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The Italian Communist Party and the Hungarian crisis of 1956

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ABSTRACT

Despite a vast research about the impact of the Hungarian crisis of 1956 on the legacy of Communism in Italy, the controversial choices of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) have been often considered to be a sort of negative exception in the progressive path of Italian Communism toward modern European socialism. Instead, the main idea of this research is to reconstruct the PCI's decision-making within the context of the enduring strategic patterns that shaped the political action of the party: can the communist reaction to the impact in Italy of the Hungarian uprising be interpreted as a coherent implication of the communist preexisting and persisting strategy? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to reconstruct how the news coming from Hungary left an imprint on the "permanent interests" of the PCI, and how the communist apparatus reacted to the crisis. Therefore, this research is going to demonstrate that the Italian Communist Party was not just a "passive" agent in the context of the Hungarian crisis, but it operated as an "active" one. The reaction of the PCI resulted into a confrontation between emerging dissent and authoritative imposition of the party-discipline. This issue interjects the historiographical controversy over the ambivalent role of Communism in Italy: between Stalinist-type practices and the emerging "Eurocommunism".

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INTRODUCTION

“I think that it is useless to answer. The position stated in the text, the language, the tone, do not belong to our party; it is pure repetition of vulgarity and slanders of our enemies”.¹ Palmiro Togliatti, head of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), wrote these words on October 31st, 1956, in response to Giacomo Sarfatti’s letter (October 29th) wherein the latter criticized the communist position over Hungary. Sarfatti, a “common” PCI voter since 1945, had argued that “the attitude of the party was humanly unacceptable and politically most harmful”.²

The Hungarian Revolution had broken out in Budapest just six days before Sarfatti’s letter to Botteghe Oscure³, and the Italian Communist Party was slowly sinking into a moral and political crisis. On the other hand, the party was able to react efficiently to such a crisis: although in 1957 two hundred thousand members had not renewed their party membership, the general election of 1958 witnessed a 0.1% increase of the communist seats in the Parliament.⁴ Therefore, the impact of the Hungarian crisis on the PCI was definitely controversial because of the ambivalence of its effects on the realm of Communism in Italy.

The correspondence reported above is impressive because it let questions about the attitude of PCI toward emerge. One might wonder why Togliatti answered so rudely: was the intolerance toward any kind of dissent and criticism just a sort of psychological defense from the growing hostility toward communism? Or did this intolerance find its roots in the depth of the PCI’s political strategy? This question might be rephrased in political terms:

¹ Letter from Palmiro Togliatti to Giacomo Sarfatti, October 31th, 1956, Archive of the “Antonio Gramsci” Foundation (Rome); “Palmiro Togliatti” fond; serie no. 5: “*Corrispondenza politica*”; archival unit no. 13, box “1956”.

² Letter from Giacomo Sarfatti to Palmiro Togliatti, October 29th, 1956, Archive of the “Antonio Gramsci” Foundation (Rome); “Palmiro Togliatti” fond; serie no. 5: “*Corrispondenza politica*”; archival unit no. 13, box “1956”.

³ By “Botteghe Oscure” is meant hereby as well as later on in the dissertation the PCI itself, because the Rome-based headquarters of the party was in *via delle Botteghe Oscure*.

⁴ The results of the 1953 and 1958 elections are available hereby: http://www.storiadc.it/elezioni/politiche_1958.html.

was the attitude of the Italian Communist Party toward the Hungarian Revolution a sort of “mistake”, an erroneous evaluation of the events, or was it a coherent implication of the PCI’s political strategy?

The adaptation of one or the other viewpoint implies a certain moral and political evaluation of the position of the Italian comrades in both the national and international political contexts: where to set the boundary between myth and reality in the historiography of Italian Communism, depicted as a national and innovative force from 1945 onwards?⁵ Therefore, the problem involves the investigation on the PCI itself and on the basic assumptions of its policies. This issue might be, to some extent, still “politically-incorrect”: the contemporary transition of the party of the former Italian communists is still stranded, since a changeable and unstable number of small parties succeeded the old-PCI and tried to construct their legacy on a partly distorted interpretation of the history of their disowned “old-father”.

For answering these main research questions, firstly I will focus on the general strategic patterns of the Italian Communist Party by mid-50’s and on the impact of the Hungarian uprising on the PCI’s strategy.

Next, I will move on to the analysis of the debate within the party, and on the study of the evolution of its position between October 24th and October 28th. The second chapter is focused on the initial phase of the crisis, when the Italian Communist Party was on a defensive position. The time-span under examination is limited to a few days because the approach of the PCI at the very beginning of the uprising was deeply shaped by the changeable and uncertain Soviet attitude toward the crisis.

Then, I will move to the analysis of the turning-point: October 30th – October 31st, and of the strategic implications in Italy of the events taking place in Hungary as well as in other

⁵ Giorgio Napolitano, *Dal PCI al socialismo europeo* (Bari, Laterza, 2005), pp. 16-17.

regions (particularly, in Egypt, but also in the USSR). In this chapter, I will explain how the PCI shifted from a defensive to an offensive position, by stressing features and objectives of the communist counter-attack.

Finally, I will focus on the controversial cases of within-party dissent. In this chapter, I am going to explain why dissent affected both the party apparatus and the communist network (the trade union and the intellectual circles), and how the political establishment managed to impose a strict party-discipline. Therefore, this part of the dissertation has the purpose to highlight whether the PCI worked according to democratic criteria at all, and what the limits of internal democracy were.

The leading hypothesis of this work is that the reaction of the Italian Communist Party to the Hungarian crisis should be interpreted in terms of strict continuity of the party's political strategy. The radicalization the PCI experienced in the context of the Hungarian uprising did not force Botteghe Oscure to arrest a process of democratization toward an Eurocommunism. Conversely, the reaction of the Italian Communist Party was a coherent implication of party's values and strategies.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

The research has been mostly based on a number of primary sources, remarkably those of the Archive of the “Antonio Gramsci” Foundation (Rome), the newspapers’ collection at the National Library (Rome), and the online-based historical archive of the PCI’s press organ, *L’Unità*.

In parallel to this, a relevant number of pieces of secondary literature has been included in the bibliography, in order to enlarge the analysis with valuable contributions. These were most useful in order to point out the state of art on this topic, and to support the theoretical framework (first chapter) of the thesis.

In addition to many books were cited, and others were consulted though not necessarily quoted, the methodology chosen for the empirical part of the research (second, third and fourth chapter) widely relies on primary sources. The motivation for this choice finds its roots in the very purpose of this research, which is to give an original interpretation of the decision-making of the Italian Communist Party as well as a personal assessment of sources that have been already analyzed in former studies.

As far as the theoretical framework is concerned, the starting-point of its interpretative pattern owes a lot to the revisionist historiographical stream (1990’s, 2000’s, and very recent years) which revised the history of Italian Communism stressing its subordination to the USSR as well as its ambivalent role in Italian democracy (V. Zaslavsky, E. Aga Rossi), its attempts at constructing a false version of the Hungarian uprising (F. Argentieri, A. Frigerio), and the impact of the PCI on Italian culture (A. Brogi) and understanding of history and politics (G. Zazzara). Nevertheless, the interpretative framework of this dissertation is based on the attempt at a further development of these studies. Indeed, the intent is to theoretically connect the impact of the Hungarian crisis to persisting strategic

factors in Italian Communism. Therefore, this interpretation stresses strong elements of continuity between the attitude of the PCI in 1956 and its ambiguous position in the Italian democratic context.

In order to work on the second and third chapters, many primary sources were considered: particularly, newspapers' articles – in order to highlight the evolution of the position of PCI and PSI; official *communiqués* released by these political parties and by the CGIL (the PCI-driven trade union); the archival sources of the Archive at the “Antonio Gramsci” Foundation – particularly, the archival series “Carte Ferri-Amadesi” and “Botteghe Oscure”, concerning Togliatti's political correspondence; the documents about the Hungarian crisis collected and translated by Granville (*Soviet documents on the Hungarian revolution. 24 October – 4 November*, Woodrow Wilson Center – Cold War International History Project, 2004) and by Békés, Rainer and Byrne (*The 1956 Hungarian Revolution. A history in documents*, CEU Press, 2006). Although in these two chapters reference to secondary literature is present when necessary to support a given interpretation, these primary sources have been considered and interpreted in order to construct the interpretative pattern of this dissertation. Therefore, the assessment of the historical problems under examination has been mostly based on the analysis of the primary sources.

The fourth chapter is based on recent articles that reported the testimony of two eye-witnesses (M. Pirani and L. Coletti) of the events under examination in that part of the research, on the transcripts of some relevant speeches (G. Manacorda, I. Calvino and A. Giolitti), on Togliatti's political correspondence – particularly, the letter to P. Spriano. Finally, an essential source for this chapter has been the study of the documents about the PCI's cultural policies and Cultural Commission by Albertina Vittoria.

First chapter

**GOALS AND STRATEGIES OF THE ITALIAN COMMUNIST PARTY IN RESPONSE TO THE 1956
HUNGARIAN UPRISING**

The communist establishment of Botteghe Oscure probably thought to have had enough in February 1956, when Nikita S. Khrushchev revealed Stalin's crimes in his "secret" speech. But the De-Stalinization caused a deep erosion of the communist legacy which led to a "second storm"¹: the Hungarian Revolution. Therefore, 1956 was an *annus horribilis* in the history of the communist movement as a whole, and particularly for Western communist parties that were forced to face the political cost of their contradictions on the democratic arena.

This chapter is an attempt to explain how the Italian Communist Party's response to the events that took place in Hungary in late October-early November 1956 was rooted in the PCI's political strategy. Therefore, in order to define the strategic patterns that drove the political action of the Italian comrades, I will firstly focus on the controversy existing in the historiography: was the communist stance on Hungary a "mistake", or was it the outcome of a strategic calculation?

Next, I will move to the analysis of the key-points of the PCI's political strategy by stressing its strengths, and the factors that determined its inherent rigidity. In this context, I will focus on the persisting interests the PCI had to preserve from the harmful impact of the crisis.

Then, I will analyze the features and policies of the communist cultural network, by stressing its strategic importance in the historical context under examination. In this section, I will define the crucial role of the PCI's Cultural Commission in the communist attempts to

¹ Lucio Magri, *The tailor of Ulm: Communism in the twentieth century* (New York, Verso, 2011), p. 128.

influence public opinion. I will try to give also a definition of what is meant hereby by “public opinion”, and to frame the definition within the interpretative pattern of the PCI’s strategies.

Finally, I will focus on the actual consequences of the Hungarian Revolution for the PCI’s strategy and, in particular, on the strategic calculation of the Botteghe Oscure establishment. Therefore, in this section, I will show how the PCI employed its strategy to face the Hungarian crisis.

A problematic definition: the controversy over the PCI’s attitude to Hungary 1956

Historians are still debating about the political action of the Italian Communist Party in the context of the Hungarian Revolution. This topic is considered to be quite relevant due to the implications that might derive from a given viewpoint on the PCI’s attitude toward the Hungarian crisis: by questioning the correctness of the position of the party, one would question almost automatically the legacy of communism in Italy.

Therefore, the controversy in the historiography implies several disputes over the following issues. Firstly, there is a dispute over the ideology concerning the PCI’s attitude to the Hungarian crisis; secondly, the strategic issue concerns the role of the Italian party during the days of the uprising; thirdly, there is the problem of the implications for the legacy of the PCI both as a national and international political agent.

The “ideological problem” can be summarized in a sort of lexical dispute: how to name whatever took place in Hungary? Miklós Vásárhelyi, during an interview with Federigo Argentieri, argued that one of the most significant and enduring consequences of the PCI’s position over Hungary had been to establish a confusion: supporters and slanderers of the

Hungarian uprising appeared so self-confident in their pronouncements that public opinion got basically confused and, even decades later, the mist is still apparent.²

Indeed, a quite fierce controversy divides the historiography and it does not involve just Hungary, but it is actually relevant for a better understanding of the ambiguous features and inherent constraints of the Italian Communist Party. This issue is not free of a heavy political significance: “revolution” or “counter-revolution” became quite popular in the very aftermath of the events since they reflected the ideological perspective of the authors and, as Federigo Argentieri pointed out, remained dominant in the 60’s.³

Historiography seldom employed different lexical means for avoiding to highlight a clear dichotomy between the dominant trends: “uprising”, “upheaval”, “tragedy” were used in historiography (and seldom journalism) as “politically-correct alternatives” to the main streams. Indeed, the importance of the “lexical” dispute relies on its ideological implications embodied in the meaning of the words. The acknowledgement of the need for a sort of lexical prudence often led to the implicit acceptance of an inherently distorted understanding of the Hungarian revolution: the events appeared still surrounded by mist, which justified definitional “accuracy”. In this context, many intellectuals, particularly of the left, pretended to achieve a kind of “neutral” significance by using the expression “*fatti d’Ungheria*” (“Hungarian events / happenings”).

But the practice proved to be quite divorced from the theory: when one used the expression “Hungarian events”, the word “event” (*fatto*) seemed to have a pejorative significance. In common language (for instance, in breaking-news), even nowadays, the word “*fatto*” might be used for identifying a given happening that one does not “dare” to name, for instance a shameful crime.

² Federigo Argentieri, *Ungheria 1956. La rivoluzione calunniata* (Venice, Marsilio Editore, 2006), pp. 104-105.

³ *Ibidem*.

In the specific context of the Italian debate on the Hungarian Revolution, the expression “Hungarian events” entered into the debate and automatically conditioned it, by introducing the confusion Vásárhelyi talked about in his interview: were really the “Hungarian events” a revolution? By using the expression “*fatti d’Ungheria*”, one accepts the following point: nobody was in a position to know. As Miklós Vásárhelyi pointed out, the Hungarian crisis might have forced the communist intellectual *élite* to change its mind on everything taken for granted up to 1956. Therefore, it was “much easier to feel comfortable with the fact that, after all, the events were not clear enough and that there was a danger of [fascist] restoration”.⁴

Although nowadays the usage term “counter-revolution” is limited to a minority of nostalgic ideology-oriented writers, the “confusion” Vásárhelyi described still exists. An interesting example of this can be found in the reconstruction of the events given by Michele Pistillo: the author pointed out that the uprising was actually the outcome of a peaceful demonstration intended to innovate the socialist State, but he also remarks that “the nationalistic attempts – [“emerged as a consequence of the first Soviet intervention”] – led to justified reactions that soon turned into an attempt to restore the old regime”.⁵ In other words, Pistillo replaced the term “counter-revolution” with a long expression which could be understood as a juxtaposition of two notions: nationalistic attempt as a justified reaction to the invasion, and attempt at restoration as ultimate aim. Therefore, the expression as a whole still sounds as a surrogate of “counter-revolution”.

Indeed, the main point is that the “lexical confusion” derives from the mist surrounding the historical events. Beyond the voluntary distortions of the historical facts⁶, the

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Michele Pistillo, *Togliatti e Di Vittorio. Dissensi e convergenze sui fatti d’Ungheria*, “Critica Marxista” (Bari, Edizioni Dedalo, 2007), p. 81.

⁶ This problem will be discussed later, particularly in the second section of the third chapter.

chronological sequence of the events was partly misleading for the foreign observers in Budapest: for instance, the Western journalists, residents of the *Duna hotel* during the revolution, witnessed the abolition of the one-party system (October 30th), the declaration of neutrality (November 1st) and the Soviet invasion of Budapest (November 4th), and they related the facts in this sequence. However, they were not in position to know that the actual chronological sequence was almost the opposite: Nagy declared the neutrality as soon as Andropov was not able to justify troop movements from the provinces toward Budapest.⁷ Nevertheless, this “misunderstanding” had an impact on the historiography and this interpretation is still widespread despite new archival studies that dismissed it.⁸ For instance, Antonello Biagini still presented this interpretation in 2006, while Federigo Argentieri stressed the importance of clarifying the issue of neutrality in order to understand the decision-making taking place in Moscow, in Budapest, as well as in Rome.⁹

The mist around the events directly concerns Botteghe Oscure as well. One question is essential as a theoretical foundation of different historiographical streams: was the PCI aware of the actual events or did the PCI just make a “mistake” about this position in 1956? The correspondence between Botteghe Oscure and the Kremlin between October 23rd and October 30th alone gives a sense that the PCI constantly kept in touch with the Kremlin.¹⁰

⁷ Johanna C. Granville, trans. *Soviet documents on the Hungarian Revolution, 24 October – 4 November 1956*, Cold War International History Project Bulletin, no. 5 (Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, Washington D. C., Spring 1995), p. 33.

⁸ Beyond the abovementioned contribution by J. C. Granville, another essential source is the following collection of primary sources: C. Békés, J. Rainer, M. Byrne, *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution. A history in documents* (Budapest and New York, CEU Press, 2002).

⁹ The historiographical dispute can be found in Argentieri's response to Antonello Biagini's *Storia dell'Ungheria Contemporanea* (2006): http://www.sissco.it/index.php?id=1293&tx_wfqbe_pi1%5Bidrecensione%5D=2803 (lasted visited on May 30th, 2012).

¹⁰ Reference to these documents in Argentieri, pp. 135-136. The problem of the exchange of information between the PCI and the PCUS will be discussed in the third chapter of this dissertation. It is now useful to remind that the correspondence consists of two telegrams, the first sent on October 23rd, the second on October 30th. The latter is very important because Togliatti implicitly suggested that the Kremlin to invade Hungary again.

Nevertheless, historiography showed a certain reticence in “accepting” the findings resulting from researches on Togliatti’s exchanges with Moscow. For instance, the historian Aldo Agosti, one of the most important authors writing on the PCI, did not mention at all Togliatti’s telegram of October 30th.¹¹

Other scholars actually mentioned the document, but still reached controversial conclusions: Adriano Guerra wrote that there are “mysterious aspects” in the words of the Italian leader – therefore, no conclusion can be reached through the study of such a source.¹² Silvio Pons, instead, stressed that Togliatti did not have any important role in the Soviet decision-making.¹³

These interpretations imply the notion of “mistake” in the understanding of the PCI’s position: this leads to a certain degree of forgiveness on the basis of a controversial reconstruction of the situational conditions in which the PCI took its stances. As an implication of these views, the debate on the strategy of the party’s response in the context of the Hungarian uprising would be simply pointless, since the PCI had just “mistaken”, it did not actually follow a given strategy. Therefore, the “mistaken” response of the PCI would be nothing “more serious” than the outcome of the complex circumstances of the Hungarian crisis. Paradoxically, according to this line of reasoning, Togliatti might be on the side of the “victims” of the confusing “Hungarian events”.

In order to argue against both these views (that of Agosti and that of Pons), it is necessary to remark that Togliatti’s words appear clear especially if they are analyzed in the wider context of the PCI’s strategies in response to the Hungarian revolution. Nevertheless, it seems impossible to conduct such an analysis without considering the behavior of the PCI

¹¹ Argentieri, p. 136.

¹² Adriano Guerra, *Comunismi e comunisti. Dalle “svolte” di Togliatti e Stalin del 1944 al crollo del comunismo democratico* (Bari, Edizioni Dedalo, 2005), p. 190.

¹³ Reference to this position of Silvio Pons in Argentieri, p. 136, and in V. Zaslavsky, *Lo stalinismo e la sinistra italiana* (Milan, Mondadori, 2004), pp. 202-203.

as a “strategy”, a notion which rejects the idea of “mistake”. In addition, Togliatti’s telegram seems to be important not as a source of information about the Soviet decision-making itself, but as a source on the concerns and observations of the Italian Communist Party: nobody is probably in a position to know whether Togliatti’s telegram had a role in the Soviet decisions, but his words surely show an intent, which is historically informative – even though not successful – about the position of the Italian party.

Interestingly enough, the debate on the reconstruction of single events concerning the PCI and the Hungarian revolution is that vivid because it interjects the debate on the legacy of communism in Italy as a political phenomenon.

From the 70’s onwards, some historians described the history of the Italian Communist Party as a mixture of elements of “continuity” with its ideological tradition and elements of “diversity”: the expression of Blackmer “unity in diversity” best summarized this historiographical approach.¹⁴

It is an undeniable fact that, by late 70’s, the PCI had reshaped its strategies and the understanding of its role in Italian society and political arena.

Nevertheless, the main interpretative problem is where to set the boundary between the beginning of the new phase and end of the former one. In this sense, historians (A. Höbel)¹⁵ as well as some politicians in the guise of historians (G. Napolitano, M. Pistillo) seemed to have exaggerated the push forward revisionism which came from the trauma of the Soviet intervention.¹⁶

In this view, the position of the PCI would be seen in terms of continuity with the general strategic patterns but, *in nuce*, the party apparatus silently incorporated the will to break

¹⁴ The expression comes from Blackmer’s book *Unity in diversity* (M.T.I. Press, 1968), another source of this historiographical stream is D. L. M. Blackmer, S. Tarrow (eds.), *Communism in Italy and France* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975).

¹⁵ Alexander Höbel, *Significato e limiti del compromesso storico*, conference paper about Berlinguer, association “Ars”, Naples, 2002.

¹⁶ Giorgio Napolitano, *Dal PCI al socialismo europeo* (Bari, Laterza, 2005), pp. 16-17.

with the “muscovite” tradition and to move toward “Eurocommunism”. The main argumentative patterns for this interpretation find their roots in sense of “guilty consciousness” of Italian communists about the stance taken in 1956. But the crises of 1956 led to a strong radicalization of the PCI, and the idea of setting back the starting-time of the “discontinuity” seems to be a means to neglect the need for the controversial analysis of the strategic involvement of the PCI in 1956. Indeed, a part of historiography considered the PCI to be “trapped” into the constraints of the Cold War, but also as a progressive force in its set of values and practices. This understanding of the problem provides a logical basis for the attempts to reinterpret the whole history of the PCI as a progressive democratic force from the Postwar onwards. Eric Hobsbawm, in his book-interview¹⁷ with the current Italian President, Giorgio Napolitano, constructed his questions in order to corroborate the view that the PCI was actually an innovative actor in the conservative socio-political context of Italy.

From the Marxist viewpoint, indeed, this simply is not an issue: since the forces who oppose the communist were necessarily conservative ones, the communists were “necessarily” progressive forces in relative terms. As Federigo Argentieri points out, Hobsbawm’s interpretation seems to be an artificially constructed history intended to wipe some white paint over the trauma of the transition to post-communism: as soon as communism had collapsed, by “inventing” Italian communism as a moderate leftist movement of politically-committed intellectuals attempted to restore a fictional historical coherence in the post-1989, and to eliminate the moral dilemma caused by the reticence to come to terms with the controversial past.¹⁸ Alberto Chilosì, in his work on the evolution of communism in Italy, chose to quote one of Ashleigh Brilliant’s aphorisms which can best

¹⁷ Reference to E. Hobsbawm, *Intervista sul PCI* (Bari, Laterza, 1975) in Argentieri, p. 106.

¹⁸ F. Argentieri, p. 74.

describe the innermost sense of this historiographical stream: “My opinions may have changed, but not the fact that I am right”.¹⁹

In response to these historiographical streams, part of the academia (V. Zaslavsky, E. Aga Rossi, G. Bosetti, F. Argentieri, G. Zazzara, A. Frigerio) highlighted that the action of the Italian Communist Party was actually inspired by an inherently conservative soul and by its unconditional faith in the Soviet model as a guide for the world communist movement. In this sense, the PCI appears as an ideology-centered organization, based on a strict internal discipline and as marginalization of dissent.

The reception of this scholarly stream was seldom controversial, because the academy has not fully accepted the revisionism over the “democratic” look of the PCI yet: as Gilda Zazzara points out, the intellectual predominance of the PCI was so deep to influence historical investigation on many topics of contemporary history with the excuse that such studies would possibly affect politics even decades later.²⁰

Therefore, in the current context of Italian historiography, the controversy over the PCI and Hungary is still open because the issue is still politically relevant: it does not involve the Hungarian Revolution alone, but it clearly implies a given evaluation of the role of the former communist politicians and intellectuals, a central issue in the recent post-communist identity crisis which affected the Italian left from 1989 onwards.

¹⁹ Alberto Chilosì, *The long march of Italian communists from revolution to neoliberalism: a retrospective assessment* (Pisa, Faculty of Political Sciences and Department of Economics – University of Pisa): <http://www.dse.ec.unipi.it/persona/docenti/Chilosì/>, p. 1.

²⁰ G. Zazzara, *La storia a sinistra. Ricerca e impegno politico dopo il fascismo* (Bari, Laterza, 2011), review of the book by Paolo Mieli, “Il Corriere della Sera”, *Quel tentativo del PCI di controllare la storia*: http://www.corriere.it/cultura/libri/11_giugno_28/zazzara-la-storia-a-sinistra_bc3d555a-a196-11e0-ae6a-9b75910f192b.shtml

The disagreement in the historiography is actually based on different views on the role of the PCI in the democratic context: how did the PCI actually cope with the emergence of a hotspot of the Cold War in the Italian democratic context?

As early as 1944, from the so-called “*svolta di Salerno*” (“the swing of Salerno”)²¹ onwards, Togliatti began to rebuild communism in Italy with a clear objective: to create a new party-model divorced from the small cells-based organizational structure which the communists exploited from the time they joined the *Resistenza* (1943-1945). In order to mark a difference with the past, Togliatti named his project *partito nuovo* (“new party”).

Therefore, *partito nuovo* might be the expression which summarizes the quintessence of Togliatti's strategy for Communism in Italy: it is an organizational-structural concept and, at the same time, it has relevant ideological-political implications.

From the organizational viewpoint, the *partito nuovo* model let the Italian comrades abandon their insurgency-oriented organization by constructing a branched mass-party.

This important innovation was not applied all at once, with a sort of “magic wand”. On the one hand, recent historiography (particularly V. Zaslavsky and E. Aga Rossi) shows that Stalin had a prominent role in inspiring Togliatti's organizational action and in supporting it.²² On the other hand, a “left-winged” faction of former partisans, like Giulio Seniga and

²¹ L. Magri, p. 44. By “swing of Salerno” Italian historiography means the break of the communist isolation in the national political context achieved in 1943, as soon as Palmiro Togliatti left Moscow and came back to Italy to sustain the other anti-fascist forces and to support the government headed by Ferruccio Parri (Action Party).

²² V. Zaslavsky, E. Aga Rossi, *Stalin and Togliatti. Italy and the origins of the Cold War* (Washington and Stanford, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 80-88.

Pietro Secchia, opposed the reforms and reluctantly accepted to dismantle the insurrectional network.²³

The *partito nuovo* reshaped the leadership – cadres dynamics by gradually marginalizing “whiggism” within the apparatus: the PCI became a solid party structure²⁴, vertically headed by Togliatti and by some prominent members (Luigi Longo, Edoardo D’Onofrio, Mauro Scoccimarro, Ruggiero Grieco, Umberto Terracini) who, anyway, did not enjoy the same overwhelming charismatic legitimization of “*Il Migliore*” (“The Best”, nick-name given to Togliatti). Therefore, the construction of this homogeneous apparatus implied a common identification of the PCI militants based on two untouchable myths: communist ideology and Soviet leadership.²⁵ Therefore, criticism of the USSR and of the leadership was considered as a sign of a sort of heresy.

The gradual edification of the *partito nuovo* had a very significant political consequence for Italian communism: the PCI was *de facto* forced to “accept” the democratic system²⁶ and

²³ Giorgio Galli, *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano* (Milan, Il Formichiere, 1976), pp. 248-249. In the aftermath of World War II, the communist leadership chose to keep its clandestine military organization and, from 1948 onwards, the insurgency structure was under the control of Pietro Secchia. The communist militia was composed by former partisans who never returned their weapons to the authorities, and – according to recent studies, particularly G. Mastrangelo, *Il complotto comunista* (Naples, Controcorrente, 2002) – was kept alive thanks to concrete aids from the USSR. The insurgency apparatus was maintained in both defensive and offensive perspective as a “stay-behind” organization. Silvio Pons, instead, argued that the military network had defensive purposes only, as Togliatti received directions from Kostylev about keeping the “army” inoffensive for the Italian State (see S. Pons, *Stalin, Togliatti and the origins of the Cold War in Europe*, “Journal of Cold War Studies”, vol. 3, no. 2, spring 2001, p. 20 and p. 21 – footnote no. 75). In July 1948, the different views of Togliatti and Secchia led to a situation of potential civil war: in the very first hours after a young man attempted on Togliatti’s life, the insurgency apparatus automatically began its operations and the major cities – particularly Milan – fell into the chaos. After some dramatic days, Togliatti asked to stop the operations and the internal conflict with Secchia became irreconcilable.

²⁴ M. Einaudi – J. M. Domenach – A. Garosci, *Communism in Western Europe* (Hamden, Archon Books, 1971), pp. 193-195. The party became structurally more homogeneous also from the sociological viewpoint²⁴: the high-ranks of the PCI came all from Northern Italy (an overwhelming majority from Piedmont), with the only partial exception of Emanuele Macaluso and Girolamo Li Causi (from Sicily). The establishment had also a middle-class background (especially the men who joined in the Postwar, like Giancarlo Pajetta, Giorgio Amendola, Eugenio Reale and Emilio Sereni).

²⁵ M. Einaudi, p. 209. There was just one partial exception to this general pattern: Umberto Terracini who had openly criticized Stalin’s most controversial decision during the years of the Spanish Civil War (social-fascism) and of World War II (the Soviet-German pact of 1939-1941) – see M. Einaudi, p. 195.

²⁶ D. L. M. Blackmer, S. Tarrow (eds.), p. 55.

it necessarily had to seek a wider basis of legitimization because the contribution given to the antifascist struggle in the final years of World War II alone was no longer enough.

Indeed, since 1948, the PCI had had to adjust its political strategy to the specific features of the Italian scenario, on which the communists were strong²⁷, but not as strong as the centrist forces. In order to face the red threat, indeed, Alcide De Gasperi and Amintore Fanfani²⁸ practiced the so-called “*conventio ad excludendum*”: the coalition-game which permanently located the Christian-democrats (DC – *Democrazia Cristiana*, usually allied with liberals – PLI – and republicans – PRI) in a leading position and the communists in a minority position.

The only one way to challenge the *conventio ad excludendum* was the gradual erosion of the political support for the centrist forces, and this objective had to be achieved within the democratic procedures. Therefore, Togliatti had to reshape the traditional communist political claims in order to speak to a wider audience of potential voters: the PCI, transformed into a mass-party, tried to become a sort of catch-all party.²⁹ The communists, indeed, tried to voice the workers’ claims for better labor laws (namely for the application of the 1948 Constitution with regard to the workers’ *status*) and the claims for a number of civil rights (such as abortion and divorce) coming from anti-Church *élites*. In this sense, the PCI became the main center of the political opposition to the DC. Botteghe Oscure tried to

²⁷ The election of 1948 witnessed the following results: the Popular Front (PCI and PSI) obtained an impressive 31% (126 seats) in the vote for the low Chamber (*Camera dei Deputati*) and 30.8% (68 seats) in the vote for the upper Chamber (*Senato della Repubblica*). These results (almost 15 million of votes) were outstanding particularly if compared to the 18% which the party had obtained in 1946, in the vote for electing the members of the constituent assembly. In 1953, the share of power of the communists decreased by almost 10%: the PCI obtained 22.6% and 20.6%,

²⁸ Alcide De Gasperi was Minister of the Foreign Affairs during the negotiations that led to the Paris Treaty of 1947 and to the settlement of the Austrian-Italian controversy over Südtirol. From 1948 to 1953, he became president of the DC and he was Prime Minister of republican Italy. After his death, occurred before the general elections of 1953, he was replaced by Amintore Fanfani who held the position of Prime Minister in several occasions from mid-50’s to late 80’s: January-February 1954; July 1958-February 1959; July 1960-June 1963; December 1982-August 1983; April 1987-July 1987.

²⁹ Luciano Bardi, *Responses to electoral de-alignment in Italy*, in Peter Mair, Wolfgang C. Müller, Fritz Plasser, *Political parties and electoral change: party responses to electoral market* (London, Sage publications Ltd., 2004), p. 126.

artificially construct for the party a reputation as the main bulwark of social modernization in the “backwardness” of the religion-based Italian context. As Alberto Chilosì points out, interpreting Giovanni Guareschi’s literary metaphors³⁰, the PCI tried to become for the opponents of the centrists what the Church itself was for the DC.³¹

This strategy of continuous expansion of the influence had a number of strengths and weaknesses.

The positive outcomes of the communist strategy could be definitely seen in the political and social dimension. In political terms, the virtual enlargement of the communist claims reopened the negotiations with Pietro Nenni’s Socialist Party (PSI – *Partito Socialista Italiano*) intended to rebuild the united front of the Italian Left, which had obtained an excellent performance in the election of 1948. Furthermore, recent studies (particularly, Salvatore Vassallo) show that the PCI participated in the decision-making and finally approved 74% of the whole legislative *corpus* in the period 1948-1968.³²

The implication of this impressive data is that the PCI verbally opposed the political decisions but it did not lose the opportunity to have a say on it, and to influence partly the content of the laws. Therefore, Togliatti’s strategy gave the communists an important political weight, even if such weight was not important enough to “leapfrog” the *conventio ad excludendum*.

However, the structural features of Italian society prevented the communists from obtaining a political primacy. Therefore, Togliatti worked on the expansion of the pro-communist network in important spheres of society and public life. Indeed, the PCI

³⁰ Reference to the literary figures of *Don Camillo* and *Peppone*, the fictional priest and communist leader of the small city of Brescello. The two figures embodied the DC and the PCI. “*Peppone*” was also the nick-name sometimes given to Joseph Stalin.

³¹ Alberto Chilosì, p. 3.

³² Salvatore Vassallo, *Il governo di partito in Italia* (Bologna, Il Mulino, 1994), p. 151. The votes of the communists were determinant, in fact, for Giovanni Gronchi’s accession to the Presidency of the Republic in 1955 and for the appointment of the judges of the Constitutional Court in the same year.

practiced a clear hegemony³³ on the Italian General Confederation of Labor³⁴ (CGIL – *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro*), still nowadays the largest and most influential Italian trade union.

On the other hand, the political strategy embodied by the *partito nuovo* model had also some weaknesses. The main aspects to focus on are the rigidity of the strategy itself as well as its inherent contradictions.

The rigidity of this political strategy can be explained by a structural contradiction: the communists played a sort of “double-game”³⁵ (“*doppiezza*” in the original text by Zaslavsky and Aga Rossi), because they wanted to appear as a genuinely national and progressive force but their “official” acceptance of both the democratic methods and the national credentials served actually the purpose to cover up their strong linkage with the Soviet Union, which deeply influenced the PCI political decisions.

The inherent rigidity of the strategy led to “subjective” and “objective” limitations. The “subjective” limitation consisted of the crucial importance of discipline and of the vertical command-line in the party: the PCI was an ideology-based party organization centralized in Togliatti’s hands. As the crisis of 1956 revealed, party-membership implied full obedience to the leadership³⁶, a clear sign of Stalinism in the “aftermath” of the “secret” speech.

The “objective” limitation was actually the ideological paradox of Western Communism: the public credibility of the party was strictly connected to the credibility of the Soviet

³³ Stephen Gundle, *I comunisti italiani tra Hollywood e Mosca: la sfida della cultura di massa* (Florence, Giunti, 1995), p. 83. The author points out that many mobilizations of the CGIL had a clear political character: the purpose was to provide support for the political position of the party, rather than to defend given interests of the workers.

³⁴ M. Einaudi, p. 208. After the official proclamation of the labor unity in 1944, the DC and the PCI formed an unitary trade union. But the communists immediately started *de facto* a conquest of all the positions: the PCI placed its men in unpaid positions, usually in the low-ranks. Thanks to this move, the communist establishment isolated the operational body of the trade union from the leadership officially shared with the DC. In 1948, due to the growing arrogance of the communists, the DC chose to break the labor unity and founded the CISL (Italian Confederation of the Workers’ Trade Unions).

³⁵ V. Zaslavsky, E. Aga Rossi, *Togliatti and Stalin. Il PCI e la politica estera italiana negli archivi di Mosca* (Bologna, Il Mulino, 1997), p. 236.

³⁶ Argentieri, p. 21, quotation from Vittorio Foa.

Union itself. The political strategy of the PCI required a continuous defense of a fake ideological construction: the West as the international agent of “backwardness” and of reactionary tendencies; the socialist East as the agent of real democracy, progress and international peace.

In this sense, the communist discourse was characterized by a mixture of politics and moral significance.³⁷ Therefore, the linkage with the USSR was a source of prestige for the party, but also a source of ambiguities.

Due to these contradictions, one could hardly argue that the PCI was a modern and progressive party. Conversely, by 1956, it was still quite a conservative and “muscovite” organization. In order to “leapfrog” the *conventio ad excludendum*, the PCI had to defend its main *interessi permanenti* (“permanent interests”): prospective alliance with the PSI; linkage with the Soviet Union as a provider of political legitimization; public credibility of this ideology-centered system in which political and moral elements of persuasion were juxtaposed.

Public opinion and cultural policies in the communist strategy

Beyond their connections in the trade unions, an essential part of the communist-friendly network included the world of Italian culture. By “culture” is meant hereby the number of Italian intellectuals (scholars, writers, journalists, artists, and some famous architects).

In analytical terms, the most important aspect of the PCI’s cultural network is Togliatti’s attempt to enlarge the party’s influence: “as soon as it had consolidated its position as a

³⁷ Donald Sassoon, *One hundred years of socialism. The West European left in the twentieth century* (London, Harper Collins, 1998), p. 207. With regard to the PCI, the author mentions the idea of “an entirely different social order” in its political program. Indeed, Italian communists juxtaposed in their ideology in the second postwar the notions of modernity and morality (a new social order to be achieved by overcoming the social injustice of the existing order) in the understanding of itself.

mass-party, the PCI tried, by widening its cultural influence, to enlarge its presence in society”.³⁸ The impressive network of newspapers and intellectual reviews gives a sense of the PCI’s imprint on cultural realm: *L’Unità*, *Rinascita*, *Nuovi Argomenti*, *Vie Nuove* and a huge number of local issues (*Paese-sera* of Rome, *Milano-sera* in Milan, *Progresso* in Bologna) the communists daily voiced their statements to almost one million Italians.³⁹

Furthermore, another crucial aspect of the communist cultural network is the relationship of mutual support which kept intellectuals and communist party together: Togliatti intended to artificially construct for the PCI a reputation as the only “progressive” force in Italian society and politics. The intellectuals, on the other hand, considered the PCI to be a political point of reference because it appeared as the center of vivid intellectual life. Indeed, the DC (the major opponent of the communists) did not follow modern cultural and intellectual trends (DC’s major review was the conservative *Famiglia Cristiana*), and those intellectuals who aimed at “innovating” society and break the rules of “traditionalism” spontaneously moved toward communism for both political beliefs and will to follow the fashion.⁴⁰ They considered themselves to be the grantor of a sort of mission of modernization of Italian society.

The main objective of the cultural network of the party was to take advantage of the figurative dialogue between intellectuals and society. In other words, in order to pursue the *partito nuovo* project, Togliatti needed to find a means to influence public opinion: the cultural network provided the party with this “means”.

³⁸ S. Grundle, p. 129. A similar conclusion can be found in Alessandro Brogi, *Confronting America. The Cold War between the United States and the communists in Italy and France* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2011), p. 157. The author writes that the cultural confrontation was “a core challenge” for the communists, and he recalls Gramsci’s theory of the “cultural hegemony” as a pre-condition for the development of communism in Italy.

³⁹ M. Einaudi, pp. 205-206.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

However, the notion of “public opinion” can be understood in a “narrow” and a “wide” sense. Firstly, with regard to the communist attempt to consolidate the ideological affiliation between PCI and its followers, “public opinion” means the number of voters – as well as potential voters – whose ideological beliefs were, to a given extent, already close to leftist ideas. In this sphere, the PCI was in competition just with the PSI.

Secondly, the notion of “public opinion” can be understood in a “wider” sense, when it comes to the analysis of the cultural and political disputes the PCI engaged with “bourgeois” forces: in this case, the communists intended to speak to a wider audience, potentially to all Italian voters, and to all those citizens following the political debate. Therefore, in this sphere, the competitor of the PCI was the DC itself.

After having identified the “means” of the communist cultural network (the intellectuals) and the “object” (the public opinion), it is necessary to clarify how the cultural policies were actually carried out: the Cultural Commission of the PCI provided the cultural network with a “channel” to transform the ideas into influence. Vittoria provides a good definition of the PCI’s cultural policies and of their connections with the actual work of the intellectuals: “Cultural communication became an organizational and coordination instrument intended to direct the cultural work of the intellectuals of the party, and [intended to] use the outcomes [of their work] in a political sense.”⁴¹ Therefore, the cultural policies cannot be theoretically separated from a given political agenda, and from a strong moral connotation which sustained the legacy of Italian communism.

As far as the political agenda is concerned, Togliatti, as well as other high-party ranks, had an “aristocratic view”⁴² of culture, but he also needed to speak to an audience as wide as possible; therefore, it was essential to “exploit” the connections with intellectuals in a

⁴¹ Albertina Vittoria, *La commissione culturale del PCI dal 1948 al 1956*, “Studi Storici” (Rome, “Antonio Gramsci” Foundation publication, no. 1, 31st year, January-March 1990, pp. 135-170), p. 154.

⁴² S. Grundle, p. 160.

political sense.⁴³ Indeed, the replacement of Salinari with Alicata as leader of the Cultural Commission in January 1955 had the purpose to attempt at a further instrumentalization of the intellectuals: “culture as instrument to support the strategy of the party”.⁴⁴ Indeed, according to Asor Rosa, “the PCI tried to apply the most ambitious project of cultural policy in the postwar”.⁴⁵ This attempt implied a delicate equilibrium between spontaneous dedication of the intellectuals to the communist cause and authoritative subordination to the party-establishment. As I am going to argue later in this thesis, the Hungarian uprising deeply affected this equilibrium with controversial consequences.

Moreover, as far as the moral connotation is concerned, the attempt to construct a wide public credibility was an essential part of the communist strategy: the PCI wanted to consolidate its “followership” with leftist voters, but also to catch new voters – this is the main strategic achievement of the shift from the “old” party-model to the *partito nuovo*. In order to attempt to do so, Botteghe Oscure pretended to have assumed for itself “the task to embody a moral alternative”⁴⁶ to the other political forces: the PCI as the only chance for a moralization (as well as a modernization – as already discussed) of the bourgeois and capitalist society. Therefore, it was essential for the PCI to keep this reputation unchanged, and the Hungarian uprising led to a crisis of confidence in the moral mission of the party.

Necessity and choice: the PCI's response to the Hungarian crisis and its strategic implications

The Hungarian Revolution was understandably a crucial “stress-factor” for the PCI's strategy. As explained above, the strategic assumptions were based on a delicate equilibrium

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ A. Vittoria, p. 160.

⁴⁵ Alberto Asor Rosa, *Lo Stato democratico e i partiti politici*, “Letteratura Italiana” (Turin, Einaudi, vol. I, 1982, pp. 598-615), p. 601.

⁴⁶ Letizia Paolozzi, Alberto Leiss, *Voci dal quotidiano: L'Unità da Ingrao a Veltroni* (Milan, Baldini&Castoldi, 1994), p. 70.

between a number of *realpolitik* factors (such as the instrumental acceptance of the “bourgeois” democratic rules) and a strong ideological affiliation which founded and shaped the internal dynamics of the party.

As soon as the Hungarian uprising broke out, the shocking images incoming from Budapest unveiled the contradictions of the PCI.

The communist supporters as well as the PCI establishment found themselves at a crossroad: on the one side, the road through a painful examination of conscience; on the other, that toward the acceptance of the party-discipline and, the consequent removal of the individual moral choice.

In analytical terms, the reconstruction of the decision-making of the Italian communists is crucial for understanding how the party coped with the Hungarian Revolution strategically-speaking: was its response a coherent implication of the communist political strategy or was it, to any extent, a deviation from that strategy? This question also is crucial with regards to the abovementioned historiographical controversy: was the PCI a “passive” or an “active” actor in facing the impact of the Hungarian Revolution?

The response of the Italian Communist Party was a complex juxtaposition of ambivalent boosts: defense and counter-attack. The overall response might be defined as a balanced mixture of enforcement of the “strongholds” followed up by a fierce ideological offensive.

By “strongholds” hereby is meant the struggle for saving the *interessi permanenti*, either all of them or as many as possible, from the harmful impact of the Revolution: just like “strongholds” on a battleground, the defense of the *interessi permanenti* was the foundation of the political strategy the *partito nuovo* was intended to pursue. This enforcement consisted of the fierce application of the party-discipline, to such an extent that the theoretical discussion over the interpretation of the “*fatti d’Ungheria*” was a major issue at the Congress of December 1956.

However, this initial defensive approach appears, to some extent, as an unavoidable stance taken out of “necessity”: by denying the USSR, the party would have denied itself. Therefore, the imposition of the internal discipline had the purpose to keep untouched the strong ideological foundation of the party apparatus and to remove dissent from the ranks. In addition, it also served the purpose to demonstrate the faith of the Italian comrades in Moscow as a supreme guide and decision-maker in the communist world.

The response of the PCI contained also an “active” element: the ideological offensive, which Botteghe Oscure deliberately, without any constraint, chose to carry out. The press was the main weapon of the party: *L’Unità* tried to depict the uprising as a pro-fascist coup which disseminated in the streets of the Hungarian capital the “white terror”.

Furthermore, the communist press tried to unify two images: the bodies hanged in *Köztársaság tér* (example of fascist terror) and the picture of Mindszenty (image of the threatening role of the Church). In this way the PCI attempted to speak a language Italian communists could easily understand and, therefore, the attack was addressed to the DC by stressing the fictional equivalence between anti-communism as such and a vague idea of fascist restoration.

However, what was the strategic cost of these two moves? This response was probably the most efficient in terms of strategic calculation. The purpose of the PCI was to maintain its *interessi permanenti*, in spite of the expected negative impact of the Hungarian events. By choosing to provide political legitimization to the second Soviet intervention, the PCI caught the opportunity to shield at least two basic interests from the devastation of the crisis: the linkage with the Soviet Union and the crucial ideological foundation of the party apparatus were preserved, two important factors of political legitimization.

Conversely, the PCI had to “tolerate” a loss just with regard to the connections with the Italian Socialist Party: Pietro Nenni deplored the conduct of Togliatti’s party and interrupted

the negotiations for the reunification of the Left.

The analysis of the strategic dilemma of the PCI suggests that the communist decision-making in the context of the Hungarian crisis was logical: Botteghe Oscure could not break with the USSR, simply because this would have led to a general criticism of the guidelines that reshaped Italian Communist Party from 1945 onwards. However, such a political break was not an option at all, due to the importance of ideology for both the establishment and the popular base of the party.

Conclusion

The PCI reacted to the Hungarian Revolution by defending the *interessi permanenti* that shaped the political actions of the *partito nuovo*. Although Togliatti tolerated the break with Nenni, he managed to preserve the ideological foundations of the *partito nuovo* and to enhance the ideology-centered party discipline.

Indeed, in order to expand the influence of his new-party model, Togliatti had to build up a solid public credibility. The purpose was to persuade as many Italians as possible that the PCI was a better choice in comparison with the DC in both political and moral terms: on the one hand, Botteghe Oscure pretended to be more efficient than the Christian-democrats to advocate given social and constitutional claims; on the other hand, the party pretended to be able to drive Italy's move toward real democracy, to be achieved through the political shift from the primacy of the bourgeois-conservative forces to the dominance of the social-popular ones.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Donald Sassoon, pp. 197-198. The author describes the attitude of the European left to innovate its political program as a sign of realism, but he also stresses the persisting role of the left as defender of the values of pre-capitalist society. This understanding might be suitable to define the political role and program of the British Labor Party, but it does not work that well with regard to the PCI. Indeed, Italian communists did not consider

There was no examination of conscience because there was no doubt on the moral choice: morality was on the Soviet side, exactly where it had always been. The party establishment (with just a few of relevant exceptions) and its voters accepted the “slanderous”⁴⁸ version on the Hungarian uprising because it appeared as the most natural implication of their political tradition: as Argentieri puts it, “the lie was necessary for accepting the enormity of the events”.⁴⁹

Italian society as a modern one. Conversely, the PCI considered itself to be a political agent of modernization in the context of a Catholic society with strong capitalist foundations – particularly in the North.

⁴⁸ This is actually the main concept in Argentieri’s book: *la rivoluzione calunniata* means “the slandered revolution”.

⁴⁹ F. Argentieri, p. 57.

*Second chapter***OCTOBER 24TH – OCTOBER 28TH: SHOCK AND DEFENSE***Stress-factors on the PCI and the first counter-measures*

“It is worth reminding the Italian bourgeois press that the Polish events have a central issue and a prospective: the construction of socialism, its methods and time. Polish workers debated about this and fought for this”.¹ This way *L’Unità* welcomed the diplomatic solution of the Polish crisis on October 23rd. The Italian communist press did not mention that, just few hours before, the Kremlin was still wondering whether to use the tanks that had encircled Warsaw during the previous days.²

Nevertheless, Botteghe Oscure had no time for a sigh of relief: by the evening of October 23rd, the demonstration of solidarity with Poland taking place in Budapest had turned into an uprising against the regime. On the first page of the October 24th issue, the communist press stressed the risk of a dangerous counter-revolution in the socialist bloc by contrasting two notions: the edification of socialism through reforms in Poland, and the risk of a degeneration toward a reactionary attempt in Hungary.³

Botteghe Oscure received the news from Budapest with an initial astonishment but, thanks to the guidance of the leadership, the party was able to rapidly “digest” the shock, and to respond efficiently to the changeable circumstances of the crisis.

Nevertheless, the position taken by the press organ of the Italian Communist Party implied a number of problematic issues for the legacy of communism in Italy. The outbreak

¹ Pietro Ingrao, *Gli avvenimenti polacchi*, “L’Unità”, October 23rd, 1956, p. 1.

² Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 554-556.

³ Adriana Castellani, *Scontri nelle vie di Budapest provocati da gruppi armati di contro-rivoluzionari*, and Franco Fabiani, *Oggi Cyriankiewicz e Gomulka parleranno al popolo polacco*, “L’Unità”, October 23rd, 1956, p. 1. The two pieces stressed the following notions respectively: “counter-revolutionary attempt at distorting the democratization process” and “path toward the edification of socialism” respectively.

of the Hungarian crisis led to the emergence of multiple stress-factors that forced the party to adjust the strategy previously described.

Indeed, the Hungarian Revolution had an impact on all the strategic interests of the party (the so-called “*interessi permanenti*”). Firstly, the public credibility of the *partito nuovo* happened to be under attack since the contradictions of Togliatti’s party might become apparent in the eyes of the public opinion and, by implication, might lead to the emergence of a dangerous fault-line between communist followers (the popular base) and the party establishment. Furthermore, the impact of the news incoming from Hungary might have also opened a leak in the ideological foundations of the PCI’s legacy, by exposing the real face of the Soviet domination over the so-called “satellites”.

Secondly, the communist appeasement toward the Soviet military intervention in Hungary might endanger the system of political alliance Togliatti and Di Vittorio were trying to construct for the PCI and the CGIL.⁴

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the strategic choices of the PCI, and its political implications in the first phase of the uprising. The definition of the initial attempts at a sort of “crisis management” need to be interpreted in the general frame of the political strategies described before.

The time-span under examination in this chapter is October 24th – October 28th because it was characterized by an initial state of astonishment which shaped the PCI’s very first response accordingly. In addition, from October 29th, the PCI’s attitude toward the Hungarian crisis appeared partly changed due to the changeable position of the USSR itself.

In order to explain the PCI’s decision-making process in this phase of the crisis, firstly, I will focus on the issue of the public credibility of the *partito nuovo* by stressing the

⁴ While the PCI was negotiating an alliance with the PSI, Di Vittorio’s CGIL and the socialist trade union UIL (Italian Union of Labor) were involved in negotiations for a potential reunification after the split of 1948. See Pier Carlo Masini and Stefano Merli (eds.), *Il socialismo al bivio. L’archivio di Giuseppe Faravelli, 1945-1950* (Milan, Feltrinelli, 1990), p. xx. The authors argue that the break of 1948 was “unavoidable and beneficial” (p. 9).

important role of the press reports as a means intended to defend the legacy of Togliatti's party-model. Next, I will address the issue of the political cost of the stance on Hungary with particular attention to transformations in the Italian Left, which included, beyond the PCI, Nenni's PSI and Saragat's PSDI (Italian Social-Democratic Party).

The “mud-machine”: L'Unità and the defense of the partito nuovo

The *partito nuovo* was an essential component of Togliatti's strategy intended to make of the PCI a mass-party with an effective political influence. By the very beginning of the crisis in Budapest, the PCI had just one viable road, in order to defend Togliatti's political creature from expected criticism: the stigmatization of the riot against a socialist power was crucial to maintain the public credibility of the party.

This initial approach to the crisis aimed at defusing the propaganda-attack on the communists which would endanger the legacy of the PCI after the trauma of the “secret” speech, and the trauma of the Poznań upheaval. In the peculiar context of mid-50's, the PCI was perceived by its followers as a force of both modernization and moralization of the Italian Catholic and bourgeois society. Therefore, this moral element in the communist ideology had to be protected from any attempt at criticism.

As the news coming from Hungary reached Botteghe Oscure, *L'Unità* became the most important means to defend the *partito nuovo* by constructing the legacy of the theory of the counter-revolutionary coup: “what really mattered was to protect the *partito nuovo* project of which the newspaper was an important component”⁵, the historian Letizia Paolozzi wrote in her book-interview with the communist leader Pietro Ingrao, back then chief-editor of *L'Unità*.

⁵ L. Paolozzi and Alberto Leiss, *Voci dal quotidiano. L'Unità da Ingrao a Veltroni* (Milan, Baldini&Castoldi, 1994), p. 20.

Nevertheless, in the eyes of the Rome-based communist establishment, it seemed to be crucial, in the mist of confusing news incoming from Hungary, to exercise a sort of situational prudence: the exposure of the alleged reactionary coup (“planned long time ago”⁶ – *L’Unità* stated) needed to be dissociated from the “patriotic and socialist”⁷ mass-movement which staged the demonstration the day before. On this basis, the party might have attempted to construct an interpretation of the troubles in the socialist bloc which could appear coherent with the climate of the De-Stalinization. Botteghe Oscure had as ponderously as reluctantly accepted.⁸

In this sense, the popular movement was considered to be the genuine expression of the blossoming democratic spirit of the Hungarian People’s Republic. By implication, the political transformations of 1956 (in Poland as well as in Hungary) had necessarily to be interpreted as an improvement on the path toward democratic socialism: the regime was renewing itself by removing the “mistakes” of the recent past.⁹ This interpretation implied a distortive syllogism: the demonstrations in Budapest had to be “socialist” first, in order to be also “democratic”. On this basis, the uprising could not originate from the democratic movement. Logically, it must have been a reactionary coup, possibly inspired by an external enemy of both socialist Hungary and the USSR.

This interpretative pattern, in which the PCI’s position was rooted, seems to be based on a one-sided and distorted view of the political context: regardless of the peculiar historical and political circumstances, the uprising could not be justified, because the authority to be overthrown was a communist one. Significantly, Togliatti himself provided this very

⁶ A. Castellani, October. 24th, 1956, p. 1.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ From February 1956 to July 1956, the PCI had given several interpretations of the “secret” speech. Firstly, Botteghe Oscure tried to release a sort of “soft” version of the criticism toward Stalin. As soon as the content of the speech happened to be known in the West, Togliatti had to accept an interview with the communist review *Nuovi Argomenti*: he interpreted the speech as a sign of renewal of the pure socialist spirit. Nevertheless, he never admitted the crimes of Stalin. Indeed, communist press spoke about “mistakes” only.

⁹ F. Fabiani, p. 1: “there is a sense of satisfaction because the masses demonstrated for what is now new in this plenum”. The author referred to the first meeting of the new Plenum of the Polish communist party.

interpretation in his political correspondence: “the use of armed violence and of an insurgent movement is not admissible at all in non-capitalist countries. [...] If mass-protest, in a non-capitalist country, goes beyond the legal boundaries and becomes an insurrectional attempt, we have the right to consider it to be the outcome of the contribution of the enemy, either from the beginning or at any time later”.¹⁰

However, the sudden outbreak of the crisis in Budapest actually found the communist establishment unprepared; therefore its press-organ did not show a clear line of action.

In fact, the first problematic issue, at the very beginning of the uprising, was the organizational one.

From the organizational viewpoint, as early as October 24th, the Italian communist press, like other Italian newspapers, had only a few operating correspondents permanently in Hungary. Although *L'Unità* had officially one contributor in Budapest, Adriana Castellani, most of the reports were edited in other Central European cities, far from the hotspot of the riot. The interpretative problem, which might help to cast new light on the communist decision-making in Italy, is the following: why did the Rome-based editors prefer to set aside the contributions of their established correspondent in Hungary?

On October 24th, *L'Unità* released a long article by Adriana Castellani, who fully endorsed the view of the uprising as a counter-revolution: she pretended to have witnessed the insurgents “preventing Nagy from making a speech”¹¹ the night before.

Instead, from October 25th onwards, the organization of the press had changed, since Castellani's pieces were replaced by other contributions. The analysis of the leading-article issued on *L'Unità* on October 25th and the *communiqué* by Suslov and Mikoyan¹² to the

¹⁰ Letter by P. Togliatti to Paolo Spriano, Rome, October 31st, 1956, Archive of the “Antonio Gramsci” Foundation, “Palmiro Togliatti” fond, “Carte Ferri-Amedesi” serie, sub-serie no. 4 “1956”, archival unit no. 24.

¹¹ A. Castellani, October 24th, 1956, p. 1.

¹² Anastas Mikoyan and Mikhail Suslov were sent to Budapest on October 24th with Ivan A. Serov, head of the KGB, and the general Mikhail S. Malinin, in order to provide assistance to the Hungarian government in the

Kremlin shows such an extent of similarities that it is no exaggeration to state that the communist press in Italy initially chose to stay on the safe side, and just “translated” the statements of Suslov and Mikoyan.

Therefore, organizational issues concerning the press can be interpreted as an outcome of the experience of the “secret speech” of February 1956: by fully accepting the Soviet position, the PCI tried to keep an institutional profile, especially due to the effective lack of precise information in the very first hours of the uprising. In this sense, the communist establishment did not “attempt” to make an individual assessment on what to release and what not to release (which the PCI had done on the problem of the “secret” speech with controversial consequences). Botteghe Oscure applied the principle of the socialist discipline: particularly in the circumstances of October 23rd – October 24th, the Soviet sources of news were considered the only ones to be fully reliable. Therefore, the communist newspaper tried to temporarily ignore individual contributors who were not in a position to be carefully “supervised” by the central editing board.¹³

Also considering that the mail communication with Budapest was delayed, the main center of news-supply was Vienna. Another center for the transmission of the news from the socialist bloc to Italy was Prague, where the journalist Orfeo Vangelista operated as a permanent correspondent of the communist press.¹⁴ Indeed, Vangelista became a stable reference-point for the communist press during the days of the crisis.

attempts to regain the power. They used to send daily reports to Moscow that shaped the Kremlin’s official position, and deeply influenced the Soviet decision-making process. The first report by the two Soviet “delegates” contributed to give Moscow, and the communist parties all around the world, the impression that the riot was less dangerous than what they had expected: “We have the impression that Gerő especially, but the other comrades as well, are exaggerating the strength of the opponent and underestimating their own strength”, Mikoyan-Suslov report, October 24th, 1956, telegram from Budapest to the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Johanna Granville, trans. *Soviet documents on the Hungarian Revolution, 24 October – 4 November 1956*, Cold War International History Project Bulletin, no. 5 (Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, Washington D. C., Spring 1995), p. 29 .

¹³ Marco Travaglio, *Montanelli in Ungheria*, “Il Cannocchiale”, October 7th, 2007, http://www.voglioscendere.go.ilcannocchiale.it/ilcannocchiale.it/2007/10/04/montanelli_in_ungheria.html.

¹⁴ The structure of the press organization can be inferred from the provenience of the contributions which clearly appears on the issues of the newspaper.

Similarly, the journalists Sergio Segre and Fabio Fabiani followed the development of the events from Warsaw, in particular by informing the Italian public about the viewpoints on the Hungarian events of Polish newspaper *Trybuna Ludu*. The Polish perspective, indeed, acquired a very significant political weight for supporting the interpretation of the Italian Communist Party: the viewpoint of *Trybuna Ludu* served the purpose of stressing the distance between the dangerous degeneration of the reactionary attempts in Hungary and the virtuous correction of the mistakes taking place in Poland with the Soviet blessing.

However, on October 25th, the communist followers learnt from *L'Unità* that a group of insurgents had long prepared a counter-revolutionary coup. But the intervention of the Soviet troops had already fulfilled the objective to repress the attempt at overthrowing the People's Republic.¹⁵

Nevertheless, *L'Unità* welcomed the appointment of Imre Nagy as Prime Minister.¹⁶ Indeed, Botteghe Oscure considered Nagy's accession to be a step forward in the process of removal of the mistakes of the Stalinist era.¹⁷

Interestingly enough, the Italian Communist Party still showed a certain optimism: the events were not presented as an ideological defeat of the socialist international movement, but they were actually considered to be an effective opportunity for a further improvement.¹⁸ Therefore, Imre Nagy was initially depicted as a positive figure, the man with the mission to safeguard the regime and break with the Stalinist past: "his brave opposition to the crimes of Stalin and Rákosi is well-known all around the country", Vangelista wrote on October 27th.¹⁹

¹⁵ Orfeo Vangelista, *Gli avvenimenti*, "L'Unità", October 25th, 1956, p. 1.

¹⁶ A. Brogi, p. 197.

¹⁷ O. Vangelista, "L'Unità", October 25th, 1956, p. 1.

¹⁸ P. Ingrao, *Da una parte della barricata a difesa del socialismo*, "L'Unità", October 25th, 1956, p. 1. Ingrao wrote: "this is just another criminal attempt at arresting with coercion and force the path toward the socialist revolution all around the world. This [attempt] actually took place while Hungary was witnessing a process of democratization of regime, and of removal of the mistakes of the past".

¹⁹ O. Vangelista, *Chi sono i membri del nuovo governo?*, "L'Unità", October 28th, 1956, p. 1. The article was written on October 27th, but it was released just one day later.

This position might seem ambiguous, especially if considered in retrospect. Nevertheless, the PCI had no alternative to this interpretation, because the position of the Kremlin itself was too changeable before October 30th. In the period under examination, indeed, the Soviets were attempting at a consolidation of the HWP's power under Nagy's and Kádár's leadership. The accession of these two leaders to power was a concession that Moscow had not been able to do before the uprising. By October 25th, the main point at stake was whether the attempts at a consolidation could be actually carried out by Nagy, and with what limits.

In this context, *L'Unità* had to consider the insurgents to be the enemy, and it could not give a final assessment on the political situation as a whole. Indeed, the situation was too unstable to foresee the events.²⁰ Indeed, radical stances might be still risky back then.²¹

In order to fulfill this objective the press had to overstress two concept, logically connected one to the other in the PCI's interpretation: the "Hungarian tragedy" and the "attempt at a restoration". The analysis of the issues of *L'Unità* of October 25th and 28th provide good examples of this strategy, which the historian Alessandro Frigerio named "*la macchina del fango*" ("the mud-machine").

On October 25th, Pietro Ingrao wrote his piece *Cosa vogliono restaurare?* ("What do they want to restore?"), wherein he stated: "Here's Horthy's Hungary, Hungary allied with Hitler. While a few of landowners were in possession of the 43% of the whole land, two million peasants had no land at all and one million and half did not have enough land. [...]"

²⁰ C. Békés, J. Rainer, M. Byrne, *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution. A history in documents* (Budapest and New York, CEU Press, 2002), pp. 262-299, documents no. 40 (session of October 30th) and 49 (session of October 31st). The reconstruction of the Soviet decision-making process is possible thanks to the "Malin's notes", the minutes of the debate within the CPSU CC Presidium during the sessions concerning the Hungarian crisis. Within the CC there a sort of "contrast" between hardliners, particularly Zhukov (the Minister of the Defense) and Voroshilov (the marshal in charge of the task to help Rákosi in the period 1945-1947), and a "moderate" faction, Shepilov (Minister of the Foreign Affairs) and Malenkov. All the other members of the CC were divided around these groups. Khrushchev himself seemed to be quite unsure about how to solve the crisis: while the hardliners pushed for a stronger military intervention, the moderates preferred to wait for a political consolidation of Nagy's leadership. By October 31st, the moderates lost support because most of the CC members could not tolerate the abolition of the one-party system decided by Nagy on October 30th.

²¹ A. Guerra, p. 192.

The regime of fascist landowners kept the country in ignorance. [...] The Hungarian people seeks its road, the least painful, toward socialism”.²²

This quotation is quite relevant for the purpose of the analysis presented hereby: Ingrao depicted the insurgents as fascists, followers of the old, backward regime, which they were trying to restore. They were attempting to knock down the People’s Democracy, which – according to what Ingrao wrote – still enjoyed the support of Hungarian people. By implication, only the fighters were the enemies targeted by *L’Unità*, because they were responsible for the suffering of Hungary. Therefore, the country as such and its “civil” population were actually victims (significantly, the fascist insurgents were imperialist agents, in the communist view). The Hungarian events were a “tragedy” caused by the fascist coup. By implication, this view affects the understanding of the international role of the Soviet Union: the Red Army, with its intervention, was actually trying to save Hungary from a dangerous fascist outburst.

Further features of this interpretation appeared in the piece by Giancarlo Pajetta (October 28th), a very influential party-member: the text²³ gives the reader a sense that an attempt at encircling the communist movement with reactionary forces was taking place (remarkably, Pajetta mentioned the Algerian case as an example).²⁴

Therefore, the socialist movement was considered to be under attack. This view had two important implications: communists did not need to bear the moral burden of the human cost of the intervention against alleged imperialism; the intervention of Soviet troops in Hungary was not just morally justified, but also legally correct, since it aimed at maintaining the legal order in the People’s Republic.

²² P. Ingrao, *Cosa vogliono restaurare?*, “L’Unità”, October 25th, 1956, p. 1.

²³ G. Pajetta, *La tragedia dell’Ungheria*, “L’Unità”, October 28th, 1956, p. 1.

²⁴ In late October 1956, *L’Unità* widely covered the conflict taking place in Algeria between the French colonial troops and the forces of the national front. The PCI interpreted the Algerian crisis as a clear signal of the imperialist aggression all around the world. As the uprising broke out in Budapest, the Hungarian “counter-revolution” was repeatedly compared to the military oppression of France in Algeria.

As far as this article by Pajetta is concerned, once more it is impossible not to notice the similarities between the statements of the Italian communists and those of *Pravda*. Indeed, on October 28th, *L'Unità* reported, with no single line of criticism nor distance, the “Pravda’s assessment on the Hungarian events” – edited by Giuseppe Boffa: “This anti-popular adventurism is the result of a long subversive work of the imperialist powers intended to overthrow the democratic order and to restore the capitalist one”.²⁵ In other words, the Moscow-based Central Committee of the Soviet Party, whose statements had been reported by Giuseppe Boffa, and Giancarlo Pajetta, based in Rome, gave the same interpretation of the events at the very same time. This shows a high consideration of the Soviet viewpoint from Botteghe Oscure, but it also shows that there was a strong coordination of the press organization.

In order to strengthen this interpretation with a sort of visual framework, *L'Unità* applied a certain rule in drafting the first pages of the issues of the days under examination: the readers could find very often a clear contrast between the Polish positive model of path toward socialism through certain reforms, on the one side, and the dangerous terrorist attempt at restoration which led to the “Hungarian tragedy”, on the other hand.

In addition, the first pages were visually structured on the basis of the juxtaposition between one leading article of comment and a number of short ones on breaking-news, whose objective was to give sense of tragedy and panic. For instance, the most impressive case is the issue on October 28th: the abovementioned article by Pajetta (*La tragedia dell'Ungheria*) was accompanied by a flash-news edited in Vienna: “Erő Gerő executed by a group of insurgents!”.²⁶ The news was clearly fake, and *L'Unità* was surely aware of that, since the former First Secretary of the HWP had fled to Moscow two days before, and Botteghe Oscure was in constant contact with the Kremlin.

²⁵ G. Boffa, *Un giudizio della Pravda sugli avvenimenti in Ungheria*, “L'Unità”, October 25th, 1956, p. 8.

²⁶ Flash-news: “Erő Gerő fucilato da un gruppo di insorti!”, “L'Unità”, October 28th, p. 1.

In sum, the “mud-machine” was the ideal tool for the PCI, in order to support an otherwise contradictory interpretation of the genesis of the crisis: the uprising must have been against the people, because the communist party was the people itself. This way, the communist press tried to maintain the public credibility of the party, by shielding the *partito nuovo* from any possible criticism. The “slandorous” interpretation of the uprising – as Argentieri names it – was necessary because of the strong moral suasion which characterized the legacy of the PCI, and the idealized view the communist followers had of their party. The party-establishment was afraid that a potential disillusionment might be as strong as the ideological affiliation which provided the PCI with theoretical foundations for its alleged mission as the agent of progress in Italy.

Earthquake and aftershock: re-assessments in the Italian Left

Togliatti’s *partito nuovo* implied a wider project of joining the forces of the communists of the PCI and the socialists of the PSI. Through this alliance, Togliatti aimed at both reconstructing the popular front which achieved a great performance in the vote of 1948 and limiting the influence of Saragat’s PSDI (Italian Socialdemocratic Party), which Nenni considered to be a potential ally as well. Therefore, in strategic terms, the PSI might be compared to the ally the other leftist parties sought.²⁷

Nevertheless, the PSDI could not be considered to be a potential ally for the PCI (therefore, no three-party coalition would be possible) due to the strong anti-communist values of Saragat’s party.

²⁷ Francesco Malgeri, *La stagione del centrismo: politica e società nell’Italia del secondo dopoguerra* (Soveria Manelli, Rubbettino, 2002), p. 244.

Nenni had two alternative options: to side with the PCI, and rebuild the “*Lista Garibaldi*” (as in 1948); to side with the PSDI, and move toward a British-like model of labor party. The second option would imply an irreversible break with the USSR, and with the PCI.

On the other hand, Togliatti might have wanted to avoid boosting the leaning of the PSI toward the PSDI: the negotiations for the alliance might continue unless the PCI did not make its submission to the Soviet line particularly apparent. But the stress-factors on the PCI’s strategy did not let Togliatti consider any degree of moderation as a serious option: he needed to react with resoluteness in order to minimize the negative effects of the crisis.

Nevertheless, as the revolution broke out in Budapest, the PSI did not immediately move away from the PCI. Conversely, the initial attitude of *Avanti*, the newspaper of Nenni’s party, had some similarities with that of *L’Unità*.

First, on October 25th, Tullio Vecchietti wrote that “among the rebels, there must be surely fascists and counterrevolutionaries, but the riot broke out because of the university students, the intellectuals, then the riot expanded to the factories”.²⁸ Therefore, the position of *Avanti* appears particularly interesting in political terms: on the one hand, the PSI’s interpretation of the crisis was not too distant from that of the PCI by the very beginning of the revolt, at least as far as the risk of counter-revolution was concerned.

Nevertheless, already on October 25th, the PSI rejected the gist of the PCI’s position: the Italian Socialist Party did not approve the idea of the fascist coup as such because it did not share the PCI’s idealized view of the socialist camp, nor the fully positive consideration of the USSR. In this sense, the socialist party showed a more moderate spirit than the PCI did: it rejected the rigid version of the dichotomy “popular forces” versus “bourgeois forces”, which deeply shaped the communist understanding of the political system.

²⁸ Tullio Vecchietti, *Il dramma di Budapest*, “Avanti!”, October 25th, 1956, p. 1.

The most important implication of this interpretation was the consideration of the Soviet intervention: in the communist view, the invasion of Hungary (on October 23rd, the Hungarian authorities had asked the Soviets to intervene)²⁹ was a legitimate attempt at defending socialism; in the socialist view, it was an attempt at defending an unpopular regime through an illegal invasion. Therefore, Nenni's party stressed the democratic characterization of the Hungarian popular movement which staged the demonstration and later turned into a popular uprising for Gerő's stubborn attitude toward the demonstrators.³⁰

However, the position of the PSI was partly ambivalent: on the one hand, the party was not willing to accept Ingrao's "invite" on the "one [leftist] side of the fence in defense of socialism"³¹; on the other hand, a certain intolerance toward the attitude of the communist comrades was emerging.³²

Therefore, the PSI wanted to communicate the PCI that the door for the alliance was still open, but it would be soon closed unless the PCI would reconsider its position on the Soviet intervention, and on Hungary generally-speaking.

On October 26th, indeed, the PSI sent some ambivalent signals to *Botteghe Oscure* and, by implication, to Saragat's PSDI. On the one hand, the *Avanti* issue of that day had a clear attitude of appeasement toward the Togliatti's party: the newspaper is very informative

²⁹ According to the study of the Research Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution (later on, 1956 Institute), the Soviets troops were "invited" by an informal committee composed by members of the HWP and of the government. Indeed, in the chaotic situation of October 23rd, the Hungarian communists passed their decision of asking for the military intervention out of the legal procedures. As András Hegedűs argued, in an interview realized years later, the committee was "heterogeneously" composed, therefore, it did not have the authority of the government, nor that of the party itself. Nevertheless, the plan of invasion of Hungary was carried out, and the Hungarian government signed a formal document which provided the invasion with a legal legitimization just on October 25th. The interview with Hegedűs is part of the collection of video-documents screened in the film *La rivolta di Budapest*, "La Storia Siamo Noi", RAI Educational, 2006. For further details on the planning and concerns about "Wave Operation" (first intervention) see Johanna C. Granville, *The First Domino: international decision-making during the Hungarian crisis of 1956* (College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 2004), p. 76.

³⁰ This remark referred to the radio speech done by Gerő in the evening of October 23rd. The First Secretary of the HWP spoke about the alleged sense of gratitude Hungarian should feel toward the Soviets and, the demonstrators, who had been involved in fruitless negotiations with the head of the radio, Valéria Benke, reacted by assaulting the building of *Bródy Sándor utca*.

³¹ P. Ingrao, *Da una parte della barricata in difesa del socialismo*, "L'Unità", October 25th, 1956, p. 1.

³² F. Malgeri, p. 244.

about the PSI within-party dynamics, since it was the only one newspaper (naturally, with *L'Unità*) to give no mention about the *véres csütörtök* (October 25th), an unequivocal matter of fact which Togliatti would have hardly been able to explain within the interpretative frame he was building up.³³ On the other hand, the piece by Leo Paladini (*Come si giudicano a Mosca gli avvenimenti polacchi e ungheresi*) did not share the pro-Soviet attitude which characterized the abovementioned article by Giuseppe Boffa: Paladini defined the Soviet crisis-management as “very stubborn” (“*molto chiuso*”).³⁴

Another piece issued by the socialist newspaper is a very good source to give sense of what the PSI expected from the PCI: the piece “Italian comments on the events of Budapest” (*I commenti italiani agli avvenimenti di Budapest*) started with a criticism of the PCI’s theory of the “counter-revolutionary putsch”³⁵ and, immediately after that, expressed satisfaction for the fact that – according to what *Avanti* argued – this position had been withdrawn.³⁶

This last statement was not true, since the PCI would not change its position on Hungary until 1989. Nevertheless, in the peculiar situation of October 26th, that statement served the purpose to be a sort of “warning” from the PSI to its potential ally: Nenni (who had not spoken out in person yet) was taking some time for a final assessment. This way, he gave Togliatti time to understand that the negotiation with the socialists would go on if the PCI

³³ Historians name *véres csütörtök* (“bloody Thursday”) the episode of mass-killing which took place in the morning of October 25th in *Kossuth Lajos tér*: the Soviet tanks at the posts of garrison before the Parliament and the offices of the HWP of *Akadémia utca* started to shoot at the civilians that gathered in the square. According to the report of Kádár’s government the victims were about 300. The circumstances that suddenly led to such an incomprehensible use of force have not been fully clarified yet. According to the reconstruction of the 1956 Institute (available on the website: www.rev.hu), the head of the KGB, Serov, ordered the tanks to shoot on the people as soon as he was aware of the episodes of mutual approaches between invaders and locals (the historian G. Dalos documented many episodes of this kind). In this view, Serov ordered to fire in order to radicalize the climate. According to another reconstruction, the ÁVH, and the Hungarian hardliners such as Antal Apró, ordered some agents to fire in order to provoke the expectable Soviet reaction. The purpose, in this second version, might be to further destabilize the internal situation and undermine the consolidation of the new government.

³⁴ Leo Paladini, *Come si giudicano a Mosca gli avvenimenti polacchi e ungheresi*, “Avanti!”, October 26th, 1956, p. 1.

³⁵ *I commenti italiani agli avvenimenti di Budapest*, October 26th, 1956, p. 1.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

would be able to reduce its political and ideological dependence on the Soviet Union. This appeared as a sort of minimum requirement as well as a proof of the genuine good-will of cooperation of the communists.

This “warning” became explicit in the issue of October 27th. Indeed, Lelio Basso’s words (in the article *Aver coraggio* – “To be brave”) expressed a wish, which might sound as an admonition to Togliatti’s ears: “I think that the wish that all the socialists and all the democrats should address to all the communists all around the world is that the latter would be able to understand on time what the current situation taught us all, and they will not turn themselves from actors of a great popular revolution to obstacles on the path toward socialism”.³⁷

This quotation points out two interesting concepts politically-speaking: for the first time since October 25th, the word “democrats” came alongside “socialists”; secondly, and very importantly, Nenni seemed to be moving toward a disavowal of the PCI as a reliable referent of the socialist movement in Italy. Indeed, Basso seems to be suggesting that the PCI confused submission to the Soviet Union with socialism. This concept of a sort of socialist “succession” as legitimate reference-point of the left clear appeared one year later, at the International Socialist Conference of Vienna (November 1957): the socialist parties (including the PSI) “protest[ed] against the cruel terror which the communist counter-revolution employ[ed] to take revenge on the fighters for Hungary’s freedom”.³⁸ Significantly enough, the PSI seemed to be suggesting that the PCI’s position actually implied a counter-revolutionary effort – what the communists pretended to be fighting –

³⁷ Lelio Basso, *Aver coraggio*, “Avanti!”, October 27th, 1956, p. 1. The article is very significant, not just for its informative content, but also for the author. Indeed, Lelio Basso was one of the most important men within the PSI establishment.

³⁸ Text of the resolution of the Socialist International Conference of Vienna (November 1957), p. 3, par. 1 “On Hungary and the victims of the political persecution”, “Filippo Turati” Foundation (Rome), serie 20; sub. 2: *conferenze internazionali*; archival unit no. 19.

because of its repressive nature; by implication, the PSI pretended to have “inherited” a role the PCI had lost.

These factors proved to be important in order to boost the tendency of the PSI to look to its right, precisely at the PSDI, as a potential ally, by implication missing the PCI.

In addition, the *Avanti* issue of October 27th contained a sort of ultimatum: the newspaper announced an official position from Pietro Nenni to be taken one day later. Therefore, Togliatti had still some hours to move away from the USSR. But the First Secretary of the Italian Communist Party did not. Furthermore, his position seemed to have weakened in his own party by October 27th.³⁹ Indeed, Giuseppe Di Vittorio, President of the CGIL, released a *communiqué*, wherein he maintained Togliatti’s interpretation of the uprising as a counter-revolution, but he clearly pointed out that “social progress and the edification of a society where labor is free from capitalist exploitation are possible just with the active participation of working class and popular masses, as grantor of freedom and national independence”.⁴⁰ In this sense, Di Vittorio, who had not broken with Togliatti yet, seemed to move much closer to Nenni than Togliatti did.

However, by October 27th, the attempt at an exposure of the alleged risk of counter-revolution was so crucial for the PCI’s strategy that its position had to be necessarily radicalized alongside with that of the USSR. In other words, by the time Nenni was just about to break with Togliatti, the latter was exclusively concerned about what has been called before “enforcement of the strongholds”. In the number of the *interessi permanenti*, the PCI-PSI alliance appeared as the one which Botteghe Oscure could sacrifice eventually.

As a result, when the “ultimatum” had expired, the leader of the PSI took a critical chance toward the communist position. In his article *La corrente pura e la sporca schiuma* (“The pure stream and the dirty lather”), he first compared the Soviet intervention in

³⁹ The perception Togliatti had of these events clearly emerges from the text of the telegram he sent to Moscow on October 30th, 1956. The text can be found in Argentieri, p. 136.

⁴⁰ *Presa di posizione della CGIL sugli avvenimenti di Ungheria*, “L’Unità”, October 28th, 1956, p. 1.

Hungary to the attack of the monarchic forces Paris-based commune in 1871, and to the foreign intervention against Béla Kun's socialist republic in 1920.⁴¹

Next, the socialist leader stated that “[according to] Italian socialists it [was] not at stake that revolutions need[ed] to be defended, but [it was at stake] the principle that the defense of the working class revolution either relied on the shields and hearts of the workers or it [was] impossible”.⁴²

In sum, Nenni considered the Hungarian democratic movement as the “pure stream” of socialism, aiming at the improvement of socialist society; the Soviet troops, as well as their Italian allies, were considered to be the “dirty lather”, which had to be washed away by pure water.

In this sense, the PSI provided further evidence that its political culture was in the middle of the leftist political spectrum: between the Saragat's PSDI (on the right side) and Togliatti's PCI (on the left side), but quite distant from both of them. In the circumstances of 1956, the PCI appeared in the eyes of Nenni as an unreliable counter-part. Therefore, Nenni stopped considering the negotiations with Togliatti as a serious political option. Consequently, the position over Hungary proved to be the main reason which had been keeping the PCI isolated on the national scenario from 1956 up to Berlinguer's *compromesso storico*.⁴³

⁴¹ Pietro Nenni, *La corrente pura e la sporca acqua*, “Avanti!”, October 28th, 1956, p. 1.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ By *compromesso storico* (“historical compromise”), Italian historiography named the gradual dismissal of the *conventio ad excludendum* by the DC in return of a cooperation of the PCI in the efforts to protect Italian democracy from political terrorism (in particular of the extreme leftist *Brigate Rosse*). Enrico Berlinguer, leader of the PCI, partly broke with the USSR, and opened to Eurocommunism in 1973; later on, in 1976, the PCI gave its vote of confidence (without a participation in the government) to the government headed by Giulio Andreotti and composed by DC men only. It was actually a government formed in emergency for facing the terrorist threat. With that move, the political isolation of the PCI came to an end.

Conclusion

During the first phase of the uprising, the PCI employed a strategy intended to enforce its “strongholds”, that is to protect its *interessi permanenti* (public credibility and ideological affiliation, linkage with the USSR, system of alliance). Nevertheless, the set of options Botteghe Oscure actually had was quite limited by two factors that were not under the control of Togliatti’s party: by October 28th, the situation in Hungary was still so unstable that the Central Committee of the USSR itself had not been able to define clearly a coherent strategy for facing the crisis; the news coming from Budapest was so impressive that they exposed the contradictions of the PCI’s position.

In this context, Togliatti needed to rely on *L’Unità* as a means to maintain the public credibility of the *partito nuovo*, the ideological affiliation of followers, and the confidence of the popular base toward the political establishment.

The communist newspaper attempted at constructing an “artificial truth” about the Hungarian events, which would provide the PCI’s position with a possible ideological coherence. But the uncertainty of the political evolution in Hungary and the graveness of the contradictions forced the PCI to radicalize its statements alongside with the Soviet ones: concessions to intellectual honesty were not considered to be an option, because even the admission of a partial truth might have been destructive for the public credibility of the party.

At the same time, the constraints that influenced the PCI’s strategy in this phase of the crisis negatively affected the system of alliance Togliatti intended to construct. Indeed, the PCI happened to be politically isolated after the outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution, particularly due to its firm support to the Soviet line. As a result, while social-democrats (and later PSI as well) moved toward the center-left coalitions of government, the PCI

remained far from the government positions. Nevertheless, strategically-speaking, this isolation was perceived as a choice more convenient than the alternative: in other words, to be the only total opponent of the DC and its allies was considered to be still better than to endanger party discipline and the ideological foundations of the PCI's legacy.

*Third chapter***THE PCI FROM THE STALEMATE TO THE COUNTER-OFFENSIVE***Why and how the Italian Communist Party “reversed” the impact of the Hungarian crisis*

This chapter is focused on the evolution of the PCI's strategy in the context of the complex political changes taking place in Hungary in very late October 1956. Indeed, by October 28th, Botteghe Oscure had stigmatized the uprising against the Hungarian Workers' Party, but it was still officially supporting Nagy and Kádár in their attempts to persuade the insurgents to lay down the weapons.¹

Nevertheless, the scenario changed very fast, and the problem in the scope of this chapter is why and how the PCI carried out the passage from a defensive to an offensive phase of the “crisis management”. This issue is actually as relevant as controversial in order to understand whether the Italian Communist Party remained a “passive” agent during the whole Hungarian crisis or it took considered decisions aiming at given political objectives. Therefore, this problem interjects the debate existing in the historiography on the features of communism in Italy into the context of the Cold War and of emerging Eurocommunism.

In order to develop this issue, firstly, I will focus on the ambiguities of the PCI's position between October 29th, when the USSR was still withdrawing troops in spite of the collapse of the Hungarian Workers' Party, and October 31st, when the Presidium of the CPSU CC “promised” Togliatti to reconsider the withdrawal. In this first section, I will analyze the ambivalent boosts toward radicalization and prudence in the position of the PCI.

Secondly, I will focus on the factors (Hungarian as well as international) that let the PCI carry out a counter-offensive after the attack of the “bourgeois” forces. In the second section, I will examine objectives and features of this offensive. I will explain why and how

¹ O. Vangelista, *Imre Nagy parla alla radio di Budapest*, “L'Unità”, October 29th, 1956, p. 7.

the PCI managed to provide political and moral legitimization to the awaited Soviet military intervention, and to “convert” the Hungarian crisis into an “Italian issue”, in order to create empathy between the victims of the “white terror” and Italian communists.

Uncertainty and radicalization in the PCI's position

October 29th was definitely a day of tension at the headquarters of the Italian Communist Party. Togliatti considered the Soviet withdrawal from Hungary to be an apparent sign of indecision, which Western powers would interpret as a weakness. This might have provided the West with the opportunity either to “win” Hungary to the Western camp or, at least, to minimize Soviet influence on that country.²

The Soviet tentative choices of October 28th might have an impact on the PCI as well: Togliatti had been pretending for years that the Soviet influence in the so-called “satellites” was sustained by a real democratic spirit, and the legacy of the PCI was strictly linked to the international prestige of the “motherland” of socialism. But the failure in the military attempt to regain control made clear that the Soviet influence on Hungary would not exist at all without a strong military presence of the Red Army.

In this sense, the ideological cost of the Soviet withdrawal might be huge: the PCI could hardly explain to its popular base why the masses voluntarily moved against the HWP, and struggled in order to knock down its authority. Indeed, the only possible explanation implied the exposure of the real face of the Soviet domination: a truth Botteghe Oscure did not want nor could admit.

Such an admission would create an ideological leak in the set of values of the PCI, and would affect also the *interessi permanenti*: the ideological and moral foundations of the

² Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 522. Kissinger defined the “geopolitical competition” after the 1955 Geneva Summit as follows: “a gain for one side was widely perceived as being a loss for the other”. Therefore, the Soviet strategic comedown in Hungary (due to either a Finnish-type or Austrian-type move away from Moscow) would break the stalemate in Europe.

party's legacy and the linkage with the USSR. Therefore, the PCI risked suffering a further strategic comedown, after the relation with the PSI had already cooled-off.

After the beginning of the Operation "Wave" (the first intervention of October 23rd) and the changes in both the government and HWP leadership, Togliatti preferred the intervention to go on.³ In fact, the Soviet – Hungarian negotiations caused a serious embarrassment to the Italian communists: as Togliatti himself wrote to Moscow, "In the very moment in which we defined the riot as a counter-revolution, our position was different from that of the Hungarian [Workers'] [P]arty and government, and it is now the Hungarian government itself that glorifies the uprising".⁴ This contradiction would be easily perceived by leftist public opinion, therefore, it would affect very negatively the public credibility of the party. In this context, Hungary could be sacrificed on the altar of the defense of the *partito nuovo*.

Nevertheless, the events of October 28th – 29th had changed the scenario again: the Red Army was withdrawing from Budapest and – at least officially – the USSR opened negotiations with the Hungarian government.

The new circumstances were a factor of confusion for the PCI, since it could no longer depict the insurgents as a minority nor the USSR as the international power involved in the fight against counter-revolution. Therefore, the PCI strategically moved in two directions: firstly, an attempt to persuade Moscow to invade Hungary again; secondly, the definition of a new communication strategy which would be able to combine defense of the communist legacy (of both the PCI and the USSR) with a sort of "open-door" approach to the Hungarian crisis as a whole.

³ F. Argentieri, p. 136. The text of the telegram is available in Argentieri's book. Togliatti wrote: "in my opinion the Hungarian government is moving along a reactionary road. I would like to know whether you agree or you are more optimistic". The telegram shows Togliatti's concerns for the Soviet attitude toward the uprising and, even without mentioning the word "intervention", the Italian leader seemed to be suggesting the Soviets to stop the Hungarian reactionary tendencies.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

The PCI made its first move as soon as there was clear perception of the radical changes in Hungary: by October 29th, the State Security Authority had been abolished; the HWP had proved to be deeply fragmented and in need of a full reconstruction; the abolition of the one-party system still appeared to the new Hungarian government as the only possible solution for persuading the insurgents to lay down the weapons.⁵

As Botteghe Oscure perceived the risk that the party might have fallen in the deadlock of a further contradiction (that is, the USSR negotiating with the counter-revolution), Togliatti in person addressed a telegram to Khrushchev (October 30th) asking for a reconsideration of the withdrawal due to the huge risk of a counter-revolution in Hungary.⁶

Significantly enough, Botteghe Oscure experienced a process of ideological radicalization⁷ as soon as the Hungarian government (formally still in the hands of the communists) and the Soviet leadership seemed to be closer to find an agreement. Indeed, the Soviet bargain with the “counter-revolution” would be hardly compatible with the myth of the Soviet fight against imperialism and fascism.

In the context of increasing pressure on the PCI due the celebrations of the bourgeois press⁸, the impact of the Hungarian-Soviet tentative settlement⁹ on the leftist public opinion might lead to another leak in the legacy of the PCI: what was true? Italian communists could believe either that the insurgents were fascists or that the USSR would come to terms with them, but they could not believe the two together.

⁵ Johanna C. Granville, *The first domino. International decision making during the Hungarian crisis of 1956* (College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 2004), pp. 79-85.

⁶ Argentieri, p. 136.

⁷ F. Argentieri, p. 67.

⁸ Indro Montanelli, *Questa è la storia della battaglia di Budapest...*, “Il Corriere della Sera”, July 23rd, 2001, p. 3.

⁹ By “Soviet-Hungarian settlement” is meant hereby the tentative agreement reached between the Soviet delegation of “experts” (Mikoyan and Suslov) and the Hungarian government about the withdrawal of the Red Army. Historians now know that the Soviet will to negotiate was a tactical move to take some more time for a final decision. In the telegram of October 29th, Mikoyan suggested the Kremlin to “[give] instructions to the minister of defense to cease sending troops into Hungary, continuing to concentrate them on Soviet territory. As long as the Hungarian troops occupy a nonhostile position, these troops will be sufficient. [...] We do not have a final opinion of the situation”. See J. C. Granville, CWIHP, p. 32.

Therefore, it is paradoxical just at first sight to state that, by October 30th, the PCI was actually more radical than the PCUS itself: indeed, while the latter would have possibly been ready to make some concessions in return for keeping Hungary under Moscow's influence, the Italian party needed to prove that real communists would never come to terms with rightist forces. In this sense, by October 29th – October 30th, Togliatti must have been very nervous about the fact that the USSR was precisely doing what he was actually trying to prevent Italian communists from doing.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the position of the PCI was limited by a further constraint because, after having sent the telegram, the PCI had to be in a waiting-position: by October 29th – 30th, nobody was able to foresee how the Kremlin would solve the Hungarian problem. Therefore, an official radical position over the political changes would be a risky move for Botteghe Oscure.

In this context, the PCI did the second move of this controversial phase of the crisis: the quest for a new communication strategy. This interpretation seems to be coherent with the ambivalent content of the communist press during these days: there is a sense of mixture of opposite impulses toward radicalization and need for moderation.

These ambivalent features were present already in the leading article by Orfeo Vangelista released by *L'Unità* on October 29th.¹¹ In particular, the content of the piece of writing partly differs from the previous ones because of its focus, much more on the (pretended)¹² reconstruction of the events than on the political assessment. On the other hand, the article also presents clear elements of radicalization: for instance, Vangelista used the expression

¹⁰ The text of the telegram (particularly, the quotation reported) actually shows Togliatti's disappointment in this contradiction.

¹¹ O. Vangelista, *Nuovo passo del governo Nagy per accordarsi con gli insorti*, "L'Unità", October 29th, 1956, p. 1.

¹² In his reports from Prague, Vangelista often related facts that never happened, but to increase the scale of "horror" in the narration of the uprising. For instance, according to the reports by Vangelista, on the October 29th issue of the newspaper, "Farkas, both father and son, had been executed in jail" (p. 7). Similarly, but even more interestingly, Gerő had died twice: the first on the issue of October 25th ("Erő Gerő executed by a group of counter-revolutionaries!", p. 1) and the second on the issue of November 4th ("Erő Gerő killed by the counter-revolutionaries", p. 1).

“*marcia su Budapest*”¹³ for describing the attitude toward Nagy of the Győr-based national committee headed by the former local HWP-leader Attila Szigethy.¹⁴ The expression “march on Budapest” had the purpose to recall in the minds of the leftist readers the fascist coup of 1922, which started with a march from Naples to Rome, the so-called “*marcia su Roma*”.

But the main source of the ambivalent attitude of the PCI in this phase of “forced” *empasse* is definitely Togliatti’s in-depth analysis of the PCI’s position over the Hungarian crisis. Indeed, on October 30th, the Secretary of the Italian Communist Party spoke out through his article (*Sui fatti di Ungheria*)¹⁵ in the communist review *Rinascita*.

Togliatti tried to defend the legacy of the party and the reputation of the USSR in Italy. At the very beginning of the text, Togliatti warned Italian communists about the “reactionary, anticommunist, antisocialist, anti-Soviet wave trying, in the confusion of the events, to influence (*trascinare*) public opinion”.¹⁶ Indeed, he pointed out that the origin of the Hungarian suffering was to be retraced in the Western promises of a “liberation from socialism”¹⁷, which inflamed the riot against the legitimate power. For the first (and last) time, Togliatti recognized also that “non counter-revolutionary workers joined the riot”.¹⁸

¹³ O. Vangelista, “L’Unità”, October 29th, p. 1.

¹⁴ Attila Szigethy was a local-based leader of the HWP operating in the North-Western Duna Region, in the city of Győr. After the outbreak of the uprising, Szigethy tookover the local national committee, and headed the revolutionary movement. During the days of the uprising, Szigethy’s men were able to replace the “official” administration with a new one, and they drove the transition from the “old” to the “new” system. According to the “bourgeois” press (in particular, “Il Corriere della Sera”), Győr might become *de facto* an alternative power to that of the capital. Although this interpretation exaggerated the organizational capacities and the real strength of the local-based national committee, it is interesting to notice that, in many cities, former HWP-men headed the revolutionary councils: beyond Szigethy, Földvári had a similar role in Miskolc; Sándor Rácz headed the Central Workers’ Council of Budapest, several groups of fighters were composed by members of the working class, in particular those of *Csepel* and *Corvin köz*; the fighters of *Tűzoltó utca* were admittedly communists. Therefore, the revolt had not an anti-communist characterization as such, but it was definitely an anti-Soviet uprising.

¹⁵ Palmiro Togliatti, *Sui fatti di Ungheria*, “Rinascita”, issue of November 1956, collection of the issues of the PCI review at the National Library (Rome), pp. 492-493.

¹⁶ P. Togliatti, p. 492.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ P. Togliatti, p. 493.

On the other hand, the article contains a strong admonition addressed to all those (particularly, the bourgeois forces) who cast doubts on the democratic foundations of socialism in Central-Eastern Europe, and on the conduct of the role of the USSR: Togliatti defined “grotesque”¹⁹ the idea that “the popular and socialist regimes can be compared to fascism, and the Soviet Union to an imperialist country”.²⁰

The most relevant point emerging from the analysis of this source concerns the anxiety of the PCI for a stronger Soviet position over Hungary. Therefore, the article on *Rinascita* is very informative particularly if considered in parallel with the telegram sent on that very same day.

Indeed, both these sources help to highlight constraints and aims that shaped the PCI’s decision-making process: the move toward radicalization appeared as the most natural implication of the interpretation of the events Italian communists gave before the Soviet withdrawal. But the ambiguous Soviet attitude during the “days of the *empasse*” forced the PCI to seek a new strategy.

By October 31st, the time of the “forced prudence” had come to an end. The Italian communist establishment received a reply from Moscow: “In your evaluation of the situation in Hungary and of the Hungarian government’s tendencies to move in a reactionary direction, we are in agreement with you. According to our information, Nagy is occupying a two-faced position and is increasingly falling under the influence of the reactionary forces. For the time being we are not speaking out openly against Nagy, but we will reconcile ourselves with the turn of events toward a reactionary debauch”.²¹

These words gave Togliatti the understandable expectation that the USSR would try to overthrow the Hungarian government due to the most recent political changes in the country. Indeed, on October 31st, the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Soviet party

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ J. C. Granville, CWIHP, p. 33.

gathered again, and decided to move troops into Hungary without a formal declaration of war.²²

The PCI had serious clues of this prospective decision, and this expectation shaped the party's decision-making process: the time of the *empasse* was over, and the Italian Communist Party knew that Hungary as such (including all those communists that failed in consolidating the HWP's power) would become very soon an enemy of the Red Army. In this situational perspective, the PCI adopted an "offensive" strategy.

Definition of the enemy and justification of the intervention: inventing the "white terror" and its implications in Italy

A turn in the PCI's strategy took pace due to a number of factors that changed the overall political context. Indeed, the Italian communists were able to pass from a defensive (October 24th – October 29th) to an offensive position (from October 31st onwards) by exploiting the impact on Italian public opinion of a number of impressive and unforeseeable events taking place in Hungary as well as abroad on October 30th and October 31st.

Firstly, the evolution of the Hungarian crisis provided Botteghe Oscure with a great opportunity for its propaganda: on October 31st, the news incoming to the West about the massacre of *Köztársaság tér* (October 30th) appeared as an important piece of evidence on the side of *L'Unità* and *L'Humanité*. In addition, the abolition of the one-party system (October 30th) "allowed" Western communists to target Hungary as such (not the insurgents only): since the Hungarian government was no-longer communist, it had become a "deviationist" and illegitimate power.

²² C. Békés, J. Rainer, M. Byrne, document no. 53, October 31st, 1956, pp. 307-310.

Secondly, the USSR found quite a widespread consensus among the socialist countries on the prospective condemnation of Nagy's government. Indeed, by October 30th, the Soviet leadership had already considered Beijing's position on the Moscow – “satellites” relations²³, and it was going to obtain both Tito's (November 2nd) and Gomułka's (November 1st) “no impediment” to repress the new-born Hungarian democracy.²⁴ Therefore, all socialist leaders, in both the East and the West, agreed on one point: the Hungarian uprising was a counter-revolution, and the repression was justified regardless of the human cost.

Third, the parallelism between the Soviet withdrawal from Hungary and the French-British attack on Egypt in support of Israel provided the communist propaganda against “Western imperialism” with lifeblood. By implication, the USSR appeared as the power engaged in a fight against a worldwide aggression, possibly from Suez to Budapest.

The main concern of the communist offensive was to restore the legacy of communism in Italy. Therefore, the counter-offensive of the PCI had two main objectives: on the Italian scenario, the PCI needed to counter-attack bourgeois forces by providing public opinion with the apparent evidence that communists had been not been the perpetrators but the victims in the Hungarian tragedy; on the other hand, Togliatti correctly read the clues hidden in the words of the Soviet telegram of October 31st, and he used his political influence in order to prepare the ground for a political and moral legitimization of the second Soviet intervention.

The moves of this offensive strategy were mainly characterized by two features. First of all, the communist press used such “verbal violence” that it definitely differed from the relative “prudence” of the previous phase.²⁵ This was a crucial element of the communist

²³ J. C. Granville, CWIHP, p. 94.

²⁴ J. C. Granville, CWIHP, pp. 95-97, and footnote no. 42, p. 217 (minute of the meeting between Tito and the Soviet delegation explaining the terms of the meeting of November 2nd).

²⁵ F. Argentieri, p. 74.

shock-tactic: according to Botteghe Oscure, a violent propaganda might have partly bridged the credibility-gap in the communist interpretation of the crisis or, at least, it would call potentially into question the bourgeois interpretation. The major categorization used in order to fulfill this objective was the “white terror”, continuously illustrated with the image of the bodies hanged before the MDP House of *Köztársaság tér*. Indeed, in the perspective of the PCI followers, the “white terror” sounded as the most natural implication of the “*marcia su Budapest*”²⁶ Vangelista had mentioned on October 29th.

The second feature of the communist propaganda was the usage of “Italian categories” to categorize the evolution of the Hungarian crisis: in its news-reports, *L’Unità* over-stressed some aspects of the Hungarian political changes that might recall in the eyes of the Italian leftist opinion the features of the political confrontation between leftist and rightist forces in Italy. In particular, the role of the Church and of the primate of Hungary, Cardinal József Mindszenty, was hugely exaggerated as well as that of anti-communist feelings in the uprising. Nevertheless, both these distortions were necessary because the propaganda needed to speak a language Italian communists could understand very well: communist struggle in Hungary had to be theoretically connected to the communist struggle in Italy. Therefore, a distortive notion of the enemy was to be applied: *L’Unità* did not try to explain the complicated nature of the anti-Soviet feelings of a wide number of Hungarian comrades, and preferred to categorize the enemy in Hungary with typical elements of the political confrontation in Italy. The purpose of this second feature of the offensive was to create empathy between Italian and Hungarian communists (at least, those who were still on the side of the USSR).

²⁶ O. Vangelista, *Nuovo passo del governo Nagy per accordarsi con gli insorti*, “*L’Unità*”, October 29th, p. 1.

The analysis of the issues of *L'Unità*²⁷ helps to highlight how the distorted categorization of the “enemy” was employed in order to give concreteness to the false myth of the “white terror”.²⁸

Indeed, the illustrative signs of the communist offensive clearly showed on the first page of November 1st issue of *L'Unità*. The main concern of the communist press was “peace”, and this is not surprising in the context of the general patterns of the communist strategy intended to “exploit” the Suez crisis: “The PCI calls to fight for peace”²⁹, the main headline said. According to Botteghe Oscure, international peace was endangered by the worldwide action of imperialist forces. This is the gist of the *communiqué* released on November 1st: the Hungarian events provided clear evidence that “every move back of the socialist camp, every action against the Soviet Union, weakens the forces of peace, [and] increases the risk of war”.³⁰ Significantly enough, in these words there was already a sense of preventive justification of the Soviet military intervention.

The “campaign for peace” was intended to criticize also the Italian DC-headed government³¹: according to the communists, even thanks to a silent acceptance, Rome was guilty for having provided political support to its “imperialist” allies. Indeed, Pietro Ingrao

²⁷ L. Paolozzi, A. Leiss, pp. 19-20. This distortive strategy was successfully applied by the PCI from November 1st also due to the fact that, by the very last days of October, the organization of the press had undergone relevant changes from the previous phase. Indeed, *L'Unità*, just like all the other main Italian and international newspapers, had sent additional correspondents into Hungary. The communist press organ sent to Budapest, alongside with Adriana Castellani, the influential journalist Alberto Jacoviello, and the correspondent of other communist reviews that accompanied *L'Unità*, Giorgio Bontempi of *Paese-Sera* and Sergio Perucchi of *Vie Nuove*. On the one hand, this organizational improvement was essential for the communist press because it would provide the Rome-based editors with reports about the “white terror” from eye-witnesses. However, this move led to controversial outcomes: on the other hand, the contrast between the reality and the interpretation of the PCI was so sharp that some journalists, in particular the faithful Alberto Jacoviello and Adriana Castellani, radicalized even more their positions; on the other hand, Giorgio Bontempi and Sergio Perucchi gradually broke with the PCI during the remaining days of the Hungarian crisis. The daily work of Italian journalists in Budapest during the uprising is the topic of Sergio Perucchi's memoirs, *Dove abitava l'anima del mondo*. Some information about the changes in the press organization after October 30th, and on the impact of these changes on propaganda, can be found in F. Argentieri, pp. 61-62. The experience of the Italian journalists in Budapest was also dramatized by Indro Montanelli who wrote the play script *I sogni muoiono all'alba* (1961), realized as a movie by Mario Craveri and Enrico Gras.

²⁸ F. Argentieri, pp. 59-60.

²⁹ “*L'Unità*”, November 1st, 1956, p. 1.

³⁰ *Communiqué* signed by the General Directive Board of the Italian Communist Party on October 31st and released by “*L'Unità*” on November 1st, p. 1.

³¹ Italian government was composed by a coalition of DC-PSDI-PLI, headed by Antonio Segni.

fiercely attacked, on November 2nd, whom he named “the advocates of the aggression”³² (“*Gli avvocati dell’aggressione*”), in particular the new-born Italian State Radio and Television Broadcasting (RAI), which stayed focused on the Hungarian case without a sufficient coverage of the aggression on Suez, Ingrao argued.

In brief, the main purpose of the “campaign for peace” was to attempt to “reverse” the political cost of the international crises: more precisely, on the one hand, to discharge the PCI from the political cost of Soviet intervention in Hungary; on the other hand, to charge the DC with an equivalent cost for its (just theoretical) support to the French and British intervention in Egypt.

In addition, the communist press used a clear falsification³³ of the news coming from Hungary. The issues of *L’Unità* of November 1st and 2nd are still illustrative examples: according to Vangelista, Hungarian sources (telegraphed to Belgrade and, from Belgrade, to Prague) reported 130 communists hanged³⁴ on October 30th, and a prominent role of Cardinal Mindszenty in enflaming the spirit of the counter-revolution with his speeches about giving birth to a new Catholic party.³⁵

³² P. Ingrao, *Gli avvocati dell’aggressione*, “L’Unità”, November 2nd, 1956, p. 8.

³³ By “falsification” is meant hereby false news, that is facts that never happened. Nevertheless, *L’Unità* reported them as breaking-news on several issues. Here is the list of some illustrative examples (already introduced in a footnote of this chapter, but still repeated for a further clarification): For instance, according to the reports by Vangelista, on the October 29th issue of the newspaper, “Farkas, both father and son, had been executed in jail” (p. 7). Similarly, but even more interestingly, Gerő had died twice: the first on the issue of October 25th (“Erő Gerő executed by a group of counter-revolutionaries!”, p. 1) and the second on the issue of November 4th (“Erő Gerő killed by the counter-revolutionaries”, p. 1).

³⁴ O. Vangelista, *I controrivoluzionari impiccano centotrenta comunisti che avevano difeso fino all’ultimo la sede del partito*, “L’Unità”, November 1st, 1956, p. 1. This is also an example of the kind of falsifications communist press carried out: mob-violence against the defenders of the House of the Party of *Köztársaság tér* was a matter of fact, but just a small group of ÁVH-agents was actually hanged by the crowd.

³⁵ O. Vangelista, *Il cardinale Mindszenty vuol fondare un partito. Imre Nagy ha denunciato il Patto di Varsavia*, “L’Unità”, November 2nd, 1956, p. 8. This provides an example of deliberate attack on Mindszenty in order to “convert” the Hungarian crisis into an “Italian issue”: Mindszenty never proposed to enter the political arena – as the historian György Dalos (*Ungheria 1956*, Rome, Donzelli, p. 116) remarked. Nevertheless, Western press introduced the idea that Mindszenty could run a Catholic party (*Mindszenty Sees a Better Future*, in “New York Times”, November 1st, 1956), but Mindszenty never said this, nor did he show a particularly negative attitude toward Nagy. The Cardinal just remarked that the Hungarian government was still full of men of the old regime (speech of November 3rd – sources on the website www.rev.hu). Nevertheless, the PCI employed a huge extent of verbal violence against Mindszenty. The best example of this can be found on November 1st issue of *L’Unità*. Three concepts are actually associated: “completion of the Soviet withdrawal” – “Mindszenty back to the capital” – “Trash of the old regime come back” (p. 8).

Therefore, communist journalists strictly connected the notion of “white terror”, characterized by mob-violence carried out by “fascist” insurgents, with the Italian notion of the “enemy of communism”, that is the Church and centrist political forces. Thanks to this approach, Botteghe Oscure obtained a sort of shift in the political debate: the Hungarian counter-revolution was not just a crisis taking place in Budapest, but it involved Italy as well.

By transforming the Hungarian crisis into an “Italian issue”, the PCI tried to persuade its followers that the popular forces of Hungary could not be on the side of the insurgents and of the “deviationist” government. Therefore, the false myth of the “white terror” helped to provide the awaited Soviet intervention with a moral justification³⁶: the invasion of Hungary, as well as its human cost, was morally acceptable because the USSR had the moral obligation to “stop chaos and white terror”.³⁷

However, Togliatti and Ingrao accompanied the moral justification with a political legitimization of the Soviet intervention of November 4th. In order to prepare the ground for this interpretation, *L'Unità* depicted the choices of Nagy's government as a betrayal of the communist cause.³⁸

In particular, the problem of the Hungarian neutrality was crucial: the chronological sequence of the events, as it appeared to the Western journalists who lived the crisis mostly from the windows of the *Duna hotel*, seemed to be suggesting that the Soviet invasion of November 4th occurred as a consequence of the Hungarian neutrality (November 1st).³⁹ Indeed, the foreign observers were not in a position to know that in the villages of Eastern Hungary the march of Soviet units had been already apparent for three days. In fact, the

³⁶ O. Vangelista, *Le truppe sovietiche intervengono in Ungheria per porre fine al caos e al terrore bianco*, “L'Unità”, November 5th, 1956, p. 1.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ F. Argentieri, p. 69.

³⁹ Giulio Nascimbeni, Montanelli “*I sogni rinascono all'alba*”, “Il Corriere della Sera”, August 25th, 1994, p. 25.

Hungarian government decided to proclaim neutrality after a meeting with Andropov, who did not provide any sufficient justification of the troop movements in Hungarian territory: as soon as the Soviet intent to attack Budapest became clear, the government declared neutrality in the hope to get political support from the international community.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, the chronological “misunderstanding” had a strong impact on journalism: the newspaper headed by Ingrao considered the Hungarian break with the Warsaw Pact (November 1st) as the natural implication of the counter-revolutionary tendencies existing in the spirit of the uprising and in the new government. Therefore, it seemed to be understandable that the USSR would invade Hungary after Budapest had issued a declaration of neutrality.⁴¹

This “misunderstanding” affected historiography as well, because the interpretation endorsed by *L’Unità* in fact appeared as the most logical reconstruction of the events. Indeed, historians, regardless of their background and beliefs, did not have full information about the decision-making of the Hungarian government, because relevant sources emerged just recently. Therefore, historians now know that the Hungarian declaration of neutrality was actually the consequence of the Soviet intervention, and not the cause of the attack.⁴² Nevertheless, in the Italian context, the opposite interpretation (neutrality as cause of the attack) is still very solid, in spite of its inconsistency in a source-grounded investigation.⁴³

⁴⁰ J. C. Granville, CWIHP, report by Y. Andropov, November 1st, 1956, p. 33.

⁴¹ O. Vangelista, *Imre Nagy ha denunciato il Patto di Varsavia*, “L’Unità”, November 2nd, 1956, p. 8. The article describes a fictional situation: empty streets because of the fear of the terrorists; anarchy in the Hungarian government; ongoing Soviet withdrawal; emergence of a strong role of the Church as a political agent; mass-killings of communists. The Hungarian neutrality was considered to be the final outcome of a process of reactionary degeneration which made the intervention unavoidable.

⁴² C. Békés, J. Rainer, M. Byrne, document no. 53 (Working notes of the CPSU CC Presidium meeting, October 31st); no. 65 (Report by Yurii Andropov to the CPSU CC Presidium, November 1st); no. 66 (Telegram from Nagy declaring neutrality), pp. 307-311 and, pp. 330-334. The ambiguous attitude of the ambassador Andropov, indeed, boosted the proneness of Nagy’s government toward the declaration of neutrality (November 1st). Significantly, Budapest took the chance to issue such a declaration just as soon as several local reports witnessed the troops movements from Záhony toward Budapest.

⁴³ This point is crucial in Federigo Argentieri, p. 50. Nevertheless, the historian Antonello Biagini still argues that the Hungarian declaration of neutrality had a role in the Soviet decision for the second intervention (*Storia dell’Ungheria contemporanea*, Milan, Bompiani, 2006 – Argentieri’s review of Biagini’s book: http://www.sissco.it/index.php?id=1293&tx_wfqbe_pi1%5Bidrecensione%5D=2803).

In sum, the moral and political legitimization of the second Soviet intervention were constructed in the Italian communist press through several distortions of the Hungarian events.⁴⁴ All the elements of the PCI's final position on the Hungarian uprising were later summarized in a speech of Giorgio Napolitano in December 1956: "the Soviet intervention in Hungary avoided the creation of a flash point of revolt, and let the USSR stop the imperialist aggression in Middle East. Therefore, [the intervention] contributed to save Hungary from falling into the chaos of the counter-revolution, and it also contributed to a decisive extent not just to defend the military and strategic interests of the USSR, but to save international peace as well".⁴⁵

Conclusion

The Italian Communist Party was able to realize the passage from a defensive to an offensive position thanks to the break of the stalemate in the Soviet decision-making: as soon as the Kremlin gave Botteghe Oscure the expectation of new measures to be taken, the Italian communists gave up the situational "prudence" which had characterized the former phase.

L'Unità framed the communist offensive in the international context of the crisis in Middle East, and it tried to "demonstrate" the imperialist spirit and objectives of the

⁴⁴ However, non-communist press related the events taking place in Hungary with a number of distortions as well. In particular, non-communist journalists and writers endorsed a sort of "liberal" interpretation, arguing that the Hungarian revolution was intended to the establishment of a neutral or possibly Western-like political system. Therefore, they neglected as well to recognize the importance of the workers' councils and of revisionism from within the ranks of the Hungarian Workers' Party. A good example of this can be the controversy between Argentieri and the journalist of the "Corriere della Sera" Giuseppe Russo (November 1996) – Argentieri, pp. 108-110.

⁴⁵ The complete statement of the current President of the Italian Republic can be found here: http://www.storialibera.it/epoca_contemporanea/comunismo_nel_mondo/est_europa/ungheria_1956/articolo.php?id=732. Just fragments of the speech have been reported by the main newspapers. For instance, the following is an article issued by "La Repubblica" on October 29th, 2006, few months after the election of Giorgio Napolitano: <http://www.repubblica.it/2006/06/sezioni/politica/presidente/napolitano-ungheria/napolitano-ungheria.html>.

Western powers. This interpretation was intended to restore, in the eyes of the leftist followers, the image of the USSR as the only international agent of peace and grantor of the post-1945 democratic order.

Through its final position the Italian Communist Party constructed a political and moral legitimization of the Soviet intervention. On the one hand, a political legitimization was necessary in order to protect one of the *interessi permanenti*: the linkage with the USSR and its prestige in Italy. On the other hand, the moral justification was crucial in order to make the human cost of the intervention as the outcome of the rightist coup, not of the Soviet war on Hungary. In this sense, the PCI intended to defend its *interesse permanente* in shielding from criticism the ideological foundations of the party's legacy, among which the morality was an essential component.

The analysis of the communist counter-offensive is also interesting because it highlights that the PCI had actually an “active” role during the days of the Hungarian uprising. Therefore, this interpretation challenges some historiographical streams. First of all, the historiographical stream of the “mistake”: since the PCI took part in the Soviet decision-making process, and chose a given line among several available options. In addition, this interpretation shows that the attitude of the PCI was very conservative and quite dogmatic by late 1956, therefore, such a view is in contrast with the historiography which endorsed the idea of a sort of democratic and reformist spirit widespread in the ranks of Italian communism from the swing of Salerno (1944) or, at the latest, in the very aftermath of the “secret” speech.

Fourth Chapter

DISSENT AND PARTY-DISCIPLINE: ANY DEMOCRACY IN THE *CENTRALISMO*

DEMOCRATICO?

The problem of freedom in the ranks of the Italian Communist Party and in the connections with its network

The communist offensive had helped the Italian Communist Party to keep the ideological affiliation of its followers. However, the official position of the PCI had controversial consequences, particularly because of the gradual emergence of a problem of freedom within the ranks of the party: the dramatic nature of the Hungarian events, and their impact on the Italian audience, “forced” the leadership to stigmatize dissent in order to establish the PCI’s truth about the Hungarian crisis. Therefore, the contrast between authority and individual freedom became seldom intolerable in the aftermath of the crisis.¹

In fact, in order to appear as a reliable political agent in the eyes of the leftist public opinion, the Italian Communist Party needed to show a homogenous position. Nevertheless, the “second storm” of 1956 opened a definitive leak in the ideological affiliation on which the connection between the party and its cultural network was based.

In other words, the controversial position of Botteghe Oscure led to an internal party crisis on the notion of *centralismo democratico* (“democratic centralism”) and on its actual practice within the ranks of the PCI.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the impact on the Hungarian events, on the political apparatus (the party-organization itself) and on its network (including a number of institutions such as the CGIL as well as students’ councils and intellectuals). More

¹ A. Guerra, p. 279.

precisely, I intend to focus on the contradictions between individual freedom, proclaimed ideals and realism in the PCI's position over Hungary.

Therefore, I will analyze the emergence of dissent within the ranks of the party and the attitude of the political establishment toward the "dissidents". This point is actually crucial in order to assess whether the Italian Communist Party was really moving toward a sort of "Eurocommunist" paradigm or, conversely, the events of 1956 contributed to strengthen the hardliners within the party.

In order to conduct this analysis I will stress the areas where a crisis of the *centralismo democratico* became apparent by late 1956: firstly, the connection between the PCI and the communist-friendly Italian *intelligenza*, with particular attention to the paradoxical nature and outcome of the PCI's cultural policies in the context of the Hungarian Revolution. In this section, I will illustrate as well the genesis and evolution of the most significant document of dissent in 1956, the "*Manifesto dei Centouno*".

Secondly, I will move to the analysis of the meeting of the PCI's Cultural Commission of November 15th and 16th, with particular reference to the internal contrast between the official line of the president of the Commission, Mario Alicata, and several "revisionists", such as Calvino, Battaglia, Manacorda.

Thirdly, I will focus on the political crises that affected the PCI before and during the VIII Congress of December 1956, with particular attention to the political ruptures between Togliatti, on the one side, and Di Vittorio and Giolitti, on the other. In this section, I will address the issue of the democratic deficit in the realm of the PCI, and I will stress the persistence of Stalinist-type features in the apparatus and practices of the Italian Communist Party.

Freedom “to agree”: the paradoxical nature of the PCI’s cultural policies and the road toward the “Manifesto dei Centouno”

In January 1955, the PCI appointed Mario Alicata as president of the Cultural Commission with the purpose to carry out a new cultural policy: Alicata, in agreement with Togliatti, intended to apply the theory of *centralismo democratico*² to the connection between the PCI and its cultural network. In principle, Alicata’s line can be summarized as follows: the intellectuals were very welcome in the phase of elaboration of the party line, but dissent was not tolerated as soon as the decision had been taken.³ In other words, they were actually “free” unless they “agreed” with the political stances taken from above.

By implication, the political outcome of Alicata’s line was the attempt at a mobilization of the intellectual in support of the PCI’s positions⁴: influential members of Italian *intelligenza* were considered to be an optimal resource to “validate” the communist stances in the eyes of the Italian public opinion.⁵

Significantly enough, this idyll between the party and leftist intellectuals was not affected by any constraint: by mid-50’s, most of the Italian intellectuals perceived the PCI as the only progressive political agent of the country, therefore, they welcomed its political directions in principle.⁶ In addition, they were spontaneously willing to give a positive

² “Democratic centralism” is a decision-making process introduced in the communist doctrine in order to “democratize” the original Marxist notion of “organic centralism”. The latter (organic centralism) consists of an anti-democratic decision-making since the soviet is considered to be entitled to pass all decisions because of it is the only opponent to the forces of the old-regime. Therefore, the mandate of the soviet has no limits in time, subject or procedure. Instead, “democratic centralism” theoretically allows free discussion before the decision. As soon as the entitled institution passed a decision, nobody could dispute it.

³ Emilio Carnevali, *I fatti d’Ungheria e il dissenso degli intellettuali di sinistra. Storia del manifesto dei “101”*, in “MicroMega” (Rome, L’Espresso – gruppo editoriale, no. 9, 2006), available online: <http://temi.repubblica.it/micromega-online/i-fatti-dungheria-e-il-dissenso-allinterno-del-pci-storia-del-manifesto-dei-101/>

⁴ A. Brogi, p. 190.

⁵ A. Vittoria, p. 160

⁶ A. Vittoria, p. 161.

contribution to its political choices: “we do not claim for independence from the party. We claim for the opposite: to be integrated in the life of the party”, as Lucio Coletti put it.⁷

But the explosion of the Hungarian crisis, and particularly the evolution of the historical events, deeply affected the tuning between the party and its cultural network: the Hungarian Revolution changed the terms of cooperation, since the party became more intolerant toward dissent and, at the same time, the intellectuals became more intolerant toward party-discipline.

In other words, the party and many intellectuals were approaching a breaking-point on a problem of principle: the right to individual free choice.

Nevertheless, the break did not take place all at once. Indeed, it was the outcome of a gradual process of process of attrition of the “special” connection between leftist intellectuals and the communist party. The analysis of the genesis of the “*Manifesto dei Centouno*” is very informative in order to understand how the cultural policies and the mechanism of *centralismo democratico* actually worked in the context of leftist *intellighenzia*.

The idea to prepare a document of solidarity in favor of the Hungarian students demonstrating in Budapest came to the minds of the Roman students of “La Sapienza”, in particular to the Marxists of the Students’ Council, where men such as Asor Rosa, Tronti and D’Amelio were sitting.⁸ They sent a letter to the Hungarian Embassy in Rome granting the support of the “Italian progressive students”⁹ to the Hungarian colleagues demonstrating for the improvement of socialism. Indeed, that letter had been written on October 23rd, when the demonstration had not turned into an uprising yet.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ E. Carnevali, “MicroMega”, no. 9, 2006. Interestingly enough, those students, in particular Asor Rosa, are now established journalists and writers belonging to the leftist area.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

After the outbreak of the upheaval, the chief-editor of the communist review *Società*, Carlo Muscetta¹⁰, welcomed the initiative of the students and had the idea to create an informal network of intellectuals to urge the PCI to give political support to the Hungarian students and workers fighting in Budapest.

Later on, by October 27th, Botteghe Oscure had received several complaints from influential leftist intellectuals¹¹ who had invited the party to reconsider its position on the crisis as a whole. According to the testimony of an important eye-witness, Mario Pirani¹², Togliatti was very disappointed by the dissent emerging within the party-friendly cultural network.

In particular, Togliatti as well as Pajetta were concerned about the risk to give the public opinion the impression that the PCI was not homogeneously in agreement with the official interpretation: “each comrade has the right and the duty of giving his opinion, his concerns, his doubts within the organization, but your initiative has a different connotation, because it may lead to a critical situation: to further damage [the party]”, Togliatti wrote in a private letter to Carlo Muscetta.¹³

Giancarlo Pajetta and Giorgio Amendola had an argument with Lucio Coletti and Alberto Caracciolo. In that occasion Pajetta sarcastically commented: “the world is divided in two blocs...were not you aware that Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia are under Russian occupation?”¹⁴

Since Botteghe Oscure did provide any satisfying reply to the complaints, a number of leftist intellectuals chose to open an official debate within the party about the Hungarian crisis. In the night between October 28th and 29th, a group of intellectuals (Cafagna, Coletti,

¹⁰ Paolo Di Stefano, *Confidenze critiche di Carlo Muscetta*, “Corriere della Sera”, July 9th, 2009, p. 41.

¹¹ The most significant complaint came from Paolo Spriano, who addressed a letter to Togliatti.

¹² Mario Pirani, one of the most influential writers of *L'Unità* related to Carnevali his memories about the genesis of the “*Manifesto*”.

¹³ E. Carnevali, “MicroMega”, no. 9, 2006.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

Bretoni, Trombatore, Muscetta, Caracciolo) gathered in Rome, and wrote an official letter of complaint.¹⁵

The content as well as the “procedure” followed in the elaboration of this document are very interesting. As far as the procedure is concerned, it is quite relevant to remark that, at the very beginning of this “operation”, the cultural network did not have any intent to break with their political organization: they wrote a “letter” supposed to remain confidential¹⁶, a topic of discussion between the subscribers (by October 28th, they were one hundred-one), and the party apparatus, in particular the Cultural Commission. In this sense, the informal procedure of *centralismo democratico* in the relation between PCI and cultural network proved to be efficiently applied at the beginning of the crisis: the intellectuals wanted to speak out in order to provide the party with new ideas for a different political line.

Nevertheless, the content of the “*lettera dei Centouno*” was not acceptable for the party in that particular context: the subscribers had asked for a deeper implementation of the internal democratic system (with reference to the need for a further move in the direction indicated by the XX Congress of the PCUS), and for the publication of the letter on *L'Unità*.¹⁷ By issuing the whole document, the party would demonstrate that the internal democratic order was actually effective and working: a new political had been elaborated, proposed, discussed, and finally approved.

But the Hungarian Revolution had strengthened the “centralist” component of the *centralismo democratico* and, by implication, reduced the tolerance toward internal debate. On October 30th, the high-ranks of the PCI and of *L'Unità* met in the offices of the

¹⁵ *Ibidem*. Just in order to give a sense of the importance of the crisis of confidence of these intellectuals toward the PCI, it is interesting to remind that Alberto Caracciolo was the chief-editor of the communist review *Nuovi Argomenti*, which Togliatti had chosen in March 1956 to give his partial and party distorted version of the “secret” speech.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

newspaper based in *via IV Novembre*. Ingrao and Giovanni Berlinguer¹⁸ considered the option of accepting the request of the intellectuals, at least concerning the publication of their letter; Togliatti and Pajetta, visibly disappointed for the “lack of realism”¹⁹ of the intellectuals, opposed the publication and made quite clear that no concession would be done in favor of lines different from the official one.

This stance appeared quite clear also to Paolo Spriano who received from Togliatti, on October 31st, a letter full of dogmatism: “Unfortunately, there are comrades (Togliatti referred to the trouble-makers who prepared the letter of protest) who do not understand our position and our line because they do not understand that our line is dictated by doubtless experience in class struggle”²⁰.

As a consequence, the stubborn attitude of the PCI “trapped” the subscribers into a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, they did not want to break with their party, and they really wanted to give a contribution to the improvement of the party. On the other hand, they had to choose between obedience to party-discipline and their own freedom of assessment of the facts: on October 31st, they chose the second option.

Therefore, D’Amelio brought the text to the Italian General Press Agency, ANSA (*Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata*).²¹ The dissemination outside the realm of the party and its network changed the characterization of the document, since it acquired a specific significance of protest toward the PCI: from being a confidential “letter”, it became a “*Manifesto*” with a programmatic revisionist intent, that is the introduction of an effective democratic spirit in the PCI’s understanding of *centralismo democratico*.

Furthermore, the imposition of party-discipline was considered to be necessary in order to protect the ideological foundations of the communist legacy in Italy. Therefore, at the

¹⁸ Back then, he was the National Secretary of the Union of the Students, part of the PCI’s network.

¹⁹ E. Carnevali, “MicroMega”, no. 9, 2006.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

VIII Congress (Rome, December 1956) the assembly approved the “doctrine” of the counter-revolution and neglected to accept the invitation to debate about it. As a result, the *Centouno* sent back their membership cards to Botteghe Oscure.²²

Therefore, the outcome of the break between PCI and its cultural network was as paradoxical as its genesis, because the attitude of the party contributed to create a cultural stream of opposition to the official line of Italian communism. Significantly, such opposition would not exist at all without the attempt of the PCI at a replacement of freedom with authority.

Nevertheless, the move of the communist establishment was strategically effective: as Spriano lamented that there was a tendency to “forget that unforgettable year, and the base of the party, its popular base, reacted in a way diametrically opposed to that of the intellectuals”.²³ The position of the establishment and of the leader himself resulted to be enforced by December 1956, in spite of the “sacrifice” of part of the cultural network.

The debate in the Cultural Commission: criticism of the orthodoxy of the cultural policies

The distance between Spriano and Togliatti had appeared clear and irreversible, and the correspondence of Botteghe Oscure does not leave any room for doubts about this.²⁴ The same could be said about other leftist intellectuals, such as Melograni, Sapegno, Muscetta.²⁵ In this context, the Cultural Commission opened a debate over a potential reconsideration of

²² A. Brogi, p. 199.

²³ E. Carnevali, “MicroMega”, no. 9, 2006.

²⁴ Letter by P. Togliatti to Paolo Spriano, Rome, October 31st, 1956, Archive of the “Antonio Gramsci” Foundation, “Palmiro Togliatti” fond, “Carte Ferri-Amedesi” serie, sub-serie no. 4 “1956”, archival unit no. 24.

²⁵ Piero Melograni and Antonio Sapegno are two very well-known Italian scholars. The first is a historian and sociologist, particularly known for his studies on the discourse of modernity and backwardness in European and Oriental history. Sapegno is a jurist whose scholarly contribution focused on the comparative study of public law in Europe.

Alicata's approach toward the intellectuals: the organ of the PCI started wondering whether the party actually needed a real injection of democratic practices in order to keep its special relationship with the intellectuals alive.

Such a doubt implied two political challenges. Firstly, it questioned the correctness of Alicata-driven cultural policy, intended to pursue a political exploitation of the intellectuals. Secondly, and even more importantly, the discussion concerned the founding principles of the *partito nuovo*: the notion of *centralismo democratico* should be really implemented, possibly sacrificing on the altar of free choice even the will of the leader.

The Cultural Commission met on November 15th in order to prepare the ground for the Congress of December. The debate over these issues could not stay out of the discussion: the problem of balance between freedom and party-discipline dominated the meeting.²⁶

The prospective of those who took part in the meetings of November 15th and 16th was much different from that of the intellectuals of the “*Manifesto*”. First of all, all the members of the Commission were not simple party-members, but they were also components of the leading establishment of the PCI. Therefore, they focused on the “problem of freedom”, but

²⁶ A. Vittoria, p. 163, footnote no. 109. Normally, according to the modification of the internal rules passed in 1955, the Cultural Commission operated in small groups (three or four members in each sub-commission). Twice a year the Commission gathered in full-composition. In 1955, the components were: M. Alicata, R. Guttuso, M. Spinella, C. Lizzani, C. Muscetta, A. Trombadori, R. Battaglia, E. Santarelli, C. Salinari, G. Manacorda, A. Del Guercio, G. Berlinguer, A. Donini, E. Modica. However, the meetings of November 15th and 16th, 1956, took place with a different composition, enlarged because of the importance of the meeting before the VIII Congress: E. Basevi, M. Cavagnaro, A. Banfi, R. Guttuso, E. Treccani, R. De Grada, A. Giolitti, F. Ferri, D. Durbé, F. Feltrinelli, S. Lozza, A. Natta, S. Scuderi, G. Pellegrini, N. Sansone, M. Ferrara, E. Santarelli, G. Trevisani, E. Modica, C. Melograni, M. F. Alicata, M. Penelope, L. Foa, R. Rossanda, A. Diemoz, I. Calvino, F. Jacchia, V. Gerratana, Zanni, G. Berlinguer, G. Della Volpe, G. Vianello, A. Pesenti, T. Zancanaro, S. Tutino, G. Manacorda, C. Salinari, E. Nizza, A. Trombadori, G. De Santis, C. Muscetta, G. Procacci, E. Ragionieri, Mattioli, Cavandoli, Felisatti, P. Spriano, G. Fumagalli, A. Pizzinato, Severini, I. Ambrogio, F. Maselli, G. Del Bo, R. Bonchio, R. Battaglia, M. A. Manacorda, A. Lampredi, Daniele, A. Alinovi, G. Neri, Fasano, L. Colletti, G. Corsini, Baldassi, R. Bianchi Bandinelli, D. Bertoni Jovine, M. Rago, M. Spinella, G. Sotgiu. L'elenco proseguiva con i nomi degli invitati che non poterono partecipare (G. Arian Levi, A. Accornero, G. Berti, M. Bartolotti, P. Bufalini, A. Cossutta, A. Donini, M. Fabiani, C. Luporini, C. Negarville, L. Pergola, R. Zangheri, P. Fortunati, G. Brega, L. Ferrante). Some members, even if invited, did not attend: M. Aloisi, A. Boldrini, G. Brambilla, F. Busetto, L. Fibbi, S. Garavini, P. Ingrao, R. Ledda, C. Lizzani, L. Lombardo Radice, C. Marchesi, O. Nannuzzi, A. Natoli, G. Noberasco, E. Pancini, S. Pessi, E. Sereni, V. Spano, G. Adamoli, P. Alatri, F. Berlanda, R. Bilenchi, G. Bollati, L. Barca, S. Bertelli, U. Cerroni, L. Cosenza, D. Cantimori, S. Filippelli, L. Gruppi, F. Onofri, C. Polidoro, Sprovieri, D. Lajolo, A. Zadro, F. Zappa. Others showed up at the meeting without formal invite: M. Mafai, Muzii, Ciufoli, Peggio, Ciofi, Garritano, Ferretti, Vitello, Del Guercio.

their understanding of the dispute was different from that of the intellectuals: while the subscribers of the “*Manifesto*” contested the correctness of the PCI’s decision-making process, the “dissidents” of the Cultural Commission stressed the need for an effective application of the principle of *centralismo democratico* in the decision-making process.

In other words, the members of the Commission in disagreement with the leadership did not dispute the merit (with the partial exception of Gustavo Manacorda only) of the decision over the Hungarian crisis, but they questioned the legitimacy of the procedure. As Gustavo Manacorda said during the meeting: “the main issue at stake is whether and how the party should provide the ideological and cultural activity of the comrades with a certain direction”.²⁷

In other words, despite Manacorda accepted “the right and the duty of the party to run its ideological and cultural battle for Marxism-Leninism”²⁸, he considered this prerogative of the political apparatus as a “starting-point”²⁹ only: it was basically a way to avoid “anarchy and spontaneity”³⁰. Therefore, the main point of dispute was “how the party should give a direction, and with what limits”.³¹

In this context, the leadership had to face the emergence of a “moderate” opposition (by “moderate” is meant hereby that the disagreement was finally accommodated and it did not result into a political break among the party-members).

The influential writer Italo Calvino recognized the need for a political direction, but stigmatized the suppression of dissent by stressing the positive role of the Hungarian intellectuals of the *Petőfi* circle: “the movement recalls the great tradition of the soviets”.³² Significantly enough, Calvino’s criticism did not come “from the right”. Conversely, his

²⁷ *Interventi alla riunione della Commissione Culturale del PCI (15-16 novembre 1956)*, “Studi Storici” (Rome, “Antonio Gramsci” Foundation publication, 40th year, no. 3-4, pp. 1026-1038), p. 1026.

²⁸ *Ivi.*, p. 1026.

²⁹ *Ibidem.*

³⁰ *Ibidem.*

³¹ *Ivi.*, p. 1027.

³² A. Vittoria, p. 168.

remarks seemed to be deeply rooted in the strong ideological affiliation of the leftist intellectuals to their party: Calvino expressed a position of revisionism “from the left”, a wish to give up on party-centered orthodoxy and to democratize socialism. Naturally, by the mid-1950’s, he considered the democratization of socialism to be a viable option for communist parties (according to Giancarlo Bosetti, the controversial experiences of Hungarian socialism provided a demonstration that such an option did not exist).³³

Alongside with Calvino, Roberto Battaglia stigmatized the attitude of the party toward dissent, and invited the Commission to open a debate over the “tragic truths”³⁴ about the XX Congress of the PCUS and the Hungarian crisis.

However, the most interesting speech was that of Manacorda, and not just because he was the only one to reject openly the PCI’s interpretation of the Hungarian crisis. Manacorda questioned the *centralismo democratico* itself as well as the effective achievements of the PCI in the “efforts” to incorporate the spirit of the XX Congress. Indeed, the speaker mentioned persisting “reticence in facing internal disputes”³⁵ due to the “orthodox attitude”³⁶ of the party cadres. He gave also a definition of what he called “orthodoxy”: the attitude to think that “the party-élite is the depository of the truth”.³⁷

Interestingly enough, he pointed out how this attitude worked in the context of the Hungarian crisis and said that the line of thinking of the party was “schematic”.³⁸ the base of the party did not take into account the reality, but it just accepted from above an interpretation of the facts. He stressed the following contradiction: “who can neglect the presence of reactionary forces that could have prevailed? But I would like to ask each of you whether those workers of the Hungarian factories, still on general strike in spite of cold,

³³ G. Bosetti, foreword to F. Argentieri, p. 20.

³⁴ A. Vittoria, p. 159.

³⁵ “Studi Storici” (no. 3-4, 2003), p. 1030.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ *Ivi.*, p. 1033.

hunger, blood, can be really considered to be, possibly with no intent, servants of the reaction?”³⁹

From the analytical viewpoint, there are two relevant elements in the quotation above. First of all, Manacorda stressed that the repression of the uprising – which the PCI was going to approve officially three weeks later at the VIII Congress – was an illegitimate attack on the Hungarian workers. This remark recalls Di Vittorio’s statement about the impossibility to defend socialism from the workers (October 27th).⁴⁰ Therefore, it gives a sense of a common point of dissent in several spheres of the party: in both the main communist trade union and the Cultural Commission, one of the institutions that marked the shift from the old organization to the *partito nuovo*.

However, there is also another interesting element. Manacorda’s criticism was theoretically similar to that of Calvino: the speaker criticized Alicata’s line “from the left”, and intended to give a positive contribution to the improvement of the party. Nevertheless, the party was experiencing a process of radical marginalization of dissent: “the base of the party gathered (“*arroccamento*”) around Togliatti”⁴¹ – as Paolo Spriano put it.

In spite of the fact that the criticism came ideologically from the left and it was definitely intended to positive purposes, the radicalization of the PCI implied the demonization of many intellectuals who opposed the authority of Botteghe Oscure.⁴²

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ The *communiqué* of the CGIL has been discussed in the second chapter. The text can be on the October 27th, 1956, issue of “L’Unità”, p. 1.

⁴¹ E. Carnevali, “MicroMega”, no. 9, 2006.

⁴² Alessandro Frigerio, *L’ordine del PCI: denigrare la rivoluzione d’Ungheria*, “Storia In Net”, <http://www.storiain.net/arret/num123/artic1.asp>.

Political “opposition” at the VIII Congress: need for De-Stalinization?

The events of 1956 had made the contrast between the PCI's claims and the reality apparent: the Italian Communist Party employed a sort of Soviet-style of party-discipline, since the leadership considered the marginalization of dissent to be a legitimate means to mobilize the ideological energies of the party.

In three weeks between the X Congress of PCI's local units of Capitanata (November 25th-27th, 1956) and the VIII Congress of Rome (8th-13th December) the debate about effective democratic methods within the party and between the party itself and its network affected both the top-hierarchy and the relation PCI-CGIL. It was also a confrontation between men and models of socialism: on the one hand, Giuseppe Di Vittorio and Antonio Giolitti, willing to move toward a less party-centered socialism; on the other, Palmiro Togliatti (and the PCI's establishment generally-speaking), trying to impose party-discipline particularly at the VIII Congress.

The historical facts that characterized the abovementioned political clashes are partly unclear. The uncertainty is motivated by the “facts” used so many times by historians and often in a politically-oriented way. Therefore, most reconstructions appear as “constructions”.⁴³

Therefore, it is crucial to understand what the available sources say about the political fault-lines within the PCI and between the PCI and the CGIL, and whether the clashes under examination might imply that Togliatti's leadership had been actually questioned due to the last “storm” of 1956.

⁴³ This section provides some examples of this: Michele Pistillo (cited later on) tried to interpret the history of the dispute between Togliatti and Di Vittorio as a minor episode, pretty much exaggerated by a politically-oriented historiography. Conversely, other historians and writers (hereby the example of Bruno Trentin will be given) overstressed the traits of reformism in the political position of Di Vittorio. The interpretation introduced in this section actually differs from both these streams.

The text of Togliatti's telegram to Moscow of October 30th shows that the leader of Italian communism was actually worried about the emergence of an internal opposition that was potentially dangerous. He wrote that in the party there were two opposite streams: "the one concerned for the abandonment of Stalinist methods; the second willing to provide the [Hungarian] uprising with [political] support".⁴⁴ Since Togliatti himself wrote these words, it is not possible to neglect – as Michele Pistillo pretends⁴⁵ – that there was not an opposition to "*Il Migliore*" at all: Togliatti mentioned the issue to the Soviets, therefore, that issue must have a certain importance, at least important enough to bring it up in a "conversation" with the Kremlin.

Nevertheless, it is still possible to wonder what the real features of this opposition were, without necessarily accepting the post-1989 interpretation which described Di Vittorio and Giolitti to be precursors of "Eurocommunism" –in Italy – as Bruno Trentin, in dispute with Pistillo, did.⁴⁶

As far as the leader of the CGIL is concerned, a partial sign of the distance from Togliatti can be distinguished in the *communiqué* of the Italian trade union released on *L'Unità* on October 27th: as already mentioned, Di Vittorio warned the PCI about the inherent risk of siding with the soldiers against the workers. Therefore, the CGIL leader was less concerned than Togliatti about the Soviet consideration, and about the party itself generally-speaking. He was definitely worried about the risk that the PCI could lose the innermost sense of the political cause of socialism: the defense of the working class.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ The text of the telegram can be found in F. Argentieri, p. 136.

⁴⁵ Michele Pistillo, *Togliatti e Di Vittorio. Dissensi e convergenze sui fatti d'Ungheria*, "Critica Marxista" (Bari, Edizioni Dedalo, 2007), p. 80.

⁴⁶ Bruno Trentin, *Quel dissenso tra Togliatti e Di Vittorio*, text of the speech at the conference Di Vittorio e i fatti d'Ungheria, Rome, October 12th, 2007: http://www.brunotrentin.it/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=58&Itemid=21. Trentin mentioned that Di Vittorio "broke with the leninist practices" and moved toward a more democratic and modern understanding of socialism.

⁴⁷ Mario Pio Patruno, *Giuseppe Di Vittorio e il X Congresso provinciale del PCI di Capitanata (25-27 novembre 1956)*, "Sud-Est" (no. 3, January, 2005), p. 100.

Nevertheless, after that controversial stance, Di Vittorio sent Togliatti several signals of appeasement. In particular, the General Secretary of the CGIL disseminated an additional *communiqué* on October 29th: in response to a breaking-news launched by ANSA and saying that “the replacement of Togliatti with Di Vittorio was probable”⁴⁸, the latter argued that “the widespread rumors have no foundation at all and they are senseless”.⁴⁹ Furthermore, this *communiqué* gives an additional and important piece of information: “this rumor assumes my opposition to Togliatti, but such opposition does not exist to any extent”.⁵⁰

This position taken by Di Vittorio can be interpreted⁵¹ as a demonstration of his will to save from the impact of the crisis the project of unification of the Italian trade unions and the connection between the CGIL and the PCI. In this sense, Di Vittorio and Togliatti were on the same wavelength, since the strategy of the CGIL moved alongside with that of the PCI. Furthermore, this interpretation appears coherent with Di Vittorio’s statements about the need for a better defense of the workers.

Unsurprisingly, Di Vittorio did not give up on his defense of the Hungarian workers, whose interest should prevail over the party’s *realpolitik* – according to what Patruno remarks⁵². Indeed, on *L’Unità* of November 8th (*Insegnamenti dei fatti d’Ungheria*), wherein he wrote that “extreme rightist forces took control of the movement and turned the uprising into an antisocialist and counterrevolutionary [coup]”⁵³, supports the interpretation

⁴⁸ M. Pistillo, p. 80.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ D. Fertilio, *La rivolta dei 101*, “Corriere della Sera”, September 22nd, 2006, p. 53. There is also another possible interpretation of Di Vittorio’s statement. According to the testimony of Lucio Coletti, while the witness (Coletti) was discussing with Pajetta and Ingrao in the office of *L’Unità*, Di Vittorio called the phone of Ingrao’s office. The Secretary of the CGIL had a phone conversation with Pajetta and the latter “slapped” him (metaphorically speaking), and asked him to issue immediately a *communiqué* to clarify that he had no intent to replace Togliatti. Nevertheless, Coletti is the only one who left a testimony about this happening (Di Vittorio died few months later; Pajetta and Ingrao would have no interest in relating this story), therefore, this version cannot be verified.

⁵² Mario Pio Patruno, p. 100.

⁵³ M. Pistillo, p. 80.

that Di Vittorio did not mean to break with Togliatti, but he definitely intended to contribute to opening the debate within the PCI on the consideration the workers – an issue Manacorda stressed as well.⁵⁴

Therefore, it seems that Di Vittorio was personally troubled because he felt the contradictions of his position: on the one hand, he “needed” to accept the *diktat* of the PCI’s leadership; on the other hand, he was not able to give up the struggle for the welfare of workers. Indeed, he partly disagreed with the speech of Savino Gentile⁵⁵ at the X Congress of Capitanata (25th November, 1956). The local General Secretary of the PCI repeated Togliatti’s argument: “We agreed with the Soviet intervention because we know that the achievements of socialism need to be defended”.⁵⁶

But Di Vittorio did not question the right to defend socialist achievements, he just questioned how to defend them, and whether such a defense could be carried out by fighting against the workers.

In other words, Di Vittorio tried to stress a paradox, which can be expressed with a metaphor: can the cure be so aggressive to cause the death of the patient? This is actually the gist of his speech at the VIII Congress of the PCI, on December 8th, 1956. The leader of the CGIL pointed out that processes of excessive bureaucratization caused “serious problem of finding a [correct] direction”⁵⁷ in the communist parties of the East as well as in those of the West. In parallel to this, Di Vittorio criticized the PCI for its democratic deficit when it came to actual decision-making: he proposed a “system which would not give up on democracy on the altar of the principle of authority”, as Galante points out.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ Savino Gentile was the Secretary of the local-based unit of the PCI, M. P. Paturno, p. 101.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ Michele Galante, *Giuseppe Di Vittorio, i fatti di Ungheria e la via italiana al socialismo in un discorso a Foggia del novembre 1956*, “Sud-Est” (November 2006), p. 91.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

Therefore, there is a sense of criticism from “the left” in the words Di Vittorio said at the VIII Congress. This criticism did not imply an attack over the leadership of Togliatti, since the head of the CGIL gave his clear demonstration of accepting and respecting the hierarchies of Italian communism, but Di Vittorio can be definitely considered to be one of the most important voices – maybe the most important – in the PCI to speak out, and bring outside the party the problem of freedom within the ranks of Botteghe Oscure.

Further implications of the position taken by Di Vittorio were developed by Antonio Giolitti in his speech at the same Congress. Indeed, the communist leader added his criticism alongside with the proposals of Manacorda and Di Vittorio: need for a “debate about opinions and ideas”⁵⁹ as a “basic condition for a real democracy”.⁶⁰ He also remarked: “A given assessment, a pronouncement cannot be imposed through discipline: persuasion through debate is necessary. Open debate and loyal comparison of different opinions is needed”.⁶¹

In Giolitti’s view, there was definitely need for an inclusive procedure which would make the *centralismo democratico* effective. Therefore, from this criticism, it can be inferred that Giolitti shared Di Vittorio’s concerns about the risk of an excess in bureaucratization of the PCI leading to a compression of within-party freedom: the principle of party-discipline prevailed on the basis of authority.

However, Giolitti added a possibly more important remark: “If Gomulka had not maintained his position of dissent, Poland would have experienced a crisis possibly similar to the Hungarian one. In many occasions, who does not speak out helps the enemy. All the

⁵⁹ *L'intervento di Antonio Giolitti al Congresso del PCI nel 1956*, “MicroMega” (Rome, L’Espresso – gruppo editoriale, no. 9, 2006): <http://temi.repubblica.it/micromega-online/lintervento-di-antonio-giolitti-al-congresso-del-pci-nel-1956/>

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

good intentions to realize a democracy in our party have been jeopardized when a comrade is accused of treason for his criticism”.⁶²

In this sense, Giolitti stressed the permanence of a sort of Stalinist practices in the PCI: according to him, there was a practice of demonization of those who disagreed with the party-line, and dissent was often marginalized (“as it occurred in the last period” – he said) by labeling the “dissidents” as traitors.

When it comes to the considerations concerning the Hungarian uprising, Giolitti’s words became even more interesting with regard to the interpretative problem of the limits of democracy in the practice of the “*centralismo democratico*”. The communist leader said: “with regard the Hungarian events, we witnessed once more [the party] fighting and liquidating (more precisely, Giolitti said: “*sradicare*” – rooting out / to uproot) with no pity the opinion of the comrades who expressed a dissent”.⁶³ Interestingly enough, Giolitti himself connected the main concepts of his criticism to that of Di Vittorio: “[those opinions] should be validated, instead they were suppressed, even that of their most important expression, the CGIL”.⁶⁴

Indeed, Giolitti and Di Vittorio pointed out a democratic deficit in the PCI’s effective practices: “effective freedom of debate in the frame of democratic centralism”⁶⁵ – Giolitti said. In addition, the position of the two leaders, though a minority, shared such an extent of similarities that it is definitely possible to call this an opposition to the party-line, which an overwhelming majority of the members approved at the VIII Congress.

Di Vittorio’s and Giolitti’s criticism affected the PCI much deeper than that: the two leader stressed that the party was still Stalinist in its innermost core, and the replacement of the principles of freedom and internal democracy with the authoritative imposition of an

⁶² *Ibidem.*

⁶³ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁵ *Ibidem.*

“institutional truth” was widely accepted as an established practice in the realm of the party as well as in the connection of the party with its network.

Conclusion

From October to December 1956, in the time-span from the outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution to the conclusion of the VIII Congress, the Italian Communist Party experienced the impact of a crisis of confidence in its own legacy in the ranks of the political apparatus and in the connections between the party and its network (the leftist cultural circles, and the communist-driven trade union CGIL).

Significantly enough, this crisis affected the popular base of support for the party just marginally. Indeed, the communist offensive, from October 30th onwards, was successful in maintain the ideological affiliation of Italian communist as well as their overall confidence in the party.

Within the ranks of the PCI things worked differently. Firstly, the party-members considered themselves to be active agents in the theoretical notion of “*centralismo democratico*”, but the need for imposing party-discipline in the context of the Hungarian crisis resulted in an additional disillusionment about the within-party democratic practices. Secondly, the perception of the contradictions between Togliatti’s statements and the reality was much more apparent by the end of 1956, and not all the faithful communists of the PCI were still willing to accept the leader’s will.

Therefore, the main interpretative point is whether “centralism” was actually “democratic”. And, if it was, with what limits. In order to clarify this issue, it is important to recall that the “opposition” (that of the intellectuals, and that of politicians such as Manacorda, Di Vittorio, Giolitti) did not emerge because of the ideological disillusionment

only. The cause of the opposition to Togliatti was the result of the excess in radicalization in the context of the Hungarian crisis: this phenomenon made the practices of the high-party ranks no longer tolerable for some influential members, who actually spoke out against the leader.

However, this point is quite relevant in interpretative terms, because it shows that the break between intellectuals and the PCI (as well as the dispute between Togliatti and Di Vittorio) was not the direct result of the Hungarian crisis itself, but it was the direct outcome of the centralist attitude and authoritative practices of Botteghe Oscure.⁶⁶

Furthermore, it is interesting to point out that the PCI did not have any viable alternative to the straight application of party-discipline and radicalization around the position of the leader.

On the one hand, the need for maintaining unchanged the *interessi permanenti* (linkage with the USSR; ideological affiliation and public credibility), “forced” the party establishment to tolerate no dissent.

On the other hand, this attitude was the most natural implication of the basic practices of the party: was there any democracy in the “*centralismo democratico*”? Probably not, because the free-practice of the dissent might be dangerous for both the strategic interest the PCI tried to defend, after having “sacrificed” the alliance with the PSI. The potential impact of the Hungarian crisis on Italian public opinion made the need for suppressing voices of dissent felt even more.

The actual practice of the “*centralismo democratico*” PCI-style was limited to “freedom to agree”: no constraint for intellectuals and party-cadres, unless they agreed with the “political center”, the high-ranks of Botteghe Oscure.

⁶⁶ V. Zaslavsky, E. Aga Rossi, p. 326.

CONCLUSION

The main findings of these research help to grasp the features and objectives of the PCI's reaction to the Hungarian crisis by focusing on its persisting interests-centered strategy. Indeed, as explained in the thesis, the Hungarian Revolution clearly affected all the *interessi permanenti*: the system of alliances; the linkage with the USSR, and the ideological affiliation popular base-establishment as well as the public credibility of the *partito nuovo*.

However, the position of the PCI in the context of the crisis was intended to defend all these interests or, alternatively, as many as possible. In order to do so, the PCI had to modify its strategy according to changes in the international context.

Between October 23rd and October 28th, Botteghe Oscure happened to be “forced” to stay on a defensive position: the purposes were to beat back the criticism of the “bourgeois press” and, to provide the leftist public opinion with the “evidence” that the USSR invaded Hungary in order to prevent the “counter-revolution” from overthrowing the legitimate socialist government.

Nevertheless, from October 29th to October 31st – that is, between the suspension of the first intervention to the reception in Rome of the Kremlin's telegram responding Togliatti's request for a further military engagement in Hungary – the PCI experienced a moment of uncertainty in the strategy: on the one hand, Italian communists maintained their negative assessment of the events taking place in Budapest; on the other hand, they could not give a clear negative evaluation of the recent choices of the Hungarian government, still headed by a communist but de facto enlarged to non-communist politicians.

However, October 30th was a turning-point: Togliatti urged Soviets to change their mind about the tolerance they used with the Hungarian “counter-revolutionary road”.¹ Therefore,

¹ Togliatti's telegram, Argentieri, p. 136.

the Soviets, particularly concerned about the abolishment of the one-party system, communicated to Botteghe Oscure (October 31st) that they shared Togliatti's view. Indeed, the Soviet telegram gave the Italian Communist Party the expectation that new repressive measures would be soon carried out. Therefore, this communication contributed to change the perspective of the Italian comrades on the overall problem: they needed to carry out a "counter-offensive" in order to prepare the ground for a legitimization of the Soviet intervention.

Other international factors changed the scenario as well: the Suez crisis negatively affected the prestige of the West, and provided the PCI with a chance to begin a "campaign for peace"; the news incoming from Budapest about the killings in *Köztársaság tér* were an ideal context to construct the false myth of "white terror"; the consensus on the intervention among socialist countries (including China, Poland and Yugoslavia) boosted the PCI's propensity to overcome the uncertainty of the former days.

In this context, the PCI could start a propaganda "offensive" (from November 1st onwards) to provide the military intervention on the new-born Hungarian democracy with political legitimization and moral justification: the USSR invaded Hungary in order to liberate the country from "white terror".

Interestingly enough, this "offensive" let the Italian Communist Party strengthen two of its *interessi permanenti*: the verbal violence of the campaign against the Hungarian revolution enhanced the ideological affiliation between political apparatus and popular base; in parallel to this, the choice to "slander" the Hungarian revolution let the PCI maintain its political linkage with the USSR.

Nevertheless, Botteghe Oscure had to "suffer" a strategic loss: the tension between internal dissent and party-discipline resulted in the break with a number of intellectuals, some politicians, and a number of party-members. But, despite this strategic "loss", the

situation of external pressure on the PCI seemed to have “forced” the party to choose a way to defend those interests that really mattered for the political establishment: Italian communists sacrificed the negotiations with Nenni, and radicalized their position in support of the USSR. After all, the ideology-centered imaginary of communists by mid-50’s was so full of a dogmatic understanding of the USSR-West confrontation that it was not too difficult to believe the forgeries about the Hungarian crisis. In this sense especially, *L’Unità* had a crucial role in creating empathy between Italian and Hungarian communists – but the latter was a distortion of the truth as well, since many communist workers were actually fighting against the Soviet tanks.

Therefore, between October and December 1956 (the VIII Congress was the final act of the crisis), the PCI’s strategic choices were coherent with persisting interests structurally related to its centralized and ideology-based apparatus.

This consideration interjects the historical problem of the legacy of communism in Italy. The conclusion introduced hereby implies a given interpretation of the core values inspiring the PCI’s policies: the Italian Communist Party, despite its progressive and democratic look, was characterized by a strong conservative attitude, and its political establishment worked according to a Stalinist-type model. In other words, the transition toward the *partito nuovo* had not transformed the PCI into a democratic party, the “Eurocommunist” model was still very far from being realized.

Therefore, this conclusion opposes the historiographical stream (among the authors cited in the thesis, particularly Michele Pistillo) that underestimates the authoritarian traits of the PCI’s practices. Similarly, the interpretative pattern introduced hereby highlights the limits of the historiographical stream that neglected to recognize two important points: the strict connection between the PCI’s and the Soviet decision-making due to the conservative

values of the party; the fact that the attitude toward the Hungarian crisis was not a mistake at all, but it was the coherent implication of an enduring political strategy.

In sum, the main intent of this thesis is to describe the peculiarity of the PCI not as a result of its uniqueness, but as a result of two contradictions: the contrast between a strong ideology-centered party apparatus and the democratic face to show to Italian public opinion; the contrast between the unwillingness to give up on Stalinist-type practices and the need to cope with the democratic context of the West.

Significantly, the PCI maintained its position about the Hungarian crisis up to 1989, when Achille Occhetto took part at the reburial of Imre Nagy. In 2006, during an official visit in Hungary for the 50th anniversary of the Revolution, Giorgio Napolitano declared as Italian President of the Republic that, in 1956, Giolitti was right. As Federico Argentieri interestingly remarked, Italian communists did a great job and spent many energies in “constructing the slanders”, and they really showed an impoverishment of will and of commitment to admit their guilty conscience even fifty years later.²

² Argentieri, p. 19.

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