the past, and which had been conserved in the conditions of enforced political inertia, of abstract discussions in gaol or in internment were to make their presence felt for a long time to come. In part these were going to be burned by the experiences during the Resistance, but in part they remained for a long time as elements of an internal dialectic. This was destined to make itself heard in a particularly lively way during the transformation of the old party of cadres into a mass party. But this chapter of the history of the PCI is right outside its membership of the PCI is right outside its membership of the Communist International, and not only from the chronological point of view.

The final balance of the relationship between the PCI and the Comintern is undeniably a subtle and complex one. It is a relationship which proves complicated since the beginning: from 1921 to 1924 the PCI is probably the Comintern section most reluctant to accept the new line set by the Third Congress. In October 1926 the statement of Gramsci and the Political Bureau, warning the Russian majority not "to win hands down" over the opposition, though smoothed by Togliatti's cautious attitude in Moscow, raises a new wave of mistrust against the Italian party: a mistrust which is going to increase once the short experience of Bucharin's leadership is over, an will culminate in the harsh attack against Togliatti and the PCI during the Tenth ECCI Plenum.

Even the total realignment to the "class against class" tactics and the slogan of "social-fascism", implemented between 1930 and 1934, will not immunize the PCI from recurring criticism, mainly pointing against its alleged "sectarism" and its weakness in "mass action" inside Fascism. After 1935, with the tighter alliance between Hitler and Mussolini, Italy is identified by the Comintern as one of the "warmonger powers": so that the small Italian party is charged with responsibilities in the struggle against the danger of war that its feeble shoulders are unable to bear; and in 1937-1938 the PCI is severely rebuked for its lack of vigilance toward Trotskyism.

Still, these recurrent criticisms, often intimately contradictory, do not strike the fundamental loyalty of the party towards the Comintern. Having become very soon a small, persecuted party, the PCI find in its link with the International the very reason of its survival, both in political and organizational terms; and does not hesitate to align itself to every "turn" of the international line: not without paying a tribute in terms of inner crisis, which nevertheless are not as acute and destructive as in other parties. In the same time, the Italian communist leadership, though uniforming itself to the Comintern directives, leads, especially thanks to Togliatti's ability, a stubborn and subtle subterranean struggle in order to preserve some spaces of autonomous analysis and initiative.