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THE MYSTERY OF THE FAKE "RINASCITA" *

by Kevin Devlin

Summary: A fake issue of the Italian CP's weekly magazine, Rinascita, has gone on sale in some places, to the embarrassment of the party leadership. It contains what purports to be a list of Italian Communist victims of Stalinist purges in the Soviet Union, together with a list of leading party members, dead and alive, allegedly coresponsible for their fate. The lists and comments are said to be the work of Paolo Robotti, a pro-Soviet veteran who died last summer and who was himself imprisoned and tortured in the USSR. Whoever may have been behind this expensive forgery, the PCI has been politically hurt by the reminder that it has yet to come to terms with this chapter of its past.

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Who is behind the mystery of the fake Rinascita? The Italian Communist Party (PCI) had hardly finished celebrating its 16th congress in Milan when a "forged" copy of its weekly magazine went on sale at some newsstands there and in a few other Italian cities. It is, apparently, a well-done imitation: the unsuspecting reader would hardly have noticed that a different name is given for the printer and that the price is 200 lire more than usual. But the main story might well have aroused suspicions, since it deals with a sensitive subject that Italian Communists have long been reluctant to discuss: the fate of scores of Italian communist victims of Stalinist terror in the Soviet Union and the extent to which party leaders bore some responsibility for their sufferings and death.

This controversial theme had been a subject of dispute last fall, after the death of Paolo Robotti, a former brother-in-law of the PCI's long-term leader, Palmiro Togliatti. Robotti was an official of the apparat in exile in Moscow when he was arrested in 1938 and imprisoned for a year and a half; he bore the marks of

(*) This paper was written on 17 March 1983.

the torture inflicted upon him until his death. (1) Yet Robotti remained stubbornly loyal to the Soviet Union and in later years made clear his disapproval of the PCI's new attitude of critical independence. Just before his death last summer, Robotti summoned to his hospital bed Roberto Napoleone, editor of a new, pro-Soviet magazine, Interstampa, and gave him an envelope with a list of nearly 100 names of Italian communist victims of Soviet purges, together with "a notebook of reflections on what happened during those years and on the behavior of the leaders of the PCI, particularly the attitude of Palmiro Togliatti." (2) This material obviously presented some problems for Napoleone, since it was potentially detrimental not only to the PCI but also to the Soviet regime. What he did was to give a series of interviews to noncommunist newspapers in which he talked vaguely about the light Robotti's documents cast upon the responsibility of some leaders of the PCI for the death of exiled militants. The response of the leadership to what committee board member Emanuele Macaluso called "a scandal-mongering and defaming campaign" (3) was the virtual exclusion [radiazione] of Napoleone from the party.

The fake issue of Rinascita refers to this episode in presenting what it claims to be Robotti's list of 99 Italian communist victims of the Soviet purges, with his own introduction, and a list of PCI leaders "coresponsible" for their fate, with some comments. The latter list contains some well-known names: Togliatti and his successor Luigi Longo, Giuseppe Dozza, and Robotti himself, among those now dead; Gian Carlo Pajetta, Vittorio Vidali, Edoardo D'Onofrio, and Antonio Roasio, among those still living. Some of these men were said to have prepared and passed to the Soviets dossiers on the exiles.

"A Provocation." The first angry reaction of the PCI leadership came through Alessandro Natta, the new Chairman of the Central Control Commission, who declared:

For me, there's no doubt about it: this is an attempt to mount a classical provocation. To whose advantage is it? It's hard to say. Certainly, there are not many people who would be in a position to carry out an operation of this nature. (4)

Reacting on another level, the two principal officials of Rinascita, Editor-in-Chief Luciano Barca and Managing Editor Ottavio Cecchi, took legal action in Rome, calling for an investigation of the affair and the eventual prosecution of those responsible for

- (1) See Kevin Devlin, "The Bitter Legacy of Comrade Robotti," RAD Background Report/231 (World Communist Movement), Radio Free Europe Research, 2 November 1982.
- (2) Renzo Di Rienzo, "The Comrades that Togliatti Did Not Save," l'Espresso (Rome), 10-17 October 1982.
- (3) L'Unità 26 October 1982.
- (4) La Stampa, 10 March 1983.

what they termed "false and provocative activity, clearly directed at impugning the honor of the Italian Communist Party, the honesty of its leaders, and of the undersigned." (5)

Gian Carlo Pajetta (whom the fake Rinascita accused of having denounced to the Soviet secret police a former camp inmate who had sought repatriation) said that a glance at the fake story would reveal it to be "a provocative and even blatant forgery," which used some material already known and added some gross errors. "The objective is not to cause trouble for the PCI with some 'revelations' but to create a powder keg," he added. (6)

More interesting, perhaps, was the reaction of Napoleone, whom some might have suspected of being the ultimate source of the material in the fake Rinascita. He flatly denied that this was the material that he had got from Robotti on the latter's deathbed. First, the material he got from Robotti did not contain the fake Rinascita's introductory note in which Robotti allegedly spoke of being torn by doubt as to whether or not he should tell all he knew. Again, the original was merely "a cold list of names," without the comments added in the fake list. The two lists, moreover, coincided "only in part"; and the original list contained 92 names of Stalinist victims and not 99 as in the fake list and as was mistakenly reported at the time. Napoleone added:

Finally, in Robotti's material there is no list of [Italian] Communists "coresponsible" for the purges. It is precisely this that makes me think that it is a provocation against the PCI, as well as against me, because I have just asked to be readmitted to the party. (7)

Here it might be noted that Napoleone did not, at the time, deny several reports that he had received from the dying Robotti not only a list of victims but also a list of "coresponsible" leaders of the PCI. It can be taken that he is not, indeed, the source of the article in the fake Rinascita; but his effort to regain the good graces of the leadership by applying for re-admission must lessen the weight of his evidence.

Then where did the material, distorted and inaccurate or not, come from? The unknown authors of the fake Rinascita had an explanation, of course. The introductory note says that it came from the PCI's archives, having got there thanks to two unnamed comrades who had a close relationship of collaboration with Robotti. Natta denied that Robotti's documents, given to Napoleone, had ever been made available to the party archives.

(4) La Stampa, 10 March 1983.

(5) La Repubblica, 12 March 1983.

(6) La Stampa, 10 March 1983.

(7) Ibid.

Smoke and Fire. The identity of the people responsible, and the source of the funds presumably needed to launch anything as ambitious as a fake number of Rinascita will probably remain a matter for speculation. When it comes to the presumed motivation, the speculation becomes somewhat easier. The objective certainly was to damage the PCI politically, at a time when it had reaffirmed its independence vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and its domestic strategy of a "democratic alternative" to Christian Democratic rule at the Milan congress.

The fake harms the PCI by splattering its present image with the mud of its past; and the harm lies in reminding the Italian public that, for all the undoubted changes that have taken place, the party has not yet completely come to terms with that past. It is now nearly two decades since the former Communist Guelfo Zaccaria wrote a painfully detailed collection of case histories in a book (8) entitled Two Thousand Italian Communists Among the Victims of Stalinism. Earlier, a former Editor of l'Unità and secretary to Togliatti, Renato Mieli, had covered part of that inglorious terrain in his work Togliatti 1937. Among several others who have written books on the subject one may note Dante Corneli, an Italian Communist who spent 24 years in the Gulag.

In its current issue l'Espresso carries an interview with Antonio Roasio, one of those accused of "coresponsibility" in the fake Rinascita; he was said to have "compiled the dossiers of all the Italian Communists in the USSR." His tone is defensive: "What could we have done? -- fight against the Russian police? It was a painful period." He went on, however, to say: "In compiling the dossiers, we were careful not to put in anything that could have aroused the suspicions of the Soviets. For example, past sympathy for [leftist PCI leader] Bordiga -- the Soviets would have read that as sympathy for Trotskyism." (9)

Dante Corneli, the veteran mentioned earlier as having spent 24 years in Soviet camps, is understandably more blunt and bitter about this shadowed aspect of the PCI's past:

When the leaders of the PCI say they did not know, they are lying. They knew perfectly well; they knew everything. Now, in this false Rinascita, it is claimed that some Italian [CP] leaders were coresponsible for the arrests. I don't know about that and can't say. What I do know is that they kept silence, before and afterward. (10)

(8) Guelfo Zaccaria, 200 Comunisti Italiani tra le Vittime dello Stalinismo (Milan: Edizioni Azione Comune, 1964).

(9) Quoted in Piero V. Scorti, "In the USSR Togliatti Knew but Did Not Want To Risk Anything," Avanti!, 13-14 March 1983.

(10) Ibid.

One leader known to feel that the silence has been a mistake is Gian Carlo Pajetta. In a book of memoirs that is about to be published, he says of his Comintern days in Moscow:

There are many things to be understood, and I do not find it intelligent to minimize them, and worse to ignore them, all the more if one does so in a prejudicial way. (11)

Is it possible that the fuss over the fake Rinascita might induce the PCI leadership to break the silence and undertake that independent investigation of the fate of Italian communist victims of Stalinism for which a PCI deputy called as long ago as 1956? It is possible, of course, but on past performance it seems rather unlikely. One of the most telling comments on the affair of the fake Rinascita came from the party's most distinguished historian, Paolo Spriano, now a Central Committee member:

The persecution that Italian militants suffered in the USSR is the only point on which I have not had help from the party, and the archives of the PCI have remained silent [on this]. (12)

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(11) Quoted in Ezio Mauro, "The PCI and the False 'Rinascita,'" La Stampa, 10 March 1983.

(12) Ibid.