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### TOGLIATTI FROM ANOTHER ANGLE

by Kevin Devlin

Summary: Reacting to a television program suggesting that the communist leader Palmiro Togliatti and the Christian Democratic leader Alcide De Gasperi, while adversaries, both helped to shape modern Italy, a scholar of the Italian Socialist Party, Luciano Pellicani, contributed to his party's newspaper an article depicting Togliatti as a political leader who was opposed to Western values and had worked to "Sovietize" Italian workers. His charge that Togliatti knew, and concealed, the truth about Stalinist crimes and was himself a Stalinist can be supported by the testimony of a leading Italian communist historian.

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The 20th anniversary of the death of Palmiro Togliatti, for nearly 4 decades the leader of the Italian CP, predictably gave rise to several laudatory articles in the party press.<sup>1</sup> As it happened, this coincided more or less with the 30th anniversary of the death of Togliatti's great political adversary, the Christian Democratic leader Alcide De Gasperi<sup>2</sup>; and an Italian television producer had the felicitous idea of basing a joint commemorative program on interwoven interviews with Togliatti's widow, Nilde Iotti, and the veteran Christian Democrat, ex-Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti. Reporting on the program and on the hour-long debate that followed, *l'Unita* suggested complacently that what emerged was a picture of "De Gasperi and Togliatti as adversaries who together constructed, however, the foundations of this republic and guaranteed democracy for decades . . . the true 'fathers' of modern Italy."<sup>3</sup> Eugenio Scalfari, editor of the daily *La Repubblica*, on the other hand, thought that to present De Gasperi and Togliatti as "champions of

the secularization of Italy" was a distortion of history; but he also felt that "the role played by both of them was substantially positive."<sup>4</sup>

One scholar who strongly disagreed with even this modified judgment was Luciano Pellicani of the Italian Socialist Party, who was moved to write for his party's newspaper a hard-hitting article<sup>5</sup> that not only presented a very different portrait of Togliatti but also reflected the deterioration in relations between Italy's two main left-wing parties since Bettino Craxi became the country's first Socialist Prime Minister. Pellicani could not understand how anyone could put the political work of De Gasperi and that of Togliatti on the same plane:

De Gasperi thought in European terms; and for that very reason he linked Christian Democracy with those parties--social Democrats, Republicans, Liberals--that identified themselves with the vital values and interests of Western civilization. He understood, in other words, that the way Italy had to take to get out of the tunnel of political, economic, and cultural backwardness was that of integration into the great family of industrialized, pluralistic democracies.

#### *Against the West*

Togliatti's political activity, Pellicani went on, pointed in the diametrically opposite direction:

The leader of Italian communism spent all his energies in trying to keep Italy outside Western culture. His declared enemies were liberalism, social-democracy, the culture of the enlightenment, and capitalist industrialism--that is to say, the great agents of the process of modernization. He fought them with the weapon of denigration and in the name of Stalinized Marxism-Leninism. He could not Sovietize Italian society, but he did succeed in Sovietizing a good part of the working-class movement, imbuing it with a systematic distrust of the West. . . . He even used the ideas of [Antonio] Gramsci to strengthen the spiritual [sic] links between the Italian Left and Soviet totalitarianism.

What was worst of all, the indictment continued, was that Togliatti had "dug this abyss between the Italian Left and the West, not on the basis of a blind faith in the superiority of Soviet communism over liberal democracy but on the basis of jesuitical calculation." This had been recognized even by some communist scholars. The historian Paolo Spriano, for example, had described Togliatti as "a Machiavellian who knew his goal, the communist society, and would try to reach it through political maneuvers." Even more explicitly, Franco Rodano (the "Catholic-communist" adviser of Enrico Berlinguer) had said that "Lies uttered within the framework of a great institution have a great truth of their own. This is how one should consider the lies of Togliatti within Stalinism."

Togliatti, the article went on, "had direct experience of Stalinist barbarism, accepted it, and became one of its most appreciated administrators" (presumably a reference to his role as a high Comintern official during the 1930s):

He knew all, or almost all, about the purges, the rigged trials, the mass slaughter carried out in the name of socialism by the omnipotent machine created by Lenin and perfected by Stalin. He was not unaware that in the "fatherland of socialism" the Gulag Archipelago had become an institution in which millions of wretched victims were sacrificed on the altar of the revolution. . . . Unlike so many sincere communist militants, he knew the truth; and, knowing it, he decided to keep it hidden.

Pellicani is on firm ground here. It is now 20 years since the former communist Guelfo Zaccaria published a painfully detailed collection of case histories in a book entitled *Two Hundred Italian Communists Among the Victims of Stalinism*.<sup>6</sup> One of those victims was Paolo Robotti, Togliatti's brother-in-law, imprisoned in the Soviet Union in 1938 and 1939, who bore until his death in 1982 the marks of the torture inflicted on him but remained stubbornly loyal to the Soviet regime.<sup>7</sup> Before his death Robotti gave a pro-Soviet dissident a list of Italian communist victims of Stalinist terror in the USSR, together with another list of leading party members who allegedly bore some responsibility for their fate; this material was subsequently published in a fake issue of the party weekly *Rinascita* that went on sale briefly in Milan.<sup>8</sup>

Pellicani recognized, however, the truth of the observation by Aldo Tortorella of the PCI Executive Committee that "if Togliatti's edifice had been founded only on the myth of the Soviet Union, it would have crumbled with the disappearance of that myth." Another important element in the development of the party was his intuition that if it were to become a popular force rooted in the masses it would have to adopt the reformist tradition:

This was why Togliatti raised the standard of progressive democracy, structural reforms, the strategy of alliances and of dialogue with the Catholic world; but all this was inserted into a typically Marxist-Leninist, which is to say totalitarian, framework.

### "Duplicity"

Pellicani noted that in developing the idea of a nonviolent way to socialism at the party's eighth congress in late 1956, Togliatti had said that its peaceful character would be affected by "the action of the enemy." That was as much as to say: "We shall be democratic as long as we do not meet opposition on our path." Even in elaborating the reformist strategy, he had continued to maintain the Marxist-Leninist idea of the dictatorship of



the proletariat, replacing it, indeed, with the Gramscian phrase, "hegemony of the working class," but noting himself that there was no substantial difference between them:

Hence the "duplicity" [*dopiezza*] that he brought into the political culture of the PCI, transforming it into a sort of "ideological centaur": half communist and half social-democratic. . . .

He had perfectly assimilated the Machiavellian lesson of Lenin and Stalin. A communist party should not say no to reforms: it should transform them into intermediate phases in a long journey through the institutions, the final goal of which, however, was to be the departure from liberal democracy and the building of a society completely state-controlled and ruled from the center.

Pellicani found it only natural that, faced with this "duplicity," the political parties committed to the rules and values of liberal democracy should have agreed, in a so-called *conventio ad excludendum*, that the PCI was to be kept out of national government. How could it be otherwise, so long as the PCI had not disavowed "Togliattian duplicity" and still boasted of its links with "the totalitarianism and imperialism of the Soviet Union"? (This polemical formulation would, of course, be rejected by the PCI, as would be the justification of the other parties' refusal to collaborate with "a party that saw in the Soviet Union the ideal society, and claimed to reconcile the irreconcilable--communist totalitarianism and social-democratic pluralism.")

Modifying somewhat the harshness of this judgment, Pellicani added that during the past decade the PCI had fortunately been "contaminated" in some ways by liberal-democratic and reformist culture, and the link with Moscow, while still existing, was no longer an "iron" one (Togliatti's phrase). This "partial Westernization" of the PCI, remained only partial, however, because of "the persistence of the mythology that Togliatti deliberately cultivated, knowing full well that it hid from Italian workers the horrors of the Gulag."

The PCI has taken no public notice of Pellicani's article. One reason may be that it comes from a spokesman of a party that the PCI will need if its strategy of the "leftist alternative" is ever to become a practical possibility; but another may be that behind the polemical rhetoric there lies historical truth. As the communist historian Paolo Spriano said in an interview<sup>9</sup> some years ago:

Togliatti was certainly a Stalinist, and he continued to esteem Stalin even after the 20th [CPSU] Congress. Until his death he thought that socialist regimes were indeed more democratic than capitalist ones; he always sought to restore

the unity of the communist world. I would go further: better than any other, he used his intelligence to justify all the zigzags of Soviet foreign policy from 1926 to 1953.

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- 1 See the articles by PCI historian Paolo Spriano in *l'Unita*, 21 August 1964, and by Secretary-General Alessandro Natta in *Rinascita*, 25 August 1984.
- 2 De Gasperi died on 19 August 1954 and Togliatti on 21 August 1964.
- 3 18 August 1984.
- 4 *La Repubblica*, 22 August 1984.
- 5 Luciano Pellicani, "Togliatti's Role Was Not So Positive," *Avanti!*, 26-27 August 1984.
- 6 Gelfo Zaccaria, *200 Communisti Italiani tra le Vittime dello Stalinismo* (Milan: Edizioni Azione Comune, 1964).
- 7 See Kevin Devlin, "The Bitter Legacy of Comrade Robotti," RAD Background Report/231 (World Communist Movement), *Radio Free Europe Research*, 2 November 1982.
- 8 See Kevin Devlin, "The Mystery of the Fake *Rinascita*," RAD Background Report/71 (World Communist Movement), *RFER*, 5 April 1983.
- 9 *L'Espresso* (Rome), 18 October 1981.

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