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THE DILEMMAS OF DESTALINISATION: Togliatti, the 20th Party Congress of the CPSU and its Consequences (1956)

"We cannot accept this hurling of ourselves against everything and everyone. One stays with one's own side even when it makes mistakes" – Togliatti, 30 October 1956¹

The *partito comunista italiano (PCI)* had been tied by umbilical cord to the Soviet communist party since its inception.² The question that 1956 posed in the sharpest form was whether that intimate bond, subordinate in nature, was worth preserving at any cost. Had the Soviet leadership never raised the issue of Stalin at the 20th party congress, that debate within the *PCI* could have been postponed until a new generation of leaders arose who had never undergone the clandestine years of oppression, exile and war; and therefore stood relatively free to make new choices. The fact that it came up when Palmiro Togliatti and his generation still predominated in the party made all the difference.

A feature not peculiar to Great Powers but perhaps most evident in Superpowers is that they are often so preoccupied with matters at home that they are notoriously insensitive to the impact of domestic policy abroad. The Soviet Union was painfully self-absorbed after the death of Stalin. His successors Georgii Malenkov (1953-55) and Nikita Khrushchev (1955-64) faced extreme international tension and economic crisis. They had done much within the limits imposed by the system to rectify these problems, though those limits were ultimately to prove an excessive constraint. However, the most damaging elements of Stalin's time - rule by terror - remained a bloodstained wound in society; and the failure to acknowledge openly Stalin's tyranny made its repetition by the hand of others more probable. Moreover, hiding the truth from the rest of the party could ultimately jeopardise the régime. The difficult decision was therefore taken to lance the boil and divulge the most destructive features of Stalin's despotism in an effort to dissociate the current leadership from an embarrassing past best forgotten.³

At a meeting of the party leadership (*prezidium*) on 1 February the entire issue of what to reveal at the congress forthcoming was debated at length and in some acrimony. Discussing Khrushchev's draft, old bolshevik, foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov offered the stoutest defence of Stalin, to whom he had been unreservedly loyal since the 1920's: "...one must recognise Stalin as a great leader", Molotov insisted. "And you, comrade Molotov, supported him" parried long-time rival, old bolshevik Anastas Mikoyan, the most outspoken proponent of destalinization. Fellow long-term survivors of Stalin's rule Kliment Voroshilov and Lazar Kaganovich also backed Molotov, though to a lesser degree. "The truth is", Molotov said, "that under Stalin's leadership socialism was victorious. And what was wrong has to be balanced out; shameful matters are also fact." He doubted, however, that all this could be presented to the congress.⁴

A more comprehensive discussion took place over a week later, on 9 February. By then the issue was not what to tell, but how much and when. Khrushchev suggested that it be the closed session of the congress, from which all fraternal delegates were usually excluded. Then came the issue of how much to reveal. Accustomed to accepting the inevitable, Kaganovich adroitly moved in line behind Khrushchev. "We bear responsibility", he admitted. "But the situation was such", he added, "that we could offer no opposition." They had to acknowledge what had happened, Nikolai Bulganin argued, or "they will say that we are afraid." Voroshilov continued to drag his feet: granted Stalin acted wrongly, he persisted, somewhat lamely; "none the less there was much that was human about him." Mikoyan, however, pressed on with the thought that they had no choice. Mikhail Suslov was equally set on candour and Malenkov suggested that it was impossible to rehabilitate the fallen without explanation, which necessarily meant "clarifying the role of Stalin." Others, such as Averkii Aristov, were even more outspoken. "The delegates have sharp minds. To say 'we did not know' is unworthy of Politburo members. These terrible years were years in which the people were deceived." The *prezidium* should not worry: "The party will not lose its authority" (an opinion echoed at the end of the discussion by Khrushchev). Maxim Saburov was blunter still, insisting (in contrast to Mikoyan) that there was only "One Stalin (and not two), whose essence was revealed in the last 15 years." "These are not shortcomings (as comrade Kaganovich says) but crimes." Molotov said in Stalin's defence that he had been with them through the past 30 years. Indeed, said Saburov, "his role in war is known but in the postwar period relations with every nation were damaged...We lost a lot as a result of a stupid policy (the Finnish war, Korea, Berlin). Tell the whole truth about Stalin's role", he pleaded.⁵

Khrushchev's speech on 25 February thus began by ridiculing the notion of Stalin as "some kind of superman" and openly admitting this not to be "a fully-rounded evaluation" of his life and work. Stalin's overall role and achievements were "well-known to all." Instead Khrushchev highlighted the consequences of "unlimited power in the hands of one figure." That power magnified Stalin's worst traits. "These negative characteristics grew and grew, and in recent years assumed a character of complete intolerance." Brute force was used against those that stood up to him and "that seemed to him, capricious and despotic as he was, to be contradicting the positions he took." If prior to the XVII party congress in 1934, "he still recognised the opinions of the collective", after that point "Stalin increasingly ceased to take into account members of the party central committee and even members of the Politburo." Worse still, Stalin took the view that the closer they came to socialism, "the more enemies there would be..." Hence the "mass repressions", including destruction

of the officer corps on the eve of war (1937-1941). And when the Soviet Union was attacked in June 1941, Stalin fell into a blue funk. "Everything that Lenin created we have obliterated forever", Khrushchev quoted him as having said soon after the outbreak of war. Thereafter the Cold War followed on the steps of victory, and not by chance: "under Stalin's leadership our peaceful relations with other countries were frequently placed under threat, as a result of which decisions made by one man could lead and at times did lead to great complications."⁶

Of course, no thought was ever given to the international impact of such revelations which, if generally known, threatened to explode the ground from under communist and fellow-travelling parties that had steadfastly denied the veracity of accusations such as these which were commonplace in Cold War propaganda from the United States. Thus no prior consultation with the leaders of fraternal parties was deemed necessary. The outlook of the Soviet leadership was unchanged from 12-14 July 1953, just after Lavrentii Beria's arrest, when fraternal parties had convened in Moscow. Giulio Seniga of the *PCI* delegation questioned whether Beria really had been an agent of imperialism since 1919. To which Molotov retorted: "We are telling you these things and that should be enough for you."⁷ Thus key figures such as general secretary Palmiro Togliatti and Mauro Scoccimarro of the *PCI*, and Maurice Thorez, leader of the French communist party (*PCF*), were briefly shown a copy of the text from which they were allowed to make notes in order to brief their respective central committees in the most general terms. Togliatti was also privileged with sight of the discussions within the *prezidium* (party leadership). Such matters scarcely came as a surprise, however, to a man once enmeshed in the destruction of the Trotskyist and anarcho-syndicalist left in prewar Spain only to return to Moscow as silent witness to the frightening cull of the Comintern. His own brother-in-law, Paolo Robotti, had been arrested, imprisoned and tortured by the NKVD. A case was prepared against Togliatti as well, but never acted on by Stalin, who evidently found him too reliable. Estimates vary and documentation hard to find, but of some 500 Italians in exile in the Soviet Union, historian of the *PCI* Paolo Spriano estimated that 104 fell in the terror.⁸ Indeed, conversing with Vittorio Vidali, Togliatti shed a shaft of light onto his innermost thoughts when he unhesitatingly used the term "despotism". He soon recovered, however. When they left Moscow after the congress closed, Vidali's instructions were not to talk about Stalin back home in Trieste: "Talk about all the rest...", Togliatti advised.⁹ Personal feelings were one thing; party interests quite another.

Candour was certainly not Togliatti's forte. And with reason in this instance. Not only was the issue of Stalin an explosive matter but one-man rule of the Soviet party discredited by Khrushchev raised unsettling questions about one-man dominance of fraternal parties, including the *PCI*, which undoubtedly suffered, as did all communist parties, from a large democratic deficit in its internal practices. On return, Togliatti briefed the party secretariat, which was entirely under his thumb, but not the party leadership (*direzione*), which contained people with their own ideas (leftist Pietro Secchia and rightist Umberto Terracini, not least, on the two opposing wings). Expectations were high when Togliatti delivered a carefully censored summary to a plenum of the *PCI* central committee on 13 March, none of which was cleared with the rest of the leadership beforehand.¹⁰ He claimed that to have had a meeting of the *direzione* beforehand would have been "superfluous."¹¹

Witness Giulio Cerreti recalls, with a certain degree of exaggeration, Togliatti "really said nothing..."¹² The core of the speech was wrapped in an extended paean on behalf of the Soviet Union: "a new world on the way up" now guided by a "new spirit" within a "system of socialist states", all "free, independent, sovereign, completely autonomous" that collectively exerted influence across the globe. Although he insisted that "we always resisted the mechanical application of things Soviet in our agitation, our propaganda, our activities, even if there were those among us who showed a tendency to do so", no longer would such practice be followed. He went on to sum up Khrushchev's attack on one-man rule, including the "false" doctrine that opposition intensified as socialism drew closer. But these "negative elements" of "a great figure for all in our movement" were variously and euphemistically described as "defects, omissions, errors...", "a problem for history..." In a transparent attempt to forestall further debate on the subject Togliatti more than once insisted that, given the responsibility with which the critique of Stalin had been effected, this should be reciprocated within the *PCI* on receipt of the news.¹³

Despite much of its self-evident vacuity, the speech with respect to Stalin took the central committee completely by surprise. The shock was such that almost no one spoke.¹⁴ Dissatisfaction was palpable. Typically it was veteran Terracini, known for his courage, who took up the cudgels and said what others were thinking, as he had done in October 1947 when the Russians dragooned the *PCI* into opposing the Marshall Plan and into confrontation with the government in the streets, on the docks and in the factories. "What has caught the attention of militants", he said, "what has shaken and moved them are the political and internal aspects of the CPSU, and we will make a mistake if we do not discuss them within the central committee, saying that this is not the most important issue and that, if we could separate out the various elements, it would be a mistake to fix one's attention on these questions. But comrades are talking about them. There is a generally diffused sense of unease." The issue of Stalin might be one of sentiment, he continued, but no less important for that. And here Terracini touched the nub of the matter, which was to re-emerge from the pen of Togliatti a few months later: "was the cult of personality the fruit of Stalin? No. Not his alone. Men and events played their part." Quite by chance, he added, "a door has been opened, a window and now one can see in an instant things never suspected." As to the party, why wait for the Russians to debate these issues? "There is fear of discussion in the party, within the cells...and even here we do not discuss as we should."¹⁵ Caught momentarily off guard, Togliatti promptly cut short the debate and closed the meeting.¹⁶

While he could still do so, Togliatti persisted in his intention to steer the party away from debating Stalin. His resolve instead was to focus on the positive. *L'Unità* thus published statements emphasising the Italian road to socialism. "The search for our own road – an Italian one – of development towards socialism remains our standing preoccupation." Here the figure of Gramsci and his legacy, little spoken of since the late forties when the prison notebooks were published, was drawn to the fore: what Togliatti called the "conversion into Italian of the lessons of the Russian revolution."¹⁷ In other respects his reticence was evident still at the meeting of the party's national council on 3 April. Pietro Ingrao, then editing *L'Unità*, recalled the "ferment and the discussions apparent in the corridors" outside.

He also remembered Amendola's controversial comment in the council that the party was now free of external "mortgages".¹⁸ The initial attempt to turn the focus onto Gramsci's inheritance was, moreover, soon thrown back into Togliatti's face by the *PCI* cultural magazine **Il Contemporaneo** on 12 May, whose editors – Carlo Salinari and Antonello Trombadori – must have resented being kept in the dark as much if not more than the rank and file. An article by the noted novelist Carlo Cassola attacked the followers of historian Benedetto Croce, who had taught the young student Togliatti, in a backhanded and cryptic statement that could be read with more than one distinct meaning, depending on initial assumptions: "These [followers] have all become Togliattian, seeing in Togliattianism the insertion of the workers' movement into the Italian tradition; that is, the Italian road to socialism, without understanding that Togliattianism was pure Stalinism and that, if one subscribes to a psychological tradition, it is not always for the best but for the worst; in that if it is fed by our traditional defects – Machiavellism, Jesuitry, an admiration for mental agility, power, success, and disdain for taking a stand on conscience and for prophets disarmed."¹⁹

And what, exactly, were those lessons that Togliatti believed should be drawn from the Soviet experience? Was an objective assessment of the Stalin era not essential to answering that question? In the event, control rapidly passed out of his hands. Word of Khrushchev's secret speech had begun to leak out even before Togliatti addressed the central committee. On 12 March the French ambassador to the USSR reported rumours of the speech, summarising the broad outlines in a despatch to Paris.²⁰ It now emerged into the world press as a result of widespread diffusion within the Polish workers' party – some 80,000 copies were printed, and "because this was done in Poland a lot of black market copies were run off."²¹ This was later confirmed to the *PCI* by Khrushchev.²² It soon became impossible for Togliatti's evasive tactics to continue. Ally Pietro Nenni, leader of the *PSI*, then broke cover on 25 March in his party's daily **Avanti!** with "Light and Shadow in the Moscow Congress", printed in the socialist journal **Mondo Operaio** later that month. Worse was to follow. First secretary of the Warsaw committee of the Polish workers' party Stefan Staszewski "personally handed a copy, hot off the press, to Philippe Benn, the **Le Monde** correspondent, and to Gruson from the **Herald Tribune** and Flora Lewis from the **New York Times**..."²³ By the end of May CIA had a complete copy of the secret speech. Only after considerable debate, however, did the US government publish it against a background of massive publicity on 4 June.²⁴

The least Togliatti could hope for was that the issue of Stalin would not overshadow the local elections forthcoming. To that end he issued a statement through the party secretariat. It was described by his deputy, Luigi Longo, as a "counter-attack" and "a brief riposte" to the furore building up from the opposition in parliament with respect to the Soviet Union, communism in general, but against the *PCI* and *PSI* in particular. The statement, which was never considered by the *direzione*, included the comment that "in spite of its deformations the system has worked and has allowed for the attainment of great achievements." Thus when the *direzione* finally met on 29 March – after an uneasy interlude since 13 January – there was, not surprisingly, a good deal of ill feeling in the air. For the first time the leadership as such sat down to consider "The results of the debate on the XX Congress of the CPSU".

Those who spoke found it hard to reach a common position. It rapidly became apparent, where not evident before, that if the causes of the deformation of the Soviet régime were not uncovered, how could they ensure that their own party did not end up in a similar situation, should they attain power? The leadership thus splintered between those who demanded to know more, and those like Giancarlo Pajetta, who in many ways resembled Togliatti in brains and *sang-froid*. He claimed everything had been said and ruled out discussion of what he dismissed as "marginal questions". Pajetta thereupon attacked Terracini for telling the press that the supreme soviet in Moscow should meet more often. Secchia, however, until recently one of two deputy leaders along with Longo, insisted that these could not be treated as purely Soviet matters. He also wanted to know "whether it is possible to discuss particular questions before they are decided. Today things are done as brusquely as they were before." Pietro Ingrao developed the point raised by Terracini at the central committee plenum. "Why, given the power of the [Soviet] system, were such errors possible, why were such errors not corrected at the outset; is there not something within the system to put right?" Giorgio Amendola, invariably drawn to compromise, acknowledged that "Feelings are deep among the workers and intellectuals." He emphasised the importance of getting to grips with the issue, of extending democracy within the party, and conducting the electoral campaign "on the basis of the Italian road to socialism."

Events had thrown Togliatti onto the defensive. "People were caught by surprise", he said, "and a certain disorientation was in part inevitable bearing in mind who Stalin was." There had been "a popular tendency to personify the movement and the idea. I am therefore not taken aback by reactions, even when mistaken. The party will have the benefit of discussion and will think things out for a while longer in its own way." Why were there errors? The explanation reached back into history. It had to be discussed "to bring some depth" to the subject but not just for the sake of saying something, however "eccentric and marginal." Terracini was wrong. They should all await Moscow's decisions. This statement set the dogs on Terracini – including Celeste Negarville, who immediately called for Terracini to withdraw his assertions in public; Mario Montagnana, who made the extraordinarily stupid assertion that there had always been more democracy in the USSR than anywhere else; and Longo, who typically warned Terracini that one should not make statements in public without taking into account the impact one wished to make.²⁵

The party was in trouble. On 9 May Longo reported to the *direzione* on preparations for the local elections on 27-28 May. He was not optimistic; no one was. And the leadership was as confused and divided as before. Amendola pointed out that the number of activists since the 20th party congress was continuing to fall. "Our defensive position on the XX Congress and the failure to use its positive aspects" lay at the root of the problem. They were evidently losing ground to the *PSI*. The party had to affirm its leading role in the "Italian road" versus the socialists. Others insisted that they could not leave the bad news aside. Negarville said that the motives for criticising Stalin had to be explained. Velio Spano, unknowingly echoing Saburov in Moscow, pointed out that there was a world of difference between talking of "errors" and of "crimes." Whatever their preferences, however, "one cannot not bear in mind that we are in an electoral campaign. People want to know our past..."²⁶

The results were not disastrous and were not unexpected. Longo reported on 1 June that a total of 165,000 votes had been lost. A

straw in the wind interpreted with unfounded optimism was the success of social democrats - *PSDI* - led by Giuseppe Saragat relative to the socialists led by Pietro Nenni, which was bound to cause the *PSI* to reconsider its twenty-year alliance with the *PCI*.²⁷ Little consideration was given, however, to a possibility that this might drive the socialists to the right, leaving the communists haplessly carrying the heavy Stalin burden entirely alone. Indeed, on 25 August Nenni and Saragat met, in an attempt that failed, to negotiate a merger on terms favourable to the *PSDI*. But that the attempt had even been made was a shot across the bows. By June, Togliatti had finally made up his mind what to do on the assumption that further progress on democratic reform in Russia had stalled and that nothing would be lost and much stood to be gained by distancing himself and his party from Khrushchev. He pursued two strands of policy, interconnected: first, the argument earlier alluded to by Terracini that the problem was not that of Stalin as such but the Soviet system itself; second, the argument Togliatti himself touched on briefly, recently backed by Amendola, that it was time to take to the Italian road without looking back and, if necessary, against the wishes of the Kremlin.

The bomb Togliatti delivered was made up of written answers to nine questions from the bourgeois journal **Nuovi argomenti** published on 17 June. Here he steadfastly stuck to the term “errors” in relation to Stalin’s crimes. Only those suffering from “simple-minded infantilism” could ever have thought that a socialist régime was immune to “errors and dangers.”²⁸ Thereafter he attacked Khrushchev and his colleagues, as had Terracini before him: “one could not consider satisfactory the position taken at the congress and which today has been fully developed in the Soviet press regarding Stalin’s errors and the causes and conditions that made them possible.” For instance, Stalin was “suspicious in the extreme” and succumbed to “an obvious form of paranoia”, but current leaders of the Soviet Union knew his “serious defects” better than anyone, yet they continued to hail Stalin to the skies; they could at least have been more prudent. Responsibility was thus shared. “It is true that today they are critical, and that is to their great merit, but in this criticism a little of their own prestige is without doubt lost.” What Togliatti most objected to was that whereas in the past all that was good was heaped in praise on Stalin, and now all that was bad was attributed to him with equal lack of discrimination. In the process “the real problems are evaded, which are how and why Soviet society could lead to and did lead to a certain form of alienation from democratic life and from legality that has been described, and even of degeneration. This must be studied according to the various stages of development of this society, and above all it is for all the Soviet comrades to do it, because they know matters better than ourselves, who could make partial errors or be ignorant of facts.”

Togliatti’s first target was bureaucracy. “What occurs to us, first of all, is that Lenin, in his last speeches and writings, had highlighted the danger of a bureaucratisation that threatened the new society. It appears to be beyond dispute that Stalin’s mistakes were linked to an excessive increase in the weight of the bureaucratic apparatus in Soviet economic and political life, and perhaps above all in the life of the party. And here it is very difficult to say what was cause and what consequence. The one bit by bit comes to be the expression of the other.” This bureaucratic weight also had something to do with Russian tradition. Lenin showed signs of believing this. But given those in government changed after the revolution almost completely “we are less interested in evaluating residues of the old than the fact that a new type of bureaucratic leadership came to emerge from the womb of the new ruling class at a time when it took on completely new functions.”²⁹ As the best organiser and bureaucratic leader, Stalin, on this reading, was “at the same time the expression and the author of the situation...”³⁰ In sum Togliatti demanded an answer, in Marxist terms, as to “how the mistakes denounced today are interrelated to the development of socialist society...”³¹

This was, of course, precisely the same analysis of the “new class” Lev Trotsky, and, later, Milovan Djilas made of the Stalin dictatorship. And Togliatti certainly knew such criticism would go down badly in Moscow. What lay behind this attack was a determination to proceed to a new degree of autonomy for the *PCI*: not so much a divorce (now contemplated by China and Albania) as a trial separation. The *direzione* met on 20 June to prepare for the forthcoming meeting of the central committee. Here Togliatti admitted that he should probably have consulted his colleagues beforehand about the **Nuovi argomenti** interview “but”, he claimed disingenuously, “matters were pressing.” Now he raised “the question of our greater freedom of movement, of relations between ourselves and Soviet leaders; we have never spoken of these things; now we will.” The system within the international communist movement would no longer turn on Moscow. “Polycentrism” was the order of the day. What had to be underlined was “that an Italian road to socialism would signify a progressive socialist transformation towards socialism.”³² And in a vain effort to bolster support, he insisted on party unity.

Terracini launched into the attack regardless. It was, he said, “disagreeable that the *direzione* and the Party came to know of the speech [Khrushchev’s] by means of the bourgeois press: I must add that we have reason to be very unhappy at the manner in which the Soviet comrades have behaved.” “Was this speech of Khrushchev’s really secret for all of us? I am referring to the comrades who were at the congress. When T[ogliatti], made his speech to the C.C. (with no preceding meeting of the *direzione*), in fact his own speech corresponded to what was said in Khrushchev’s speech.” The fact that it was close to the elections was neither here nor there. It was a mistake not to brief the *direzione* beforehand. “The entire secretariat was informed; in my opinion the secretariat shows signs of turning into the *direzione* on questions of great importance. The [Italian] press spoke of it [the Khrushchev speech]. *L’Unità* said that these were calumnies; then came the American press; our opponents’ newspapers sold like hot cakes; as a member of the *direzione* I found myself in the humiliating position of sending off to the American embassy to ask for a copy of the speech...” Togliatti then published the interview not with *L’Unità* but **Nuovi argomenti**; and, anyway, how could one understand the interview without having read the Khrushchev speech?

Togliatti now attempted for the first time in recent months to explain himself. “At the XX Congress”, he said, “I had sight of a copy of the speech which does not correspond in some of its parts to that published by the Department of State (international questions, China, etc.); these concern additions to the record of Khrushchev’s speech or of interpolations by the Americans.” The report given him was also shown to Scoccimarro but not for the eyes of the whole delegation. “Back in Italy, I reported to the *PCI* secretariat on the basis of notes. I did not believe that I was authorised to refer it to the *direzione*.” This contradicted an earlier statement that he had not thought

referral necessary. He confessed that he had no idea how to handle the revelations with respect to the central committee given elections pending and he did not know that copies had been released to fraternal parties in government, such as the Poles (from whom the Americans obtained their copy for publication). Togliatti explained the **Nuovi argomenti** interview by saying that he was given the questions before the election and released information by that indirect means in order to keep it unofficial. But he thereby left unanswered why, if time was therefore not so pressing as he previously argued, he could not have shown his draft replies to the rest of the *direzione* for their views. In sum, his defence overall was that “We found ourselves in an embarrassing situation not created by ourselves; we stuck to the line that was fixed that was later changed by them [the Russians].”

Inevitably the excuses offered did little to appease Togliatti's critics in the leadership. This “is the first time finally that discussions have opened up”, Terracini gibed. His chief complaint at the whole affair – no different, in fact, from that of Togliatti – was the manner in which “Khrushchev's speech has raised emotions; the idols have crashed to the ground...giving little food for thought while inciting the emotions, feelings.” After further discussion Togliatti finally unburdened himself of Stalin. Most of what he said, however, remains off the record. He pointed to Stalin's “great merits and grave defects.” Togliatti also detailed his various encounters with Stalin in power. The Soviet experience was, he said, “a precious lesson for us; the issue is how to make use of the lesson.” On fundamentals, however, he sustained a key aspect of the practice of *doppiezza*: the contradiction between operating within the framework of democracy under capitalism in a less than fully democratic manner with a view ultimately to ending multi-party democracy with socialism. Here the attitude to democratic reform in the Soviet Union exposed contesting views as to the form socialism should take in Italy: “one could not admit that from the dictatorship of the proletariat one can return to a multiple parties...”, Togliatti insisted.³³ It was here, especially, that he came to blows with Terracini, who believed that Togliatti had failed to draw the correct lessons from the tragedy of the Soviet experience.

The Russians decided not to publish Togliatti's interview. They denied that they had leaked secret speech deliberately to the Americans, as Robotti had intimated to a Soviet diplomat. “Some fraternal parties made a comparatively large number of activists aware of the speech, which led as a result to the American services obtaining possession of a copy of the document.” They now acknowledged the obvious: “With the publication of the text of the speech our enemies are trying to force us and the fraternal parties into a discussion, and thereby introduce confusion into the ranks of the communist and workers' movement.” They did agree with much in **Nuovi argomenti** but some statements were unacceptable. Particular objection was expressed at “the thesis on the degeneration of Soviet society” which “undermines the faith of the workers in the superiority of the socialist order in general...” Without a trace of embarrassment at applying one set of standards to their own behaviour and another to the Italians, Soviet leaders went on to ask why Togliatti had not consulted them about the interview beforehand, since, as a consequence, he had “given an opportunity to our enemies...”³⁴

To clear the air on both sides, Togliatti had already raised the idea of a delegation to Moscow. The French had sent one and the resultant communiqué had left the impression that they had come to receive instructions – something Togliatti was determined to avoid. Pajetta, Negarville and Giacomo Pellegrini were sent off early July. They briefed the Russians according to Togliatti's instructions, summing up the party's collective discomfort since the 20th party congress. When Boris Ponomarev, responsible for relations with non-ruling communist parties, tried to suggest that it was merely a matter of upsetting intellectuals, Pajetta brusquely retorted that “in fact everyone had been badly hit.” Looking ahead, the delegation expressed the opinion that “new revelations would not serve any purpose because what has been said up to now is more than sufficient to liquidate ‘stalinism’.” But they did want to know what the Russians were going to do about renewing the sense of democracy in the Soviet Union. They agreed that a “new climate” had been created with the “destruction of Stalin's personality cult”, but they were unhappy at the fact that the Russians “did not talk of what lay ahead...” Meeting most of the leadership was revealing. Molotov sat next to Pajetta at the banquet laid on by the *prezidium*. He stubbornly refused to discuss Togliatti's interview.

Khrushchev, whom they met on 11 July, expressed himself blithely optimistic about everything, including the international situation. It rapidly became clear that, despite the prospect of West German rearmament now that Bonn had entered NATO, he believed he had a breathing-space for his destalinisation campaign. In Europe he did “not see any country sufficiently militaristic that it could be turned against us by America.” And the United States talked of war only because it was afraid. Underlying concerns were none the less raised by others about stability in Eastern Europe. “Togliatti's interview worried Soviet comrades because they feared that it would become a weapon of warfare by an opposition acting under a misapprehension, above all in certain countries of the new democracy.”³⁵ They wanted him to withdraw it. The *direzione* backed Togliatti in his refusal.³⁶

A further meeting, with the leaders of the *PCF*, on 23 July – Jacques Duclos, Étienne Fajon, François Billoux, Benoit Frachon, Raymond Guyot – was a depressing experience. The atmosphere was somewhat bizarre with Fajon talking stiffly about “the report attributed to comrade Khrushchev”.³⁷ Relations between Togliatti and Thorez, invariably cordial, were somewhat frozen;³⁸ so little could be expected from the meeting. The whole notion of polycentrism made no sense to the French; and the idea of criticising the Soviet system for degeneration sounded too much like heresy. What divided the two sides soon diminished in importance, however, when Eastern Europe finally exploded in the faces of the Russians. Indeed, the events in Hungary unexpectedly – if temporarily – boosted the diehard wing of the leadership, casting a shadow of Togliatti's attempts to remove the *PCI* from too close a relationship with the unpredictable régime in Moscow.

The message from Moscow that Togliatti's interview would become a handy instrument for the opposition in Eastern Europe was not groundless. The hardline Albanian leadership did not publish it, of course. But Radio Prague broadcasted it.³⁹ An abbreviated version had been published in **Szabad Nép** and fed into the fierce debates on destalinisation that were sweeping through Hungary.⁴⁰ In June Enver Hoxha, who judged everything and everyone according to their attitude towards hated Yugoslavia, was passing through from Tirana en route to Moscow. By that time fellow diehard, the merciless Mátyás Rákosi had left, soon to be summarily dismissed by Khrushchev. Hoxha was therefore hosted by his underlings. “Togliatti's interview has caused us many problems”, one said. It encoura-

ged the discontented to contemplate reform. One, a central committee member, had aggressively asked Politburo members why they had not published the interview; so they did.⁴¹

On 9 July, Rákosi now consigned to a life of leisure in Moscow, the young Soviet ambassador Yuri Andropov met the new first secretary of the party Ernő Gerő. Gerő, disapprovingly, called Andropov's attention to a Hungarian radio commentary of 3 July devoted to Togliatti's interview which praised the fact that the Italian leader had entered into a polemic with the CPSU "and the skies did not fall in". The commentator added that prior to the 20th party congress Hungary had mechanically copied Soviet practices and paid for this more than once.⁴² And this came not long after the massacre of Polish workers demonstrating in Poznań on 28 June. There, some 150 were killed, 500 wounded.⁴³ A day later some 60 or so tanks were visible on the streets. After signals from Moscow – the *prezidium* talked of the "subversive activity of the imperialists"⁴⁴ – Togliatti rushed to blame it on the machinations of the capitalist Powers.⁴⁵ Even here his interview with *Nuovi argomenti* was seen as playing an inflammatory role. Indeed, the party daily *Trybunie Ludu* was taken to task by the Polish Politburo after the Poznań massacre for printing the interview without permission.⁴⁶

Not only had Togliatti's interview apparently fuelled the Polish crisis, but his rallying to Moscow's clarion call condemning foreign subversion was equally out of line even with Warsaw's own assessment and statements. First secretary of the Polish workers' (communist) party – *PUWP* – Edward Ochab was involved in "an acrimonious discussion" with the Russians, "who before the July plenum had suggested to us that the bloody Poznań clashes had been provoked by the imperialists. I told them there was no proof," he said, "and that I couldn't make a claim of that kind at the Central Committee plenum."⁴⁷ The resolutions of the Polish Politburo on 28-29 June and 3 July thus made no mention whatever of imperialist subversion.⁴⁸ Togliatti remained obstinately unrepentant, however: "when the right of insurrection in the countries of the people's democracy is recognised, I oppose it."⁴⁹ These were his words late October, even after Moscow had given its seal of approval to the new régime.

The accusations against "imperialism" were a fig-leaf conveniently brandished by Moscow, behind which lay a double crisis equally evident in the repression of the rebels in East Berlin, June 1953: in the illegitimacy of communist régimes in Eastern Europe originally established by Red Army occupation, and their evident failure to sustain a decent standard of living for the working-class. The people were told they had forfeited the confidence of their government. Bertolt Brecht had asked, not unreasonably: "Would it not be easier in that case for the government to dissolve the people and elect another?"⁵⁰ That Togliatti should have lent his name to this resulted from cold calculation. His priorities were strictly Italian; and since they required facing up to the Russians on matters Italian, he had evidently resolved that, where the interests of others were concerned, he would loyally tow the Moscow line. The Cold War may have temporarily given way to an interlude of détente as a result of the summits at Geneva, but Togliatti was as concerned as were Soviet leaders not to jeopardise a fragile balance of power in Europe. A lingering sense of co-responsibility as a result of his controversial interview for what unfolded in Eastern Europe is unlikely to have held him long – perhaps a momentary pause for thought, no more; for on past practice Togliatti kept a tight grip on issues of conscience. Yet the problems of Eastern Europe were not to be so easily disentangled from the fate of the *PCI*, as he was shortly to discover to the party's cost.

Not unexpectedly Poland's complications grew rather than diminished, as not only within the party but also among public opinion at large a groundswell arose in favour of placing *Władysław Gomułka* at the head of party and government; the same man removed from office in 1948 for national deviation in opposing the collectivisation of agriculture and incipient Titoism in his resistance to copying all Soviet practices. As Ochab later noted with some bitterness and obvious envy: "They [the Poles] fell for those phrases...about patriotism and independence",⁵¹ which were precisely what worried the Russians.

On 19 October a delegation led by Khrushchev hurriedly left for Warsaw to forestall the election of *Gomułka* at a central committee plenum to which the Russians had not been invited. Their presence – marked by abusive and bullying behaviour in public and in private – made no difference anyway, and they returned to face the dilemma of what to do next in the face of Polish recalcitrance. The Poles had robustly asserted their right to determine their domestic affairs without Soviet interference – not least the composition of the leadership in party and state (including the army) – though they were sufficiently cautious to reassure the Russians that they would remain allies.⁵² Option one was "to put an end to what is going on in Poland."⁵³ No conclusion was reached. On 21 October they considered two options: "to influence and watch events" or "go the road of intervention." Khrushchev – despite the rancour of his conversations with *Gomułka* – came down in favour of "refraining from military intervention" and "showing patience." All were agreed. They simultaneously called a meeting of other fraternal parties, "given that the European parties have been expressing considerable anxiety, as political and economic problems have arisen in Poland in a severe form."⁵⁴ The Poles were helped not least by having the Chinese on their side. Ochab – with the intention of drawing *Gomułka* back into the leadership – had made it his business to attend the Chinese party congress at the end of September where, in extensive discussions with and without the presence of the inquisitive Soviet ambassador, he emphasised the urge to greater independence within the bloc.⁵⁵ On the Polish issue at the inter-party discussions in Moscow on 24 October the "weight" lay with the Chinese.⁵⁶ So misgivings such as those of the GDR's dour diehard Walter Ulbricht – "They are opening the doors to bourgeois ideology, a leadership in drift"⁵⁷ – were more readily dismissed. These were the beginnings of a special relationship between Warsaw and Beijing. The Russians, however, were nothing if not grudging. Defence minister Marshal Georgii Zhukov later said, somewhat haughtily, that "what we had at our disposal would have been enough to wipe them out like flies."⁵⁸

But Warsaw's experimental *nouvelle cuisine* soon influenced impressionable chefs in Budapest, even though more was promised on the menu than ever appeared on the plate. Imre Nagy, deposed as chairman of the council of ministers in 1955 when Khrushchev defeated Malenkov and the reformers in Moscow, was now hailed as "the Hungarian Gomulka".⁵⁹ The circumstances of his re-emergence were even more startling. US intelligence had, indeed, noted well before the events of 1956 the high levels of passive resistance to communism in Hungary.⁶⁰ But they had concluded that open conflict was most unlikely.⁶¹ As events gathered pace following the denunciation of Stalin, all eyes gravitated towards Poland. But Hungary never lay far behind. As pressure mounted, the Russians,

hoping to salvage the situation, had brusquely dismissed Rákosi, but in his place sat the equally diehard but less sadistic Ernő Gerő. The self-exculpatory Soviet analysis of the problem was that everything could be laid down to “the errors committed by the leadership of the workers’ party and of the government of Hungary” in respect of economic development. Added to this was “the distance of the party from the masses of the people.” And the party itself, with a mere 900,000 members, was “from the ideological and organizational point of view weak, crumbling...” Apart from anything discontent within the party and among the working-class was due to “the gross violation of socialist legality and repression against the innocent (in the years 1949-52).” Although Moscow was ultimately responsible for all this, and in the case of the repression directly culpable, the Russians were congenitally incapable of acknowledging this even to themselves – at least on paper.⁶² So, having failed to take an objective view of how things came to crisis, it is not surprising, perhaps, that they were repeatedly caught by surprise.

It was not that plans for the worst outcome were not laid. The Russians were already disturbed by the direction of events in Hungary in the summer of 1956. This is evident from the review conducted by first deputy chief of the Soviet general staff and chief of staff of the Warsaw Pact Alexei Antonov. On 20 July corps commander lieutenant general Pëtr Lashchenko produced a plan of action – codenamed “Wave” – “for the establishment of public order on the territory of Hungary.” This named areas of occupation and designated units for action by which control over the country could be obtained in just three to six hours.⁶³

Writers naturally led the drive for freedom of speech. At first they gave the government under Gerő time to meet their demands. But this grace came to a decisive end on 8 September when Gyula Hay published an article calling for full freedom of expression, a position echoed by speaker after speaker at the Hungarian Writers’ Association on 17 September.⁶⁴ A further sign that the government was gradually giving way to demands from below came on 14 October when Imre Nagy was readmitted to the party, having refused to recant much of his criticism of its conduct in the past.

From 6 to 19 October Soviet ambassador Andropov kept the Soviet military advised in detail on developments within Hungary and urged them to raise their level of readiness. The likelihood of disturbance was thus signalled early on. By 19 October the 108th guards parachute regiment of the 7th guards parachute division was put on alert, ready for airlift from air bases in Kaunas and Vilnius in Lithuania. Two days later Soviet troops in Hungary were inspected with a view to implementation of operation “Wave”.⁶⁵ The upsurge of discontent then reached a peak on 23 October when a demonstration banned by the authorities of writers, students – who had formed an organization independent of communist control a week before – and off-duty soldiers took place regardless. They demanded a new government under Nagy and the immediate withdrawal of Soviet forces based in Hungary, amounting to some 27,000 ground troops.⁶⁶

By the close of the day the ranks of the demonstration were swollen with angry government employees and impatient workers from the surrounding factories. Up to this point the *prezidium* in Moscow was entirely taken up with Poland which was to be discussed by leaders of fraternal parties in Moscow on the following day. Gerő decided he could not risk further absence – he had been in Yugoslavia with Tito when the troubles began – and instead rushed back. It is variously claimed that he phoned Moscow and Andropov in panic at 7.00pm that evening and immediately requested Soviet forces to put down the troubles; and that he was called to the phone by the Russians and pressed to request Soviet forces.⁶⁷ Given Soviet behaviour later – the Russians attempted to extort from various figures a predated letter requesting military intervention⁶⁸ – one is inclined to believe it was Moscow that took the initiative rather than Gerő. It is agreed, however that he inflamed opinion at home with an ill-considered, intemperate and insulting radio broadcast an hour later. Speaking in the same language as that used to denounce Nagy in 1955, Gerő attacked the leaders of the demonstration for “chauvinist incitement” and “nationalism.”⁶⁹ This led directly to an assault by demonstrators on the radio station on Sándor street staunchly defended by the AVO, the political police. To the sound of calls such as “Russians, go home” and “Death to Gerő”, the battle for Budapest thus began with what American intelligence described as “large-scale, armed violence”.⁷⁰

Despite persistent Soviet references to imperialist involvement, the revolt was spontaneously generated. Once underway, however, the Americans did much to accelerate the speed of the movement that resulted into open rebellion by rebroadcasting local Hungarian radio programs calling for insurrection.⁷¹ President Dwight Eisenhower’s right-hand man in the White House, General Andrew Goodpaster, recalls that “Later he [Eisenhower] was very conscious that there might have been previous inducements and enticements held out to the Hungarians to lead them to think that if they took this action that we would intervene to support them. We had a couple of surveys and examinations made, investigations really, of what had been beamed out to them over Radio Free Europe and other ways.”⁷² These were the actions of Frank Wisner, conducting covert operations for the CIA. But he is reported to have attempted and been refused permission to fly in weapons and men.⁷³

That evening – 23 October – between about 10.00 and 11.00pm Moscow time, Zhukov reported to the *prezidium* on the 100,000 demonstrators in Budapest, the attack on the radio station, and the seizure of the headquarters of the regional party and the ministry of interior. Whereupon Khrushchev suggested moving Soviet forces into the capital. Bulganin spoke out in support, as did almost everyone else present. Mikoyan alone opposed: let the Hungarians restore order, he insisted. Sending in Soviet forces would only “make things worse.” “Try political measures and then bring in the troops,” he suggested instead. Mikoyan argued for Imre Nagy’s appointment as head of the régime: it would be “cheaper for us.” Molotov, however, saw Nagy as useless and spoke in favour of troops. Kaganovich even more bluntly said: “It is a question of overthrowing the government. There is no comparison with Poland.” Zhukov also pressed for troops, a state of emergency with curfew, and the despatch of a *prezidium* member. Nagy did, indeed, emerge as chairman of the council of ministers early on the morning after the demonstration at a time when events were already running out of control. In summing up, however, Khrushchev accepted the need for Nagy in government but not as chairman of the council of ministers. Mikoyan and Suslov would be sent to take charge of affairs on the ground.⁷⁴

From the outset, therefore, with the single exception of Mikoyan, the Soviet leadership spoke for a military solution, which was imme-

diately put into effect. When the meeting opened at 10.00pm chief of the general staff and first deputy minister of defence Marshal Vasili Sokolovskii was already placing the special corps in Hungary on alert.⁷⁵ Right after the *prezidium* dispersed, Zhukov formally mobilised the special corps in Hungary and units from Ukraine (a rifle brigade) and Romania as planned.⁷⁶ At 12.30 am on the following day, 24 October, the 2nd guards mechanized division of the Soviet army stationed at Kecskemét, fifty miles south-east of Budapest, rolled forward into the capital in some urgency, arriving at 4.00am.⁷⁷ The instructions were to fire with cannon to clear the streets of rioters.⁷⁸ An hour later two detachments from the 33rd mechanized division forming a 76-truck artillery convoy left Timisoara in western Romania for Hungary. At 11.28am the 17th guards mechanized division at Szombathely, more than one hundred miles due east of Budapest, was also called into action.⁷⁹ The commanders of its 83rd tank and 1043rd artillery regiments were ordered to Budapest.⁸⁰ Fighting continued across the country through the 25 October. That morning at Mikoyan's suggestion Gerö was removed as first secretary by János Kádár, once severely tortured by the previous régime but now rehabilitated.⁸¹

After the appearance of calm, the situation further worsened when at mid-day a massive crowd emerged onto the square outside parliament refused to disperse on orders from Soviet forces, who opened fire and killed 60. There was further shooting just outside the central committee building where Mikoyan and Suslov were negotiating. Nagy requested a reinforcement of Soviet troops. Only József Kébél, a recent entry into the Politburo, called on the Russians to withdraw their forces. "We stated", Mikoyan and Suslov reported to the presidium, "that it was impossible to raise the question of removing Soviet forces from Hungary because this will mean the entry of American forces." Instead all they promised was that once order was restored, Soviet forces would return to their bases. The rest of the Politburo agreed.⁸² Thereafter, Mikoyan and Suslov pressed for the slimming down of the Politburo to a "directorate" and, when anyone spoke out of line, they talked ominously of "taking measures".

"Some Hungarian troops have joined the insurgents and legation officers personally witnessed on the afternoon of the 25th some Soviet tanks and their crews who had also joined the rebels", CIA noted. But Soviet forces continued to be mobilised within the Soviet Union for transfer across the frontier into Hungary. Following talks with Mikoyan and Suslov, Nagy announced at 3.30pm (Budapest time) that the "Hungarian government is initiating negotiations on relations with the USSR on the basis of national independence and equality between Communist parties and will ask for the withdrawal of Soviet forces stationed in Hungary when order is restored."⁸³ Yet this was not what the Politburo had agreed with Mikoyan and Suslov, who received a verbatim translation of Nagy's speech only later that night. Indeed, it was precisely the reverse (in fact Nagy had the meeting reconvened after Mikoyan and Suslov left the building in order to obtain agreement to the speech which contradicted what had been agreed with the Russians).⁸⁴

On 26 October the 70th guards rifle division in the Trans-Carpathan military district was mobilised to reach north-eastern Hungary two days later.⁸⁵ Large-scale fighting had spread to the countryside, with much of western Hungary in the hands of the rebels. As a consequence the frontier with Austria was now open to traffic in both directions.⁸⁶ A hole had effectively been punched through the Warsaw Pact. CIA reported that "The government of Premier Imre Nagy...apparently does not exercise real authority." At least one regional administration emerged independently in Miskolc and Borsad, in north-eastern Hungary. Such autonomous entities were demanding concessions from the centre in return for subordination.⁸⁷ There were now four Soviet divisions in the country, totalling some 40,000 men.⁸⁸

By 28 October it was clear that all attempts to put down the rebellion had failed despite headlines in *Izvestiya* that morning arguing "The Organizers of the Counter-Revolutionary Putsch in Hungary have Failed"; and according to US intelligence "rebel forces, acting independently with no central leadership" were "in control of most of Hungary outside of Budapest." Nagy, who was increasingly evading Politburo meetings at which Mikoyan and Suslov were present, was calling for a cease-fire on the basis of the new status quo, ordering troops not to fire unless fired upon.⁸⁹ At noon that day the 31st guards parachute division of the Red Army was also mobilised for airlift from air bases in Lvov and Khel'nikskii.⁹⁰ As of 2.00pm on 29 October CIA reported that Nagy's government had identified itself with the rebel cause – *Szabad Nép* was calling on Soviet troops to withdraw - and that "the Soviet forces in Hungary have largely disengaged themselves from the fighting in order to await further orders from Moscow." Moreover, in contrast to other neighbouring parties, the central committee of the Polish party echoed the demand.⁹¹ That evening at 10.00pm Soviet forces in Budapest were ordered to cease fire.⁹² A straw in the wind was that two Romanian officials told Thayer, minister at the US embassy in Bucharest, that "things were just as they should be" in Poland and Hungary.⁹³ Clearly the infection of national liberation from the Soviet empire was spreading.

As of 2.00pm Budapest time on 30 October, with the population reported as in a state of "psychological frenzy" and the lynching of AVO personnel increasingly evident, Soviet forces, having disengaged from street fighting, were withdrawing from the capital. The crowds marching on the parliament that afternoon demanded that all Soviet troops leave the country by mid-November. Nagy stated that the provisional regional administrations that had sprung into existence across the country maintain order and announced the abolition of the one-party state. A multi-party government came into being.⁹⁴ Radio Budapest now denied Nagy had ever called in the Soviet military, blaming former chairman of the council of ministers András Hegedüs and former party first secretary Gerö.⁹⁵

That day, 30 October, the *prezidium* agreed a declaration on relations between the Soviet Union "and other socialist countries" which, it claimed, were founded on "the immutable basis of respect for the full sovereignty of each socialist state." It explained that "the future stationing of Soviet military units in Hungary may serve as grounds for an even greater worsening of the situation" and that these forces would be withdrawn from Budapest at the wish of the Hungarian government. It also announced the willingness of the Soviet government to discuss the "presence of Soviet forces on the territory of Hungary" and its willingness to do so with all members of the Warsaw Pact.⁹⁶ Yet no sooner had this appeared in the editorial column on the front page of *Pravda* the following day than the *prezidium* reversed the decision and set about the final liquidation of the Hungarian revolt.

The trigger was the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt – operation Muskateer - which began at 7.44am Moscow time that day. The Russians plausibly but mistakenly understood the United States was implicated. Khrushchev announced that the situation in Hungary

had to be reviewed, that forces would not be withdrawn but “take the initiative in restoring order...” The reason given was entirely new: “If we leave Hungary, this will encourage the Americans, the English and the French – the imperialists.” They would “understand us to be weak and will attack.” The party would not understand. “Together with Egypt we would then add Hungary. We have no other choice.”⁹⁷ Had the Russians known that the Americans were unconnected and, indeed, utterly opposed to the Suez adventure, it is doubtful whether they would have moved when they did; particularly once the British and the French were in the dock for aggression at the UN security council. Out of premature fear and alarm they allowed themselves to be panicked into hasty action. A week later the uprising had been crushed.

It was too late for the *PCI*. An anonymous editorial *l'Unità* that was written by Togliatti had already stated bluntly that “When the counter-revolutionaries’ weapons are crackling one is on one side or other of the barricades. There is no third way.”⁹⁸ At 1.35 am on 31st October a telegram came in to Moscow from Rome that was not deciphered until 10.30am.⁹⁹ It explained that the party was badly split over Hungary – a part of the *PCI* favoured the application of “Stalinist methods”, a part felt the uprising fully justified. The latter wanted the leadership supplanted by Di Vittorio and his supporters (who had attacked the Soviet military intervention in sustaining trades union unity at the *CGIL*). Togliatti pointed out that, having condemned the uprising as counter-revolutionary, the *PCI* found the Hungarian party and government had adopted another position. His own feeling was that “the Hungarian government, whether Nagy does or does not remain in charge, will evolve irreversibly in a reactionary direction.” He wished to know what Soviet comrades thought. He added that the *direzione* were concerned lest the Soviet leadership split over the Polish and Hungarian events.¹⁰⁰ Nagy, not yet knowing the latest Soviet decision and addressing a crowd in Kossuth square in Budapest mid-afternoon, called for Hungary to withdraw from the Warsaw pact.¹⁰¹

The meeting of the *direzione* on 30 October concerning “the facts of Hungary” was the most heated yet. Togliatti’s stance was unchanged from the events of Poznań on the illegitimacy of insurrection under communist rule. “From the very beginning”, he had written to Carlo Muscetta three days before, “...it was clear to us (or at least myself) that as in Poland so in Hungary the situation emerged in a manner that it was not possible to see if or how our comrades would be able to get on top of it. It was yet more clear later that in the event that they did not succeed in getting on top of it, a very serious blow would hit us, more serious than any that we have received in a decade – regardless of the fact that we are today not directly implicated in any responsibility for these matters.”¹⁰² At the *direzione* Togliatti opened with the comment that the party had from the outset condemned the “uprising” but that “The anxieties awakened among us by the Soviet intervention were even greater than for the Hungarian events themselves.” He positioned himself between the two flanks described in the telegram to Moscow, emphasising his core belief that “We do not agree that Gomulka and Nagy are examples to follow.” He stubbornly refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the stance adopted by Di Vittorio. He insisted that “The uprising is an historical fact and we must draw the lessons from it. The leadership methods in the countries of people’s democracy must be altered radically and economic policy must also be changed.” His bottom line, which history in part bears out, was that “Profound democratisation is the precondition to saving the socialist system.” Terracini pointed out that it was “the first time that the party finds itself faced with a popular revolt in a socialist country and that presents much food for thought.” He went on to compare it with the Kronstadt uprising and thereby found himself unable to align himself openly with Di Vittorio, who continued to fight his corner and not merely in the name of tactics. “Everything would be clearer is side by side with the Soviet army there were forces from among the [Hungarian] communists and workers. It is their absence that upsets the party.”¹⁰³

The counselling of caution to those in the party protesting against the events in Hungary became ever more frantic. On 5 November Togliatti wrote to Trombadori, complaining in the starkest terms of his management of *Contemporaneo*. “You have played the game of the Petoefi circle [of Budapest], without understanding how dangerous such a game is. The Petoefi circle – I mean irresponsible, open agitation against the party – is, in acute conditions, the first step in the counter-revolution. In our circumstances it is the first step towards disintegration.”¹⁰⁴ Instead of reaching out to the core of the party, the journal was accused of having closed itself in on the intellectuals in hostility against the party. The Hungarian tragedy thus ate into the vitals of the *PCI*, by raising in such an acute form the issue of what constituted socialism in Eastern Europe and therefore in the future of Italy. Within the leadership only such as Di Vittorio clung to heresy.

What Di Vittorio, for one, never considered (nor did Gorbachev many years later) was what Togliatti surely knew: that fully-fledged democratisation would almost certainly destroy *ersatz* socialism in Eastern Europe. His premiss – like that of the Russians – had little to do with ideology. It was likely as not reasons of state: if socialism collapsed in Eastern Europe, then the Soviet empire in the region would collapse along with it, shifting the balance of power decisively to the advantage of the United States. At this time the US government possessed a mass of strategic nuclear weapons that could obliterate the bases of Soviet power with no likely response. All the Russians had was the capacity to inflict severe damage within Europe and much of that still depended upon the capability of conventional forces stationed forward in central Europe.¹⁰⁵ The related assumption was that if Soviet power were deflated and neutralised, associated communist parties within the US sphere of influence could be expected to wither along with it.

A further factor played its role. Emanuele Macaluso, member of the *PCI* central committee and head of the Sicilian branch of the party, recalls the manner in which Amendola had earlier in the year taken up the cause of the 20th party congress and received great applause by saying that the party was now free of foreign mortgages. Yet it was also Amendola, in Turin on the anniversary of the October revolution (7 November), who spoke to applause of the Soviet Union as the “best basis of support, including military, for the Hungarian comrades.” Macaluso’s view, which he claims to have been that of “the whole leading group”, was “that it would not have been possible to beat the conservative bloc, extremely strong within the *PCI*, without taking up that stance: otherwise, the conservatives would have won hands down, and the party would have been split.”¹⁰⁶

By the time the *direzione* met again, on 21 November, the damage was already done. Togliatti had ended the previous meeting of the leadership with a refusal to summon the central committee on the basis of the shaky claim that the situation within the party was “not as serious as it seemed.”¹⁰⁷ But with the preparations of the party’s VIII congress under way, issues of principle were being thrashed out in heated debate among the rank and file. The party’s crockery was being smashed with considerable abandon. And with the Soviet occupation of Hungary following the disillusionment over destalinisation, the *PCI* was to lose one quarter of its membership.¹⁰⁸ Amendola expressed his anxieties in characteristic euphemism on 21 November: “The facts of Poland and Hungary have greatly animated meetings directed towards discussion of international problems, the Italian road to socialism, internal democracy. The concrete problems of the Italian road to socialism and themes of local concern, work among catholics...and even among socialists...have been cast into the shade.”¹⁰⁹ There was no eagerness to linger further over the disasters of that year.

Togliatti thus emerges from these crises indissolubly bound to Soviet power and Soviet policy excepting only freedom of manoeuvre for the *PCI* in the domestic realm. The interview with **Nuovi argomenti** had been a bold stroke, indeed. But thereafter he drew back for fear of the larger consequences within the Soviet bloc that rapidly became apparent. He was shackled to the Stalinist past. He was increasingly a stranger to new times. The instincts honed in an earlier era failed him now that the ground beneath his feet began to move with revolutionary rapidity. He was certainly not alone in this, and the man ultimately responsible, Khrushchev, was to find exactly the same slippery surface underfoot once the process of reform took hold.

Perhaps the last word goes to Harry Pollitt, general secretary of the insignificant British communist party (*CPGB*). Pollitt told **Pravda** correspondent Nekrasov that “the fundamental reason for the weakness of the English [sic] communist party is the policy of the CPSU.” “We have hitherto had no inner party crisis whose origins lay within the party itself or within the domestic political situation in England. Every crisis came to us from abroad.”¹¹⁰ As an alibi for the longstanding weakness of the *CPGB*, it had its faults and by no means told the whole story. But it is hard not to conclude that the prospects for these parties as a whole, and the left in general, were bound to be set back by close association with the Soviet Union, whose brutal policies pursued in Eastern Europe during the Cold War were determined primarily for reasons of state that undermined the legitimacy of non-ruling communist parties.

note

- 1 **Archivio PCI**. Fondo Mosca. Direzione Verbali (1944-1958). Verbale 30 October 1956.
- 2 P. Spriano, **Storia del Partito comunista italiano**, vol. 1 (Turin 1967) – vol. 5 (Turin 1975).
- 3 The original analysis can be found in R. Conquest, **Power and Policy in the USSR** (London 1961). Much was based on his work in the IRD, an intelligence and research arm of the Foreign Office. He resigned to write the book because his superiors in both intelligence and diplomacy refused to take this kind of analysis seriously. For the latest on this episode in Soviet history, the best to be found is in W. Taubman, **Khrushchev: The Man and His Era** (New York and London 2003).
- 4 **Prezidium...**
- 5 Protokol No 187, 9 february 1956: *ibid.*, doc. 32.
- 6 Original text first published in Russia under Gorbachev: **Izvestiya TsK KPSS**, No 3, 1989, pp. 128-170.
- 7 G. Seniga, **Togliatti e Stalin** (Milan 1978) p. 47.
- 8 Quoted in “La ‘salvaguardia’ dei comunisti italiani a Mosca e il terrore”, **I'ircocerve**, No 1, 2003, p. 19.
- 9 V. Vidali, **Diario del XX Congresso** (Milan 1974) pp. 58 and 110.
- 10 Pietro Secchia. **Archivio Pietro Secchia 1945-1973**. Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli. **Annali**. 1978, p. 302. Also, speech by Terracini to the *direzione*, quoted below (p.).
- 11 Togliatti to Secchia, 19 March 1956: **Archivio Secchia**, p. 679.
- 12 G. Cerreti, **Con Togliatti e Thorez. Quarant'anni di lotte politiche** (Milan 1973) p. 338.
- 13 “Il XX Congresso del Partito comunista dell'Unione Sovietica”, in P. Togliatti, **Opere**, Vol. VI, ed. L. Gruppi (Rome 1984) pp. 93-124. The footnote carelessly dates the address to 13 February. The text also appeared in **Pravda**, 18 March 1956.
- 14 Secchia. **Archivio Secchia**, p. 302.
- 15 **Archivio PCI**. Fondo Mosca. 040. Verbale. Comitato Centrale, 13 March 1956.
- 16 Cerreti, **Con Togliatti**, p. 338.
- 17 **L'Unità**, 15 March 1956.
- 18 P. Ingrao, **Masse e potere** (Rome 1977) p. 134.
- 19 Quoted in Seniga, **Togliatti e Stalin**, p. 26.
- 20 Dejean (Moscow) to Paris, 12 March 1956: **Documents Diplomatiques Français**, 1956, Vol. 1 (Paris 1988) doc. 163.
- 21 Polish ambassador to France Stanisław Gajewski's comment, 7 May 1956: C. Sulzberger, **Last of the Giants** (London 1970) p. 279.
- 22 Meeting with Khrushchev, 11 July: **Archivio PCI**. Fondo Mosca. Partiti Esteri, 253. 1956.
- 23 T. Toranska, ed., “**Them**”: **Stalin's Polish Puppets** (New York 1987) p. 174.
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