

A black and white portrait of Palmiro Togliatti, a middle-aged man with dark hair, wearing round glasses, a dark suit, a white shirt, and a dark tie. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a faint smile. The background is a patterned wallpaper.

I.B. TAURIS

COMMUNIST
LIVES

palmiro togliatti
a biography
aldo agosti

PALMIRO TOGLIATTI

Aldo Agosti is Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Turin in Italy. He is the author and editor of numerous books about the history of the Socialist and Communist movements.

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A Biography

Aldo Agosti

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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Series Foreword</i> by Matthew Worley	ix
<i>Foreword</i> by Donald Sassoon	xi
<i>Preface</i> by Aldo Agosti	xvii
1. Political and Cultural Development	1
2. A Revolutionary Party Facing Reaction	19
3. Moscow, Switzerland and Paris	41
4. The Night of Social Fascism	67
5. The Season of the Popular Front	85
6. Europe in the Storm	119
7. National Unity	151
8. Cold War and Retreat	189
9. Years of <i>Détente</i> and the Crisis of Centrism	223
10. The Last Years, The Last Question	265
<i>Endnotes</i>	297
<i>Index</i>	331

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SERIES FOREWORD

Communism has, traditionally, appeared to be something of a faceless creed. Its emphasis on the collective over the individual, on discipline and unity, and on the overwhelming importance of ‘the party’, has meant that only the most renowned (and mainly Soviet) communist leaders have attracted interest from English-speaking political historians and biographers. In particular, the party rank-and-file have tended to be dismissed as mere cogs within the organisations of which they were part, either denigrated as ‘slaves of Moscow’, or lost in the sweeping accounts of communist party policy and strategy that have dominated the historiography to date. More recently, however, historians have begun to delve beneath the uniform appearance of democratic centralism, endeavouring to understand the motivations and objectives of those who gave their lives to revolutionary struggle. The current series, therefore, has been established to bolster and give expression to such interest. By producing biographical accounts of communist leaders and members, it is hoped that a movement that helped define the twentieth century will begin to be understood in a more nuanced way, and that the millions who – at various times and in various ways – subscribed to such a Utopian but ultimately flawed vision will be given both the personal and historical depth that their communist lives deserve.

Matthew Worley

Series Editor – *Communist Lives*

FOREWORD

The art of political biography does not bloom in Italy the way it does in the Anglo-Saxon world, where no self-respecting politician, including the second-rate, fails to chance upon a biographer. Even the inevitable self-serving memoir finds a publisher. Gerald Ford, the only US president never to have won a national election, scored on both counts. Alec Douglas Home, British prime minister for just a year, has four biographies and published several volumes of memoirs and letters. Neil Kinnock, who led the Labour Party between 1983 and 1992 and lost two elections, has at least three biographies.

Italians are more circumspect. Writing biographies is regarded as the prerogative of journalists. Academics who experiment with the genre try hard to avoid the trivia they disdain but readers love. Italians who want to know about Mussolini read British (or, more recently, Australian) biographies and use Renzo De Felice's barely readable multi-volume biography of the *Duce* (in reality a history of fascism) to embellish their bookshelves.

In 1973, Giorgio Bocca, a well-known journalist, produced the first comprehensive biography of Palmiro Togliatti (who had died in 1964) using a wide range of interviews and published sources. Bocca exhibited the endearing trait of acknowledging the subject's remarkable political intelligence and his leading role in the transformation of the post-war Italian Communist Party (PCI) into a force for progress and democracy, while expressing quite forcefully his unremitting antipathy towards Togliatti. No other significant life appeared until 1996, when Aldo Agosti published the first and, so far, the only authoritative, archive based, serious and balanced biography of the communist leader. This, in an abridged and updated form, is the volume you are about to read.

The paucity of works on the life of Palmiro Togliatti is all the more remarkable if one considers that he was one of the towering political figures of twentieth-century Italy, along with the Liberal statesman Giovanni Giolitti, Benito Mussolini, and the Christian Democratic leader Alcide De Gasperi.

Unlike them, he was never prime minister. It is rare for someone who never won an election, made a revolution, or staged a takeover to achieve such status. One of Togliatti's peculiarities was that he spent almost his entire lifetime in opposition, but then occupied his last twenty years behaving as if he were in government. He thought that one had to operate on a dual track; that it was necessary to combat the adversary, yes, and with all means at one's disposal; but, in the end, the objective was not to oppose but to govern.

His favourite expression was *fare politica*. Literally, this means 'make politics', an expression which – in English – has little meaning. For in Anglo-Saxon countries one does not 'make politics'; one is 'in' politics (whether to change things or to stop things

from changing). But the broader political canvas remains unaltered as befits nations blessed or cursed with uncommon political stability.

In Italy, 'making politics' implies changing the shape of the political, its rules, its flavour. It is a dynamic concept; it underlines the unfinished nature of the Italian polity, the relatively recent construction of its state, and the undetermined character of its foundations. But there is also, I think, behind this expression, the weight of older political traditions stretching back a few centuries, all the way to Machiavelli, whose *Principe* was less concerned with the management of existing states than with the creation of new ones. And in the creation of 'the new' Togliatti had two political accomplishments to his credit.

The first was the invention of the *partito nuovo*, the post-war PCI with its one-and-a-half-million members, its network of branches and federations, its affiliated cultural and sporting associations, and its mass daily and weekly press. This was quite distinct from the traditional Leninist sect, based on trusted and dedicated activists, waiting for the moment of revolutionary rupture, 'a small, closed association of propagandists of the general ideas of communism and Marxism'. After opposing fascism for twenty years, Togliatti believed the time had come to co-operate in the hard task of national reconstruction. The *partito nuovo* he had in mind had to become 'national', Italian, deeply rooted in society – an active participant in the country's hopes and aspirations – and not a distant observer of the woes of capitalism, exulting at every sign of its failings in the hopeless expectation that things have to get much worse before they can get any better.

National reconstruction was Togliatti's second great political accomplishment. Its centrepiece was the constitution of 1948, drafted in a new common political language which embraced the main political families that had emerged or re-emerged out of the destruction brought about by the war and the dictatorship: the liberal-secular, the Catholic and, of course, the socialist-communist. This compromise, for it was a compromise, was to be held together by the spirit of anti-fascism which had given a sense of purpose to the Resistance. Such co-existence withstood even the most difficult moments of the Cold War and lasted until the early 1990s when the post-war party political system collapsed under the double impact of massive corruption scandals and the end of communism.

Togliatti understood that a constitution had to enshrine the possibility of coexistence between the contending parties. Bypassing the socialists he dealt directly with the other great mass party of post-war Italy, the *Democrazia Cristiana* (Christian Democrats), and produced the only constitution in Western Europe which bore the decisive imprint of a communist party. The subversive had become a state builder.

The post-war settlement could have gone another way. The role played by Togliatti and the PCI in the construction of the Italian republic and its constitutive charter contrasts with that of the French Communist Party (PCF), the only other comparable communist party in Western Europe. The PCF too pushed for a new republican constitution, but failed to mobilise enough support behind it. It was defeated in a referendum. A new amended constitution, grudgingly endorsed by the increasingly isolated communists, was reluctantly approved by the electorate and lasted a decade or

so. The French communists never felt at home in the short-lived Fourth Republic (a pathetic copy of the Third) and opposed – understandably so – the creation of the Fifth, Gaullist, Republic. The PCF remained an antagonistic force until the day it died. More nationalist than national, the PCF, like de Gaulle, had ‘a certain idea of France’ though not the same as the General or indeed anyone else outside its own ranks.

Yet, the beginnings of Togliatti’s career had not been auspicious. In his early days he often wavered and showed indecision. When the First World War broke out and Italy stayed out of it (joining the Anglo-French Alliance the following year, in spite of great opposition in parliament), Togliatti’s position (and Gramsci’s) – as this biography makes clear – was closer to Mussolini’s than to the leadership of the socialist party. Absolute neutrality was not a position with which Togliatti felt comfortable. Italy should not be left out of a momentous event which was about to reshape Europe. He even thought it might not be a bad outcome if the principles of economic liberalism championed by Great Britain were to triumph in Europe. His Marxism was *suis generis* (as it would remain ever after). In 1917, unlike Gramsci, he seemed barely aware of the importance of the Soviet Revolution. And, also unlike Gramsci, Togliatti was cautious, pragmatic, aware of the lasting strength of institutions, less confident of positive outcomes. He could not ‘make up his mind, as was always somewhat his habit’, wrote Gramsci, a little disparagingly, in January 1924.

Togliatti, the prudent revolutionary, was disdainful of the maximalist rhetoric of many socialists. Events confirmed him in this attitude. During the turmoil of the wave of strikes of the so-called *biennio rosso* (the ‘two red years’ of 1919–20) Togliatti soon realised how little his small group of activists could influence the Italian labour movement. His great gift, essential for a politician, consisted in being able to learn from mistakes.

In *L’Ordine Nuovo*, the journal he edited with Angelo Tasca, Umberto Terracini and Antonio Gramsci, Togliatti refined his skill as a sarcastic polemicist. But he was not aware, any more than anyone else, of the real threat posed by fascism. Too busy with the daily edition of the paper, he was not even present in Livorno in January 1921 when the new communist party was founded. Togliatti, like many others, fell at first under the influence of Amadeo Bordiga, the sectarian leader of the new party. Soon he realised that the advent of fascism meant that the Left had been defeated, and – what was almost worse – that it had not realised the historic magnitude of this defeat. He hesitated. The alternatives he faced seemed to be either to dedicate himself to cultural pursuits – the cultivation of one’s garden, as Voltaire’s *Candide* would have it, or to spend the rest of his life in politics. By May 1923 he had taken the plunge (something he would occasionally regret) and threw himself into reorganising a party soon to be banned and persecuted. This reluctant revolutionary faced a new, agonising choice: whether to follow Bordiga’s line, thus breaking with the Comintern (Lenin had been scathing about Bordiga, finding him guilty of ‘infantile’ communist extremism) or accept the discipline required by Moscow. He chose Moscow. As he wrote to Gramsci, on 1 May 1923, ‘entering into open battle with the Communist International, putting ourselves outside of it, then finding ourselves without powerful material and moral

support, reduced to a tiny group held together by almost solely personal ties' would entail 'losing all real and practical immediate influence on the development of the political battle in Italy'.

In Moscow in 1926, he became head of the party after the effective establishment of Mussolini's dictatorship. He lived in exile returning again to Moscow from France when the war broke out. By 1927 Gramsci was in prison. Angelo Tasca eventually drifted away, gathering a remarkable archive while becoming a police informer. Bordiga, expelled from the party in 1930, lived a quiet life under fascism. Togliatti was now in charge. But in charge of what? The PCI was little more than an insignificant little sect, barely able to organise against fascism. Its best activists were in exile or in jail. The liberal and socialist oppositions to fascism were just as ineffectual, resorting to futile gestures or keeping their head down, waiting for better times. Togliatti now inhabited two worlds: the world of the international communist movement and that of the Italian party.

Each of these worlds was in turn divided. The leaders of the Comintern, of which Togliatti had risen to become one, were, in theory, in charge of a global communist revolution. They received and read reports from China and India, from the Philippines and from Brazil, from Berlin and from Madrid. They were aware of what was going on, not just in Paris and London but also in Ulan Bator and Cairo. They discussed the impact of strikes and wars, debated who should be in alliance with whom and why. At the same time they lived in a surreal atmosphere, cooped up in the Hotel Lux in Moscow, 'its dusty corridors were still populated by rats' and Soviet secret agents, and were participants in the momentous sectarian clash taking place inside the vanguard party which was supposed to lead the global revolution. This is where Togliatti met Zinoviev and Kamenev and Bukharin and Trotsky and, of course, Stalin. It was a dangerous milieu but one which, until Stalin established his final control, was relatively open to debate and disagreement – described by Agosti with uncommon poise and balance. In fact the situation was all the more dangerous when the debate was open, since one was less prudent and would pay the price later.

The other world, that of the PCI, was equally disjointed. Inside the country, bands of clandestine activists, constantly suspicious of everyone and yet more in touch with the life and feelings of ordinary people, carried on a brave, if largely ineffectual, struggle. Outside the country, a band of exiles, under the prestigious mantle of an international revolutionary movement, pretended to direct them. The conventional anti-communist narrative, taking the same line as the official communist one, has regarded the Comintern and its affiliated organisations as an amazingly efficient monolith, endowed with a near perfect communication system, able to move its various pawns, almost at will, on the great chessboard of revolutionary politics. The reality, as Agosti deftly shows, was more complicated. The truth of the matter is that the Comintern was an organisation in disarray. During its reign (1919–43) not a single successful communist revolution occurred anywhere in the world, (with the possible exception of the People's Republic of Mongolia whose entry into the roster of communist states in 1924 was due to the Red Army rather than the Comintern). Indeed while the Comintern was laying down the line, trying to locate the

contradictions within the ranks of the enemy, the 'enemy' was scoring repeated successes. By the time the Second World War broke out, staunchly anti-communist authoritarian governments of various hues were in power throughout eastern, central and southern Europe, from Metaxas's Greece to Antanas Smetona's Lithuania, from Franco's Spain to King Carol's Romania. The Comintern offered hope and faith in these trying times. The prospects were dismal and the enemy powerful, but the future belonged to the International – or so they felt.

Togliatti's relationship with the Comintern was complex, but not unusual for communists of the interwar years. He did not regard himself merely as a leader of the PCI, loyal to Moscow, but as a leader of the international communist movement. He could not see any contradiction between the two positions. In the 1920s one could argue about whether Italian fascism was in crisis, whether it had succeeded in building around itself a compact system of power, and whether the PCI could defeat fascism on its own. These were not just debates between Moscow and the Italian party but within (above all within) the party.

At least in the 1920s, Togliatti could and did express positions which went against the prevailing mood in the Comintern, in particular by his insistence that fascism was an exceptional form of capitalist rule against those who maintained that the differences between fascism and the hated social democracy were insignificant. But he then realised that he was in danger (he had been too close to Bukharin) and knuckled under. He allowed his work in the Comintern to take second place to the business of defending his position in the PCI. The enthralling fourth chapter of the biography ('The Night of Social Fascism') maps out this most difficult period in Togliatti's life. His caution was such that it was Dimitrov who was instrumental in getting the Comintern to adopt the new line of the popular front. Togliatti threw his weight behind the new policy only when he was sure it had Stalin's *imprimatur*. Even so he remained distrustful of the French communists.

The new situation enabled him to produce one of the most interesting analyses of fascism during the interwar years: the lectures on fascism to the cadres at the Moscow party school – lectures (published in English in 1976) which urged activists to work within fascist organisations and *fare politica*. When the Spanish Civil War broke out, Togliatti, abandoning the caution of the previous year, explained that the struggle (which had previously been between communism and all forms of 'capitalist dictatorship', whether fascist or 'bourgeois' democratic) was now today, everywhere in the world, between fascism and democracy. The testing ground for this struggle was Spain where Togliatti was sent, as chief Comintern adviser, or Stalin's henchman as some would have it. Those who propound for the henchman's thesis would do well to read chapter six ('Europe in the Storm') in which his criticism of the sectarianism of the Spanish Communist Party is analysed and contextualised.

Other crucial and controversial moments of Togliatti's career are examined by Agosti without reticence: the reaction to the Nazi-Soviet pact; the revitalisation of the resistance against fascism; the role he played in the formation of a unity government after Italy joined the Allies in 1943–44; the reconstruction of the Italian state; the beginning of the Cold War; and, above all, Togliatti's reception of Khrushchev's de-

Stalinisation speech in 1956 and his clear support for the Soviet intervention in Hungary. Regardless of the differences he had with Stalin and his successors, he knew and probably believed that there was no other choice open to a leader of a communist party than complete subordination to the 'vanguard state'. One can speculate whether – had he broken with the USSR – he would have been able to carry his party with him, but there is little doubt that this was not an option Togliatti ever seriously considered.

There was, inevitably, a kind of political schizophrenia. On the one hand there was Togliatti's genuine attempt to develop a distinctive 'Italian Road to Socialism' quite different from that taken by Lenin and his successors. On the other there was the realisation that – in a bipolar world and in the situation in which Italy found itself – one had to choose one's own camp. This, of course, meant that Togliatti's analysis of international relations during the Cold War, though often subtle, was debased by an inability or unwillingness to do what he did so well in domestic politics: to see the reasons of the enemy.

To see the reasons of Togliatti and situate his life in the context of his times is the supreme achievement of this biography.

Donald Sassoon
London, 2008

PREFACE

This biography was first published in Italian in January 1996. Although it is condensed, this revised and updated English version has retained the structure of the first Italian edition. Some quotations have been omitted or abbreviated, mainly in the last three chapters. The sections specific to the inner-workings of Italian politics have been simplified. In addition, I have expanded the treatment of Togliatti's role as a leader of the international communist movement, as brought to light by documents released from the Moscow archives after 1994 and from Dimitrov's diary. I have also considered some of the most significant historiography of the last decade, which has informed the study of Togliatti and the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the party of which he was the undisputed leader for 40 years. These revisions have resulted in the substantial rewriting of certain sections and the bibliographical notes, which seek to give an albeit brief account of the new research which emerged between 1996 and 2007.

Togliatti has left an uneven imprint on historiography. In Italy, his character has attracted almost as much attention as Gramsci's. Even more than the latter, obviously, he has been identified with the history of the PCI, which – from at least the 1960s – has become a particularly contentious topic for historical research no less than an object of burning political passion. Togliatti's place in the historiography of other countries is less clear. An enormous amount of literature concerning the communist movement was produced in the years of Cold War, especially by American historians and political scientists. But in attempting to retrace Togliatti's activities and political thought in the years of the Communist International (Comintern), the English-speaking reader would have found little to rely on until at least the mid-1970s. Considerable attention had been paid, it is true, to his role alongside Gramsci in the founding of the PCI¹; but very little was known about his role in the Comintern. This was only been touched on in the admirable books of E. H. Carr and Jane Degras. Both are accurate in reconstructing the events; but neither enter deeply into the more subtle details of the ideological and strategic issues confronting the Comintern.²

No selection of Togliatti's works was published in English before 1976, when the *Lectures on Fascism* were translated by Lawrence and Wishart. This included an introduction by James Klugmann, which was both didactic and 'militant', without catching the complexity of its subject. Three years later, Donald Sassoon edited and introduced a rich selection of Togliatti's writings. Of the twelve published texts, only four could be considered directly political; the remainder had been selected, in the editor's words, 'to trace the essential elements of the politics of transition which is at the core of the strategy of Italian communism'.³ Within this perspective, Sassoon's introduction offered an excellent overall survey of Togliatti's thought, especially after 1944.

It is only in the last two decades that Togliatti's role in the Comintern has been more closely scrutinised, both in works of synthesis about the international communist movement and in studies specifically concerning the PCI.⁴ In contrast, the second phase of Togliatti's political career, coinciding with the final 20 years of his life, has been more closely examined by English-language historians since the 1960s. This was partly due to the blossoming of a rich school of studies in English-speaking universities on Republican Italy, but also due to the great interest aroused in the PCI's 'peculiarity' in the international communist system. As early as 1968, Donald Blackmer produced a very serious analysis of the PCI's role in the debate within international communism after 1956.⁵ In 1981, Donald Sassoon wrote a lengthy and penetrating monograph on the strategy of the Italian communists after 1944, which focused especially on Togliatti's role.⁶ In the 1990s, Paul Ginsborg and Patrick McCarthy published two of the best histories of the Italian Republic, offering a stimulating, partly critical interpretation of the role played by the PCI and its leader.⁷

After the political earthquake of 1992, which caused all the Italian political parties acting on the political scene over the previous forty years to disappear or to radically change their nature, the history of the PCI seemed, with few exceptions, to lose much of its appeal for English-language historians.⁸ Italian scholars, on the contrary, have never ceased to deal with the subject, following mainly two paths. On the one hand, they explored the social and cultural history of the party, often at a local level. On the other hand, stimulated by the opening of the Soviet archives, they concentrated on the 'external bond' (*vincolo esterno*) that loyalty to the Soviet Union exerted over the PCI as the main key to unlock its part in the history of the Italian Republic. As a result, many Italian historians changed their views on the scope of the PCI's perceived 'autonomy'. This issue had been presented – with some difficulty – as the pivot of previous Italian communist historiography, and there were reasons in favour of such reappraisal.⁹ But the 'external bond' thesis seems too reductive for understanding the complex events in the PCI after 1944, and therefore indirectly for rereading the last 20 years of the life and work of Togliatti.

In its second part, this book poses, starting from Togliatti's biography, a series of more general questions that are still pertinent for the history of the Italian Republic. Was the PCI's distinctive identity formed wholly by the 'external bond' of double loyalty? How important was the other side of the 'external bond' to which the Italian political system was subjected, namely its place inside the strategic arena of American influence? And how much did internal matters count? Was the only reason that the governing class isolated the PCI its affiliation to the communist international movement? Or does this choice rather also reflect another historical characteristic of the governing classes, namely a timid management of the resources of political democracy? What impact did the presence of the Catholic Church in Italy have on this choice, at least until the papacy of Pope Pius XII, and even afterwards? These are all questions that must become a part of a general rethinking of the history of the Italian Republic; otherwise there is a risk that historians will use the PCI as a convenient scapegoat for all its distortions.

Nobody could question the importance of the relationship between the PCI and the Soviet Union, nor its persistence long after Togliatti's death. Nevertheless, this

'iron bond' – as he himself called it – does not explain the long survival in Italy of such a strong communist party. Roberto Gualtieri has given a very thought-provoking, and partly convincing, explanation of this fact: he has argued that 'the PCI was far more fit than the Italian socialists and social democrats to underpin the "negative integration" of the world of labour in the new democratic State, unifying and regulating most of the various forces and subcultures that constituted the variegated and turbulent world of the Italian left into a robust national (and international) backbone'.¹⁰ In other words, perhaps only a mass communist party was able to absorb the shock of an extraordinarily rapid modernisation process with its extremely high social costs. As intriguing as this explanation may be, it does not entirely resolve the question. It underestimates both the contribution of the PCI to the defence of the constitutional legality of Republican Italy and the growth of a pervasive democratic culture. This aspect has often been better perceived by external observers of Italian affairs than by Italian historians.¹¹ Of course some – often serious – incongruities and delays may come to the fore in this field. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the PCI is a force which has long persisted in Italian society. Its significance can be traced by observing its ability to teach its militants the principles of democracy, which has resulted in great civil growth, transforming, as I state in the conclusion to this book, millions of 'subjects' or 'rebels' into 'citizens'.

This is Togliatti's most important legacy. It is a legacy that has generated an extraordinary paradox, allowing Italian communists to renew their organisational forms and open up their ideology to changes. Togliatti's achievement was to preserve the Italian communist party from the ghettoisation which afflicted its 'brother parties'. Its status as a mass party also made it so strong and dangerous – in the bipolar logic of international relations – that it was denied access to national government.

The realisation of this English edition was made possible by a team of friends and colleagues, to whom I would like to express my profound gratitude: first, Matthew Worley, who with great passion has followed each step of my work; also Donald Sassoon and Nina Fishman, who proposed an English translation of this book and who worked to find the necessary resources; Gino Bedani, who has read some chapters and given precious advice. Special thanks also to Vanna Derosas and Jane Ennis, who translated this book with particular skill. And just because I have been given the occasion of fully appreciating the art of translation, I would like to dedicate this edition to the memory of my mother, Maria Luisa Castellani, an Italian translator of Jane Austen, Katherine Mansfield, Henry James and many other English-language classics.

Aldo Agosti
Turin, 2008

POLITICAL AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Palmiro Togliatti was born in Genoa on 26 March 1893 in an old house on *Via Albergo dei Poveri* to Antonio and Teresa Viale. He was the third of four siblings: Eugenio Giuseppe (born 1890), Maria Cristina (1892) and Enrico (1900). With characteristic historical and philological precision, the future secretary of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) appears to have undertaken research into his own family history. He wrote in a letter to Carlo Trabucco in 1962:

According to the registers of *Castellania di Lanzo* – a Toglià (the name will then become Togliat, Togliatto, Togliatti) Pietro bought fields and woodland from a Giovanni de Toglià to the value of 100 Viennese monies. The sale is registered in an account of N. Agnone of Challand and dates from 1347–48. [...] As you can see, I'm not short of titles of nobility, and of the true kind. Free peasants since the 1300s!¹

Free indeed, but poor. Palmiro's father was born in 1852 in Coassolo, a village of around 4,500 souls, 30-or-so kilometres from Turin. His parents owned little more than a hectare of grazing land and some fruit trees. Antonio had six brothers and sisters, and the land was not enough for all of them: one, Martino, emigrated to the United States, while Caterina became a nun.

Initially, Antonio also appeared destined for an ecclesiastic career; but, on the eve of his entrance into the seminary, the young man, not feeling the vocation of priesthood, left his birthplace to seek his fortune in Turin where he succeeded in taking the diploma to become a primary school teacher. Having taught for a while in private schools, he worked as a tutor in the Turinese *Convitto Nazionale*. In the meantime, he had met Teresa Viale – in a school where they both taught – and married her.

The social class of Togliatti's mother must have been quite modest. She was adopted at the age of six by a well-to-do Turinese family. It seems that a brother, a worker in a bakery, died young from tuberculosis (and Togliatti would not fail to note this modest proletarian ancestry in the autobiographical file compiled in 1932 for the personnel office of the Communist International). Teresa Viale's adoptive family had her undertake teacher training.²

Teresa Viale was an energetic woman, ready to sacrifice herself to ensure a satisfactory social position for her children. Her tenacity was rewarded, if it is true that all four of them received a degree. She was gifted with an artistic temperament and was highly cultured. Very religious, she imparted to her children a rigorous Catholic education. 'Nevertheless' – Togliatti recalled – 'the family atmosphere I lived in was

not bigoted even though it was very religious. I would go to church every Sunday out of habit, but did not feel the question of religion with much intensity.’³

Togliatti’s family, then, exhibited some of the traits possessed by a typical Piedmontese petit-bourgeois family at the end of the century, characterised by attachment to religious values and to the royal dynasty that constituted the backbone of Piedmontese bureaucracy; but there was in both mother and father a certain refusal to submit to a pre-established destiny.⁴ Antonio’s salary as a state employee was barely sufficient to cover the upkeep of his wife (who stopped teaching as soon as she married) and his children. Having moved from the post of tutor to that of administrator, Antonio was forced by his profession to transfer frequently from one city to another. From Turin, the Togliattis moved to Genoa, where the third child was born, then briefly to Novara, where Palmiro began primary school, and then back to Turin. Yet another transfer order took the whole family to Sondrio, where Palmiro enrolled in the *Ginnasio G. Piazzi* in the same class as his sister Maria Cristina.

FROM SONDRIO TO SASSARI: AN ADOLESCENCE IN ‘DIGNIFIED POVERTY’

Sondrio at the beginning of the century was a quiet town with a relatively prosperous economy based on wine, textiles and livestock. Political life was quite lively, although largely restricted to the local dimension. The Radical Party was prominent, looking towards the figures of the pedagogue Luigi Credaro and the ex-Garibaldian Giuseppe Marcora.⁵ It seems Antonio Togliatti was a regular reader of the radical paper *La Valtellina* that often distinguished itself with lively anti-clerical polemics. It is not unlikely that during this period Togliatti’s father was at least tending towards radical and socialist sympathies, which would explain the ‘small bundle of socialist leaflets’ Palmiro happened to find in a wardrobe at home.

Reading this ‘prohibited’ material made a considerable impression on the boy, who must have been between 12 and 14 at the time, perhaps because an interest in the ‘social question’ had already been excited by two distinguished teachers. One was Baldo Peroni, a scholar of Italian Jacobins and a historian of education; the other (in fact more influential, if we are to believe that Palmiro wrote him on finishing the lyceum to ask for advice on his future) was Mosé Niccolini, a socialist from the Trentino.

Togliatti excelled in his studies from the outset: after all, a very high mean score was a condition of exemption from fees. As a model student, he disseminated his knowledge generously, letting his classmates copy Greek and Latin translations. A taste for mockery in the face of authority emerged alongside this spirit of solidarity according to the memory of his sister, as when ‘he carefully rolled up the exam exercise in a fountain pen, asking the teacher himself to pass it on to the recipient’.⁶

The boy does not appear to have made particularly significant friendships: his life flowed serenely in the circle of family affections and in the furrow of habits that would re-emerge in future years whenever circumstances allowed. Palmiro and his siblings had a marked sense of nature: an allotment behind the Sondrio house allowed them to rear all kinds of small animals and to cultivate flowers. A passion for botany would never leave Togliatti, just as he never lost his passion for walks, in particular for mountain

excursions. On days off work, the father led the children on extremely long trips. It was, surely, such experience which tied Togliatti so intensely to the mountains, and led him once he returned to Italy after 18 years in exile to retreat there every time a pause in his political work permitted. It was, moreover, a connection loaded in memory but, perhaps, already nourished by adolescent readings on the meaning of a metaphor of typically romantic origins. On 9 August 1946, he wrote in a letter to Nilde Iotti:

I saw again the fresh, large Alps and again I felt their call to freedom, to solitude. One day I will tell of what the Alps meant to me when I ran them as a boy, alone with my pride, alone with my dreams. Perhaps they are what taught me to desire, and to live alone in myself, and to despise what is easy, and to rebel, and to go forward when there is no longer a road, but only the body that grips the rock and fingers that search for purchase and the knee that trembles but does not give.⁷

It was in Sondrio that Togliatti first tackled involved readings and got into the habit of dedicating much of his free time to them outside his studies. He would later tell his biographers that he had been impressed by Voltaire, and even more by Francesco De Sanctis, whose work 'was a revelation, perhaps not so much for the aesthetic analyses as for the profound new vision of history and of the cultural upheavals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries'.⁸ His interests concentrated mainly on history. He remembered in 1961:

What struck me in the history of the *Risorgimento* was above all the universal popular element: universal in the sense of a particular vision of the world, even though the *Risorgimento* movement was without doubt national. The poet I felt most was Carducci, for the universal concept of the *Risorgimento* and for the re-evaluation that he made of the French Revolution.⁹

In May 1908, Antonio Togliatti was transferred to Sassari in Sardinia.¹⁰ Palmiro and Maria Cristina enrolled in class 1B of the *Lyceum Azuni*. The political climate of the city, provincial but lively, was characterised by the clash between clericals and anti-clericals, and by a vivid anti-Giolittism amongst a section of the intellectual bourgeoisie. It appears the Togliattis took no direct participation in local political life, although Palmiro later remembered witnessing with his father a protest demonstration against the assassination of Francisco Ferrer in October 1909.

As a teenager, Togliatti's efforts were poured totally into study, always with excellent results. Confirming a striking predilection for the humanities, in his second year, as was then possible, Togliatti opted for 'Greek culture' rather than for mathematics. In truth, the *Lyceum Azuni*, which Togliatti himself described as 'rather shoddy', was – as remembered by fellow student Nunzio Cossu – a school where there was no space for 'the questions of the day that agitated culture and science [...] all the work was undertaken in quite a gloomy and stuffy atmosphere, lacking in light and sun [...] life was rather miserable and sterile'.¹¹

Not even in Sassari did the young Palmiro appear to forge particularly firm or long-lasting friendships. Some of the schoolmates to whom he was closest sided with the democratic-republican camp and, like Mario Berlinguer, father of the future

secretary of the PCI, also took a stance against the war in Libya. Togliatti shared their anti-Giolittian attitude, but shunned any active display of political engagement. He had only recently begun his last year at the lyceum when a terrible tragedy befell his family. Antonio Togliatti became ill with a throat tumour: he was taken to hospital in Turin and died aged 59 on 21 January 1911. The family's economic condition, deprived of its sole income, became very precarious and a question hung over the continuation of the adolescents' schooling. Teresa Viale obtained the sum of 400 lire from the *Sassari Convitto* in recognition of 'the extraordinary administrative services' rendered over the three previous years together with her husband. Palmiro and Maria Cristina added to the income of the family by giving private lessons. Both brilliantly obtained the lyceum certificate. Thanks to the extremely high marks achieved, they took part in the annual competition held by the *Collegio Carlo Alberto* reserved for young people born in the old provinces of the Kingdom of Sardinia. In October 1911, joining their mother in Turin, they succeeded: the boy even came second, his sister eleventh, while the ninth place on the pass list for the same group of law and literature students featured a young man from the lyceum in Cagliari, Antonio Gramsci. The winners were guaranteed a monthly cheque of 70 lire for ten months a year until graduation, on condition that they did not fall behind with their exams and their marks did not fall below a certain average.

UNIVERSITY STUDIES

Palmiro Togliatti enrolled in the law faculty, the most heavily subscribed in Turin University. A law degree offered the possibility of a qualified and relatively well-paid job, especially in the public sector. Indeed, such reasoning induced Togliatti to renounce the philological and literary studies for which he felt he had more talent.

When the 18 year-old student arrived in Turin in the summer of 1911, Italy was on the verge of an event destined to stand as a watershed in its national history: the war in Libya. The Giolittian experiment, characterised by the union of the liberal government with the left in the name of social progress and resolution of class conflict, showed clear signs of wear and tear. In Turin, the industrial capital of the kingdom, amidst celebrations commemorating 50 years of unification, social radicalisation presented itself more acutely than elsewhere. For Togliatti, the leap from the sleepy provincial atmosphere he had experienced earlier in the century could not have been more clear-cut. The demonstrations for and against the war were intensifying and the protagonists on the two opposing sides were most often workers and students, with the latter representing 'the current of bourgeois opinion that will bring the atmosphere of rising nationalism to the streets and squares with greater impetuosity and physical presence'.¹² It is true that there was a small but militant group of socialist students¹³, but the university environment was generally dominated by an atmosphere of fervent nationalism.

In truth, Togliatti did not seem to have been infected. During the first years of university, the generically anti-Giolittian position he had matured in Sardinia found a reference point in *La Voce* magazine that he subscribed to and whose criticism of the war he agreed with. But these were political trends that were still ill-defined, certainly

not such as to induce the young man to participate in political battles in the first person; also, to meet his own material needs and those of his family, much of his free time went towards those private lessons, largely on Italian composition, for which 'he received a small sum and a vermouth, and wrote off the cuff in an hour a lyceum student's essay'.¹⁴

Togliatti was an extraordinarily diligent university student: he followed all the obligatory courses and frequented numerous others outside his faculty; he kept himself abreast of the study programmes needed to obtain renewal of the Carlo Alberto scholarship, and also to attain a series of study awards for deserving students.

The cultural atmosphere that was breathed in Turin during the years of Gramsci and Togliatti's 'university apprenticeship' has been the subject of deep and exhaustive studies.¹⁵ The cult of science and of severe philological discipline linked to positivism began to be questioned by spiritualistic currents and, especially, by neo-idealism; but the level of teaching, which remained extremely high, was not impaired. Togliatti would have been influenced by it, and he later noted that Gramsci was too: 'the precision in thought, the taste for exactness of information, disdain, even moral repugnance [...] for improvisation and superficiality'.¹⁶

Palmiro's university career would know no *défaillances*: he would pass though all the faculty exams with marks never lower than 30/30, even though he was not passionate about studying jurisprudence. Between 1912 and 1914, the young man met the teachers destined to have most influence on his development. Among them was Francesco Ruffini, lecturer in ecclesiastical law who in his course illustrated a conception of the relation between church and state that Togliatti would refer to explicitly as the basis for his position in the Constituent Assembly of 1946–47. Above all, he met Luigi Einaudi, holder of the chair of fiscal policy. The intellectual influence that the youth was subject to in greatest measure was certainly Einaudi's liberalism, as testified by his writings of 1917–18 and his degree thesis, discussed in November 1915, which was apparently based on the theme 'The Customs Regime of the Colonies'. Unfortunately, this thesis, which obtained maximum marks *cum laude*, has been lost.¹⁷

Togliatti's attendance at three complementary courses in his last two years at university (forensic medicine, scientific policing, and the extra-curricular 'madness and its crimes'), along with his at least occasional attendance of clinical psychiatry courses, demonstrate how the influence of positivism continued to be well represented. However, anxious to widen his knowledge and broaden his horizons, he also followed courses in the arts faculty. Those of the Germanist Arturo Farinelli, who held lessons in 1912 on the Romantic German poet Christian Friedrich Hebbel, made a profound impression on him.¹⁸ Of the ethical content of Romantic German thought, he would later recall having found inspiration also in the Dantesque lessons of Umberto Cosmo, '[in which] Hegel's dialectic in its idealistic form was already making a comeback'.¹⁹

From all this came a growing interest in idealist philosophy, which led Togliatti to translate of his own accord 150 pages of Hegel's *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* from German. It is certain that the scope of Togliatti's reading continued to expand beyond the subjects he studied, into areas which conflicted with the positivism and philological

erudition prevailing within the university. The idealism of Croce almost inevitably came to represent the catalyst to this reaction. Revisiting *a posteriori* his adherence to its inspiring motives, Togliatti would always be concerned to present it as an indispensable stage for the recovery of a non-spurious Marxism freed from the encrustations of positivism. He also sought to keep his distance from those degenerations of Idealism that resulted in an 'exasperated anarchic and aestheticising individualism, in nationalism, in the cult of the person superior not just to the social being but even to the common human being, in the exaltation of will for will's sake, [and] in the preaching of violence for violence's sake, all covered by a brilliant aesthetic and philosophical veneer'.²⁰ In reality, the process must have been less clear cut, and the charm of the spiritualistic currents greater than Togliatti was later prepared to acknowledge, even though never sufficient to produce full identification with the most frequent of their political expressions, nationalism. Two things probably acted as an antidote to this temptation: on the one hand, reading Charles Péguy's *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, through which Togliatti discovered the Romantic universalism of Romain Rolland, the French writer destined to leave a strong impression on the *Ordine Nuovo* group (see below); and, on the other, familiarity with Salvemini's *L'Unità*, with its attention to social and economic problems and its intransigent anti-protectionist and 'meridionalista' (pro-South) battle.

It is not documented what were, in this process of cultural development, the fundamental stages of Togliatti's approach to Marxism, except for the rationalisation he himself undertook with hindsight. The decisive step was supposed to have been the discovery of Antonio Labriola: 'his texts explaining and delving deeper into Marxism [...] were read, re-read, studied, commented'.²¹ It is an affirmation that needs to be 'calibrated' in the light of the politico-cultural operation that Togliatti himself conducted after his return to Italy in 1944, aiming to reconstruct a particular genealogical tree of Italian Marxism. It is more likely that Togliatti's adherence to Marxism matured along a less linear path, interwoven with multiple intricate components. In any case, two factors appeared decisive in its determination: the first was the beginning of the friendship with Gramsci; the second was the encounter with the Turinese workers' movement.

GRAMSCI, SALVEMINI, MUSSOLINI

Togliatti met Gramsci briefly for the first time towards the end of October 1911 on the day of the competition for the Carlo Alberto bursary; he subsequently met him again in the lecture theatres of the faculties of law and literature. If not real friendship, a habitual dialogue grew between them, rooted in their common provenance and direct knowledge of Sardinia, as well as in their similar condition of economic difficulty bordering on extreme poverty, unusual among university students of the time. Without doubt, Gramsci was the more mature of the two, and the more politically oriented, for he frequented a young socialist group, having made friends with one of its most active representatives, Angelo Tasca. Togliatti shared this experience, albeit in a milder and more casual way, although his encountering workers marching through the crowded streets of the city in 1912–13 (years of intense union battles in Turin) made a

strong impression on him. According to Togliatti himself, he became a card-carrying member of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) in 1914. Such a claim has been questioned by Andrea Viglono, who was the active director of the young socialist branch,²² but is probably true: both because Togliatti reaffirmed it in significant documents such as a Communist International (Comintern) questionnaire, and because it would have been less difficult for him to justify his 'interventionist' position towards the war – discussed below – had he not had any formal tie with the PSI. However, his adherence did not translate into active militant engagement.

What was the nature of Togliatti's socialism at this time? To answer this, two points of reference may be discerned: Gaetano Salvemini and Benito Mussolini. Togliatti read Salvemini's articles in *La Voce* and *L'Unità* and shared his anti-protectionist position: it is, therefore, not unlikely that he might have been, with Gramsci, Tasca and Ottavio Pastore, among those young socialists who in 1914 supported the southern historian's candidature to the supplementary elections for a vacant Turin constituency. With regard to Mussolini, 'the "Mussolinismo" of young socialists in the period 1912–14 [...] was in reality something more and of greater importance in their ideological and political formation [...] than would appear from the testimonies of the young protagonists of the time',²³ and this holds undoubtedly for Togliatti, who later recognised that in 1914 the editor of *Avanti!* had made a great impression on him 'for his will, for his energy'. What is certain is that Mussolini personified the mixture of heterogeneous elements (from Bergsonian spiritualism to Sorelian 'leftist' revisionism to voluntaristic activism) that characterised the development of a generation of young socialists.

And there was a more than ephemeral trace of Mussolini's influence in the attitude that Gramsci and Togliatti took towards the war. On 31 October 1914, Gramsci wrote an article in *Il Grido del Popolo*, a publication of the Turinese socialist branch, in which he criticised 'the comfortable position of absolute neutrality', fearing that it might induce socialists to 'an overly naïve contemplation and Buddhist renunciation of our rights'. According to Togliatti, Gramsci submitted the article to him before its publication, and he approved it without reservations. In fact, after the end of the war, *Il Grido del Popolo* would conduct a resentful campaign against the men who had sided with intervention or even just hesitated about it. In this, 'Doctor Togliatti' would be one of its main targets. Of course, it was not an interventionism inspired by myths of nationalism, nor did it blindly follow that of Mussolini: rather, it was quite close to the democratic interventionism of Salvemini, based on a confidence that a British victory would be followed by 'a triumph of commercial freedom in the whole of Europe'. Indeed, such a liberalist theme of Togliatti's philo-interventionism would receive full confirmation in his first articles in *Il Grido del Popolo* in autumn 1917, and more still from an article that appeared in *L'Ordine Nuovo* on 9 August 1919, where Togliatti went back over the fortunes of Wilsonism:

It really seemed that [...] the liberal idea was then about to come out of the realm of dreams, the world of utopias, to become embodied in a world political system! The world would have thereby become all one great democratic republic; the international would have become a

reality, with a white flag, with principles of liberalism, and a programme of peace in perpetuity.²⁴

Declared unfit for military service (apparently due to the severe myopia he suffered from) immediately after having received his degree in November 1915, Togliatti enrolled as a volunteer in the Red Cross and saw service in various territorial hospitals, first in Turin and later in a field hospital in the Isonzo valley. During 1917, however, following revision of the enrolment criteria imposed by the need to recruit new soldiers, Togliatti was declared fit. Once attendance on courses for obtaining the degree of complementary officials became obligatory for pupils with the necessary educational qualifications, he was admitted to the Officers' School of Caserta in February 1918, where he followed a five-month course. Here he told of listening to the 'military morale' lessons that young infantry lieutenant Luigi Russo, future illustrious historian of Italian literature, held for aspiring officers. According to him, however, he was more passionate about the 'visits made carefully and alone, during half-days off, to the locations of the battle of Volturmo [...], with the help of history books and Garibaldine memories'.

Before the end of the course, Togliatti was recognised as 'physically unfit', apparently because of a bout of pleurisy that forced him into protracted confinement in various military hospitals. It is not known whether during his military service he remained in contact with his Turinese friends, and with Gramsci in particular; but his brief leaves, which allowed Togliatti to sit exams in literature and philosophy, may well have provided occasional opportunities for encounters. For this faculty was the one Togliatti had enrolled in as soon as he had received his law degree, gaining admission to the third year, and it was a choice that suggests a need to integrate his own juridical formation by obeying the inclinations he had matured in previous years. Between April 1917 and July 1919, Togliatti passed eight exams, four of them in philosophy, with top marks. His university career would stop, however, at the threshold of a second degree because, in the summer of 1919, he decided to embark on the road of political engagement. A first signal of this direction was his participation in a special issue of *Il Grido del Popolo* in October 1917, edited by Gramsci and entirely devoted to the problem of free trade, where Togliatti published in his own name an article entitled '*Lotta economica e guerra*' ['Economic Battle and War']. Together with a second essay published two weeks later,²⁵ it bore witness to a phase of critical re-evaluation of the unconditional liberalist faith of the previous years. The profound influence of the democratic '*meridionalismo*' of Nitti, Fortunato and Salvemini could be perceived in both articles, and they attempted to analyse the social-political forces capable of cancelling the gap between the 'Two Italys', proposing a more radical sense of liberalism 'which is not a battle for a few reforms to be obtained with parliamentary repairs, but is a social battle that assails the whole structure of the nation'.

L'ORDINE NUOVO AND THE 'BATTLE OF IDEAS'

Having been discharged from the army in November 1919, Togliatti returned permanently to Turin, where he lived with his mother and siblings in modest quarters

in council housing at 'Borgo Rossini'. He was nearly 26 and had behind him a solid cultural education; he had reached maturity having been sheltered from the profound disorders that marked Italian and European history. His return to civilian life, however, seemed to coincide with what quickly became total immersion in the acute political and social tensions that animated the industrial capital of the kingdom.

Togliatti's attendance at socialist meetings now became assiduous. He was also regularly present in the head office of the Piedmontese edition of *Avanti!*, first published in December 1918 and for which Togliatti worked as a temporary clerk. Alfonso Leonetti, a young socialist from Puglia who at the time was a reporter on the paper, remembered his first encounter with him:

He wore a modest bourgeois suit, dark, a 'pan' hat and very thick glasses. He wanted to have a familiar air, but one sensed he was a bit awkward on those premises. At the end of the conversation, Gramsci accompanied him to the door to say goodbye, then coming towards me said: 'He's Togliatti, a very well-prepared friend.'²⁶

At least for the time being, his interventionist past did not seem to be an obstacle to his reintroduction into the Turinese socialist branch. One of the first problems that those socialists were posing themselves was the task of proselytising in the university, where 'socialist students, militant or sympathisers, could be counted on the fingers of one hand',²⁷ and Togliatti's engagement was addressed in just that direction. It is certain in any case that he had by now developed an idea of direct engagement that involved a new conception of the duties of an intellectual and his relationship to social and political reality.

It is not surprising, then, that Togliatti was, with Gramsci, Tasca and Terracini, to the fore in promoting the idea of a magazine that, as Mario Montagnana (a young worker who became a frequent contributor) wrote a few months later, 'must be for young socialists what up until recently *La Voce* was for the most intelligent part of the bourgeoisie [...]; that is, it must be the fulcrum around which all the intelligences and the wills to understand take place and develop'.²⁸ Thus was born *L'Ordine Nuovo*, the first number of which came out on 1 May 1919. Tasca, exploiting his contacts in the organisation of the party and the network of trade union and cooperative associations, had found the necessary financial resources for print and distribution, as well as a head office in the same building as the editorial office of the Piedmontese *Avanti!*²⁹

Little more than a year later, Gramsci – having mainly let the responsibility fall on Tasca – gave a very critical and perhaps overly severe verdict on the first issues of the magazine: 'No central idea, no intimate organisation of the literary material published [...] a review of abstract culture, with a tendency to publish hair-raising short stories and well-intentioned xylographies [...] a product of mediocre intellectualism which on all fours searched for an ideal basis and a route to action.'³⁰ According to a later testimony of Terracini, Togliatti also seemed from early on to nurture some concerns about the line taken by the magazine, and wanted to make it 'an instrument of action, therefore a light on reality, an elaborator of experiences, a generator of creative force', directed above all at factory workers.³¹ Nevertheless, the articles that he published in

the first six issues were for the most part book reviews, in line with the primitive set-up of a 'socialist cultural review' which was characteristic of the magazine. It was these articles, however, collected in the survey *La battaglia delle idee* ('The Battle of Ideas') – a name that would remain dear to Togliatti and would appear again 25 years later in *La Rinascita* – that constituted the principal trace of the 'rendering of accounts' achieved by his own intellectual formation with the authors and teachers that had nourished his youthful readings.

The double yardstick by which the validity of that cultural baggage was measured was given by the war and the Russian Revolution. The war demonstrated for Togliatti the inability of the capitalist world to renew itself and overcome its contradictions. The Bolshevik Revolution – from the beginning of which he had been keen to underline the originality of a movement that 'has a practice and ideology all of its own, that cannot be those of any preceding bourgeois movement'³² – appeared only fleetingly in these first writings of Togliatti. He evidently had a still incomplete and imprecise image of it: but the awareness of the acceleration that it imposed on history can be sensed behind his every argument.

The heads of Italian Idealism, Croce and Gentile, whom Togliatti recognised respectively as 'the major educator of our generation in Italy' and 'the most illustrious and listened to of the Italian philosophical school', appeared incapable of understanding the significance of war and revolution as both expression and cause of an epochal *caesura*. Beyond the differences in tone – that denoted on the one hand a greater familiarity with the work of Croce and on the other a more direct interest for the themes discussed by Gentile – Togliatti's reservations in relation to the two Idealist philosophers were, as he himself specified, 'the reservations of a revolutionary'. As such, he assailed the inadequacy of their thought to capture the importance of the revolutionary antithesis as a crucial moment of historical development and, above all, their concept of the state, in which he saw an implicitly conservative idea of a subject superior to every law and without 'concrete support of the moral wills of individuals'.³³

Far harsher and more dismissive, however, was his polemic against a number of individuals who had a more prominent role in political culture before the war and in his own development. His attitude towards the *vocianti* (followers of *La Voce*) of the first generation was pitiless: Prezzolini, for instance, was now dismissed as a preacher of 'school teacher's morality, pre-destined to sterility'.³⁴ While there still remained a sentiment of respect towards Sorel – if only for his capacity to comprehend the revolutionary greatness of the Bolshevik Revolution – harsh indeed was the slating criticism of the Italian followers of revolutionary syndicalism, portrayed as 'nits' on the bodies of those giants of thought, such as Sorel and Bergson, whom they claimed to be their inspiration.

Even the extremely young Gobetti of *Energie Nove* ('New Energies') did not escape Togliatti's caustic criticism; with respect to him, the sarcasm assumed ferocious tones:

[Here] the whole universe is judged while remaining suspended half in the sky in a nebulous vocabulary that is supposed to give an illusion of depth [...] Blessed be positivism, which sent

its neophytes around mad-houses to measure the skulls of delinquents, and didn't make of each 'youth of understanding' a preacher of the moral renewal of the world.³⁵

One must recognise that Gobetti, who replied in a measured but curt way to the criticism and earned himself a further ugly response from Gramsci, showed evidence of notable fair play when, three years later, he judged the 'brilliant cultural reports of Togliatti' as 'the only lively things' in the first series of *L'Ordine Nuovo*.³⁶ In any case, behind the harsh tone of the *Ordine Nuovo* editors there seemed to be a vexed attitude towards the intellectual who wanted to rise to teacher of moral life and politics, a role which they viewed as an aristocratic anachronism isolated from collective action organised by the masses. Such attitude was, particularly in Togliatti's mind, the expression of an almost iconoclastic anxiety to make a blank slate of a past of uncertainties, of illusions and inaction which was his own.

But, alongside this corrosive *pars destruens*, a *pars construens* also began to take shape, with an ever more precise outline. In one of the most mature of Togliatti's writings of this period, he saw in the crisis of the unitary state the re-emergence of 'the original sin of home-grown liberalism, that of having been the movement of an intellectual aristocracy and not the insurrection and reorganisation of strong social energies': class war had been, for a good part of the people, 'the only school of liberty', and thus 'socialism can become the true liberator of the whole of our country, making us accustomed to considering freedom as a conquest, political institutions as an incarnation of wills organised and coordinated to a common end.'³⁷

WORKERS' COUNCILS AND THE PARTY

When Togliatti wrote these words, in September 1919, *L'Ordine Nuovo* had already profoundly transformed its nature. From the seventh issue, in June, after what Gramsci would recall as an 'editorial *coup d'état*' enacted with the full participation of Togliatti and Terracini, it began to lose its initial character of 'socialist cultural review' to become the platform on which the theme of factory councils, seen as possible equivalents in Italy of Russian soviets, was developed with most coherence. Gramsci planted the seed from which the new organisms could develop in the factory internal commissions, which had to be revolutionised on the basis of two guiding principles: the right of all workers, including those not organised in the union, to elect members, and the organisation of the workers' representation by workplace rather than by trade.³⁸

Togliatti did not arrive unprepared for the direction in which his friend wanted to take the magazine. The translations that he had previously carried out for the Turinese socialist press, thanks to an excellent knowledge of foreign languages, had enabled Togliatti to familiarise himself with the new institutions of workers' democracy – the shop stewards' movement in Britain, the *Arbeiterräte* in Austria, the *Revolutionäre Obleute* in Germany – then reinvigorating the workers' movement. It is likely that his knowledge of the few writings of Lenin that circulated in Italian and French dates from these months. It is not surprising, then, that he not only followed without reservation the new policy of the magazine, but was also among its promoters. In collaboration

with Gramsci, he wrote the first editorial of *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 'Democrazia Operaia' ('Worker Democracy'), addressing the topic of councils and, from here on, he dedicated much of his writing to the theme of factory councils and their function. He was concerned with defending their essence as a functional instrument in the construction of a proletarian state in Italy: from his first article he upheld the thesis that the factory council, based on the premise of a 'spontaneous organisation of the self-governing masses', must prepare itself to become the 'supreme regulator of work in practice and by rights the organiser of the whole regime of production and exchange', until it constituted effectively 'the new State, the State of labour'.³⁹

On these grounds, Togliatti decisively rejected the attacks on the council experiment coming simultaneously from left and right: from the leaders of the powerful Federation of Engineering Workers (FIOM), who saw in it the spectre of anarcho-sindicalism and feared that conceding the vote to non-members drained the power of union organisation, but also from those exponents on the left of the PSI, like Serrati and Bordiga, who accused the followers of *L'Ordine Nuovo* of believing that 'the proletariat can emancipate itself by gaining ground in economic relations while capitalism along with the state still holds political power' – as Bordiga affirmed in *Soviet* on 4 January 1920.

In the meantime, the campaign launched by *L'Ordine Nuovo* achieved wide success: the council movement was rapidly extended, so much so that towards the end of the year it affected around 30 plants and more than 50,000 workers. On 1 November 1919, an assembly of the Turinese branch of the FIOM approved with a large majority the principle of the constitution of factory councils based on the election of workshop 'commissars' chosen by each 'work team'.⁴⁰

Togliatti participated intensely in the development of the movement: hardly a day went by when he was not engaged in debates, conferences and meetings to explain and popularise the function of the councils.⁴¹ Having been hired as a member of the editorial staff of the Piedmontese *Avanti!*, it can be said that his career as a 'professional revolutionary' began here.

The first months of 1920 saw him engaged in the internal battle of the socialist party for the election of a new executive committee: together with Gramsci and almost all the working class core-followers of *L'Ordine Nuovo*, but not with Tasca and Terracini, he sided with the 'communist-abstentionist' faction in opposition to the 'maximalist-electionist' one. In reality, the denominations that reflected the complex national geography of the socialist factions did not have a defined and stable organising equivalent in Turin: the problem of participation (or lack of it) in elections was not felt as fundamental or decisive. Rather, the reasons for opposing the maximalist current stemmed from concern that it had not provided an effective critique of the reformist influence in the national *Direzione*⁴², which was deemed incapable 'of giving a firm and precise direction to class war'.⁴³

The communist-abstentionist list won the majority of the branch: Togliatti obtained 239 votes and got onto the executive, of which a worker, Giovanni Boero, was secretary. From this point, the *Ordine Nuovo* group began to come out of its narrowly Turinese focus, concentrating more on how to reconcile the renovating

function of the new institutions with transforming the PSI into a revolutionary party. Togliatti, too, shifted the emphasis of his argument in this direction, for the first time engaging in internal party battles at the national level. Between February and March, he wrote a detailed critique of the constitution of the soviets presented by Nicola Bombacci, one of the leaders of the maximalist current, which he admonished for being too abstract.⁴⁴

The lockout decreed by Turinese industrialists following a engineering strike in protest against working hours marked the beginning of a bitter struggle that continued for a month, including a ten-day general strike. At stake, as clearly perceived on both sides, was the very legitimacy of factory councils and, consequently, the workers' control of production. The almost total isolation of the Turinese workers due to the lack of support on a national scale was proof that the leading organs of the PSI and the Italian Confederation of Labour (CGIL) were not willing to back any initiative that could lead to a revolutionary outcome that they judged premature or inopportune. For the *Ordine Nuovo* group, it was a decisive turning point: 'the illusion that a regeneration of the party could be born spontaneously given the existence of an organised mass movement on the production site' was no longer plausible.⁴⁵ In April, Gramsci prepared – and the Turinese branch approved – a document that a few months later would be judged by Lenin to be the PSI 'fully responding to the fundamental principles of the Third International'. It contained an extremely harsh criticism of the politics of the PSI leadership, and it enjoined its transformation from a 'mere parliamentary party that keeps itself immobile within the narrow-minded limits of bourgeois democracy' into a 'homogeneous, cohesive [party] with its own doctrine, own tactics, a rigid and implacable discipline', from which 'revolutionary non-communists' must be excluded. The Turinese branch expressed a very clear-cut verdict on the situation: 'the current phase of class war in Italy is the phase that precedes either the conquest of political power on the part of the revolutionary proletariat [...]; or a dreadful reaction on the part of the property-owning class and the governing caste.'⁴⁶

Togliatti seemed to agree completely with this analysis. In an article entitled *Guerra di classe* ('Class War'), he explained more concisely – but no less dramatically – the alternative indicated by Gramsci: 'either all power is won, or all is lost in the battle.'⁴⁷ Hence the urgency to forge a new type of party and the requirement to win over the decisive levers of the organisational structure of the PSI. On this ground, however, a quite clear-cut differentiation within the *Ordine Nuovo* group became manifest at the beginning of the summer.

The first and most serious disagreement divided Gramsci from Tasca, who at the end of May presented to the Turinese congress of the *Camera del Lavoro*⁴⁸ a report aimed at bringing the council movement back under the guardianship and direction of the union. Despite what Tasca stated subsequently, it seems unlikely that Togliatti had been informed of this and that he made 'no objection'. In these weeks, he still appeared to be counting on a re-launch of the councils, underlining their adverse function with respect to 'union bureaucracy'. His differences with Gramsci came to the surface later when, in July 1920, Giovanni Boero resigned as secretary of the socialist branch and

the different positions of the *Ordine Nuovo* followers revealed a deeper disagreement on the very conception of the party.

Gramsci, who had collected around himself a small 'group of communist education', declared himself out of the contest, concentrating on the task of education in the factories and re-launching – as he himself said – the 'integral thesis of the councils'. Togliatti and Terracini instead held the conquest of the branch to be extremely important. Their objective was the 'purging of the party', even if they rejected an 'immediate division', which would allow the reformists to drag away an important part of the proletarian base of the party. Rather, it amounted to establishing rigid discipline, excluding 'unreliable elements' from any office, preparing armaments of the proletariat 'with organic military criteria', promoting the formation of councils and 'communist groups' in factories and unions, whilst also maintaining close connections with other sections at a national level in order to arrive at a future congress in strong positions. It was necessary to participate in the then imminent administrative elections as well: 'for a political affirmation, to snatch another position from the bourgeoisie, to lay the foundations for the essential organisms of future society, connecting with each other districts, unions, cooperatives of production and consumption'.⁴⁹

This position obtained a wide majority, and Togliatti was nominated secretary of the executive committee. However, the emerging divergence was no small matter: so much so, that Gramsci even talked of 'a revenge of union bureaucracy and of the opportunist elements of the socialist section', and again in 1924 he would criticise Togliatti and Terracini for having 'caught up with Tasca'. For his part, Togliatti recalled the episode in the Turinese commemoration of Gramsci in 1949, hinting at 'a few moments, I don't want to say of demoralisation, but uncertainty' of his friend, 'when perhaps he was assailed by doubt whether the road of battle was the one to take immediately, or whether wide educational work might not be needed first'.⁵⁰ The episode highlighted, as Ragionieri revealed, different personality traits in Gramsci and Togliatti, the first capable of 'penetrating within the general awareness of a universal historical situation even the internal discussion of a party section, and in the end so profoundly trusting of the creative revolutionary forces of history', the second more cautious and pragmatic, 'more inclined to recognise the importance of historically established and realised institutions'.⁵¹

The disagreement, of which no trace appeared in the pages of *L'Ordine Nuovo* (whereas the polemic with Tasca was open and he ceased to collaborate on the magazine), was destined however to be overtaken by events.

FROM THE OCCUPATION OF FACTORIES TO THE LIVORNO SCHISM

The resistance from the engineering industrialists to the demands for improvements in wages and conditions presented by FIOM led the union, in mid-August 1920, to choose obstructionism, consisting in suspension of piecework and in meticulous observance of all safety regulations. The contractors responded with a lockout, and the workers in turn spontaneously occupied the factories at the beginning of September 1920.⁵²

In Turin, the workers' councils organised and directed the occupation of all the factories in the city, preparing armed guards and also managing to continue production activity: the tenacious propaganda started by *L'Ordine Nuovo* little more than a year before had borne fruit. The editors of the magazine threw themselves into the movement heart and soul, holding rallies in the occupied factories, participating in the workers' assemblies, making efforts to guarantee internal discipline and armed defence. In the heat of battle, the differences that had emerged the previous July–August were forgotten: Tasca, the Gramscian group of 'communist education', the 'electionists' and the 'abstentionists' were all united in this gigantic effort.

As secretary of the socialist branch, Togliatti found himself in the front line. He had a strong conviction that he was facing a revolutionary situation unlikely to be repeated. A year later, in a profoundly changed context marked by defeat, he would write that in September 1920 'the proletarian dictatorship appeared realisable as its fundamental historical premise had been achieved: the predominance of the industrial and revolutionary proletariat in the life of the country, and the transmission of its ideology of victory to all categories of workers.'⁵³ In line with this conviction, his intent was to overcome the original trade union nature of the movement and have it assume the character of a struggle for power. At a meeting of the governing bodies of the CGIL and the PSI held in Milan on 9 September, he declared that the Turinese branch 'has drawn the battle on political ground' and that a 'national action' should also 'be centred on a movement of political character, [while] union and parliamentary action must only serve as a smokescreen'. Although sceptical about the possibility of success should the workers attack first, Togliatti declared 'insurrectional action [to be] better, as long as the *Direzione*, which has the means to judge, warns us in this sense'.⁵⁴ Demanding from the top of the PSI the choice of which direction to take, without expressing his own opinion on whether the conditions existed to attempt a seizure of power, Togliatti's conclusion exposed the dramatic isolation in which the *Ordine Nuovo* group had developed its project, and the excess of trust that it placed in the creative spontaneity of the council movement as an element in and of itself capable of resolving the political contradictions of the PSI.

At this point, the decision of the CGIL to look for a trade union resolution to the dispute in compliance with the PSI *Direzione* was already clear. Equally clear to Togliatti was his own impotence with regard to influencing the orientation of the Italian workers' movement. On 19 September, the *Confindustria* (employers' federation) and the FIOM, with government mediation, negotiated an agreement for the conclusion of the dispute; a week later, the workers began to leave the occupied factories.

The outcome of the battle was not immediately perceived as negative, even by the Turinese: the engineering workers obtained notable wage increases, and the Giolitti government instituted a joint committee to formulate a bill on the workers' control of industries. Togliatti himself seemed worried, not so much about the consequences of what for him did not yet appear to be a defeat, as about the dangers for preserving class autonomy in such an agreement. The fundamental lesson drawn from the conduct of the engineers was very clear, however: the awareness of the vacuity of every effort