



The Rebirth of Italian Communism, 1943–44

Dissidents in
German-Occupied Rome

David Broder

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Today is an inauspicious time to study this history: few of the Resistance generation are still with us, the Left has rejected its own past ambitions, and both EU and Italian authorities are imposing anti-communist fabrications as unchallengeable fact. It was thus an honour not just to write the history of this generation of militants, but to be able to meet and speak with some of them, notably Modesto di Veglia, Osvaldo Schiavoni, the late Renato Fratini and Claudio Pavone, and especially my 102-year-old comrade Mario Fiorentini.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACS/CPC	Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Rome), Casellario Politico Centrale
ACS/PS	Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Rome), Pubblica Sicurezza
ANPI	Associazione Nazionale Partigiani d'Italia, biographical database
APC	Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Archivio Partito Comunista
APC/CRM	Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Archivio Partito Comunista, Correspondenza Roma/Milano
ASR/CAS	Archivio di Stato di Roma, Corte d'Assise Speciale
ASS/FRB	Archivio storico del Senato, Fondo Rosario Bentivegna
ASV/FAB	Archivio di Stato di Viterbo, Fondo Angelo la Bella
BCF/FOT	Biblioteca Comunale di Follonica, Fondo Otello Terzani
CGB/FAP	Circolo Gianni Bosio (Rome), Fondo Alessandro Portelli
FB/FGB	Fondazione Basso, Fondo Gerardo Bruni
FGAN	Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Fondo Agostino Novella
FGFM	Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Fondo Mosca
IPR/AC	Istituto Piemontese per la Storia della Resistenza e della Società (Turin), Fondo Arturo Colombi
ISEC/V	Istituto per la Storia dell'età contemporanea (Sesto San Giovanni), fondo Venegoni
MSdL/FSC	Museo Storico della Liberazione (Rome), Fondo Silverio Corvisieri
NA	National Archives, Kew



Introduction: The Many Refoundations of Italian Communism

One hundred years since the Italian Communist Party (PCI) was founded at the Livorno Congress, the centenary in January 2021 was rather subdued. The public memory of the PCI remains intensely politicised, and yet three decades since the dissolution of the West's largest Communist Party, few actually defended its original ambitions.¹ As the anniversary approached, liberal ex-prime minister Matteo Renzi trolled former Communists by promising 'a big event in Livorno with Tony Blair' to show that 'only the reformist left can win'.² Other 'reformists' who had their early political training in the PCI protested that the party had in fact soon abandoned its Bolshevik infatuation. Massimo D'Alema, in 1998–2000 Italy's first ex-Communist prime minister, told *La Repubblica* that the real PCI tradition began not with 1921 but rather when Antonio Gramsci and Palmiro Togliatti steered the party towards a democratic 'Italian road to socialism'. D'Alema insisted that the PCI could never have become a millions-strong force if it had been a 'Cossack encampment in Italy'; rather, this was a 'reformist party which concealed this fact with

¹ Several new works cast the Livorno split as mere folly, for example, Mauro, Ezio. 2020. *La Dannazione. 1921. La sinistra divisa di fronte al fascismo*. Milan: Feltrinelli, and Flores, Marcello and Giovanni Gozzini. 2021. *Il vento della rivoluzione. La nascita del partito comunista italiano*. Bari: Laterza.

² 'Renzi vuole celebrare il Pci con Blair, l'ironia degli ex comunisti'. *La Repubblica*. 23.11.2020.

language compatible with a revolutionary horizon'.³ His old comrade Pier Luigi Bersani, who led the centre-left Democrats in the early 2010s, offered a similar perspective. For him, the Socialist-Communist split in 1921 had been a 'defeat' for the whole Left, but he still looked fondly on Gramsci's PCI, for it had 'inherited the best of the reformist tradition, giving it a political solidity that the Socialist tradition had lacked'.⁴

If this modern emphasis on the word 'reformist' reflected these figures' contemporary politics, their description of the PCI also had certain roots in the party's postwar self-narration. Throughout these decades, PCI leaders cultivated a democratic and 'national' party tradition, centred on Gramsci and, especially from the 1960s, increasingly defined in its distinction from the Soviet model. Curating the Italian communist tradition was a key concern for cadres asserting their own legitimacy; apart from a five-volume history by party-affiliated scholar Paolo Spriano,⁵ the most influential works of PCI history at least up till the 1970s were written by its central leaders. Indicative in this sense was Togliatti's work as editor of the monthly cultural review *Rinascita*⁶; his editorship of volumes of party documents; and similar tomes under the direction of his successor Luigi Longo and his effective wartime deputy Pietro Secchia. As well as authoring volumes that reconstructed the history of PCI strategy, these leaders also left their mark on such works as Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, first published posthumously starting in 1948 in an edition co-curated by Togliatti. While by the period of Enrico Berlinguer's leadership in the 1970s PCI history had become a more pluralistic affair, the decades in which its leaders wrote their own history established a deep bond between political practice, party tradition and reflection on the past.

Decisive in this sense was the repeated need to refound the PCI, producing a tradition that banished party founder Amadeo Bordiga (and, from the mid-1950s, Stalin).⁷ Togliatti's 1962 volume *The Formation of*

³ Ibid.

⁴ Pier Luigi Bersani: "Livorno, che sconfitta". *La Repubblica*. 20.1.2021.

⁵ Most of interest for our purposes, Spriano, Paolo. 1973. *Storia del Partito comunista italiano*. Vol. IV, *La fine del fascismo. Della riscossa operaia alla lotta armata*. Turin: Einaudi, and 1975. Vol. V, *La Resistenza. Togliatti e il partito nuovo*. Turin: Einaudi.

⁶ Created June 1944, and from May 1962, a weekly.

⁷ See Cortesi, Luigi (ed.). 1999. *Amadeo Bordiga nella Storia del comunismo*. Naples: ESI and Alcara, Rosa. 1970. *La formazione e i primi anni del Partito Comunista Italiano nella storiografia marxista*. Milan: Jaca Book.

*the Italian Communist Leadership Group*⁸ dated the genesis of the PCI tradition to 1923–24, after cadres were forced to reckon with the Fascist takeover and the party’s failure to mobilise in defence of democracy. In this account, the defeat had inspired the rise of a new leadership, rejecting what Togliatti called Bordiga’s empty ‘maximalism’ and defining the intermediate objectives that could rally wider layers of Italian society under its banner. Yet such a presentation tended to overemphasise the real effect of these changes within Communist ranks: the Gramsci-Togliatti ‘Lyons Theses’ setting out a new strategic orientation were passed at the exile Lyons Congress in January 1926, but they could not be debated or agreed by the mass of members, and already by November the party was finally crushed by Mussolini’s *leggi fascistissime*. Only once the regime began to break up under the effects of World War II, would it be possible for Togliatti to build what he called his ‘new party’—the mass, democratic party ‘of the whole Italian people’. Not only the PCI’s own self-narration, but militants and historians who cast a more critical gaze on its tradition, thus saw the war years as marking a decisive turnaround in both its political approach and its influence on national politics.

Indeed, these years had seen the recreation of a long-suppressed party. As late as summer 1943 the PCI could claim only around 5000 clandestine members, with its main leaders in exile or in jail and most of its militants disconnected from its central apparatus. Since the failed attempt to kickstart a revolutionary movement in the Depression era, even the underground PCI had been ‘more a party of prisoners than conspirators’.⁹ Yet the regime’s military defeats radically changed the conditions in which Communists operated. If for 21 years Fascism had seemed all-dominant, the 21 months that began in July 1943 would see the King sacking Mussolini, a brief armistice, the German invasion of northern-central Italy, a slow Allied advance up the peninsula, and the rise of the underground partisan movement that ultimately played a key role in liberating cities like Bologna, Milan and Turin. In March 1943 the PCI triggered the first factory walkouts in Turin; that September an armed Resistance began, with the PCI the largest single force; and on 25 April 1945 Communist militants would march through the streets of the Northern Italian cities with guns and tricolore armbands. It was a PCI man, Walter Audisio, who

⁸ Togliatti, Palmiro. 1962. *La formazione del gruppo dirigente del partito comunista italiano nel 1923–1924*. Rome: Riuniti.

⁹ Pons, Silvio. 2021. *I comunisti italiani e gli altri*. Turin: Einaudi, p. xxx.

executed Mussolini on 28 April 1945, and a PCI Justice Minister—Togliatti—who passed a sweeping amnesty for crimes committed in the war period. By the end of the decade it could boast some 2 million members, making it easily the largest Communist Party in the West. The PCI thus emerged as a mass force that had played a central role both in the popular mobilisation against Fascism and German occupation and in stabilising new democratic institutions.

This also gave the PCI a very different relation to institutional power, compared to its 1920s origins as a militant but marginal force. When Togliatti docked in Naples at the end of March 1944, this marked the first time he had been able to set foot in his homeland for almost two decades. Yet already by this point the PCI organised around half of all partisans in occupied Italy and it was now building its strength in liberated regions; from Naples, Togliatti declared the need for ‘national unity’ in the mobilisation against Nazi Germany. Already following the German invasion of northern-central Italy in September 1943, the underground PCI had formed a National Liberation Committee (CLN) together with liberal, socialist and Christian-Democratic parties; seven months later, Togliatti declared the PCI willing to join the government of Allied-controlled regions headed by King Vittorio Emanuele III. In April 1944, the PCI and its CLN allies joined former Fascist marshal Pietro Badoglio’s cabinet, based in Salerno; when the Allies reached Rome in June, these same parties established a civilian-led administration. Togliatti’s so-called Salerno Turn had an enduring legacy: the CLN-based governments of subsequent years laid the bases of republican democracy, with a June 1946 referendum abolishing the monarchy, followed by a Constituent Assembly which authored a new constitution.

Even after Cold War tensions exploded the international anti-fascist alliance in spring 1947, permanently forcing the PCI out of any direct role in national government, it remained staunchly committed to the new Republic’s institutions. The constitution it had helped write in postwar years declared Italy a ‘democratic republic founded on labour’; and over the decades that followed, the PCI would remain a loyal opposition, its rhetoric often framed by the imperative of upholding the ‘constitution written by the partisans’ and truly realising its social objectives. In this spirit, the Resistance appeared in PCI memorialisation not simply as the act of an armed minority—or still less as a struggle for power—but rather as the uprising of the ‘whole Italian people’, through which the masses had built a real democracy for the first time. Especially in the 1950s and

1960s, as the PCI sought to assert its legitimacy in a Republic dominated by the Cold War divide, this meant skating over the sharper class tensions of the Resistance era, instead emphasising the party's role in leading the working-class part of a broad popular mobilisation. In the PCI's particular presentation of Gramsci, the working class was the 'national' class par excellence, upholding the interest and the honour of the Italian nation; and just as it had been the central actor in the Resistance, it would also join in building a new democracy.

1.1 HISTORY FROM BELOW

In both its political uses and scholarly history, the Salerno Turn is usually assumed to be the decisive, or at least most symbolic, point in the creation of Togliatti's 'new party', insofar as it marked the transformation of a revolutionary party into one embedded in national institutions. Socialist Party leader Pietro Nenni famously termed Togliatti's pact with the King and Badoglio a 'bombshell'¹⁰; a historical reconstruction of this move by Elena Aga Rossi and Victor Zaslavsky, emphasising Stalin's role in the turn, casts it as a break with the PCI's previous republican 'intransigence',¹¹ and a recent Trotskyist account by Donny Gluckstein paints the Salerno Turn as the PCI's abandonment of a 'class struggle' Resistance policy.¹² Apart from a long debate on the question of whether Stalin or Togliatti truly made the decision¹³—with the overwhelming evidence telling us that the PCI leader merely assented to the Georgian generalissimo's approach—the Turn remains a focus of controversy insofar as it is blamed for undermining anti-fascism's potential to break the 'continuity of the Italian state'.¹⁴ Historians who see local CLN structures as the bases of a new, grassroots democracy have criticised the PCI's pact with Badoglio for rerouting the energies of the Resistance into the old structures inherited from Fascism, thus preventing a deeper democratisation process.¹⁵

¹⁰ 'La bomba Ercoli'. *Avanti!* (Rome edition). 5.4.1944.

¹¹ Aga Rossi, Elena and Victor Zaslavsky. 2011. *Stalin and Togliatti: Italy and the Origins of the Cold War*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 60 et sqq.

¹² Gluckstein, Donny. 2013. *A People's History of the Second World War: resistance versus empire*. London: Pluto Press, p. 155.

¹³ See Chap. 9.

¹⁴ Bermani, Cesare. 1997. *Il nemico interno*. Rome: Odradek.

¹⁵ For a recent example in English, see Horn, Gerd-Rainer. 2020. *The Moment of Liberation in Western Europe: Power Struggles and Rebellions, 1943–1948*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 77 et sqq.

This narrative of Togliattian malfeasance is well established in the historiography of the anti-Stalinist far left, which usually (and rightly) locates the Turn's roots in Kremlin realpolitik and the Allied powers' division of European 'spheres of influence'.¹⁶ This critical conception of the postwar institutional compromise is today especially well-known thanks to the Italian New Left of the 1960s and 1970s, whose rise was fanned by discontent at permanent Christian-Democratic rule and the impasses of postwar PCI strategy. In this period, a variety of dissident-left currents accused the PCI of derailing the radicalism of the Resistance movement,¹⁷ not only holding back from a bid for power, but using its close relationship with the Allies in order to exert a counter-revolutionary pressure within the workers' movement.¹⁸ In our final chapter we will look more closely at the mythology of the 'Red Resistance' as well as the New Left's efforts to recover the militancy of the anti-fascist struggle. Here we shall simply emphasise that in militant folklore as in scholarly accounts of the Resistance, there is a widespread sense that the Salerno Turn was a traumatic moment that shocked grassroots communists or betrayed their revolutionary hopes, which drifted ever further from view in postwar decades.

The problem with such narratives is their tendency to circle around another problem—the political choices of the militants whose hopes were seemingly betrayed by these leaders. If New Left currents critical of the PCI placed a great emphasis on the 'self-activity' of the working class, it seems odd to assert that partisans lusting for revolutionary transformation ended up the gullible victims of a sell-out. A similar problem comes from the fashion for a social history counterposed to the 'congress history' of parties, their texts and programmes. Without doubt, the dynamics of working-class life or even organised collective action can hardly be seen through the lens of party organisation alone; an insightful student of

¹⁶Lambert, Serge. 1985. *Tradition révolutionnaire et 'Nouveau Parti' en Italie (1942–1945)*, PhD thesis at the Grenoble Sciences-Po, supervised by Pierre Broué, especially highlights this connection.

¹⁷See, for example, Montaldi, Danilo. 1976. *Saggio sulla politica comunista in Italia (1919–1970)*. Piacenza: Quaderni Piacentini, p. 232 and Basso, Lelio. 1965. 'Il rapporto tra rivoluzione democratica e rivoluzione socialista nella Resistenza'. *Critica Marxista*. III/4, July–August, p. 19.

¹⁸Broué, Pierre. 1995. 'The Italian Communist Party, the War and the Revolution'. *Revolutionary History*. Vol. 5, No. 4. Originally published in *Cahiers Léon Trotsky*, 29 March 1987.

historical memory, Alessandro Portelli warns against the historiographical tendency to collapse the history of the Italian workers' and revolutionary movements into a 'disorganised pre-history of the Communist Party'.¹⁹ Yet it would be equally mistaken to reduce our focus to a kind of micro-subjectivity from which political decision-making is all but erased. There is no neat separation between formal politics and class mobilisation: and at a time of enormous politicisation and radicalisation like the Resistance, questions of communist strategy were also hotly debated, in person and in print, even by militants not known as famous party intellectuals.

It is here that we see the specific value of a study of dissidents—the militants who resisted Togliatti's vision of the 'new party' and fought to uphold a different Italian communist tradition. This seems a particularly fruitful line of inquiry when we consider that in Rome from September 1943 to June 1944—the nine months of armed Resistance against German occupation—most organised communists were not members of the PCI but instead belonged to movements which rejected its new positions. The largest single force in the capital was a dissident Communist Movement of Italy (MCd'I), known after its newspaper *Bandiera Rossa*. Claiming its descentance from the revolutionary origins of Italian communism, it rejected the PCI's involvement in the CLN alliance and denied its cadres' right to declare themselves leaders. Long before the PCI's Salerno Turn took the party into the King's government, indeed even in the debates that animated the tiny underground circles of 1940–42,²⁰ these dissidents denounced Togliatti's positions as a break with basic Marxist principles. If the Fascist ban in 1926 had 'suspended Italian communism for twenty years',²¹ this largely Roman-based movement like others in Turin, Naples, the Alto Milanese region and elsewhere claimed that they upheld the original party tradition, against its reformist degeneration.

Through the German occupation the MCd'I thus organised separately from what it called the 'central' or 'official' Party, even while proclaiming itself a 'provisional' executive awaiting a congress that would refound the PCI.²² As it fought to build its political leadership in the partisan movement, it was also fully part of the armed Resistance, seeking to organise

¹⁹ Portelli, Alessandro. 2003. *The Order Has Already Been Carried Out*. New York: Palgrave, p. 163.

²⁰ See pp. xxx.

²¹ Lambert. *Tradition révolutionnaire et 'Nouveau Parti' en Italie (1942–1945)*, p. 395.

²² 'La nostra propaganda': Archivio Centrale dello Stato (henceforth ACS)/AGS/PS/F1/104/1314.

bands of draft-resisters, capture weapons and fuel, and even expropriate food for distribution among the population. Chapter 4 looks at the specific forms of mobilisation implied by its vision of class-war politics,²³ and how this differed from that promoted by PCI leaders. Here, it will suffice to note that both Italian police and Allied authorities often saw it as dangerous precisely because it was not under the control of the CLN parties: one police report warned just weeks before the Allies' arrival that this movement had 'the secret aim, together with the other extreme-Left parties, of seizing control of the city, overthrowing the monarchy and government and implementing a full communist programme while the other parties are preoccupied with chasing out the Germans'.²⁴ For months after Liberation in June 1944, Allied sources bemoaned MCD'I partisans' continued attempts to foment class warfare, in what one British official stuffily (if almost romantically) termed its 'Robin Hood' campaign of expropriations and blackmail against landlords and business owners.²⁵

Hit hard by Nazi repression and criminalised by the Allied Military Government, this dissident-communist movement would meet its end in 1947, leaving little trace either on the postwar Republic or on Resistance historiography. PCI-linked historians' accounts often either ignored its history or crudely silenced its political challenge to the 'official party'. Roberto Battaglia's totemic 1953 *Storia della Resistenza italiana* thus devoted just one line to this 'anarchoid and Trotskyist [sic]' formation.²⁶ While leading PCI member Giorgio Amendola's introduction to 1965's *Il sole è sorto a Roma*, a volume published by partisans' association ANPI, recognised that 'it is impossible to write the history of the Roman Resistance without an objective study of [the MCD'I's] activity',²⁷ this book like Piscitelli's 1967 *Storia della Resistenza romana* and De Simone's 1994 *Roma città prigioniera* made no reference to its specific politics.²⁸ According to the tally of partisans and Resistance 'patriots' registered with the Lazio recognition commission after Liberation, the movements led by

²³ See pp. xxx.

²⁴ Notizie sui partiti della concentrazione di sinistra'. 8.5.1944. Copy in Fondazione Gramsci. Archivio Partito Comunista (henceforth APC) 62/1362-1364.

²⁵ ACS/ACC/B245A/S50/'Extract from file No. 636/3 sheet no.23'; see also pp. xxx.

²⁶ Battaglia, Roberto. 1964. *Storia della Resistenza italiana*. Turin: Einaudi. p. 202.

²⁷ ANPI. 1965. *Il sole è sorto a Roma*, edited by Lorenzo D'Agostino and Roberto Forti. Rome: ANPI, p. xiv.

²⁸ ANPI. *Il sole è sorto a Roma*; Piscitelli, Enzo. 1965. *Storia della Resistenza Romana*. Bari: Laterza; De Simone, Cesare. 1994. *Roma: città prigioniera*. Milan: Mursia.

the dissident communists were the largest force in the Resistance in the capital; those listed for either *Bandiera Rossa* or its associated *Armata Rossa* account for a total of 2548 militants, as against 2336 for the PCI.²⁹ Yet while the PCI and other forces like the Socialists and Christian Democrats became major parties after 1945, the MCd'I was not similarly incorporated into the origin story of the postwar Republic.

Beyond its specific role in the partisan war in the capital, the main interest in the MCd'I's history lies in its militants' claim to uphold an authentic 'traditional' communism, which had survived Fascism and yet was marginalised by Togliatti's new party. Its programme keenly insisted on this ancient orthodoxy, declaring the movement as having arisen 'via Marx' (*marxisticamente*) from the Lyon riots of 1831³⁰; its clandestine newspaper *Bandiera Rossa* lustily claimed the legacy of 'a shining path of thinkers, apostles and martyrs' dating back to the very origins of the socialist 'faith'.³¹ Prophesying a 'revolutionary situation which the European proletariat has been awaiting for a century',³² it sharply attacked all who blocked 'the proletariat's march to redemption'; the 'old defenders of private property who now change[d] their names, and for a while at least, their attitudes'³³ in order to preserve Italian capitalism.³⁴ In similarly florid tones it insisted there could be 'no community of action or of ideology' with the Italian ruling classes: to 'hold off the class struggle until the future' was to 'drug the masses with the illusion of freedom'.³⁵ The MCd'I press thus established a direct connection between the historical 'continuity' of its positions and its refusal of all opportunist accommodations. Yet as we shall see, this avowed 'orthodoxy' was much at odds with the reality of the MCd'I's political practice.

The militants at the centre of our study were, without doubt, an unusually radicalised minority—the kind among whom this language of unbroken tradition exerted a real power of attraction. For all its thousands of clandestine members, the MCd'I was unable to become a mass

²⁹ Commissione regionale Laziale per il riconoscimento della qualifica di partigiano.

³⁰ MCd'I. 1944. *La Via Maestra*. Rome: Bandiera Rossa, p. 5.

³¹ 'Serenità intuizione'. *Bandiera Rossa*. 22.10.1943.

³² Ibid.

³³ 'Partiti e nomi vecchi e nuovi'. *Bandiera Rossa*. 15.10.1943.

³⁴ Note also 'Chiarificazione', and 'Perché collaborare?'. *Bandiera Rossa*. 5.10.1943. See Chap. 2 for militants' analyses from before July 1943, foreseeing the royalist coup against Mussolini.

³⁵ 'Moniti?'. *Bandiera Rossa*. 15.10.1943.

organisation after Liberation; while PCI cadres often expressed alarm at dissident influence among their own ranks, with its own militants stuck to intransigent positions, the MCd'I failed to impose any change in the Party line; and this study also makes no claims about its popularity among the general population. Some historians have relativised the significance of even active partisans' political allegiances: Portelli doubts that the average partisan, perhaps semi-literate and in his early twenties, really opted for one unit over another after comparing their different manifestos,³⁶ while Santo Peli³⁷ draws focus towards the everyday concerns and impulsive aspirations that shaped Italians' Resistance activity. However, to speak, like Peli, of 'mass political illiteracy'³⁸ is also an unjustifiable dismissal of the militant minorities who clearly did look beyond their particular situations, and the determination of Italians from even the most modest backgrounds to educate themselves politically. If disbanded soldiers formed a clandestine 'communist school' at Grotta Rossa in autumn 1943, and young draft-resisters maintained armed communist cells even after Liberation, clearly theirs became a 'partisan' engagement even in the most politicised sense.

Drawing at length on handwritten polemics, clandestine bulletins and newspapers by forgotten authors, our study focuses precisely on the autodidact Marxism that developed in the dissident-communist milieu. Studying this underground archive is also key to understanding the strands of communism that were cut off by Togliatti's *partito nuovo*. In these militants' writings we uncover ideas widely apparent in contemporary sources yet absent from the Italian Marxist canon. How many scholars know that one of Rome's leading partisan commanders, a carpenter who left school aged 13,³⁹ termed the CLN the 'National Front for the Salvation of Institutions'?⁴⁰ That one electrician wrote polemics against industrial reconstruction, arguing that Italy should become the 'garden of a Soviet Europe'?⁴¹ That a little-known graphic designer maintained that Wehrmacht soldiers were potential 'class brothers' even after SS officers

³⁶ Portelli. *The Order Has Already Been Carried Out*, pp. 82–83, 122.

³⁷ Peli, Santo. 2006. *Storia della Resistenza in Italia*. Turin: Einaudi.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁹ Mucci describes his youth in an oral history project carried out by Alessandro Portelli: see Circolo Gianni Bosio, Fondo Alessandro Portelli (henceforth CGB/FAP), Mucci.

⁴⁰ 'Carte in Tavola'. *Disposizioni Rivoluzionarie*. 27.7.1944.

⁴¹ Poce, Antonino. 1947. *Pianificazione della ricostruzione e dell'economia*. Rome: Centro studi sindacali.

massacred dozens of his comrades—or that some German conscripts even joined partisan ranks?⁴² The Italian Marxist canon venerates Antonio Gramsci's democratic-spirited sentiment that 'all men are philosophers'⁴³—strange, then, that so few historians contemplate the 'organic intellectuals' of the Roman proletariat who did not happen to share PCI leaders' particular understanding of 'Gramscian' politics.

1.2 INVENTING TRADITIONS

This study thus uses the Roman dissidents' history to portray a wider battle to shape the rebirth of Italian communism in the Resistance period. This conflict involved far-reaching disputes over questions as diverse as military tactics, party organisation, and even divergent forecasts on Stalin's intentions for postwar Europe. A constant theme of this study is the way in which these polemical concerns shaped, and were shaped by, the Resistance mobilisation itself. Without doubt, these autodidacts' analyses will frequently strike today's reader as arcane or founded on glaring misconceptions; often their reasoning imitated the quirks of the few books or pamphlets that they had to hand, hidden in mattresses and chicken coops across Mussolini's rule. Yet the fact that their analyses are so fragmentary and rough-edged—and so lacking in reference to such prominent figures of interwar Italian Marxism as Antonio Gramsci or Amadeo Bordiga—itself has much to tell us about wartime communism. Far from reciting a catechism handed down from Stalin, or even the most renowned Italian theorists, their politics expressed a communist culture that had for two decades developed largely isolated from the international Left.

In this sense, their idiosyncrasies reflect a peculiarity of Italian communist history. While the Comintern demanded the centralising 'Bolshevisation' of all its national sections over the 1920s, transforming them into near-monoliths subordinate to Moscow's policy zigzags, in Italy this disciplining process was stunted by Fascist repression. This also created the conditions in which Gramsci could write *Prison Notebooks* from 1929 to 1935, inspired by questions of Communist strategy yet separate from—and not obedient to—the contemporary Comintern policy. At the moment of his 1926 arrest the Party remained a composite force,

⁴² See pp. xxx.

⁴³ Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence and Wishart. p. 347.

with the mounting faction-fight between the Gramsci-Togliatti centre and Bordiga-inspired leftists cut short before any final split could take place. Bolshevisation continued apace in the Paris-based apparatus, as cadres in France and confino [internal-exile] organisations expelled Bordiga and his allies, falsely accused of ‘Trotskyism’.⁴⁴ Yet this was the deed of a phantom apparatus, unable to organise on home soil or even to distribute a clandestine press. Despite its efforts to purge its prison and exile organisations of dissidents, it never managed to forge a Bolshevised Communist Party on the peninsula. With those militants who remained ‘at liberty’ in Italy cut off from the Comintern throughout the 1930s, PCI cadres instead had to impose their new line during the Resistance itself.

Impeding this belated ‘Bolshevisation’ process was an underground foreign to the *centro estero* and largely unaware of its political initiatives. The PCI’s national-front strategy would come to Italy from the outside, stemming not from the underground’s own experience but rather from the 1935 Comintern Congress, which had compelled all Communist Parties to build cross-class, national alliances against Adolf Hitler. Togliatti along with Luigi Longo had helped build similar coalitions in late 1930s France and Spain, pursuing this same Comintern strategy, but had almost no opportunity to do so in Fascist Italy itself.⁴⁵ Indeed, if Togliatti was influenced by Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, which he had not yet published, this had no obvious tactical expressions different to that of the French Communists; the wartime presentation of Gramsci was limited to his role as an anti-fascist ‘martyr’ and representative of the need for ‘national unity’.⁴⁶ Yet in advocating a national front with liberals and conservatives in 1943–44, Togliatti and his comrades met with the resistance of militants inexperienced in such alliances and bemused by the PCI’s new line. While for French communists the wartime alliance policy marked the resumption of the 1935–39 People’s Front, Italian-based militants never previously drilled in Comintern discipline proved far less prepared to bend

⁴⁴ APC/827. For works on Italian Trotskyism and the Stalinist hounding of all manner of dissidents as ‘Trotskyists’ see Francescangeli, Eros. 2005. *L’incudine e il martello: aspetti pubblici e privati del trockismo italiano tra antifascismo e antistalinismo (1929–1939)*. Perugia: Morlacchi; as well as *Revolutionary History*, Vol. 5, No. 4.

⁴⁵ Pietro Secchia attempts to portray an ongoing Party activity into the 1930s. Yet it was impossible to create a ‘Bolshevised’ organisation without there being a continuous clandestine leadership in Italy. See Secchia, Pietro. 1970, *L’azione svolta dal Partito Comunista in Italia durante il fascismo, 1926–1932*. Milan: Feltrinelli.

⁴⁶ See my ‘The Misuses of Gramsci’. *Weekly Worker*. 1336, 25.2.2021.

to this ‘class-collaborationist’ line—or the cadres advocating it—than were their PCF confrères.⁴⁷

Given this long separation, our study is deeply rooted in what Luigi Cortesi has called a ‘proletarian-communist’⁴⁸ underground—an antagonistic subculture perpetuated by veteran worker-militants and as well as a more amorphous ‘subversive’ milieu. Unable to create formal organisations until deep into Fascism’s war-crisis, this subculture survived in isolation from Party structures across the period from the 1920s to the 1930s, sustaining militants’ faith in the ‘sun of the future’ even when open revolt was impossible. As PCI cadre Giorgio Amendola later recalled, this enduring underground was an impediment for returning *centro estero* cadres’ efforts to refound Italian communism on a more gradualist, ‘national’ basis; ‘almost all the groups with which the [PCI] Centre entered into contact [in 1941–42] proved sectarian and extremist in orientation, and thus motivated neither to understand nor accept its political initiatives’.⁴⁹ In this subculture, admiration for the Soviet Union combined with maximalist and millenarian notions of revolution inherited from the nineteenth century. Cadres thus faced multiple simultaneous forms of leftist dissent, from the reticence of ‘old comrades [who had] stuck firm to sectarian positions across long years of repression’⁵⁰ to the sudden influx of ‘over-enthusiastic’ youth ‘knocking on the door of the Party’ in hope of ‘doing like they did in Russia’.⁵¹

Yet, because of their peculiar genesis, these divides did not conform to the more recognisable forms of ‘dissident communism’, setting Stalin-loyalists in opposition to the comrades of Leon Trotsky or Amadeo Bordiga. In fact, while PCI leaders’ positions obeyed decisions taken in the Stalin-era Comintern, the main dissident movements in 1943–44 were themselves imbued with enthusiasm for the USSR and Stalin personally.⁵² Even as the MCd’I claimed allegiance to communism’s ‘traditional conceptions’—and PCI cadres painted it as wedded to Bordigist

⁴⁷ A point made by Barth Urban, Joan. 1986. *Moscow and the Italian Communist Party. From Togliatti to Berlinguer*. London: IB Tauris.

⁴⁸ Cortesi, Luigi. 1999. *Le origini del PCI*. Milan: FrancoAngeli.

⁴⁹ Amendola, Giorgio. 1973. *Lettere a Milano*. Rome: Riuniti, p. 136.

⁵⁰ ‘Lettera di Luca alla direzione’. 25.1.1944. in Istituto Piemontese per la Storia della Resistenza e della Società (Turin), Fondo Arturo Colombi (henceforth, IPR/AC)/3.

⁵¹ PCI Federazione Laziale, Comitato direttivo federale. ‘Rapporto politico’, late November 1943. APC/7/2/14, p. 4.

⁵² See Chap. 2.

sectarianism—the Roman dissident movement expressed a deep, at times religious, admiration for Stalin, such as would have been impossible in the pre-Fascist era. Hence alongside its claims to represent a century-old Marxist tradition, the MCD'I proclaimed its own 'distinctly philo-Soviet character', upholding 'Marx and Engels's theory, as realised by Lenin and Stalin'⁵³; it even named its youth wing *COBA* in homage to Stalin's teenage nickname.⁵⁴ Lacking direct ties to Moscow, it was precisely its militants' ignorance of the Kremlin's role in determining PCI strategy that allowed them to champion Stalin as continuator of 1917 while condemning Togliatti as a mere 'opportunist'. Little aware of Moscow's real political initiatives, its militants came to use the distant 'workers' fatherland' as a cipher for their own projections. Combined with an unfavourable view of Togliattian gradualism, such idolisation of the USSR made 'doing like in Russia' the watchword of an idiosyncratic dissident Stalinism.

Fed by Red Army successes on the Eastern Front, the cult of Stalin peaked at the very moment that Italian communism was itself most fluid and undisciplined. Everywhere in Europe, long-defeated communists felt that history was turning in their direction; such euphoria was particularly strong in an Italy where 'communist consciousness was being reborn'⁵⁵ after 20 years of Fascism. Wartime communist ranks were heavily coloured by triumphalism, millenarianism, and often a sectarianism borne of the belief that the 'long-awaited moment'⁵⁶ of socialist transformation was finally at hand; years of resigned passivity could give way to an opposite belief that anything was now possible.⁵⁷ Such illusions even affected the PCI's own members: organisers in Rome and Turin each complained to superiors that they were struggling to convince local branches that the new gospel of 'national unity' was not in fact a 'ruse' before the Party finally 'jettisoned its bourgeois partners and seized power'.⁵⁸ Where PCI

⁵³ 'In linea'. *Bandiera Rossa*. 5.10.1943.

⁵⁴ See Chilanti, Gloria. 1998. *Bandiera rossa e borsa nera. La Resistenza di una adolescente*. Milan: Mursia.

⁵⁵ 'In linea'. *Bandiera Rossa*. 5.10.1943.

⁵⁶ Behan, Tom. 1987. *The Long Awaited Moment: the Working Class and the Italian Communist Party in Milan, 1943-1948*. New York: P. Lang.

⁵⁷ Mason, Timothy. 2008. *Nazism, Fascism and the Working Class*. Cambridge: CUP. See pp. xxx.

⁵⁸ A phrase used in 'Lettera di Luca alla direzione', 25.1.1944, IPR/AC/3. On this sentiment in Rome, see 'Rapporto sulla 2° zona', December 1943, in Fondazione Gramsci, Fondo Agostino Novella (henceforth FGAN)/87/262-70. On this idea of *doppiezza*, see

leaders proclaimed the Party's democratic and patriotic credentials, the 'spirit of separation' that drove its foundation in 1921 lived on in militants' continued belief in founding a 'Soviet Republic on Italian soil',⁵⁹ especially in the early phases of the Resistance.

Animated by similar enthusiasms, the MCD'I fancied itself the bearer of a destiny foretold not only by Soviet advances but also the Leninist creed of 'turning imperialist war into civil war'. Its propaganda proclaimed that the conflict would 'inevitably' produce opportunities like the one that had been 'missed'⁶⁰ in the *biennio rosso*, the two years of strikes and factory occupations that had followed World War I. Yet while this connection between war and revolutionary crisis was based on analogies with an oft-cited Bolshevik example more than the realities in front of them, it was far from limited to these Roman militants alone. Over the border in Yugoslavia, when Vladimir Dedijer brought news that the Wehrmacht had invaded Poland, Milovan Djilas told his alarmed comrade that past imperialist conflicts were to thank for the 1871 Paris Commune, the *soviets* of 1905 and the October Revolution.⁶¹ Even the Nazi-Soviet Pact, so offensive to anti-fascist fellow-travellers, met with other, more positive reactions on Italy's communist underground: bulletins spoke excitedly of the 'Western imperialisms' destroying each other in an attritional stalemate before the Soviet 'bulldozer'⁶² moved in to 'Bolshevisc' Europe.

In the West such predictions proved unrealistic. Even an Italy beset by deep military and social crises only superficially resembled the Russia of a quarter-century previously. The Western Allies were in fact taking decisive measures to stabilise European capitalism, and the fall of Fascism heralded not the 'final crisis of capitalism' but its democratic renovation. This meant elements of institutional continuity, genuine reforms and an international context blocking more fundamental social change. Yet while the Roman dissidents were merely dogmatic in their Leninist definition of Fascism as the 'last stage of bourgeois dictatorship', they also showed greater insight when they looked beyond this passive-teleological view of history. More than any other Resistance force, they sharply delineated the political

section 6.6 as well as Di Loreto, Pietro. 1991. *Togliatti e la "doppiezza". Il PCI tra democrazia e insurrezione 1944-1949*. Bologna: il Mulino.

⁵⁹ 'In linea'. *Bandiera Rossa*. 5.10.1943.

⁶⁰ 'Orizzonte rivoluzionario'. *Bandiera Rossa*. 22.10.1943.

⁶¹ Dedijer, Vladimir. 1961. *The Beloved Land*. London: Macgibbon and Kee, p. 269.

⁶² See the four bulletins conserved in ACS/PS/1942/65, principally *Bollettino* no. 5, 4.11.1939, p. 2, 'Francia'.

competition among the anti-fascists seeking to impose their stamp on a new Italy, and the likely direction of PCI strategy well before the Salerno Turn. Militarily speaking, partisans played a small auxiliary role in the Allied liberation of Italy. Yet the clashes of this period decisively shaped the country's new democratic politics and the form of the Communist Party itself. The history of the MCD'I provides us with a 'negative'—a history told from the viewpoint of the losers.

Ultimately, Togliatti's *partito nuovo* was the great winner of the Resistance. It became a truly 'mass party', shaped by a new generation of members and leaders; a 'popular-front' beast built on the Comintern model, proudly vaunting its democratic and patriotic values even as it built its own organisation on the most hierarchical lines. With even its reforming 'Gramscian' hues heavily filtered through its leaders' long apprenticeship in Stalin's Comintern, this was a party unlike anything previously existing on Italian soil. It would become near-synonymous with Italian Marxism in the postwar period, and the PCI a structuring element of Italy's new republican order. Yet by no means were the Party cadres of the Resistance years simply colonising virgin territory. All over Europe during World War II, Communist Parties arose from clandestinity to fight Nazi-Fascism, but nowhere as in Italy had an underground survived so long cut off from Party organisation, and nowhere else did dissident movements so strongly challenge the authority of 'official' Party leaders. The creation of a new party meant not only the channelling of a scattered underground into more organised structures, but the suppression of historic traditions of sovversivismo, distrust for institutional power and class autonomy that once again raised their head in the Resistance years. Ignoring this wartime battle over the fate of Italian communism, mountains of works of Resistance history have overlooked a vital turning point in the development of the Left. Our study's aim is to highlight what they have obscured.

1.3 STRUCTURE

Each chapter of this study focuses on this fight to shape the Italian communist movement as it emerged from two decades of repression:

Chapter 2 examines the culture of the Roman communist underground in the early phases of World War II. It highlights the culture clash between the intellectual fellow-travellers drawn into the orbit of Togliatti's party during the popular-front era, and the proletarian underground that had survived across Fascism. This chapter highlights the effects of the Fascist

experience on this clandestine milieu, including the spread of a millenarian cult of Stalin, outside of and in tendency opposed to the PCI's new strategy.

The clashes among the Roman communists become more sharply defined in Chap. 3, which spans the 45 Days between the 25 July 1943 palace coup against Mussolini and the German invasion on 8 September. The liberalisation period following Marshal Badoglio's appointment allowed the formation of the political movements that would go on to shape the Resistance. This chapter explains how the PCI's 'national-unity' policy hardened it against the dissident MCD'I.

The German invasion marked the beginning of a harsh Occupation regime, and Chap. 4 turns our focus to the social conditions in which armed bands now emerged. Exploring the differences between the slum proletariat in Rome's peripheral *borgate* and the industrial working class of the North, it explains how their respective forms of mobilisation related to communists' differing conceptions of 'class struggle'. This focus on the particular forms of social revolt on Rome's periphery allows us to explain the relative strength of the dissident communists in these areas compared to all other Resistance forces.

Chapter 5 takes on a more international dimension, with the Anglo-Americans' January 1944 arrival at Anzio, 35 miles south of the capital. For many anti-fascists these landings offered hope that Liberation was close at hand. This chapter explains how this prospect drove tensions within the anti-fascist coalition, as the parties advanced their rival visions of the next government. This is also informed by a study of the Allies' efforts to impose order on the democratisation process in the 'laboratory' of the liberated South.

Chapter 6 focuses on the effect of repression on the Roman Resistance, focusing on the counterinsurgency that struck in February–March 1944 as the Allies' march towards the city was halted. In particular, it highlights the contested place of terrorist tactics in communist strategy, and the increased opposition to their use in the face of devastating Nazi reprisals. It argues that this wave of repression succeeded in demobilising the Roman Resistance.

Chapter 7 revolves around Togliatti's 'Salerno Turn', as he led his party and its allies into government. It argues that the Turn embodied the overlapping of the PCI's new democratic approach with its ongoing Soviet inspiration, allowing the Party to unite widely varying political sensibilities. It highlights how communists both within and outside the Party

sought to reconcile Moscow's diplomatic moves with their understanding of their own strategic possibilities.

The controversy over the 'Salerno Turn' again poses the question of what potential communists really had to transform an Italy liberated thanks to Anglo-American invasion, and Chap. 8 explains why Rome did not see a popular insurrection upon the Allies' arrival. It explains that the weakness of Resistance movements in the capital was compounded by the new institutional deal and the Allies' own efforts to prevent social unrest.

Chapter 9 proceeds into the post-Liberation period, with the disarming of the partisans and the formation of Ivanoe Bonomi's Allied-backed 'government of national unity'. It highlights the tensions between the CLN parties in government, the state machine inherited from Fascism, and the armed bands continuing to operate on the Roman city periphery. This allows us to see how a new Republic built itself on the pacification of social unrest.

Finally, the Conclusion explores the echoes of the so-called Red Resistance in the culture of the postwar Italian Left. Tracing the continual re-emergence of militant anti-fascism and the politics of insurrection, it points to the disappointed hopes of the Resistance period that continued to fuel political violence. It thus presents repressed partisan radicalism as an enduring factor for instability in Togliatti's new party, as in the new Republic.

A Note on Sources

This study focuses on the political and strategic debates among communists in the war period, and thus draws heavily on their public press; internal bulletins; and organisational reports.

The MCd'I did not have any institutional heirs to preserve its records, and much of its archive was destroyed upon its dissolution. The most substantial set of documents from the movement is that collected by Silverio Corvisieri, author of 1967 book *Bandiera Rossa nella Resistenza romana* and other works on the post-Liberation period in Rome. His archive, deposited at the *Museo Storico della Liberazione* in 2013, includes documentation collated in the immediate wake of Liberation. It features minutes of some of its committee meetings, its press and internal bulletins, and postwar conference proceedings. While this archive offers a limited view of the MCd'I's internal organisation, it does include the reports that each of its armed bands were asked to produce after Liberation, detailing their activities. These were produced for the sake of seeking official