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HOW STALIN TRIED TO REMOVE TOGLIATTI:

PCI WASHES DIRTY LINEN

Summary: Italian Communist revelations have told part of the story of a dramatic episode in the party's history -- a battle of wills and wits between Stalin and Togliatti in 1951. The Soviet dictator tried to remove Togliatti from the leadership of the PCI and send him into East European exile as head of the Cominform. When the Italian resisted, Stalin rallied the rest of the PCI leadership behind his plan. Togliatti fought back and finally prevailed through a shrewd stratagem.

June 1956 is a month that stands out in the history of the Italian Communist Party: it was then that Palmiro Togliatti, the veteran leader of the PCI, issued his first, sophisticated challenge to Soviet authority in the international Communist movement. In reaction to the publication (by the U.S. State Department) of Khrushchev's secret speech at the 20th CPSU Congress denouncing Stalin's crimes, Togliatti gave his famous interview to the magazine Nuovi Argomenti, following it a week later with an equally startling address to a PCI Central Committee plenum.

In the interview Togliatti proclaimed a new order of "polycentrism" for the international movement and, with reference to Stalinism, posed the problem of "how and why Soviet society could reach and did reach certain forms alien to the democratic way and to the legality which it had set for itself, even to the point of degeneration." (1) In his Central Committee report he spoke of "a consensus and a connivance which amount to the coresponsibility of those [Soviet leaders] who today denounce [Stalin's errors]," adding: "From this there follows the question not only of the necessary corrections, but of guarantees against the repetition of such errors." (2) This was going too far: on July 2 a CPSU Central Committee resolution on de-Stalinization attacked Togliatti by name for daring to suggest that the Soviet system, as such, had degenerated under Stalin.

Stalin's Demand

Togliatti's challenge attracted so much attention that one passage in his Central Committee report passed almost unnoticed. In it he revealed that in January 1951, when he was convalescing in Moscow, Stalin proposed that he give up the leadership of the PCI to become Secretary-General of the Cominform. Togliatti resisted the demand:

I held that, since public opinion would see this as a return to the organization of the Comintern, it was bound to have serious and negative repercussions on the already grave international situation. Secondly, I held that this would not be a correct move with regard to the organization of the international Communist movement. Finally, there were reasons of a personal nature for opposing it. Lively debates took place, but the affair ended well, because Comrade Stalin withdrew his proposal. (3)

Stalin's successors made no comment on this revelation, and Togliatti himself never mentioned it again. On the face of it, one could only conclude that, whatever his motives, Stalin tried to get Togliatti to give up his leadership of Western Europe's most important Communist party for the ineffectual post of Secretary-General of the Cominform. (4)

(1) Nuovi Argomenti (Rome), No. XX, May-June 1956.

(2) Il Partito comunista italiano e il movimento operaio internazionale, Rome 1968, p. 78.

(3) Ibid., p. 76.

(4) Founded in September 1947, the Cominform (Information Bureau) was composed of representatives of the Soviet, Yugoslav (until 1948), Polish, Hungarian, Czechoslovak, Rumanian and Bulgarian ruling parties, as well as of the French and Italian CPs. Lacking the supra-party powers and institutional rigidity of the Comintern, it was used by Stalin as an instrument of Soviet interparty policies.

Now, after 14 years a great deal more light has suddenly been cast upon this episode -- with the first rays coming from Togliatti's widow, Nilde Jotti. Reminiscent articles and letters have unfolded the byzantine story of a battle of wills and wits between Togliatti and Stalin -- during which the rest of the PCI leadership sided for a time with the Russian against their own leader.

It all began, implausibly enough, with the publication in late March of a PCI booklet, Il Compagno Longo, dedicated to Secretary-General Luigi Longo on his 70th birthday. Nilde Jotti's contribution was an essay on the relationship between Togliatti and Longo, entitled "Something More Than A Friendship." The core of the article, however, was not a conventional tribute to Longo but a detailed, "inside" account of Stalin's attempt to remove Togliatti in 1951.(5) Subsequently Giorgio Amendola of the Politburo gave the left-wing weekly L'Espresso an interview in which he offered some outspoken comments on the affair.(6) The ex-Communist Giulio Seniga, who had been in Moscow at the time, got into the act with an Avanti! article which added some polemical details to the story.(7) Then the veteran Pietro Secchia, formerly a "hard-line" member of the top leadership of the PCI and one of the protagonists of the 1951 drama, sent the party weekly Rinascita a letter giving an account of the affair which in some important respects conflicted with that of Nilde Jotti; Rinascita published it together with her reply.(8) Finally, two members of the PCI Secretariat, Alessandro Natta and Paolo Bufalini, covered the controversy in articles which cast useful light upon the political motivations behind the revelations. (9)

Summoned to Moscow

The story begins in December 1950, when Togliatti, then recovering from a car accident and a subsequent operation, was summoned to Moscow, ostensibly for further recuperation. In fact, says Jotti, "the reason for the journey was predominantly, if not

(5) See "Quando Stalin voleva Togliatti al Cominform," L'Unità, 26 March 1970.

(6) "Eravamo Stalinisti," L'Espresso, 29 March 1970.

(7) Giulio Seniga, "Togliatti e Stalin," Avanti!, 27 March 1970.

(8) Rinascita, 3 April 1970, pp. 30-31.

(9) Alessandro Natta, "Togliatti e Stalin," L'Unità, 5 April 1970, and Paolo Bufalini, "Le ragioni di Togliatti," Rinascita, 17 April 1970.

actually exclusively, political." Secchia goes further: Stalin "insisted" that Togliatti come to Moscow. Togliatti and Jotti, who accompanied him, soon found out what lay behind this insistence.

A few days after he arrived at a Moscow clinic in late December, Togliatti was visited by Stalin. The dictator came quickly to the point. The Cominform was not functioning satisfactorily, he declared: it would have to be reorganized and strengthened -- and he proposed that Togliatti take on the job, as Secretary-General. This, Jotti notes, meant that he would have to leave Italy.

All accounts agree that Togliatti resisted from the start. Amendola says that he "fenced, let it be understood that he felt he would be more useful in Italy than in Russia, and in short did not accept the invitation." Jotti, who had accompanied him to Moscow with their adopted daughter, says that he was "strongly against the proposal" -- above all, because he was convinced that any move back toward the Comintern period would be a grave mistake: the problems of the international movement had to be solved in very different ways. He was therefore determined to fight against the proposal, while realizing that "the battle would be a hard one." It was.

On New Year's Eve Togliatti was summoned to dinner in Stalin's dacha, and the dictator, flanked by other Soviet leaders, renewed the attack. This time, Stalin had other arguments. One of them was highly melodramatic -- Togliatti's road accident in August 1950, he declared, had been no accident but an attempt by NATO agents to assassinate him. Since the PCI could no longer guarantee the safety of its leader, he should be removed to Eastern Europe. Togliatti, who knew that he had been speeding when he met a truck on a Val d'Aosta road, protested in vain that it had been an accident: the Russian scoffed at this naivety. Furthermore, Stalin proceeded, it was important that the Secretary-General of the Cominform should be a West European Communist leader -- and since Thorez of France was seriously ill, that left Togliatti. "Once more Togliatti resisted," says Amendola. "And once more Stalin continued to insist."

Dilemma for other PCI Leaders

At this point Stalin tried another approach. Over Togliatti's head (it seems), he summoned his deputy, Luigi Longo, and Pietro Secchia to Moscow. On their arrival, in January 1951, they joined Togliatti in a meeting with Stalin, Molotov, Malenkov and Beria. At this session Stalin renewed his demand, more pressingly than ever, and added new arguments, which in retrospect seem notably unconvincing. Thus, he declared that there was imminent

danger of an East-West war which would leave Togliatti "a prisoner in the hands of the enemy"(10); this possibility must be averted. According to Secchia's account, the Russian offered a tactical concession: in becoming Secretary-General of the Cominform, Togliatti could remain the nominal leader of the PCI, "but he will reside abroad, in a country close to Italy, for example in Czechoslovakia." Togliatti continued to argue vigorously against all this.

Caught in the middle, Longo and Secchia tried to prevaricate. Secchia says that, "while substantially supporting the arguments of Togliatti, we did not reject and took into consideration those of Stalin." They pleaded that the whole question would have to be submitted to the party Directorate in Rome. Stalin rejected this, insisting that they had power to decide there and then -- that is, by overruling the official leader of their party. But he finally agreed to let them report back to Rome.

According to Jotti, at the end of this "very harsh meeting," which went on into the night, Stalin withdrew his proposal, as Togliatti reported with relief on his return. Not so, says Secchia: Togliatti may have assumed that, since no decision had been taken that night, the matter had been dropped, but "to my knowledge, Stalin did not withdraw his proposal."

"We Were Stalinists"

It seems that the latter is right: Stalin was merely using other means to pursue his end. Back in Rome, Longo and Secchia reported to the Directorate on Stalin's demand and Togliatti's resistance. But they not only reported: they took sides -- with the Russian dictator and against their own leader. As Secchia puts it:

We explained ... the request that had been made by Comrade Stalin and the [other] Soviet comrades, and the motivations for it, and we expressed the opinion that it would not be possible to reject it. We proposed that it be decided that Comrade Togliatti, while remaining Secretary-General of our party, should go to reside for an indefinite period in Czechoslovakia, and should accept the proposal that ... he be at the same time the top leader of the Cominform.

(10) Secchia in Rinascita, 3 April 1970.

The majority of the Directorate, he adds, accepted this proposal. Amendola, in his Espresso interview, is more precise: all except one voted to back Stalin's demand against the known wishes of Togliatti. The exception was the veteran Umberto Terracini, who had shown his independence in the past, and would do so again. Amendola's explanation of this historic vote has the merit of frankness:

This was the opinion of Stalin, as our delegates reported it on their return from Moscow. And, after having heard it, we replied: Yes, even if it displeased Togliatti. We were convinced that Stalin was right. After all, we were Stalinists, and today I have no difficulty in admitting it.

Togliatti's Stratagem

In Moscow, Togliatti was preparing to leave for home, in the belief that the affair was now settled, when a telegram arrived telling him of the Directorate's decision. Nilde Iotti recalls:

It was a very hard and unexpected blow. It separated Togliatti from the party and put him up against the wall. However, Togliatti did not give in. He asked ... that a delegation of the Directorate come to Moscow for discussions.

On this point Secchia contradicts Iotti. He says that there was no such request from Togliatti -- that the Directorate itself decided to send two delegates, himself and Arturo Colombi, to Moscow. They were to explain the decision to adopt Stalin's proposal but had "a full mandate to take a decision together with Comrade Togliatti and the Soviet comrades on the future work of Comrade Togliatti." Although the decision had in fact already been taken, this last reservation meant that the matter was still not settled-- that Togliatti still had a chance to reassert his hold over the PCI apparatus. He made the most of it. Secchia continues the story:

In Moscow, Colombi and I found Togliatti very irritated by the Directorate's decision. On political and personal grounds he argued his disagreement with the decision. He asked us to give up that decision and to prepare a letter, in the form of a resolution, to the leaders of the CPSU, in which we would declare our agreement that Comrade Togliatti should return to Italy to participate in the 7th Congress of the party and to arrange matters so that an efficient leadership of the party would be

ensured during the period for which -- while remaining Secretary-General of the party -- he might eventually have to reside abroad.

Colombi, from the first, rather stormy talk that we had with Togliatti, told me that we must go back on the decision taken in Italy and accept Togliatti's viewpoint...

Secchia himself, an old Stalinist, was evidently more reluctant to accept this, but eventually did so, and Togliatti dictated the terms of the letter-resolution. This was a master-stroke which transformed the situation. In ostensibly complying with Stalin's demand, he was in fact evading it. Stalin could hardly object to his returning to Italy to prepare for a party congress and a smooth transfer of power to his deputy, Luigi Longo.(11) But both the Soviet dictator and the Italian leader were aware that if Togliatti returned to Italy that would be the end of Stalin's project.

A member of the Soviet leadership in charge of liaison with the Italians made this clear. He told them that "Comrade Stalin feels that the discussion to be held with you would now be pointless, since you have already decided that Togliatti is to return to Italy." Reminded that Togliatti had undertaken to take up his Cominform post after a transitional spell in Italy, he said brusquely: "But the letter-resolution means nothing: once Togliatti has returned to Italy, the promise will remain [only] on paper."

Nevertheless, the Soviet-Italian talks did take place, and Stalin made a final attempt to have his way. Having ordered the official interpreter replaced by Togliatti himself "as a sign of trust," he got down to the attack. Secchia recalls:

The discussion took place in a tense atmosphere. The Soviet comrades repeated their viewpoint, with the arguments already mentioned. Both Colombi and I as well as Togliatti were very embarrassed. The situation was well characterized by a remark of Stalin's, who at a certain point interrupted and said:

'The situation seems clear to me. Comrades Secchia and Colombi are advancing reservations out of fear of displeasing Comrade Togliatti, and Comrade Togliatti does not reject our proposals outright only out of fear of displeasing Comrade Stalin and the

(11) In his Espresso interview Amendola said that there was no question but that Longo, then Vice-Secretary-General, would be Stalin's successor.

Soviet comrades. Such considerations of a personal nature should not be allowed to intervene. You should make your judgment only on the basis of the very serious political considerations put forward by us.'

Or, if one may paraphrase; "Do as I say."

Stalin Gives Way

But Togliatti, having turned the tables by an adroit stratagem, quietly held his ground; and Stalin finally gave way, agreeing that Togliatti could return to Italy for the 7th PCI Congress (held in early April), after which the question would be reconsidered. According to the ex-Communist Seniga, who was in Moscow at the time, Stalin declared: "We do not want to hold Comrade Togliatti here by force. We are concerned for his safety, but we cannot hold him prisoner here, if he doesn't want to stay." Then he added: "If Comrade Togliatti returns to Italy, we'll never see him here again."

On this point, there is more than a trace of retrospective animus in the account of the old Stalinist Secchia:

The conclusion was that Togliatti should return to Italy for the 7th Congress, and he pledged himself to organize his residence abroad (Czechoslovakia was still mentioned) after the Congress. But it was immediately clear to all of us, and not only to the Soviet comrades, that this commitment was only an expedient, and that there was no intention on Comrade Togliatti's part of standing by it.

Secchia added acidly that "Comrade Jotti's version, as well as Comrade Togliatti's reference in his Central Committee report of 24 June 1956, that Stalin withdrew his proposal, is not correct." (In reply, Jotti stood by her version, and asked why Secchia had not challenged the accuracy of Togliatti's 1956 account at that time.)

Secchia, it seems, is right: Stalin had not withdrawn his demand; but he recognized that Togliatti had outmaneuvered him -- and he showed his displeasure. When Togliatti finally left for home in late February, Jotti relates, not one of the Soviet leaders was at the station to see him off. The aura of displeasure extended to Prague, where Togliatti spent two days en route "completely isolated in a villa," having only a brief encounter with Slansky." (At that time, Jotti adds, the Czechoslovak Central Committee was taking up "the question of Sling and Svermova, the first of a tragic series.")

Back in Italy, Togliatti made it clear that he considered the incident closed. "He proposed that nothing more be said about it," says Amendola, "and nobody did speak of it." A few weeks later the 7th PCI Congress brought the re-election of Togliatti as Secretary-General. "That re-election was an implicit reply to the PCSU," Amendola continues. "It signified that with the passage of the months our general political evaluation had changed. And perhaps theirs had also changed in the meantime. The fact is that the proposal was not made again."

Some Questions

Although much light has been shed on a dramatic incident in Communist history by these revelations, many questions remain unanswered. The first is: Why did Stalin attempt to remove one of the world's most prestigious Communist leaders from his position at the head of the strongest non-ruling Communist party?

The arguments about the imminence of East-West war and the danger to Togliatti's life can hardly be taken seriously. Stalin's expressed desire to build up the Cominform and give it a Western leader are scarcely more convincing: at that time the Cominform was already a moribund institution, bypassed in favor of more direct means of Soviet control, and, once Togliatti had won the battles of wits and wills, nothing more was heard of the project. The purpose, it seems, was primarily to oust Togliatti from the leadership of the PCI. Why?

Perhaps one should look for the answer in the paranoia of Stalin's last years. With Dimitrov dead, Tito an outcast, Gomulka imprisoned and Mao Tse-tung preoccupied with his own revolution, Togliatti was one national Communist leader of international prestige who had shown some signs of cautious readiness to think for himself. At the opening session of the Cominform in September 1947 the French and Italian parties had been roundly criticized for lack of revolutionary zeal, but since then Togliatti had shown distinct reluctance to implement Zhdanov's call for political strikes and civic disturbances.

The removal of Togliatti to East European exile against his wishes would have been a dramatic assertion of Soviet authority: a signal for further tightening of discipline in the international movement.

This is a matter for speculation, however. Stalin habitually kept his own devious counsels, and we can be sure that the present Soviet leaders will cast no further light on the matter, even if they were capable of doing so.

A more interesting question, perhaps, is why the Italian Communists chose to make these partly conflicting revelations at this time. One answer is that this is part of the image-building process to which the PCI has paid so much attention. The PCI is presented as a party which is not afraid to reveal its true historical face, warts and all. As Amendola puts it:

Apart from the figure of Longo himself, it seems to us in any case opportune to demythologize and "laicize" the history of our party as far as possible, by casting light on those issues which are still covered by certain shadows of mystery or of conspiracy.

Alessandro Natta makes the same point at length in his Unità article, writing of the need to liberate the history of the party from "triumphalistic attitudes and formulas, reticences, omissions and taboos, which in reality were common to the whole Communist movement."

Drawing the Moral

Nevertheless, there is clearly more to all this than a domestic exercise in public relations or an attempt, the sincerity of which may be debated, to serve the cause of historical truth. In his article in the current issue of Rinascita (12) Paolo Bufalini of the PCI Secretariat sheds further light upon the political motivations behind the substance and timing of the discussion.

Summing up, Bufalini remarks that certain points have been clearly established in the course of the debate:

First: that also in 1951 Togliatti and the PCI were acting autonomously, even in confrontation with Stalin and his authority, which was immense and unchallenged -- not only by Communists. Second: that Stalin not only had profound esteem and respect for Togliatti, but gave proof of great reasonableness and civility. (The conflicts between Stalin and Togliatti as regards general lines remain, and I am convinced that Togliatti was right; but this is a different matter.) Third: that the PCI was not that monolithic phenomenon that propaganda and mythology have always made it out to be. The head of the party, the great and prestigious

(12) Paolo Bufalini, "Le ragioni di Togliatti," Rinascita, 17 April 1970.

Togliatti, could be contradicted by the Directorate; the Directorate was not unanimous; the disagreements, even on questions of great importance, did not provoke rifts. In particular, in this case, a political disagreement arose between Togliatti and Longo; but Longo continued to be Vice-Secretary of the party, and between Togliatti and Longo there continued to exist a reciprocal relationship of profound esteem, respect and affection

Stress on Independence

This exposition is at once more subtle and less convincing than Amendola's frank avowal: "We were Stalinists." What it clarifies is not so much what happened in 1951 as the orientation of the Italian Communist leadership in 1970. Bufalini's account of Togliatti's clash with Stalin is distorted by retrospective rationalization. The Italian leader, shrewdly and stubbornly defending his own interests, certainly did not stand up to the Soviet dictator in these terms --

Togliatti dissented from Stalin on two fundamental points:

- 1) Togliatti contested the analysis which Stalin made of the international situation: this was not so grave; world peace could still be saved.
- 2) Togliatti also opposed another argument: it was not advisable [he held] to return to a centralized leadership of the international Communist movement; on the contrary, the correct thing was to stand firmly by the principles which led to the dissolution of the Third International in 1943. It seems to me that history has justified Togliatti...

The intuition of Togliatti was correct, that the unity of the Communist movement should be sought through full recognition of the autonomy and specific function of each Communist party, of every anti-imperialist, libertarian, democratic and peace movement, of every progressive force...

...The fact remains that Togliatti opposed a different analysis, a different line to that of Stalin. The Directorate of the PCI agreed with Stalin, but finally,

in the fact of Togliatti's firmness, accepted the decision of the latter.

The contemporary moral is already clear, but Bufalini makes it explicit:

What is certain is that the PCI has never been a servile imitator of others. Not, certainly, with Gramsci and Togliatti... Not, certainly, with Longo.

...We are struggling for the democratic and socialist renewal of Italy along a road and in a perspective that are profoundly different from those of the USSR and other socialist countries. We are struggling to reach socialism along a democratic path, to attain a pluralistic socialist society. History does not repeat itself; one learns from historical experiences.

The lessons which the PCI wishes to draw from this particular historical experience have become clearer. It is hardly an accident that this story of gross Soviet interference in the affairs of the Italian party has been (partly) revealed just when the CPSU is beating the interparty drums for Lenin's centenary. In its subtle way, the PCI has made another gesture of independence.

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