

THE KHRUSHCHEV SPEECH, THE PCG AND THE PCI

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1. *The PCF*

(Jean Pronteau and Maurice Kriegel-Valrimont, who were members of the Central Committee of the French Communist Party in 1956, were interviewed by Paul Noirot of *Politique Hebdo*.)

P.N.: What happened at the famous meeting of the Central Committee that followed the 20th Congress?

J.P.: Duclos summarised the Congress without revealing anything more than we could have read in *L'Humanité*.

M.K-V.: Thorez wasn't there. He let Duclos carry the can.

J.P.: So Duclos vaunted Stalin's talents and proposed a resolution praising him to the skies. About a dozen of us spoke in favour of destalinisation. Others were in agreement, but would say nothing. We didn't constitute a faction, **we** were still bound by the Stalinist conception of democratic centralism which forbade organic links among militants. We were scattered and isolated, and so incapable of forcing a change in direction.

M.K-V.: There were a relatively high number of speeches for a debate in the CC. They didn't add up to an organised movement. Waldeck-Rochet and **Benoît** Frachon were among those who demanded that the problems raised by the 20th Congress should be widely debated within the Party.

J.P.: On the other hand Servin and Casanova defended Thorez' position.

M.K-V.: The fullest speech was made by Florimond Bonte who was still editor-in-chief of *France Nouvelle*.

J.P.: Yes. He had a good grasp of German and he had got to know about a pamphlet published by the East Germans which contained a watered-down version of the K. report. He was able to speak knowing what it was all about.

M.K-V.: **Bonte's** speech touched on most of the problems raised by the 20th Congress. Apart from a small group centred round Duclos, he was well received by the CC. The same day a full-scale campaign to denigrate Bonte was launched, but what had started it off was never mentioned.

P.N.: Did Thorez in fact let the Moscow delegation have the text of the K. report?

J.P.: It is impossible to believe that Duclos and the others didn't find out about the contents of the report while they were in Moscow.

P.N.: But did Duclos mention the secret report to that meeting of the Central Committee?

M.K-V.: No, not at all.

J.P.: None of those who spoke on the resolution knew anything. After our speeches the Political Bureau decided to adjourn the meeting and nominated a commission to redraft the text. In this way a second resolution was passed, a little less outrageous and a little more honourable. But the members of the CC continued to be ignorant of the report, as was the rest of the Party.

In this connexion, I should like to tell you of a personal recollection. Just after the meeting of the CC we have been talking about, I went to Poland to attend a congress of economists. There I met a leader of the Polish party, who asked me: 'Well, comrade Pronteau, how did the discussion of the K. report go in your CC?' I told him about the discussion on the official report. He interrupted: 'Don't let's beat about the bush. What did you think of the secret report?' I looked at him, astounded: 'A secret report? What secret report?' Suspicious, he asked me: 'You are a member of the Central Committee, aren't you?' 'Yes, of course.' 'Well then, it's very important, you really must know.' He gave me a copy of the secret report in Polish and called in a secretary who spoke French. Through the night she translated the report for me, and I took notes feverishly.

Immediately on my return to Paris, I asked Maurice Thorez if I could see him. It was natural to report to the secretary general after a mission abroad. I was convinced that the report was going to appear in the bourgeois press and that we had to prepare our militants for the possibility. Thorez received me in his office. Straight away, I said to him: 'I've just got back from Poland, I've seen the report.' He looked at me, expressionless: 'The report? What report?' I replied: 'The report K. made in closed session, the secret report.' Without turning a hair, Thorez said: 'There is no secret report.' I started to get worked up, and took out of my briefcase the notes I had taken in Poland. At that point Thorez said to me: 'Oh! so you've got it. You should have said so straight away.' And he added in a pontifical manner: 'Anyway, just remember one thing. This report doesn't exist. Besides, soon it will never have existed. We must pay no attention to it.'

Thorez' cynicism was no longer a surprise to me, and later I understood the quiet pleasure he showed, when the 'anti-Party group' almost managed to seize power and overthrow K. It was a near thing. Molotov, Malenkov and Kaganovitch had a majority in the Praesidium. If it hadn't been for Zhukov's tanks, K. would have been beaten. They had put together a resolution, which I saw, in which they made out K. to be *an enemy of the people*', particularly on account of his report to the 20th Congress, which

was described as a '*tissue of lies and infamy*'. Well, Thorez had links with the 'anti-Party group'. They held splinter meetings, and Thorez was banking on their winning.

M.K-V.: One day Courtade, who had also been sent to Moscow, came back to Paris instructed by Molotov to tell the 'French comrades' that there were still some in Moscow who remained real bolsheviks. It was the opposition to the line taken at the 20th Congress, which Thorez upheld in France. In this fight against K. Thorez and the Chinese Communist Party took up parallel positions. It's a little known fact. This parallelism lasted until K. emerged the victor from the confrontation with the 'anti-Party group'.

When the victory of K. was confirmed, Duclos recognised with deep regret that he had had the masses on his side.

J.P.: That's right, I remember it clearly. I came back from Moscow where I had been sent into 'exile', for 'retraining', just after the defeat of the '*anti-Party group*'. I went straight from the airport to the National Assembly, where I met Duclos who asked me what had been happening in Moscow. Delighted, I told him: 'A right old clear-out, it was.' And I told him all about the battle. It was then that he said to me, with an air of consternation, 'He had the masses on his side.' Let me add that, coming from him, it was almost a major accusation. Because the Stalinist apparatus is characterised by contempt for and fear of the masses.

M.K-V.: We're getting to the nub of the matter. The main subject of debate in 1956 was the manner in which the Party should link itself with **the** masses and promote their movement. In France this debate vanished into thin air. When K. turned out to be the winner, the about-face was total. Thorez even went as far as to bestow upon him the title of an exceptional Marxist theoretician for **his** discovery of the importance of political facts in class confrontations. This clean sweep of old grievances was a way of avoiding any criticism. There was no debate. All prospect of change was blocked. History was held back by twenty years.

II. *The PCI*

(An interview with Rossana Rossanda, one of the founders of *Il Manifesto* and a member of the Political Bureau of the Party of Proletarian Unity (PDUP). P.H. stands for *Politique Hebdo.*)

P.H.: What impact did the Khrushchev report have within the Italian Communist Party? When and in what form was it known to the cadres and militants?

R.R.: We got to know about the 'secret report' at the beginning of June 1956 when *Espresso*, a left-wing weekly, reprinted it from the *New York Times*. I remember it was a Thursday and on the Saturday the federal committee of the party met, as usual, in Milan. Questions poured out from

all sides, particularly as *Unita* had decided to ignore the document, refusing either to confirm or deny its authenticity. The replies of the party leaders were evasive: 'We don't yet know whether this document is authentic; we didn't know about Stalin's errors, mistakes or crimes (the choice of term defined the attitude); but we know from the public speeches at the 20th Congress that there have been violations of socialist legality in the Soviet Union.' These replies, which were both flexible and reductive, had the effect of softening the shock. What is more, we were right in the middle of an election campaign—it was for local elections but they were being held nationwide—and we had to return our opponents' attacks.

To understand the debate that took place between June and October, you have to remember that the CPI had received the arguments propounded at the 20th Congress with considerable enthusiasm, including the criticisms made of Stalin's simplified version of history and violation of legality. The Soviet Union had thereby demonstrated, in the eyes of the CPI, that it had at last made the move essential to the advent of a 'mature socialism.' Broadly speaking, it was the view which Isaac Deutscher had been defending for a long time, and which the Italian communist press had treated with caution. Consequently, when Pietro Nenni immediately after the 20th Congress had started, in an editorial in *Mondo Operaio (In the light and the shadow of the 20th Congress)*, that we were facing a 'degenerescence of the system', he was roundly criticised by the PCI. But Khrushchev's 'secret report' changed the nature of the problem. For it was one thing to talk about violations of legality, but quite another to portray Stalin as a bloodthirsty old man, whose misdeeds could be placed in the category of genocide. Such accusations were both outrageous and oversimple: one man could not be held accountable for actions of that kind.

So Togliatti intervened by giving his now famous interview to *Nuovi Argomenti*, a non-communist journal, without giving prior warning to the Party secretariat. In it he initiated an attack on the inadequacies of the 'secret report' and on the concept of the 'personality cult'.

Togliatti's interview wasn't well received in the Soviet Union, nor by the French CP, nor even by all the leaders of the PCI. But it helped the Polish October and the Hungarian uprising. It was then that the debate became dramatic, confronted with photographs of party workers hanged in Budapest by angry workers, and with Soviet tanks entering Hungary, despite the solemn declaration of 30th October on the total independence of popular democracies. Once more Togliatti decided to ride the tiger: in a long communique he defended Soviet intervention, but at the same time he denounced the errors of the Hungarian Party which had led to the insurrection. The leadership urged the Party at all levels not to take action against any one who, even outside the Party, had adopted a different attitude towards the Hungarian affair. In fact, the main concern of the leadership was on the one hand to prevent the debate calling into question

the **PCI** itself and Togliatti in particular (hence the tough reaction to those who were claiming that the Party had hidden the truth about the Soviet Union from its militants), and on the other to try for the first time to disengage itself from too close a link with the Soviet Union by presenting at the 8th Congress a 'Programme for an Italian path to socialism.'

On the whole the operation succeeded for a number of reasons: a) the **PCI** didn't try to stifle the debate, even if today it may seem to have been inadequate; b) it kept to a minimum recourse to disciplinary methods; c) the Socialist party started to move in the direction of social democracy, which had the effect of arousing the Communists' loyalty; d) the employers tried to take advantage of Budapest in order to intensify their offensive in the factories against Communist organisations, which had already been sorely tried over the past five years. The Communist rank and file responded by mobilising in desperation and as a consequence a few months later in Italy (in June 1957) a new impulse was given to the workers' movement which has continued to grow ever since.

P.H.: How do you explain after the event the decision of the leadership of the **PCI** to authenticate the report and engage in a process of 'destalinisation'?

R.R.: Togliatti had long been of the opinion that Stalin's methods were not correct; but that didn't prevent him from considering as **irresponsible**—and he hardly hid the fact—Khrushchev's manoeuvre which had placed the popular democracies and the communist parties in a difficult position. However, given a '**fait accompli**', he saw no point in denying the obvious, preferring to 'historicise' the past and face up to the present, and making the most out of the 20th Congress that he could.

And that wasn't negligible. Most of all, he strengthened his own position within the Party. In 1951 Stalin had asked him to give up the post of secretary of the **PCI** to take on that of the Cominform: but, while he answered Moscow in the negative, the leadership of the **PCI**, on the contrary, gave Stalin to understand that it accepted and could do without him. Togliatti refused to give in and came back to Rome determined to change the power structure of the leadership. In fact, he only managed to do this with the help of the 20th Congress of the Soviet CP and the 9th Congress of the Italian CP: the debate which had been touched off led to the revamping of the cadres along the lines of 'the Italian path'.

To what extent had Togliatti always set his sights on this way? It's impossible to answer a question like that in a few words. Certainly, right from the beginning, he had made the **CPI** into a party 'with a difference'; more flexible in its internal organisation, more closely linked with the masses, and strongly unitary in its structure. It shouldn't be forgotten that it was a party that had been more or less reborn out of the resistance to the German occupation, and that it had escaped the destructive disputes of the Thirties.

The struggle against fascism gave it a strongly democratic flavour. In the last analysis, if you consult *Rinascita*—which more closely expresses Togliatti's ideological line than any other organ—and if you think about the publication of Gramsci's works, you realise why after the 20th Congress the section of the leadership behind Togliatti adopted the belief (at least formally) in autonomy and an end to the idea of a 'guiding state'.

Basically, this arose out of the idea that Italian society was much more complex than Russian society in **1917**, that the modern State was something other than an autocracy, and that democracy could not be conceived of simply in tactical terms. It was in this context and as early as this that the CPI called into question the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', although in an ambiguous manner; at the same time it gave pride of place to the concept of the hegemony of the new revolutionary social block, in as far as it had the ability to maintain a radically new leadership, and enjoy the specific consensus of a wide variety in an advanced Western society. Under Togliatti the formulas remained vague: it was only after his death that the ambiguity resolved itself in the direction of explicit **parliamentarianism**.

P.H.: Didn't the liberalisation that then set in in the CPI strengthen the drift to reformism? Wasn't the fascination with the CPI which quickly spread among other European Communist parties ambiguous?

R.R.: The CPI was never 'liberal'. The flexibility of its line has no effect on the very firm conception it has of the Party. The Party is the 'new prince' of Gramsci's Machiavelli—it implies a great deal of dexterity and tractability, but very little 'liberalism'. It is a party which goes in for discussion, because it knows that discussion can be a factor of powerful cohesion. It is a party which seeks to incorporate within itself the reasons for every divergence, in order to retain overall control. This method requires a real capacity for synthesis, and it functions, naturally, as long as that synthesis is possible.

That was proved in the last years of **Togliatti's** life, between **1958** and **1964**, when the Communist Youth, followed by the workers' federations, in keeping with the new pattern of struggle emerging, opened up a **left-wing** front within the Party. Togliatti tried to mediate from his 'advanced position', either by recognising the novel features of the situation, or by skirting round them: he rarely tried to deny their existence. **After** his death, when synthesis became both subjectively and objectively more difficult, the leadership refrained from mediation. At the **11th** Congress in **1966 Ingrao** was badly defeated and at the **12th** Congress in **1969**, it was to be our turn; defeat was followed by exclusion.

Having said that, why should 'liberalism' strengthen the drift to reformism? It appears to have legitimised a left-wing current in the CPI as it did in the unions. Reformism has never been much a feature of the Party's style: the French CP has always had a more rigid internal structure, but it has often taken a more right-wing line than the CPI (Algeria, May

1968, worker and student struggles, its attitude towards leftist groups). The fascination exerted by the CPI surely lies in the fact that it has always projected, if not a democratic image of itself, at least one which is more 'democratic' than that of other CPs; but it mainly lies in the fact that it represents far and away the largest Communist power group in Europe.

The reason for this is because it had posed the question of the specific nature of a revolution in the West, both through Gramsci and through the more ambiguous Togliatti; because too of its indisputable ability to maintain and feed a movement which has no equal in Europe. To the extent that it has undermined the ruling class and its State, so that it will probably become, with the next elections, the largest Italian party—three times larger than the Socialist party—and be in a position to take on the responsibility of a government in a position of strength.

From this arise a number of problems that are of equal concern to us. 1) Why is it that the most widely spread and best sustained workers' and socialist movement, and also the one that has developed the most advanced anti-capitalist line in Europe, should express itself mainly, either directly or indirectly, through a reformist party? Even if it is true that it also feeds an extreme left which is stronger than anywhere else? Well, the answer to this question may possibly be found in the 'destabilising' nature of the CPI's position. For the Party has always been successful in maintaining a real link with the masses, offering them even on the level of power politics a line that they can follow, even if only to go beyond it afterwards. The answer is also to be found in the political complexity of the CPI's reformism, in the sense that one has the impression that it is offering concrete answers, albeit practical ones to the global problem of an advanced society, a problem which part of the extreme left has often underestimated. 2) Although **Berlinguer's** reformism has succeeded in modifying the power structure of Italian society to the point where the Party finds itself on the threshold of governmental power, doesn't it, by its very nature, risk being rendered incapable of controlling the processes that its accession to power will set in motion? In fact, it is then that a number of things will become apparent: the poverty of a democracy conceived along **parliamentary** lines; the illusory character of a programme which aims at overall political control of economic affairs, instead of preparing the ground for a transition to another system; and above all the limitations of a conception of consensus and alliances which instead of enriching the class front, blur it, and, as a consequence, risk leaving the masses defenceless in the face of a new right-wing coalition.

P.H.: Now, twenty years later, are we not witnessing a breach between the interests of the Soviet bloc and those of the Communist parties of Europe (particularly Southern Europe), so that the polycentrism advocated by Togliatti has become an objective reality? Are we not seeing the **consolida-**

tion of a 'Southern Communism', characterised by an 'electoralist' conception of alliances and transition, and a 'national conception' of socialism? And if so, what are the consequences?

R.R.: The Soviet Union has no interest in seeing any change take place in Europe, as much because of a desire not to upset the **dialogue/confrontation** taking place elsewhere with the United States, as because the CPI in government would constitute a danger. For a defeat, as in the case of Chile, would amount to a setback for the whole Communist movement. On the other hand, a victory would constitute a challenge which would provide uncontrollable movements in the popular democracies. This is the first bone of contention affecting relationships between Western Communist parties and the Communist **Party** of the **Soviet** Union. The second is the fact that the Soviet Union is becoming more and more a military society and that she is tending to militarise as a compensation for her internal failures. This **represents** a serious danger **for** the Communist parties: indeed, they fear that Brezhnev, after Angola, might play the same card elsewhere, particularly as they have every reason for thinking that it wouldn't be the cause of internationalism, but because of the need to increase his bargaining power in opposition to the United States.

P.H.: What is your analysis of the open attitude adopted by the CPI towards the extreme left, in particular the PDUP (Party of Proletarian Unity)?

R.R.: Because the CPI is a highly realistic party; because the Party of Proletarian Unity (of which the **Manifesto** is a part) exists, as do Avanguardia Operaia and Lotta Continua; because a left-wing majority can also be achieved with our organisation, as has already happened in some regions and localities. That is what counts in politics. The CPI has not managed to crush us and acts accordingly.

P.H.: Six and a half years after the creation of the 'Manifesto' how effective do you think it has been, and in particular how far does it offer an alternative form of revolutionary politics? From this point of view can you comment on the debates at the Bologna conference of the PDUP and define the direction taken by the party?

R.R.: This will have to be dealt with at greater length another time. I would like to remind you of one fact, which brings us back to the theme of the 20th Congress: namely that in Italy a coherent left-wing criticism of Stalinism has led to the formation of a party with a real worker, student and union base. Admittedly, it is a small party, but it is firmly established, on the left of the vast river of the CPI. It has succeeded in forcing the CPI into a confrontation, on the level of struggles and strategy. Tomorrow, if the country has a government made up of left-wing parties, I do not think it will be possible to avoid the fate of Chile or Portugal, unless a position like ours is adopted. It will be achieved by blocking the dual temptation of a reformist government sliding further and further to the right, and of a

movement torn between vanguard groups who rush headlong forward leaving the masses disorientated.

It is against that situation that we are working; looking to Gramsci and the struggles of the sixties for the formulation of a riposte which can already be discerned in our action. Tomorrow, we hope it will be re-integrated with the movement as a whole.