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THE PCI AND THE IRRELEVANT EASTERN MODEL

by Kevin Devlin

Summary: Contrary to earlier expectations, the question of the Italian CP's judgment that the Soviet model had lost its "propulsive force" was far from being a dominant issue at the party's 16th congress in Milan. Precongress debates at various levels over several months had shown that the challenge to that opinion mounted by a member of the top leadership, Armando Cossutta, had the support of no more than 5% of the membership. Instead, the congress proceedings were largely concerned with domestic politics (notably, relations with the Socialists within the framework of the new strategy of the "democratic alternative"). The Soviet/East European "model," already specifically rejected, was seen as simply irrelevant.

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Pundits had announced it months in advance: the 16th Congress of the Italian Communist Party in Milan (March 2 to 6) was to be the congress of "lo strappo," a term difficult to translate (1) but now taken to refer to the PCI's judgment, after the military takeover in Poland in December 1981, that the October Revolution had lost its "propulsive force," and that the Soviet/East European model no longer had any relevance for Western Europe. This judgment had been contested by one member of the top leadership, Armando Cossutta, and for more than a year a propaganda campaign on various levels had appealed to pro-Soviet sentiment in the ranks of the party. Many expected this to be the dominant issue at the Milan congress.

Well, it was not; and that fact in itself is one of the most significant features of the congress. Well before the more than 1,100 delegates gathered in the Palasport, precongress debates on the level of sections and federations had shown that the amendments that Cossutta and one other pro-Soviet member of the Central Committee had presented in November to the draft resolution for the congress were being supported by only a small minority of little more than 5%. In his three-hour speech opening the congress Secretary-General Berlinguer said that there had been overwhelming support for that part of the draft dealing with

- (1) The basic meaning of this word connotes an abrupt change of direction, and in this context the spectrum goes from a severe deterioration of relations to an open break.

our judgment on the countries of so-called 'real socialism,' including the formulation about the exhaustion of the propulsive force of the Soviet model. The amendments of Comrades Cossutta and Cappelloni, and others of similar tenor, have been rejected almost everywhere by heavy majorities. (2)

By the time the congress opened, in fact, it was generally recognized that lo strappo had been largely replaced as the important issue to be settled at the congress by the demand for more internal democracy, championed and personified by another veteran leader, Pietro Ingrao. Only 18 of the amendments adopted at local, precongress meetings took the Cossutta line, while 186 adopted various forms of Ingrao's

In fact, one dominant impression that an observer might have gained at the Milan congress was that the Soviet/East European "model" has more or less become irrelevant to the PCI, to the point where even a leader of the pro-Soviet minority like Cossutta concedes that it cannot and should not be imitated in the West. The interventions at the five-day congress confirm this impression. Very few speakers paid any attention to the Eastern regimes, for or against. It was not until the third day that a voice challenging the official line was heard. That was dissenting CC member Guido Cappelloni, who criticized the party's "liquidatory" judgment on the regimes and insisted that the "propulsive force" of the Soviet regime was not yet exhausted. But he also defensively declared himself

convinced that the Soviet model cannot

The Silent Visitors. In his speech on the same day Gian Carlo Pajetta turned firmly away from the old toward a new perspective, in which relations with noncommunist forces in the West would apparently become more important, and relations with the Eastern regimes less so:

This is really the congress of lo strappo. And it is the congress in which we reaffirm the need for and the possibility of a new internationalism, of the search for ever wider knowledge and relations, of that unity that is possible only on the basis of defense of our autonomy, and of respect and recognition for the diversity of communist, socialist, and social-democratic parties and movements of liberation. (6)

The change of perspective thus outlined was symbolized by the fact that none of the foreign communist delegates at the Milan congress was allowed to address it, whereas this honor was extended to the leaders of all Italian political parties except the neo-fascist MSI (and all except the Christian Democratic Secretary De Mita availed themselves of the opportunity). The only foreign guest invited to speak was the President of the European Parliament, the Dutch Socialist Piet Dankert, who was warmly applauded for supporting the PCI's "Euroleft" strategy and his tribute to the PCI's contribution to "the struggle for our Europe, a more human and just Europe." (7)

His presence, and the reception he got, demonstrated again that the PCI has made its option for the West: its struggle to make headway in that difficult terrain will not be distracted by nostalgic attachments to the East. The Yugoslav exile journalist Frane Barbieri noted one small but telling symbol of that strategic option. Observing that Berlinguer in his opening speech had referred to "Comrade" Craxi, the Italian Socialist Party leader, but mentioned Yuri Andropov only by his name, he remarked: "It is a congress much more concerned about what statements or objections Craxi may make than about the objections and discontent of the representative of the CPSU." (8)

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(6) La Stampa, 6 March 1983.

(7) L'Unità, 4 March 1983.

(8) La Stampa, 4 March 1983.