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TOGLIATTI'S IDEOLOGICAL TIME-BOMB

The publication in the Italian Communist Party weekly, Rinascita,¹ of letters exchanged between Antonio Gramsci and Palmiro Togliatti in 1926 raises many intriguing questions for students of communism. The letters dealt with the struggle going on at that time within the Soviet party leadership, between the majority led by Stalin and the minority in which Trotsky was the dominant figure; but, published in 1964, they take on new meaning against the background of a wider and even more bitter ideological struggle.

In brief outline, this is the story. In early October 1926 Antonio Gramsci, founder of the Italian Communist Party and its leading theoretician in its early years, sent to the Central Committee of the Soviet Party a letter in which -- speaking for the leaders of the PCI at a time when Mussolini's Fascists were moving vigorously against it -- he deplored the effect on the whole international movement of the split in the Soviet leadership, and maintained that other parties had the right and duty to intervene in a matter directly affecting their interests. The Italian Party, he said, supported the ideological line of Stalin's majority faction; but he urged the majority not to "abuse its victory" by taking "excessive measures" against the minority, and he had some kind of words for Trotsky and the other erring rebels.

This letter was sent to Togliatti (otherwise known at that time as Comrade Ercoli), who was then the Italian Party's representative at the Comintern. Togliatti (he says now) passed the letter on to Nikolai Bukharin, then head of the Soviet Comintern delegation and later, as leader of the "Right Deviation," to fall victim to one of Stalin's show-trials. As a result, the Comintern Secretariat sent a delegate, Jules Humbert Droz, to reason with the critical Italian comrades. At a meeting in Genoa Droz and Italian Communist leaders reached "full agreement" in support of Stalin's line. However, Gramsci, who was being watched by the Fascist police, could not

¹ Rinascita, May 30, 1964.

attend this meeting, and Togliatti then sent him a personal letter which is now published for the first time.

Togliatti's letter to "carissimo Antonio" amounts to a sharp rebuke to the founder and leader of his party. Gramsci is blamed for placing too much emphasis on the dangers of a split, without entering into the merits of the dispute -- he is wrong in placing Stalin's majority faction and the opposition on the same footing. However, Togliatti admits that Gramsci is right in claiming for the other parties the right and duty to intervene in the Soviet struggle -- his point is that they must intervene in the right way.

In the introductory note with which he prefaces Rinascita's publication of these letters, Togliatti explains that Gramsci sent a brief reply to this rebuke, "not accepting my arguments." This second letter, he adds, has not been found in the Party archives; he does not say whether he took a copy -- as he evidently did with the first Gramsci letter before passing it to Bukharin -- and he gives no further indication of its contents.

Out of the Archives

This Rinascita article raises many intriguing questions for the student of communism. The first is why Togliatti has chosen this climactic moment of ideological struggle in the world movement to publish these historic letters, long kept hidden in the party archives. One can understand why they were kept hidden. This was an extremely delicate matter -- for the Soviet Party, for the Italian Party, for the world movement and, not least, for the Trotskyites. Only three years ago Isaac Deutscher, Trotsky's biographer, made a vain attempt to force Togliatti to publish the facts about Gramsci's letter (having learned of its existence from an Italian Communist who defected to Trotskyism). In The Prophet Outcast, the third volume of his biographical trilogy, he explains:

"In 1961 I asked Togliatti publicly, in the Italian Press, to explain the matter. He answered through a friend of his that Gramsci had indeed urged him in 1926 not to involve Italian communism in the Russian inner-party struggle.. Togliatti maintains that Gramsci's letter arrived in Moscow during an inner-party truce; and so, after consulting Bukharin, he decided that it had no relevance to the current situation. When the struggle between Stalin and Trotsky was resumed, the Comintern and the Italian party were nevertheless kept

in ignorance about Gramsci's attitude."²
Stalin-Trotsky - or Sino-Soviet?

Mr Deutscher was apparently not aware that the Gramsci letter (but not Togliatti's reply) had, in fact, been published already, on several occasions. Angelo Tasca, who had also been a Comintern delegate, and who was expelled from the CPI for right-wing factionalism in 1929, reproduced it in the April 1938 issue of Problemi della rivoluzione italiana, an obscure exiles' magazine published in France.³ In 1957 Eugenio Reale, one of the Communists who left the PCI as a result of the Hungarian events of 1956, published it in an article written for the magazine Corrispondenza socialista. The Gramsci letter has also appeared in a book by the Italian historian, Aldo Romano.

However, what matters is not that the letter has been published before, but that Togliatti has chosen now, after nearly four decades of silence and for his own subtle reasons, to release it from the party archives and publish it in the official organ of his party. First he gave his copy of Gramsci's letters to the editors of a new collection of Gramsci's letters which has just appeared.⁴ As if to make sure that this revelation would not be overlooked, he then published Gramsci's letter, together with his own introduction and original reply, in Rinascita -- which is on sale in Moscow --

² Isaac Deutscher, The Prophet Outcast, 1963; page 31, footnote. It will be noted that the account Togliatti gave of the affair in 1961 -- as reported by Mr Deutscher -- differs from that given in his Rinascita note; he now says that he passed the letter to Bukharin, instead of merely showing it to him before deciding himself that it had "no relevance." Since the letter was addressed to the Soviet Central Committee, and not to Togliatti, it may be that Mr Deutscher is inaccurate in his report of Togliatti's earlier account, as transmitted by a friend. He is certainly inaccurate in his statement, on the same page of his book, that "Gramsci, from his prison cell, had sent his declaration to Moscow, where Togliatti ... suppressed it" -- Gramsci was not arrested until November 8, 1926, about a month after he had written the letter (he emerged from Fascist prisons only to die in a Roman clinic in April 1937).

³ See Giorgio Galli's Storia del partito comunista italiano (Milan, 1958; page 127). Tasca's version, as quoted by Dr Galli, is virtually identical with that published in Rinascita.

⁴ 2,000 pagine di Gramsci, edited by Giansiro Ferrata and Nicolo Gallo, "Il Saggiatore," Milan; two volumes, Writings 1914-26 and Letters 1912-37, have already appeared, and two further volumes of Prison Notebooks will come out this fall.

and other Bloc capitals, and is read by Communist leaders in many other Western parties, particularly in Latin America. The significance of Gramsci's letter, and of its publication at this time, will not be lost on these readers. In effect, Togliatti is using Gramsci, with whom he disagreed at the time, to make his own points with regard to the Sino-Soviet dispute.

In the first paragraph of his letter to the Soviet Central Committee, Gramsci made his basic point bluntly:

"It seems to us [Italian Communists] that the present attitude of the opposition group and the intensity of the polemics within the Soviet CP demand the intervention of the fraternal parties. It is by this conviction that we are moved in sending you this letter."

The relevance of this claim to the Sino-Soviet dispute is obvious. If accepted -- and, as we have noted, at the time Togliatti accepted it in principle, urging only that the Fraternal parties must make their "contribution" in the correct way -- it justifies not only attempts at mediation but attempts by the Italians and others to avert the showdown for which the Soviets are pressing.

A Warning

Gramsci was concerned with the effect that the deepening split in the Soviet leadership would have, not only on the Soviet regime but on the fortunes of other Communist parties and of the whole movement. On this point he added a remarkable and thinly-veiled warning. European Communists, he said, "wish to see ruling in the Soviet Republic and Party a single fighting unit, working [for] socialism. Only insofar as the West European masses see Russia and the Russian party from this viewpoint do they accept willingly and as an historically necessary fact that the Communist Party of the USSR should be the directing party (partito dirigente) of the International." This, again, takes on new meaning in the light of the Italian CP's recent insistence on the autonomy of each party and its efforts to promote what one may call regional communism.

Remarking that the Italian party would be more affected than any other in the International by the repercussions of the Soviet struggle, Gramsci went on to deliver an appeal which was also a rebuke:

"The intensity of the present crisis and the threat of an open or latent split which it contains halts this process of development ... in our parties, crystallizes deviations to the Right and Left, and once more postpones the success of the organic unity of the world workers' party..."

"Comrades .. today you are destroying your own achievement; you are degrading and running the risk of annulling the leading role which the Soviet Communist Party won through the impulse of Lenin; it seems to us that the violent passion of the Russian issues is

causing you to lose sight of the international aspects of these Russian questions, making you forget that your duties as Russian militants can and must be discharged only within the framework of the interests of the international proletariat."

After 38 years the implication is once more relevant: each party has the right and duty to safeguard its own interests, and this includes trying to avert a split which would damage individual parties as well as the entire movement. This insistence that a final break must be avoided at all costs is taken up again in the closing sentence of Gramsci's letter:

"The harm done by an error committed by a united party can be easily overcome; the harm done by a split or a prolonged condition of division can be irreparable and mortal."

In his letter Gramsci recognized that Stalin's majority line was "fundamentally correct" (adding that "a majority of the Italian party" would support it). But he refused to condemn Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev, and he expressed concern that the majority should not take harsh measures against them:

"Comrades Zinoviev, Trotsky and Kamenev have contributed powerfully to educating us for revolution; sometimes they have very energetically and severely corrected us; they have been our teachers. To them in particular we turn, as to those mainly responsible for the present situation, because we want to be certain that the majority of the Central Committee does not intend to abuse its victory in the struggle and is disposed to avoid exceptional measures."

In his reply Togliatti rebuked Gramsci for not condemning the Soviet opposition and implying that "all are responsible, all are to be called to order." But he avoided the question as to how the opposition might be treated, merely chiding Gramsci for not being already sure that Stalin would not "abuse his victory."

As the world knows now, Gramsci was right and Togliatti was wrong. The uneasy truce introduced just as the letter arrived from Rome, with the opposition's statement of submission of October 16, 1926, did not last: Trotsky was driven to exile and death by assassination; Zinoviev and Kamenev on the Left, Bukharin and Rykov on the Right, perished with many thousands of others in a reign of terror that left Stalin the unchallenged master of the world Communist movement.

The Togliatti of 1964 makes no attempt to defend the stand taken by the Togliatti of 1926. As an arch-revisionist in the world movement, a man who now stands against everything that stalinism means, he can perhaps afford to admit that he was mistaken in the past. Nevertheless, he must be conscious of the political risks that he is running. The recent book "Togliatti 1937" by the ex-Communist journalist Renato Mieli

has already embarrassed the Italian Party by its revelations -- supported by 125 pages of documentation -- of Togliatti's association with, or even complicity in, such unsavory Comintern actions as the dissolution of the Polish Communist Party in 1938, or the liquidation in the USSR of hundreds of East European Communists at a time when Togliatti was the Comintern representative responsible for the Central European parties.⁵

The Challenge

Mieli has explicitly challenged Togliatti to make his own contribution -- which could be a unique one -- to uncovering the truth about the stalinist decades. This challenge represents a pressure which is bound to be strengthened by the publication of the Gramsci letter -- an impulse which has found expression both inside and outside the CPI. Outside the party, for example, the left-wing Italian Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity, which broke away from the Socialist Party in January, has insisted in its program that "the question of Stalin cannot be reduced to the so-called personality cult, but requires a deeper analysis of the structural causes which have brought about such a serious bureaucratic and tyrannical involution in Soviet society."

Within the ranks of the PCI itself the same pressure for the truth about the past has been felt, intermittently, since 1956, when the American revelation of Khrushchev's "secret report" at the 20th CPSU Congress burst like a bombshell upon the Communist world. It was particularly evident during the intra-party debate which followed the 22nd CPSU Congress in 1961. Togliatti himself gave guarded expression to it in his report to the stormy Central Committee meeting in November. The attack on Stalin, he said, raised two great questions -- "How were such serious things possible, and how can it be guaranteed that they will not be repeated?" It was not enough to blame it all on Stalin: "It is necessary to probe further, to arrive at an analysis of the actual conditions of development of Soviet society." He went on to make a promise which has not yet been fulfilled:

"We committed ourselves in 1956 to carrying this investigation forward, and something was done through contacts with the leading comrades of the Soviet Party, the sending of study delegations, extensive press coverage and the publications of studies and books... More must be done, and we commit ourselves to doing so, appealing for new assistance to both the Soviet comrades and the scholars of other parties."⁶

Giorgio Amendola, a leader of the party's right-wing tendency, put it even more emphatically in a Rinascita article a few weeks later: "The criticism of Stalin ... affects all of us, all that we have been and all that we are... The criticism of Stalin must necessarily become self-criticism -- a critical study of our co-responsibility."⁷

⁵ Renato Mieli, "Togliatti 1937," Edizioni Rizzoli, Milan, 1964.

⁶ L'Unità, November 11, 1961

⁷ Rinascita, December 1961.

But Togliatti's promise was not fulfilled, Amendola's demand was not answered; and the pressure remains. It has now found effective and threatening expression with the formation in Italy of a committee of ex-Communists "to investigate the crimes of stalinism and the complicity of the Italian (Communist) Party." The committee was founded by Ignazio Silone, and the members include the author of "Togliatti 1937," Renato Mieli. Its first publication appeared in Rome on June 24 -- an investigation by Guelfo Zaccaria, a member of the editorial staff of Corrispondenza Socialista, into the disappearance of some 200 Italian Communist victims of stalinism. A statement issued by the committee to mark the occasion said: "We feel it is our duty to show Italian workers how low proletarian organizations can sink when they linked with power politics that deny free discussion and mutual respect among the various tendencies of the working class."

Togliatti's Stand

The founder of the committee, Ignazio Silone, has himself already made a valuable contribution to establishing the truth about that period by revealing a sequel to the affair of the Gramsci letter. Silone arrived in Moscow in January 1927, having been sent to join Togliatti as representative of the now-clandestine Italian party apparatus. The temporary truce in the Soviet power struggle which had just been established as Gramsci's letter reached Moscow was broken a few weeks later with the removal of Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev from various Party and Comintern posts. Another lull followed, but the struggle was renewed in the late spring of 1927. In May Togliatti and Silone took part in an extraordinary session of the Comintern Executive, and in the autobiographical chapter which he contributed to "The God That Failed" Silone tells what happened.⁸ Briefly, the delegates were asked to condemn a document written by Trotsky -- and which the non-Russian delegates had not seen. They were told -- falsely, as it turned out -- that it was an attack on internal Soviet state policy which (in Stalin's words) "it would not be expedient to translate and distribute."⁹

8 cf. "The God That Failed" (edited by R.H.S. Crossman; New York, 1949), pp. 106 et seq.

9 The document in question, originally addressed to the CPSU Politburo, was later published abroad by Trotsky himself under the title "Problems of the Chinese Revolution" (New York, 1932). It was not concerned with internal Soviet affairs, but was a very damaging criticism of Comintern policy toward China.

Silone -- supported by Togliatti -- stubbornly insisted that he could not condemn the document until he had read it. As indignation against the Italians mounted, Stalin calmly declared that the resolution could only be passed unanimously, and adjourned the session after appointing the Bulgarian Kolarov to "explain the situation" to the recalcitrant Italian comrades. Next day, despite Kolarov's cynically opportunistic arguments, the Italians stood their ground, and were joined this time by the Frenchman Albert Treint and the Swiss Jules Humbert Droz. After further attacks against the Italians, the unperturbed Stalin withdrew the resolution -- which was later passed and issued anyhow, by the Comintern Presidium, acting in the name of the Executive. Silone's account continues:

"Togliatti decided that it would be prudent for us both to address a letter to the Political Office of the Russian Communist Party explaining the reason for our attitude at that meeting of the Executive. No Communist, the letter said in effect, would presume to question the historical pre-eminence of our Russian comrades in the leadership of the International; but this pre-eminence imposed special duties on our Russian comrades; they could not apply the rights it gave them in a mechanical and authoritarian way. The letter was received by Bukharin, who sent for us at once and advised us to withdraw it so as not to worsen our already appalling political situation."

This revealing incident shows that Togliatti in fact shared Gramsci's concern about the methods used by Stalin in his struggle for power: by temperament and conviction he is a revisionist, as his post-war leadership of the Italian Party, even under Stalin, shows. But this appears to have been his last significant gesture of rebellion against Stalin's rule over the international movement. He was, above all, a dedicated Communist; and in a later conversation with Silone he explained his stand frankly:

"The present state of the International, he said in brief, was certainly neither satisfactory nor agreeable. But all our good intentions were powerless to change it; objective historical conditions were involved and must be taken into account."

- 10 Silone, op. cit., page 112. On his return from Moscow in the summer of 1927 Silone had made a report to the clandestine PCI leadership, criticizing the coercive methods used against the Soviet opposition by Stalin's majority. At the time of this conversation with Togliatti he was in a Swiss sanatorium, playing no part in politics. In 1931, on orders from Moscow, he was expelled from the PCI.

With this ambivalent attitude towards his Comintern past, and being aware of the pressure inside and outside the party for an objective account of the stalinist decades, Togliatti must have recognized the political risk he was taking in publishing the Gramsci letter. But the risk involved was outweighed by the political value of the letter in the circumstances of today, against the background of the ideological dispute. The important thing is (so runs the implicit argument) that Gramsci was right in 1926 in much the same way as Togliatti is right today.

Today, the Italian leader stands for the continued loosening of the bonds that once bound the international movement, the freedom of each party to shape its own policies in its own interests, even if it means abandoning such sacred doctrines as the dictatorship of the proletariat (which the PCI has quietly dropped overboard). In line with this, his party is still stubbornly opposing a "showdown conference" to condemn the Chinese and their followers, fearing that this would lead to the "closing of the ranks" for which Soviet spokesmen have called.

A Challenge

But by publishing the Gramsci letter he has done more than reaffirm indirectly his party's independent stand in the ideological dispute: he has also, quietly and implicitly, made a direct challenge to the Soviets. The original copy of Gramsci's letter to the CPSU Central Committee presumably rests in the Soviet party archives. By all the rules of inter-party relations Togliatti should have obtained Soviet approval before publishing even his "almost certainly authentic" version. We can safely take it that he did not obtain, and probably did not seek, such approval. The challenge is clear - particularly since the original letter, in Soviet eyes, constituted interference in the internal affairs of the Soviet party.

The Soviet leaders must be equally displeased by Togliatti's action in "opening the dossier on the internal feuds which followed Lenin's death," as K.S. Karol put it in his article on the Gramsci-letter revelation.¹¹ Mr Karol remarks rightly that "For the ordinary reader, these documents ... constitute something like an effective rehabilitation, unique of its kind, of Stalin's victims among the Bolshevik old guard." The point is emphasized by the fact that the Rinascita article is illustrated by pictures of Bukharin and of Rykov, Kamenev and Zinoviev in a group with Stalin.¹²

There has been no overt reaction from Moscow to all this, and we need expect none; but the CPSU and the PCI will not be the only parties to feel the effects of Togliatti's ideological time-bomb.

¹¹ New Statesman, June 19; Le Monde, June 20.

¹² According to Mr Karol, a picture of Trotsky was also to have appeared, but was dropped at the last minute.

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