

THE “BORDIGIST CURRENT”
(1919-1999)

Italy, France, Belgium

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Introduction

To this very day, the Italian Communist Left (*sinistra italiana*) is still unknown — and is even misrepresented — in the very countries where it emerged and to which it spread through the immigration of its militants.

It emerged in Italy during the years preceding the first world war, around Amadeo Bordiga, who was its main inspiration, and from 1921 to 1925 it was to be found at the head of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). In this period Gramsci's current played no more than a secondary role within the party, as its right wing. In fact, in spite of pressure from the Comintern, the latter had great difficulty getting rid of the left leadership, which was supported by the majority of the PCI. But in 1926, following the Lyon Congress, the old 'Bordigist' majority were gradually excluded from the party. Soon after, its most prominent militant, Bordiga, was imprisoned. Once freed again, he retired from all militant activity, and devoted himself to his profession as an engineer and architect. He didn't break his silence until 1944.

It was therefore without Bordiga and outside Italy — where 'fascistic' laws impeded any organised political activity — that the Italian Communist Left was to perpetuate itself. It became the Left Fraction of the PCI in April 1928, then the Fraction of the Communist Left in 1935, and from its founding at Pantin right up to its dissolution in 1945, it worked to reclaim the heritage of the party which had been under the leadership of Bordiga.

Following its exile in 1926, the Italian Communist Left gradually lost what was specifically 'Italian' in its origins and development. It was a group of Italian immigrant workers in France and Belgium who went back to the original traditions of the PCd' Italia. As immigrant workers forced to leave their native land, strongly committed to the tradition of the Communist International, they had "no nation or national boundaries"; as such the 'Italian' Fraction was truly internationalist. It was to exist not only in France and Belgium, but also in the USA. It would have militants in Russia for a few years and contacts as far afield as Mexico. It managed to escape the inwardness that was so strong among political groups of immigrants, and constantly sought a confrontation of ideas with all the groups that left or were expelled from the Comintern; from the Trotskyists to the left communists who had broken with Trotsky. In spite of a series of ruptures with these groups, this perseverance with international discussion bore fruit. A Belgian Fraction (which came out of the League of Internationalist Communists of Hennaut — LCI) was formed in 1937, followed by a French Fraction in 1944. This showed an undeniable extension of its influence, which was however more ideological than numerical. From now on, the Italian Communist Left ceased to be specifically 'Italian'; in 1938 it became the International Communist Left, and an International Bureau of Fractions was set up.

The Italian Left was internationalist to the core both in its political positions and in its activity. For this small group of workers, internationalism meant not betraying the cause of the world proletariat. In an historic period which was particularly terrible for the small revolutionary groups which became more and more isolated from the proletariat, it was one of the very rare organisations which chose to swim against the current. It refused to support democracy against fascism; it rejected the defence of the USSR and the struggles for 'national liberation'. In a period which was completely dominated by the war, it tirelessly called for revolutionary defeatism, as Lenin did in 1914, against all military camps. It tirelessly defended the need for a world proletarian revolution as the only solution to crises, wars and mass terror.

In spite of the hostility it encountered amongst the workers, the vast majority of whom followed the directives of the Popular Front and ‘anti-fascism’, it put forward its own directive: not to betray the working class. And so, although already isolated, it made the difficult decision to isolate itself still further in order to staunchly defend an internationalist position against the war. During the war in Spain, it was the only group in France which refused to support — even critically — the Republican government, and called for the “transformation of the imperialist war into a civil war”. It was supported in this only by a minority of the LCI in Belgium and a small Mexican group. So its isolation became total; as it did with the Union Communiste in France, the LCI in Belgium and the Revolutionary Workers League (RWL) in the USA. The price it paid for the intransigent defence of its positions was an internal split which led to a significant minority leaving. Although weakened numerically in this way, the Left Fraction nevertheless came out of it strengthened ideologically. When the war broke out, a war that it believed to have been postponed to a more distant time, it, together with the Dutch internationalists, the German RKD and the French Revolutionary Communists, was one of the few groups to denounce the imperialist war, and the resistance fronts. Against the war, it put forward the need for a proletarian revolution that would sweep away all blocs and military fronts. Against the massacre of workers in the war, it called for their fraternisation across national boundaries.

In characterising their positions, some historians and/or political adversaries have labelled them both ultra-left and Bordigist. In fact, the Italian Communist Left was neither ultra-left nor Bordigist. And from the very beginning it always defended itself against the charge. It did not try to be ‘original’ in its positions; although attacked by Lenin — with the German Communist Workers’ Party (KAPD) — in *Left-wing communism, an infantile disorder*, it was above all an expression of the left of the Comintern. What it wanted was to continue the revolutionary tradition of the latter’s first two Congresses. This is why, although it was one of the first left currents to arise within the Comintern, it was also one of the last to leave, and even then it did not leave of its own volition but because it was expelled. Although accused of “ultra-leftism” by Trotsky, it still worked and discussed for several years with the Trotskyist current, which finally excluded it. It arose as an intransigent Marxist current before the first world war and remained ever faithful to the original “intransigence” of the Comintern, although the Comintern itself later went off in the opposite direction, when it adapted the ‘tactic’ of the united Front and ‘workers’ states’.

The Italian Communist Left kept going as a current, not because it tried to be ‘extremist’, but because its political experience forced it to evolve and to question past schemes that seemed outdated to it. It believed that the experience in Russia shouldn’t be turned into something hallowed, but should rather be passed through the sieve of vigorous criticism. As far as it was concerned, Marxism was neither a bible nor a list of recipes; it was there to be enriched in the light of the proletariat’s experience. It refused to reduce Lenin and Bordiga to eternal religious dogmas. Because it believed that the Russian revolution and the whole period that followed, should give rise to a precise ‘bilan’ (balance sheet), to be made without prejudice and without ostracising anyone, it criticised certain positions of Lenin and of Bordiga, which were still nevertheless part of its own history. Whether it was on the union question, on ‘national liberation struggles’, or else on the state in the period of transition, it did not hesitate to make innovations, when it considered it necessary. It cannot therefore be pigeon-holed either as Leninist or Bordigist in the period from 1926 to 1945. It is certainly this critical ‘bilan’ of the past which enabled it to survive the second world war and to continue as a current up to today.

The longevity of the Italian Left, wrongly called ‘Bordigist’, cannot be explained in terms of individuals like Ottorino Perrone (Vercesi), who was one of the main originators and inspirations of the Left Fraction. However brilliant he might have been, what Perrone had

above all was the crystallisation of a theoretical and political activity which flowed from every militant. His political hesitations, for example his surprising participation in an anti-fascist coalition in Belgium in 1944-45, showed that the ideological continuity of the 'sinistra italiana' depended more on the organisation as a whole than on simple individuals. To use an expression dear to the Italian Fraction itself, each militant reaffirmed himself within the organisation, just as the organisation reaffirmed itself in each one of its militants. If it extolled 'proletarian leaders' such as Lenin, it was in order to show that these 'leaders' synthesised the organic life of their party. For this reason, it tried as much as possible to give an anonymous form to those militants who were most in view. In doing so it was responding to a preoccupation of Bordiga in the 20s, who had always tried to ensure that the life of the party was based not on a passive following of its leaders, but on its political programme.

It is certainly amazing that the groups today that claim descent from the tradition of the Italian Left pass over their own history in silence, although some of their militants belonged to the Italian Fraction. When they are obliged to speak of *Bilan*, they represent this review as a small review produced by Italian immigrants and remain silent about the positions they defended. This is true of the both 'Parti Communiste International', for example, represented in France by *Programme Communiste* and in Italy by *Programma Comunista* and *Comunismo*. Although claiming complete continuity with the Italian Left since 1921, invariance in its positions and absolute faithfulness to all the positions of Bordiga and Lenin in the 20s, it nevertheless takes great care to maintain a political silence about the Italian Fraction abroad between 1926 and 1945.

In fact the history of the Italian Communist Left reveals an important split between 1943 and 1945, when the 'Partito Comunista Internazionalista' (PCInt) of Italy was formed. This led to the dissolution of the Italian Fraction in France and in Belgium, as most of their militants were integrated as individuals into the new party, without even knowing what its programme was. In the excitement of joining the PCInt of Italy, which had thousands of militants and was crowned with leaders as prestigious as Bordiga (who was, however, no member of the Party), Onorato Damen, Bruno Maffi and Ottorino Perrone (this one in Belgium), many of the old divergences were forgotten momentarily; many militants joined in the hope of seeing the party of Bordiga resurrected intact. Its concern with numeric strength led the PCInt to defend a sectarian policy which was very different from the Fraction of the International Communist Left in France and in Belgium. It refused all discussion and confrontation of ideas with groups like the RKD-CR in France and the Councils' Communists (Mattick group in the United States, Communistenbond Spartacus in Nederland), which had nevertheless refused to support the war and had maintained internationalist positions. In fact it excluded some militants of the French Fraction which wanted to maintain the tradition of *Bilan* and which had been responsible for awaking the fractions in France and Belgium from their inactivity during the war.

A few years later, the new party in Italy experienced a profound crisis, with a proliferation of splits and resignations. The 'party' saw its resources reduced and it became a small organisation of militants who still went on declaring that they were the party, although they had neither the form nor the means in a period — like the 30s — in which they were profoundly isolated. In 1952, the Damen tendency which had formed the PCInt, separated itself from the pure 'Bordigist' tendency, as a result of several years of divergences with Bordiga, who wasn't even a member of the party. This pure 'Bordigist' tendency would return to the theses of Bordiga and of Lenin in the 20s and, consequently, rejected all the theoretical developments made by *Bilan*, *Octobre* and *Communisme* throughout the 30s. In the 90s, of all the groups of the existing Italian Left, only the PCInt (*Battaglia Comunista*) (with the British group *Revolutionary Perspectives*), who is the successor of the PC Internationalist founded by

Damen in 1952, laid claim to *Bilan*. At the time of the 1952 split, most of the members of the ex-Fraction of the Italian left joined the Damen tendency.

Although it did not develop from the Italian Communist Left during the two wars, the International Communist Current (ICC) laid explicit claim to *Bilan* and the Gauche communiste de France (GCF) which, after 1945, tried to develop its positions around the review *Internationalisme*. This current has published texts of *Bilan* in several languages. Some groups in Great Britain and in USA have published texts concerning Bordiga and the Italian communist Left, particularly the both International communist Party (*Programma comunista* and *Comunismo* in Italy) and the group *Revolutionnary Perspectives*, in relationship with the Italian group “*Battaglia comunista*”, a former split in the 50s of the official bordigist group.

The Italian Left had a political influence and importance far greater than its numerical size. Today — the nineties — when the whole ruling class is crowing about the ‘death of communism’, *id est* the “death of the world revolution”, when the lie that Leninism, Trotskyism and Stalinism equal “communism” has reached a point of ideological paroxysm, it is necessary to show that these Italian militants were authentic revolutionaries who resisted all forms of counter-revolution from the beginning, and who both maintained and critically developed the real acquisitions of the revolutionary wave in Europe (1917-1921), against all the distortions and defamations of the Leninist-Stalinist counter-revolution.

The existence today of numerous groups coming or claiming from a more or less mythical Italian left, the history of which they artificially reconstruct when they simply hide it, demands a work of research into the less well-known period of its existence in the emigration from 1926-1945, in France and in Belgium (but also in the USA) and in Italy, from the Lyon Congress (1926) to 1943-1945, which saw the adherence of the Italian Fraction to the new party.

We won't hide the enormous difficulties involved in this work. Practically no study has been written on this key period, neither in Italy, France, nor Britain. In Italy, the Bordigist current is clearly better known than in France; but its study is often limited to the period before 1926. The texts of Bordiga, written when he was at the head of the Italian Communist Party, have been republished bit by bit. Numerous studies have been devoted to this party, its origins, more and more insisting on the importance of Bordiga and putting Gramsci and Togliatti back in their right place. But such studies often limit themselves to the personality of Bordiga rather than the current that he helped to form. Alongside some honest works (in particular that of De Clementi) there are many books written by members of the PCI or leftist groups, whose avowed goal is to show the ‘sectarianism’ even ‘infantilism’, of ‘Bordigism’, in order to contrast it with “realistic” ‘gramscism’.

In France, it would be difficult to find a study on the ‘Bordigist’ current before 1926. The political fashion of the day, of Stalinist or leftist leaders or intellectuals looking for an historic affiliation less compromised than of Stalin, had given birth to ‘gramscism’ in the 70s.

There doesn't exist any study of the Italian Fraction, for the period 1926-1945, outside of a short note published several years ago in the *International Review* of the ICC (cf. bibliography), and outside of a text of Lucien Laugier, a former militant of the International Communist Party (ICP) in France. Some collections of texts of *Bilan* that the Italian Fraction published in French, dedicated to the war in Spain (published in Paris ed. 10/18, Barcelona, etcetera) showed a still growing interest for the ‘Bordigist’ current in the emigration in France and in Belgium.

In Britain, with its tradition of pragmatic insularity, the Italian Communist Left is even less known. Nevertheless some texts has been published in English by groups (ICC, ICP and Revolutionary Perspectives).

To carry out our project, we relied essentially on the texts, and papers published by the Italian and Belgian Communist Left from 1928 to 1939, by the French and Italian fractions

from 1942, by the PCInt from 1943 to 1945. Published in Italian and in French, they show the continual evolution of this current in the thread of events. We haven't neglected the 'internal Bulletins' which were published after 1931, in the discussions with Trotsky, in 1937-38 (*Il Seme Comunista*, in 1943-44 international bulletins of the Italian fraction) when it was possible for us to obtain or consult them.

If, fortunately, newspapers like *Prometeo*, *Bilan*, *Octobre*, and *Communisme* are to be found in different libraries in Europe (Milan, Paris-Nanterre, Amsterdam, Brussels), this is not the case for the archives of militants of the left fraction. This gap has been partly filled — little by little — by the depot of the so-called Perrone Archives (in fact the Ambrogi Archives) at the BDIC of Nanterre, and of Piero Corradi at the library of Folonica. The true Perrone archives can be consulted at the Free University of Brussels (ULB).

One can only hope that such an example will be followed and supplemented to make the Italian Communist Left better known.

We haven't neglected the reports of the Italian police which can be found in the Perrone Archives and in the Italian Archives (Archivio Centrale di Stato, Roma). After 1944-45 for a short period, the militants hounded by fascism after 1922 could see the reports and documents concerning them. Needless to say the archives of the French and Belgian police will certainly not be open for quite a while.

The testimony of Piero Corradi concerning the *Réveil Communiste* and the minority of *Bilan* at the time of the war in Spain has been extremely fruitful, as has been that of the former militants of the Italian Fraction Marc Chirik, Bruno Proserpio.

If in the course of this study we have sometimes given the names and pseudonyms of dead militants, it's not only through the concern of a historian to be as scrupulous and as exact as possible. We know that the Italian Communist Left tried to act as an organisation and not as a sum of personalities and individuals. It manifested itself more by its publications, in an anonymous way, than by putting forward illustrious names. But all organisations, the Italian left being no exception, find themselves at one moment or another confronted by divergences which crystallise around tendencies and thus the people who were their most visible and resolute spokesmen. The Italian Fraction moreover, more than any other revolutionary organisation, always refused to hide its divergences behind a façade of monolithic unity. It always tried hard to facilitate the expression of political disagreements, even if they were only held by a few militants.

We hope above all, in taking the Italian Communist Left out of total anonymity, to encourage militants who are still alive, or their families, to rectify certain historic errors, to enrich the history of a current which should be known, and to break the silence enforced on it.

We thank Mme Annie Morelli, daughter of a sympathiser of the Italian Left to have had the kindness to send us the notes that she made on the 'Bordigists' in her thesis on the Italian immigration in Belgium. In particular those devoted to *Italia di Domani* and to the role of Perrone in the Anti-fascist Coalition, have been very useful. We are grateful to Arturo Peregalli, Sandro Saggioro, Fausto Bucci and Agustin Guillamon for their relevant works on the Italian Communist Left.

We have considered it necessary to separate this very succinct history of the left fraction into chronological sections. We have also made a resume of its origins and development in the PC d' Italia before 1926.

We have made the deliberate choice to insist particularly on the political positions of the Bordigist current, in showing their progressive evolution, determined by the historic context. Without neglecting the social history of the Italian Fraction, or the organisational history, it seems to us particularly important and necessary to make its positions stand out. They reflect

a whole historic period, rich in debates in the wake of the Russian Revolution; debates which are far from concluded given the importance of the questions raised.

A history of the Italian Communist Left can only be political because, as well as the problems raised, the replies given have been and still are political. The history of the Italian Communist Left is not a dead letter, but embraces the future through the richness of the responses given by it in the 30s.

Nevertheless this history should find all its significance inside whole the international communist left. Without studying the theoretical lessons of the German and Dutch Lefts, it would be impossible to understand and “up-to-date” (and thus to criticize) the political lessons of the Italian Communist Left.

P. Bourrinet, September 1998.

1. The origins (1912-1926)

All the lefts of the social democratic parties emerged from the 2nd International. Faced with the reformist current represented by Bernstein, Jaurès, Turati, Renner, etc., the Marxist current developed very late. It was more a left opposition tendency than a real fraction organised internationally within the International. At the beginning of the century, the revolutionary current was organised on a national basis. First in Russia and Bulgaria in 1903 with the Bolsheviks and the *Tesniki*, then in 1909 with Gorter and Pannekoek's new party in Holland. In the German SPD, the respected and admired guide of the International, Rosa Luxemburg's current — even though it had created a party, the SDKPiL, in Poland — was not organised as a fraction. Although the left current had long been denouncing the “opportunist danger”, it only began to organise internationally during the World War.

Partly due to the national development of capitalist states, the 2nd International was constituted as a federation of national sections, without any truly centralised organisation on a world scale. The International Bureau, established in Brussels under the authority of Camille Huysmans, had the task of co-ordinating the sections, rather than of providing them with a political direction. It was only with the 3rd International that for the first time in the history of the workers' movement, an international organisation appeared before some of its national sections were formed.

The development of the reformist current, and the weakness of the intransigent Marxist tendencies, were not fortuitous. The prodigious development of capitalism after 1870 had made it possible for large sections of the workers' movement to believe that the struggle for reforms, and the real improvements in working class living standards in the advanced countries, made the proletarian revolution no longer necessary in these states — and still less world-wide. As long as the proletariats of the different countries were not confronted with the reality of a world war and a world crisis, the world proletarian movement seemed like a utopia, the invention of a few high-flown minds. The Italian workers' movement did not escape these general characteristics.

The birth of the Italian Socialist Party

Up until 1870, the Italian socialist movement remained very weak. At this point, there were no more than 9,000 industrial enterprises and 400,000 wage-earners in the country. In 1871, Engels, who was nominated as the International Workingmen's Association's (IWA) secretary for Italian affairs, counted only 750 members in the Italian section of the International ('Federazione degli Operai'). The following year, a split between Mazzinists and socialists further weakened the workers' party. The development of anarchism, which was a characteristic of the backward countries, and the government's dissolution of the Italian section of the IWA in 1874, almost reduced the proletarian socialist movement to zero. The Bakuninists dominated the local insurrections which they fomented in Romany in 1874 and Beneventino in 1877.

It was only in 1881 that the organised socialist current re-emerged, with the foundation of the 'Revolutionary Socialist Party of Romany' on the initiative of Andrea Costa. Its programme was based on revolutionary Marxism:

The RSP of Romany is and can only be revolutionary. The revolution is above all a violent material insurrection by the multitudes against the obstacles which the existing institutions

*put in the way of the affirmation and realisation of the popular will. This is why the revolution is above all the temporary dictatorship of the labouring classes, i.e. the accumulation of all social power (economic, political, military) in the hands of the insurgent workers with the aim of destroying the obstacles which the old order of things puts up against the installation of the new; of defending, provoking, and propagating the revolution; of realising the expropriation of private persons and establishing collective property and the social organisation of labour.*¹

A year later, this party united with the ‘Partito Operaio’, born in Milan around Turati. The latter was a “workerist” party, which only accepted waged workers as members; hostile to all programmes and all ideology, it abstained from elections. Its members included Lazzari, a typographic worker, and the theoretician, Benedetto Croce. There was no distinction between the party and the unions that adhered to it, such as the ‘fight del lavoro’. However, this party was intransigently internationalist: during the Ethiopian war, Costa proclaimed: “Not a man, not a penny for the adventures in Africa”. In 1886, Cafiero translated *Capital*, and despite the dissolution of the party, the *Rivista Italiana del Socialismo* was published. In 1889, the first translation of the *Communist Manifesto* appeared, and in 1891, the publication *Critica Sociale*.

The proletariat’s increasing numbers and the development of the class struggle among the agricultural workers, led to the constitution of the first trade union centres (camere de lavoro) and in 1892, to the foundation of the Italian Socialist Party in Genoa.

This foundation was extremely important because it involved the separation between socialists and anarchists. But the new party was formed on a reformist basis, calling for “struggle by trade”, “the widest struggle aiming at the conquest of public powers” and “the management of production”, without any mention of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Henceforward, the party was to participate in elections, but at the Bologna congress, it envisaged the possibility of electoral alliances. Nonetheless, the party evolved slowly towards the basic positions of socialism: in Florence, in 1896, it rejected the idea of the organisation adhering to economic and electoral associations, recommending only individual membership. Very quickly, the PSI had to pass the acid test. Dissolved in 1894 by the Crispi government’s ‘anti-socialist laws’, the party still underwent a definite development. Hunger revolts, caused by the war, broke out all over the Mezzogiorno in 1898; in the same year, ferocious repression in Milan cost 100 workers their lives. Despite this repression, *L’Avanti* became a socialist daily. The elections of 1900 saw the defeat of the right and a breakthrough by the PSI which won 13% of the vote.

But this victory also resulted in the victory of the reformist current organised around Turati. After King Umberto’s assassination by anarchists, Turati declared to the parliamentary deputies: “We associate ourselves with your pain”. The Rome Congress of the same year saw the triumph of this current. It proclaimed not only the defence of the Constitution but the autonomy for local sections in electoral matters, and for the socialist group in parliament. The attitude of the government, which recognised the ‘right of coalition’ after some big workers’ strikes, further encouraged the reformist tendencies. The counterpart to this reformism was the appearance, at the Bologna congress of 1904, of the ‘revolutionary syndicalist’ tendency around Antonio Labriola, which proclaimed the necessity for the general strike and the predominance of the unions over the party. Labriola’s current left the party in 1907.

¹ For the history of the socialist movement before 1918, one can refer either to Bordiga’s book (*Storia de la sinistra italiana*), the irreplaceable testimony of a militant, or the book by G. Arfe: *Storia del socialismo italiano (1892-1926)*, 1966, Einaudi.

The Left in the Party (1913-18)

Up to this point, a true left tendency still did not exist within the PSI. The first intransigent Marxist reaction did not develop until 1910. With the parliamentary group supporting the right, at the Milan congress Lazzaro bitterly criticised the parliamentary action of Turati's friends. He declared that "if the Italian proletariat was no longer represented in parliament, it would be a lesser evil". Mussolini, in the name of the lefts from Romany, denounced the political truce between socialists and republicans. But the left minority around Lazzaro was crushed.

It was the Italian-Turkish war over Libya that gave a real push to the intransigents. The extreme right of the party around Bissolati, Bonomi, and Felice (as well as Labriola), declared their solidarity with the government. But in 1912, the whole socialist group voted against the annexation of Libya to the kingdom. This intransigent position was confirmed at Reggio-Emilia, when the congress expelled Bonomi, Bissolati, Cabrini and Podrecca, all of them deputies who had gone to the Quirinal to express their disapproval of an attempt on the king's life. This was a success for the left, which published *Lotta di Classe* in Forli, and *La Soffitta* (the 'attic' — a title defying those who claimed that Marxism was only good to be 'scored in the attic'). Encouraged by Mussolini, the congress rejected the autonomy of the parliamentary group, as well as the preponderance of electoral activity in the party. Universal suffrage only served "to demonstrate to the proletariat that it is not the weapon that will enable it to obtain its total emancipation". Furthermore, "the party is not a shop-window for illustrious men". Supporting the left, Lenin commented on the split in these terms: "A split is something grave and painful. But it is sometimes necessary, and in this sense any weakness, any sentimentality, is a crime... The Italian Socialist Party has taken the right road in distancing itself from the syndicalists and the right-wing reformists." (*Pravda*, 28 July 1912). Strengthened by the support of the International, Mussolini became editor of *L'Avanti*.

But the most resolute struggle against the right and the centre of the PSI was to develop above all in the Federation of Young Socialists. Formed in 1903, the Federation held a congress in Bologna in 1907 where it put on the agenda the necessity for anti-militarist propaganda. Concerned to maintain the purity of the party, it proclaimed the impossibility for militant Catholics and Christian democrats to be members of the organisation. Through its organ *L'Avanguardia* it also demanded that Freemasons be expelled from the party. But the left of the Federation's definitive triumph came at the 1912 congress in Bologna, which also saw the first public appearance of a small group of intransigent young socialists, all from Naples. They were a centre of attention, and their leader was undoubtedly Amadeo Bordiga.

Bordiga was born in 1889, near Naples. His father was a professor of agrarian economy, while his mother came from the nobility. He entered the socialist movement in 1910. In Naples, after the departure of the revolutionary syndicalists, the socialist group was still permeated by freemasonry and had a penchant for autonomy in electoral matters and for alliances with the parties of the republican left. This is why the intransigent Marxists around Bordiga were compelled in 1912 to leave the Naples socialist section en masse, no longer considering it to be socialist. From this split came the 'Circolo Socialista Rivoluzionario Carlo Marx' whose leading lights were Bordiga and Grieco. Its split was greeted positively by *La Soffitta*. As for the reformists, organised in the 'Neapolitan Socialist Union', they were to leave the party in 1914. Bordiga, Bombacci and Grieco then rebuilt the Naples section of the PSI, composed of 16 members.

At the youth congress of 1912, Bordiga took up arms against Tasca's 'culturalist' current which wanted to transform *L'Avanguardia* into "an essentially cultural organ", and all the young socialist circles into study circles, through a system of lectures and libraries. The

motion from the left current, presented by Bordiga, won a majority. It affirmed that “in the capitalist regime the school is a powerful weapon of conservation in the hands of the ruling class and tends to give the young an education inculcating loyalty and resignation towards the present regime”. Consequently, “the education of the young takes place much more in action than in study regulated by a bureaucratic system and norms”; education “can only be given by a proletarian atmosphere animated by a class struggle which is understood as a preparation for the proletariat’s greatest conquests”.²

Bordiga was to stick to this vision of the party as an organ of revolutionary action rigorously organised in the class struggle for the rest of his life.

Bordiga’s activity in the party for the defence of an intransigent Marxism was to have four axes aimed at preserving the party’s proletarian and political character:

- *antiparlamentarism*: Bordiga always advocated the subordination of electoral action to revolutionary goals. But he was not an abstentionist before 1918. In 1913 he even wrote an article against the anarchists, entitled ‘Contro l’astensionismo’;
- *revolutionary syndicalism*: Bordiga was the fiercest partisan of the subordination of union action to that of the party. He opposed the revolutionary syndicalists who wanted to subordinate the party to the unions. This is why he was to become an adversary of Gramsci, Tasca, Togliatti and “l’Ordinovism”, which held that the party had to be based on the factory councils in particular, and on economic action in general;
- *reformism*: Bordiga was the most determined partisan, along with Mussolini up to the war, of the expulsion of the Freemasons (agreed on in 1914), and of the right-wing tendency with its ‘wait and see’ attitude to the class struggle. To purify the party in order to maintain its revolutionary integrity — this was always the watchword of the ‘Bordigist’ current;
- *war and anti-militarism*: faced with the threat of war, the intransigent Marxist tendency in the youth Federation was in the front line of the struggle against militarism. In 1912 it saluted the Basle *Manifesto* against war, which called for the transformation of imperialist war into civil war. In the *Voce di Castellamare di Stabia*, Bordiga wrote: “When the order of mobilisation is announced, we will proclaim the unlimited general strike; to the declaration of war, we will respond with the armed insurrection. It will be the social revolution”. To support this position of principle, Bordiga was made editor of an antimilitarist pamphlet *The Soldier’s Penny* with which the youth Federation was associated.

But Bordiga’s hope that the war would be transformed into revolution was not to be realised. While the ‘Red Week’ at Ancona led to a wave of working class agitation all over the country against repression and war, the decision of the union HQ to call for a return to work broke the movement.

How would the PSI, with a left tendency at the forefront, respond to the war? The majority of the main Socialist Parties had revealed themselves to be participationist. In *L’Avanti*, Mussolini wrote that he refused to consider a ‘truce’ with the Italian bourgeoisie. Bordiga pronounced against any distinction between ‘offensive war’ and ‘defensive war’. In 1914, he criticised any idea of neutrality in the workers’ ranks: “For us neutrality means a fervent socialist intensification of the struggle against the bourgeois state, the accentuation of all class antagonisms, which is the real source of any revolutionary tendency”. The left declared itself to be “at its post for socialism” in another article by Bordiga: “We must be and

² For Bordiga, *Invariance*, *Le Fil du temps*, *Programme Communiste* give all the references of the texts in their numerous reeditions. See in particular *Le Fil du Temps* no. 13, Nov. 1976, and *Programme Communiste* nos. 48-56.

remain at our post, against all wars, and for the proletariat which has everything to lose in them, nothing to gain, nothing to preserve". But the article underlined the weakness of the proletariat's reaction:

... in all countries the ruling class has succeeded in making the proletariat believe that it is animated by peaceful sentiments, that it has been forced into war to defend the country and its supreme interests; in reality, the bourgeoisie in all countries is equally responsible for the outbreak of the conflict, or rather, it is the capitalist Regime which is responsible because of its need for expansion, which has engendered the arms race... (Avanti, 'Al nostro posto', 16 August 1914).

The PSI was not to maintain such an intransigent position. Mussolini renounced his revolutionary past by adhering to the war. He became an interventionist in October 1914 when he published in *L'Avanti* an article entitled '>From Absolute Neutrality to Active and Operative Neutrality'. Expelled from the party he published *Il Popolo d' Italia*, thanks to the subsidies of the Entente, which he received through the intermediary of the French socialist deputy, Marcel Cachin, a future leader of the French Communist Party. On the question of war, the attitude of the PSI centre, led by Lazzari, was not of the clearest. Faced with the war it proclaimed that the party should "neither adhere nor sabotage", which was an equivocation about the transformation of war into revolution and took the form of neutrality towards the Italian bourgeoisie. When the war broke out, *Il Socialista* of Naples, however, ran the headline "War has been decided. Down with the war". And *L'Avanti* declared itself to be "against the war, for anti-militarist international socialism".

The PSI's oscillation between left and right did not favour the development of a left fraction during the course of the world war. At Zimmerwald, it was nor the left which was present at the conference, but the right in the person of the deputy Modigliani. Bordiga, mobilised twice, in 1915 and 1916, was unable to crystallise a left opposition before 1917.

Towards the conquest of the Party (1918-1921)

It was only in 1917, at the Rome congress, the opposition between the right and the left hardened. The former obtained 17,000 votes, the latter 14,000. The victory of Turati, Treves and Modigliani, at a time when the Russian revolution was already underway, precipitated the formation of an 'intransigent revolutionary fraction' in Florence, Milan, Turin and Naples. Against the formula 'for peace and life after the war' put forward by the majority of the party, the platform of the fraction defended "the right of the proletariat in all countries to set up its own dictatorship" and to "pursue the struggle against all the bourgeois institutions, not only on the political terrain, but also through the socialist expropriation of the capitalists".

This crystallisation of a revolutionary fraction reflected a maturation of the revolutionary consciousness of the Italian proletariat. In August 1917, the workers of Turin, driven by hunger and encouraged by the Russian example (a few months before they had given a triumphant welcome to the representatives of the soviets), set up barricades and armed themselves with rifles handed over to them by the soldiers.

More than 50 were killed. But despite the upsurge of a revolutionary movement, the Rome congress of September 1918 failed to eliminate the right fraction from the party; it forgot that Turati, at the time of Caporetto, had declared that "*L'Avanti* has, during this period of war, written a glorious page in class history". Thus was born the 'maximalist'

tendency; radical in words, it did not dare draw a clear line between right and left, above all in the form of a split.³

Convinced that it had to march resolutely towards the organisation of a Left fraction to eliminate the right and the centre, the intransigent fraction equipped itself with its own organ, in Naples in December 1918: *Il Soviet*. This was the birth of the ‘Abstentionist Communist Fraction’. In a situation of proletarian fever marked by economic strikes, the Fraction formally constituted itself after the Bologna congress in October 1919. In a letter from Naples to Moscow in November, it set out its goal as being to “eliminate the reformists from the party in order to ensure for it a more revolutionary attitude”. It also insisted that a real party, which would have to join the Comintern, could only be created on an anti-parliamentary basis. Not only “all contact must be broken with the democratic system”, but a real communist party was only possible “if we renounce electoral and parliamentary action”.

But Bordiga did not want a split. Although organised as an autonomous fraction within the PSI, with its own press, the Abstentionist Fraction sought above all to win the majority of the party to its programme. It still thought this was possible, despite the crushing victory of the parliamentarist tendency represented by the alliance between Lazzari and Serrati. The Fraction could only become a party if it worked with all its strength towards the conquest of at least a significant minority. Not to abandon the terrain before having taken the struggle as far as it can go: this was always the preoccupation of the ‘Bordigist’ movement. In this it showed that it was never a sect, as its adversaries have alleged.

It was the implicit support given by the Comintern at the 2nd World Congress to Bordiga’s intransigent tendency which was to enable the Abstentionist Communist Fraction to break out of its isolation as a minority in the party. While opposed to antiparliamentarism as a principle, Lenin saw Bordiga as the most ardent and resolute partisan of the foundation of the International on a rigorous basis. The representative of *Il Soviet* persuaded the Congress to adopt the 21st condition for joining the Comintern — the expulsion of those parties which did not accept all the conditions and theses of the International. Reassured that the struggle against the reformists would be carried out in a resolute manner, Bordiga bowed to the discipline of the Comintern in its demand that each party should present candidates at the elections. To distinguish himself from the anarchists, he affirmed that his abstentionism was ‘tactical’, that in practice the choice was posed between “electoral preparation”, requiring a disproportionate mobilisation of resources by the communist party, and “revolutionary preparation”, through the propaganda and agitation necessary for the development of the party.⁴

Bordiga and the Partito Comunista d’Italia

Thus the road to the constitution of a Communist Party was open. In March 1920, a general strike broke out in Turin, lasting ten days. The dispersion of the struggles and the PSI’s immobility, supported by a legalist trade union, forced the different oppositions to work together and shortly afterwards, to unite. On 1 May 1919 the first issue of *L’Ordine Nuovo* was published, led by Gramsci, Togliatti and Tasca. Contacts with the ‘Bordigist’ tendency were necessarily close; the Turin group of the PSI was abstentionist and led by a partisan of Bordiga: the worker Giovanni Boero. Gramsci’s tendency, however, was in favour of participating in elections. It opposed *Il Soviet* with a subtle dosage of Lenin and De Leon’s

³ For the PSI during the war, see the collective work *Il PSI e la grande guerra*, Firenze, 1969.

⁴ The relations between Lenin and Bordiga are studied in H. König, *Lenin und der Italienische Sozialismus (1915-1921)* Tübingen 1967. König was in correspondence with Bordiga.

revolutionary syndicalism. It thought that “trade unionism has shown itself to be nothing other than a form of capitalist society”, that it had to be replaced by factory councils and soviets. Later on it called for workers’ management of the factories and seemed to underestimate the role of the communist party by assigning it purely economic tasks. For *Il Soviet* the key question was that of the party, without which the class struggle would be unable to find its true path. Bordiga was a partisan of the councils but he insisted that they could only acquire a revolutionary content by being formed on the basis of “local sections of the communist party”. For him the dictatorship of the proletariat could only be realised through the dictatorship of the party, because the soviet was not “in essence a revolutionary organ” Apart from these theoretical questions, on which Bordiga waged a continuous polemic, the fundamental divergence was over *Ordine Nuovo’s* failure to break with maximalism and its hesitation in constituting a fraction with a view to a rapid break with Serrati’s centre.

At the end of 1920, the *Ordine Nuovo* group moved towards the ‘Bordigist’ fraction, which now had a majority not only in Naples, but also in Turin, Milan and Florence. The failure of the occupation of the factories in September dealt a severe blow to Gramsci’s theories of “economic management” and “workers’ control”. The Giolitti government, through a consummately skilful manoeuvre, had let the strike in Turin fade out and decreed workers’ control in the factories. Revolutionary events had shown up the absence of a communist party ready to support and guide the movement. The reflux that followed proved to the Abstentionist Fraction and to *Ordine Nuovo* that it was no longer possible to wait and to act separately. In Milan in October the Unified Communist Fraction was formed. It put out a manifesto calling for the formation of the communist party through the expulsion of Turati’s right wing; it gave up the electoral boycott, applying the decisions of the 2nd Congress.⁵

The move towards a split, which had not yet become an open one, was decided at the Imola conference in December. It rejected the German model of a party based on a fusion between communists and left socialists. “Our work as a fraction is and must be terminated now”. The participants unanimously affirmed that they would no longer remain in the old party to carry out the exhausting work of persuasion, which is in any case completed, because that way the proletariat would be condemned to immobility till another congress”. Thus the conclusion was “an immediate exit from the party and the congress (of the PSI) as soon as the vote puts us in majority or a minority. From this follows... a split with the centre”.

On 21 January 1921, the Imola motion obtained a third of the votes: 58,783 against 172,487. The Communist Party of Italy, section of the Comintern, had been founded. Previously, Bordiga had declared at the PSI Congress that “the Socialist Party remains what it was on the eve of the war: the best party of the 2nd International, but not yet a party of the 3rd International”. Serrati had formally accepted the 21 conditions, but had not been capable of “translating them into action. We take with us the honour of your past”, he concluded before leaving the congress. The Abstentionist Fraction dissolved itself into the new party which rejected the presence of autonomous fractions and was to act in the “strictest homogeneity and discipline”.

What were to be the bases of the new party, under Bordiga’s leadership? These had already been laid down in the ‘Theses of the Abstentionist Communist Fraction’ in 1920. The theses affirmed that the communist party had to act “as a general staff of the proletariat in the revolutionary war”, because “only its organisation into a political party can carry out

⁵ Alfonso Leonetti has published a collection of texts on the question of the councils confronting Bordiga and Gramsci: *Dibattito sugli consigli di fabbrica*, 1973. *Programme Communiste* nos. 71,72 and 74 has published a number of texts in French from the debate, from a viewpoint critical of Gramsci and ‘Gramscism’.

the proletariat's formation as a class fighting for its emancipation". Rejecting the United Front with other parties which did not adhere to the communist programme, and the subordination of the party to simple economic action, the next underlined that the supreme goal of any communist party was the violent seizure of power, installing the dictatorship of the party.

The councils which would arise in the revolution would only be revolutionary "when the majority of them are won over by the communist party"; otherwise they would represent "a serious danger for the revolutionary struggle". In the immediate struggle, through propaganda, through "an intensive work of study and criticism... the communists must continually direct things towards an effective preparation for the inevitable armed struggle against all those who defend the principles and power of the bourgeoisie".

The 'Rome Theses', drawn up by Bordiga and Terracini for the 2nd Congress of the PCI in 1922, confirmed this vision. They were the basis of the 'Bordigist' current. They showed that the war had opened up a new historic period in which "capitalist society is falling to pieces and in which the class struggle can only end up in an armed conflict between the working masses and the power of the different capitalist states". The party is the synthesis of programme and will, the instrument for putting this into action, and is defined by its organic continuity with the fraction which gives birth to it. It could not form an agglomeration with other parties or fractions without endangering "the firmness of its political position and the solidity of its structure". As a unitary party, it had to become the unitary leadership of the unions and of any workers' economic associations. Finally, the party was not a sum of individuals but a disciplined collectivity. It had to develop an incessant critique of other parties and denounce their practical action when it reflected a dangerous and erroneous tactic.⁶

But the Communist Party had already been formed too late. The development of the fascist movement was to limit its action and put it onto the defensive. It organised armed groups to protect its offices and push back the fascist offensive, sometimes victoriously. But really to push it back the PCI could only count on widespread economic struggles, and since September 1920 these had gone into decline. It could not count on an alliance with the PSI, because the latter had adopted a policy of 'neutralism' by signing a 'pacification pact' with Mussolini. Its calls for a 'return to legality' showed the impotence it hid behind maximalist language. The PCI therefore carried out its own policies, rejecting any United Front with "elements whose goal is not the armed revolutionary struggle of the proletariat against the existing state". The party's policy was identical towards the anti-fascist coalitions. In order to maintain a revolutionary vision within the proletariat, in order to preserve its class independence, there could be no question of the party allying itself with the *'arditi del popolo'*. The latter, like the PSI, called for a return to "democratic order". Having come out of fascism they proposed to "bring about internal peace".

They declared themselves patriots and only gave admittance to former combatants and members of assault battalions. It was not out of 'sectarianism' or 'purism' that the PCI refused to form such alliances. As a revolutionary party, it could not permit any equivocation on the nature of democracy or divert the proletariat from its goal, which was not the defence of the 'democratic' state but its destruction.

In fact, as Bordiga underlined, it was democracy which encouraged and developed the fascist movement. The government which the PSI did not find quite 'strong' enough had, by a decree of 20 October 1920, sent 60,000 demobilised officers into the training centres, with the obligation to sign up for the groups of 'squadristi'. Whenever fascists burned down the

⁶ For the birth of the Italian CP, Giorgio Galli has written a very clear *Storia del partito comunista Italiano*, 1958. The programmatic texts of the Italian Communist Party can be found in *Fil du Temps* no. 8, October 71.

offices of unions or the Socialist and Communist Parties, the army and the gendarmerie were always on the side of the fascists. And these armed forces were those of the liberal democratic state.

From this historic experience, the PCI at the 4th (1922) Congress of the Comintern drew out what it saw as the most essential lessons.

- Fascism was not the product of the middle classes and of the landed bourgeoisie. It was the product of the defeat which the proletariat had suffered and which had the indecisive petty-bourgeois strata behind the fascist reaction:

When the middle class saw that the Socialist Party was incapable of taking advantage of the situation, little by little it lost confidence in the proletariat's chances and turned towards the opposing class. This is the moment when the bourgeois and capitalist offensive began. It exploited essentially the new state of mind in which the middle class found itself.

- Fascism was not a 'feudal' reaction. It was born first of all in the big industrial towns, like Milan, where Mussolini founded its party in 1919. The industrialists had supported the fascist movement, which presented itself as "a grand unitary movement of the ruling class, ready to put it self at its service, to use and exploit all means, all the partial and local interests of groups of bosses, both agrarian and industrial".
- Fascism was not opposed to democracy. It was its indispensable complement when "the state was no longer able to defend the power of the bourgeoisie". The fascist party provided it with a "unified party, a centralised counter-revolutionary organisation". In other texts, the Italian Left drew out the practical implications of its analysis vis-à-vis the PCI and 'anti-fascism':
- It was the left, and in the first place social democracy, which opened the door to fascism, by lulling the workers with the defence of 'democratic freedoms' and the 'democratic statue'. Alongside the Left, Bordiga saw the Italian CGL — which, as in 1921, during the metallurgical workers' strikes in Lombardy, Venice and Liguria, was imprisoning the struggle in a regional framework — as a major factor in demobilising the workers and leaving them open to the fascists' attacks. To summarise its position, by using the German example of 1919, he declared that "this was the road that leads to 'Noskism'".
- 'Anti-fascism' was the worst product of fascism, because it pretended that an alliance with the liberal or left parties would save the proletariat from the blows of a united bourgeois reaction. It kept up the worst illusions about the 'democratic' left which had peacefully ceded power to Mussolini in 1922.

The Communist Left saw the solution in the workers' offensive against capitalism, emerging out of the economic struggle. Against a unified offensive of the bourgeoisie, the Italian proletariat could only give a unified response on its own specific terrain: the strike. This is why, while the 'Bordigist' leadership rejected the political united front, it still supported the united trade union front with the socialist and anarchist unions. The PCI rallied to the 'Labour Alliance' which had been formed on the initiative of the railway workers' union and to which all the unions adhered in February 1922. However, the Communist Party, confronted with the Alliance's policy of local strikes, had to say that the latter remained "inert and passive; not only had it not undertaken the struggle, but it hadn't even said clearly that it

was ready to do so, not shown that it wanted to prepare for it”. In fact, at the time of the great August strike which spread all over the country, the Alliance ordered a return to work.⁷

Despite this bitter experience, the PCI, and latter the left communist minority, never questioned the slogan of the united trade union front. There was a certain lack of logic in this position: if the unions were led by the political parties, they necessarily had the policies of these parties. Consequently, it is difficult to see the basis for this distinction between the trade union united front and the political united front. Unlike the German Left, the Italian Left did not question its participation in the unions, which it continued to define as “opportunist” workers’ organisations.

It was precisely the question of the united front which was to lead to an increasingly animated opposition between the ‘Bordigist’ leadership and the Comintern. At its 3rd Congress the Comintern had ordered the application of this ‘tactic’ in all countries; it had even participated in a joint meeting in Berlin between the three Internationals, in order to organise this front. At the 4th Congress, the PCI delegation opposed this slogan and declared that it:

would therefore not accept being part of joint organs of different political organisations... (it) would also avoid participating in joint declarations with political parties, when these declarations contradicted its programme and were presented to the proletariat as the result of negotiations aimed at finding a common line of action.

The PCI also refused to take up the slogan of the “workers’ government”, which was the concretisation of the political united front:

To talk about a workers’ government by declaring that we could not exclude the possibility that it could emerge from a parliamentary coalition in which the Communist Party participated amounts to a denial in practice of the political programme of communism, i.e. the necessity to prepare the masses for the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat⁸.

‘Bolshevisation’ and the reaction of the Left

But the main divergence between the leadership of the Comintern and that of the Italian party crystallised around the fusion between the PCI and the left of the PSI, once the latter had expelled Turati’s right wing. The Comintern wanted to create a mass party in Italy on the model of the German VKPD. It thought that Serrati and Lazzari were revolutionaries from whom Bordiga’s tendency was distancing itself out of “sectarianism”. Even though it proclaimed that “reformists and centrists were an iron ball chained to the party’s leg”, that they were “nothing but the agents of the bourgeoisie in the camp of the working class”, the Comintern Executive ordered a fusion without delay in order to form a united communist party. With this aim an organisation committee was formed, comprising Bordiga and Tasca for the PCI, Serrati and Fabrizio Maffi for the PSI, and Zinoviev for the Executive. Thus the Comintern gave its backing to the right wing of the party (which was a small minority, having obtained only 4,000 votes against 31,000 for the left at the Rome Congress) in the

⁷ The Italian Left’s conception of fascism is presented in the collection of Bordiga’s texts. *Communism and Fascism*, ed. *Programme Communiste*, 1970. See also *Programme Communiste* 45-50, ‘Le PC d’ Italie face à l’offensive fasciste’.

⁸ See *Relazione del PC d’ Italia, 4° congresso dell’ Internazionale comunista, novembre 1922* ed. Iskra, Milan, 1976.

attempt to tame the 'Bordigist' leadership. The right wing tendency was composed of all the old '*ordinovisti*', except for Gramsci and Togliatti who still followed the majority. It was decided to apply Zinoviev's directives⁹.

As to the fusion, which for the Comintern was the motive for eliminating the leadership, it did not even take place. The PSI refused to accept the conditions for joining and expelled the Serrati-Maffi group around the review *Pagine Rosse*. The '*terzionalisti*' or '*terzini*' finally fused as a group in August 1924, bringing 2,000 members from a party which, under the effects of repression and above all of demoralisation, only had 20,000 adherents.

Zinoviev's Bolshevisation had not succeeded in eliminating Bordiga's intransigent tendency, which remained the overwhelming majority of the party. The Comintern Executive then tried to neutralise its uncontested leader by asking Bordiga to return to the Italian Executive Committee. Given his disagreements, Bordiga refused. He also refused the post of deputy that was offered him — a real insult to an abstentionist. His reply was brief, and blunt: "I will never be a deputy, and the more you carry on with your projects without me, the less time you will waste." (Letter from Bordiga to Togliatti, 2 February 1924.)

In Como, in May 1924, the conference of the PCI was held in clandestinity. it was a crushing victory for the Left. 35 federation secretaries out of 45, 4 inter-regional secretaries out of 5 approved the theses presented by Bordiga, Grieco, Fortichiari and Repossi. These stated that the party had been formed in an unfavourable period; however, fascism, "by beating the proletariat had liquidated the political methods and the illusions of the old pacifist socialism", posing the alternative "dictatorship of the proletariat or dictatorship of the bourgeoisie". In particular they criticised the International for imposing the fusion and for its equivocation on the nature of maximalism. On the political level, while waging a resolute struggle against fascism, the party also had to make "a determined critique of the so-called anti-fascist bourgeois parties, as well as the social democratic parties, avoiding any policy of blocs or alliances...". But above all the left launched its attack on Bolshevisation, which had imposed a disciplinary mode of functioning. In its Naples organ, *Prometeo*, it stated that throughout the history of the workers' movement "the revolutionary orientation has been marked by a break with the discipline and hierarchical centralism of the previous organisation". The party being based on voluntary membership, discipline could only be the result of and not the premise for a healthy mode of functioning. Otherwise the latter would be reduced "to a banal rule of mechanical obedience".

But paradoxically, at the 5th Congress, Bordiga was the most resolute defender of the application of discipline, even though he maintained its previous criticisms. "We want a real centralisation, a real discipline", he explained, to show that his intention was not, as was being claimed, to constitute a left fraction. His rejection of Zinoviev's offer of the Vice-Presidency of the Comintern may thus seem contradictory. However, this proposal was not an innocent one: it was nothing other than an attempt to buy off the founder of the Italian Party. But Bordiga was not Togliatti.

Henceforth, the war was on between the 'Bordigist' tendency and the Russian leadership of the Comintern. The year 1925 was to be decisive.

1925 was the year of the active Bolshevisation of the parties. It was also the year in which the struggle of the Russian CP and the Comintern against Trotsky's Left opposition really got under way: in January Trotsky resigned from its post as People's Commissar. This was the year that the old 'left' leadership of Fischer and Maslow began to be pushed out of the KPD, and Karl Korsch began to organise its fraction. It was thus the decisive beginning of the Comintern's struggle against its left tendencies, to the profit of a centrist leadership subordinated to Stalin.

⁹ The resolution on Italy can be found in *Les Quatre Premiers Congrès de l'IC*, Maspero reprint, Paris, 1971.

It was therefore more out of a reaction against these policies than on its own initiative that the Italian Left found itself compelled to organise as a tendency and to wage a struggle against Gramsci-Togliatti and the Russian leadership.

In March-April 1925, the Enlarged Executive of the Comintern put the elimination of the 'Bordigist' tendency on the agenda of the 3rd Congress of the PCI. It forbade publication of an article by Bordiga favourable to Trotsky ('The Trotsky Question'). The Bolshevisation of the Italian section began with the removal of Bruno Fortichiari from its post as the federal secretary of Milan. In April, the Left, through Damen, Repossi and Fortichiari, founded an 'Entente Committee' (*Comitato di intesa*) in order to co-ordinate its activities.¹⁰

The Gramsci leadership violently attacked this Committee, denouncing it as an "organised fraction". In fact, the Left still did not want to constitute itself into a fraction; it did not want to provide any pretext for its expulsion from the party while it was still a majority. At first, Bordiga refused to adhere to the Committee, as he did not want to go outside the framework of discipline that had been imposed. It was only in June that he rallied to the position of Damen, Fortichiari and Repossi. He was given the task of drawing up a 'platform' of the left, which was the first systematic attack on Bolshevisation. It condemned the politics of "manoeuvres and expediency" which aimed at the creation of a mass party on an artificial basis, "given that the relationship between the party and the masses depends essentially on the objective conditions of the situation". It condemned the system of factory cells, "negation of the centralisation of the communist parties". In an article published the same day as the platform, Bordiga emphasised that the function of these cells was to stifle any internal life and to imprison the workers in the narrow boundaries of the factory. In the name of the struggle against the "intellectuals", the power of the functionaries was being reinforced. It would be worth pausing to examine the arguments of the left which most systematically criticised the policy of Bolshevisation:

- The replacement of territorial sections by cells was the abolition of the organic life of a revolutionary party, which had to present itself "as an active collectivity with a unitary leadership". It was the negation of centralisation and the bureaucratic triumph of federalism, in which the party's body would be partitioned off into watertight cells.
- 'Bolshevisation' favoured particularism and individualism. The party became a sum of individual workers, attached to their professional branch. The consequence of this was corporatism and workerism, breaking the organic unity of the collectivity of the party, which must go beyond all professional categories.
- Instead of limiting the role of "intellectuals" in the party, the system of cells had the opposite effect:

The worker, in the cell, will have a tendency to discuss only particular economic questions of interest to the workers in his enterprise. The intellectual will continue to intervene in it, not thanks to the strength of his eloquence, but more thanks to the monopoly of authority granted to him by the party centre, to 'settle' whatever question comes up.

Furthermore, the 'proletarianisation' of the party leadership, a goal proclaimed by the 'Bolsheviks', was so little a reality that the new leadership, in contrast to the old one, did not have one worker on the Executive.

¹⁰ It seems that Damen and above all Repossi were, contrary to Bordiga, in favour of the immediate formation of a left fraction: the left elements must not take up posts, but constitute themselves into a fraction, and work among the masses, to take the party back to a healthy activity." (Letter from Repossi to comrades, cited by Danilo Montaldi, *Korsch e i comunisti italiani*, Milan, 1975.

- Having leaders with a working class origin was no guarantee of the proletarian character of the party, because “leaders from a working class extraction have shown themselves to be at least as capable as the intellectuals of opportunism and treason and, in general, more susceptible to being absorbed by bourgeois influences”.

Under the threat of expulsion, the Entente Committee had to dissolve, respecting the principle of discipline. It was the beginning of the end for the Italian Left as a majority. Since the recruitment campaigns launched by the Gramsci leadership, the party had gone from 12,000 to 30,000 militants. The newcomers were young workers and peasants entering political life for the first time; according to Togliatti, “the level of political capacity and maturity was rather low”. It was with this profoundly transformed party¹¹ that the Lyon Congress was to eliminate definitively Bordiga’s partisans from positions of responsibility; the latter only obtained 9.2% of the votes. But to prevent its tendency from creating a fraction, or even a new party, Gramsci brought three members of the Left into the central committee.

It was on the occasion of this congress that the famous ‘Lyon Theses’ were presented. These theses were to orient the politics of the Communist Left in exile.

The theses were first of all a condemnation of the politics of Gramsci, which were denounced as a pseudo-Marxist mixture of Croce and Bergson. They criticised the proposed alliance with the antifascist parties at the time of Matteoti’s assassination, and the slogan of a “federal workers’ republic” as an abandonment of Marxism.

In the second place, they gave a definitive summary of the ‘Bordigist’ conception of the party. In order to lead the class struggle to its final victory, the party had to act on three levels:

- theoretical: Marxism enriches itself through complex situations, and cannot be reduced to “an immutable and fixed catechism”, being “a living instrument for grasping and following the laws of the historical process”;
- organisational: the party is formed not out of the pure will of a small group of men, but in response to a favourable objective situation. “The revolution is not a question of organisation”, and the party is “both a factor and product of historical development”. The ‘theses’ therefore reject voluntarism and fatalism;
- intervention: the party participates in the class struggle as a party independent from all others.

In the third place, the ‘Bordigist’ platform rejected the kind of discipline which replaces voluntary adherence with the military law of submission to authority. It underlined the danger of degeneration in the parties of the International submitting to Bolshevisation. In the face of this danger, the ‘theses’ did not envisage the constitution of a fraction, since the real danger was emerging “in the form of a subtle penetration, wearing a unitary and demagogic garb”, and was “operating from above to frustrate the initiatives of the revolutionary vanguard”.

What were the historical perspectives arising out of this degeneration? They were becoming sombre for two reasons:

¹¹ Togliatti *La formazione del gruppo dirigente del PCI*, 1962, which can usefully be compared with Stefano Merli, “Le origini della direzione centrista del PC d’Italia” in *Revista di storia del socialismo* 1964, as well as his study: “Il PCI, 1921 -1926”, Annali Feltrinelli, 1960.

- **the stabilisation of capitalism.** While recognising that the "crisis of capitalism is still open", the "partial stabilisation" had led to "a weakening of the revolutionary workers' movement in practically all the economically developed countries".
- **The danger of counter-revolution in Russia.** A revolutionary policy by Russia and the Comintern would subjectively determine the future conditions of the revolution. But Russia was threatened by capitalism from within its frontiers, from its economy where bourgeois elements (state capitalism) coexisted with socialist ones. Faced with an evolution which would "make it lose its proletarian characteristics", the Russian revolution could only be saved "through the contribution of all the parties and the International".

In order to make such a contribution Bordiga, for the last time, in February-March 1926, took part in the 6th Enlarged Executive of the Comintern.¹² For him this was an opportunity to bid a long discussion with Trotsky and assure him of the Italian Left's solidarity in his struggle against 'socialism in one country'. In some extremely firm interventions, Bordiga mounted an attack on Stalin. He courageously defended the necessity for a "resistance from the left against the danger from the right", and this "on an international scale". He did not envisage the formation of fractions, but neither did he reject this as a possibility. He recalled that the "history of fractions is the history of Lenin"; they were not disease, but symptom of a disease. They were a reaction of "defence against opportunist influences".

This was the last fight by Bordiga and the Italian Left within the Comintern. From then on, it was little by little to constitute itself into a fraction of the Communist Party of Italy. After its elimination from the party, and because of its disperse into several countries under the blows of fascist repression, it was to find itself alone and isolated in its struggle to redress the Comintern. Without contact with Trotsky, who was following his own path, without support from left fractions within the International, without the possibility of developing its propaganda in Italy in the party, and in the Comintern, it found itself in the status of a very restricted minority opposition.

Relations with Karl Korsch

The first question posed to the Italian Left, therefore, was to establish links with the German Left opposition, which at that time was working towards an international regroupment of the communist lefts. These Links had already been begun in 1923, when members of Bordiga's tendency, present in Germany, were directly in contact with the left of the KPD. Some, like Pappalardi (see Chapter 2) had even resigned from the Italian CP and formed the first organised opposition of the Italian emigration.

But it was above all with Karl Korsch, whom Bordiga had known since the 5th Congress of the Comintern, that the closest links existed. Excluded from the KPD on first May 1926, because of his opposition to the Russian state's foreign policy, which he called red imperialism, Korsch had founded an opposition of several thousand members, 'Die Entschiedene Linke', the 'Intransigent Left', which published a review *Kommunistische Politik*. In the theses of this group, Korsch defined the Russian revolution as bourgeois, its nature having become clearer and clearer "with the reflux of the world revolution". His group, in contrast to the Italian Left, "had abandoned all hope of a revolutionary reconquest of the Comintern"¹³.

¹² Bordiga's interventions can be found in French in *Programme Communiste* no. 69-70, May 1976.

¹³ D. Montaldi, *op. cit.* Die Entschiedene Linke, which regrouped the most intransigent left opponents of Stalinism, was in fact created in Berlin on 2 April 1926 at a conference which adopted a 'platform of the lefts'.

The group's organisational goals did not appear very clearly, *Kommunistische Politik* did not define itself as a party or a fraction, and its members could be non-party or adhere to the KAPD. Nevertheless it affirmed that "in the present situation, the historic task of all Marxists consists in the new foundation of a really revolutionary class party on the national and international level, of a new communist International". But it emphasised that "it is not possible to carry out this task at the present moment". Without communist parties, the group could not see other solution than to call a new Zimmerwald:

The formula which we have found for our political and tactical use in the present moment is Zimmerwald and the Zimmerwald Left. By that we mean that in the period of the liquidation of the 3rd International we must take up the tactic of Lenin at the time of the liquidation of the 2nd International. (Letter from Korsch to the external Italian opposition group, 27 August 1926, cited by Danilo Montaldi, *Korsch e i comunisti italiani*).

This proposal was put to the Italian Left, and a letter of invitation to an international conference of the lefts to be held in Germany was sent to Bordiga, who was living in Naples. *Kommunistische Politik*, after becoming acquainted with the proceedings of the 6th Enlarged Executive, published in German in Hamburg, believed that a community of ideas and action between the two lefts could quickly be created.

The response from Bordiga and from the Italian Left — since at this stage Bordiga was in permanent correspondence with the latter — was a clear refusal. This refusal was the consequence of political divergences, not of a 'sectarian' withdrawal.

The divergences centred around the nature of the Russian revolution and the perspectives for the work of the communist Lefts:

- **The nature of Russia.** This was defined as proletarian, even if there was a real danger of counter revolution:

Your way of expressing yourself does not seem right to me. One cannot say that the Russian revolution was a bourgeois revolution. The 1917 revolution was a proletarian revolution even if it was an error to generalise its 'tactical' lessons. Now the problem is posed as to what happens to the dictatorship of the proletariat in one country, if the revolution does not carry on in other countries. There can be a counter-revolution; there can be a process of degeneration whose symptoms and reflections within the communist party have to be discovered and defined. One cannot simply say that Russia is a country where capitalism is expanding.

This pronounced itself against any spur in the KPD and the Comintern. It was extremely heterogeneous and this led the EL to break up very quickly:

- the group around Iwan Katz, strong in Nieder-Sachsen, separated from the Korsch group on 16 May 1926; with Pfemfert's AAU-E, is founded on 28 June the 'Spartakusbund der Linkskommunistischen Organisationen', publishing the paper *Spartakus*. 'Spartakusbund no. 2' disappeared in the spring of 1927;
- the group around Schwartz, KPD deputy in the Reichstag, who had founded the EL with Korsch, separated itself on 28 September. It then published a paper *Die Entschiedene Linke* which took up the original name of the organisation. The EL merged with the KAPD in June 1927; this led to a grave crisis in the party, as Schwarz refused to abandon his seat in parliament;

the group around Korsch, which after the September split, was then called *Kommunistische Politik*, from the name of the review published since 1926. Hostile to the KAPD, it was in favour of a "communist union policy". It was for the creation of an 'independent C P' in an International independent from the Comintern. A propaganda group, whose militants could belong to workers parties formed around class principles (like the KAPD) to the Unionen or to revolutionary syndicalist organisations, the group practically disappeared in December 1927.

- **The rejection of a split.**

We should not be in favour of splitting the parties and the International. We should allow the experience of artificial and mechanical discipline to reach its conclusion by respecting this discipline in all its procedural absurdities as long as this is possible, without ever renouncing our political and ideological critique and without ever solidarising with the dominant orientation.

- **The rejection of opposition blocs.**

I believe that one of the faults of the present International was that it was a ‘bloc’ of local and national oppositions.

- **The critical evaluation of the past.**

In general, I think that what must be a priority today is, more than organisation and manoeuvring, a work of elaborating a political ideology of the international left, based on the eloquent experiences which the Comintern has been through. As this point is far from being attained, any international initiative seems difficult.

For all these reasons, Bordiga concluded by rejecting any joint declaration, as he did not think this was possible in practice¹⁴.

The whole spirit of the Italian Left was summed up in this letter. First of all there was loyalty to the Russian revolution and the International which it helped to build. There was above all a fundamental difference with the other lefts — one of approach and method. The Italian Left never abandoned the battlefield before fighting to the end. This was a theoretical fight in that it sought to draw all the lessons it could from the defeat. Here its approach was similar to that of Luxemburg, for whom defeats were rich in lessons for the victories of the future. It was above all a political fight in its conception of a revolutionary organisation defining itself through the clarity of its goals, its principles and its tactics, tied together by its theoretical framework.

In contrast to the groups who precipitously proclaimed the foundation of new parties and a new International, the Italian Left always proceeded with method. As long as the International was not dead, as long as there was a breath of life in it, it would still be attached to it, like a member is attached to a body. Its conception of organisation was a unitary one: splits were an evil to be avoided, in order not to disperse the forces tending towards an international centralised organisation. Only when the death of the International was certain would it envisage forming an autonomous organisation. The foundation of the fraction of the old party, maintaining its former revolutionary programme, would be a precondition for the constitution of a new party, which could only be proclaimed during a revolutionary upheaval. The construction of the International obeyed the same laws: only the real existence of revolutionary parties in several countries could lay the bases of an International.

This organic view of the party was to be maintained until the Second World War. As the organ of an International and a party, it wanted to develop according to the natural laws of this organ, without making any hazardous grafts, and without hurrying its free, natural development.

By 1926, the Italian Communist Left had virtually completed the elaboration of its most fundamental principles. It rejected:

¹⁴ *Programme Communiste* no. 68, December 1975.

- the United Front and ‘workers’ and peasants’ governments’;
- anti-fascism, and any policy not placing itself on the terrain of the class struggle;
- socialism in one country;
- the defence of bourgeois democracy.

Other theoretical points, such as the Russian question and the formation of fractions, had hardly been developed. This was to be the role of the Italian Left in emigration.

It may be asked why Bordiga’s tendency was defeated in the Italian CP. Indeed, this remains inexplicable if we forget that the Italian party was a section of the Comintern. It was not the base of the party which eliminated Bordiga, but the Comintern via Gramsci and Togliatti, making use of its hierarchical authority. The weight of the Russian party in the Comintern, which itself had become an instrument of the Russian state, swept aside all the left oppositions. In these conditions resistance was very limited. Not only had the revolutionary wave subsided, but the prestige of the Comintern, despite its degeneration, remained enormous and paralysed the will of the opposition.

All these reasons explain why the defeat was inevitable, despite all the sympathy the ‘Bordigist’ leadership had in the party. Perhaps its hesitations to resist, its semi-mechanical acceptance of discipline and its refusal to form a fraction accelerated this defeat. But while we can interpret the past, we cannot remake history with ‘ifs’.

Bordiga’s development after 1926

At the end of 1926, after seeing his house ransacked by the fascists, Bordiga was arrested and condemned to three years of banishment, first in Ustica then in Ponza. With Gramsci he organised a party school of which he directed the scientific section. Dissension soon appeared among those detained. When 38 of them, including Bordiga, announced against 102 others their opposition to the anti-Trotskyist campaign, the CP leadership in Paris decided to expel the former founder of the party. This was done in March 1930, following the report of the Stalinist hit-man, Giuseppe Berti.

Whereas the Italian Left, in the prisons of Italy and abroad, carried on the struggle, Bordiga was little by little to distance himself from all political life, devoting himself to its work as an architectural engineer.

Many were astonished by his silence and put it down to his constant surveillance by the fascist police: wherever he went he was accompanied by two police agents.

In the 1930’s, Trotsky asked Alfonso Leonetti, who had become a Trotskyist and knew Bordiga well since in 1924 he had been on *Prometeo’s* publication committee: “Why is Bordiga not doing anything?” Leonetti replied “Bordiga thinks that everything is rotten. We have to wait for new situations to begin again.” (Letter from Leonetti to PCI historian Franco Livorsi, 1/5/1974.)

This testimony is confirmed by a police report of 26 May 1936 (ACS, CPC 747, Roma) which notes a conversation between Bordiga and his brother-in-law. Bordiga declared: “It’s necessary to distance oneself and wait... wait not for this generation but for future generations.” Bordiga was exhausted and disgusted by militant life, as can also be seen from this conversation of 3 July 1936 (ACS 19496, Divisione degli affari generali e riservati): “I am happy to live outside the sordid and insignificant events of political militancy... its day-to-day events do not interest me. I maintain my faith. I am happy in my isolation.”

Despite all the efforts of the members of the Italian Left to join up with him, Bordiga rejected all contact, limiting himself to purely informal contacts through old militants of the left like Ludovico Tarsia or Antonio Natangelo, who in 1939 was asked by Bordiga to convey

his solidarity to friends in Milan, with the recommendation that they should stay faithful to themselves, without deviations and vacillations, and ready for any eventuality (ACS, Bordiga's folder in the Central Political Archive).

As can be seen, while having the same view about the counter-revolutionary nature of the period, Bordiga and his comrades in exile arrived at very different conclusions: for the former, the impossibility of any organised work in this phase; for the others, the absolute necessity of such work, as a left fraction that had detached itself from the old party. This profound difference was to have an enormous weight — given Bordiga's great influence — on the orientations taken up by the internationalist movement in Italy after World War 2. It seems that he expected a revolutionary resurgence to come out of war:

*“If Hitler can push back the odious powers of England and America, thus making the world capitalist equilibrium more precarious, then long live the butcher Hitler who despite himself is working to create the conditions of the world proletarian revolution”. And he added: “All wars have as their final epilogue the revolutionary deed. After the defeat comes the revolution.” (26 May 1936, *ibid.*).*

Convinced therefore that the revolution would come out of a war, Bordiga only resurfaced in 1944, in ‘Frazione dei comunisti e socialisti italiani’ (see below). Before that, he had refused all offers of collaboration made to him first by Bombacci — who had created a profascist review ‘of the left’ — then by the Americans.¹⁵

From 1926 to 1945, the Italian Left was to follow its own course, deprived of the man who had best embodied it.

Because of its international action in several countries, the Italian Left was neither ‘Italian’, nor ‘Bordigist’. Born in Italy, it was to develop internationally. Crystallised by the theoretical and political contribution of Bordiga, it was to become anonymous. Here it was following the essential lines of the Rome Theses, which defined the organisation as a unitary collectivity.

This label of ‘Bordigism’, which was often stuck to it, was always rejected by the Left in emigration, because it tended to give credence to a cult of ‘great men’, which it had nothing to do with, at least until the end of the war... The theoretical and political development of this left, enriched by its experience, was to go beyond and enrich the contribution of the man Bordiga. Thus the exasperated reaction of the Italian Fraction in 1933 was perfectly understandable:

On several occasions, within the Italian party, in the presence of comrade Bordiga, as well as within the International and the left opposition, we have affirmed the non-existence of ‘Bordigism’ as well as all the other ‘isms’, which have become real performances since a stockexchange of confusion and political dupery has been instituted within the communist movement. The only time the term ‘Bordigist’ has appeared is on the cover of our platform in French, and on this point we have explained ourselves many times. We said that this term was an error, although in the intention of the comrades it was employed only to

¹⁵ During the war, the pro-Nazi speaker Philippe Henriot (Radio Paris), as well as certain newspapers, claimed in May-June 1944 that Bordiga supported the Red Army advance in Europe as a victory for the ‘proletarian revolution’. This assertion, which perplexed the Italian Fraction in France and Belgium, is not credible. One should hear in the atmosphere of the time rumour-mongering and the most incredible falsification of information. On this point, however, the Internationalist Communist Party (ICP) never issued an official denial (on Bordiga's political position, see the last chapter).

The communiqué published by the Italian Fraction in Marseilles can be found in its *Bulletin de Discussion* no. 7 (July 1944). It stated: “We do not think that a comrade of Bordiga's ideological capacity could express such a position which, behind its apparently radical phraseology, can only express the position of international capitalism and its ally, ‘socialism in one country’, which has allowed it to throw the proletariat into the imperialist war. The present conditions do not allow us to establish the truth rapidly and precisely”.

specify, among the numerous oppositional groups of the French party, the traditions of the political currents which edited the platform.

'Bordigism', as well as the reduction of our political currents to the personality of Bordiga, is the most crass deformation of the opinions of comrade Bordiga himself, who, following Marx, has destroyed the notion of individuality as such and shown theoretically that only the collectivity and its social organisms can give a significance to the individual himself. (Bilan no. 2, 'Pas de "Bordiguisme"!').

If, during this study, we use here and there the term 'Bordigism' or talk of a 'Bordigist' current, there is no malicious intent. It is more a matter of convenience than any belief that the Italian Left had a fetish about the man Bordiga. However, in the post-war period, which saw former members of the Fraction, out of enthusiasm and sometimes without any critical spirit, join the 'party of Bordiga', or split 'for Bordiga', the term 'Bordigism' —often as one of abuse — is certainly justified.

2. German Left or Italian Left?

(From Réveil Communiste to L'Ouvrier Communiste)

The Italian Communist Left did not remain indifferent to the existence of other lefts in the International during the 1920's. Considering itself an integral part of the International, it acquainted itself with the theses defended by the KAPD and its theoreticians Gorter and Pannekoek. In *Il Soviet*, it published the fundamental texts of the current of the 'German Left'. It was natural that there should be a certain convergence between the two currents in the face of the Comintern's attacks on 'extremism', defined by Lenin as an 'infantile disorder'. On the question of abstentionism, on the rejection of the United Front with social democracy (a tactic adopted at the Comintern's 3rd Congress), in their common rejection of a fusion with the German 'Independents' and the Italian 'maximalists', there was a clear identity of views.

However, this 'identity' remained highly relative, and was of short duration. After the Comintern's 2nd Congress (in 1920), Bordiga — assured of the International's support for the formation of a communist party through a split with the reformists and the maximalists, and firmly committed to the new world party of the revolution — put to one side his opposition on the parliamentary question. He put forward the idea that the divergence with the theses defended by Lenin and Bukharin on participation in elections was a matter of tactics, not of principles.

For Bordiga, who despite everything remained an abstentionist, the most urgent question was the constitution of a real communist party attached to the International. During the Italian elections of 1921, the new party applied the policy of the Comintern and put forward its candidates:

For clear reasons of international discipline in tactics, the CP must and will participate in the elections. As abstentionists, we must also give an example of discipline, without evasions or hesitations. The Communist Party has therefore no reason to discuss whether it must participate in elections. It must participate.

In fact, the Italian Left was liquidating the abstentionism which gave birth to it in 1918: "As a Marxist, I am first of all a centralist, and only then an abstentionist". (Bordiga, *Il Comunista*, 14 April 1921).

A few years later, Bordiga would be one of the most ardent partisans of the electoral 'tactic', even criticising the Italian workers' growing tendency to desert the parliamentary terrain:

Every good communist has but one duty: to combat the tendency towards abstention by many workers, an erroneous conclusion drawn from their hostility to fascism. By acting this way, we will make excellent propaganda and contribute to the formation of a resolutely revolutionary consciousness which will serve us well when the moment comes — imposed by the facts and not by our will alone — to boycott the edifice of the bourgeois parliament in order to destroy it completely.

Thus, the Italian Left distanced itself from the international opposition to parliamentarism which was appearing in the KAPD, the Dutch KAP, in Bulgaria, in England around Sylvia Pankhurst, in Belgium in Van Overstraeten's PCB, in Austria and in Poland. For the Italian Left there could be no question of forming an opposition, and still less a fraction in the

International, around this question. This is why it kept away from the ‘Amsterdam Bureau’ founded in 1920 for Western Europe, and particularly influenced by the theses of the KAPD and Sylvia Pankhurst. The same applied to the ‘Vienna Bureau’ grouped around the review *Kommunismus* and influenced by Lukacs¹.

Bordiga and KAPD before 1926

Bordiga’s Fraction was extremely distrustful and reserved towards the German Left from 1920 onwards. It saw in the KAPD’s abstentionism a syndicalist, anarchist deviation identical to that of the Spanish CNT and the American IWW:

We share the opinion of the best marxist comrades of the KPD who judge that this is a hybrid petty bourgeois tendency, like all the syndicalist tendencies, whose appearance is a result of the loss of revolutionary energy by the German proletariat after the red week in Berlin and the Munich days. The result is an electoral abstentionism of a syndicalist type, ie, denying the usefulness of the political action of the proletariat and the struggle of the party, which by inclination and habit are confused with electoral activities. (Il Soviet, no. 11, 11 April 1920, ‘The German Communist Party’).

Because of the struggle with *L’Ordine Nuovo* in Turin, which advocated the formation of factory councils and put the party in second place, Bordiga was led to assimilate the KAPD with the Gramsci group. In fact the German Left did call for the formation of factory councils (*Betriebsräte*) and ‘Unionen’ (AAUD), which may have made it seem that it was concentrating its work on the economic terrain alone. But in contrast to Gramsci, it vigorously fought against the trade unions which it denounced as counter-revolutionary, calling for their destruction in order to form workers’ councils. Because of this, it may have seemed that it underestimated or even denied the necessity for a political party in favour of ‘the idea of the councils’. But this was not at all the case; the KAPD defined itself as a centralised and disciplined party:

The proletariat needs a highly formed party-nucleus. Each communist must individually be an irreproachable communist — that is our aim — and must be able to be a leader on the spot.... What compels him to act are the decisions that the communists have taken. And here the strictest discipline reigns. Here nothing can be changed, or he will be sanctioned or excluded (Intervention by Jan Appel (Hempel) at the 3rd Congress of the Comintern, Moscow, 1921).

What really differentiated the two lefts was that one advocated the dictatorship of the party and the other the dictatorship of the councils. One wanted to lead the proletarian masses to victory through the development of the party, the other worked for the masses to lead themselves, by freeing themselves from any ‘domination by chiefs’. Against the Bolshevik-type party which Bordiga wanted to create in Italy, the KAPD put forward the idea of a party which “is not a party in the traditional sense of the term. It is not a party of chiefs. Its main work consists in supporting, as far as its strength allows, the German proletariat on the road which leads to its liberation from all domination by chiefs” (Declaration of the founding Congress of the KAPD, 4/5 April 1920, Berlin).

This is why Bordiga, who followed the situation in Germany and the evolution of the KAPD very closely, could only be distrustful, after the Heidelberg split in 1919, towards a

¹ For the history of the KAPD: Hans Manfred Bock, *Syndikalismus und Linkskommunismus (1918-1921)*, 1969, Maisenheim am Glan; Fritz Kool *Die Linke gegen die Parteiherrschaft*, 1970, Freiburg; Didier Autier et Jean Barrot (Gilles Dauvé), *La Gauche communiste en Allemagne*, Payot, Paris, 1976.

party which seemed to be working for its own disappearance in the heat of the revolution itself:

*The political party, says the opposition, has no preponderant importance in the revolutionary struggle. This must develop on the economic terrain without centralised leadership. This tendency rejects the importance of political action and party action in general, in other words it negates the political party as a central instrument of the revolutionary struggle and of the dictatorship of the proletariat. (Bordiga, ‘The tendencies inside the 3rd International’, *Il Soviet* no. 15, 23 May 1920).*

Thus, the Italian Left did not see the difference between the KAPD and the anarchists and syndicalists of the IWW variety. It saw the KAPD’s theory as “a libertarian critique, leading to the usual horror of ‘chiefs’”. Poorly informed, it believed that the ‘National Bolshevism’ line of Wolffheim and Laufenberg was contained in embryo in the KAPD’s conception and was the “result of a petty bourgeois degeneration from marxism” (*Il Soviet* no 15). It confused the KAPD with the AAUD-Einheit of Otto Rühle, for which “the revolution is not a party question” and which denied that there could be any such thing as a proletarian party — any party could only be bourgeois and an enemy of the revolution.

Nevertheless, Bordiga made contact with the KAPD and corrected his initial judgement, which had been based essentially on the arguments of the KPD which had bureaucratically excluded the left:

The party centre was both for entering into the unions and participating in elections. The conference convoked in July in Heidelberg approved the Centre’s programme. The opposition again questioned the conference’s validity and demanded that another be called, after a broad discussion on the two questions in the party organisations. The Centre on the contrary, fixed the date of the second Congress in October 1919 according to a strange criterion: the representatives who, on the two questions of parliamentarism and the unions, did not have a mandate in conformity with its directives, would be excluded from it. Thus only those who had the same opinion as the Centre could come to the Congress, in particular a number of party officials, and the opposition was declared excluded from the organisation. The comrades of the KAPD have told me, quite rightly, that they had no intention of forming a new party, but that they were excluded by an incredible procedure, whereas if the Congress had been convoked in a regular manner, they would have had a majority. In April 1920, seeing that all efforts to gain satisfaction were useless, they held the constitutive congress of the KAPD.

Furthermore, Bordiga did not fail to note the proletarian character of the new organisation, and its combativity which he contrasted with the passivity of the KPD during the Kapp putsch:

*The new organisation is to a large extent more combative and revolutionary and has developed a broader activity amongst the masses; its partisans are the workers who tolerate neither the lack of intransigence which the old party has sometimes shown, nor its conversion to parliamentarism, which took it closer to the Independents, who are taking advantage of its tactic to gain credence in front of the proletariat and the International. (Bordiga, ‘The situation in Germany and the communist movement’, *Il Soviet* no. 18, 11 July 1920).*

While maintaining his reservations about the positions of the KAPD, Bordiga hoped that the Comintern could resolve the crisis by reintegrating the KAPD into the KPD. For him, the main danger, as in Italy with Serrati, was represented by the Independents (USPD); and he

clearly saw the similarity of the position of the International, which in Germany as in Italy was pushing for the integration of these currents into itself, thus threatening the left by creating a mass party amalgamating communists with 'centrists'.

His hopes were not realised in either case. The KPD fused with the left wing of the USPD; the PCI had to accept Serrati's 'terzini'. The 3rd International, after its 3rd Congress in 1921, excluded the KAPD, which it had originally accepted in its ranks as a sympathising party.

Contacts between the PCI and the KAPD came to an end. Until the end of his life Bordiga maintained an essentially hostile ("Leninist") attitude to the KAPD; he always considered it and its Dutch descendants to be 'anarchist'. Even in opposition within the Comintern, there could be no question of a convergence of views with the KAPD.

The PCI aimed to be the best party of the International, the most 'Leninist' on the question of the party against Zinoviev's 'tactical' opportunism. In order to avoid giving any substance to the accusation of 'ultra-leftism', but above all for more profound reasons, the 'Bordigist' leadership carefully distinguished itself from the German Left right up until its own elimination in 1926. While rejecting the United Front, Bolshevisation, the policies of the Russian state, it fundamentally accepted the theses of the 2nd Congress of the Comintern.

After the World Congress of 1921, Bordiga continued his attacks against the KAPD current on the union question. Although the latter wasn't 'trade unionist', since it called for the destruction of the old trade unions and the formation of 'Unionen' on the political basis of recognising the dictatorship of the proletariat, Bordiga still denounced its 'syndicalist' standpoint:

The trade union, even when it is corrupted, is still a workers' centre. Leaving the social democratic union corresponds to the conception of certain syndicalists who want to create organs of revolutionary struggle which are of a union and not a political character.
(Bordiga, 'Sulla questione del parlamentarismo', Rassegna Comunista, 15 August 1921).

Finally, the foundation of Gorter's KAI in 1922 marked the definitive impossibility even of any informal contact between the two lefts. By defining Russia as the principal enemy of the world proletariat, by characterising the October Revolution as bourgeois, the ideological break was complete. (Cf. *Proletarier*, Sondernummer, 1922, 'Die Thesen des I. Kongresses der Kommunistischen ArbeiterInternationale').

Pappalardi and the Italian 'Bordigists'

Despite this gulf, elements from the PCI left were to make individual contacts with the German Left. An initiator of this was Michelangelo Pappalardi (entered in the police records as Pappalardo). Born in 1896, from the beginning he adhered to the Abstentionist Fraction. In 1922 he emigrated to Austria; in 1923, he militated in Germany where he represented the PCI to the KPD. During this time he had long discussions with the KAPD. On 10 November 1923, he resigned from the PCI, a resignation accepted by the Executive Committee on 30 November in a letter sent by Tasca (Valle). Arriving in France, he settled in Lyon, from where he corresponded with Bordiga, inviting him to constitute a left fraction in the PCI and the International. With a few Italian immigrant workers, he presented the 'Lyon Theses' translated into French to the 5th Congress of the PCF at Lille (20/26 June 1926), under the heading 'Platform of the Left, draft theses presented by a group of 'leftists'

(Bordigists) to the 5th Congress of the French Communist Party’. According to a former member of *Réveil Communiste* (Piero Corradi), Bordiga supervised the translation.

The members of the Italian Left were in fact in close contact with the French communist movement from the beginning. Bordiga represented the International at the Marseilles Congress in 1921. Damen, threatened with imprisonment after an armed clash with fascist squads, was sent as an official representative of the PCI in France, to preside over the organisation of groups of Italian communist émigrés, in order to co-ordinate political activity. He was nominated director of the weekly edition of *L’Humanité* in Italian until his clandestine return to Italy in 1924. ‘Bordigist’ ideas were therefore not unknown within the PCF. The overwhelming majority of Italian émigrés, even in 1926, held to the positions of the old left leadership; in some sections (Paris, Lyon, Marseilles), they were in the majority. This alarmed the new Italian leadership around Tasca, Togliatti, exiled to France after the party’s total suppression by the Mussolini government in 1926, which made it impossible for the party to carry out its activity in Italy. His new leadership made contact with the French party in order to get the ‘Bordigists’ expelled or to force them to resign.

A certain number of them remained in the PCF and tried to defend Bordiga’s positions within it for as long as possible. They were in close contact with the autonomous Italian communist group formed by expelled comrades in several French towns, as well as in Switzerland, Belgium and Luxemburg. Through the intermediary of their platform, they tried until around 1929 to remain in contact with the French communists and influence them ideologically within the ‘cells’. This was done at the price of enormous difficulties, as can be seen from the preface to Bordiga’s theses:

Not being able to express ourselves freely in the official press of the party, we have decided to make our thoughts known of French communists through our own means (signed: a group of members of the PCF).

Chased out of the International, the Italian Left had no desire to isolate itself. Frustrated in its hopes of forming an international fraction, it still sought to carry on political work in the communist movement, in all the countries in which exile had compelled it to reside. It did not consider itself to be ‘Italian’, except for the fact that it was born in Italy, but as international. Its natural vocation was international work, everywhere it existed; its only ‘homeland’ was the International linking workers in all countries for a single ideal, a single goal: their emancipation in world communism.

The questions being posed in the French Communist Party could not therefore be reserved’ only for workers of French nationality, any more than the latter could remain ignorant of the rich political experience of the Italian proletariat after the war, especially on the questions of fascism and of the party. The platform of the left added to the ‘Lyon Theses’ a whole chapter on ‘French questions’, dealing with the perspectives for French capitalism and the political orientation of the PCF.

This chapter defined the economic situation as “a situation of crisis, which manifests itself through inflation and difficulties of the state budget”. It said that “this crisis is not yet a crisis of production and industry in general, but it won’t fail to become one before long”. It underlined the consequent sharpening of social tensions, with “the opening up of the period of unemployment which will further aggravate the situation of the working class”. Considering the bourgeoisie’s policies in this context, it foresaw a change of orientation on the basis of the Italian experience: “It is very possible that, as the economic crisis grows, and the bosses’ offensive develops, there will be a complete change of programme in the political domain. This phase of rightist policies could have analogies with Italian fascism, and certainly

the appreciation of the Italian experience is very useful for the analysis of the present French situation”.

However, the Italian Bordigists’ did not envisage the immediate advent of fascism, because “there is a fundamental condition missing, i.e. a great revolutionary threat which gives the bourgeois class the impression of being at the edge of the abyss”. Tempered by the Italian experience, where fascism engendered antifascism on the basis of the United Front, the Italian Left rejected in advance any possibility of an antifascist alliance:

What is essential is to understand that the fascist plan is in the first place a plan against the proletariat and the socialist revolution, and that it is thus up to the workers to halt or repulse its attacks. It is quite wrong to see fascism as a crusade against bourgeois democracy, the parliamentary state, the petty bourgeois strata and their political men and parties holding the reins of power... According to this idea, the proletariat can only sound the alarm, take the ‘initiative’ (...) in this antifascist struggle, fighting alongside others to defend the advantages of a ‘left’ government, considering the downfall of fascism in France to be a glorious goal...”.

In this period, which the ‘Bordigists’ saw as being unstable and uncertain, “the French working class because of its numerical importance and its historic traditions is the central element of the present situation and the social struggle”. This necessary required the development of revolutionary tendencies within the PCF. On this point, the author of ‘French questions’ was highly pessimistic: “The party was constituted at Tours on too broad a basis.. As it is today, the PCF leaves much to be desired in its marxist ideological preparation, in its internal organisation, in its policies, in the formation of a leading centre capable of interpreting situations and their requirements”. It was above all the internal regime that the Italian Left was criticising here — the disastrous results of its inadequacies had been to fuel “the French workers’ traditional distrust for political action and parties”.

In order to remedy this situation, the Left advocated a resolute policy of opposition to the Comintern’s theses on ‘the workers’ and peasants’ government’, the ‘united front’, the ‘antifascist struggle’. It proposed the development of a solid network of communist fractions in the unions, while working for trade union unity and a determined intervention in economic struggles, which were the basis for the political struggle against all bourgeois parties, right and left, against the state and not “for the dissolution of the fascist leagues by the state”.

Where was the PCF going? Here the text, drawn up by Bordiga, did not come up with any definite conclusion. It remarked simply that ‘Bolshevisation’ had led to a real stagnation. Bordiga did not see this situation as the consequence of a right-wing danger; the exclusion of the Souvarine wing had served as a “phantom to cover up the blows directed against the international left”. Faced with “opportunism and liquidationism in the French party”, Bordiga did not see a left wing. He rejected the syndicalist theses of *Révolution Proletarienne* as “frankly erroneous and dangerous”.

Bordiga did not hide “the difficulties of such a situation”. He thought that it was above all the communist militants who could make improvements in the party’s internal regime.

Clearly, the Italian Left did not modify its positions in 1926, despite its defeat at the Lyon Congress. It thought that the CPs were a privileged arena for its intervention. They were not seen as irrecoverable for the communist movement. The Bordigists thus excluded any possibility of founding a new party and remained in the context of the International. Their attitude was very different from that of the German Left which had proclaimed the bankruptcy of the Communist International and the necessity to form new communist parties.

Very quickly, with the defeat of the revolution in China as a result of Stalin's and Bukharin's policies towards the Kuomintang, a part of the Italian Left in exile, mainly in France, was to modify its position and proclaim the impossibility of redressing the Comintern, and rapidly moved towards the positions of the KAPD, via its contacts with Korsch.

Réveil Communiste 1927-29

Under the influence of Pappalardi, an important minority was to detach itself from the Italian 'Bordigist' group influenced by Ottorino Perrone (Vercesi). The latter, fleeing from Milan, arrived in consummated in July 1927. In November of that year appeared the first issue of *Réveil Communiste*², “internal bulletin of the groups of the communist vanguard”, whose centre was at Lyon. It defined itself as a “group of intransigent communists”.

The aims of *Réveil* were not clear. It took no position on the formation either of new parties or new International. It sought “the unity of the lefts on the international terrain”. This position, close to that of Korsch, was tempered by great caution: “no new international organisation until the process of developing a left one on the international terrain has been completed”. In fact, this group saw no possibility of internal or external opposition towards a Comintern which they proclaimed still-born in 1919:

The process of the germination of a new International, which had been attempted to push to a solution at Zimmerwald, even before the great Russian revolution, reached a premature conclusion in 1919 when, following this great historical movement which was initially proletarian, there was an effort to force the history of the revolutionary movement.

Réveil supported the position of Rosa Luxemburg who was against the foundation of the Comintern and regretted the attitude of the delegate Eberlein who didn't vote against its foundation. According to *Réveil* this resulted in a “format unity” and not a “real” one. It was “to become fatal to the development of a real world communist party, and to suppress any possibly of regeneration in the Comintern”.

Réveil argued that the cause of this was the excessive role of Russia in the International. While still qualifying the Russian revolution as “grandiose”, especially during ‘war communism’, it saw the beginning of its decline in the NEP in 1921. It criticised the idealisation of the NEP by the ‘Perronnists’, who still supported Lenin's position at that point. The NEP was “a first ideological manifestation of a class or several social strata which were not the working class”. What were these classes? Here Pappalardi's group gave no reply. It asserted that in 1927, the degeneration of the Russian state was a fait accompli and that with “the bureaucratisation of the state machine” the dictatorship of the proletariat no longer existed:

The bureaucratisation of the state machine, the total distancing of this state from the working class, the non-proletarian ideological manifestations in the apparatus itself denote that the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia is no longer a reality in the country of the greatest revolution of the working class.

Behind the question of ‘degeneration’ there lay in fact the problem of the state “which did not find a complete and definitive solution in the Russian revolution”. Later on we will see

² It is through lack of information that Jean Rabaut (*Tout est possible*, Denoël, Paris, 1974, p. 77-80) claims: 1) that Prudhommeaux-Dautry were the promoters of *Réveil communiste*; 2) that the latter first appeared in February 1929, whereas this was in fact its last issue (no. 5).

that this question was one of the main subjects of theoretical discussion in the Italian Left in the 1930s.

While proclaiming “no return to the past, to positions that have already been liquidated”, the ‘groups of the communist vanguard’ were still, in issue no. 2 of January 1928, attached to the tradition of Bordiga. They even described themselves as the most faithful continuators of “the great chief of Italian communism”, as against the “so-called Bordigists or Perronnists who detached themselves from our group in July 1927”.

They believed this Bordigist ‘purity’ meant the rejection of the “theoretical terrain of Leninism, i.e. of neo-Leninism”. This was an illusion on *Réveil’s* part, since Bordiga always declared himself to be the most faithful disciple of Lenin, even in the opposition within the Comintern.

This is why *Réveil* was not long in criticising Bordiga himself, reproaching him for having wanted to remain in the Comintern at any cost, “in order not to leave the terrain of the masses”, and thereby remaining on the terrain of the “tactical use of compromise” advocated by Lenin. It reproached him for his distrust in fractional groupings and for not having formed a fraction:

“Two years ago (...) we proposed to comrade Bordiga the necessity to form an open fraction, because we said that Bolshevisation had already accomplished its work of social-democratising the Komintern, and we didn’t see any possibility of organising, on the terrain of discipline, a serious resistance among the Comintern rank and file.”

Réveil’s attitude of the left opposition around Trotsky, was much clearer, seeing it as the continuator of ‘Leninism’ and the unconditional defender of the Russian ‘workers’ state’:

“We must not submit to this ideological imposition of Trotsky. We do not contest the past revolutionary value of this comrade (...) even against him and his followers (...) we insist that it is an opportunist tactic to pass off as a workers’ democracy this tragic caricature of the proletarian dictatorship by the government of the Stalinists.”

Rejecting the “Trotskyist heritage” and criticising “comrade Bordiga”, would the “groups of the communist vanguard” converge towards Korsch, who had been publishing *Kommunistische Politik* since March 1926? Two texts signed by Korsch were to be published in *Réveil Communiste*: ‘Ten years of class struggle in Soviet Russia’ (R.C. no. 1), and ‘The Marxist Left in Germany’ (R.C. no. 4). This did not however result in a community of thought between the two groups: “It goes without saying that this fact implies neither our organic fusion with Korsch’s group, nor the subordination of our clearly left-wing line to the Korschist directives for ideology and action, which tend towards a dangerous eclecticism”. *Réveil* even addressed a warning of the German group: “This eclecticism could divert our German comrades away from the real revolutionary one and take them back to obsolete maximalism”.

Pappalardi, who wrote a critical article on ‘Korschism’, reproached *Kommunistische Politik* for calling into question the proletarian character of the Russian revolution. He argued that “the bourgeois counterrevolution in the new Russia began at the same time as the proletarian revolution”, but that to deny the proletarian revolution was also to deny that there was a counter-revolution in Russia, because “it’s obvious that if you deny the proletarian character of the October revolution, you also deny its dependence on the world crisis of capitalism”.

But above all, *Réveil* criticised Korsch for being an intellectual and for having compromised with Maslow and Fischer in 1926, for having led the proletarian elements who followed him into the void, with the rapid disappearance of his group and the entry of a part

of it into the ‘Leninbund’ and social democracy. The last issue of *Réveil* (February 1929) thus invited Korsch of return of his “beloved studies”.

In fact, because of its ouvrierism and its distrust of political confrontation, the *Réveil* group increasingly isolated itself from the revolutionary milieu, at a time when the ‘Perronnists’ had formed the Left Fraction of the PCI (see below) and opposition groups were developing all over France. “We have not feared and do not fear today provisional isolation from the proletarian mass”, it asserted. While demarcating itself from sectarianism, the organ of the ‘groups of the communist vanguard’ defined itself as a “sect”.

Ideologically, these groups were absolutely isolated. They were the only ones communist groups in France who called for the workers of leave the Comintern and not to work inside or outside it for the triumph of a left fraction (“Out of the Moscow International!”).

At this time they were also the only ones who did not call for the ‘defence of the USSR’, which they defined as “the formula for the Union Sacrée in Russia”. At the end of 1928, *Réveil* had practically the same position as the KAPD on this question:

...the proletarian dictatorship, instead of dying in the Marxist sense, has been gradually defeated in a monstrous apparatus, where a caste Has grown up with the ideology of the new bourgeoisie. And this without Thermidor, without events reproducing the historic past”.

Prometeo, in its issue no. 12, strongly criticised this position of *Réveil*. It replied that the term “caste” was not marxist and underlined the contradictions of a theory which affirmed both that the Russian government “is not a pure capitalist government” and that it is “a bourgeois government”. While defending the proletarian nature of the Russian state “on the basis of socialisation”, *Prometeo* opened the door to discussion, to which it invited the militants of *Réveil*³.

Prometeo’s open attitude, as well as its loyalty to the Bordigist heritage on the Russian question, and to the theses of Lenin, were to lead to the departure from *Réveil* of a few elements, such as Piero Corradi, who went back of the Fraction of the Italian Left. These ones, though formed by Pappalardi, saw themselves above all as ‘Leninists’ and saw no reason to militate in a group which refused to form a Fraction. The Pantin Congress of February 1928, where the Left Fraction of the PCI was proclaimed, removed their hesitations, as Piero Corradi put it 50 years later. From new on, ideologically and organisationally, the only ‘Italian Communist Left’ was the one grouped around *Prometeo*.

But Pappalardi’s tendency did not disappear after this split. It even had a new influx of elements like André Prudhommeaux, who ran a bookshop at 67, Rue de Belleville; these elements gave the group a less ‘Italian’ colouring, but they were more ambiguous vis-à-vis anarchism.

In August 1929 the first issue of *L’Ouvrier Communiste* appeared, defining itself as the organ of the “communist workers’ groups” and whose centre was at Prudhommeaux’s bookshop in Paris⁴.

³ “Risposta al ‘Risveglio”.

⁴ The report of the Italian police (13/12/1931) notes in the “workerist fraction...a small nucleus of 15 people” whose secretary was Ludovico Rossi, and the most noticeable members of which were Antonio Bonito (known as ‘Dino’) and Alfredo Bonsignori. This report only deals with Lyon (ACS CPC, Roma, no. 441/030600).

The influence of the KAPD: L'Ouvrier Communiste (1929-31)

The term “communist workers” was an explicit reference of the KAPD. *L'Ouvrier Communiste* no longer saw itself as part of the Italian Left, which it saw as an inferior tradition of that of the German Left:

... we have participated in a revolutionary experience less complete than that of our German comrades (...) Anchored in the Bordigist tradition, it has taken us much effort to chase from our thinking the system of prejudices which still hid this reality from us, a reality drawn directly out of the struggle of our German comrades (L'Ouvrier Communiste no. 2-3, October 1929, 'Should the unions be conquered or destroyed?').

Whereas in its issue number 2 (January 1928) *Réveil* was still criticising “elements like Pannekoek in Holland and Pankhurst in England” for founding a 4th International, “an absurd melange of the most disparate elements”, *L'Ouvrier Communiste* made an act of contrition and thenceforward considered itself as “a belated branch of the real marxist left, the one whose representatives in 1919 and 1920 were Pankhurst in England, and in Holland the Tribunists Gorter and Pannekoek” (O.C. no. 1).

The Pappalardi group therefore published in serial form in its paper Gorter's pamphlet, *Reply to Lenin*, which condensed the positions of the German Left. This publication emphasised the ‘anti-Leninist’ orientation of the “communist workers’ groups”:

Gorter was right and Lenin wrong. The Leninist line has led of the worst defeats, the constitution of mass parties has formed a new opportunist and counter-revolutionary rampart in the camp of the proletariat. (O.C. no. 1).

Contacts were made with the Dutch and German comrades of the ‘Gruppe Internationaler Kommunisten’ (GIK), as well as with the AAU and the KAPD. These contacts did not reach the point of fusion into the same organisation — these groups remained very cautious about the very principle of this, and preferred to make their respective contributions in the ‘communist workers’ press. This ‘KAPDist’, ‘anti-Leninist’ tendency did not however remain isolated internationally: groups defending the same programmatic positions were constituted around 1930 in Austria and Denmark (*Mod strømen*). But the basis of all this remained fragile: numerically weak, isolated from a working class milieu dominated by social democratic and stalinist ideology, they were neither homogeneous politically nor forged into a single international organisation community — something which seemed to them premature or useless, since they had got their fingers burned by the still-birth of the KAI in 1922.

Although isolated in France and numerically weak (15-20 militants), the communist workers’ organisation did make the positions of the German Left better known, since they had always been tarred with the traditional clichés about infantilism and extremism.

The participation of Miasnikov and the Russian Workers group in *L'Ouvrier Communiste* was to confirm the latter's anti-Leninist line. An old Bolshevik militant⁵, Miasnikov found himself in opposition to Lenin from 1921 onwards, concerning the NEP and workers democracy in the Russian Communist Party and the soviets. He called for the broadest freedom of criticism and organisation within them. He criticised the tactic of the United Front as a “tactic of collaboration with the declared enemies of the working class, who express the revolutionary movement of the proletariat with arms in their hands”, and as being “in

⁵ Roberto Sinigaglia, *Mjasnikov e la rivoluzione russa* (Milano, 1973).

overt contradiction with the experience of the Russian revolution”. He also rejected any banning of strikes in Russia, demanding that the proletariat “should really participate in the management of the economy” through the intermediary of the unions and factory committees. Considering Russia and the Russian Communist Party to be still proletarian, the Miasnikov group formed itself into a workers group of the Bolshevik Party “on the basis of the programme and statutes of the RCP, in order to exert a decisive pressure on the leading group of the party itself.”⁶

Expelled from the party in 1922, Miasnikov had the *Manifesto* of his group translated into German by the KAPD, who added critical comments on the unions and the proletarian character of the RCP. Arrested in 1923, tortured, he was able to escape to Armenia in 1928, reaching Persia and Turkey. After an intensive campaign, Korsch and *L'Ouvrier Communiste* succeeded in getting Miasnikov allowed entrance into France, at the beginning of 1930. At this point, he was more or less on the positions of the KAPD, and rejected Trotsky's efforts to form an opposition as doomed to dislocate or of fall into the hands of the bourgeoisie⁷.

The experience of this Russian Left, non-Leninist and opposed to Trotsky, critical of the Russian experience, was thus to lead *L'Ouvrier Communiste* to defend vigorously the theses of the German Left, which had been the first to criticise the politics of the RCP and the Cornintern. On five points:

- **The parliamentary question.** Unlike Bordiga who saw antiparlamentarism as a question of ‘tactics’, O.C. saw it as a matter of principle and advocated the boycotting of parliament. Nevertheless, like the KAPD, it demarcated itself from syndicalist antiparlamentarism “which has nothing to do with the radical tendencies of marxist and communist antiparlamentarism”.

- **The national question.** On this point, and even more clearly than the Dutch Left which remained indecisive, it was affirmed that it was not possible of support national movements which “can only serve as a pretext for the development of international conflicts (...) and are even provoked artificially in order to unleash a war”. Taking up the theses of Rosa Luxemburg, *L'Ouvrier Communiste* rejected the position of Lenin for whom “the proletariat could even be described as the champion of national defence, because it is the only class that fights of the end, notably against any national oppression”. In fact, the article ‘Imperialism and the national question’ in O.C.nos. 2-3 insisted that: “The proletariat develops its movement, makes its revolution as a class not as a nation. Immediately after the victory of the proletariat in several nations, frontiers can only disappear”.

There could be no progressive “national bourgeoisie” in the colonial and semi-colonial countries, because the bourgeoisie in these zones “is in its essence and its structure an artificial creation of imperialism” (O.C. no. 9-10, May 1930). This is why, even tactically, there could be no question of defending “the right of peoples to self-determination”, as in 1917 — a slogan by which the national bourgeoisie went into hiding: “This disastrous experience shows that when the proletariat goes to the defence of its ‘country’, of its ‘oppressed nation’, there is only one result — strengthening its own bourgeoisie”. *L'Ouvrier Communiste* therefore rejected the Trotskyist slogan of the United States of Europe as being

⁶ *Manifesto of the workers group of the RCP (Bolsheviks)*, published in *Invariance* no. 6, series 2, 1976, with the KAPD's comments. *Réveil* had already published as a pamphlet (January 1928) *On the Eve of Thermidor*, by Sapronov and Smirnov, a group close to that of Miasnikov. The latter formed an ephemeral ‘Communist workers party of Russia’ linked to Gorters KAI.

⁷ “There are only two possibilities: either the Trotskyists regroup under the slogan ‘War on the palaces, peace to the cottages’, under the flag of the workers’ revolution — the first step that must be taken to make the proletariat the ruling class — or they will slowly fade out and pass individually or collectively into the camp of the bourgeoisie. These are the two elements of the alternative. There is no third way” (O.C. no. 6, January 1930).

part of the same nationalist line: “Marxist communists do not want to build the United States of Europe or of the world; their goal is the universal republic of workers’ councils” (O.C. no. 2-3, op. cit.).

• **The union question.** Here the “communist workers’ groups” took up the position of the KAPD, i.e. the rejection of any activity in the unions to ‘reconquer’ them and any attempt to found new union organs, even ‘revolutionary’ ones: “The unions cannot be conquered for the revolution, revolutionary unions cannot be built”. (O.C. no. 1).

Basing itself on the German experience, where the unions stood alongside Noske against the revolution, Pappalardi’s group called for their destruction. This meant the destruction not simply of particular unions, but of the union form itself, which had been made obsolete by the “modifications which the historic process had brought to the forms of the class struggle” (O.C. no. 1). The struggle couldn’t go through the unions because this process “had turned these former class organs into docile weapons in the hands of capitalism”.

Does this mean that O.C. rejected any intervention in the class struggle? No, because “the participation in all partial struggles of the proletariat is undoubtedly necessary”. The existence of permanent organs of struggle had become impossible: “the constitution of permanent organs based on inferior forms of class consciousness and struggle no longer has any *raison d’être* at a time when the revolution can arise from one moment to the next” (O.C. no. 4-5, ‘Faut-il conquérir les syndicats ou les détruire?’). In fact this was a very ‘spontaneist’ vision because it saw the revolution as a permanent possibility. The struggle would find its spontaneous organs in ‘factory committees’, which could not be permanent. *L’Ouvrier Communiste* criticised the AAU in Germany who were transforming these factory committees into “forms replacing the classical unions”. For O.C. the economic struggle could only be connected to the struggle for power. The form of proletarian power was the workers’ councils.

• **Party and councils.** Having left ‘Bordigism’, the militants of the ‘communist workers’ left were more and more to see the party question as secondary, neglecting to study the concrete conditions for its emergence:

... we are not rushing to form a new party, to enlarge our organisational base (...) our goal is to form a really revolutionary party, and to attain this goal we are ready to spend a long time as a sect. (O.C. no. 1, August 1929, “Pour sortir du marais”).

In reaction to Bordiga who asserted that consciousness could only exist in the party, and that the party must lead the class in order to establish a dictatorship of the Communist party after the seizure of power, O.C. put forward a ‘Luxemburgist’ vision:

The role of the party is not one of eternal supremacy, it is a role of education, of complete the political consciousness of the working class. (*L’Ouvrier Communiste* no. 1, “Récents progrès de la dialectique matérialiste chez Trotsky et ses épigones”).

Here it must be noted that in fact this educationist role given to the party reduced its function of that of a small study circle, rather than an organ of struggle developing the workers’ political consciousness. *L’Ouvrier Communiste* thought that this consciousness was spontaneous: the party was simply juxtaposed to it.

In fact, a whole ‘councilist’ conception was being developed here, putting the councils in place of the party. *L’Ouvrier Communiste* avoided the term “party”, preferring that of proletarian elites” whose role “will be more and more absorbed by the masses as we move towards victory”. (O.C. no. 7-8, “Sur le rôle des élites prolétariennes dans la révolution de classe”).

• **Russia and the state.** Recognising that the Russian revolution had been proletarian, O.C., like *Réveil*, saw the origin of the counter-revolution in the NEP and the crushing of Kronstadt in 1921:

The basis of the present degeneration goes back to the NEP, to the compromise between the proletarian and the bourgeois elements of the Russian revolution, which created a gulf between the Russian revolution and the revolution in the West, which offered an economic base for the embourgeoisement of the proletarian apparatus, of functionaries, employees, etc.

The nature of the proletarian state was thus turned into its opposite. Through state capitalism, the bureaucracy, which O.C. still call a “caste”, was transformed into a bourgeois class:

There is an objective basis for this caste becoming a class. This objective basis is state capitalism...and its relations with the free market created by the NEP. (L'Ouvrier Communiste no. 1).

In fact there were two closely connected factors which determined this process: the external factor (the absence of revolution in the west, leaving Russia isolated) and the internal factor (state capitalism), both factors acting together to open up the counter-revolution. In its analysis, *L'Ouvrier Communiste* did not separate the two factors. But it saw the second as more pernicious, because the Bolshevik party remained at the head of the state and did not put itself alongside the Kronstadt mutineers:

In 1921, there were only two choices for the Russian Communists: either a desperate and heroic struggle against the internal and external forces of reaction and 'very probably' defeat and death in the struggle, or a compromise with the bourgeois forces, the abandonment of revolutionary positions without any resistance, the gentle absorption of communist forces into the new bourgeois relations of production introduced by the NEP.

L'Ouvrier Communiste drew two fundamental lessons from the Russian experience:

The proletarian dictatorship... can neither develop socialism nor preserve itself, if it does not develop the proletarian revolution on the international terrain. This is particularly true for an industrially underdeveloped country. The dictatorship of the proletariat is “the dictatorship of the councils and not the dictatorship of the party”; it is “the antistate organisation of the conscious proletariat. (O.C. no. 12, October 1930, in Italian).

Further on we will see that all these positions were to be discussed in the Fraction of the Italian Left, often leading to the same conclusions. But there was a fundamental distinction between these two branches of the Italian Left: one envisaged its work in the long term, in the framework of an organisation committed to intervention in the class struggle; it approached its theoretical work within this framework, and in a systematic manner. The other did not grasp the importance of developing a political organisation, which it saw as a secondary task, considering that the consciousness of the proletariat could develop at any time in a revolution that was possible at any moment. It developed its theoretical positions in less depth, and more through intuition, thanks above all of the German Communist Left. The absence of the revolution which it had expected of emerge out of the crisis of 1929, the growing influence of anarchistic positions developed by Prudhommeaux and his wife, were to lead to the group's dislocation around the end of 1931. Prudhommeaux and his wife had resigned before this: *L'Ouvrier Communiste* welcomed this in an Italian article as the elimination of the “intellectual petty bourgeoisie”, looking for privileges and fame, seeking of

“make their name on the back of the working class”. (O.C. no. 13, January 1931, “Prudhommeaux et sa femme ont f... le camp, tant mieux”).

This split, which wasn't really a split, had grave financial repercussions on the paper. The Prudhornmeaux financed this one and owned the bookshop which was the organisation's centre. The publication soon had to stop appearing. *Spartacus*, under the wing of the two who had resigned and of Dautry, succeeded it in the same year. The Pappalardi group fell apart; Pappalardi became ill and had to abandon all political activity until his death in Buenos Aires in 1940. *Spartacus*, then *Correspondance Internationale Ouvrière* in 1932, only had an ephemeral existence. They were more the publications of a couple, with the addition of Dautry, interested in 'councilist' positions, and soon after that, libertarian ones, than the political organ of a real organisation⁸.

In fact, the death of *L'Ouvrier Communiste* was not the product of contingent factors, but political ones. Although it went a long way and with considerable audacity along the path of questioning the schemes of the past, it did not develop a political and organisational coherence. It was more a federation of study groups than a real political organisation with a programme and a view of the present in order of prepare the future. Although it supported the need for a party, it moved towards the Italian anarchists⁹ of *Lotta Anarchica*, calling for an anarchism “renewed from top of bottom, transcending itself and its traditional antagonisms”. (O.C. no. 11, September 1930). Through its “workerism”, it isolated itself from the ‘political milieu’, even though it was already isolated from the workers’ milieu. The isolation of the German Communist Left, its crisis at the end of the 1920s, its weaknesses on the organisational level, the difficulties in maintaining international contacts did not allow it to hold on for very long¹⁰.

⁸ Prudhommeaux was very pessimistic about the possibilities of revolution. He saw the proletariat as the new ‘Spartacus’ whose struggle could only be “a desperate fight for the supreme revolutionary goals”. Later on Dautry joined Souvarine's circle *Critique sociale* and then Georges Bataille's *Contre-attaque*.

⁹ The same police report quoted above noted that the “workerists” had “moved towards the anarchists, to the point of working together”. It pointed to “the participation in propaganda for the anarchist victims at Saint-Priest” and in “the Sacco-Vanzetti anarchist circle”. It concluded: “they affirm that they don't reject any means of struggle, including terrorist acts”.

¹⁰ The split between the AAU and the KAPD in 1929 was rapidly to dislocate the German Left. The ‘maintained’ KAPD continued to defend the strictest positions on the necessity for the party, rejecting any revolutionary

This was very different from the history of the Fraction of the Italian Left, which went through many crises but which was guided by coherence even in its errors and stutterings, remaining attached to valid lessons of the Italian Left in the 1920s.

syndicalism, including in its 'Unionen' form. In December 1931 the debris of the AAU and the AAU-Einheit united in a Kommunistische Arbeiter-Union (KAU), characterised by theoretical weakness and an activist orientation.

In these conditions, the impact of the German Communist Left in France could only decline. After the desintegration of *l'Ouvrier Communiste*, the Spartacus group took its place in 1931. Composed of German militants for the most part (8 comrades), it was only able to publish its paper *Spartacus* thanks to money from Prudhommeaux who took advantage of this to put in articles outside any editorial control. For this reason Prudhommeaux was expelled from the group in September 1931 for “indiscipline” and “an absence of political and organisational consciousness” (letter by Heinrich to the Dutch KAP, 6/9/1931, in the Canne-Meyer archives, Internationaal Instituut voor Sociaal Geschiedenis, Amsterdam). Without any publication, the Spartacus group disappeared soon afterwards.

The Prudhommeaux-Dautry tandem then published the review *Correspondance Internationale Ouvrière* between 25 September and June 1933, in liaison with Dutch councilists and English anarchists. >From 1933 on, the Prudhommeaux and Dautry evolved towards anti-fascism. Jean Dautry participated to the French Resistance and became just after the end of the war member of the French Communist Party. The lessons of the revolutionary intransigence of the German Left were forgotten.

3. The Birth of the Left Fraction of the PCI

The Left Fraction of the PCI was really born after the split of July 1927, which saw the departure of the minority oriented towards the positions of the German Left. As yet, the Fraction had no press in which to develop its positions. Nor did it have an official existence as an organisation. Chased out of the PCI, its militants were exiled in France, Belgium, Luxemburg, Switzerland and as far away as the USA and Russia. Unable to engage in any activity in Italy after the laws of exception passed by Mussolini in 1926, they were thus dispersed to the most far-off countries. This difficult situation did not break their will. Considering themselves members of a single international body, the workers' International, they were not demoralised by exile. On the contrary, they were to extract new riches from the political life of the countries in which they found themselves. Although they followed the Italian situation attentively, they naturally took part in the political confrontations which were beginning to develop with Trotsky's expulsion from the International and the birth of opposition groups in the Comintern. The Italian workers' condition as 'emigrants' was taken on proudly by the Left; this was shown by Bordiga's intervention at the 6th Enlarged Executive of the Comintern in 1926, when he compared the Italians to the chosen people, the Jews:

To a certain extent, we play an international role because the Italian people is a people of emigrants, in the economic and social meaning of the word, and after the advent of fascism, in the political sense as well... it's 'rather like the Hebrews: if we've been beaten in Italy, we can console ourselves by thinking that the Hebrews also are not strong in Palestine but outside it.

In order to survive, the militants of the 'External' Italian Left, as they called themselves, had to organise themselves to carry on a political work that had been completely decapitated in Italy. They had set themselves up mainly in France and Belgium. During the war these two countries had seen their youth sacrificed to the world holocaust, returning mutilated and in much diminished numbers. The French and Belgium governments called for Italian manpower, which had already been present on their soil since the end of the 19th century and which was known to be extremely adaptable. The Italian workers provided the Belgian and French capitalist with an underpaid and skilled labour force in the main sectors of the economy (metallurgy, mining, building).

The militants: working class immigrants

The overwhelming majority of the Italian Fraction was composed of workers. This should not surprise us. Under Bordiga's leadership the Communist Party had attracted a whole generation of young workers galvanised by the Russian revolution and the revolutionary movements in Italy after the war. They had been formed in this revolutionary struggle and had not gone through the demoralisation of an inglorious defeat. On the contrary, they had ardently resisted the offensive of the Italian bourgeoisie grouped behind Mussolini, often with guns in their hands. Ideologically they had remained loyal to the intransigent Marxism defended by Bordiga. Even when the latter was deprived of his positions in the leading organs, the working class 'base' of the party remained faithful to him. Few of them had followed the Gramsci-Togliatti leadership which the Comintern had placed in an authoritarian manner at the head of the Italian Party. In France itself, in 1926, several

thousand Italian communists inside the 'cells' remained faithful to the positions of the Italian Left.

Trained in a great revolutionary tradition, educated by the struggle, nourished by the theoretical rigour of Bordiga, these Italian workers imposed themselves on the revolutionary milieu through the breath of their political culture. With their rigorous judgement they could cut through the general confusion which had developed in the French oppositional milieu in particular. In France, where the political and theoretical traditions of the communist movement were very weak, their voice remained isolated for a long time, up until the war. In Belgium, on the other hand, as we shall see, the voice of these revolutionary Italian workers had more success in making itself heard within the opposition which had developed on the basis of antiparlamentarianism and in contact with the Dutch Left.

It would be a waste of time trying to name all the members of the Fraction. Not because there were so many of them (never more than 100 after 1926): the initial 1,000 in the emigration was considerably reduced in a matter of months. But above all because the Italian Left always refused to personalise its political life. From Bordiga they had learned that its members had to be anonymous and only existed in the collectivity of the party, which went beyond individualities and personalities. What came first was the organisation, and the Fraction always expressed itself not through individuals but through its organs (executive committee, federations, etc.).

Nevertheless, the creation of central organs, and above all the tendency struggles that took place within the Fraction, pushed some militants to the fore. Enrico Russo (known as Candiani), a mechanic from Naples, who fled Italy in 1926; Piero Corradi (Piero), an engineering worker then a taxi-driver living in France; Otello Ricceri (Piccino), a jewellery worker from Florence who emigrated in 1925; Bruno Bibbi (Alfredo Bianco), who had taken part in the Communist 'action squads' against the fascists and had arrived in France in 1922; Ferdinando Borsacchi (Pieri or Rintintin), a car worker born in Florence; Bruno Zecchini (il Biondo), born in Venice and a member of the PCI's 'defence squad' in Milan, escaping from the Lipari islands in 1931 to reach France.

In 1927 all these militants were barely 25 years old; nearly all were young workers who had joined the PCI very young, very often at the Livorno Congress; they already had a long militant experience behind them, having been tempered by fascist repression and the struggle against the right in the party. These names of young workers, chosen from among others, reflect the common history of the members of the Fraction, of the 'average' militant so to speak — if such a term can be applied to this organisation, where everyone was an active militant, very often until they died.

Other militants, intellectuals' by profession rather than workers, were in the front ranks of the Italian Fraction. They were less young (over 30 and sometimes 40) and some had already been members of the PSI before the war. They had a long history as militants, often having been members of the PCI. Ersilio Ambrogi (Massimo), whom we will hear of again, represented the Left in the right wing central committee elected in 1926; a lawyer by profession, he had to go into exile for many years, in Russia, Germany, then again in Russia, from where he remained in contact with the Fraction. Virgilio Verdaro (Gatto Mammone) was over forty in 1927, when he found himself with Ambrogi in Russia. He left there for France in 1931. A member of the PSI since 1901, a history teacher at the lyceum in Florence, he had always been part of the Left; in 1920, with Bordiga and Giovanni Boero, he had been secretary of the Executive Commission of the Abstentionist Fraction. Both of them remained in touch with Italian and Russian realities, and held responsible positions in the organisation.

Two militants, who were not wage-labourers, were also linch-pins of the organisation. Giovanni Tornielli (Nero) was a businessman in Vincennes; a former provincial councillor in Turin, he was the organisation's treasurer. Mario De Leone, born in Naples, had been close to

Bordiga in the 20's; exiled to France he set himself up as a grocer in Annemasse close to the Swiss border (Geneva), from where he would be the representative of a minority which arose during the events in Spain, resulting in a serious crisis in the Fraction.

Some of these militants met tragic ends. This was the case with Fausto Atti, a party member since Livorno, and who had emigrated to Brussels. He was one of the founders of the Internationalist Communist Party (PCInt) in 1943, and for this was assassinated by Togliatti's Stalinists in Bologna. Others, who had been part of the Fraction until its dissolution in 1945, when the new party emerged, did not suffer such a tragic fate, and also played a leading role: Aldo Lecci (Mario Marini or Tullio), Giovanni Bottaioli (Butta), Stefanini.

Ottorino Perrone

The best-known representative of the Fraction was undoubtedly Ottorino Perrone (Vercesi), so much so that their political enemies called the members of *Prometeo* and *Bilan* 'Perronists'. Born in 1897 in Aquila, he did his military service in the artillery during the war. In 1920, he joined the PSI; he was nominated secretary of the Camera del lavoro in Venice. In 1922, given the job of organising in Padua, he became the editor of the Trieste communist paper *Il Lavatore*. In 1923, he was given the task of reorganising the Federation of Venice and Aquila. He supported Bordiga at the Rome Congress. Known for his talents as an organiser, he prepared the PCI's clandestine conference in Como in May 1924. The police, having learned about his role, put him under house arrest in Aquila. This did not stop him going, with Bordiga, to the 5th Congress of the Comintern in June of that year. He was arrested at the Swiss frontier on returning from Russia, and again transferred to Aquila. In 1925, he was a member of the Committee of Entente (*Comitato di intesa*) made up of Damen, Fortichiari, and Repossi. After moving to Milan, he took care of liaison between the members of the communist left living abroad and Bordiga's tendency. At this time, he was also the secretary of the Communist union federation. At the Lyon Congress in 1926 he made a strong impression with his defence of Bordiga's positions. After returning to Milan, his house was ransacked by the fascists and he was arrested. Freed again, he was the real organiser of the Left after Bordiga's imprisonment. Put under two years house arrest in November 1926, he fled to France via Switzerland. In Paris, he was the official representative of the party, and regrouped the militants of the Left. In opposition to Pappalardi, he advocated the formation of a Left Fraction, in July 1927. But, in August, he was expelled from France. From then on he lived in Belgium, in Brussels, where he found work as an employee of the Socialist union, where his legal and accounting qualifications (he was a doctor of law) and his long trade union experience stood him in good stead. He was in permanent contact with the union world, being a member of the office workers' union. With his great political experience, his outstanding writing and speaking abilities, his unlimited passion for theoretical and political questions, Vercesi was for a long time the motive force of a small organisation, which conferred on him the main political responsibilities. His influence over the militants no doubt explains a number of the political agreements and disagreements which appeared later. It was around him that the minorities and majorities on important divergences tended to crystallise.

How many members did the Fraction have? It was difficult to answer this question at the time of the Pantin conference in 1928. Perhaps 200 in all. But at that time, when the reorganisation of the 'Prometeoists' was being carried out slowly, without any real centralisation, there was no fixed line between militants and sympathisers. It was rather the local sections which were free to define who was a real member of the organisation. Thus, a

circular from the central committee of the Fraction, dated January 25 1931, expressly asked the federations to make an exact list of members, so that dues could be regulated. From then on, a distinction was made between militants and close sympathisers. Again in 1931, an internal letter from Bianco asserted that there were 60 members in France, Belgium and the USA, but that “it is impossible to give a figure for Germany, Switzerland, Russia and Italy”, despite the fact that it was absolutely necessary to count the membership in order to give mandates to the groups adhering to the International Left Opposition which — in principle — was holding a conference that year.

The Fraction’s organisation: France, USA, Belgium-Luxembourg

From an informally organised opposition, the Italian Left transformed itself in 1928 into a centralised organisation independent of the CP. Its central organs (Central Committee, then Executive Commission), were modelled on those of the Communist Parties. There were ‘national’ federations (Belgium, France) and provincial ones (Paris, Lyon, Brussels, New York) made up of local sections, who elected a federal committee. It is worth noting that the Fraction rejected the system of workplace ‘cells’ which had been imposed by Bolshevisation, and which the Left had always criticised for stifling the internal life of the Communist Parties. In adopting a territorial rather than a ‘factoryist’ organisation, the Italian Left was seeking to develop a real political life, outside the narrow and corporatist framework of the workplace.

When the Left Fraction was formally founded in Pantin in April 1928, there were four federations: one in Brussels, one in New York, one in Paris, and the last in Lyon which centralised the work in Marseilles and Italy. Isolated militants like Mario De Leone in Annemasse and Ambrogi in Berlin did not belong to any federation but were in close liaison with the central committee. There was a group in Luxemburg and another in Moscow, before the departure of Verdaro and Ambrogi. At this time the Paris Federation was divided into three groups (or sections): one in Paris with 20 members and two others in the outskirts at Bezons (7 members) and Fontenay (8 members). The Lyon Federation, led by Aldo Lecci, had 20 members; the New York one, which did not publish a review in English, but distributed *Prometeo*, 9 members; the Philadelphia group, which was in contact with the American federation, had a sympathiser’s status. Finally, the Brussels Federation, which included Vercesi, had nine members, and supervised the work of the group in Luxemburg.

At the end of 1928, the provisional central committee was replaced by a Central Committee of 7 members: three from Brussels (Candiani, Pieri and Vercesi); three Parisians (Peri, Bianco and Nero), and one from Lyon (Tullio). Within the Central Committee there was an Executive Committee composed of three Parisians, with Bianco as secretary. In 1931, Verdaro returned from Russia and was co-opted onto the Central Committee; the Executive Committee was transferred to Brussels. Verdaro was the secretary. Unemployed, he was the only member of the Fraction to be paid as a fulltimer. He was only replaced in 1939, when he withdrew to Switzerland. At the head of the Paris Federation, Luigi Danielis (known as Gigi) was appointed secretary in place of Bianco who had been expelled. Danielis also took charge of administration.

The founding conference at Pantin

On what political bases was the Fraction founded at Pantin? It was the expulsion of Trotsky and the course initiated by the 15th Congress of the RCP, which proclaimed the “building of

socialism in one country”¹, that determined the holding of the Pantin conference to examine the situation created by this “opportunist” course. The conference declared that “the Communist International has not succeeded in eliminating opportunism from its ranks”. Its aim was not to create a new party, but to rejoin the International by eliminating ‘centrism’; it thus called for a 6th World Congress with Trotsky as president. As in 1919, and with the same aim of driving the right from the party, the Italian Left formed itself into a Fraction with its own organs and discipline. It thus left behind the hesitation it had shown in 1925 about constituting itself into a Fraction: at that time it still thought it necessary to keep strictly to the discipline of the International. While the Fraction was in solidarity with Trotsky, it still defended its own standpoint: the theses of Bordiga, and of the Comintern’s 2nd Congress; it thus rejected the 3rd and 4th Congresses defended by the Russian Opposition current around Trotsky. Finally, it should be noted that it formed itself not as an ‘Italian Fraction’ but as a ‘Left Fraction of the Communist International’.

These positions were condensed in a synthetic manner in the final resolution, adopted unanimously:

RESOLUTION OF THE CONFERENCE

1. *To constitute a Left Fraction of the Communist International.*
2. *To elect a provisional central committee.*
3. *To publish a bimonthly, to be called Prometeo.*
4. *To constitute left groups whose task will be to wage a ruthless struggle against opportunism and the opportunists. This struggle will be on the basis of the Communist Manifesto, the theses of the first two Congresses of the 3rd International, the Rome Theses, the theses of the national conference of the PCI, the theses presented by Bordiga to the 5th World Congress, the theses presented by the Left to the Lille Congress of the French section of the Comintern and all the writings of comrade Bordiga.*
5. *To take up as an immediate goal:*
 - *the reintegration of all those expelled from the International who adhere to the Communist Manifesto and accept the theses of the 3rd World Congress.*
 - *to call the 6th World Congress under the presidency of Leon Trotsky.*
 - *to put on the agenda of the 6th World Congress the expulsion of all those who declare themselves to be in solidarity with the resolutions of the 5th Russian Congress. (Prometeo, no. 1, May 1928).*

This act of foundation, giving rise to the Italian Left’s own organisation, now gave it the capacity to intervene publicly in the milieu of the International Opposition. The first groups advocating resistance to Stalinist policies really began to appear in 1928 after the waves of expulsions. With the Russian Opposition decapitated, the European and American groups came to the fore. In Germany, whose communist movement was the most important outside the USSR, there was formed in March 1928 the Leninbund led by Urbahns; for a short period Ruth Fischer and Arkadij Maslow were part of it. It regrouped several thousand members, the disappearance of Korsch’s group having left room for its formation. Much earlier (1924) the Greek opposition, known as the ‘Archeiomarxists’, had been expelled from the party and formed a group of over 2,000 members. In Belgium, the Opposition was born in 1928 out of the vigorous condemnation by the central committee of the PCB, of the repression against Trotsky in Russia. After their exclusion, Van Overstraeten, the founder of

¹ “We only wanted to give life to the Fraction when no other solution to the crisis was possible and when any other course would have made us impossible to intervene effectively in the revolutionary struggle.” (*Prometeo* no. 1, May 1928, Brussels).

the party, and Adhemar Hennaut, both secretaries of the Belgian organisation, founded an Opposition which pronounced itself in favour of “a second party”. The same year, the American Opposition was formed around James Cannon, Max Shachtman and Martin Abern; its fusion with the ‘Trotskyist’ group in Boston gave birth to the ‘Communist League of America’ of 500 members, both American and Canadian (among them the founders of the Canadian CP: Maurice Spector and Jack McDonald). The defeat of the revolution in China, in 1927, led to the formation of Opposition groups around Chen Du-xiu and Wang Shu-zi. But it was above all in France that the Opposition was to find its main strength: Treint’s elimination from the leadership of the PCF gave birth to l’Unité Léniniste (and later Redressement Communiste) which influenced small groups of workers in Bagnolet and Courbevoie (whose leading member was Gaston Davoust). In March 1928, Pierre Naville brought out *Lutte de Classe*, which defended Trotsky’s positions. At the end of that year an Opposition of workers excluded from the party was formed in the “15th rayon” (Puteaux, Suresnes, Nanterre, Courbevoie, La Garenne-Bezons).²

As it can be seen, the Opposition groups grew as the expulsions multiplied. Coming from different origins, both from the CPs’ rank and file and from the bureaucracy, this Opposition was not homogeneous. Within it, two wings emerged: a right wing whose best known representatives were Boris Souvarine and the “Democratic Circle” formed in 1925 in France, and in Germany the KP-O led by Brandler and Thalheimer and formed in 1928, and a left. Very often the left of the Opposition did not distinguish itself very clearly from the right. Their common banner was their aversion to Stalinism.

In France, where the International Left Opposition was most numerous and served in a sense as a reference for all the Opposition groups, an attempt was made at the end of 1927 and in 1928 to gather together all the currents of right and left. On 20 November 1927 appeared *Contre le Courant*, ‘organ of the Communist Opposition’, which for two years (around Paz, Lorient, Jean Barrué, Lucie Colliard, Delfosse) tried to act as the real representative of the whole Opposition. This group, oscillating between right and left, advocated unification before any confrontation, even before adopting a common platform. Appearing more as a club than an organised fraction, it wanted to get together first and discuss later.

Fist contacts with the Left Opposition

In June 1928 *Contre le Courant* proposed a national conference of the Opposition, to be held on 14-15 July in Paris. The invitation was sent to all the Opposition groups the Opposition in Lyon and Limoges; Rosmer’s *Révolution Proletarienne*; Souvarine’s Cercle Marx-Lénine; the Barré-Treint group; and finally to the two groups of the Italian Left *Réveil Communiste* and *Prometeo*. Most of the replies were negative.³

Prometeo’s refusal was particularly clear. It was motivated not by ‘sectarian’ reasons, by the desire to protect its own little chapel, but by profound political considerations, and a great caution about the method to be applied in order to arrive at a minimum basis of agreement. In a letter of 8th July, Vercesi, writing for the Fraction’s political bureau, criticised the method used:

² For the history of the ‘opposition’ refer to the book by Rabaut (op cit.) and the preface by Michel Dreyfus in vol. 1 of the collected works of Trotsky (March — July 1933), EDI, Paris, 1978.

³ *Contre le Courant*, facsimile Maspéro, 1971.

Many opposition groups want to limit themselves to the role of a club which registers the progress of degeneration and does no more than present to the proletariat a series of self-evident truths.

Above all Vercesi reproached the Opposition in general, and *Contre le Courant* in particular, for having taken anti-Stalinism as a common denominator, and not the experience of the Comintern at its beginning:

It is inconceivable that all the events we have been through can be reduced to the question of anti-Stalinism, and it is certain that this basis — anti-Stalinism — provides no guarantee for the regeneration of the revolutionary movement.

For the Italian Left, the proliferation of oppositions was not a sign of strength but of weakness, and this could only be remedied through a discussion that eschewed complacency and laxity.

There are many oppositions. That's bad; but there is no other remedy than a confrontation between their respective ideologies, a polemic, in order to arrive later on at what you propos... Our watchword is to take our efforts to a deeper level, without being guided by the lure of a result which would in fact be a new failure. We think it is vital to understand each other thoroughly before we can agree whether this or that group is making a true left critique.

Prometeo considered that the Communist Parties and the International were the main terrain for revolutionary activity, even if they had been expelled from them. The role of a Fraction was not to note passively the degenerative process, but to try to intervene actively to reverse a course which was not predestined. However, Vercesi did not exclude the worst hypothesis, the definitive fall of the CPs:

The Communist Parties... are the organs in which we have to work to combat opportunism and — this is not to be excluded — to make them guide of the revolution. It may be that the opportunists will exclude us all; we are convinced that situations will compel the leaders to reintegrate us, as an organised fraction, unless they lead to the Communist Parties' complete eclipse. In this case, which we consider to be very improbable, we will also be able to carry out our communist duty. (Reply to the Left Fraction to the Communist Opposition, 8th July 1928, *Contre le Courant* no. 13).

This reply was characteristic of the Italian Left. It was always very prudent in its international contacts. Hardened by its experience in Italy, where it had been weakened by mergers with heterogeneous groups like *Ordine Nuovo* and the 'Terzini', it sought above all for maximum clarity through a confrontation of positions, in order to establish the bases of the disagreements and to go beyond them through clarification. The course of the Stalinist counter-revolution, which often dispersed left opposition groups into confusion, only strengthened its conviction that to resist the tide and maintain one's weak forces, it was necessary to base oneself on firm principles, rather than to 'expand' in a confused manner. This was in no sense a 'sectarian' withdrawal into itself, as the Trotskyists claimed. This is clearly shown by more than three years' collaboration with Trotsky's Left Opposition.

In February 1929, Trotsky, expelled from Russia, exiled in Prinkipo, immediately made contact with the different opposition forces which had arisen in the sections of the Comintern. His prestige as a leader of the Russian revolution, the uncompromising combat he had waged against Stalin and against Zinoviev's indecision, naturally made him the unchallenged symbol of the whole International Left Opposition. His Opposition gained

heart through the written correspondence with Trotsky and regular visits to Turkey. In many countries, including Latin American countries like Argentina, Cuba and Chile, an Opposition was developing and it saw Trotsky as its spokesman. Up until 1932, when the Trotskyist Opposition was definitively formed, there were innumerable small groups from Poland to Spain calling themselves 'Bolshevik-Leninists'. But there was a great heterogeneity in these small circles; many who came from the old parties had been deformed by their responsibilities in the period of Bolshevisation under Zinoviev; others were very young and had not been through the Russian revolution or the great debates of the time within the Comintern. Impatience and activism were often the dominant traits in these organisations of young people. Furthermore, very deep divergences soon emerged within them: on the question of the 'regeneration' of the parties, which some like Urbahns and Overstraeten judged impossible, calling for the foundation of new parties; on the nature of the Russian state, which some defined as state capitalist; on the imperialist nature of the foreign policy of the USSR when the Red Army attacked China with the aim of seizing the Manchurian railway; finally, on the question of the United Front with social democracy in Germany, in the face of the development of the Nazi Movement.

In the second quarter of 1929, the International Left Opposition was constituted de facto. On 15 August in France, the first issue of *La Vérité* appeared, around Alfred Rosmer, Pierre Naville, Henri Molinier, Gourget, Lucie Colliard, all from different backgrounds. The Communist League (Left Opposition) was created and aimed to appear as the real mouthpiece of the whole French Opposition.

Although it wanted to adhere to the International Opposition, the Left Fraction did not bide its disagreements with Trotsky. The meeting of the provisional Central Committee at the end of 1928 (see *Prometeo* no. 10) proclaimed its "solidarity with this (Trotsky's) group in October 1927 for the defence of the principles of the victory of the proletarian and communist revolution of October 1917", but underlined that "there remain differences in political position between the Left Fraction and the opposition group led by Trotsky".

Prometeo and Trotsky

In 1929, still anxious to integrate itself into the Opposition, the Italian Left published an open letter to Trotsky in *Prometeo* 20. Trotsky, who had known Bordiga personally and recognised his qualities, responded in a letter dated 25 September. Although he wanted to create an opposition on a purely 'Bolshevik-Leninist' basis, the old leader did not want to turn the Italian Left away. The latter had a considerable influence in France; its paper sold better than that of any Opposition group; for the Italian Stalinists, it was much more the 'Enemy Number One' than the Trotskyists, to the point where, in a letter of 19 April 1929 to Jaroslavsky, Togliatti demanded that all the Communist Parties "use a maximum of rigour against them" and that "in this already very difficult struggle" they should combat "the debris of the Bordigist opposition which is trying to organise all the malcontents into a fraction".⁴

⁴ The PCI central organ thought that the Italian Left had more members than the Stalinised party (cf. Perrone archives). This draft underlined the importance of the conference with these words: "The importance of this event does not derive from the numbers and strength of the groups convened and represented, but from the fact that the constitution of a Secretariat to unify the groups of the Opposition marks an important step in the process of the communist crisis." But it had its reservations: "The conditions exist for an international regroupment of the Opposition, but within each country there do not exist formations capable of carrying out an effective activity for a centre of the of the international oppositions". The document called for:

"a) a centre;

b) one based on programmatic foundations individual membership of the fractions under the control of the international Secretariat. If these rules were absent "the Fraction would adhere to the Secretariat but would not participate directly in its work".

Given the prestige of the Italian Left in the emigration, its political weight, Trotsky's reply was extremely warm and seemed to recognise the Fraction as the only representative of the entire Italian Left Opposition. He wrote that "The platform of the Left (1926) has made a great impression on me. I think that it is one of the best documents emanating from the International Opposition." Contrasting the Fraction with the confusion of *Révolution Proletarienne* and Souvarine's group, he eulogised "the living, abundant, muscular, revolutionary thinking of Amadeo Bordiga." And he added: "I note with pleasure, basing myself on your letter published in *Prometeo*, that you are in complete solidarity with the Russian Opposition in defining the social nature of the Soviet state." In conclusion, he showed the difference between the Fraction and the 'ultra-left' *Réveil Communiste* which he defined as 'confusionist':

Thus having, on one side, centrists like Ercoli, on the other the ultra-leftist confusionists, you, comrades, are called upon, in the difficult conditions of the fascist dictatorship, to defend the historic interests of the Italian and of the international proletariat. With all my heart, I wish you good luck and success (Trotsky's letter to the Fraction, 25 Sept. 1929, published in the Fraction's internal bulletin, no. 2, Sept. 1931).

However, Trotsky added that he wanted "to leave to time and events the possibility of verifying our ideological continuity and our mutual understanding. I hope they will prove to be complete and lasting."

In practise, the attitude of the 'Trotskysts' towards the Italian Left remained ambiguous. In April 1930 an international conference of the Opposition was held in Paris, called by the Ligue Communiste. Out of it came an international bureau composed of Kurt Landau for Germany, Alfred Rosmer for France and Markin (Leon Sedov, Trotsky's son) for Russia; two other elements came a few months later to complete it: Andres Nin for Spain (*Izquierda comunista*) and Shachtman for the USA. It seems that the Fraction was not really invited to this conference or hesitated to go to, even though it had published a draft text for it in *Prometeo* 31.⁵

Informed that *Prometeo* had not participated in the conference, Trotsky sent a letter on 22 April, in the form of an ultimatum, which asked the Fraction to define itself either as 'national-communist' or as an international tendency:

1. *Do you consider that communism can have a national character... Do you then consider yourself as a national tendency or as part of an international tendency?*
2. *I do not doubt that you consider yourselves as internationalists. In this case, a second question is posed: what precise international tendency do you belong to?*
3. *Your absence from the preliminary international conference could be interpreted as a consequence of the disagreement that separates you from the Left Opposition on questions of principle. If this is the case, a third question is posed: why do you not organise an international fraction of your own tendency?* (Trotsky, open letter to the editors of the Italian communist journal *Prometeo*, 22 April 1930, in *Bollettino Interno* no. 2).

The Fraction's response was not long in coming. In a letter dated 3 June, it pointed out that "it was due to an error in the transmission of the letter of convocation to the directing organs of the Fraction" that it had not been able to attend the conference; it expressed its agreement "with the constitution of this Secretariat" nominated at the end of the conference, but also its "disagreement with the methods of working and its lack of an ideological base". In particular

⁵ [note missing]

it replied to Trotsky’s three questions, insisting that it did not want to create an artificial international organism, even around its own platform

1. *We consider ourselves as a part of the international movement;*
2. *Since the foundation of the Comintern, we have belonged to the left tendency;*
3. *We do not want to create an international fraction of our tendency, because we think we have learned from Marxism that the international organisation of the proletariat is not an artificial agglomeration of groups and personalities from different countries around one group.*

In its reply, the Fraction demonstrated that it had been extremely shocked by the ‘national communist’ label that Trotsky had given it, since it “represented the first nucleus of Marxist resistance to the progress of opportunism”. It did not seek to hide its differences with the Opposition on the slogans of the ‘workers’ and peasants’ government’, the ‘United Front’, and ‘proletarian anti-fascist committees’, which it rejected absolutely as having led to defeat. But above all it asked for clarification about the contacts between the ‘International Secretariat’ and the Stalinist ex-leaders of the PCI who had just been excluded. These elements (Pietro Tresso, Alfonso Leonetti, Ravazzoli) had in 1926 been the most determined adversaries of the ‘Bordigist’ tendency and had supported until their expulsion the Stalinist policy of ‘socialism in one country’; they had thus participated in the campaigns denouncing the Left Opposition and ‘Trotskyism’. It was these same elements who were now constituting the ‘New Italian Opposition’ (NOI) and who were being admitted into the International Opposition, up to the level of its Secretariat. It was thus understandable that in this letter the Fraction expressed its refusal to “participate in the leadership of the Secretariat”. On the basis of the 2nd Congress of the Comintern, there could only be one organisation representing communism in each country, on a basis preserving “the proletarian movement from the manoeuvres which led to the triumph of opportunism in the Comintern”.

A third letter from Trotsky — and to our knowledge the last — dated 19 June 1930, further widened the gap between the Italian Left and the Trotskyism movement. The tone employed was suspicious of *Prometeo’s* good faith. It said:

- that “it is clear from your letter that there is something more here than a postal error”;
- that “a current which remains closed up for years on a national basis is inevitably doomed to degeneration”;
- that *Prometeo’s* divergences were pretexts showing “a purely formalist, non-political and non-revolutionary way of approaching the question”;
- that, consequently, “you must play an active part in all the work of the International Opposition, i.e. you must enter its ranks”.

Trotsky replied energetically to the questions posed by the Fraction, insisting that the conference was perfectly well prepared ideologically, that it was “monstrous” to claim otherwise. As for the NOI, he asserted that there had been no manoeuvre in its recognition by the International Secretariat, which had responded “with all cordiality to the questions posed by these comrades”. But, above all, the method Trotsky was using to create the Opposition was contrary to that of the Italian Left. He affirmed in effect that the question of a political platform was secondary, that the platform of 1926 “was only an episodic document which gives no answer to the questions posed today”; that “if the communist left only had 5 members, it would still have to create an international organisation at the same time as a national one”.

A last letter from *Prometeo* to Trotsky, while making no concessions on the political level, clearly left the door open to an active participation within the ranks of the Opposition. It said that “the Fraction has every interest in dissipating misunderstandings and avoiding polemical games that begin by falsifying our opinions”. It thus did not make a fetish out of its platform:

When we talked about the platform, we did so in the spirit of its application and not as an oracle to which one has to swear a sacred loyalty and whose conservation would acquit us of our duties to the proletarian struggle. Its ‘isolation’ was not the result of its own will, but of the general weakness of the whole left communist movement: As for our so-called international isolation, we also have to consider the modest proportions of our forces which we are not in the habit of exaggerating through bluff.

Prometeo explained that its “caution in international relations” had enabled it to “resist the inevitable backlash resulting from the prevailing politics of confusion”. Its method was diametrically opposed to that of the Russian Left which “has worked in the direction of the non-elaboration of platforms. It is here that our disagreement lies and not at all in our (non-existent) claim to having a complete and finished document”. The Bordigist current thought that the precondition for an international regroupment was “the critical re-examination of the Congresses of the International, on the statutory basis of the statutes and principles upon which the Communist International was founded”. The Comintern, the reference point for any left communist group, should not be transformed into an idol, the object of a submissive cult, which was the attitude of the Russian Left with its religious attachment to the first four Congresses. On the contrary it had to be subjected to the fires of criticism:

The Communist International represented the first attempt made in the epoch of imperialism. Its work, since its foundation, consisted in a mechanical generalisation to all countries of the programme and tactics of the Russian party. The Communist Parties became parasites on the Russian party and revolution, and one by one they became the main stays for the opportunism which has sapped the basis of the proletarian dictatorship.

Concerning the NOI, *Prometeo* reiterated its accusations of manoeuvring on the part of the International Secretariat:

1. *A group of the enemy fraction which has declared its solidarity with the International Opposition has immediately been given hospitality in the press of the French Opposition.*
2. *All this took place without our Fraction being informed of anything. Now, it is to be supposed that, for example, your group has a much better knowledge of the militants and the questions of the Russian movement. If there was no attempt to ‘manoeuvre’, the first duty would have been to consult our Fraction.*
3. *To the repeated requests of our Fraction no reply has ever been made... Not only has the opinion of a group affiliated to the Secretariat not been sought, but the requests of this group concerning the New Opposition have not been answered.*

Despite the question of the NOI, the Italian Left was to participate loyally in the work of the International Secretariat (in which it refused to take a leadership role because of the absence of programmatic documents), showed its willingness to participate in all the discussions of the Opposition, and even to intervene in the life of all its sections.

Regarding the NOI the Fraction was to bold a permanent discussion for nearly two years, without either sectarianism or compromise. It published the texts and resolutions of

this group in *Prometeo*. Joint meetings were organised from the end of 1930; the Fraction even proposed a joint discussion bulletin, for which it would take responsibility⁶.

Relations with the New Italian Opposition, the German and French Oppositions

For the 'Bordigists', it was not a question of forming an 'alliance' or a 'United Front', but essentially of leading the NOI to make a critique of its past and to move towards renouncing its 'antifascist' positions, its support for 'democratic' slogans, and to constitute a true left Fraction whose goal was not the 'critique' of the PCI but the triumph of the Fraction through the expulsion of the Stalinist faction from the communist movement. The discussions led nowhere, and both sites remained on their positions. While *Prometeo* did not manage to win over any of the NOI's members, the reverse was not true, since the latter succeeded in detaching from the Fraction Nicola di Bartolomeo (Fosco), who put into question the programmatic bases of the Pantin conference: supporting Trotsky's positions, he called on the Fraction to participate in the 'Antifascist Coalition' which had been formed around the Left parties in Italy; he considered that the Fraction should not have an autonomous life but should have an entrust tactic, "working in the party... penetrating the party organs in order to combat and prevent its pernicious work of disintegration". (*Prometeo* 42 and 43 'Il convegno della regione parigina').

In 1931-32, the Italian Left, via Ersilio Ambrogi, entered into direct contact with the German Opposition. The latter came out of a split in the Leninbund over the class nature of the Soviet state, which Urhahns defined as bourgeois. The new organisation, led by Kurt Landau in Berlin, regrouped the 'Wedding Opposition' and a group in Saxony. According to Ambrogi, relations were good: not only did he take part in the meetings in Wedding, he was also invited to the group's national conference, then to an international pre-conference. He thus had the opportunity of discussing with the Spanish

Opposition whose representative Andres Nin lived in Berlin. The criticisms which Ambrogi made to the German Opposition were not 'individual' but reflected perfectly the opinion of the Italian Fraction. The German Trotskyist group, which brought out *Die Permanente Revolution*, had come out of a fusion of several local groups without prior discussion and without establishing a common platform:

... Your unification has come about according to the methods in usage in the Opposition, on the basis of more or less personal agreements, without discussing fundamental questions of principle... In sum you have no platform to refer to. Thus it is the duty of the Berlin and the Leipzig groups to prepare this platform as quickly as possible... From this would come a conference which would be a real conference of unification, and if that is not possible, there will be a split, which would then be the most useful result. (Letter from Ambrogi to the EC of the Fraction, 1-2-31, Ambrogi Archives, BDIC, Nanterre).

Relations remained good despite these hard criticisms. When Trotsky's son (Markin), who was in Berlin in clandestinity, and was a member of the International Bureau of the Opposition, called for a break with the Italian Left, Kurt Landau's group (in a resolution of 24 March 1931) clearly refused and made "a most serious protest against the behaviour of

⁶ cf. *All' opposizione nel PCI con Trotsky e Gramsci, Bolletino dell' Opposizione comunista Italiana (1931-33)*, presented by Alfonso Leonetti, Rome 1977. In no. 3 of this bulletin we read: The columns of *Prometeo* were opened to us; different documents were published which the official press still hid from the comrades of the Party; various meetings were organised in which divergences were gone into without insults or personalisations." (*Bolletino*, August 1931).

comrade Markin” (cf. Ambrogi Archives), since the “German leadership... has received documents which show that the Italian Left is a member of the Opposition”⁷.

The relations with the Belgian Opposition also became very close, at least with Hennaut’s group in Brussels. The latter contained an important number of workers; it was also the only group coming out of a CP which had brought the majority of the central committee with it. It existed mainly in the capital and in Charleroi, where the federation was led by Lesoil. The latter rallied to the positions of Trotsky in 1929, advocating participation in the elections and supporting the Red Army’s entry into China. In contrast to Hennaut who wanted to form a second party, Lesoil wanted to ‘redress’ the PCB (Parti Communiste de Belgique) by staying as an opposition. The Charleroi group, pushed on by Trotsky, split and formed the official section of the International Opposition. Despite its test to attach itself to the Opposition, Hennaut’s group came up against Trotsky’s categorical refusal to hold a discussion:

*To the first letter sent by the leaders of the Opposition to comrade Trotsky to explain our disagreements, he replied with a categorical refusal to discuss, declaring that he no longer considered the leaders as belonging to the same fraction as his. The International Bureau broke all relations with the Belgian Opposition without giving the slightest reason*⁸ (‘Comment l’Opposition s’est-elle scindée?’, *Le Communiste* no. 9, 1st November 1932).

It was with this group that the Italian Left had the most profound and cordial relations. In the face of Trotsky’s policies, there was even a convergence of ideas and a community of work (see below). However the Italian Fraction was strongly opposed to the idea of forming ‘a second party’, which it thought not only premature but contrary to its methods, which foresaw the emergence of the party in a particular conjuncture corresponding to the triumph of the Fraction.

With regard to the Communist League of Naville, Frank, Molinier and Rosmer, the Fraction’s policy was also to intervene towards it in order to clarify disagreements. It had its documents published in the International Bulletin of the Opposition, and at the end of 1931 edited in French a *Bulletin d’Information de la Fraction de Gauche Italienne*. Six issues appeared up to February 1933. The aim was not to close in on itself, but to make its positions known as widely as possible.

In 1931 the Communist League went through a serious crisis. Personal dissensions arose between Frank/Molinier, on the one hand, and Naville/Rosmer on the other. This crisis, which was resolved through Trotsky’s support for Molinier (the ‘Prinkipo Peace’), ended in the departure of Rosmer, and the formation of the ‘Gauche Communiste’, led by Collinet and Naville’s brother. This group published a bulletin *Le Communiste*. The evolution of the League was not towards the formation of an opposition, but anticipated the policy of entristment which it practised later on. In October and November 1931, the League proposed to the PCF that it should be reintegrated, accepting in advance the suppression of its press and the dispersal of its groups; it even took out a subscription for *L’Humanité*. Despite the entry into

⁷ The Fraction protested vigorously in its press, denouncing Trotsky’s manoeuvring:

“Today we are seeing Trotsky adapting the same method, consisting in dividing the International Left Opposition into ‘disciples’ and ‘repentables’, into ‘Bolshevik-Leninism’ which defines him and his partisans, and ‘Bordigism’, presented as a false tactic, dogmatic and sectarian, the habitual infantilism of the ultra-left (‘Comrade Trotsky exaggerates’ by Gatto Mammine in *Prometeo* 56, 19 July 1931).

⁸ “During the Sino-Russian conflict which threatened to lead to war, we could not lose ourselves in discussions... similarly today, we cannot take an indirect responsibility for the sectarian and semi-Bakuninist superstitions of certain groups.” (*Bulletin de l’Opposition*, no. 1, an article by Trotsky).

it of Albert Treint and his group, the crises of the League was total, and its membership plummeted.

It was in this situation that in October a delegation of the Fraction, composed of Gatto Mammone (Virgilio Verdaro), Vercesi (Ottorino Perrone), Bianco (Bruno Bibbi) and Toto (whose real name was Gabassi) took part in the League's national conference. Against Molinier, who wanted the Opposition to go back in the PCF, the Fraction pointed out that "in order to regenerate the parties, you want to dismantle the Opposition". While it did not "at all rule out asking to be reintegrated into the party", it was "under conditions exactly opposite to what the League has posed, i.e. on condition of being able to defend the rights of a fraction with its own organisation and press". In effect, "the disappearance of the Fraction can only coincide with the solution to the communist crisis; it will disappear into a regenerated party or it will become the party". Unlike the League, the Italian delegates did not think it possible to regenerate the parties, because they had fallen prey to enemy forces who "threatened the very bases of the proletarian organisation". In these conditions the alternative was not 'between regeneration' or 'opposition' within a healthy organism, but "the inevitable fall of the party" or "its salvation solely through the victory of the fraction". (*Bulletin d' Information* no. 3, November 1931, and no. 4, February 1932). Despite their very deep differences, since the Italian Fraction and the League both adhered to the International Secretariat, it was decided to make official their joint work in France: each group of the Italian Left would nominate a member to represent it in any geographically close group of the League; the delegate would not however take part in voting and would have to conform to the discipline of the decisions taken by the Trotskyist organisation. His collaboration was short-lived due to Trotsky's increasingly over hostility to the Fraction, so that the latter was more and more kept away from the work of the International Secretariat.

The conference of the International Opposition which had been due to take place in January 1931 had been put off by Trotsky, who asked that it be better prepared. Faced with the crisis of the French section of the Opposition, and in reality to keep the Italian Left out of things, Trotsky proposed transferring the 'administrative Secretariat' created in February 1931 from Paris to Berlin, where it would be under the control of his son Markin. This arbitrary decision was taken without asking the opinion of the sections of the International Secretariat. In reply, in a circular letter to all sections, the Fraction made three proposals:

- a preconference should be held rapidly; from this would come:
- an international bureau, with the role of preparing;
- a real international conference (Resolution of the EC of the Left Fraction, in reply to Trotsky's letter of 22 December 1931).

During the course of the year 1932, despite Trotsky's refusal to maintain relations with the Fraction⁹, the latter showed its willingness not to act in isolation by proposing to edit a joint review of the Opposition under the responsibility of the French and German Oppositions and of *Prometeo* ('Projet de constitution d' un Bureau international d' information', *Bilan* no. 1, November 1933).

Reasons and consequences of the Fraction's expulsion from the Trotskyist Opposition

All their proposals met with a categorical rejection. In November 1932, when Trotsky, who was in Copenhagen on the invitation of Danish social democratic students, rallied to the idea

⁹ In a letter of 30 May 1932, addressed to Ambrogi, Perrone even thought it necessary to send this comrade to Prinkipo to clarify the situation.

of a 'Preconference' in February 1933 in Paris, it was in order to exclude the Italian Fraction. From then on the Fraction was no longer part of the International Opposition. In a long text published after this 'Preconference', Trotsky argued that "the Bordigists have never really been an organic part of the Left Opposition", and concluded that "the *Prometeo* group does not belong to the International Left Opposition. The only section of Bolshevik-Leninists for Italy is the New Italian Opposition".¹⁰

The real reason for the break was not the Fraction's formal adherence to the Opposition, still less "its character as a purely national sect" (the Fraction was of course present in several countries...), but deep political divergences which had been there from the beginning between 'Trotskyism' on the one hand and 'Bordigism' on the other. Trotsky admitted himself that the real divergence was "the refusal to struggle for democratic demands in any conditions and for any policy of a united front with social democracy today in 1933" (10).

The split was inevitable, and in 1933 the Fraction bitterly reproached itself for having put so much effort into this joint work that was doomed to fall, for having tried for a long to stay within the framework of the International Opposition¹¹.

In fact the Italian Left was ideologically strengthened by this confrontation. Faced with the grave events which took place between 1931 and 1933, it was able to maintain political continuity with its past positions, the same that it had defended within the PCI. The break with Trotskyism took place in a very clear manner, and really marked the beginning of its existence as a 'Bordigist' current. What were the basic issues behind the break, apart from the organisational ones?

- **The Spanish question and 'democratic' slogans.** In 'The Spanish Revolution and the Duties of Communists'¹², Trotsky wrote that "the slogan of the republic is naturally also a slogan of the proletariat". In 1931, the King was chased out in favour of the Republic, which, under the authority of Lerroux, did not hesitate to use ferocious repression against the Spanish workers. But Trotsky not only abandoned the theses of the Comintern on the dictatorship of the proletariat; in the name of 'democratic slogans' he supported the right of the Catalan and Basque bourgeoisie to secede, declaring that "the Separatist tendencies pose to the revolution the democratic duty of national self-determination". And he concluded that the "Spanish revolution" had begun. But what "revolution" was this, since power had been transferred solely from the monarchist bourgeoisie to the republican bourgeoisie? This is why *Prometeo* replied:

It is clear that we cannot follow him along this road, and that to him (Trotsky) as well as to the anarcho-syndicalist leaders of the CNT, we reply by denying in the most explicit manner that communists must be in the front ranks of the defence of the Republic and still less of the Spanish Republic.

For the Fraction there could only be one slogan in the imperialist period of 'wars and revolutions' defined by the Comintern at the beginning of the century: the dictatorship of the proletariat, the destruction of the bourgeois state and its parties of right and left. This important question of the bourgeois nature of the social democratic parties, whose bankruptcy had been proclaimed by Lenin, was naturally closely linked to the question of the united front against fascism in Germany.

¹⁰ *Les Congrès de la Quatrième Internationale*, éd. La Brèche, 1978: 'L' Opposition de Gauche Internationale, ses tâches, ses méthodes (p. 68-69).

¹¹ From 1931, Ambrogi leant towards breaking with Trotsky; his opinion seems to have been shared by many members of the Fraction.

¹² Article of 24 January 1931, in *La Révolution Espagnole*, texts by Trotsky introduced by Pierre Broué, 1975.

• **The German question and the United Front.** Faced with the development of Nazism, which expressed the offensive of the German bourgeoisie against the workers in a key country in the international situation, Trotsky adopted the same ‘tactic’ as in 1923, calling for a United Front between the KPD and the SPD. In a letter of 28 July 1931 he wrote: “in certain cases victory is possible even with very bad policies... a victory for the German Communist Party cannot be excluded even with the policies of the Thälmann leadership”. But for the Fraction, as reality was to confirm, the “‘centrist revolution’ is inconceivable and to make the revolution, you need a party which is able to liquidate the politics of centrism”. (Resolution of the EC of the Left Fraction of the PCI on the tasks of the left fraction of the KPD)¹³. Vis-à-vis social democracy, the Fraction reiterated and developed its position that by crushing the German proletariat in 1919, by assassinating Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the SPD had “made a bed for fascism”. Despite the assertions of the Trotskyists, it did not take up the theory of ‘social fascism’. It considered that social democracy and fascism were two distinct, but complementary, methods for crushing the proletariat. Both were forces of the bourgeoisie but they played a different role in that the first had to wipe out a revolutionary proletarian movement, whereas the second, with the worst crisis of capitalism, had to finish the job by replacing the democratic method with the dictatorial one. This is why the Italian Left refused to give credence to the policies of social democracy through the ‘tactic’ of the United Front. The only solution, the Fraction insisted, was in the “development of class movements” on an economic terrain. Fascism could be overturned, not by supporting the “forces of the enemy”, but through the triumph of the proletarian revolution.

• **The question of the Fraction and the Party.** In the international situation of 1931-32 which was marked by the growing and almost complete submission of the CPs to the policies of the Russian state, the Fraction saw no way of constituting an ‘opposition’, which could only mean going back into the CPs, in order to regenerate them. The Italian Left defined an ‘opposition’ as “the current which boits that the parties will reconquer their capacity to guide the proletariat towards the revolution through the specific forms of the life of the party organisation (assemblies, conferences, congresses, etc.)”. The fraction, on the other hand, “is the organism which affirms that only through its channels will the party reconquer the capacity to guide the proletariat to victory”.

However the Fraction was only formally a fraction of the CPs: “in practice, we do not constitute left fractions of the Communist Parties because we have been expelled from these parties”. Its task was to “assure the continuity of the communist movement”. The left fraction was thus defined more by an ideological continuity with the former revolutionary parties. We can see that the concern of the Italian Left was to base itself on the programmatic foundations of the Comintern, and not pretend to be starting from scratch. This was not at all a sentimental attachment to the past but the essential method of the Italian Left, which considered that a revolutionary party could only emerge from a critical balance-sheet of the old communist movement, and not from speculations about the future. This was the whole difference with the Trotskyists: in 1933 Trotsky proclaimed the death of the Comintern and the immediate necessity to build new parties; the ‘Bordigists’ affirmed that the conditions for the emergence of new parties and the new International depended on the work and development of the left fractions, but also on the development of a revolutionary situation which would put the transformation of fraction into party on the agenda. The Italian Left was thus unable to proclaim the foundation of an international fraction; this depended

¹³ *Bulletin d’Information*, no. 5, March 1932.

fundamentally on the real development of left fractions in all countries, and not on the artificial proclamation of an International which could only exist in a revolutionary situation.

Throughout the years 1931-1932 discussions were taking place about the perspectives for the Fraction. Massimo (Ambrogio) hit that the betrayal of the CPs and their transformation into counter-revolutionary organs meant that the Fraction had to proclaim the formation of the party.¹⁴ Vercesi, opposing this conception, won a majority in the Belgian and French conferences. In fact, since 1930, following the conference of the Belgian federation, the Fraction had been acting as an autonomous organisation with regard to the CPs and had been developing its forces “through the recruitment of militants of the party or those who have moved away from it for political reasons” as well as elements who had not been through the Communist Parties.

Fraction or party? “Centrist” parties, or parties that have “fallen into treason”? Revolutionary or counter-revolutionary situation? There were the implicit questions that had to be answered prior to the appearance of *Bilan*. Other theoretic questions, and burningly important ones in that they would determine the political attitude of the Fraction, had hardly been approached before the “terrible year” 1933:

- the nature of the Russian state which was still defined as a ‘proletarian state’;
- the nature of ‘national liberation struggles’, a vital question in the period of the developing interimperialist rivalries after 1931, beginning with the Sino-Japanese war;
- the role of the revolutionary party in the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the nature of the transition period to socialism;
- the form of workers’ struggles since 1914 and of the economic organs of the proletariat;
- the Fraction’s work in the trade unions.

All these questions arising from the new period opened up by the defeat of the German proletariat and the growing incorporation of Russia into the international arena could not be resolved in theory alone. It was in the “situations”, to use a formula of Vercesi’s, that all these questions would be posed, on the basis of a balance-sheet (*Bilan* in French) of the whole revolutionary experience of the post-war period, and in particular of the Russian revolution.

¹⁴ “d) since the party has become a counter-revolutionary party, the Fraction engages in the most bitter struggle against the party and declares itself to be the party of the proletariat”. (BI no. 4, January 1932, ‘Différences de tactique et unité de perspectives de l’Opposition Internationale’, by Maxime (E. Ambrogio).

1933-39

Bilan

Milestones on the road to defeat

4. The Weight of the Counter-Revolution

In the last issue of the *Bulletin d'information de la Fraction de Gauche Italienne* (February 1933), Vercesi wrote: "...the victory of fascism in Germany marks a break in the revolutionary course which appeared in 1917, and which could have ended in the triumph of the world proletariat. This victory also marks a turning towards the capitalist outcome of the present situation: towards war."

In November 1933 appeared the first issue of the 'Theoretical Bulletin of the Left Fraction of the PCI': *Bilan*. The legal editor was Gaston Davoust (Henri Chazé) of Union Communiste, who lent his name so that the review could be published legally, given the lack of any French citizens in the Italian Fraction. It was printed in the French language, in Brussels. On the cover appeared the words: "Lenin 1917 — Noske 1919 — Hitler 1933". Published once a month, there were 46 issues of *Bilan* up till February 1938, when it ceased to appear. *Bilan* succeeded the *Bulletin d'information*, on the cover of which was the slogan "The future belongs to communism".

Bilan announced that it had not been the Fraction's wish to bring out this international bulletin on its own; it had hoped to edit it jointly with the French and German Opposition, with the aim of bringing clarification to the whole revolutionary movement:

Our Fraction would have preferred it if such a work could have been carried out by an international organism, convinced as we are of the necessity for political confrontation between those groups capable of representing the proletarian class in several countries. Thus we would have been very happy to have entrusted this bulletin to an international initiative guaranteed by the application of serious methods of work and by a concern to hold a healthy political polemic.

With the Trotskyist Opposition, the parting of the ways had already come. *Bilan* would publish in its columns contributions from members of the Ligue des Communistes Internationalistes, like Mitchell and Hennaut; it even opened them to the Dutch Communist Left. But it would no longer publish texts by Trotsky, as it had done in *Prometeo*.

1917-33: two key dates: one opening a revolutionary course, the other dramatically closing it. The goal was thus to draw the lessons of this period of 16 years, so rich in world-wide and decisive events in the history of humanity. Was this an over-ambitious enterprise? was aware of the enormous difficulties involved, and it defined its tasks very modestly:

Our Fraction, in publishing the present bulletin, does not believe that it can present definitive solutions to the terrible problems posed to the proletariat of all countries. To be sure, our Fraction can refer back to a long political past, to a profound tradition in the Italian and international movement, to a totality of fundamental political positions. But it does not intend to use its political antecedents to demand agreement on the solutions it puts forward for the present situation. On the contrary, it calls on all revolutionaries to subject the positions it now defends to the verification of events, as well as the political positions contained in its basic documents.

There were two possible methods for re-examining past experience: either sticking to Lenin's texts as though they were a bible, or "placing the Congresses of the Comintern and the different parties in the crucible of criticism and in the light of events". The Italian Fraction chose the second method. "While basing itself on the foundations of the Comintern", it

would be seeking a profound understanding of the causes of the defeats without “*any taboos or ostracism*”.

It was in this open spirit, free of dangerous prejudices, that *Bilan* proposed to “complete the work bequeathed to us by the Russian Revolution”. It declared that “*to draw a balance-sheet of the post-war events is... to establish the conditions for the victory of the proletariat in all countries*”.

‘Midnight in the Century’

What was the result of this political and theoretical reflection? The fruits were bitter. Although by entering into crisis, capitalism had provided the objective conditions for a new revolutionary period, the subjective factor was totally missing. A period of counterrevolution had opened up; the proletariat had been beaten:

It was not thanks to a change in the historic situation that capitalism was able to get through the turmoil of post-war events; in 1933, even more than in 1917, capitalism is definitively doomed as a system of social organisation. What has changed between 1917 and 1933 is the balance of forces between the two fundamental classes in the present epoch: capitalism and the proletariat.

Outside Russia, the proletariat had not been able to forge the militants its parties needed. This delay had “determined the series of defeats suffered by the proletariat in the post-war period”; it was above all the weight of the Russian state, absorbing the Comintern to the point of making it its own instrument, which was the decisive cause of the defeat. This took place in three stages:

- **1923**, in Germany, where “the interests of the proletarian state were no longer connected to the struggle of the world proletariat”;
- **1927-8**, a key date in the process towards the transformation of the Communist Parties into counterrevolutionary organs, through the abandonment of internationalism (‘socialism in one country’) and the exclusion of the Communist Left, a subjective element which had determined the crushing of the revolutionary wave in China;
- **1933**, the culminating point, which was only the final consequence of the betrayal of the Comintern, “which died with the victory of fascism in Germany”.

It took a long discussion in the Italian Fraction to determine that the Comintern was dead and that its parties had betrayed by becoming parties of national capital. This idea was condensed into the formulation “*the party does not die, it betrays*”.

For a long time, this position was not accepted. Although a majority was pushing to proclaim the death of the International, the executive commission, via Vercesi, had sent a long letter to the leadership of the PCI, in 1933, on the eve of its congress. Here it explained why it had constituted itself into a Fraction and demanded to be allowed to take part in the congress. This proposal provoked an animated response from the New York Federation, and the majority of the Parisian Federation. After a discussion, it was concluded that it was impossible to have any activity towards the CPs, as parties, as long as the ‘redressment’ had not taken place.

However, up until the war the definition of the CPs remained hesitant. They were still considered as ‘centrist’. In the terminology of the Comintern, at the beginning, the centre had been the left fraction of the IInd International which, like the USPD and the PSI,

balanced between the latter and the Comintern. Later on, 'centrism' referred to Stalin's centre which was fighting both Bukharin's right wing and the left led by Trotsky. This concept was thus more the heritage of a previous period than a new theory. It provided the Italian Left with a definition of the parties to the Left of social democracy, considered either as 'centrist workers' parties or as traitor parties'.

It was thus the left fractions which represented the continuity with the old revolutionary movement. It was they who assumed the continuity of the proletariat as a revolutionary class. "The Fraction is the sole organism in which the proletariat realises its organisation as a class, being the organism which derives from a past historic period and which prepares another."

Given the "numerical weakness" and the "present theoretical inadequacy of the Left fractions", which expressed "the incapacity of the world proletariat to oppose capital's attack in the conditions of the economic crisis", the foundation of parties was not on the agenda. The Italian Fraction was completely opposed to Trotsky's attempt to create a IVth International in 1933 by linking up with left socialists (SAPD, Sneevliet's RSP, the Norwegian party). For the Fraction the party could not be created out of nothing but had to be prepared by a solid work of theoretical reflection: "This party will pose the problems that the historical conditions enable it to pose. This party will carry out its tasks on the sole condition that it is able to foresee the problems that are going to arise." (*Bilan* no. 1, 'Vers l'Internationale deux et trois quarts?'). It was not possible for one man, even a Trotsky "despite the services he has rendered to the cause of the proletariat", to force the movement of history. The individual, however prestigious, could not be a guarantee:

... loyalty to Trotsky's work can be expressed by fighting against his current errors, because it is absolutely false that a personal continuity is a guarantee for the ulterior struggle of the proletariat. On the contrary, this continuity can only be based on political positions. The question there fore is to see whether or not comrade Trotsky's new positions correspond to the necessities of the proletarian struggle. (Bilan no. 1, ibid.).

The perspective of revolution had moved into the distance, and only the victory of the fractions could prevent the march towards war; and then revolution could only come out of the war:

If the fractions do not succeed, in opposition to centrism, in leading the proletariat to victory, no individual will can avoid the other outcome of the situation: war; and it would only be during the course of the war, or after it, that the fraction, by transforming itself into the party, could then lead the proletariat to victory.

The most probable outcome of the crisis of 1929 was war. On this point, in 1933, the position of the Fraction was hesitant. Sometimes it would say that "the alternative posed in the present phase of capitalism is revolution or war"; sometimes it said that war was inevitable with the defeat of the German proletariat and the death of the Comintern: "...the proletariat is perhaps no longer able to prevent the unleashing of a new imperialist war through the triumph of the revolution.... if there are any chances for an immediate revolutionary resurgence, they reside solely in an understanding of past defeats" (Bilan no. 1, Introduction).

What would be the decisive factor in mobilising the class for war? Ideologically, the capacity to mobilise the European workers for war depended on Russia's position in the international arena. Already in February 1933, the Italian Left declared that Russia would integrate itself into one of the imperialist blocs, and that this could include the German bloc:

“...centrism has suppressed the fundamental role that the Russian state can play in case of war, ensuring that the Soviet state, instead of being the front-line of support for the world proletariat, has become an element at the disposal of one or another group of imperialisms. We must recognise right now that the only outcome of this situation is the one that will lead centrism to betray the interests of the revolutionary proletariat and, in case of war, to justify the position taken by Russia.” (Bulletin d’information no. 6, ‘Le fascisme au pouvoir en Allemagne’).

And it added that “it is quite probable that in the long run it will be the bloc of fascist states which will prevail in making an alliance with Russia”. However, it did not exclude the possibility that it would be the ideological mobilisation for the defence of ‘democracy in danger’ which would be the decisive factor: “the bourgeoisie which, through its economic conditions, can still allow the vestiges of democratic freedom to survive, could call the proletariat to war in the name of ‘democracy’ and for the struggle against fascist states.”

Little by little, these two hypotheses were to be verified. Thus, the Italian Left recognised Russia’s integration into the game of the great antagonistic powers. This meant that “...the workers’ state is being incorporated into the world capitalist system, submitting to its laws, its evolution.”

There was a contradiction in this analysis. On the one hand, the Russian state, qualified as proletarian’, was capitalist on the international arena; on the other hand on the internal level this state was described not as capitalist, but socialist on the strength of the socialisation of production’.

The strength of the Italian Left was that it grasped every phenomenon first of all in an international context; but its attachment to the USSR, once the country that hosted the revolutionary Comintern, prevented it for a long time from making a more rigorous study of the nature of the Russian economy and of its state superstructure. It took the Second World War for a part of the Italian Left to abandon definitively the concept of the ‘proletarian state’.

In order to deal with these hesitations, from 1934 until the war, and even during it, the Italian Left put the question of the state in the period of transition on the agenda, and thus the problem of the attitude of the proletariat and the communist party towards the state.

In general, all the basic theoretical questions were subjected to the fire of criticism. From the contact with the LCI in Belgium, and particularly with Mitchell (Jehan), the Italian Fraction rediscovered Rosa Luxemburg’s texts dealing with the decadence of capitalism. The Fraction began to take an interest in economic questions, which it had previously paid little attention to. Out of this came a more developed theoretical analysis of the phenomena of the crisis and also of the economic problems of the period of transition.

From Rosa Luxemburg, the Italian Left also took up the refusal to support national liberation struggles, defined as the field of manoeuvres for different imperialisms, and on the theoretical level, the affirmation of the impossibility of any bourgeois revolutions in the period of capitalism’s decadence.

Guided by its principles and by its enormous work of theoretical reflection, *Bilan* was to confront events as crucial as the Popular Front, wars, and the convulsions in Spain. Working against the stream, its isolation was to grow in direct proportion to the march towards war.

There are two clear periods in the history of the Fraction: one between 1933 and 1935 in which it was consolidating its positions; the other between 1936 and 1939 which saw the total isolation of the Italian Left, the breaking off of contacts with the political milieu and splits in its own ranks.

Bilan confronted with anti-fascism and the Popular Front

The period between 1933 and the Popular Front was a dramatic one world-wide. The economic crisis continued, bringing with it factory closures and massive unemployment, which in some countries hit 20-30% of the working class. It was a period of austerity and impoverishment. Anti-crisis plans which went from inflation to deflation, or which maintained jobs through laws decreeing wage-cuts (e.g. the Laval decrees reducing state employees' wages) could not halt the world crisis. The year 1933, the year of the New Deal and German rearmament, was the beginning of a long series of economic measures, which to a greater or lesser extent in different countries, re-launched production by setting up a war economy — either directly, by the transformation of the economy, or indirectly, through policies of public works which developed a whole infrastructure of transport and heavy industry. This tendency was to accelerate after 1936.

The state, the economy's last resort, revealed itself as the ultimate defender of the capitalist system. In France and Belgium 'national plans' began to develop. In Belgium the De Man plan expressed this attempt to take hold of the economic mechanisms that had begun to break down, advocating a series of nationalisations. In the USA, Roosevelt put through the National Industrial Recovery Act, which was concretised in the formation of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Under Hitler and Mussolini, the state had assumed direct control of the whole economy. In Russia, the Five Year Plans, followed by Stakhanovism sought to build up heavy industry (steel, energy, etc.) with the avowed aim of developing Russian military power. All over the USSR labour camps were set up; industry developed at the price of the exhaustion and death of millions. The world seemed to be in the grip of madness, of the most primitive barbarism, hiding behind the most sophisticated products of modern technology. Everywhere, in the beautiful but terrible words of Victor Serge, it seemed to be "midnight in the century".

This economic offensive of world capitalism was expressed on the political level through a brutal or gradual transformation of the most 'democratic' regimes into openly authoritarian, dictatorial ones. The legislature, parliament, lost its importance to the benefit of the executive. The consequence was a vigorous control over social life. Arbitration laws were passed in order to control and limit strikes, which threatened to break out on a massive scale in response to the wage freeze. In countries like Belgium and France, following the Anglo-Saxon example, the unions became privileged partners in the state, the latter's final dyke in time of social conflict — as politicians and trade union spokesmen did not fail to point out during this period.

However in 1933 it seemed that the strengthening of the state would be realised not through 'democratic' methods but through the development of the fascist movement, which was fast becoming a universal trend. In all the European countries parties were growing who modelled themselves on Hitler or Mussolini and whose programme was the strengthening and concentration of political and economic power in the hands of a one party state. Their development coincided with a vast antiworking class offensive by the state, based on a repressive apparatus backed up both by the army and, when necessary, by the troops of the fascist parties. This offensive had begun well before Hitler came to power. The main theatre had been Germany 1928-1932; in 1929, for example, the police under the command of the social democrat Zoergiebel had fired on a crowd of workers demonstrating on the first of May.

In 1932, during the miners' strike in Belgium, the government sent machine gun carriers and assault cars to occupy the pinheads. Reconnaissance planes were used to locate concentrations of strikers and send the gendarmes against them. On the radio, it was

forbidden to talk about the events. The strike was broken essentially by the unions and the POB (Parti Ouvrier Belge) who called on the workers "not to allow themselves to be taken in by irresponsible agitators who may be in the pay of the bosses" (*Le Peuple*, the POB's daily, 22 June 1932). This big strike showed the need for stricter union control. The Bondas report advocated — and this was taken up by the new left-leaning government — compulsory union membership, through reserving certain advantages to those who were unionised, such as indemnify in the case of strikes, and social security benefits¹.

Keeping up the democratic framework, whose content was becoming more and more empty as state organisms developed in a dizzying manner, was only possible in the industrialised countries least bit by the crisis. The growth of social discontent had, even before the Popular Front, been reflected in a succession of left or coalition governments. In all cases, planning and nationalisation expressed the same tendency towards a strengthening of the state on a singularly restricted economic foundation.

In countries that were less industrialised, like Austria, Spain, central Europe, the offensive of bosses and state took on a more brutal form. It was the army based on the local Nazi party which in February 1934 crushed the desperate uprising of the workers of Vienna. The same year the Spanish Republican government sent Franco's troops to put down the fierce resistance of the Asturian miners. From Rumania to Greece there was a growth of fascist-type organisations, which with the complicity of the national state took on the job of dealing with any working class reaction. Whatever its constitutional form, dictatorship became overt, and most often took on the shape of Hitler's or Mussolini's 'model'. It was all the more overt for the fact that the state, which was economically and politically weak, drew support from a broad mass of discontented petty-bourgeois; that the absence of any sizeable working class reaction pushed this mass into the hands of movements which promised them a bright tomorrow.

All these movements had undoubtedly been born out of the long series of defeats suffered by the European proletariat since 1923. Each set-back in the workers' struggle was necessarily followed by an offensive by the capitalist state which grew stronger each time.

The crisis, which was no longer a 'classical' cyclical crisis as in the 19th century, was leading inevitably towards world war. If the 20's had been a period of arms limitation, the 1930's was an of war economy. From 1933-34 this was advancing rapidly, above all in Germany and Russia. After 1936, all the other countries followed suit, whatever the form of their political regime. In a world which seemed too narrow to contain the expansion of the most modern apparatus of production, and after a period of reconstruction which had barely lasted six years (1923-29), war became for each state the last resort in the face of the bankruptcy of the world economy. With no new markets to conquer, all that remained was to redivide the world market; in this situation the weaker capitalist states were necessarily the most aggressive ones².

The establishment of a war economy made many of the economists of the time dream of reviving production without falling into a generalised conflict. Even revolutionary groups, including the Italian Left, did not escape from this illusion.

In fact, the Italo-Abyssinian conflict in 1935, then the remilitarisation of the Rhineland in 1936, were decisive steps in preparing the world war. The weapons that had been produced had to be used in local conflicts, had to have real military value, because they had no real commodity value in the accumulation of capital.

¹ Cf. Vereeken, Juillet 1932, *Journées révolutionnaires insurrectionnelles et grève générale des mineurs*, Brussels, 1932 pamphlet.

² Many elements on the crisis can be found in Fritz Sternberg, *The Conflict of the Century*.

In a bleak period for the class struggle, defined by the Italian Left as the long night of the counterrevolution, fascism and war seemed to be everywhere, while Russia and the parties linked to it were being increasingly integrated into the international manoeuvres of capitalism, through the League of Nations and the policy of national defence.

The whole of social and political life seemed to be crystallising around the question of war, in the name of the most varied ideologies: fascism and anti-fascism, democracy and totalitarianism.

The strikes in France and Belgium in 1936 seemed to bring a breath of hope to a working population that had been subjected to the most drastic austerity measures. But what hope could the revolutionaries of the time have when they saw that each strike took place under the banner of the Tricolour, and took the Marseillaise as its hymn? When the sound of the accordion was replaced by the whistle of bullets at Clichy in 1937? When wage rises were followed by inflation, and the continuing slide of revenues into the abyss of the war economy?

Democracy, fascism and Stalinism seemed to be moving towards the same goal with different methods. For the Italian Left, which had known the enthusiasm of revolutionary events in Italy, Russia, or Germany, this period of 1933 to 1936, then 1936 to the war — in which it nevertheless believed the revolution to be imminent — was the blackest in its existence, but also the richest in theoretical reflection.

Was there a difference in nature between fascism and democracy? Was fascism going to develop in all Popular Front variety? What capacities to react did the different fractions of the working class still have; to what extent could they still resist a generalised offensive? Were the emerging strikes revolutionary in nature? Were they purring off the perspective of generalised war? Those were the kinds of questions facing the Italian Left, and that had to be answered not only on the theoretical level — as in its platform, which was based mainly on the Italian and German experience — but in practice, from day to day, in the rush of events that would either confirm or refute its analyses.

For *Bilan* as for the PCI before the elimination of Bordiga, there could be no question of seeing fascism as anything other than a form of capitalism. If there was any difference in the two methods of running capitalist society, it lay in the change in historic period opened up by the first world war. In the period of capitalist ascendancy in the 19th century, ‘democracy’ was the mode of operation of the ruling class, which attempted to regulate the conflicts between its different factions through the parliamentary system. But “there is an irreducible and irreconcilable opposition between democracy and the workers’ position... the condition of life for the democratic regime consists precisely in forbidding the power of specific groups”. On the other hand, “the foundation of an organisation of the working class is a direct challenge to the theory of democracy”; and, “from a historical point of view, the opposition between ‘democracy’ and workers’ organs has expressed itself bloodily”. If at that time the workers’ movement had an orientation “towards the conquest of rights allowing the workers to accede to government or state functions... 1914 turned the page on this revision of Marxism and betrayal”³.

Fascism was a typical product of “capitalism in agony”. It marked the disappearance of parliamentarism as the real government of the bourgeoisie, whose internal contradictions had broken out in a generalised crisis. War and revolution were pushing the ruling class towards political disintegration.

This was the explanation for fascism’s physical attacks against the representatives of liberalism or the Socialist Parties — “which were no longer part of the workers’ world, but, since 1914, of the capitalist world, a fact which they proved by massacring the revolutionary

³ ‘Fascisme, Démocratie, Communisme’, *Bilan* no. 13, Dec. 1934.

proletariat immediately after the war”. The peaceful game of ‘democratic rules’ had been irremediably disturbed: “If, in the past, the conflicts between right and left took place in the parliamentary arena, today the decline of capitalism demands that they take on a more violent form.” (*Bilan* no. 9, July 1934, ‘La situation en France’).

The development of the fascist parties, their coming to power in Italy, Germany, and so in Austria, was not the expression of an antagonism between ‘fascism’ on the one side and democracy on the other. The two played a complementary role in opening up the counter-revolution. Fascism had been engendered by democracy, which ceded power to it legally:

In Italy, it was a government containing the representatives of democratic anti-fascism who stepped aside for a ministry led by the fascists, who thus gained a majority in this anti-fascist and democratic parliament even though rite fascists had only had a parliamentary group of 40 out of 500 deputies. In Germany, it was the anti-fascist Von Schleicher who stepped aside for Hitler, who had been called in by that other antifascist Hindenburg, the chosen man of the democratic and social democratic forces. (Bilan no. 13, December 1934: ‘Fascisme-démocratie: Communisme’).

In fact ‘fascism’ was the child of ‘democracy’, or more precisely of the left of social democracy. According to *Bilan*, social democracy had to leave government office once its counter-revolutionary tasks had been carried out. By crushing the proletariat physically (Germany) or ideologically (Italy) social democracy had done its job, and could now make way for fascism to complete the work it had begun:

Between democracy, between its finest flower, Weimar, antifascism, there is no real opposition: the one makes it possible to crush the revolutionary menace, disperses the proletariat, fags its consciousness; the other, at the end of this business, is the iron claw of capital, ensuring the rigid unity of capitalist society on the basis of smothering any threat from the proletariat. (Bilan no. 16, ‘L’écrasement du prolétariat allemand et l’avènement du fascisme’).

But why was it necessary to crush the class in this way, when there was no revolutionary threat in Germany, or even in Austria? *Bilan* pointed to the accelerating preparations for war as the only way out of the crisis. This solution was all the more pressing in countries like Germany and Italy, who had been fleeced by the Versailles treaty and, lacking any colonial outlets, had to launch themselves into a new imperialist struggle for the redivision of the world. Thus ‘fascism’ corresponded “to the need for an apparatus of domination which could not only repress the resistance or revolt of the oppressed, but which could mobilise the workers for war” (*Bilan* no. 10, August 1934, ‘Les événements du 30 juin en Allemagne’).

This is why, despite the contrasts and discussions existing inside the German and Italian state machines, the dislocation of fascism was not on the agenda. Neither the Matteotti affair, nor the liquidation of Röhm’s SA could lead to the internal collapse of fascism:

There is no reason to suppose that we are seeing a weakening of fascism in Germany... on the contrary, this repression indicates a considerable strengthening of its dictatorship, linked to real difficulties which it cannot overcome without the outbreak of world war. (Bilan no. 26, January 1936, ‘L’exécution de R. Claus’).

The Italian Left did not think that this strengthening of fascism meant that capitalism as a whole was moving towards the Nazi or Mussolini model. On the contrary, fascism, by giving birth to antifascism, had reinforced the ‘democratic’ powers. This polarisation between fascism and anti-fascism had even shown itself to be extremely useful in the ideological mobilisation for the next world war. As *Bilan* pointed out, by raising the spectre of fascism

the French and Belgian bourgeoisies had managed to strengthen the state's preparations for war. The choice between capitalism and communism was replaced by the choice between dictatorship and democracy.

We can see, for example, that today after 14 years of fascism in Italy, in a situation of very sharp inter-imperialist contrasts, the fascist movement is not at all becoming universal and that, on the contrary, the course of events that is leading us towards war is taking place under the banner of anti-fascism. This is the case in France, and also, despite the total absence of the basis for fascism and antifascism there, in Britain, one of the richest countries in terms of its colonial empire. Experience is confirming everyday that the diversify of fascist dictatorial and of liberal-democratic regimes makes it possible to place all the struggles between states under the banner of dictatorship vs. democracy' — the banner under which the working masses will be mobilised for the new world carnage. (Bilan no. 22, August-September. 1935, 'Rapport sur la situation en Italie').

The genesis of the Popular Front in France only confirmed *Bilan's* analysis. The Fraction pointed out that the reaction of the French workers had been diverted by the left and the unions onto the terrain of capitalism "because its banner was the defence of the republic, of democracy" (*Bilan* no. 16, Match 1935, 'La grève générale: expression de la lutte de classe'). The fact that the French workers were marching under the flag of trade union unity, of the Popular Front, under the Tricolour, marked the defeat of the proletariat and showed that it was being drawn ineluctably towards war.

It is under the sign of imposing mass demonstrations that the French proletariat is dissolving itself inside the capitalist regime. Despite the fact that there are thousands and thousands of workers marching in the streets of Paris, we have to say that in France as in Germany there is no longer a proletarian class fighting for its own historic interests. The 14th July marks a decisive moment in the process of the dislocation of the proletariat and in the reconstitution of the sacrosanct unity of the capitalist Nation. This was a true national festival, an official reconciliation of antagonistic classes, of the exploiters and the exploited; it was the triumph of Republicanism, which the bourgeoisie, for from restraining it with overzealous stewards, has encouraged to the point of apotheosis. The workers thus tolerated the Tricolour of their imperialism, sang the Marseillaise, even applauded Daladier, Cot and other capitalist ministers who, with Blum, Cachin and the rest solemnly swore 'to give bread to the workers, work to youth and peace to the world', in other words, lead, barracks, and imperialist war to all. (Bilan no. 21, July-August 1935, 'Sous le signe du 14 Juillet').

More than fascism, the meal enemy of the French and Belgian proletariat was democracy:

...Democratic rule is much better adapted to maintaining the privileges of the bourgeoisie, because it is much better than fascism at penetrating the workers' brain, at undermining from within, whereas fascism uses violence to crush the class maturation that capitalism has not managed to do away with. (Bilan no. 22, August 1935 'Les problèmes de la situation en France').

Under the banner of the Popular Front, 'democracy' had achieved the same result as fascism: the crushing of the French proletariat, its disappearance from the historical scene. "The proletariat momentarily no longer exists as a class, as a result of profound world-wide defeats." (*Bilan* no. 29, March-April 1936, 'L'écrasement du prolétariat français et ses enseignements internationaux').

This analysis gave rise to disagreements within the Italian Fraction. A minority held that the Popular Front was born out of the pressure of the class struggle, and expressed a degree of maturation and radicalisation of the working class. This was not the opinion of the majority, who while not denying the class character of the wildcat strikes in Brest and Toulon in 1935, considered that the strikes of June 1936 had been diverted onto the terrain of capitalism. In *Bilan* no. 31 (May-June 1936) the majority wrote:

...the Popular Front can only represent a form of capitalist rule, the form which best corresponds to the interests of the bourgeoisie. Far from facilitating the outbreak of workers struggles, its job is to dragoon the workers from the first day of its arrival in power, and even before that.

Bilan's analysis did not deny the power of the strikes. It noted that the French strikes had broken out “rather like the strikes of May ‘36 in Belgium: outside and against the unions, in short as wildcat’ movements” (*Bilan* no. 31, ‘La victoire électorale du Front Populaire en France’). Without making concessions to the enthusiasm of the Trotskyist groups who saw these strikes as the beginning of the ‘French revolution’, the Italian Fraction observed that “the enthusiasm élan of the proletarians has been struck to the back of the Tricolour, thus undermining their real significance”; that “the occupation of the factories has been carried out under strict union discipline: ‘not one bolt must go missing’”. In conclusion, *Bilan* argued that “there has been room neither for a new consciousness nor for a new form of organisation, whereas the influence of the capitalist parties and the grip of the CGT have been considerably reinforced”. (*Bilan* no. 32, June-July 1936, ‘Le prolétariat a répondu au Front Populaire’).

The French bourgeoisie had thus succeeded in channelling the strike movement to its own advantage. The Popular Front, far from being an “expression of the weakness of the French bourgeoisie”, was, on the contrary, “an expression of strength” (*Bilan* no. 32, op. cit.). The mobilisation of the workers of France behind the Popular Front, which was developing a whole programme of rearmament, was thus underway. When the Popular Front was eliminated from the government, and the repression started in earnest — such as the shootings at Clichy and the banning of the general strike of 30 November 1938 — *Bilan* concluded that the left had fully completed its task of demobilising the class. Fascism in Italy and Germany would be strengthened by this:

The Popular Front, through its struggle against the French proletariat, has thus deprived the workers of Italy and Germany of the only help that could support them in the ferocious struggle against fascism; it is the direct auxiliary of Mussolini and Hitler. (Bilan no. 40, April-May 1937, ‘Premier mai 1937’).

But for *Bilan*, more than the Popular Front, it was Russia which played the decisive role in the triumph of the counter-revolution. On the ideological level, “the role of Russia has done more to kill the idea of the proletarian revolution, of the proletarian state, than any ferocious repression by capitalism” (*Bilan* no. 17, April 1935, ‘De la Commune de Paris à la Commune russe’).

For *Bilan*, the Russian state still had a dual nature: proletarian, by its origins, in the Russian framework; and capitalist because of its membership of “alliances for the war” (*Bilan* no. 2). Its recognition as a state by the USA, its adherence to the League of Nations, marked an acceleration of preparations for war. “Russia’s entry into the League of Nations immediately poses the question of Russia’s participation in one of the imperialist blocs for the next war.” Consequently, the Italian Left, unlike the Trotskyists, rejected any defence of the USSR: “The duty of the workers of the whole world is thus to wage an equal and

simultaneous struggle against it, as against the other states.” (*Bilan* no. 2, December 1933, ‘Une victoire de la contre-révolution mondiale: les Etats-Unis reconnaissent l’Union soviétique’).

In 1935, when Stalin recognised as ‘positive’ the Laval government’s preparations for war — a statement immediately supported by the PCF — the Italian Fraction had no further hesitation in breaking officially all its links with the Communist Parties.

Until 1935, the Italian Fraction had continued to call itself “the Left Fraction of the Communist Party of Italy”. It was more as a reference to the revolutionary past of the party, to Bordiga’s day, than because of a belief in the revolutionary nature of the PCI, that the Fraction maintained this name after 1928. The opening up of a period of counter-revolution, the long series of defeats since 1927, convinced the Italian Fraction that there was no longer any hope of reconquering the Italian Party by eliminating its ‘centrist leadership’. To maintain any reference to the PCI in the present conditions, when the CPs were supporting the principle of national defence, and when Russia was integrating itself into the web of alliances, appeared more and more of an anachronism to the majority of the Fraction’s militants.

The Fraction’s 1935 Congress

The Congress of the Italian Fraction held in Brussels in autumn 1935 thus had the task of setting this question. A minority represented above all by the central organs (executive commission), out of loyalty to the past, but above all to conserve an organic link with the Communist International as it had been at the beginning, remained hesitant. It was afraid that to suppress the term “Fraction of the PCI” would give rise within the organisation to hopes of proclaiming the party, whereas it was clear that the period was not a revolutionary one.

In order to prepare the Congress, Vercesi was given the job of writing a draft resolution on the problems of organisation. This draft, published under the name of Alphonse, sought to mark the definitive closing of a whole historical period; it underlined the fact that the CPs had become part of “the concert of the counter-revolution” and thus that there was no possibility of regenerating them. This was a crucial text in the life of the Fraction, which is why it is necessary to quote it at length. It declared:

- *That in 1933, with the death of the Third International, came the definite closure of the phase which posed the possibility of the regeneration of the Comintern thanks to the victory of the proletarian revolution in a sector of capitalism, a victory whose precondition would have been the conquest of the leadership of the struggle by the left.*
- *That the centrist parties, still organically linked to the corpse of the Third international, are already operating in the concert of the counter-revolution, today presenting their candidature for the role of direct organs of imperialism in order to drag the proletariat into the abyss of imperialist war.*
- *The Fraction declares that the phase envisaged in 1928, of a possible regeneration of the parties and of the Comintern, is now closed, and consequently that:*
 - *the Left Fraction takes on the task of reconstructing, independently, and exclusively around itself, the communist party of tomorrow, through its work of training militants;*
 - *the only elements who can adhere to the Left Fraction of the PCI are these who accept the texts adopted by the Pantin Conference and who recognise as an essential task the critical examination of the whole experience of the Third International, of the degenerated proletarian state, in order to elaborate, in a more advanced historical direction, the*

material for the world party of tomorrow. (*Bilan* no. 18, April-May 1935, ‘Projet de résolution sur les problèmes d’organisation’, by Alphonse).

A discussion opened up prior to the Congress on the need to suppress the reference to the PCI; and on the moment for founding the party, which the resolution placed solely in the hands of the Fraction.

A *Manifesto*, written by Vercesi in the name of the Fraction, dated 21 July and distributed in French to the workers of France and Belgium, called an then to leave the Communist Parties immediately. It called on then to “fight against all fatherlands: fascist, democratic, or Soviet”. But, above all, it proclaimed: “Not one more minute in these instruments of the world-wide counter-revolution”, in the CPs who had been “reconciled with the interests of world capitalism”. (*Bilan* no. 23, September-October 1935, ‘En dehors des partis communistes devenus des instruments du capitalisme mondial’).

The invitation to leave the CPs was also, logically, an invitation to get rid of the reference to the PCI. This was the conclusion drawn by Vercesi, supported by the organisation’s rank and file:

... On the very terrain of the process of the formation of tomorrow’s party, there has been a profound modification which should be recognised by changing the name of our organisation; we can no longer refer to a party which has gone over to capitalism, a party which has taken on an equivalent function to capitalism impregarding the war... for this reason, I propose that the Congress adopts the name ‘Italian Fraction of the Communist Left’. (*Bilan*, op. cit.).

This view was not shared by a number of militants with positions of responsibility in the organisation, such as Jacobs, Pieri and Bianco, who thought that “the reference to the PCI did not constitute any obstacle to the future functioning of the Fraction”, and even that it would facilitate “the development of the Fraction’s militants who, in Italy tomorrow, will reconstitute the real communist party in the revolutionary tempest”. More important than the name, for them, was the need to affirm that the party could not emerge from nowhere, that the Fraction which would form it was necessarily linked to the old parties of the Comintern. They added that this reference was “still linked to a historic body which, with the foundation of the party at Livorno and the civil war that followed, was rooted in the body of the Italian proletariat”.

In fact this minority, composed of the most experienced militants in the Fraction, was afraid that the organisation would imitate Trotsky and the Trotskyists and proclaim the party in a historically unfavourable moment. As Jacobs put it: ‘To believe that the Fraction could lead movements of proletarian desperation would be to compromise its intervention in the events of tomorrow’. On the other hand “keeping the term PCI means proclaiming our will to maintain the Fraction until events make it possible to transform it into a party...”

This fear seemed to be based on the intervention of militants like Candiani who affirmed that “the party retains its function through a theoretical and organic activity equally in a depressive period”; that the Manifesto of the Congress was “the indication that one period was closing and another opening, one with the possibility of political work”.

In order to close the debate, three motions were submitted to the Congress:

- Vercesi’s motion. It declared essentially that the Congress had to consider that “the process of transforming the fraction into the party is the same as the transformation of the present reactionary situation into a new revolutionary situation”. But the motion added, paradoxically, that “each moment of the present situation is a step towards our inevitable transformation into a party”,

- the motion from Jacobs, Pieri, Bianco. It asserted that “It is only in the course of the war, in a situation which contains a perspective of revolutionary movements, that the Fraction can take up positions directly oriented towards its transformation into a party”;
- the motion from Candiani, Gatto Mammone, Piero. “The Congress considers... that it can no longer call itself the fraction of a party which has definitively gone over to the ranks of the enemy, and decides on the denomination ‘Italian Fraction of the Communist Left’”.

In order to avoid divisions in the organisation, Vercesi withdrew his resolution in favour of the one from Gatto, Piero, Candiani, but proposed the following amendment:

The Congress of the Fraction conceives this process of its transformation into a party solely through the triumph of its positions, of its cadres and the expulsion of all the Socialist, Centrist and other currents from the working class. It is only on this basis that it can intervene in class conflicts and during the course of the war.

This resolution was adopted by a very small majority of delegates (8 votes to 7). But this was the way in which the name of the Fraction was changed, responding to the wish of the majority of militants; while at the same time it reaffirmed the Italian Left’s position that the party could only be born in a revolutionary period, which it thought would come out of the war.

As we will see later on, the differences were far from having been absorbed; they would reappear at the time of the war in Spain and up until World War II, leading to major splits.

In fact the Congress minority — which perhaps represented the majority of the organisation in 1935 — did not understand that the historic period opened in 1927-33 was one of profound reflux. Very dynamic, often impatient and voluntarist (some of its leading members had come out of *Réveil Communiste*), it thought that the perspective was one of developing class struggles with a revolutionary content. Although it subscribed to the analysis of the Fraction, it did not really believe that war was inevitable. This was the minority which in 1936 was to split after serving in the POUM militias, finally ending up in Union Communiste.

The Congress majority, on the other hand, was much more prudent. It considered that the counterrevolutionary course could only be broken by the war. Less ‘interventionist’, no doubt expressing a certain inward-looking attitude, it believed that the primordial task, in order to prepare the future, was to make a balance sheet of the revolutionary period opened up by the Russian revolution.

The evolution of the Italian Fraction, especially after 1937, showed that the two tendencies often intermingled. One saw the war in Spain as the opening act of the world revolution; the other saw ‘local’ wars as expressing the exacerbation of conflicts between bourgeoisie and proletariat, and that this also would lead to the proletarian revolution.

However, the Fraction’s Congress clearly affirmed that the perspective was one of war. The Italian-Abyssinian conflict was a decisive step towards a world conflagration. This particular war was the only passable response of a weak capitalism, literally at the end of its tether and ready for any adventure. But, for *Bilan*, Italy’s entry into this war mirrored the situation of world capitalism as a whole.

However, although it saw no sign of a revolutionary resurgence in Europe, despite the strikes in Belgium, France, Britain and America, and although it considered that despair reigned over the class, the Fraction made an exception for Italy. This ‘sick man of Europe’ had crushed the proletariat physically, but not ideologically. The report presented at the Congress by Jacobs saw in the existence of the Fraction, the only organisation defending intransigent revolutionary positions, the undeniable sign of the class consciousness of the Italian working

class: “*The fact that the Left Fraction is isolated today, as were the Bolsheviks before the war, could indicate that the conditions for a revolutionary maturation exist only in Italy today*”.

The task of the Fraction was therefore full of responsibilities for the future, because “this element of consciousness depends entirely upon the capacity or incapacity of the Marxist nucleus of the proletariat to act upon the historic situation of the working class.” (*Bilan* no. 17, April 1935, ‘Projet de resolution sur les problèmes de la fraction de gauche’). But, when there was an upsurge of the Italian workers in 1943, the Left Fraction failed to arrive at the rendez-vous...

The Fraction isolated

Indeed, the Italian Fraction of the Communist Left, up until the war, and particularly between 1933 and 1936, could have no doubts about its tragic isolation. The pressures of a period in which each defeat was presented as a victory by the various parties which had an influence over the working class, led little by little to a break, or at least a weakening of contacts with the workers’ milieu, and even with the weak revolutionary milieu.

At this point the Fraction seems to have maintained its membership, which in 1936 was probably no more than 60-70 militants. Though some of them had left, others — coming from Union Communiste — had joined the Fraction, refusing to support any position smacking of antifascism or ‘critical support’ for the Popular Front.

Material difficulties weighed heavily on a mass of the militants, the immense majority of whom were workers. Unemployment added a greater and greater burden to their already mediocre living standards. In Belgium and France, deportation was often the common lot of these Italian émigrés. In Belgium, the mere possession of *Prometeo* could lead to being searched over and over again. It was only Vercesi’s good relations with the Socialist leaders which could, to a very slight extent, protect the best known ‘Bordigist’ workers from the most drastic police measures in Belgium⁴.

When they were not under surveillance by the local police, they were watched by the Italian OVRA, which was present in Paris and Brussels and spied vigilantly on the members of the Italian Fraction. It is very probable that in Brussels a spy of the Italian police kept the Fraction’s activities under permanent observation, even penetrating the section meetings⁵.

On top of the OVRA theme was the Russian GPU. The GPU’s special weapon was Ersilio Ambrogi, an old militant of the Italian Left. Returning from Berlin to Moscow in 1932, he quickly capitulated. His former role as a divisional general of the GPU made it easier for this police organ to hold him in its clutches. Threats to deport his second wife and his son did the rest. Having been expelled from the Russian CP, in March 1932 he asked to be reintegrated. In a letter addressed to the party’s control commission, he claimed that “the experience of the undeniable successes achieved, the giant progress in the industrialisation of

⁴ Ottorino Perrone (Vercesi), who was a member of the office workers’ union, had excellent relations with the Socialist typesetters union in Brussels.

⁵ The police reports of the time, which in 1945 and afterwards were communicated at their request to militants who had been investigated during the fascist dictatorship, never indicated the informant’s name. He seems to have had access to all the meetings of the Brussels section, and even of the central committee which sat in this city (cf. Paolo Spriano, *Storia del Partito comunista italiano*, t. II), in the section dealing with the Italian Fraction). In 1938 suspicion fell on Alfredo Bianco, an EC member in Paris; he was expelled. After the war, quite recently, Dante Corneli (in *Lo Stalinismo in Italia e nell’emigrazione antifascista*, Roma, 1977) did not hesitate to accuse Alfredo Morelli of being the informer. In fact neither one nor the other — until we have proof to the contrary — seem to fit in with these grave accusations. We must bear in mind the extremely difficult atmosphere of the 1930s. Each militant, faced with a hostile outside world, felt himself to be constantly surveyed and threatened. Suspicions sprang up like poisonous mushrooms. People tended to lose their heads. This historical enigma remains unsolved. (Bruno Bibbi, known as Bianco (1901-1979) joined the PCInt after the war. After 1952, and until his death, he was a member of *Programma Comunista*).

agriculture, the control of the countryside thus assured, the tendency for classes to disappear” had pushed him to re-examine the situation. This letter was obviously written under constraint. The “progress” of Stalinist agriculture would make one laugh if one didn’t know that Ambrogi, like many other militants exiled in Russia, had been led to capitulate and renege on his real beliefs. In a last gasp of rebellion he concluded — in an expression with a double meaning — that he did not “intend to reject responsibility for his past fractional activity”. The references he made to the IInd Congress of the Comintern and the 21 conditions, about which the Stalinist Comintern was making “a redoubled campaign for their application” were of a similar kind (see *Bilan* no. 6, April 1934, ‘Maximo rejoint le front de la contre-révolution centrisme’).

Bilan recognised that “Maximo has dissipated the equivocation that has lasted two years by totally menacing the positions of the Left”.

Two years later, Ambrogi, no doubt with the GPU’s agreement, made contact with the Italian consulate in Moscow. He obtained authorisation to go to Belgium, his archives to be sent by diplomatic channels. The Fraction refused any contact with him, knowing him to be a double agent. He was under surveillance both by the CPU and the OVRA. In 1940 he wrote in a Belgian newspaper an article eulogising fascism. Returning to Italy in 1942, he was acquitted, but was then deported to Germany. In 1956, he was a member of the Italian CP.⁶

This itinerary was not fortuitous. It was symbolic. Ambrogi reflects a whole epoch of the suffocation of the revolutionary epoch of the 20s, an epoch which deliberated the small revolutionary milieu. Rather than loyalty to the revolutionary positions of the past, desertions if not betrayals were the norm. In October 1934, *Bilan*, addressing itself to its readers, bitterly recognised this fact:

Our isolation is thus accentuated in proportion to the debacle along the entire workers’ front. Some want at any cost to save this degenerated state from a definitive collapse, and in so doing became allies of social-democracy; others leave the terrain of struggle and wallow in indifference. (Bilan no. 12, October 1934).

As the USSR and the CPs integrated themselves into the preparations for war, the position of the Italian Left became more difficult. It was subjected to the repression not only of the ‘democratic’ or ‘fascist’ police, but also to that of the CPs⁷. In Russia, a militant of the Italian Left — despite the Fraction’s campaign to get him freed⁸ — disappeared in a concentration camp. In countries like France and Belgium, the Italian militants were denounced in meetings or demonstrations by the PCI, the PCF or the PCB as ‘Bordigo-fascists’ and were often subjected to physical violence and even death threats by Stalinist shock-troops.

As for gaining an influence in the ‘mass’ organisations, this became impossible. With most of them expelled from the PCI between 1926 and 1929, they were simultaneously driven out of the unions. This was the case for example with Bruno Proserpio (known as Milanese), a militant of the Fraction in Marchienne-au-Pont (Belgium), expelled in 1929

⁶ In order to follow the ‘odyssey of Ambrogi, cf. Anne Mettwie-Morelli: *Lettres et documents d’ Ersilio Ambrogi*, Annali Feltrinelli, Milan, 1977.

⁷ A militant of the Fraction in Lyon, ‘Piccino’ (Otello Ricceri), was selling *Prometeo* in 1931. He was attacked by Italian Stalinists who threatened to kill him. In order to get away he had to fire in the air. His assailants from the PCI denounced him to the French police, who beat him up so badly that he was handicapped for the rest of his life. (Testimony of Marco Chirik).

⁸ This militant imprisoned in Russia, Luigi Calligaris, was the editor of a clandestine communist paper in Trieste from 1926-1932. He was banished to the island of Lipari, from which he escaped. Taking refuge in Moscow, he was arrested in 1935, and deported to the White Sea area. Letters from the Fraction demanding what had happened to him were not answered. The PCI, via the ‘wigmaker’ Germanetto, let it be understood that Calligaris had ‘repented’ and was now ‘content’ to work in Siberia ‘for socialism’. The companion of Virgilio Verdaro had better ‘luck’. Reduced to the most extreme poverty in Moscow, to the point that her child died of hunger, she was miraculously able to leave Russia in 1944-45 and joined her companion in Italian Switzerland.

from the PCI and the union. Political refugees, often illegal, threatened with deportation at any moment, the militants tried to find help from ‘Secours Rouge’. Expelled from Luxemburg in 1930, ‘Milanese’ was able to enter France thanks to this organisation. But very quickly militants were expelled from it even though Secours Rouge claimed to be open to all working class victims of repression. Subjected to the control of the Stalinist Comintern, it would only defend and materially aid those who submitted to the directives of the CPs⁹.

This political (rather than physical) isolation from the working class was manifested in the most striking way in the absence of any links with proletarian youth. In Liebknecht’s words, the latter was the ‘flame of the revolution’, but it was generally missing from the ranks of the Fraction. Most of the militants were between 30 and 50 years old; new blood was not flowing in as it did during the revolutionary period of 1917-23¹⁰.

This indifference of working class youth towards revolutionary activity — which sometimes took the form of hostility to the old revolutionaries “who had become objects of contempt for young workers, and sometimes victims of their fanatical blindness”¹¹ — was also the fruit of the period of counterrevolution. The young were left to themselves and became factors in the spread of anti-working class ideas and illusions:

Under the impulse of October 1917, working class youth radiated round the world the hopes raised by this great victory of the world proletariat. When the latter went through its first defeats, the young people tended to withdraw into themselves and as defeat followed defeat, as the resulting political divisions multiplied and as the length and intensity of the crisis ravaged the workers ranks, the youth was first seized by disquiet, then by indifference, and was finally completely disoriented, falling into the prevailing atmosphere of action for action’s sake as peddled by the reactionary organisations. Finding itself alone, left to itself in the face of an extremely complex situation, unused to theoretical work and feverishly looking for an activity which would allow it to forget reality, the youth easily became an element in the acceleration, maturation and triumph of the objectives of the capitalist class. (Bilan no. 12, October 1934, “Le problème de la jeunesse” by Hilden (Hildebrand).)

In such a situation, it was understandable that militants close to the Fraction should give into despair and fall into unthought-out actions. This was the case with Beiso, a former PCI militant, responsible for its activities in France. He had been accused by the PCI of being an agent provocateur. Hostile to the policies of Stalin who had signed the celebrated pact with Laval, and sympathetic to the positions of the ‘Bordigists’, he was expelled from the party. Enraged by the accusations against him, in August 1935 he shot down the PCI’s leader in Paris, Montanari. Sentenced to five years in gaol, he was only defended by the Fraction; the Trotskyists did not solidarise with him¹².

⁹ This information about the activity of the Fraction in Marchienne-au-Pont is taken from the interview with Bruno Proserpio by Mrs Anne Morelli, in her thesis on the Italian immigration in Belgium between the two wars. We are extremely thankful that she has shown us the pages dealing with the ‘Bordigist’ current in Belgium.

¹⁰ Bordiga, in the obituary he wrote for Perrone (*Programma Comunista*, October 1957) underlined: “In 1921 at the Livorno Congress, Ottorino was 20; along with the whole socialist youth at the time, he was with us. The Serratinists and Turatinists put us in the minority, but we left them without any of the youth”.

¹¹ *Communisme* no. 4, 15 July 1937 ‘Le rôle de la jeunesse prolétarienne dans le mouvement ouvrier’.

¹² Cf. *Bilan* no. 22, September 1935, ‘l’ attentat de Beiso’. Trotsky, in an article he devoted to this affair (“For a jury of workers’ organisations”) noted that Beiso has been through some extremely painful ordeals which have seemed intolerable to him and which, in the end, have made him unbalanced and pushed him to commit an act both irrational and criminal”. He concluded that it was necessary to “throw as much light as possible on this affair” in order to prevent “the repetition of people being killed by revolver shots in the revolutionary milieu”. The PCI accused Beiso of being at one and the same time a “fascist”, a “Trotskyist” and a “Bordigist”.

Such an act showed the pressures and hostilities faced by revolutionary militants who refused to go along with the ride. The weakest often responded to their isolation with acts of despair.

The Left Fraction was perfectly conscious of this dramatic, stifling situation and did not seek to bide it. Its isolation was the price it had to pay for not renegeing on its positions; its activity had to be restricted to propaganda in an increasingly restricted milieu:

It's clear that at the present time we can only propagate political positions without the proletariat having the possibility of applying them. This does not mean that our positions are wrong, but just that it is necessary to tear the masses away from the capitalist influences which are dissolving them... if there is one chance of avoiding the massacres of a new war and of unleashing an insurrectionary struggle, it resides in the strict maintenance of the principled positions of communism, which the vanguard will have to have succeeded in linking to widescale movements of struggle. (Bilan no. 12, October 1934 'Le problème de la Sarre: Non! Non! Non!')

Resignations, betrayals, the hostile atmosphere weighing on the Fraction within the working class, could however not get the better of militants hardened by revaluation and repression. While the Fraction was composed of workers, it was not 'workerist'. It had been solidified as much by its past as by its theoretical framework. Working not for the immediate but for the future, it thought — following the Russian example — that only a war could raise it out of obscurity by provoking the revolution. Far from flattering this or that action of the workers, which tended to end in yet another retreat, in yet another procession behind the Tricolour and in expressions of anti-German chauvinism, it always held on to a critical analysis of events. "The reconstruction of the working class, thrown into disarray by the bourgeoisie" could only come through the revolutionary seizure of power.

The Fraction saw this resurgence of the revolutionary class coming essentially out of the struggle on the economic terrain, through the defensive general strike "against wage reductions and threats to the workers' gains", and the condition that this was not used by the governments of the 'Popular Front', who would inevitably turn it against the proletariat. The failure of the strikes in Belgium and France in 1936 seemed to the Fraction to be the crowning glory of capitalism's victory banquet.

The central activity was therefore the political preparation of working class militants through the development of the Fraction's influence in the small revolutionary milieu. Far from theorising its isolation, *Bilan* dedicated itself to discussion and the confrontation of its positions with other political groups situating themselves outside Stalinism and social-democracy. Such groups would have to show a great deal of political clarity and a real will to discuss for a community of work to be established between them and the Italian Left.

Discussions with Union Communiste

In 1933, however, it was less the Italian Left that would polarise revolutionary militants than the Opposition, who even managed to provoke a split by two militants of the Paris section: Mathieu (real name Severino) and Gandi (Compegni), who published an ephemeral bulletin (3 issues): *Pour la Renaissance Communiste*. This split took place on the basis of defining Russia as state capitalist. The regroupment that began to take place around Union Communiste seemed to offer them a wider field for intervention. Their attempts to get their positions across within this new organisation ended in failure, and these two militants withdrew from political life.

The year 1933, the year of defeat in Germany, was rich in splits from Trotskyism. Faced with Trotsky's attempts to proclaim a IVth International¹³ and to work with left social-democracy, then with right-wing social-democracy in practising 'entrism', half of the French Communist League split. 35 militants joined the first Union Communiste formed by Chazé and the XVth rayon (Courbevoie, Nanterre) with Bagnolet's opposition. This group, which lasted until the war, became the most important numerically, having more members than the Italian Left and the small Trotskyist group reduced to a handful by the split¹⁴.

While the Fraction intervened orally at the regroupment conference, contact between the two organisations remained very difficult. In its first issues, Union Communiste could hardly be distinguished from Trotskyism, except that it criticised its haste to form the IVth International. Like Trotsky, it criticised the SP and the CP for not carrying out the united front against fascism. During the events of February 1934, it called for workers' militias and reproached these two parties for not setting them up to fight fascism. In April 1934, it noted with satisfaction that the Socialist Left was "taking up a revolutionary attitude". Vis-à-vis democracy, no. 3 of *Internationale*, organ of Union Communiste, affirmed that it was for the defence of threatened democratic freedoms, and for a partial defence of French bourgeois democracy. In 1935, at the time of the Stalin-Laval pact, it made contact with *Révolution Proletarienne*, same pacifists and the Trotskyist groups, calling for these elements to come together in a new Zimmerwald. In 1936, it participated on a consultative basis in the creation of the new Trotskyist party (Parti Ouvrier Internationaliste).

An evolution took place in Union Communiste when it began to question antifascism and refused any indirect support for the Popular Front, which it defined as the ideal instrument of the bourgeoisie.

Similarly, there was a rapid evaluation on the Russian question in the group, which was animated by Henri Chazé, Laroche and Lastéradé de Chavigny. It rejected any defence of the USSR, denouncing the "Russian bureaucracy" as a new bourgeoisie.

The Italian Fraction followed the evolution of Union Communiste with a good deal of distrust. The splits that took place in Union Communiste towards left social-democracy, its activism in the committees against the 'Union Sacrée', in fronts engulfing anarchists and Trotskyists within the Technicians' Federations in which Chazé was active, none of this seemed very encouraging to *Bilan*. The latter noted that "... the Union has endlessly called for 'coming together', symbols of confusion and mystification", and it asked whether UC warned to "finish with zigzags and vacillation". In 1936 it concluded that while it was possible to discuss with the *Internationale* group, there was no possibility of joint work:

...at present we see no possibility of establishing a serious community of work with the Union. We are and will remain fully prepared to discuss with it, so that the comrades of the Union and also our own comrades can draw some clarity out of such polemics. (Bilan no. 29, March-April 1936, 'L'écrasement du prolétariat français et ses enseignements internationaux', report for discussion by Jacobs).

UC was also very distrustful towards *Bilan*. *Internationale* saw in the Fraction's attitude an excess of pride, as the implacable messianism of Italian immigrants:

... the Bordigists declare themselves to be virtually predestined to become the nucleus of the future international organisation just because they are Italians, and thus armed with an

¹³ For the relations between the Trotskyist movement and organisations like the SAP and RSP, cf. Michel Dreyfus, *Bureau de Londres ou IV^e Internationale? Socialistes de gauche et Trotskyistes en Europe (1933-1940)*. Doctoral thesis, Paris-10 Nanterre, 1978.

¹⁴ The exit of the 'Jewish group' in 1933, which went on to join Union Communiste, reduced the Frank and Molinier Ligue Communiste to a small group of perhaps 30 militants.

unequalled experience and political-doctrinal framework. (Bulletin d'informations et de liaisons, no. 2, November 1935).

Equally difficult were the relations with the American groups which had moved away from official Trotskyism.

The Communist League of Struggle

The first group, Communist League of Struggle, had emerged in 1931 out of a split with Cannon's group, which represented official Trotskyism. This group, led by Vera Bush and Weisbord, had made contact with all the groups opposed to Trotsky in order to create a 'left communist' international organisation. It contacted the New York Federation, and even sent delegates to Europe to discuss both with the Italian Left and the Union Communiste. In 1935, it proposed to *Bilan* an international conference, with which the Fraction refused to associate. The Communist League of Struggle accused the 'Bordigists' of isolating themselves:

In refusing to associate yourselves in any way with other groups, the Italian Fraction is condemning itself to live in isolation, detached not only from the activities of other oppositional groups, even those which are quite close to you in certain areas, but also detached from the activities of the working class in so far as these activities appear in its political organisations. (Vera Bush in *Bilan* no. 26, December 1935).

In fact there were profound disagreements. The Communist League defended the regime of the Negus at the time of the Italian-Abyssinian war, in the name of the principle of national liberation struggles'. Supporting the USSR, it rack up Trotsky's theses on the permanent revolution', which affirmed the possibility of bourgeois revolutions supported by Russia, a country whose economy was 'socialist' and 'proletarian' in content.

While the Italian Left did not refuse to discuss and polemics, it did reject any voluntarist attempt to create international oppositions, blocs of alliances aimed at artificially proclaiming new Internationals. The experience of its work with the International Left Opposition had convinced it that such methods could only lead to confusion, as long as the new questions arising out of the defeats in Russia and Germany had nor been clarified and deepened to their very roots:

We categorically refuse to collaborate in any initiative to form an international organisation, if we are not guaranteed against the repetition of the numerous enterprises of confusion which have infected the Communist movement in recent years. Despite our refusal to participate in such a conference, and as long as you continue your principled struggle against the two existing Internationals and all the currents attached to them (even the extreme left of Trotskyism), we still consider it useful to carry on a polemic between the two organisations on the problems posed to the proletariat. (Reply by the Fraction, Jacobs, *Bilan* no. 26).

The Revolutionary Workers' League and Oehler

The second group, a spur from the Trotskyist Workers' Party in 1935, founded by Hugo Oehler (hence the label 'Oehlerism' given to it by Trotsky) called itself the Revolutionary Workers' League. It published a paper called *Fighting Workers* and declared itself to be a partisan of the IVth International. Very activist, it had presented a candidate to the 1936 presidential election. It declared itself in favour of the defence of the USSR, where "the

dictatorship of the proletariat remains”. Its position on Russia was very contradictory. It defined it as bourgeois: “In the hands of the Stalinists, the state is constituted by a political, industrial bureaucracy which oppresses the masses in its own interests and in those of the world bourgeoisie.” This position was quite close to that of *Bilan*, but the conclusion drawn logically by the Italian Left was the non-defence of the USSR.

The two organisations had opposing positions on other points, such as the ‘progressive’ nature of national liberation struggles, democratic slogans and antifascism.

Another group, close to the other two, the League for a Revolutionary Workers’ Party, led by the economist Field, was very workerist and wanted to create a party immediately without any prior discussion on aims and principles.

All the discussions in New York between the Fraction and these three groups ended in failure. The Spanish events (see below) were to complete the split between these groups and the ‘Bordigist’ current.

The Italian Fraction reproached these groups not so much for their political positions as for their incoherent attitude. The Italian Left was not an organisation which would suddenly change positions in the most confused manner. It would only modify its positions through a slow but sure process of discussion.

For the Fraction, a Communist organisation was too serious a thing to be subjected to 180 degree turns; it had too great a sense of responsibility — the inheritance of the time when it constituted the leadership of the PCI — to compromise it through acts or positions which it judged to be premature.

But above all it was practically the only organisation, along perhaps with a part of the German-Dutch Left and the Mattick group in the USA, to define the period opened up by the victory of Nazism in Germany as one of counterrevolution. In such a period, it was a matter of resisting the ride towards war rather than rushing towards a premature regroupment. It saw the political confusion which characterised the groups which emerged and then quickly disappeared as the expression of the general immaturity of the revolutionary movement, which was paying tribute to the atmosphere of profound counter-revolution. It saw the importance of preserving its own strength. Not that it rejected discussion and polemic. *Prometeo* and *Bilan* were full of polemics and discussion texts with all the groups to the left of Trotskyism which situated themselves on the basis of the IIIrd International. But it considered that its first task was one of theoretical clarification in order to be able to intervene without peril in the political milieu, and to prepare for its future tasks as a party in the resurgence of the revolution, which was a distant prospect.

The definitive break with Trotskyism

By 1934, the break with Trotskyism was total. Trotsky had proclaimed the necessity for the IVth International because he believed a revolutionary upsurge to be imminent. During the events of May 1936 he declared that “the French revolution has begun”. His attitude was identical during the war in Spain and the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, where for him the ‘national liberation’ of China was not the prelude to world war but the prologue to the ‘Chinese Revolution’.

At the beginning *Bilan* was careful to distinguish between Trotsky and the Trotskyist movement, which it saw as false friends of the illustrious leader of the Red Army and the Comintern. In April 1934, when Trotsky was chased out of France, the Fraction still described him as “a luminous example of revolutionary courage” and demanded that “the old Communist leader be allowed to return to Russia in order to be able to continue his struggle for the world revolution” (*Bilan* no. 6, ‘La bourgeoisie française expulse Leon Trotsky’). A few

months afterwards, when the “old Communist leader” had decided in favour of the ‘Bolshevik-Leninist’ groups entering the SFIO in France and the POB in Belgium, *Bilan* modified its judgement and no longer distinguished the leader from his disciples:

Trotsky has rapidly disappointed us. Today he is slipping and we wonder whether this is a definitive fall on his part or an eclipse which the events of tomorrow will dissipate. In any case, in the present situation, we have to wage a pitiless struggle against him and his partisans who have crossed the Rubicon and rejoined social —democracy. (Bilan no. 11 September 1934, ‘Les Bolchevik-Léninistes entrent dans la SFIO’).

The Italian Left, which had learned from Bolshevism that social-democracy had definitively betrayed during World War I by defending the war and the ‘fatherland in danger’, and that this treason was irreversible, proclaimed that the Trotskyists’ entry into the SFIO marked their disappearance as a revolutionary current “in the International of traitors and renegades”. Thus the IVth International was a “stillborn abortion” for having tried to “bypass the rout of the masses and the crisis of the revolution and take a whip to history, one made up of desperate desires”. The conclusion was a struggle without mercy against Trotsky, a “great eagle” who had fallen into the mud, and against the ‘Bolshevik-Leninists’ who were “taking up their place in the enemy’s ranks, and which will have to be swept away in order to set up the new organisms of the proletariat” (*Bilan* no. 10, August 1934, ‘De l’Internationale deux et trois quarts à la Deuxième Internationale’).

First joint work with the Belgian Ligue des Communistes Internationalistes

Up until 1936-37, only the Ligue des Communistes Internationalistes in Belgium worked in close contact with the Italian Fraction.

As we have seen, the LCI was born out of a split with the group in Charleroi led by Lesoil. It was really formed in 1932. Unlike *Prometeo*, it wanted to orient its work towards the creation of a second communist party and rejected “the proposal to constitute itself as an internal fraction of the official CP as being dangerous and leading to new and cruel disappointments for the development of a communist influence in Belgium” (Declaration, November 1930). In contact with the Italian Fraction in Belgium, in 1932 it went back to its original idea of forming a party; it considered that the task of any revolutionary was to “regroup in organisations fighting completely independently of the official communist parties for the triumph of communism” (*Le Communiste* no. 9, November 1932, “Comment l’Opposition s’est-elle scindée?”, par Hennaut).

On the nature of the Russian state it more or less followed the same path as the Union Communiste. In its declaration of principles of February 1932, it considered itself to be “the best continuators and executors of the Bolshevik doctrine which triumphed in the Russian revolution of October 1917”; it declared that its duty was to “defend the soviet regime against any attack by imperialism”.

One or two years later, it defined Russia as state capitalist, and the soviet state as a bourgeois state. Following its contacts with the Dutch Left, it began little by little to defend more or less ‘councilist’ positions on the nature and role of the party. The party did not have the task of taking power and installing its dictatorship. It thought that the primordial role in the revolution fell to the workers’ councils. This position led to an exchange of texts between the Fraction and the LCI; this in turn contributed much to the clarification of the Russian question within the Italian Left.

The same divergences as with Union Communiste came to light in the permanent debate going on in Brussels. In 1933, just as UC had done at a given moment, the LCI

thought that “the effort of left Communists should be directed above all to the reserves of social democracy”; it envisaged the possibility of the emergence of “revolutionary nuclei within the independent socialist parties under the irresistible push of the masses”.

But unlike UC, the LCI had a ‘participationist’ attitude to elections¹⁵. It had already stood, as an Opposition, at the elections of 1928 and 1929. Afterwards it no longer took part directly in elections though in 1932 it declared itself in favour of a vote for the PCB, because “despite everything, it represents the idea of the proletarian revolution”. It was the same again during the 1935 by-elections. In 1936, the LCI pronounced officially in its Bulletin in favour of a vote for the POB, in order not to “facilitate the arrival of fascism”. (The Belgian ‘Rexists’ — fascists — presented a large number of candidates in liaison with the Flemish nationalists).

Despite the deep gulf between them — on certain points more profound than between the Fraction and UC — the Italian Left maintained contact with the LCI and even established a ‘community of work’ with them in the form of joint meetings, and sometimes even joint interventions. According to *Bilan* in 1935 (no. 22, August-September, ‘Projet de résolution sur les liaisons internationales’), the Hennaut group was “the only grouping directed towards the programmatic definition required to give the Belgian proletariat its class party”.

This difference in attitude towards the LCI was based on the formation of a minority within the League (a majority in Brussels), opposed to Hennaut on all the main questions (elections, anti-fascism, the Russian question, party and councils, etc.). This minority, whose main representative was Mitchell — who signed himself Jehan in the Bulletins of the LCI — was fundamentally in agreement with the Italian Fraction. Neither the Italian Fraction, nor Mitchell’s minority wanted a split. Aware of their duty to clarify political positions for as long as possible, they did not aim for an immediate success, which would have strengthened the Italian Fraction numerically but without a clear separation having taken place. At the same time, the discussion with Hennaut’s majority was not yet blocked, and had shown that it could still help the group’s evolution towards the positions of the Italian Left. It was above all the LCI’s openness to the most profound confrontation of ideas which made it a much more favourable so than the UC, which was so strongly marked by its Trotskyist origins.

As long as there were no dramatic events facing the orientation of the Ligue, this community of work carried on. The war in Spain was to provoke a grave crisis which gave rise to a split with the LCI and the formation of the Belgian Fraction.

As for the Dutch Left, with which the LCI was in contact, relations were only indirect. There was undoubtedly a problem of language and a certain lack of acquaintance with their respective positions. The GIC, which published *Rätekorrespondenz* was in liaison with the Mattick group in Chicago, and with some Danish elements. Isolated in Holland since the 1920s, the left around Gorter and Pannekoek, Canne-Meyer and Appel had made little effort to contact the Italian Left. It was only after the Second World War than there were, for a number of years, discussions (and polemics) between the two main communist lefts, through the Gauche Communiste de France¹⁶ and the Belgian Communist Fraction, and the Maximilien Rubel Councils Communist Group.

¹⁵ A strong opposition to this ‘electoralist’ policy of the LCI crystallised around Mitchell who published a critical text: ‘La Ligue devant le problème des élections’, 1936.

¹⁶ *Bilan* published texts by an old friend of Gorter, Abraham Soep, a syndicalist-revolutionair from the beginning of the century, a Dutchman who, with Van Overstraeten, had been a founding member of the PCB. The Fraction also published, in nos. 19 to 21 of its review, contributions by Hennaut summarising the *Grundprinzipien kommunistischer Produktion und Verteilung*, Berlin 1930. The main texts of the Dutch-German GIK in the 1930s were republished by Rowohlts Klassiker: *Gruppe Internationaler Kommunisten Hollands*, Hamburg, 1971.

Moreover, the divergences were very deep, both on the question of the party and the question of the workers' councils. The GIK's definition of the Russian revolution as bourgeois (the GIK's 'Theses on Bolshevism' were published in 1935) further widened the gulf. However, unlike the 'Bordigist' current after 1945, the Italian Fraction considered the KAPD, then its successor the GIK, to be a revolutionary proletarian current; it did not resort to the anathemas hurled at it by Bordiga in the 20's, who followed Lenin in labelling it as the 'infantile left' and 'anarcho-syndicalism'. The German left current had in fact been the first left reaction within the Comintern, on the questions of the United Front, the trade unions, parliamentarism, and the internal and external policies of the Russian state. The Italian Left underlined this point, while at the same time insisting on the practical impossibility of having a working relationship with groups other than the LCI:

...we consider that the IIInd Congress... does not imply the exclusion of the internationalist Communists of Holland (the Gorter tendency) and elements of the KAPD. It has to be seen that these currents represent the first reaction to the difficulties of the Russian state, the first experience of proletarian management, in linking up with the world proletariat through a system of principles elaborated by the International; then their exclusion did not bring any solution to these problems. (Bilan no. 22, 'Projet de résolution sur les liaisons internationales').

The Italian Fraction was thus not completely isolated; it tried to maintain a permanent contact with all the groups to the left of Trotskyism. It did not reject dialogue; rather it was that dialogue gradually broke down. In a period of extreme confusion for political groups (many of which did not come directly out of the old workers' movement), a period of demoralisation then artificial exaltation quickly followed by depression in the face of the accelerating slide towards world war, the general rule was withdrawal. This was the price the Italian Left paid for maintaining its own positions. For the Fraction principles were the arms of the revolution. In an unfavourable historical situation, it had the choice between swimming along with the tide, which was dragging humanity towards the abyss, in order to get out of its isolation and gain the ear of the masses; or to defend with all its meagre strength the principles which gave it life, despite suffering insults and even hatred from the workers and the political currents which claimed to be revolutionary. The Italian Left made the most difficult choice.

5. The War in Spain: No Betrayal!

The period between 1936 and 1939 was marked by the definitive consolidation of military preparations, and by the extension of conflicts in Asia and Europe. Even more than the Sino-Japanese conflict, the war in Spain was to serve as a testing ground for the latest weapons — the weapons that were to be used in the World War II.

In contrast to the previous period, the Italian Fraction was to underestimate the danger. A part of the organisation even came to believe that the events in Spain marked the beginning of the world revolution. The majority, while opposing this position thought that each local conflict was bringing closer the world-wide confrontation between bourgeoisie and proletariat.

The civil war in Spain was thus to play a decisive role in the life of the ‘Bordigist’ Fraction, on the one hand threatening its existence, on the other hand consolidating it.

The Italian Left had attentively followed the evolution of the Spanish situation since 1931. The political convulsions which had led to the Republic’s creation had given rise to a lively polemic between the Fraction and Trotsky, who implicitly defended the new regime as ‘anti-feudal’. *Prometeo* had been the only publication in the revolutionary milieu to denounce the Republic as reactionary and anti-working class. This analysis was one of the main reasons for the split between the ‘Trotskyist’ current and the ‘Bordigists’.

Up to 1936, *Prometeo* and *Bilan* saw no reason to modify their analysis. On the contrary, they pointed out that, even more than the defunct monarchy, the Republic was leading a determined offensive against the Spanish workers, in order to destroy any possibility of a class reaction: “...October 1934 marks the Frontal battle to obliterate all the forces and organisations of the Spanish proletariat” (*Bilan* no. 12, October 1934, L’écrasement du proletariat espagnol). The Italian Fraction rejected any choice other than that between bourgeoisie and proletariat:

Left-Right, Republic-Monarchy, supporting the left and the Republic against the right in view of the Proletarian revolution, these are the choices and positions defended by the different currents acting within the working class. But the real choice is elsewhere and consists in the opposition between capitalism and the proletariat, the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie in order to crush the proletariat, or the dictatorship of the proletariat in order to erect a bastion of the world revolution for the suppression of states and classes. (Bilan no. 12, op. cit.).

Faced with the Popular Front, *Bilan*, as in France, denounced “the democratic forces of the bourgeois left” which “have shown that they are not a step leading to the victory of the Proletarian revolution, but the last rampart of the counter-revolution” (*Bilan* no. 33, July-August 1936, ‘En Espagne, bourgeoisie contre proletariat’). Indeed, “the accentuation of the government’s leftward course was the signal for an even stronger repression against the workers”. (ibid.)

For *Bilan*, the Spanish situation could in no way be compared to the Russian. In a country “in which capitalism has been formed for centuries, there was no possibility of a bourgeois revolution. The struggle was not between ‘feudalism’ and a ‘progressive bourgeoisie’, but between capitalism — however backward — and socialism.

In July 1936, Franco made his ‘pronunciamiento’. The putsch provoked the uprising of the workers of Barcelona and Madrid. Militias were formed, without the Republican government being overturned. Was this a revolution?

The majority of the Fraction, confronted with the dramatic events in Spain

Very quickly a discussion opened up in the Italian Left, between those who were talking about a revolution, and those who saw the July uprising as “a bloody social tumult, incapable of reaching the level of an insurrectionary uprising”. At the beginning, the majority current which defended the second position was in quite a minority. In the Brussels section, only Vercesi and Gatto Mammone were opposed to the militants who wanted to go to Spain to fight in the militias of the POUM and the CNT, “to defend the Spanish Revolution”.¹ The same thing happened in the Paris section, where the tendency which rallied to the analysis of Vercesi and Mammone was in a minority at first. But within a few months, a majority developed against sending militants to Spain to fight in the military Fronts and for “the transformation of the imperialist war into a civil war”.

What were the arguments of the majority?

- **the absence of a class Party.** According to the conception of the Italian Left, only the party could give life and consciousness to the proletariat. While it did not exclude the upsurge of proletarian movements without the Party, the existence of the latter expressed the ripening of a revolutionary situation. Although sometimes and especially in the case of Vercesi, it supported the idea that without a powerful Party, like the Bolshevik party, the working class no longer existed, this was far from being its position in 1936. The Fraction distinguished between the proletariat taken sociologically, which could be derailed from the revolutionary path, and the proletariat as a revolutionary class moving towards the seizure of power.

If the party did not exist it was “because the situation had not permitted its formation”. For the Fraction, without a revolutionary situation there was no revolutionary party, and inversely without a revolutionary Party the revolutionary situation was absent. Neither the POUM nor the CNT, which were participating in the Popular Front through the Generalidad in Catalonia and were diverting the proletariat away from a frontal attack on the Republican state, could be described as revolutionary.

- **the transformation of the class front into the ‘antifascist’ military front.** Although for a week, the Barcelona workers had taken the initiative, the non-destruction of the Republican government had allowed the latter to regain its strength and to divert the workers’ revolutionary energies away from the industrial centres and towards the front. Whereas, without weapons, the workers of Barcelona and Madrid had overrun the barracks, on the front, in the militias, they were armed materially but disarmed politically and were on the road to defeat. Class frontiers were replaced by military frontiers. With the intervention of Germany, Italy, the USSR, and the ‘democratic camp’, the civil war was turned into an “imperialist war”.

The first phase of poor material armament but intense political armament was succeeded by one marked by the growth of technical instruments at the disposal of the workers and the progressive transportation of the latter from their original class basis to the opposite basis: that of the capitalist class.

¹ A police report dealing with the Brussels section (Direzione centrale della PS., sezione prima no. 441/032029) noted that on 1st August 1936, a discussion had emerged on the events on Spain. There was a vote on the enrolment of militants in the ‘revolutionary legions’. For, were Russo, Romanelli, Borsacchi, Atti, Consonni. Against, only Verdaro and Perrone. [position by ed.]

In place of ‘class frontiers’, the only ones which could have disintegrated Franco’s regiments and restored confidence to the peasants terrorised by the right, other frontiers arose, specifically capitalist ones, and the Union Sacrée was made a reality through the imperialist carnage, region against region, town against town, within Spain, and by extension state against state in the two blocs, democratic antifascist.

It was no longer a matter of two classes confronting each other, but two factions of the Spanish bourgeoisie, supported by the imperialist blocs. “Armed struggle on the imperialist level” had become “a tomb for the proletariat”. In effect, “*in the present period of the decline of capitalism, no war can have a progressive value except the civil war for the communist revolution*”.

- **the strength of the Spanish bourgeoisie.** Though economically weak the Spanish bourgeoisie had not been deprived of its repressive apparatus. While Franco led the military attack, the Republican bourgeoisie manoeuvred in the most consummate manner in order to disarm the workers ideologically “by the judicial legalisation of the arming of the workers” and the incorporation of the militias into the state. But it was above all the POUM and the CNT which played the decisive role in enrolling the workers for the Front. The two organisations ordered an end to the general strike without having played any part in unleashing it. The strength of the bourgeoisie was expressed not so much by Franco, but by the existence an extreme Left able to demobilise the Spanish proletariat.

When the capitalist attack was unleashed by Franco’s uprising, neither the POUM nor the CNT dreamed of calling the workers into the streets...

Through its slogan of a return to work, the POUM clearly expressed the turning point in the situation and the bourgeoisie’s manoeuvre of putting an end to the general strike, then by issuing decrees to avoid a workers’ reaction and finally, by pushing the workers out of the towns towards the siege of Zaragossa. (Bilan no. 36, Oct.-Nov. 1936, ‘La Leçon des événements d’ Espagne’).

Certainly, as *Bilan* recognised, at the end of July, the regular republican army had been “practically dissolved”, but thanks to these two parties and the Stalinist PSUC “it was gradually reconstituted with the columns of militiamen whose general staff remained clearly bourgeois...”

Finally, *Bilan* added, the power of the Republican state was definitely consolidated on 2 August, when the Catalonia Generalidad decided “to call several classes to arms”. The civil war between bourgeoisie and proletariat became a plain war between rival bourgeois factions, under the leadership of the coalition Republican government supported by the Poumists and the anarchists.

- **The trap of ‘collectivisations’ and violence.** Many militants saw in the collectivisation of factories and land the real expression of the ‘Spanish revolution’. But in any genuine proletarian revolution, underlined the majority, “politics comes before economics”. It is only under the dictatorship of the proletariat, after the capitalist state has been smashed, that there can be economic measures in the interest of the proletariat. For *Bilan*:

The way to develop the class struggle does not reside in successively enlarging material conquests when the enemy’s instrument of domination remains intact, but through the opposite road of unleashing proletarian movements. The socialisation of an enterprise when the state apparatus remains standing is a link in the chain tying the proletariat to its enemy both on the internal Front and on the imperialist front of the antagonism between fascism and antifascism, whereas the outbreak of a strike for the slightest class demand (and that even in a ‘socialised’ industry) is a link that can lead towards the defence and

the victory of the Spanish and international proletariat. (*Bilan* no. 34, August-September 1936, 'Au Front impérialiste du massacre des ouvriers espagnols il faut opposer le Front de classe du prolétariat international').

Violence against the capitalists, the priests, the big landowners was no more revolutionary. Proletarian violence can only have a class content if it attacks the state system. Socialism was the destruction of capitalism as a social organisation, and not of its symbols: 'The destruction of capitalism is not the physical and even violent destruction of the persons who incarnate the regime, but of the regime itself' (*Bilan* no. 38, January 1937, 'Guerre impérialiste ou guerre civile?').

- **The Union Sacrée and the banning of strikes.** It was anti-fascism and the military struggle which had created a situation of Union Sacrée. As in 1914, the 'external danger' had served as a pretext for depriving the proletariat of its only real weapon: the general strike. On the one hand the PSUC, in *Mundo Obrero* of 3 August, had proclaimed "no strikes in democratic Spain". On the other hand, "in October the CNT issued its union directives in which it forbade any kind of struggle for immediate demands and made the increase of production the most sacred duty of the worker" (*Bilan* no. 36, Oct.-Nov. 1936). Finally, to complete the Union Sacrée and 'social solidarity', the factory committees and workplace control committees "were transformed into organs that had to run production and were thus deformed in their class significance" (*ibid.*).

- **the isolation of the Spanish proletariat.** It was the international victory of the counter-revolution which explained this defeat and the massacre of the Spanish workers at the Front:

Without the annihilation of the most advanced proletariats, we would never have had such a tragedy... In Spain the conditions did not exist for the battles of the Iberian proletariat to be the signal for a world-wide revival of the class, even though the economic, social and political contrasts were more profound here than in other countries. (*ibid.*)

Bilan added that it was therefore impossible to reverse the present situation "once the infernal machine was in motion" (*Bilan* no. 38, Dec 1936); that this desperate situation "was simply the reflection of a balance of forces between classes unfavourable to the proletariat" (*Bilan* no. 36, Oct. 1936, 'L'isolement de notre fraction devant les événements d' Espagne').

These in brief were the arguments of the majority of the Fraction. It was conscious of going against the tide at a time when in all countries people were joining up with the 'international brigades' or volunteer militias. Against the participation in the war in Spain, *Bilan* was for desertion from the army and fraternisation between the soldiers of both camps, as in 1917. The Fraction "vehemently calls on the workers of all countries" not to "sacrifice their lives in order to accredit the massacre of the workers in Spain"; to refuse "to go off with the international columns in Spain" and to break the tragic isolation of the Spanish proletariat by engaging in "their class struggle against their own bourgeoisie" (*Bilan* no. 36, Oct. 1936, 'La leçon des événements d' Espagne'). This position, which was clearly in continuity with the 'revolutionary defeatism' of the Bolsheviks, was concisely condensed in this appeal to the workers of all countries:

*Against volunteering, desertion.
Against the struggle against the 'Moors' and the fascists, fraternisation.
Against the Union Sacrée, the development of class struggle on both fronts. Against the demand to raise the blockade of arms for Spain, struggles for class demands in all countries and opposition to all transportation of arms...*

Against the call for class collaboration, the call for the class struggle and proletarian internationalism (*Bilan* no. 38, Dec. 1936-Jan. 1937. 'Guerre impérialiste ou guerre civile?').

The Italian Left insisted that its position did not mean opening the way to the defeat of the workers in the face of fascism; on the contrary, by attacking the Republican state machine, the proletariat of Catalonia, Castille, the Asturias and Valencia would have facilitated the insurrection of the workers on the other side of the military frontier and the paralysis of the Francoist army. In fact, this attack was the only way of "disintegrating the regiments of the right", of "smashing the plans of Spanish and international capitalism" (*Bilan*, no. 34, op cit.).

The majority was ready to defend its principles to the last, convinced that "the cruel development of events has not only left the whole of (its) political positions intact, but has most tragically confirmed them". Whatever happened it would remain "immovably anchored in the class foundations of the proletarian masses" (*Bilan* no. 36, Oct.-Nov. 1936 'La consigne de l'heure: ne pas trahir').

Towards a split: arguments and activity of the minority in Spain

The minority, which had appeared in July 1936, was in total disagreement with the majority analysis. All of those who were regrouped around it in August-September left for Barcelona, where they formed a section of 26 members. Among them were founding members of the Fraction, like Candiani (Enrico Russo), Mario De Leone, Bruno Zecchini, Renato Pace, and Piero Corradi. Most of them came from the Parisian federation. This was a brutal haemorrhage for a section of 40-50 militants. In other sections and federations, the minority was tiny.

The minority's analysis was based on a serious overestimation of the Spanish situation, springing from a sentimental reaction rather than a real and mature reflection. For the minority, the Republican state had virtually disappeared and power was in the hand of 'workers' organisations', about whose nature it was not very precise: "The real government is in the hands of workers' organisations; the other, the legal government is an empty shell, a simulacrum, a prisoner of the situation". (*Bilan* no. 35 Sept.-Oct. 1936, "La Révolution Espagnole' by Tito). In fact, the minority was above all fascinated by the acts of violence and 'expropriation': "the burning of churches; confiscation of goods; occupation of houses and property; requisitioning of newspapers; summary condemnations and executions, these are the formidable, ardent, plebeian expressions of this profound overturning of class relations which the bourgeois government cannot prevent" (ibid.).

In this text we can see the minority contradicting itself. At one and the same time it proclaimed the disappearance and the existence of a Republican government. Touched by the Spanish drama, it was more disposed to action than to a real study of the balance of forces which was little being revealed in its true light.

Its position was close to that of the POUM and the French Trotskyists. It thought that the fundamental duty of any revolutionary was first to fight on the military front against fascism, and then to overturn the Republican government. The position of the majority seemed to it to be not only "a manifestation of insensitivity and dilletantism" but "incomprehensible and practically counterrevolutionary". To make "no distinction between the two Fronts" meant "facilitating the victory of Franco and the defeat of the proletariat" (*Prometeo*, 1/11/1936, 'Critique révolutionnaire ou défaitisme?' Minority of the Paris Federation).

This did not mean that it supported the Republican government. “No comrade of the minority has claimed that we have to support Azana or Caballero in Spain” (ibid.). But wasn’t its “revolutionary criticism” implicitly a ‘critical support’? Against the majority, the minority argued that this government was historically equivalent to the Kerensky government in 1917 faced with Kornilov’s offensive. But it added that it was above all necessary to fight against “the brutal attack of the capitalist reaction” represented by the Spanish Kornilov².

It supported the military struggle in a somewhat embarrassed manner. No doubt, under the pressure of the majority, it did not exclude the possibility, “if the two rival imperialist blocs intervene in Spain — which would provoke a world conflagration”, that it would be necessary “to oppose both imperialisms”. In this case, “the war would be an imperialist war”, which it would reject (ibid.).

In fact, within Spain, the minority was unable to distinguish itself from the POUM and the CNT which had decreed a truce with the Caballero-Azaña government. The Barcelona group, which published texts in *La Batalla*, the organ of the POUM, affirmed that the latter constituted a “vanguard” which had before it “a great task and an extreme responsibility” (motion of 23 August 1936, *Bilan* no. 36). For the majority, on the contrary “the POUM is a terrain on which the forces of the enemy are acting, and no revolutionary tendency can develop within it” (ibid.).

Like the POUM and the CNT, the minority soon declared themselves to be against workers’ strikes for economic defence, which had to take second place to military tasks:

How can you call for agitation in the factories, provoke strikes, when the fighters at the front need the factories to work in order to supply and support the struggle? Today in Catalonia, you cannot even put forward simple economic demands. We are in a revolutionary period. The class struggle is manifested in the armed struggle. (Prometeo, ibid.)

The two positions were irreconcilable and a split appeared inevitable. By going to Barcelona to join the militias, by organising itself outside the Italian Fraction, by forming an autonomous section, the minority was moving towards a break. It refused to pay dues and to distribute the Italian press. Soon, under the command of Candiani, it formed the Lenin column in the military front in Huesca.

There, at the beginning of September, three delegates of the majority — Mitchell (who was still in the Belgian LCI), Turridu Candoli and Aldo Lecci met up with the minority for a totally fruitless discussion. The delegates from the majority found it equally impossible to hold a dialogue with Gorkin from the POUM leadership. Only a discussion with the anarchist teacher Camillo Berneri, had had any positive results³.

The fact that the majority sent a delegation to Spain showed that it was not indifferent to the events. Despite its isolation and the certain risks it took in defending its positions (without the protection of Gorkin, the delegates were nearly assassinated by Stalinists in Barcelona on coming out of the POUM’s offices), the majority was determined to carry the

² Jean Rabaut (op. cit.) wrongly asserts that ‘the Bordigists stuck the schema of the beginnings of the Russian revolution onto the reality of the Spanish events’. The majority rejected any assimilation of the Spanish events with those of February 1917. It was the minority who saw July 1936 as a repetition of ‘February’, and Franco’s attack as an undertaking similar to Kornilov’s. For *Bilan*, for there to be a ‘Kornilov’, there also had to be dual power: the power of the state and the power of the soviets. In Spain, after a few days of indecision, there was only one power — that of the Republican state, alongside the forces of Franco.

³ A short account of the activity of the minority and the majority in Spain can be found in *Battaglia Comunista*, no. 6, 1974, ‘Una pagina di storia nella nostra frazione all’ estera (1927-43)’. This article, based on the testimony of old militants of the Fraction, retraces the activity of Aldo Lecci, one of the most determined spokesmen of the majority. From this trip by three delegates from the Italian Left was born the pamphlet by Mitchell (Jehan): *La guerre en Espagne* (“The War in Spain”), 1937, edited by the Belgian Fraction (reprinted in *Invariance* no. 8, Oct.-Dec. 1969, and published in English in *Revolutionary Perspectives* no. 5, 1976).

discussion to the end, without conceding an inch on its positions. It was aware that a "grave crisis" had opened up, "inevitably posing the problem of a split", which, however, it hoped would be "ideological and not organisational" (*Bilan* no. 34, Aug.-Sept. 1936, Communiqué of the executive commission).

The Executive Commission of the Italian Fraction, even though it could have made play of the minority's infringement of discipline, did not want to resort to measures of exclusion. Having a very high idea of organisation which "resides... in each of its militants" (*Bilan* no. 17, April 1935), it tried to preserve the organisation's integrity, and if this proved impossible, to allow for a split to take place on the clearest possible basis. It decided "not to cut off the discussion so as to allow the organisation to benefit from the contribution of comrades who have not been able to intervene actively in the debate" and from "a more complete clarification of the fundamental divergences which have appeared" (*Bilan* no. 34. *ibid.*). In order to do this, the EC opened the columns of an entire page of *Prometeo* to the minority in order that they could express their divergences. It was even prepared to pay for the publication of a paper by the minority until the Congress of the Fraction, which was due to be held at the beginning of 1937. As a precondition, the minority was to respect organisational discipline, and the majority refused to recognise the Barcelona Federation.

But the minority, while making use of the facilities for discussion, refused to accept these proposals. It formed itself into a 'Co-ordinating Committee' and sent out a communiqué which was a real ultimatum. It demanded recognition of its group; denied "any solidarity with or responsibility for the positions taken by the majority of the Fraction"; demanded, despite the EC's veto, the right to "defend the Spanish Revolution with guns in hand, even on the military front"; considered that "the conditions for a split (were) already posed"; authorised "the comrades of the minority to combat the majority's positions and not to distribute the press and any other document based on the official positions of the Fraction". Finally the communiqué 'demanded' that this agenda be published in the next issue of *Prometeo* and *Bilan*. This was done in *Bilan* no. 35, Sept.-Oct. 1936.

In any other organisation such an attitude would have merited expulsion. The EC chose not to do so. It soon recognised the 'co-ordinating committee' and even the Barcelona Federation. It wanted at all cost to "avoid disciplinary measures and convince the comrades of the minority to co-ordinate themselves in order to form a current of the organisation orienting itself towards demonstrating that the other current had broken with the fundamental bases of the organisation and that it remained its real and loyal defender" (communiqué of the EC, 29/11/36). Certainly, the EC felt a split to be inevitable; it was not the militants it wanted to excite, but the "political ideas" which "far from being able to engender real solidarity with the Spanish proletariat have accredited among the masses forces which are profoundly hostile to them and which capitalism is using for the extermination of the working class in Spain and all countries" (*Bilan*, *ibid.*).

In November the split was consummated on both sides. The minority refused to participate at the Congress of the Fraction and to send its political literature to the EC so that it could acquaint itself with it. Proclaiming any discussion with the Fraction to be useless, it entered into contact with the antifascist organisation 'Giustizia e Libertà'. This was one of the reasons why the Executive Commission excluded as "politically unworthy" the members of the ex-minority, whose activity was a "reflex of the Popular Front within the Fraction" (Communiqué of the EC, *op cit.*)⁴.

⁴ This exclusion, or rather this separation on both sides, did not stop *Bilan* from saluting with emotion the memory of Mario De Leone (1890-1936), known in the Fraction as Topo, and a militant since he left Russia for France in 1929. He died in Barcelona of a heart attack. He was the only member of the minority not to return alive from Spain (cf. *Bilan* no.37, for his biography).

When, at the beginning of 1937, the militias were militarised and formally integrated into the state under a central command, the members of the ex-minority left Spain. Soon afterwards they joined Union Communiste, of which they remained members until the war.⁵

Just before May, the Italian Fraction's delegate in Spain returned to France. Soon after that it became known that the workers of Barcelona had been massacred by the republican police, who were heavily infiltrated by the Stalinist PSUC. The CNT intervened to ask the workers not to take up arms, and to go back to work, "in order not to obstruct the war effort".

The Italian Fraction saw its whole analysis confirmed in these tragic events. It immediately issued a leaflet, in French and Italian, distributed to workers in France and Belgium: "Bullets, machine guns, prisons, this is how the Popular Front replies to the workers of Barcelona who have dared to resist the capitalist attack" (*Bilan* no. 41, May-June 1937). This leaflet-manifesto noted that "the carnage in Barcelona is the foretaste of still more bloody repression against the workers in Spain". It denounced the slogan of "arms for Spain" which had "resounded in the workers' ears": "these arms have been used to shoot their brothers in Barcelona". It saluted Berneri, assassinated by the Stalinist secret service, as one of its own. But all these deaths "belonged to the whole world proletariat". In no way could they be "claimed by currents which on 19 July, had led the workers away from their class terrain and pushed them into the jaws of antifascism".

All the deaths in Barcelona, finally, bore witness to the definitive passage of 'centrism' (i.e. the CPs) and of anarchism "to the other side of the barricade", just like the oppportunists of social democracy in 1914.

This manifesto was signed by the Italian Fraction and the new Belgian Fraction (see below) of the International Communist Left. The moment had come to "forge the first links of the international communist left".

More than ever, the communist left found itself isolated from the groups with which it had, with ups and downs, been in contact. With different nuances, Union Communiste, the Ligue des Communistes Internationalistes, the Revolutionary Workers' League and the Communist League of Struggle had adopted the same position as the minority in *Bilan*.

In the USA, during the events in Spain, the New York Federation had once again to confront Hugo Oehlers' RWL which reproached the international Communist Left for putting forward "the slogan of revolutionary defeatism, which means putting the two belligerent groups on the same level, without making any distinction". Like the Trotskyist groups, it saw *Bilan's* intransigent refusal to support the war in Spain as an "ultra-leftist position" which "plays the game of the fascists, just as the reformists and centrists are playing the game of the Popular Front".

The RWL's attitude to the war in Spain was contradictory: while calling on the Spanish proletariat to join in the military Fronts, it declared the necessity to "overturn the Popular Front government, which means the DEFEAT of the Popular Front government", and this "before the decisive struggles against fascism have been won". (Reply by the RWL to a letter from the New York Federation, in *Bilan* no. 45, December 1937).

Only the Paul Mattick group linked to the Dutch-German Left through the GIK, and which had published *International Council Correspondence* since 1934, seemed to have the

⁵ According to Henri Chazé (in *Jeune Taupe* no. 6, July 1975), Union Communiste "took in the quasi-totality of the Parisian Bordigists (most of them Italians), 20 good worker comrades who had not digested the lunatic position of the Belgian Bordigists and of Vercesi (no Bordigist Party in Spain, so no revolution) on the revolutionary movement on the Peninsula...". Caught up in his polemic with *Bilan*, or lacking information, Chazé is deforming reality here. While the figure given for the minority is correct, it is not true that they represented the "quasi-totality of Parisian Bordigists". At the beginning they were a majority in the Paris section, but they were a minority in the Parisian Federation which grouped together all the sections of the Paris region. Moreover, the Executive Committee of the Federation took a position against the minority right from the start. [position by ed.]

same position as *Bilan* in rejecting enrolment on the military Front. But not with the same clarity, since it published a text by the GIK translated from *Rätekorrespondenz*, whose position was identical to that of all the groups mentioned. In this text, which affirmed that any proletarian revolution “could only be victorious if it is international”, otherwise it would be “crushed by force of arms or deformed by imperialist interests”, the conclusion went against the premises:

The Spanish workers cannot allow themselves to struggle effectively against the unions, because this would lead to a complete failure on the military Fronts. They have no alternative: they must struggle against the fascists to save their lives, they have to accept any aid no matter where it comes from. (in I.C.C. no. 5-6, June '37, 'Anarchism and the Spanish Revolution' by Helmut Wagner).

Up until World War 2, the Italian Left does not seem to have had any relationship with Mattick's group. The direct consequence of events was to make all these groups fold in on themselves, to conserve their orientation faced with the flood of war. The profound divergences between these revolutionary groups resulted in mutual distrust and isolation. In all cases, *Bilan*'s profound coherence on the war in Spain contrasted with the hesitation and incoherence of the other groups, who remained half-way between Trotskyism and the Communist Left.

This oscillation was clearly reflected in both Union Communiste and the LCI in Belgium. UC had not sent militants to the militias. Only Emile Rosijansky, the former leader of the 'Jewish Group', had joined on his own initiative. It contented itself with giving moral support to the 'workers' militias' and the two organisations which it saw as the avant-garde. It criticised them for their “major errors”, but it saw the POUM above all as “called upon to play an important role in the international regroupment of revolutionaries”, on the condition that it rejected the defence of the USSR and distanced itself from the London Bureau. In *L'Internationale*, UC often played the part of adviser to the POUM, and rejoiced in the fact that its review was read by anarchist and Poumist youth.

Ideologically and organisationally, it remained close to Trotskyism, out of which it had emerged, even if it criticised Trotsky's “opportunism”. At the end of 1936, it took part, with this current and certain syndicalists in the creation of a 'committee for the Spanish Revolution'.

Its analysis of the situation in Spain was extremely contradictory. The same article could declare that “the revolution in progress” had dismantled the Republican state, whose “machine had burst into countries pieces under the pressure of the forces in struggle” and, in another paragraph, that “there remains much to demolish, because the democratic bourgeoisie is clinging to the last surviving fragments of bourgeois power”. Similarly, UC called for a “struggle to the death against the fascists” and the destruction of the power of the “antifascist bourgeoisie”. It did not however make it clear how this second form of struggle would be possible when the workers were mobilised on the military Front.

The lack of logic could be seen with regard to the slogan of the CP and the French Trotskyists which called for “arms for Spain”. On the one hand, *L'Internationale* proclaimed that the “non-intervention” (by the Popular Front) was a blockade against the Spanish Revolution; on the other that “the struggle to give effective support to our comrades in Spain amounts in reality to the revolutionary struggle against our own bourgeoisie”⁶.

Later on, UC affirmed the “bankruptcy of anarchism in the face of the problem of the state” and said that “the Spanish Revolution is in retreat” while “imperialist war is

⁶ *L'Internationale* no. 23, 28 Oct. 1936, in *Chronique de la Révolution Espagnole (1933-39)* by Henri Chazé, Cahiers Spartacus, Paris, 1979.

threatening”. That is to say, that this organisation, unlike *Bilan*, reacted in the wake of events, without a general theoretical position on the Spanish question. This is why the Italian Left criticised it so strongly and located it, on the map of political geography, in the ‘swamp’.

We will not go into the LCI’s position on Spain. They merely repeated the conception of the minority in *Bilan* and of the UC. Just like the RWL, they denounced *Bilan*’s “counterrevolutionary positions”: “break-up of the military Fronts, fraternisation with Franco’s troops, refusal to supply the Spanish government militias with arms”; negating “the opposition between fascism and democracy” (*Bulletin*, March 1937).

The attitude of the Italian Fraction in Brussels towards the LCI had from the beginning been one of a fraternal search for political discussion, and even collaboration, since as much as possible the two organisations published each other’s texts and contributions. Even on the question of Spain, the Italian Left, supported within the LCI by Mitchell’s minority, carried on a discussion that was patient and fraternal in tone. Vercesi, in an article in *Bilan*, summarised the divergences without acrimony or hostility:

For comrade Hennaut, it is a question of going beyond the antifascist phase to arrive at the stage of socialism; for us it is a question of negating the programme of antifascism, for without this negation the struggle for socialism is impossible. (Bilan no. 39, Jan.-Feb. ‘37, ‘Nos divergences avec le camarade Hennaut’).

Other deep-seated disagreements existed on the questions of the party, the state and the Russian Revolution. On all these points, the LCI majority was close to the Dutch Left.

The birth of the Belgian Fraction (February 1937)

It was the question of Spain which put an end to the joint work between *Bilan* and Hennaut’s group. In February 1937, the LCI held its national conference in Brussels. Mitchell (Jehan) wrote, in the name of the minority, a resolution defending the position of the Italian Left on the Spanish events. The conference, which approved Hennaut’s resolution on Spain, decided to exclude all those who supported Jehan’s text and to break off political relations with the Italian Left. The split was complete.

The minority had not been looking for a split — it had been imposed on it. It wanted the separation to take place on the clearest possible basis.

In April that same year the first issue of the publication of the Belgian Fraction of the International Communist Left appeared: *Communisme*. This monthly review published 24 issues up until the war. It represented an expansion of the Italian Left’s presence in Belgium.

The Belgian Fraction’s ‘Declaration of Principles’ showed that it was not distinct from the Italian Left. Basing itself on the body of doctrine elaborated by *Prometeo* and *Bilan*, it presented the fundamental positions of the Italian Communist Left in the most synthetical manner.

The Belgian group was not large (a maximum of 10 militants). It had all the support of the Italian Fraction in Brussels, since it was in this town that the minority in the LCI had been formed. It was a group largely made up of young people but, like the Italian Left, it had the advantage of having emerged, via the LCI, out of the old movement as it had developed in the PCB (Belgian Communist Party). It was formed after being involved in internal and external discussion with the ‘Bordigist’ group since 1932, and had thus acquired a high degree of political and theoretical homogeneity. Like Vercesi in the Italian Fraction, Mitchell (from his real name Melis or Van den Hoven?) had played a decisive role in the foundation of the Belgian Fraction. Holding an important post in an English bank (Westminster Bank), he helped to orient the Italian Left towards a deeper study of economic phenomena, and

particularly the roots of the “decadence of capitalism”. Because of his personality and the rigour of his theoretical and political thinking, he was certainly one of the few who could counterbalance the crushing influence of Vercesi. His death at Buchenwald during the war was to weigh heavily on the development of the Italian and Belgian Communist Left.

Paul Kirchoff and the ‘Grupo de Trabajadores Marxistas de Mexico’ (GTM)

Politically isolated, the International Communist Left only had a real existence in two countries. It was thus with great surprise that in June 1937, it received from far-away Mexico — where it had never had any contacts — a leaflet denouncing the ‘massacre in Barcelona’ in May. Signed by the Grupo de Trabajadores Marxistas de Mexico, it was in complete harmony with the positions of *Bilan* and *Prometeo*. It attacked the Cardenas government which had been the most ardent supporter of the Spanish Popular Front and had sent arms to the Republicans. This government aid, camouflaged under a “false workerism”, had contributed to the massacre of our “brothers in Spain”. It warned that “the defeat suffered by the workers in Spain must not be repeated in Mexico”. The Mexican workers thus had to fight for “an independent class party”, against the Popular Front and for the dictatorship of the proletariat. Only “the struggle against the demagoguery of the government, alliance with the peasants and the struggle for the proletarian revolution in Mexico under the banner of a new communist party” would “guarantee our victory and be the best aid we can give to our brothers in Spain”.

Like the Italian and Belgian Lefts, it called on the workers of Spain to break with the Socialists, Stalinists, anarchists, all of whom were “in the service of the bourgeoisie” and to “turn the imperialist war into a civil war”, through the fraternisation of armies and the constitution of a “Soviet Spain”⁷.

Such a convergence of positions undoubtedly showed that the ‘Marxist Workers’ Group’ (MWG) was well acquainted with the orientation of the Italian Left.

A few weeks later, the Italian and Belgian Left — but also Union Communiste — received a circular from this group about the campaign of slander waged against it by the Trotskyist group in Mexico, the Liga Comunista⁸. The militants of the MWG were denounced in *IV Internacional* as “agents of the GPU” and “agents of fascism”. In a country where the Mexican CP and the police did not hesitate to resort to assassination, this denunciation was to put these militants into the gravest danger — militants who undeniably defended the cause of the proletariat with the greatest firmness and energy, whatever one’s view of their political positions. The August issue of *IV Internacional* contained the most serious accusations:

... the individuals cited, or rather the provocateur Kirchof, called for not supporting the Spanish workers under the pretext that to demand more arms and munitions for the antifascist militias is to... support the bourgeoisie and imperialism. For these people, who cover themselves with an ultra-leftist mask, the sum total of Marxism consists... in the abandonment of the trenches by the workers at the Front. In this way the German and his instruments Garza and Daniel Ayala reveal themselves as agents of fascism, whether consciously or unconsciously — it matters little, given the consequences.

⁷ ‘La masacre de Barcelona: una lección para los trabajadores de Mexico’, Mexico, DF, mayo de 1937, Apartado postal 9018.

⁸ ‘Grupo de trabajadores marxistas: a las organizaciones obreras del pais y del extranjera’. This text retraced the itinerary of the militants of the group, and denounced the “campaign of slanders” by the Liga Comunista and the PCM (Mexican Communist Party). It explained the positions of the MWG on Spain and the Sino-Japanese war.

Bilan and *Communiste* sent an open letter to the Centre for the IVth International and to the Trotskyist PSR in Belgium, demanding clarification. This letter received no reply. It showed that this denunciation was at root political, and that the methods of Trotsky and his followers were curiously redolent of those of Stalinism. *Bilan* concluded that:

it has been clearly established that it was above all because these comrades have adopted an internationalist position analogous to the one proclaimed by Marxists during the 1914-18 that they have been denounced as provocateurs and agents of fascism. (Bilan no. 44, Oct.-Nov. 1937).

In fact, the militants cited by the Trotskyist organisation were not all unknown figures. And for good reason: Garza and Daniel Ayala had come out of the Liga Comunista in Mexico. They had broken with it because of its support for the 'progressive' character of the nationalisations carried out by the Cardenas government, its support for the Spanish Republican government, and its attitude in the Sino-Japanese war in which it took the side of the Chinese government.

As for the 'provocateur Kirchof' — who was known under the pseudonym Eiffel and whose real name was Paul Kirchhoff — he was also not unknown to the revolutionary movement. The one whom the Liga Comunista called "the German", the "agent of Hitler", had since 1920 been a militant of the German Communist Left. A member of the KAPD since its foundation — and also of the 'sister' organisation of the KAPD, the AAU, in Berlin — he participated in the work of this current until 1931. An ethnologist by profession, he left Germany for the USA that year. From 1931 to 1934, he was a member of the IKD in exile, also of the Latin American Department of the International Left Opposition. In September 1934, he was one of the 4 members (out of 7) of the leadership of the IKD in exile who rejected the policy on entrisism into social democracy and who described this policy as "complete ideological capitulation to the IIInd International". Having broken with Trotsky, he was until 1937⁹ a member of the political bureau of Oehler's Revolutionary Workers' League. Expelled from the US, he had to take refuge in Mexico. In contact with the RWL, which he represented vis-à-vis the Trotskyist Liga Comunista, he defended the positions of the Italian Left as a minority within that group. On the events in Spain, he presented a motion proclaiming the failure of the RWL: "The events in Spain have put every organisation to the test; we have to admit that we have not passed this test. Having said this, our first duty is to study the origins of this failure." The Eiffel motion, like that of the LCI minority, clearly implied a split:

The war in Spain began as a civil war, but was rapidly transformed into an imperialist war. The whole strategy of the world and Spanish bourgeoisie has consisted in carrying out this transformation without changing appearances and letting the workers think they were still fighting for their class interests. Our organisation has kept up this illusion and supported the Spanish and world Bourgeoisie by saying: 'The working class in pain must march with the Popular Front against Franco, but must prepare to turn its guns on Caballero tomorrow.' (L'internationale no. 33, 18/12/37, 'La RWL et ses positions politiques').

Having broken with the RWL, Eiffel and a small group of workers and former Trotskyist militants formed themselves into an independent political group. In September 1938 they

⁹ On the political itinerary of Paul Kirchhoff (1900-72), cf. apart from the above text, the passages in the *Oeuvres* (Works) of Trotsky, vols. 4 and 6, EDI, Paris. His positions in the RWL appear in *l'Internationale* no. 33, 18/12/37.

published the first issue of *Comunismo*, which had two and possibly three issues before disappearing in the whirlpool of the world war.

If the MWG had been formed in Europe, it would probably have been linked organisationally with the International Communist Left. Geographical isolation condemned the small Mexican group to live by itself in the most total isolation, in a country dominated by the ideology of ‘and-imperialism’ and the ‘workerist’ nationalism of Cardenas. In order to survive, *Comunismo* kept in written contact with the Italian and Belgian Fractions. It recognised that it was “the work of these two groups which had inspired its effort to create a communist nucleus in Mexico”. “Stimulated by this international support and by the letters sent us by the Italian and Belgian comrades”, the militants of the MWG, like them, proposed to make a critical ‘balance sheet’ of the Communist International, in order to create “solid bases for the future communist party of Mexico”.

In the theoretical and political domain, the Mexican communist left showed great boldness, going resolutely against the stream in a country where any group situating itself on an internationalist terrain was open to the most serious threats. Unlike the Stalinists and Trotskyists, *Comunismo* defined the oil nationalisations in Mexico as reactionary “in the imperialist phase of capitalism” where “there cannot be any progressive measures on the part of decomposing capitalist society and its official representative: the capitalist state”. The strengthening of this state could only have one goal: to save the global property of the national capitalism within the context of imperialist decadence, and to protect it against ‘its’ workers and peasants. Furthermore, the nationalisation of oil did not put an end to the domination of foreign imperialism. By going against British interests, Cardenas had merely strengthened the grip of the USA on the Mexican state.

Taking up the thesis of Rosa Luxemburg, the MWG rejected any defence of ‘national liberation struggles’. “Even in the oppressed countries”, the workers have no fatherland or ‘national interest’ to defend. “One of the fundamental principles which has to guide our whole tactic on the national question”, *Comunismo* continued, “is anti-patriotism... whoever proposes a new tactic which goes against this principle abandons the ranks of Marxism and goes over to the enemy”.

The positions of the MWG seemed to the Italian Left like “rays of light” coming from a distant country in the worst conditions of existence. They demonstrated that the positions it defended were not merely products of its own imagination, but of a whole movement of the communist left which went beyond the restricted boundaries of Europe.¹⁰

What balance-sheet did the International Communist Left draw from the whole debate which it had carried out, directly or indirectly, on the two continents of Europe and America:

- “The task of the hour: no betrayal”. In order to prepare the revolution in the next world war every political group of the communist left had to hold on to the principles of internationalism, against the stream. The counter-revolution exerted a merciless pressure: as in 1914, the historic period was “a period of extreme selection of the cadres of the communist revolution where you have to know how to remain alone in order not to betray” (*Bilan* no. 39, Jan-Feb. 1937, ‘Que Faire? Retourner au parti communiste, messieurs!’). The war in Spain had carried out this pitiless selection, demarcating the proletariat from the capitalist camp:

¹⁰ After 1939, it is impossible to know what happened to the MWG. We only know when Kirchhoff died. (The principal texts of *Comunismo* were translated in *l’Internationale* nos. 34 and 39; *Communisme* no. 4 and *Bilan* no. 43, and reproduced in the ICC’s *International Review* (nos. 10 (July 1977), 19 & 20 (Oct. and Dec. 1979). [position by ed.]

The war in Spain has been decisive for everyone: for capitalism, it has been the means to enlarge the Front of forces working for war, to incorporate anti-fascism, the Trotskyists, the so-called left communists and to stifle the workers' awakening which appeared in 1936; for the left fractions, it has been the decisive test, the selection of men and ideas, the necessity to confront the problem of war. We have held on, and, against the stream, we are still holding on. (Bilan no. 44, October 1937, 'La guerre imperialiste d' Espagne et le massacre des mineurs asturiens').

- “The virtue of isolation”. The Italian Left made these words of Bordiga its own, not with satisfaction but with bitterness. It remarked that its isolation was not fortuitous:

It is the consequence of a profound victory of international capitalism, which has even succeeded in corrupting the groups of the communist left whose spokesman has up till now been Trotsky” (Bilan no. 36).

But this terrible isolation was a precondition for the life, the very survival, of all the revolutionary elements. The latter, in order to move towards the formation of left fractions in all countries, had to “desert the dens of the counter-revolution; destroy them, and thus preserve the minds of working class militants who can work for communist clarification”. It was not possible “to transform the capitalist terrain into a Proletarian terrain” (*Octobre*, no. 4, April 1938, ‘Pour une fraction française de la gauche communiste’). On this capitalist terrain, the Italian left placed not only the anarchists and the Trotskyists, but also Union Communiste, the RWL and the LCI who had “gone over to the other site of the barricade during the massacre in Spain”. (*Bilan* no. 40, ‘La pause de Monsieur Léon Blum’, April-May 1937).

The International Bureau of the Fractions: the weakness of the Communist Left

Insisting that the future world communist party could only be born out of the left fractions, the Italian and Belgian Fractions formed, in early 1938, the International Bureau of the Left Fractions whose organ was *Octobre*. The balance-sheet of 10 years of existence could, it seemed, close on a positive note, with the foundation of the Belgian Fraction, the contacts with *Comunismo*, but above all the hope of being able rapidly to form a French Fraction, since there had been a certain influx of French militants.

The other site of the coin to this international organisation of the communist left, which it saw as the basis for the creation of a new Communist International, was the creation of an *de facto* ‘anti’ - Italian Left coalition to the left of Trotskyism. In March 1937, on the initiative of Union Communiste, an international conference was held in Paris. Union Communiste had invited the POUM and the organisations of the IVth International, who didn’t reply. All the groups which had been opposed to *Bilan* on the question of Spain were there: The LCI, the minority of the Italian Fraction, the RWL represented by Oehler, Field’s group, the League for a Revolutionary Workers’ Party, the GIK from Holland (represented by Canne-Meijer) and individuals like Gabriel Miasnikov, Arkadij Maslow and Ruth Fischer, representing the old Russian and German oppositions. The failure of this conference led to the RWL creating an ‘international contact commission’, since UC was unable to take up the task of international co-ordination¹¹.

¹¹ cf. *l’Internationale* no. 27, 10 April 1937, ‘La conférence internationale des 6 et 7 mars’.

The 'cordon sanitaire' which all these groups had in fact put around the Italian Left undoubtedly limited the efforts of the two Fractions to regroup the revolutionary elements which existed on both continents. An overestimation of its forces soon led the ICL to develop a theory that the way was open to the upsurge of the world revolution, under its leadership. Seeing the revolution on the horizon, it lost sight of the war which was lapping at its feet.

Indirectly, the minority of the Italian Left had a posthumous revenge. Although the majority had always fought the minority's view that the revolution was possible at any moment, it was now the former which joined them in underestimating the danger of war. Another posthumous victory of the minority was chalked up when, shortly before its disappearance, *Bilan* started a campaign of solidarity for all the victims of the war in Spain. With the aim of showing that "the left fractions are not insensitive to the martyrdom and suffering of the war in Spain". *Bilan* and *Communisme* decided to create a fund of financial solidarity to help the victims of the war, whether "fascist" or "antifascist", "the families of all, the children of all"¹².

This campaign began from a political vision, which was to differentiate itself from the two military camps. But it ended up in a sort of 'Red Cross' under the auspices of the Italian Left. While this was not the Italian Left's intention, Vercesi in 1944 acted as the executor of this campaign, when he founded, in Brussels, an Italian Red Cross to help "all Italians who are victims of the war"¹³.

Isolated politically, the communist left was led into the trap of denying its isolation, denying the reality of the danger of war, and of finding non-political recipes to break out of it. Profoundly affected by the Spanish drama, deeply wounded by the split in its ranks, it gave way to the indirect penetration of positions which had always been alien to it and which the minority had defended better than anyone in 1936.

¹² "The Belgian and Italian Fractions, faced with the impossibility of participating in any of the forms and organs of solidarity set up by the Popular Front, but wishing to participate in class solidarity without falling into the grip of the imperialist war, have decided to create a solidarity fund for all the proletarian victims of Spain." (*Bilan* no. 43, Sept.-Oct. 1937, 'Pour la solidarité de classe pour toutes les victimes de la guerre d' Espagne')

¹³ This campaign, which was based on the idea of the trade union united Front, led the Belgian Fraction, or at least a minority of it, to participate in an 'International Commission for Aid to Spanish Refugees'. From the trade union or humanitarian united Front to the position of the antifascist Front, there was only one step to take, and this was taken by Vercesi in 1944-45 (see chapter 8). This campaign met with strong opposition in the Italian Fraction in Marseilles and Paris (cf. *Il Seme Comunista*, nos. 4 and 5, Nov. 1937 and Feb. 1938).

6. Towards war or revolution? (1937-39)

In February 1938, the first issue of *Octobre* appeared. Five issues were published, up until August 1939. This review was the monthly organ of the International Bureau of the Fraction of the Communist Left. Like *Bilan* it was printed in Brussels, where the editorial work was done. Legal responsibility for the publication was in the name of Albert Boyer in Paris. The events in Spain had led Gaston Davoust (Henri Chazé) to refuse to go on assuming such responsibility for the organs of the International Communist Left.

An international review, *Octobre* was to have appeared in three languages: French, German, and English. The Communist Left announced that “soon it would publish the English and German editions” and appealed vigorously to “German comrades” owing to its real difficulties in producing German translations

The disappearance of *Bilan* and its replacement by *Octobre* was symptomatic of a profound change of orientation in the Italian and Belgian Fractions. The cover was decorated with a circle representing the terrestrial globe, over which were printed the words ‘world revolution’. The title *Octobre* clearly showed that the Communist Left believed that the world was on the eve of a new ‘Red October’.

The constitution of an International Bureau at the end of the year 1937 corresponded to the hope of forming the bases of a new International. The example of Zimmerwald, which had been at the origin of the 3rd International, was in the minds of all the militants. The betrayal, since 1933, of all the Communist and Trotskyist parties — like social democracy in 1914 — meant, for the Italian Left, that it alone had the task of being the centre of a 4th International. The work done in the past, which “has consisted above all in making contact with the individuals who, in different countries, have taken a position of combat against the imperialist war”, had now to give way to “another phase of work towards the constitution of left fractions” (*Bilan* no. 43, ‘Pour le bureau international des fractions communistes de gauche’, by Vercesi).

The creation of an International Bureau linking the two Fractions undoubtedly represented a strengthening of the Italian Communist Left. The constitution of an international centre before the outbreak of the war — the Zimmerwald left animated by the Bolsheviks had emerged during the World War — gave the illusion of being better prepared than the Bolsheviks themselves.

Apparently the ‘balance sheet’ was closed, with “the liquidation of all the groups who have since terminated their evolution”; ideologically, the International Bureau had the impression that, in the proletariat, this liquidation had left it a clear field, had put it in a situation where the treason of the old ‘workers’ parties’ had been clearly marked, without the need to go through a brutal and demoralising second ‘4 August 1914’.

But was the ‘bilan’ really closed? The discussions which continued in the two Fractions, through *Octobre* and the internal bulletin, *Il Serne Comunista*, on the questions of the state and of the unions, showed that this ‘bilan’ was in fact far from complete (see chapter 7).

War or revolution?

Above all, as local wars got nearer to Europe, heralding the final conflagration, the position of the International Communist Left became less assured. ‘Localised’ wars announcing the world revolution? World imperialist war? ‘War or revolution’ — or ‘war and revolution’? This

was the historical dilemma posed each day to the two Fractions. The cohesion of the ‘Bordigist’ organisation depended on its capacity to respond clearly to this situation.

In continuity with Lenin and Trotsky’s 3rd International, the Italian Left, from the beginning, did not try to avoid the dilemma which had been posed by Marxist theoreticians: ‘war or revolution?’ It was within this tradition of the Comintern that *Bilan* in December 1933 evaluated the existing relationships between these two historical poles:

In the imperialist phase of capitalism, and from the general point of view, there are only two outcomes: the capitalist one of war, the proletarian one of revolution. It is only the insurrection of the workers which can prevent the outbreak of the war. (Bilan no. 2, ‘Une victoire de la contre-revolution: les États-Unis reconnaissent l’URSS’).

The publication of *Bilan* corresponded to the affirmation that a whole series of proletarian defeats, from 1923 to 1933, had opened up a historic course towards world war. Ideologically this was expressed in the triumph of the counter-revolution in Russia and within the parties of the Comintern. The Italian Fraction’s certainty that war was inevitable was not based on a fatalist conception of history, any more than it implied a renunciation of any intervention in the French, Belgian and American proletariat. On the contrary, through leaflets and manifestos, the Italian Left continually warned the workers — even in the euphoria of the strikes of 1936 — of the danger of a world conflict. But as long as the balance of forces had not changed in favour of the proletariat, the course towards war remained open.

In fact, the annihilation of the proletariat had already been completed; in this annihilation — which was more ideological than physical — the role of Russia had been decisive:

War is only possible through the elimination of the proletariat as a class from the historical scene. This in turn is brought about by a long work of corruption of the proletarian organisms, who end up betraying and rallying to the cause of the enemy. (Bilan no. 16, March 1935, ‘Projet de résolution sur la situation internationale, by Phillippe’)¹.

But if the war demanded this annihilation of the proletariat, how would it have the strength to transform the imperialist war into a civil war? Could the world revolution arise out of a total defeat?

According to the Italian Left, war would, as in 1917, necessarily lead to revolution. It even thought that “in comparison to the previous war, it is certain that the role of the proletariat will be enormously increased, and that the possibility of a resurgence of class struggle will be all the greater”. It considered that the growing accumulation of arms implied “the necessity to set up enormous industrial workshops and to make the whole population participate in them”. This would “enable the proletariat to become aware of its interests more quickly because circumstances would show it that it is less difficult to challenge discipline and hierarchy in the workshops than in the ranks of an army in trenches far away from the home front”. (*Bilan* no.16, March 1935 ‘Projet de résolution sur la situation internationale’, by Phillippe).

This extremely optimistic view, defended by Vercesi, was not accepted unanimously in the Italian Fraction. In a discussion article, Gatto Mammone implicitly attacked this perspective of a quasi-automatic transformation of world war into revolution, all the more because Vercesi had underlined the “pulverisation of the proletariat”:

...those who stress most strongly the proletariat’s powerlessness, dislocation, and pulverisation before the war, also insist most strongly on the immediate class capacities of

¹ Phillippe’ was the nom de plume Vercesi sometimes used when writing articles for *Bilan*.

the workers after the war. They thus attribute a sort of thaumaturgic virtue to the war in itself as a factor in the maturation of the proletariat, and look with haughty disdain at those who believe in a more or less long phase of transition and in the bourgeoisie's capacity for manoeuvre during these moments. (Bilan no. 29, March-April 1936).

However, the strikes in France and Belgium, and above all the war in Spain — even though the majority saw this as an imperialist war, the rehearsal for a confrontation between the 'democratic' and 'fascist' blocs — were to plunge the Italian Fraction, and to a lesser extent the Belgian Fraction, into an attitude of expectantly and hopefully waiting for the war. All these social movements, despite being crushed, could be seen as harbingers of the world revolution.

Theoretically, however, the Italian Left could not be content with simply reacting after the event. It had both to verify the validity of its 1933 prognosis that war was inevitable, and to see whether the changes that had taken place in capitalism since the crises of 1929 did not imply changes in the historic perspective, and thus in Communist politics.

The theoretical debate in the Italian Left revolved around three themes:

- the nature of war since 1914, and the communist attitude towards it;
- the economic and social implications of the war economy;
- the nature of local conflicts since 1937, and the revolutionary perspective.

It was crucially important for the Italian Left to grasp the nature of wars in a period which it defined — in the tradition of the Comintern's first congresses — as that of the decadence of capitalism. This theory of decadence determined all the political positions that the Italian Left took up in each conflict.

The roots of imperialist war: the decadence of capitalism

Like Lenin, to whom it referred, the Fraction saw imperialism as the final stage of capitalism. In this phase in the transformation of capital, there was a struggle between different capitalist states to divide and re-divide the globe, in particular for the control of sources of raw materials needed for production. Nevertheless, this theory tended to ignore the problem of the markets needed for all the commodities produced. The stammering of the Russian communist movement in its attempt to define the historical period opened up in 1914 left a whole field of theory to go into.

It was the discovery of Rosa Luxemburg's works, newly translated into French, that was to direct the Italian Left towards a theory based on the affirmation of the decadence of capitalism and the saturation of the world market. The crisis of 1929, a world crisis of overproduction, seemed to provide striking confirmation of the theses which Luxemburg had defended in *The Accumulation of Capital* in 1913. It appeared as a clear refutation of Bukharin's theory, which had asserted that there were no limits to capitalist expansion outside the direct sphere of production²; the development of the latter was held back and contradicted only by the tendency for the rate of profit to fall. In the 1930's, even non-Marxists, faced with a crisis which was no longer local and conjectural as in the 19th century,

² Cf. Bukharin's book, *Imperialism and the Accumulation of Capital* (reply to Rosa Luxemburg). In the Communist International after 1925, a violent attack was launched against the 'Luxemburgist' theses. Its aim was to show the validity of socialism in one country', since capitalism was able to postpone its contradictions into the far future. According to Bukharin, these contradictions could only develop sharply through "the revolt of the coloured peoples", depriving "imperialism" of its economic bases. Economically speaking, the main contradiction was the tendency for the rate of profit to fall, and not the markets, which Bukharin called the "third persons".

but truly world-wide, did not hesitate to talk about the decline and decadence of capitalism. The very length of the crisis from 1929 to the end of the world war, the dizzying fall in production and world trade, the development of autarchic policies showed that the crisis of 1929 was not a ‘classical’ crisis that would be quickly overcome by a new surge in the productive apparatus.³

It was Mitchell and the Belgian Fraction who were to take up and develop the ‘Luxemburgist’ theories which had been defended more intuitively than in depth by the Italian Fraction. Mitchell’s contributions were decisive. They appeared in *Bilan* in a series of articles entitled ‘Crise et cycles dans l’économie du capitalisme agonisant’ (nos. 10 and 11, August and September 1934). The pamphlet he published in 1936, in the name of the LCI, *Le problème de la guerre*, developed the political implications of this analysis.

Mitchell showed that the 19th century had been the epoch of the full ascendancy of the capitalist mode of production, with the increasing development of a world market. This development had a progressive character in that it was ripening the conditions for the revolution:

It was this fundamental, motivating law of capitalist ‘progress’ which pushed the bourgeoisie ceaselessly to transform into capital a growing fraction of the surplus value extorted from the workers, and consequently, to develop incessantly the productive capacities of society. Thus its historical and progressive mission was revealed. On the other hand, from the class standpoint, capitalist ‘progress’ meant growing proletarianisation and the endless intensification of exploitation. Capitalism was not progressive by nature, but by necessity. It remained progressive as long as it could make progress coincide with the interests of the class which it expressed. (Le Problème de la guerre, January 1936).

The crises which regularly disturbed the process of accumulation in this phase were “chronic crises”. Periods of crisis and prosperity were “inseparable and conditioned each other reciprocally”. Here Mitchell referred to Rosa Luxemburg for whom “crises appeared as a means to further stake up the fires of capitalist development”.

The contradictions which underlay the capitalist system — the tendency to accumulate ever more capital and to metamorphose this into an excess of commodities on the national market — were resolved through the extension of the market, and above all through capital’s penetration into extra-capitalist zones. In his series of studies, Mitchell affirmed that “the annexation to the capitalist market of new zones, new regions, where backward economies survived, and which could serve capitalism as outlets for its products and its capital” provided a solution to this contradiction. Colonial wars had the function of enlarging the capitalist market. The national wars which had “supported the bourgeois revolutions of the previous century” were succeeded by colonial wars which, by completing capitalism’s domination over the globe, accelerated the contradictions of a system that had become imperialist:

...extensive colonialism was limited in its development, and capitalism, an insatiable conqueror, soon exhausted all the available extra-capitalist outlets. Inter-imperialist competition, deprived of any way out, moved towards imperialist war. (Bilan no. 11, op. cit.).

Once the world had been divided up by the various imperialisms, capitalism world-wide ceased to be ‘progressive’:

³ The German economist Fritz Sternberg (in the appendices of *The Conflict of the Century*) notes that between 1929 and 1932, world production had fallen from 100 to 69. In the USA, production fell by 50%. The number of unemployed in the industrialised countries went from 10 million to 40 million. During the crisis, the value of world trade in dollars fell by 60%.

Once these big capitalist groups had finished dividing up all the good land, all the exploitable wealth, all the spheres of influence, in short all the corners of the world where labour could be despoiled and turned into gold for piling up in the national banks in the metropolises, the progressive mission of capitalism was also finished. (Le Problème de la Guerre).

The war of 1914 meant “the decline, the decomposition of capitalism”. “The era of specifically colonial wars was definitively over”, to be replaced by the era of “imperialist war for a new division of the market between the old imperialist democracies whose wealth went a long way back and which were already parasitic, and the young capitalist nations which had arrived late on the scene.” (ibis)

War no longer expressed the ascent of capitalism, but its general decadence, characterised by “the revolt of the productive forces against their private appropriation”. From being “chronic” the crisis became permanent, “a general crisis of decomposition”, which “history would register as a series of bloody and agonising convulsions” (*Bilan* no. 11 1, op. cit.). According to Mitchell the characteristics of this were:

- “a general and constant industrial overproduction”;
- “permanent mass unemployment, aggravating class contrasts”;
- “chronic agricultural overproduction”;
- “a considerable slow-down in the process of capitalist accumulation resulting from the narrowing of the field for the exploitation of labour power (organic composition) and the continuous fall in the rate of profit”.

On the basis of this theoretical analysis, examining the crisis of 1929, Mitchell concluded that “capitalism was being pushed irresistibly towards its destiny, towards war” (ibid.), a war which would involve “a gigantic destruction of inactive productive forces and of innumerable proletarians ejected from production” (*Le problème de la Guerre*).

Thus, the wars of the decadent epoch could not be compared to the national wars of the previous century. They were no longer the product of a few states like Germany or Italy, but derived from a global process pushing all states towards war. There could no longer be any “just wars” or opposition between “reactionary states and progressive states.” (ibid.)

The political consequences of this analysis were in continuity with the positions of the Bolsheviks and Rosa Luxemburg. “The two terms of the historic alternative were proletarian revolution or imperialist war” (ibid.).

Consequently the two Fractions rejected any form of ‘national defence’ in any country, including the USSR, as well as any ‘pacifist’ policy like that of the ‘Amsterdam-Pleyel Committee’ in the 1930’s. For the Fractions, as in 1914, the only possible struggle was not for ‘peace’ but for the world revolution, against any ‘fascist’ or ‘anti-Fascist’ war, which could only mean the destruction of the proletariat:

War is not an accidental but an organic manifestation of the capitalist regime. The dilemma is not ‘war or peace’ but ‘capitalist regime or proletarian regime’. To struggle against war is to struggle for the revolution. (Bilan no. 11, ‘La Russie entre dans la SDN’).

The working class can only call for one kind of war: the civil war directed against the oppressors in each state and concluding in the victory of the insurrection. (Bilan no. 11, ‘Projet de résolution sur la situation internationale’ by Phillippe).

On the basis of this whole analysis of the world-wide decadence of the capitalist system, the Italian and Belgian Fractions deduced that national liberation struggles by the colonial peoples were impossible and could only be a link in the chain of imperialist war.

The reactionary function of national movements in the colonies

Against Lenin and the theses of the 2nd Comintern Congress, which called for support to national movements in the colonial countries, the Italian Left openly took up the positions of Rosa Luxemburg.

Bilan, whom Union Communiste accused of being “more Leninist than Lenin” was not afraid of opposing Lenin on this question, or of challenging Marx’s position in the previous century. As it said, “Marxism is not a bible, it is a dialectical method; its strength resides in its dynamism, in its permanent tendency to elevate the formulations acquired by the proletariat in its march towards the revolution...” (*Bilan* no. 14, January 1935, ‘Le Problème des minorités nationales’).

Bilan thus rejected not only “the right of peoples to self-determination” posed by Lenin in 1917, but also the Baku theses which preached “the Holy War of the coloured peoples against imperialism”. *Bilan* courageously rejected the sacred dogmas and, in evaluating these movements, saw them as the antithesis of the proletarian revolution, and as being tied up with imperialism:

... we have no fear in showing that Lenin’s formulation on national minorities has been overtaken by events and that the position he applied after the war has shown itself to be in contradiction with the fundamental aim given to it by its author: to aid the development of the world revolution.

Nationalist movements, terrorist gestures by representatives of oppressed nationalities today express the impotence of the proletariat and the approach of war. It would be wrong to see there movements as an ally of the proletarian revolution, because they can only develop on the basis of the crushing of the workers and thus in connection with the movements of opposing imperialisms. (Bilan no. 14, ‘Le problème des minorités nationales’).

This analysis, which differentiated *Bilan* from other currents of the inter-war period, such as Trotskyism, was not however unique to *Bilan*. It was also defended by Union Communiste which took up the tradition of the German Left on the national and colonial question, as represented by the KAPD and the GIK⁴.

On the theoretical level, *Bilan* based its position of refusing in principle to support national and colonial movements on the impossibility of development. The imperialism of the great industrial powers stood against the constitution of new autonomous capitalist nations, which could only be subordinated to imperialism:

Metropolitan capitalism, sinking under the weight of a productive apparatus which it can no longer make full use of, cannot tolerate the constitution in the colonies of new industrialised capitalist states capable of competing with it, as was the case with the old colonies like Canada, Australia and America. Imperialism stands against any developed industrialisation, any economic emancipation, any national bourgeois revolution. (Le Problème de la guerre).

⁴ At the beginning, the Dutch Left, while rallying to Rosa Luxemburg’s theses on the national and colonial question made one exception in its condemnation of ‘national liberation struggles’: the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia).

On the political level, the Italian Left considered that the crushing of the Chinese proletariat by the ‘indigenous’ bourgeoisie in 1927 had sufficiently demonstrated the reactionary role of any national and colonial bourgeoisie faced with its real enemy the proletariat. Consequently, “any progressive evolution in the colonies has become bound up not with so-called wars of emancipation of ‘oppressed’ bourgeoisies against the domination of imperialism, but with civil wars of the proletariat and the peasant masses against their direct exploiters with insurrectionary struggles carried out in liaison with the advanced proletariat in the metropolises”.

When the conflicts between Italy and Ethiopia, then between China and Japan broke out, the Italian Fraction refused to give any support to the Negus or Chiang. Supporting them meant not only apologising for the butchers of the indigenous workers and peasants, but aided the march towards world war, where each local conflict expressed the confrontation between the imperialist powers in order to divide up the world.

Thus, the civil war in every country, the struggle of the proletariat “against its own bourgeoisie, whether fascist or democratic, progressive or reactionary ‘oppressed’ or ‘imperialist’” appeared to *Bilan* and *Communisme* as the only historic alternative to any other war which “independent of its aspects” was “imperialist”. (*Communisme* no. 9, 15 Dec. 1937 ‘La guerre imperialiste en Chine et le problème de l’Asie’, résolution of the Belgian Fraction).

The discussions over the war economy

While the theoretical and political framework of the Communist Left was posed in a rigorous manner, its actual analysis of the march towards war remained partly undecided.

>From 1936 on, the Italian Fraction began to become preoccupied with a phenomenon which had plunged it into great perplexity: the war economy. As early as 1933-4, a revival of economic activity had been seen in every country. In Germany, in Russia, in the USA, unemployment tended to diminish, the indices of growth in production became ‘healthier’. The military budget was three times what it had been in 1913. Though its orders, the state was supporting a whole market for arms. Would the production of arms, by providing outlets for production, allow capitalism to do without a war?⁵.

If the war economy represented a way out of the world crisis, how was one to explain the multiplication of armed conflicts from Asia to Africa, from Spain to central Europe? Was it that by using ‘localised’ wars as an outlet for the arms it had accumulated, the war economy was putting off or even cancelling the world war?

Finally, did the rise in wages and the reduction in the working day in countries like France and Belgium, the Keynesian policies of ‘full employment’ and ‘maintaining consumption’ in the USA and Britain mean that the perspective of proletarian revolution was becoming more distant? In this case, did it mean that economic struggles — whose potentially revolutionary character the Italian Left had always underlined — had become futile if, as in 1936, they only tied the workers to the governments who made concessions to them?

All these questions began to preoccupy the Fraction from 1936 on, without a satisfactory answer being given. The debate which took place in the ‘Bordigist’ organisation was to reveal profound differences, with the most serious consequences.

The ‘orthodox’ position of the Italian Left on the war economy was defended above all by Mitchell, who, in the Belgian Fraction, had followed the world economic situation in

⁵ In this study, Sternberg showed that the indices of industrial production, in relation to the 1929 basis, had gone up by 126 by 1938; in the USA, to 113 by 1937, only to go down to 89 in 1938. But “during the same period world trade did not once return to the 1929 level, much less go beyond it”.

great detail. For him, and for others in both Fractions, the war economy was simply economic war turning into military war.

Its function was thus in contradiction with the ‘classical’ development of capitalism founded on the enlarged reproduction of capital and of the productive forces. It had a negative effect, by congealing capital accumulated on a world scale, capital which was not reinvested in the productive sector, and above all, through the massive destruction of capital by the arms it produced. *Communisme* (no. 12, ‘Rapport sur la situation internationale’) stated very clearly that “...war production involves a colossal unproductive consumption of the labour and wealth which are the vital resources of society”. The Belgian review added that war could not be an ‘economic’ way out for the system when considered from the global rather than the national standpoint. World and even local war meant “the annihilation of millions of proletarians and the destruction of incalculable riches embodying capitalist surplus value”. It is interesting to note that this text did not exclude the possibility of a period of reconstruction since the phase of destruction “would be followed by a phase of ‘reconstruction’ and the reanimation of moribund bourgeois society” (ibid.).

Vercesi and a part of the Italian Fraction, on the other hand, thought that the phenomenon of a revival of production through the growth in arms production required a modification of theory. The phenomenon of state capitalism in all countries, which the Italian Left saw as a “world-wide tendency”, and the “manipulation of the weapon of credit”, seemed particularly significant. While they “only allowed for an industrial development in the particular domains of military production”, they could “nevertheless serve the interests of capitalism, above all by preventing an economic collapse...” (*Bilan* no. 24, Oct.-Nov. 1935, ‘La tension de la situation italienne et internationale’).

In fact Vercesi and his tendency were more or less saying that state capitalism, on the basis of the war economy, represented a new solution to the crisis, resolving the question of the realisation of production on the world market:

The present economy, dominated by the hegemony of war production, makes it possible to prevent the market from being immediately overloaded by the invasion of the predominant part of production, and because of this, both economic and class contrasts have shifted: it is no longer the market which reveals the antagonistic basis of the capitalist structure, but the fact that from now on the greater part of production is deprived of any possibility of finding an outlet..

If arms production overcame the contradiction of the market, it necessarily had to overcome the system’s contradictions as they erupted into economic crisis:

This transplantation of the axis of the capitalist production has as its direct repercussion in the structure of the system a gigantic elevation in the rate of surplus value, without the resulting production immediately leading to an outbreak of the contrasts specific to the bourgeois regime. (Bilan no. 41, May-June 1937, Report on the international situation, presented by Vercesi to the Congress of the Italian Fraction).

Vercesi, basing his analysis on the measures taken by the Popular Front and the New Deal, deduced that in this manner capitalism could reduce social tensions by according substantial reforms to the workers:

...capitalism is managing to raise the rate of exploitation while in the same time conceding wage increases, paid holidays, reductions in the working day. (Bilan no. 43, Sept.-Oct. 1937, ‘Pour le Bureau International des Fractions Communistes de Gauche’, by Vercesi).

In these conditions, struggles for immediate demands lost any class content. Economic struggles could no longer lead to revolution. Only the direct struggle for revolution could revive the class antagonisms:

...in the new economic situations which have succeeded the gigantic crisis which opened in 1929, the immediate demand of the working class consists not in calling for wage increases, but in the direct struggle to prevent the setting up of war economies... the class antagonism can only arise out of the contrast between capitalism instituting a situation of imperialist war and the proletariat struggling for the communist revolution. (Bilan no. 41 op. cit.).

By contrast, in the Belgian Fraction, Mitchell emphasised that the war economy meant neither improvement in real wages, nor the suppression of the economic antagonisms determined by the appropriation of surplus value.

Without denying that the general strike of 1936 had led to wage rises, he insisted that French capitalism could not allow a rise in real wages: “any rise in real wages would automatically lower the rate of exploitation, since... the growth of one inevitably reduces the other.” (*Communisme* no. 7, Oct. 1937). The intensification of productivity after June 1936, the cascade of devaluations (up to 50% in 18 months), 35% inflation in a few months reduced these wage increases to nothing, resulting in an inexorable fall in real wages. In fact, “the error consisted in thinking that what had been conceded under the pressure of the masses could be definitively incorporated into the programme of capitalism. The truth is that the Popular Front is seeing its theory of increasing the buying power of the masses consecrated by the facts in spite of itself, and that consequently its credit among the masses has been strengthened. This is the political gain for capitalism which makes up for the economic losses brought about by the Matignon agreement.” (*ibid.*).

The Belgian Fraction thus vigorously opposed Vercesi’s theory about the disappearance of the economic struggle, according to which “successful struggles for demands in some way lead to the workers collaborating with the organisation and functioning of the war economy, and thus to adhering to the policy of the Union Sacrée which is precipitating them towards imperialist massacre” (*Communisme* no. 8, Nov. 1937, ‘Les convulsions de la décadence capitaliste dans la France du Front Populaire’). Against this view, Mitchell, while conceding that the partial struggle remained the least elevated form of the class struggle, insisted that the economic struggle “still remains an expression of class contrasts and cannot be anything else”. It was not “an objective in itself, but a means, a point of departure”. Its importance remained crucial “when the workers use their specific weapon, the strike, which is precisely what capitalism wants to destroy”. In a “profoundly reactionary phase” it would have been utopian to replace the economic struggle with “the struggle for power”, and would run the risk of falling into the position of Trotsky which called for “the expropriation of the capitalists” in France. (*ibid.*).

Vercesi was to defend this theory of the war economy up until the war (see below). He had not yet made the leap to saying that the proletariat had disappeared socially — this came later. Indeed he was one of those who saw the world revolution on the horizon. If the proletariat could no longer struggle on the economic level, its struggle immediately became revolutionary, spontaneously breaking out on the political level. The new historic period would be one of a civil war by the world bourgeoisie to destroy the revolutionary forces of the proletariat country by country.

Since the war in Ethiopia, a generalised war seemed to be in the offing, and it was difficult to deny all the conflicts which signalled this process. All the members of the International Communist Left were unanimous in thinking that the revolution would come

out of the war. How could Vercesi reconcile this certainty with his theory of the war economy, the implicit result of which was to deny that world war was capitalism's only way out?

- *The Theory of 'Localised Wars'*. In 1937, at the foundation of the International Bureau of the Fractions, Vercesi and a small minority gave an answer which could appear coherent. The war economy made inter-imperialist conflicts secondary. The bourgeoisie could postpone the world war. By drawing on classical Marxist theory, which holds that all history is the history of the class struggle, they asserted that the only contradiction undermining capitalist society was a social one, the opposition between bourgeoisie and proletariat:

As far as I am concerned, I believe that this conflagration (the war) will not take place and that for now on the only form of war corresponding to current historical evolution is the civil war between classes, whereas inter-imperialist contrasts can be taken towards a non-violent solution... inter-imperialist competition is a secondary and never a fundamental element. In 1914 it played an important role, but again only as an accessory: the essential thing was the struggle between capitalism and the proletariat (Bilan no. 43, op.cit.).

They deduced from this that imperialist war had changed its function. It was no longer a question of "conquering new markets" (*Bilan* no. 38, 'Guerre civile ou guerre imperialiste?'), nor even of a redivision of the world. War had become "the extreme form of capitalism's struggle against the working class". It had only one aim: to massacre the proletariat, "the destruction of the proletariat of each country" (*ibid.*)⁶.

This theory was profoundly marked by the events in Spain, where the workers' uprising of July '36 had been derailed into an imperialist war. When a war broke out, this could only mean that a revolutionary proletarian movement had been crushed by resorting to the modern form of imperialist war:

Each time a war breaks out, the problem is not 'what imperialist interests are at stake?'. The problem that has to be posed is rather 'what social contrasts are being deviated towards the war?' (Bilan no. 46, 'Contrastes interimpérialistes ou contrastes de classes: la guerre impérialiste en Chine').

For the bourgeoisie, these 'localised wars' also had the advantage that they prevented generalised war, that they "diverted their conflicts into zones where they did not confront each other directly". While at the same time feeding their economies with arms production. This meant that there was an "interimperialist solidarity" (*ibid.*).

Pushed to its most absurd conclusions, this theory had a dual effect:

- the Fractions had a tendency to see each attack on the proletariat as announcing the revolution. Thus, *Bilan* could write that "Stalin, the last reserve of world capitalism, through the very excessiveness of the tortures he is inflicting" heralded "the approach of great revolutionary storms". (*Bilan* no. 39, January-February 1937, 'Les procès de Moscou'). Every defeat seemed to miraculously metamorphose into victory;

⁶ This theory of Vercesi, which the LCI wrongly attributed to all the members of the two Fractions, was described by the LCI as 'purely and simply denying imperialist contradictions, just as it denies any opposition between fascism and democracy'. In its *Bulletin* of March 1937, the LCI added that "The conception that the bourgeoisie is one and indivisible internationally necessarily has to lead to negating imperialist antagonisms or reducing them to almost nothing. The minimisation of these antagonisms has to lead to the idea that war is the specific struggle of the bourgeoisie against the proletariat. One can hardly imagine a worse aberration."

- the Fractions did not understand the significance of Munich and the occupation of Czechoslovakia. They believed that the bourgeoisie was trying to avoid a world conflict, haunted by the fear of provoking a new October 1917⁷.

In fact, although there was strong opposition to the theses of Vercesi and his tendency, both Fractions were profoundly confused by all this. Believing in the possibility of a revolution coming out of a world war, they considered that the different imperialisms had every interest in avoiding one. At the same time, they could hardly deny the real danger of world war. Thus disorientated, they found it “difficult to say whether capitalist society was definitively moving towards world war, or whether the perspective opening up was the development of the class struggle towards the revolution” (*Communisme* no. 3, June 1937, ‘La situation internationale: tendances de l’évolution capitaliste’).

This inability to take position decisively on the historic course considerably weakened the Fractions. Since the revolution did not come, the theory no longer corresponded to reality. Demoralisation began to take its toll. Resignations multiplied. *Octobre* suspended publication for a year, until its last issue in August 1939. In the opinion of its own members (among others, Mitchell, Vercesi and Jacob’s), the International Bureau was suffering from a “syncope”, a sort of anaemia. Discussion within the Fractions did not produce a coherent and homogeneous position.

In fact, there were three positions confronting each other on the eve of the war:

- Vercesi’s position, still defending the theory of localised wars;
- the position of Mitchell in particular, that Munich would lead to a world conflagration, in which the fascist states would suffer their final defeat;
- a third position believing in “an evolution of world capitalism towards the establishment of regimes of fascist terror in all countries” (*Octobre* no. 3, Manifesto of the International Bureau of Left Fractions).

A few days before the war, *Octobre* had to admit that “the Munich events have profoundly shaken the two Fractions... In the Belgian Fractions, two currents have tried to define

⁷ A leaflet of the Belgian Fraction distributed after München declared:

By concluding the Munich pact, the international bourgeoisie has cynically demonstrated that it knows how to shove aside the quarrel between imperialist clans when it sees the spectre of the revolution emerging. Already caught up in the tumult of mobilisation, already agitated by war fever, it has, in a last minute turn-around, put off the perspective of a world conflict because it has a clear memory of October 1917, because it has a clear memory of its reawakening as a class.

It is true that it added: “To the war threat of 28th September, you must reply by developing your struggles in all countries” (*Communisme* no. 19, October 1938, ‘A la ‘paix’ impérialiste, il faut opposer la révolution’).

themselves; in the Italian Fraction the demarcation is not so clear” (*Octobre* no. 5, Declaration of the International Bureau of the Fractions of the Communist Left)⁸.

The war was to confirm how bad this situation really was.

⁸ In the Italian Fraction, however, some militants in Paris and Marseilles vigorously opposed the theses of ‘localised wars’ and the war economy. One of these (Marc Chirik) was at the origins of the French Fraction of the Communist Left which arose in 1942, close to the Italian Fraction (see chapter 8)

7. Balance sheet of the Russian Revolution

All the revolutionaries of the 1930's were obliged to reflect theoretically on the nature of the Russian revolution, its lessons, and the reasons for its defeat. The triumph of Stalinism and its alliance with western 'democracies', the concentration camps unknown to the 'friends of the USSR' but experienced by many militants, the massacres and the Moscow Trials all pushed the Italian Left to make a balance sheet of the October revolution. It had to explain how a proletarian revolution could in a few years be metamorphosed into a monstrous caricature of socialism. Had communism failed? Or, on the contrary, was defeat, no matter how profound, the precondition for lasting victory?

The crisis of 1929 showed the Italian Fraction that it was not socialism that had failed, but capitalism, which was heading remorselessly towards world war. If the Russian revolution had failed, this was because the programmatic issues had only been posed, but not resolved by the Bolsheviks and the Third International. The future victory of socialism, which the permanent crisis of capitalism had made a necessity, could only come about through a resolute critique of the "political errors" of the Bolsheviks and the Third International. Haunted by the horrors of Stalinism, the Italian Left did not want the revolution of tomorrow to turn into its opposite because the proletariat had not been able to draw the bitter but vital lessons of its past defeats.

The method of Bilan

It was thus necessary to break new ground if all errors were not to be repeated. In order to avoid becoming sclerotic, Marxism had to be used as a method of investigation, and not as a catechism in which everything has already been defined, resolved and codified in immutable, unchanging dogmas:

"The workers, in the course of the struggle for emancipation, cannot just 'repeat', but must innovate, precisely because they represent the revolutionary class of present-day society. The inevitable defeats they encounter on this road must be seen as stimulants, as precious experiences which will contribute to the ultimate victory of the struggle. On the other hand, if we repeat even one of the errors of the Russian revolution, we will compromise the future of the proletariat for a long time to come..." (Bilan no. 29, March-April 1935 'Pour le 65^e anniversaire de la Commune de Paris').

The precondition for a future victory was to draw up an uncompromising 'balance-sheet' ('bilan' in French, hence the name of the group and its review) of October 1917. Still faithful to Bolshevism and Lenin, it wanted to go further. For *Bilan*, to turn Lenin into 'Leninism' was the worst kind of aberration and meant turning him into an icon. Guided by the idea that Marxism is the expression of a class and not of an individual, however great his genius; that theory was elaborated in a collectivity of militants which went beyond individualities and not in the brains of men of destiny, *Bilan* could write:

Lenin has given us the theoretical notions which the working class could use in the period he was working in: he could not do more, he could not understand more, since a Marxist is not a religious apostle of the new world, but an artisan of the destruction of capitalist society. (Bilan no. 2, 'La crise du mouvement communiste').

But the work of *Bilan*, then of *Octobre* and *Communisme* was largely to go beyond the framework of Russia and the Comintern. In fact the whole historical period from the World War I to 1933 was critically examined without prejudice or ostracism. No subject was 'taboo': the organisation of the working class, party, unions, councils; the forms of the class struggle; the period of transition following the seizure of power, and the nature of the transitional 'proletarian' state.

"Today we can only stammer"¹, as Vercesi replied to Hennaut concerning the nature and evolution of the Russian revolution. As we shall see, the Italian Left did more than stammer, it provided answers startling in their rigour, their originality, and their depth, whatever judgement one may make on their content.

The point of departure: the party

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, it was practically from the beginning of its existence that the Italian Left had started to draw the political lessons of the failure of the 1917-21 revolutionary wave. Its opposition to the Comintern and the Russian party on questions of 'tactics' (united front, workers' and peasants' governments, Stalin's and Bucharin's 'Bloc of Four Classes') and of organisation (cells, centralism and federalism) had right from the outset brought it into conflict with the Russian state which controlled the Comintern's leading organs. It had noted the stages in the degeneration of the Russian revolution and the parties of the International, without immediately grasping the underlying causes.

With the Rome Theses (written by Bordiga and Terracini and adopted by the Communist Party of Italy) as a starting point, the Fraction considered that the proletariat derived its existence as a class from the communist party, which provided it with its consciousness, its goals, and its methods. Having been one of the first left currents in the 1920s to understand the reflux in the revolutionary wave after 1921, it had sought the causes of the defeat in Russia and internationally above all in the tactical faults of the Comintern and the Russian party, leading to an inevitable distortion and then negation of their basic revolutionary principles. A communist party could only have a good tactic if it had firmly revolutionary principles. Any false tactic would mechanically involve a disintegration of principles. Principles and tactics were inseparable and determined each other reciprocally.

This vision, seemingly a very abstract one, in fact put the stress on the subjective factors of the revolution, of which the party was the main, and even the only expression. The privileged character ascribed to the party looked like a monstrosity to other groups, a caricature of the Stalinist cult of the party. The Belgian LCI (after the split with its 'Bordigist' minority) wrote that "the doctrine of the party presented to us by the Italian Fraction is not a supercession of the degeneration of Bolshevism, but one of its many expressions, in the same way as Stalinism and Trotskyism" (*Bulletin*, March 1937).

The whole history of the Italian Left shows that this accusation is baseless — that it is more a knee-jerk reaction than a political demonstration. When the Italian Left declared that the party is decisive for the revolution, it was only following in the path of all the currents which came out of the IInd International (including the German Left) for whom this was one of the elementary truths of Marxism. When the Fraction said that the party takes power in the name of the working class and exercises the proletarian dictatorship, it was in continuity with Lenin and the International, and even with Rosa Luxemburg who said the same thing.

¹ *Bilan* no. 35, Sept.-Oct. 1936.

In fact, what at first sight looks like a 'mystique' of the party, in which every social phenomenon had to be subordinated to this question, was, paradoxically, to lead the Italian Left to make a critical evaluation of the party's role in the revolution. Because it had such an elevated idea of its function, it saw it as a privileged instrument of the class struggle, which had to fulfil scrupulously the task assigned to it by a proletariat which by itself was unable to arrive spontaneously at a revolutionary political vision.

The communist party bore a very heavy historical responsibility: the preparation and leadership of the revolution until its ultimate victory. If it proved unable to carry out this role, it would be heading towards bankruptcy. If it betrayed and joined up with the hangmen of the proletariat, it was because the revolutionary principles which gave it life had been abandoned.

In fact, for the Fraction, which adhered to the Rome and the Lyon Theses, the party was a part of the proletariat, whose communism goals it represented. Like the class as a whole it was forged by the fires of historical experience and enriched by new principles, "as long as classes exist — and this applies even under the dictatorship of the proletariat — there will be a necessity to increase the ideological patrimony of the proletariat, the only condition for realising the historical mission of the working class." (*Bilan* no. 5, 'Les Principes: armes de la révolution'). The Italian Left of the 1930's rejected any 'patriotism' of the party, subjecting the question to the judgement of history.

Convinced that they represented the nucleus of the future world party, the Italian and Belgian Fractions were to accomplish an enormous theoretical work. Following Lenin, they insisted that "without revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary party." Hundreds of pages were written in *Bilan*, *Communisme* and *Octobre*, on the lessons of the Russian revolution, centred around a critique of the tactics of the Bolsheviks and the Comintern.

This critique was not an attempt to reconstruct history and to justify it a posteriori. *Bilan's* approach was not based on the postulate that 'everything that is real is rational', but on a praxis whose aim was the world revolution. This is why, rather than making a painstaking catalogue of the positions of the Italian Left on the Russian experience, it seems to us preferable to define its theory of the proletarian revolution in the light of the balance sheet that it drew from October 1917. This theory in any case often went beyond the Russian framework and was supported for example by the Fraction's experience in the trade union sphere; similarly, in looking at the evolution of the Russian State at the time of the Moscow Trials, it also took into account the general phenomenon of state capitalism in the wake of the Great Crisis.

We will therefore examine:

- the conditions for the world revolution, according to *Bilan*;
- the means: party, trade unions;
- the goals: communism and the question of the State.

The objective conditions: "capitalist decadence"

The failure of the world revolution, after the crushing of the German proletariat between 1919-21, posed the question of the future possibilities of revolution. In 1917, the Mensheviks had argued that the Russian revolution had been premature, on the grounds that the objective conditions (the development of capitalist production) were not sufficiently ripe in Russia. In the mood of profound depression in the 1930's, which followed the exaltation of the 1920's, many revolutionaries seemed to be saying that capitalism had become too strong to be overcome. While recognising the collapse of world production, elements like

Prudhommeaux considered that the proletariat, like Spartacus and the slaves of antiquity, was only able to throw itself into desperate revolts with no real perspective².

Did the objective conditions for the world revolution still exist? Were they sufficient for its triumph? Such were the questions which the Italian Left inevitably asked itself during these dark years.

For *Bilan*, and especially in Mitchell's texts, World War I was the sign that the entire capitalist system had entered its phase of decline — this was the period of the “decadence of capitalism”, the epoch of wars and revolution. In this, it adhered strictly to the original positions of the Comintern. This decadence was not a moral concept, but was based on the reality of the permanent crisis, which since 1929 had seemed to have achieved a definitive domination over the world economy. It was expressed less by a regression in the productive forces, since accumulation continued with the rise of the war economy, than by a process in which they were obstructed or held back. As Mitchell put it in an article in *Bilan*: “...capitalist accumulation has arrived at the extreme point of its progression and the capitalist mode of production is nothing but a barrier to historical evolution” (*Bilan* no. 31, May-June 1936, ‘Problèmes de la période de transition’).

This decadence laid the bases for the revolution without automatically producing it. Capitalism was not “a ripe fruit which the proletariat had only to pick in order to begin the reign of happiness”; all that existed were the “material conditions... to build the base (and only the base) of socialism as the preparation for a communist society”.

Did this mean, that in all countries, even the most backward ones, the objective conditions for the revolution were ripe? In a polemic directed against the Italian Left, Hennaut seemed to explain the failure of the Russian revolution by referring to the immaturity of the economic base in the Russia of October 1917. He thought that “... *Bilan* does not attribute any importance to the backwardness of Russia's economic structure, when it comes to explain what it calls the degeneration of the proletarian State”. He considered that “the Bolshevik revolution had been made by the proletariat, but had not been a proletarian revolution”. (*Bilan*, no. 33, July-August 1936, ‘Nature et évolution de la révolution russe’).

This analysis could lead to the view that the proletarian revolution was impossible in the backward countries and that at best all that could happen there were bourgeois revolutions, which liquidated the old pre-capitalist modes of production. Without denying that the world economy was made up of national components, the Italian Left argued that all countries, whatever their level of development, were ripe for socialism in that this was posed by the world wide antagonism between the classes:

The criterion of maturity is to be rejected. Both for the more highly developed countries and for the backward ones. >From now on the problem has to be approached from the angle of the historic maturation of social antagonisms resulting from the acute conflict between the material forces and the relations of production. A proletariat, no matter how “poor” it is, does not have to “wait for” the action of the “richer” proletariats, before making its own revolution (Bilan, no. 28, February-March 1936, ‘Problèmes de la période de transition’, Mitchell).

² This idea, already developed by Prudhommeaux in *l'Ouvrier Communiste*, is defended most cogently in the postscript to the book *Spartacus et la Commune de Berlin (1918-1919)* (Cahiers Spartacus no. 15), entitled ‘La tragédie de Spartacus’. André and Dori Prudhommeaux say here that “the two Spartacist struggles, the ancient and the modern, offer the same aspect of a combat at a dead end, which is at the same time a culmination of the past, and an implicit point of departure for the future. The constant elements of human revolt are affirmed there”. The tone of this postscript is startlingly religious: “... socially there appeared the structure suited to redeeming minorities, charged with a heavy burden of responsibility and fatality in a sinful world... the proletariat is Christ...”.

This is why, in an initial period, the proletarian revolution, as in Russia, was more likely in the backward countries, where the bourgeoisie was less secure economically and politically. But for *Bilan*, the question of socialism could not be posed in terms of specific national conditions, but only on an international terrain. “Because socialism is international or it is nothing” (*Bilan*, no. 35, ‘Réponse à Hennaut, by Vercesi’).

The conditions for the revolution were fundamentally political. The criterion of maturity was a subjective one and had to be connected to the socialist consciousness of the various proletariats; those in the under-developed countries had been less infected and dissolved by democracy — which to *Bilan* was the worst of all poisons — than in the advanced countries.

The subjective conditions: the party

For the Italian Left, without a revolutionary party there could be no revolution. This conception, shared by the whole communist movement of the day, did not mean that it denied that proletarian movements could arise in the absence of the party in a given country. But these movements would be doomed to go under if they were not given a clear orientation.

In fact, the proletariat’s ability to create its party reflected a situation of maturing class consciousness. This could only be brought about by an objectively revolutionary situation “with the appearance of a perspective of attack by the world proletariat” (*Octobre*, no. 1, February 1938, ‘Résolution sur la constitution du Bureau International’). Outside such a period, the Italian Left refused to envisage any voluntarist formation of the party:

Against the formula ‘We need a class party to create the class struggle’ the Bureau defends the formula ‘We need the class struggle to found the party’ (ibid.).

In a period that was still not revolutionary, it was the Fraction which crystallised the revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat, even when the class was prey to apathy and defeat.

The proletariat, despite its defeat, finds in the fraction the political arena where it can concentrate and strengthen its class consciousness, which is the precondition for its capacity to act in the more mature situations of tomorrow. (Communisme, no. 1, April 1937, ‘Déclaration de principes de la Fraction Belge’).

A whole historical process was involved in the fraction’s transformation into the party: without *the fraction, no party; without the party, no revolution* (*Octobre*, no. 1, ‘Règlement intérieur des fractions de la Gauche Communiste Internationale’).

The function of the communist party, engendered by a revolutionary situation, was to lead the proletariat to victory through the seizure of power and the overthrow of the existing social order. As the embodiment of class consciousness, the party will exert a “dictatorship” of the party on behalf of the proletariat during the period of transition from capitalism to communism. It would be the real soul of the revolution, and would try to take over the leadership of the trade unions and the soviets, which would only gain a revolutionary content through the triumph of the party’s political positions within them.

On the question of its structure, the future communist party, in the image of the Bolshevik party before 1917, had to be a ‘narrow’ organisation. The Italian Left rejected the IInd International’s vision of mass parties. If they were to carry out their tasks, the militants would have to be ideologically and organisationally prepared and selected by the class struggle. Far from looking for immediate successes, increasing its membership through

recruiting drives, the party had to work for the future, taking care to select the cadres of the revolution. *Bilan* saw the transformation of the Comintern's sections into mass parties as one of the clearest expressions of its degeneration.

In its critique of the Comintern it rejected the concept of ‘democratic centralism’, which it saw as one of the causes of the exclusion of revolutionary elements, through the free play of the vote. It stood instead for ‘organic centralism’, which had to flow from the party's programme, and not from an electoral mechanism. It did not however deny, that divergences about the programme could arise; this would necessarily be expressed in the form of fractions, whose existence would also be something organic rather than being based on a ‘right’ recognised by the party. They would be reabsorbed through the victory of that fraction which defended the revolutionary programme.

In its fundamental positions, the International Communist Left did not move far from the conceptions of Lenin, and above all of Bordiga in the early twenties. It was completely opposed to the conceptions of Trotsky and the Trotskyists, who thought the party could proclaim itself independently of a revolutionary situation. In fact, it was in opposition to Trotsky that the Italian Left elaborated its conception of fraction and party as moments in a process, in which each moment conditioned the other.

But what was essential for the Italian Left, what gave life to a communist party, was its attachment to a revolutionary international. It conceived the latter not as a federation of parties, but as the world communist party, of which the territorial sections in this or that country were emanations, and to whose world wide discipline and centralisation they were subordinated. Even if a party had taken power in a given country, like the Bolsheviks in Russia, it had to submit to this international discipline; it remained a section of the World Party, without particular rights of precedence, whatever its numerical strength or prestige.

This enormous place accorded to the party as a factor in the proletarian revolution was to have major consequences for the Italian Left, above all during and after the war (see below).

In the period 1926-39, the Italian and Belgian fractions had a tendency to theorise the absence of a party, developing a view according to which the proletariat will disappear as a class, if the party was absent. As Vercesi put it, “the present situation is witnessing the provisional disappearance of the proletariat as a class, and the problem to be resolved consists in the reconstruction of this class” (*Bilan*, no. 6, April 1934, ‘Parti-internationale-Etat’). What's more, during the war this same conception was to lead Vercesi himself to defend the idea that, socially speaking, the working class had disappeared. This being the case, communists could only engage in humanitarian activities — which is what he did (see below).

This conception led Hennaut to say in his polemic against *Bilan* that for the Italian Fraction, “the class struggle is no longer the motor for us — its place is taken by the struggle of parties” (*Bilan*, no. 33, op. cit.). But Hennaut, who defended a conception close to that of the Dutch Left, was above all convinced that “the proletarian revolution cannot be a party revolution. It will be a class revolution or it will not be” (*Bilan*, no. 34, August-September 1936, ‘Démocratie formelle et démocratie socialiste’). He concluded that “the comrades of *Bilan*, who proclaim themselves disciples of Lenin without calling themselves Leninist, are in fact more Leninist than Lenin” (*Bilan*, no. 33, op. cit.).

In fact, *Bilan's* positions were less ‘Leninist’ than at first appears. Its theoretical balance sheet of the Russian revolution, its criticisms of Leninist ‘tactics’ during the revolution are proof of this. Its critique of the union ‘tactic’ was to be the first step in a general questioning of the Comintern's policies.

Trade unions and class struggle

Unlike the German-Dutch Left, whose anti-union positions it criticised, the Italian Left had always been in favour of active work within the trade unions. Any militant who could join a union was expected to play an active part in it, in order to defend the Fraction's positions within the economic struggles.

It saw the unions as a 'school for communism' where proletarian consciousness could be forged. They were the place where the future party would develop by gaining a growing audience in a revolutionary period. Tomorrow, in the period of transition, they would be at the basis of the proletarian dictatorship.

The fraction therefore followed the evolution of the 'reformist unions' with particular attention, especially in France and Belgium where they provided a base of support for the left parties which controlled them.

In opposition to Trotsky, it rejected any idea of working to undermine the fascist unions from within. By becoming State organs, they had been destroyed as organs for the workers' immediate economic defence. In these conditions, "in principle the problem is automatically posed of forming new unions" (*Communisme*, no. 8, 15 Nov. 1937, 'Résolution sur les tâches actuelles de la Fraction dans les syndicats').

Vis-à-vis the Communist and Socialist trade unions, it was in favour of conquering them from within, taking over the leadership and chasing out the 'reformist leadership'. It was only in these unions that it was possible to construct a trade union united front against the bourgeoisie. In order to make this happen, the best solution, faced with capitalism's offensive against wages, would have been the formation of a single union federation.

The realisation of this unity under the banners of the Popular Front, with the aim of attaching the unions to the state, "would represent another factor in the demobilisation of the proletariat to capitalism's advantage" (*Bilan*, no. 9, July 1934, 'La situation en France').

However, the fraction did not call for the formation of new unions, or for their 'politicisation'. It therefore opposed both the anarcho-syndicalists of the CGT-SR and Dommanget's teachers' union (CGT-U) who wanted to create a 'politico-trade-union' current. It considered that the "communist trade union current spreads a more refined form of the reactionary opinion that the union is enough because it gives rise to conscious minorities" (*Bilan*, no. 29, March-April 1936, "L'écrasement du prolétariat français").

The fraction's position was that the union's task was to defend the workers's immediate interests. They were to be distinguished from the communist party in that it was inside them "that the working class could forge the tools that would lead them to victory" (*Bilan* no. 5, op cit.).

Only the Left Communist militants could get the unions back on the right track and restore their original function: to be instruments of the class struggle, in which the economic struggle is transformed into a political struggle for power. The deformation of this function implied, for the Italian Left in the 1930's, that there had to be 'fraction rights' in the unions, in order to preserve their class life and eliminate the 'agents of the bourgeoisie' (i.e. the parties of the Popular Front).

In demanding the right for fractions to exist within the organs of the class, we recognise the union's inability to elaborate the programme of the revolution, while at the same time we see that they can express the life of the class, its reactions to the contrasts of capitalism — that they can become bastions of the proletarian struggle, in which communist currents and agents of the bourgeoisie vie for leadership. (Bilan, no. 25, Nov.-Dec. 1935, 'L'unité syndicale en France et les Fractions').

In order to stay inside the unions, and despite the impossibility of making their positions heard, the Communist Left was prepared to adopt to the full the ‘tactic’ that Lenin defined in *Left-Wing Communism and Infantile Disorder*.

For us, what Lenin said remains applicable until the situation changes: ‘We have to lie to put up with all kinds of sacrifice, to use all kinds of strategies and subterfuge, to remain silent sometimes, to bend the truth sometimes, with the sole aim of entering the unions, staying in them, and despite everything, carrying out communist work within them’.
(*Communisme*, no. 5, August 1937, ‘Les syndicats ouvriers et l’Etat capitaliste’).

In fact, the Italian Left had too great a sense of political responsibility to hide itself. It always expressed its union and political positions in an open manner within the unions. During the war in Spain, despite all the hostility they encountered, the ‘Bordigist’ militants defended their position of revolutionary defeatism and called for workers’ solidarity with all the victims of the war, on both sides. They overtly denounced the war policies of the social-democratic and Stalinist parties, of the popular front and the USSR. Expulsions, for all sorts of reasons, were not long in following: they were always for political reasons, however, because the Bordigists always had a militant, active attitude to the struggle for immediate demands and were irreproachable at this level. Vercesi, though defended by the typographers’ union in Brussels, was excluded from the office workers’ union by POB (Parti ouvrier belge) and PCB militants on account of his positions during the events in Spain³.

This impossibility of working in the unions was to lead the two fractions to discuss the union question in greater depth, and thus to examine the forms of the class struggle in the “decadence of capitalism”.

The evolution of the unions in the inter-war period pushed forward this work of theoretical reflection. The Italian and Belgian Fractions realised that the crisis had compelled the state to seek a greater degree of control over the unions. Not only had they pronounced in favour of national unity with a view to war, and for the reorganisation of the capitalist economy under the authority of the state (‘planism’), but the state was also tending to incorporate them through all kinds of measures: union contributions to unemployment relief institutions, and parity commissions in Belgium; the recognition of the unions and the institutionalisation of ‘workers’ delegates’ in France after 1936. In both these countries the collective agreements and arbitration commissions showed that the state and the bosses were consciously seeking to avoid new ‘accidents’ like June 1936.

It was above all in the Belgian Fraction that the discussion on the union ‘tactic’ went deepest. In a country where unionisation was practically obligatory, the group had to define its attitude on the union question clearly. No doubt its positions were influenced by its contacts with the Dutch Left, which rejected any participation by its militants in the unions and advocated their destruction and the organisation of the workers in ‘Unionen’ and in strike and unemployed committees.

While the Belgian Fraction rejected any idea of leaving the unions, it did call for wildcat strike action whenever the official unions opposed strikes, as they had done in July 1932 and May 1936. It defined the immediate aims of its activity as follows:

³ cf. *Communisme*, no. 3, June 1937, ‘In the union movement: police provocation’. In order to defend himself, Ottorino Perrone wrote a text to the National Committee of the General Union of Office Workers’ (20 Nov. 38), protesting against his expulsion: “the only grievances against me are based on my interventions in the assemblies. I have been accused of no reprehensible act against the union. Moreover, the expulsion procedure began and developed when the Sûreté’s rules concerning political refugees’ residence in the country made it impossible for me to intervene in the assemblies”. Perrone was employed by the ‘Association Typographique’ in Bruxelles, which defended him against the accusations levelled against him. Because of his job he was a member of the Office Workers’ Union (Syndicat des Employés).

- a) to mark the stages in the progressive incorporation of the unions into the state machine: union contributions to the organisation of unemployment relief, the De Man plan, the national union, the diversion of class reactions into anti-fascism, the consecration of national socialism, the channelling of class conflicts towards the mechanism of parity commissions and collective agreements; to denounce the profoundly reactionary nature of the reforms of the state and of professional organisations.*
- b) to defend the vital necessity for the unions to break all the bonds tying them to capitalist institutions...*
- c) to denounce tirelessly the practice of localising strikes and of compromises aimed at smothering them while at the same time putting forward slogans aimed at the generalisation and 'politicisation' of strikes. To give firm support to so-called 'wildcat strikes' which arise spontaneously in opposition to the capitalist directives of the union bodies...*
- e) to call for union democracy only in the sense of regular and frequent convocation of general assemblies; of respecting the prerogatives and sovereignty of the assemblies; of the freedom of expression for union fractions, and finally of organic independence from any political party.*
- ... the union can only remain in the service of the proletariat on the condition that it rejects any truce in the class struggle, no matter what the situation. (Communisme, no. 8, 15 Nov. 1937, 'Résolution sur les tâches actuelles de la Fraction dans les syndicats').*

Very quickly, but still with much hesitation, the Belgian Fraction began to question the 'working class' nature of the unions. In an article 'Occupations d' usines et conscience de classe' (Factory occupations and class consciousness, *Communisme*, 15 June 1938), it wrote: "it is certain that the trade union today is the prey of capitalism, but the same is true of the proletariat which has been thrown into the orbit of the imperialist war and the war economy, by consenting to participate in the organisation of its own massacre". It added: "The trade union is what the proletarian class is, and the life of the class cannot but be reflected in the life of its organisations".

It was thus not the form but the content (consciousness) which was no longer working class, in a political not a sociological sense. This position was thus still different from that of the KAPD, for whom both the unions' form and content had to be rejected. But to what extent?

The Belgian Fraction did not exclude the possibility of the destruction of the unions in a revolutionary period, or of the workers going beyond them by forming new unitary organs:

At the present time, given the level of maturity that the situation has reached, it is impossible to pose the question of the destruction of the unions. We do not know how far this will be possible tomorrow. It will depend to a decisive degree on the creative capacities of the masses in the heat of gigantic social battles.

Tomorrow will show whether or not the unions have been superseded by the necessities of new situations" (*Communisme*, no. 15, 15 June 1938, 'Occupation d' usines et conscience de classe').

The union question was thus an open question, one that had not yet been decisively settled. In the Italian Fraction, certain militants went even further than the Belgian Fraction. A discussion opened up to determine whether the militants should leave the unions and work outside them. A tendency emerged⁴, led by Luciano Stefanini — one of the founders of the Italian Fraction in 1927 — which answered this question in the affirmative:

⁴ Another member of this anti-unionist tendency was Luigi Danielis (known as 'Gigi'). Stefanini and Danielis resolutely defended their position on the unions against the majority of the PCIInt founded by Damen, at the

Today the question is not whether it is possible for Marxists to develop a healthy activity within the unions or not, but of understanding that these organs have passed definitively into the enemy camp and that it is impossible to transform them... It is thus a question of making this clear to the workers — essentially from the outside — by insisting that any possibility of a proletarian struggle against capitalism consists of a definitive break with all forms of capitalist oppression, including the existing unions. (Il Seme Comunista, no. 5, Feb. 1938, ‘Contribute alla discussione sul rapporto Vercesi’, by Luciano).

In fact, since they were so often expelled, the militants were generally obliged to work outside the unions, without it being possible to make themselves heard in a period of such growing isolation.

There was a risk that such isolation would be theorised. If there were no longer any workers’ organs apart from the Fraction, had defensive struggles become impossible? if strikes were diverted away from revolutionary goals, did this mean that the proletariat had disappeared socially?

This was the conclusion drawn by Vercesi and a minority of the Fraction, who, on the basis of their theory of the war economy, thought that only a directly revolutionary struggle was possible. Acceptance of this view was far from unanimous. Jacobs (Benjamin Feingold), who had previously written (in *Bilan* no. 29, March–April 1936, op. cit.) that “the proletariat momentarily no longer exists as a class, as a social terms. The class struggle still continued at the economic terrain, without being able to take on its own political forms:

The French experience shows us that, in the first phase, which for lack of any other term we can call the ascendant period of the war economy, struggles for immediate demands were not ‘partial’ but were emptied of their substance throughout their development, in the second phase, that of the ‘crisis’, these struggles became intolerable to capitalism, which began to use more brutal methods to prevent them from emerging. (Il Seme Comunista, Feb. 1938, ‘I sindacati e la guerra imperialista’, by Michel (Jacobs)).

All these questions, far from being resolved, continued to be debated during the war, and even afterwards in the various branches issuing from the Italian Left.

The defeat of the Russian Revolution

In fact the views of the two Fractions were much clearer on the goals of the world revolution, after the seizure of power, than on its means, prior to this point. They were based on a patient, thoughtful, mature discussion of the Russian experience in the light of the theoreticians of Marxism.

From Marx and Lenin, the Italian Left took up the theory of the state. In order to transform capitalist society into communism, the proletariat had to install its own dictatorship by breaking up the old state machine. In *State and Revolution* Lenin had affirmed the necessity for a proletarian state in this transitional phase. The proletarian dictatorship, which would be that of the immense majority of the labouring population, would be exercised by everyone through the soviets, and the simplest cook would be able to participate in the running of the newly emerging society.

The birth of the Communist International in 1919 showed that, at the time, the Bolsheviks and all the communists in other countries were aware that this period of transition could only be set in motion by the world-wide victory of the proletariat. Russia was seen simply as a country which had undergone a successful proletarian insurrection before the

others, and not as the 'socialist fatherland'. As a proletarian bastion, the 'proletarian' state had to be at the service of the world revolution; and the Comintern had to be the expression of the whole international revolutionary movement.

Some years later, the soviets had been emptied of their revolutionary content; controlled by the Bolshevik party and the State, they were no longer the emanation of the Russian workers. The militarisation of labour in 1920, then the bloody repression mered out to the workers and sailors of Kronstadt in 1921 were so many disturbing signs of the gulf gradually opening up between the proletariat on one side and the party/state on the other. The development of the Cheka and the 'Red Terror', whose repression was more and more being directed against the workers, showed that far from withering away the state was genuing stronger and stronger, to the point that in the 1920's there were more functionaries than workers. The dictatorship of the proletariat, which was supposed to control society, had ceased to exist. So an Preobrazhensky proclaimed the need for a 'socialist accumulation'⁵ which bore a strange resemblance to capitalist accumulation. Lenin and the Bolsheviks even advocated the development of State capitalism on the German model, as an antechamber to socialism. This was followed by the notion of building socialism in one country', which was to compete economically with the capitalist world, and which clearly entailed an intensified exploitation of labour power.

It seemed that the Bolshevik party, the party of the world revolution, had become a Russian party tied to the state whose leadership it had assumed. Gradually the Comintern, of which the Bolsheviks had been the main architect, became an appendage of the Russian CP and of the foreign policy of the Russian state. In 1922, the treaty of Rapallo marked Russia's reintroduction into the concert of the great powers. Alliances were formed with the Turkey of Mustafa Kemal, who ferociously repressed the young Turkish Communist Party. In 1922 the Red Army rearmed the Reichswehr, which carried out exercises in Russia itself. In 1923, while the Comintern was calling for an uprising by the German workers, the Russian government was supplying arms to Von Seeckt, who would use them against the insurgents in Hamburg. Soon, despite strong resistance, including that of the Communist Party of Italy, the CPs became more like supporters of Russian foreign policy in their own countries than parties working for the world revolution.

It took a number of years, and a good deal of hindsight, for the small revolutionary groups coming out of the Comintern to examine the Russian experience with a critical eye. They often saw the 'tactical errors' of the Bolsheviks and the Comintern without inquiring whether the causes lay deeper. In order to explain the 'degeneration' of the Russian revolution, they often argued that its only cause was the "capitalist encirclement" which resulted from the inability of workers in the West to make the revolution. But nearly all of them, and Trotsky in particular, saw the five year plans and the process of industrialisation as an undeniable indication that socialism in Russia could catch up with and even overtake a capitalist world that had plunged into crisis. It was not the economic policies that were called into question, but the politics of the man Stalin, or of the 'bureaucracy, which were seen as a threat to the 'conquests of October'. Other revolutionaries faced with the 'Russian enigma', like the KAPD and the Dutch-German GIK, saw the failure of the Russian revolution as a confirmation of its bourgeois nature. There had been no proletarian revolution in 1917, but a coup d' Etat which gave power to the Bolsheviks, whose role was to carry out the bourgeois revolution by setting up a form of state capitalism⁶.

⁵ Preobrazhensky: *The New Economics*, 1922.

⁶ For the positions of the German Left, after 1921, on the Russian revolution cf. *Die Kommunistische Arbeiterinternationale* by Herman Gorter, *Proletarier*, Berlin, 1923; 'Thesen über den Bolschewismus', *Räte Korrespondenz*, Dec. 1934.

For the Italian Communist Left, there was no question of casting doubt on the proletarian character of the Russian revolution, still less on the revolutionary nature of the Bolshevik party which had contributed so much to the birth of the International. Neither was it prepared to accept the Trotskyist thesis that the Russian economy was orienting itself towards socialism, despite the 'bureaucratic deformation' of the state.

All these analyses were confined to the framework of Russia. *Bilan* started from a world-wide framework in order to explain the reasons for the defeat. In a world dominated by capitalism the road to socialism could only be posed, not resolved, in Russia. For *Bilan* the revolution had to unfold first of all on the political level, that is by maintaining the party which had taken power on a revolutionary course, under the direction of the Communist International.

It was by applying this global framework that *Bilan* came to the conclusion that the 'defence of the USSR' was to be rejected, and that the Russian state had fallen into the hands of world capitalism and become a pawn in the game of inter-imperialist confrontation.

This method was to be vigorously criticised by the LCI, with which the Italian Left was still discussing. It thought that this approach was a justification for the policies of the Bolsheviks and the Comintern, in order to avoid posing the question of their responsibility in the death of the revolution. *Bilan*, it said, merely wanted to show that the failure of the Russian revolution was simply the product of its isolation, in order to avoid any criticism of 'Bolshevism':

...to find in this isolation excuses for the essential form taken by the Russian revolution: the dictatorship of the communist party. This is a real example of taking effects for causes. (Bilan, no. 34, op. cit.).

Hennaut thought that the causes of the Russian counter-revolution had been essentially internal ones:

The Russian proletariat was vanquished not by the big bourgeoisie (which had disappeared), nor by international capitalism, but by the peasant and urban petty bourgeoisie in Russia. It was the emergence of an exploiting class in the USSR which permitted the latter to lie up with world capitalism. The Russian bureaucracy works for its own interests when it exploits the Russian proletariat (ibid.).

It seemed in fact that the Italian Left only took the external causes of the defeat into account when it affirmed that "...the antagonist of the workers' state is solely world capitalism and... internal questions only have a secondary value" (*Bilan*, no. 18, April-May 1935, 'L'Etat prolétarien' by Vercesi).

But the discussion inside *Bilan*, and also with Hennaut, was to lead to a revaluation of the causes of the Russian defeat, which took account both of external factors and internal factors, with *Bilan* looking at the latter more and more clearly.

The nature of the Russian 'proletarian' state

A whole discussion took place in the 1930's to try to determine the nature of the Russian state. In fact the debate had already begun in the 1920's. While for the Stalinists and Trotskyists it was evident that this state was 'proletarian', a number of small revolutionary groups had put this 'analysis' into question; in fact it was less an analysis than an apology for the unconditional defence of the USSR.

For the German Left, at the outset the Russian revolution had been a dual revolution, bourgeois and proletarian, whose proletarian phase could not be realised owing to the

dictatorship of the Bolshevik party and the weight of the peasantry within Russian society. The economy was capitalist, and profits from the exploitation of labour power went into the pockets of the bureaucracy and the peasantry, via the state.

The KAPD, and after them the GIK, did not however define the class nature of the Russian state. If the economy was state capitalist, what was the nature of the state bureaucracy? The response to this was that it was not a truly capitalist class, but a 'new ruling class', or a bourgeoisie reincarnated in the Bolshevik party. In other words, the positions of the German Left on this question were not homogeneous.

In the 1930's, in France in particular, a lively discussion went on around the nature of the Russian state and the 'bureaucracy'. In this, the Italian Left opposed the analysis developed by Treint.

In 1933 the Treint group developed a new theory. A text presented by the XVth Rayon at the unification conference of the Left Opposition ('To unravel the Russian enigma', comrade Treint's theses on the Russian question'), declared that the "bureaucracy is a new class". Basing himself on Marx's texts on Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, Treint considered that this class was of a Bonapartist type. Its function was to maintain a balance between the classes, without having a truly bourgeois character, since the private appropriation of the means of production had been eliminated in 1917. There was state capitalism, but no capitalist class. To a certain extent, this analysis prefigured the one taken to its logical conclusion by *Socialisme ou Barbarie* after 1949 (but also, several years before that, by Burnham in the USA with his theory of the 'managerial class').

The Italian Left, on the other hand, was to confront the 'Russian enigma' with extreme caution. To begin with, it was convinced that the Russian revolution had been proletarian; the degeneration could only have come from the outside, from the capitalist surroundings and the progressive death of the International. Secondly, it based itself on the classics of Marxism elaborated in the previous century and could see no other point of departure for theoretical advance. At first it considered that capitalism could only be the private appropriation of the means of production by private capitalists. Consequently, the State born out of the revolution could only be proletarian, since the bourgeoisie had been expropriated economically and politically.

How was it possible to call for a new proletarian revolution in Russia, and still affirm that the Russian state was proletarian? How could one affirm that this state was at one and the same time 'working class' and in the hands of world capitalism? There was a contradiction here and the Italian Left felt it with some embarrassment, but it was unable to overcome it until the war. It was above all concerned that its response to the problem clearly corresponded to the classical teachings of Marxism:

If you object that the idea of a proletarian revolution against a proletarian state is a nonsense and that phenomena must be harmonised by calling this State a bourgeois state, we reply that those who reason in this way are simply expressing a confusion on the problem already dealt with by our masters... (Bilan, no. 41, May-June 1937, 'Quand les bourreaux parlent... (le discours de Staline)').

In fact the Italian Fraction was marked by the polemic it had waged against *Réveil Communiste* and Treint's theories, which asserted that the Russian 'bureaucracy was a new class' arising out of a collective appropriation of the means of production. For *Bilan*, this bureaucracy could only be parasitical:

..the Russian bureaucracy is not a class, still less a ruling class, given that there are particular rights over production outside the private ownership of the means of

production, and that in Russia the essentials of collectivisation still survive. It is certainly true that the Russian bureaucracy consumes a large portion of social labour, but this is the case for any social parasitism, which should not be confused with class exploitation. (Bilan no. 37, Nov.-December 1936, ‘Problèmes de la période de transition’, 4th part, by Mitchell).

But implicitly, little by little, the Italian Left was to call this analysis into question. The long studies of the period of transition (see below), which were to continue until the war, were to contribute much to this. But it was above all the evolution of Russia, which was more and more acting as a great world power, and the development of state capitalism, which the Italian Left defined as a general tendency, which were to act as a powerful motor in calling this analysis into question. As early as 1936, Vercesi, in a reply to Hennaut, who was arguing for the bourgeois nature of the ‘bureaucracy’, did not exclude the possibility that the latter would evolve towards a capitalist form. This evolution would be related to the private appropriation of the collectivised means of production:

In Russia, where the differentiation has not yet reached the point of determining the private appropriation of the means of production, we do not yet have a capitalist class. (Bilan, no. 35, ‘Nature et évolution de la révolution russe: réponse au camarade Hennaut’).

Three years later, Vercesi declared that:

...state industry could well metamorphose into State capitalism, into a brutal negation of the working class, without it being necessary for there to be a reaffirmation of the bourgeois regime of private property. (Octobre, no. 5, August 1939, ‘La dictature du prolétariat et la question de la violence’).

Since it insisted that the Russian economy was still subjected to the law of value, and that it was based on the extraction of surplus value, the Italian Left was gradually forced to “harmonise phenomena”. A more developed study at the economic level, a return to the texts of Marx and Engels (*Anti-Dühring*) showed that the collectivisation of the means of production could indeed coexist with a capitalist class collectively appropriating surplus value through the intermediary of the state. But the definition of the state as an ‘ideal collective capitalist’ and of the ‘bureaucracy’ as bourgeois was only really posed during the war by the French and Italian Fractions and then later on by the PCIInt of Italy.

The State in the period of transition

All this reflection on the nature of the Russian state, and the underlying causes of the defeat of the proletariat in Russia, was to lead the Italian Left to overturning its perspectives completely. Whereas its initial view had been that the counter-revolution in Russia had triumphed from the outside, it began more and more to focus its theoretical analysis on the internal causes which had allowed the external factors to take effect so easily.

The Italian Left finally found the key to the ‘Russian enigma’ in the dangerous role played by the ‘proletarian’ state, which by its nature represented a permanent threat to the proletarian revolution.

- *The danger of the State.* Starting from the Marxist view that the state emerges from a society divided into classes where scarcity still reigns, and that it seeks to preserve itself in the interests of an exploiting class, the Italian Left was to consider “following Engels, that the

state is a scourge inherited by the proletariat". It even said, in Vercesi's words, that the proletariat "would have an almost instinctive mistrust for it" (*Bilan*, no. 26, Jan. 1936, 'L'Etat soviétique').

The proletariat, whose revolution is only beginning once it takes power, comes up against a state whose function is the opposite of the proletariat's objectives: to preserve the existing order.

The state is both an instrument whose historical necessity arises from the inability of production to satisfy the needs of the producers (a historical circumstance which will accompany any proletarian revolution) and also, by its very nature, an organism destined to safeguard the supremacy of an exploiting class who will use its machinery in order to install bureaucracy which will gradually be won over to the cause of the enemy class. (ibid., no. 25, Nov.-Dec. 1935).

Going even further, the Italian Left declared that:

... the state, despite the adjective 'proletarian', remains an organ of coercion, it remains in acute and permanent opposition to the realisation of the Communist programme; it is to some extent the revelation of the persistence of the capitalist danger during all the phases of the life and evaluation of the transitional period. (Octobre, no. 2, March 1938, 'La question de l'Etat').

Thus, the seizure of power by the proletariat did not alter the nature and function of the state inherited from the long chain of previous class societies. If it became 'proletarian', it was only in the sense that the proletariat, in order to take power, had to destroy the old bourgeois state machine. In no circumstances could the new 'proletarian' State embody the revolutionary essence of this class. At best, "the state is simply a balancing organism necessary only to orient all the workers towards solutions of general interest..." (*Bilan* no. 5', Parti-Internationale-Etat').

This "almost instinctive mistrust" for the state was not, in the case of the Italian Left, a purely visceral, anarchistic reaction against the latter day 'Leviathan'. It was based both on an analysis of economic relations and on the Russian experience.

The period of transition would in fact remain dominated by capitalist laws which would exert their influence on the state, constantly threatening to tie the workers to the 'general interest' which could only be that of non-proletarian strata. There is a permanent economic contradiction between capitalism, exerting itself through the state, and socialism. "The pole for the accumulation of surplus value is the state whose laws lead inevitably to accumulate more and more to the detriment of the workers" (*Octobre*, no. 2, op. cit.)

It is through the state, even the 'proletarian' state, that we see the rebirth of capitalist privileges for which "it tends to become the pole of attraction". "This is why, whereas there can be no antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the bourgeois state, one does arise between the proletariat and the transitional state" (*Bilan*, no. 37, Nov.-Dec. 1936, 'Problèmes de la période de transition').

Politically, the Russian example showed that all the organs of the proletariat (party, workers' councils, trade unions) risked being absorbed by this state, which recognised no power but its own:

... the Russian revolution, far from assuring the maintenance and vitality of the class organisations of the proletariat, sterilised them by incorporating them into the State apparatus, and thus devoured its own substance. (Bilan no. 31, May-June 1936, ibid.).

• *The danger of substitutionism: violence.* The Italian Left, through the theoretical studies of Vercesi and Mitchell, could not ignore the role played by the Bolshevik party in the triumph of the state counterrevolution. It was one of the rare revolutionary groups to criticise the repression carried out against Makhno and the sailors of Kronstadt. It argued that “the first frontal victories obtained by the Bolsheviks with regard to groups acting inside the proletariat (Makhno and Kronstadt) were won at the expense of the proletarian essence of the State organisation. (*Bilan*, no. 19, May-June 1935, ‘L’Etat soviétique’, 2nd part).

According to *Bilan*, the Bolsheviks made the mistake of confusing party and State, a confusion which was “all the more prejudicial in that there is no possibility of reconciling these two organs and that there is an irreconcilable opposition between the nature, function and objectives of state and party” (*Bilan*, no. 26, Jan. 1936, *ibid.*)

The Italian Left thus called into question the Bolsheviks’ schema according to which the dictatorship of the state was assimilated to the dictatorship of the party. Nevertheless, faithful to its conception of the party as the embodiment of class consciousness, it considered that the dictatorship of the proletariat could only be the dictatorship of the party over the state. But it was careful to point out that this conception was diametrically opposed to the dictatorship of the Stalinist party:

The dictatorship of the party cannot become... the imposition on the working class of the solutions arrived at by the party; above all it cannot mean that the party can rely on the repressive organs of the State to sniff out any discordant voice, basing itself on the axiom that any criticism, any position coming from other working class currents is by nature counter-revolutionary. (*Bilan* no. 26, *ibid.*)

The Italian Left was convinced that there could be no guarantee that the communist party would not one day betray the interests of the proletariat in the name of the revolution. It even argued — and this may seem astonishing from a current advocating the dictatorship of the party — that the latter was “not a completed, immutable untouchable organism; it does not have an irrevocable mandate from the class, nor any permanent right to express the final interests of the class...” (*Communisme*, no. 18, Sept. 1938).

For *Bilan*, even more important than the party was the goal of the proletarian revolution: socialism, which meant liberty for the exploited, and not constraint (“whoever talks about the state talks about constraint. Whoever talks about socialism talks about liberty” affirmed *Octobre*, *op. cit.*). This difficult goal could only be achieved by the workers themselves as active agents in a process which no-one else could carry out:

The emancipation of the workers will be the task of the workers themselves, said Marx, and this central formulation of socialism has for us nothing to do with a conception used to justify denigrating those workers who follow other conceptions: IT REPRESENTS THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE OF THE PROLETARIAT. (*Octobre*, no. 2, *ibid.*)

It was this principle, which many ‘revolutionaries’ seemed to have forgotten, which determined the Italian Left’s absolute rejection of any violence within the working class and its organisations (party, unions, soviets): “...is not the central proletarian position the fraternisation of the workers against the extermination of the workers?” wrote Vercesi (*Octobre*, no. 5, August 1939, ‘La dictature du prolétariat et la question de la violence’).

While violence was a necessity faced with other classes in the conditions of civil war, its role could “only be subsidiary and never fundamental” (*ibid.*).

In all cases “YOU CANNOT IMPOSE SOCIALISM ON THE PROLETARIAT BY FORCE AND VIOLENCE” (underlined by *Octobre* no. 2). This is why the Italian Left advocated the following measures to keep the dictatorship of the proletariat intact:

- the widest, most unrestricted democracy within the party:

The whole mechanism of the party must function in an absolutely free manner and the greatest latitude must be given to the formation of fractions which must be provided with the financial means needed for their expansion by the party itself. (Octobre, no. 2);

- the defence of the economic interests of the workers in the face of the state, through the trade unions and through the right to strike:

Faced with a State whose NATURAL evolution is to oppose the economic advance of the workers, there is no other solution than the existence of trade union organisations with full rights, and above all, their organic independence with regard to party and state, and the right to strike. (Octobre, no. 2).

The Italian Left went even further. In the case of a conflict between the proletariat and the ‘proletarian’ state, in which the party participated as a delegation, it considered that it would be better for the party to give up power rather than to become the hangman of the workers in the name of ‘socialism’:

It would have been better to have lost Kronstadt than to have kept it from the geographic point of view when substantially this victory could only have one result: altering the very basis and substance of the action carried out by the proletariat... it would have been a thousand times better to have taken on the State with the certitude of being beaten than to have stayed in power by inflicting a defeat on proletarian principles. (ibid.).

While remaining faithful to the principle of the ‘dictatorship of the party’, the Italian Left more and more abandoned it in practise. Against Lenin’s formula that there could only be two parties, one in power, the other in prison, it put forward a conception which refused to wage the political struggle against non-proletarian or petty bourgeois parties in the form of despotic or police measures. It was convinced that there could not be a plurality of proletarian parties in the government, “because to admit adverse parties would mean posing the condition for the re-establishment of the power of the economy after it has been overthrown” (*Bilan*, no. 35, ‘Réponse à Hennaut’). But faced with parties which disseminated bourgeois ideology (anarchists, socialists), the ideological struggle was the only effective one, the only one which would not lead “to the progressive alteration of the very nature of the proletarian party” (ibid.).

All the remedies proposed by the Communist Left were situated in the context of a country (or group of countries) where the proletariat had taken power. It was aware that the only guarantee for keeping the state in the hands of the workers lay in the extension of the revolution. In the meantime, the proletarian dictatorship would have to be strengthened through the control over the party in power by the International as a whole. In this way the communist party would not run the risk of fusing with the interests of a national state, which would by nature be hostile to internationalism. Under no circumstances could a ‘revolutionary war’, as in 1920 against Poland, be a solution to the antagonism between the ‘workers’ state’ and world capitalism. The only solution lay in the seizure of power by the workers in all countries. Within this perspective, all remedies — internal and external — could only be palliatives.

- *The danger of ‘building socialism’.* One might easily be astonished by the enormous amount of space devoted by *Bilan*, *Communisme* and *Octobre* to the political tasks of the proletariat in the “transitional period”. This was because the Italian Left, in full continuity with Marxism, insisted that the revolution had to be political before it could be economic. It rejected any

schema of the Stalinist or Trotskyist type, which considered the ‘building of socialism’ to be the fundamental task of the proletariat. This process could only begin “after the destruction of the most powerful capitalist states...” (*Bilan*, no. 37, Nov.-Dec. 1936, op. cit.).

Economics had to be rigorously subordinated to politics. It had to be integrated into the international struggle for the world revolution. Under no circumstances could accumulation in one country, where the proletariat held power, be carried out at the expense of the final revolutionary goal: world socialism. The Italian left was haunted by the Stalinist model in which the accumulation of capital is presented as ‘socialisation’. This model was ‘monstrous’ and had “reduced the Russian workers to misery” (ibid.).

It was therefore with a good deal of reticence that *Bilan* approached the question of the economic measures of the period of transition. As Mitchell, who studied the problem, noted:

The comrades of Bilan, animated by the correct concern to deal with the role of the proletarian state on the world-wide terrain of the class struggle, have singularly resurrected the importance of the problem in question, considering that ‘the economic and military domains can only be accessories, points of detail, in the activity of the proletarian State’, whereas they are of an essential order for an exploiting class. (Bilan, no. 38, ibid.).

The revolution was not only political. It also had to penetrate into the economic sphere. It seemed difficult to imagine that the proletariat could retain power if economically it was subjected to the same constraints as under capitalism. How could it maintain the initiative if, weakened by hunger, it was incapable of struggling for anything except its immediate survival — mobilising all its strength to this end, and sinking into a war of each against all?

For these reasons, the Italian Left advocated an economic policy founded not on the accumulation of capital, but on the massive production of consumer goods. In Marxist terms, there had to be a relative decrease in sector I (producer goods) and an accelerated growth in sector II (food, clothes, furniture, leisure, etc.). While the law of value continued to exist during the period of transition, its role would be lessened through a real rise in the living conditions of the labouring classes. There would be a profound alteration which would gradually lead it to disappear:

What has to be changed is the mode of production, which must no longer obey the laws of the growing increase of surplus labour, but the opposite laws of a constant and continuous improvement in the workers’ living conditions. (Bilan, no. 21, July-August 1935, op. cit., by Vercesi).

However, socialism could only emerge through an unprecedented development of the productive forces. For this, it was necessary to increase the hours of labour devoted to such a development. There was thus a great risk that the workers would be asked to make sacrifices’ in the name of this goal. This the Communist Left rejected. It thought that it would be much better if for a whole period “there was a much slower rhythm of accumulation than in the capitalist economy” (ibid.).

The result — communism — would be the fruit of a long process taking society from the reign of necessity to the reign of abundance.

There were no. easy answers to be found through ‘egalitarian’ recipes. In particular, the ‘war communism’ adopted in 1918-20 could not provide a model for the communist transformation. It was a series of contingent measures in which scarcity was ‘socialised’. In the industrialised countries, the proletariat would not need to go through such a phase.

The Italian Left rejected with equal force the economic measures advocated by the German-Dutch Left. In a work published in Berlin in 1930 (*Grundprinzipien*

kommunistischer Produktion und Verteilung) written by Jan Appel and Henk Canne-Meijer, both members of the GIK, this current advocated 'labour time vouchers' as the best route to communism.

These 'vouchers' would not only enable the transitional society to facilitate the integration of bourgeois or non-bourgeois strata who had never done productive work, but also to prevent any attempt at capitalist accumulation. The vouchers could neither be accumulated nor exchanged. They crystallised the labour time performed by each worker. In exchange, each worker, whatever his qualification or the amount he produced would receive on the basis of an 'average social labour time' his proportion of the collective consumption. This would lead to the gradual elimination of the law of value — founded on exchange — and any individual tendency to accumulate wealth⁷.

Bilan had asked Hennaut to summarise the *Grundprinzipien*⁸, but remained unconvinced by the GIK's arguments. Mitchell remarked that to establish consumption on the basis of average social labour time amounted to determining it by the law of value. He reproached the Dutch internationalists with trying to come up with mathematical solutions and with being fascinated by the example of war communism. They wanted to establish a juridical equality at the level of wages, but the suppression of wage inequalities they called for "remains suspended in mid-air, because the suppression of capitalist wage labour does not correspond to the immediate disappearance of differences in the retribution of labour" (*Bilan*, no. 35, Sept.-Oct. 1935).

For the International Communist Left, the solution was less mathematical and juridical than political. The real issue was the need for a considerable increase in consumer goods, making it possible to overcome scarcity. This alone would make it possible to dissolve the law of value and wage labour — to produce for social need and not for exchange and profit. In fact, at no point could "formal equality exist, given the existence of individual, geographical, and other differences; communism will finally establish a real equality amid natural inequalities" (*ibid.*).

It may seem surprising that among the hundreds of pages of *Bilan*, *Octobre* and *Communisme*, hardly any deal with the question of the workers' councils and the soviets. This can be explained if one bears in mind that, apart from the German-Dutch Left, no current had really undertaken a profound study of the Russian and German councils. At the beginning, under Bordiga's influence, the Italian Left had been very distrustful of the 'factory councils' advocated by Gramsci. It had thought that the councils had to be formed in the local sections of the communist party. Otherwise they would tend to encourage workers to have an economist and localist viewpoint.

In the 1930's, the Italian Fraction scarcely altered its position. It conceded that the workers' councils or soviets could take on "an enormous importance in the first phase of the revolution, the civil war to overthrow the capitalist regime"; but after that they would lose their initial importance. The real organs of the proletariat were the party and the International. It saw the councils as a "Russian form of the dictatorship of the proletariat rather than a specific form with an international validity" (*Bilan*, no. 31, May-June 1936, *op. cit.* by Mitchell). However, it remained prudent — especially Vercesi. It thought that the councils could "represent an element of control over the action of the party which has every interest in being surrounded by the active surveillance of the whole mass regrouped in these institutions" (*Bilan*, no. 26, January 1936, *op. cit.*). It was mainly after the war that a part of

⁷ The *Grundprinzipien kommunistischer Produktion und Verteilung* were republished in 1970 in Berlin, with an introduction by Paul Mattick.

⁸ *Bilan*, nos. 19 to 21, 1935: 'Les fondements de la production et de la distribution communiste'; 'Problèmes de la production et distribution communiste'.

the Italian Left began to deepen the question of the councils, seeing them as the true organs of the proletarian dictatorship.

Many contradictions appeared in the theoretical reflections of the Italian Left. Defending the idea of the 'proletarian' state, it was its most ferocious adversary. Gradually rejecting the trade unions as organs of class struggle, it made them into organisms of the proletarian dictatorship. Partisans of the 'dictatorship of the party', it wanted the party to be strictly controlled by the broad proletarian masses and the International, and even, if necessary, to be eliminated from power. But, to use its own term, it was only stammering. Moreover, its theoretical critique was very largely based on the Italian, French and Russian experiences, rather than on the German experience which was so heavily marked by the movement for the anti-trade union councils.

Nevertheless, one can only be staggered by the extent of the theoretical reflection accomplished by the Italian Left during the dark years of the 30's, on all the questions of the past and present. It was a current that aimed to prepare the future, which could only be the communist revolution. It took advantage of its isolation to prepare that future and to avoid falling into the errors of its predecessors, no matter how glorious they might have been. It did not have the vision of a revolutionary programme fixed for all eternity. The programme remained "an approximation until the very threshold of communist society". It could never be more than "a 'movement' in historical consciousness whose progress is measured against social evolution itself" (*Communisme*, no. 18, Sept. 1938).

But, above all, the Italian Communist Left felt itself to be profoundly a part of the world proletariat. It did not see theory as a luxury, a game, a dream — a consolation for hard reality. It was a vital instrument which it wanted to use in order to remain indissolubly linked to the proletariat which had given birth to it. It did not want to betray the proletariat or become its executioner.

1939-45 Trial by fire

8. The ordeal of war: from fraction to party?

When the war broke out in September 1939, the Italian and Belgian Fractions found themselves totally disarmed. The 'International Bureau' hardly existed any more, and contacts between the different sections and fractions had virtually ceased.

A few weeks before, the last issue of *Octobre* had appeared after a year's silence. At a time when the contacts between Russia and Germany were becoming official, announcing the imminent entry of the European continent into world war, the two Fractions saw all these feverish preparations as the equivalent of a second 'Munich':

"... the fact that in September 1938, world capitalism resorted to a compromise instead of a call to arms seems to support the thesis that even in the present state of tension some kind of provisional solution will be found in a second Munich."

Even more serious was the idea of an imperialist solidarity to prevent war in order to face up to the common enemy: the proletariat.

"When you read the papers, when you listen to the speeches, you have the impression of being on the eve of an armed conflict... When you see the different imperialisms armed to the teeth and bristling with a war economy — which cannot go on working in a void indefinitely — and when, on the other hand, you see this touching imperialist solidarity, you can get completely disoriented if you do not bear in mind that democracy and fascism have one common enemy: the proletariat fighting on its class terrain."

Except for the minority which considered war to be inevitable and a matter of weeks away, the militants were themselves completely disoriented by the German army's entry into Poland. The dissident Belgian Trotskyist current, led by Georges Vereecken, and whose centre was in Brussels, wrote ironically about this paralysis:

"In the eight weeks since the war began, we still do not know what the Bordigists have been doing to put their views forward... they have perhaps been thrown into disarray by the events, by the outbreak of war, since 10 minutes before Hitler's entry into Poland they were still saying that the bourgeoisie would manage to prevent the outbreak of the conflict, thus showing that it had succeeded in overcoming its own contradictions." (Contre le Courant, Bulletin of the 'Groupe Communiste Internationaliste pour la construction de la 4^e Internationale, no. 1, Nov. 1939).

The shock of war

The 'Bordigist' current was the only political current not to bring out either leaflets or manifestos when the Second World War broke out. But its disarray was not unique. Union Communiste and the Ligue des Communistes Internationalistes stopped publishing their reviews and dissolved, even though they had announced the imminence of war.

Although their membership had slowly declined after 1937, the Italian and Belgian Fractions certainly did not lack the means to ensure their political continuity. The former members of the Communist Party of Italy had been tempered in the tough clandestine struggle against the Mussolini regime and had kept up underground links with Italy. It was

¹ *Octobre* no. 5, August 1939 'Notes internationales' by Gatto Mammone.

thus their theoretical and political errors, crystallised in the theory of the war economy and 'localised wars', which led to the organisational dislocation and effective eclipse of the two Fractions.

The immediate move into clandestinity, given the Communist Left's intransigent opposition to the war and its refusal to support any imperialist camp, led to the atomisation and scattering of its militants. The German occupation of Belgium and France, the immediate collaboration between the local political police and the Gestapo, which itself worked hand in hand with the Italian OVRA in hunting down political refugees, had a disastrous and disintegrative effect on the two Fractions. Benjamin Feingold (Jacobs or Michel), a major personality in "*Bilan*", who was Jewish, was arrested in 1942 in Marseilles, deported and died in an extermination camp. The best-known militant, after Vercesi, Mitchell (Jehan) was deported along with his son, also a member of the Belgian Fraction, and died of exhaustion in 1945 soon after being released from Buchenwald. Others were 'luckier': arrested by the Gestapo, Bruno Bibbi and Fausto Atti, after a period in German labour camps, were handed over to the Italian police and were exiled to the islands, where the conditions of detention were much less severe.

In Brussels it seems that Vercesi and a few elements continued to meet as a small circle. Many thought that the war had demonstrated the proletariat's social non-existence, and that in these conditions it was pointless to carry on with organised militant activity. This was not the view of a handful of Italian and French militants, members of the Italian Fraction, who fled the French occupied zone and regrouped in Marseilles, while maintaining contact with Paris. In 1940, the southern capital sheltered many emigrants of all nationalities. Without papers or with false papers, they were in an extremely difficult material situation. Many found work in a fruit-pie factory, the "Croque-fruit", that had been set up by some Trotskyist militants (Sylvain Itkine, the Bleibtreu brothers) and which soon became a rallying point for numerous, often Jews, militants coming from various political orientations. Later on, the 'rationalisation of labour' introduced into the factory was to result in the laying-off of certain elements who refused to abandon wage demands². It was in this refuge for political émigrés that a small nucleus of militants of the Italian Fraction managed to win some Trotskyist elements over to its positions. Marc Chirik contacted Jean Malaquais, who worked with him in the factory, and "recruited" some young elements: Robert Salama (Mouso) et Suzanne Voute (Frédéric), who were still influenced by the Trotskyist positions.

The 'nucleus of the Communist Left'

This nucleus had in fact rejected the dissolution of the Fractions proclaimed by Vercesi, and, since 1940, had been trying to reconstitute the organisation, renewing contact with elements in France and Belgium.

From a circle of about 10 militants, there appeared in 1942 the 'French nucleus of the Communist Left' on the basis of a declaration of principles:

"In 1942, in the midst of the imperialist war, a group of comrades, breaking organisationally and politically with the confusionism and opportunism of the Trotskyist organisations and with the imperialist war, has constituted itself into a nucleus of the Communist Left on the political basis of the ICL."³

² Cf. Rabaut, *Tout est possible*, p. 346-347

³ 'Statut d'organisation de la Fraction Française de la Gauche Communiste Internationale', 1945.

This declaration contained a very clear rejection of the ‘defence of the USSR’ position defended by the Trotskyists and which was to lead them to participate in the war, in the maquis:

“The Soviet state, instrument of the international bourgeoisie, has a counter-revolutionary function. The defence of the USSR in the name of what remains of the conquests of October must be rejected and replaced by an uncompromising struggle against the Stalinism agents of the bourgeoisie.”

Equally clear was the rejection of the ‘democratic’ and ‘fascist’ camps:

“Democracy and fascism are two aspects of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie which correspond to the economic and political needs of the bourgeoisie at a given moment. consequently the working class which must set up its own dictatorship after destroying the capitalist state cannot align itself with one or other of these forms.”

Participation in the imperialist war was thus a “*class frontier*” which from now on separated “the fraction, only representative of proletarian interests, from other parties or groups representing in various ways different counter-revolutionary imperialist interests”. This position thus marked not only a break with Trotskyism, but also with the old position of the Italian Left, which up to the eve of the war had used the term ‘Centrist parties’ to define the Stalinist current and its Left — which made it seem as though these parties had something ‘proletarian’ about them.

On the question of the party and the fraction, however, the ‘French nucleus’ remained on the Leninist position of the Italian Left:

“The party is the political leadership of the proletariat of a given country, whose consciousness it represents. It is the party which, after taking power, exercises the dictatorship in the name of the working class. There can be no revolutionary movement if the party does not exist.”

The party could not be created in a voluntarist manner, since “it can only be created in a period of revolutionary upsurge, when the masses break free of the grip of the traitor parties and the balance of forces swings in the proletariat’s favour”. As we shall see later on, the long debate on the moment for the formation of the party, which had developed since the inception of the ‘Bordigist’ current, had not been resolved. It was to lead to long discussions in the group at the time of the Italian workers’ strikes in 1943, then to a split.

From the theses of ‘Bordigism’, the Declaration took up the position of the ‘Trade union united front’, as against the political united front. It made joining a union obligatory for each militant. “Every militant who can do so is obliged to join a union, and consequently to defend the union policies of the organisation inside the unions.

The aim of the French nucleus was to constitute a French Fraction of the Communist Left, something which had not been possible before the war. The group’s weakness, composed as it was mainly of young and inexperienced elements alongside a few older mutants, did not immediately require the proclamation of a French Fraction. It would be wrong to force a premature birth by bringing in “disparate elements linked together by sentimental ties or vague recriminations against the society they live in” or through campaigns of recruitment based on “undercover” work in other groups. This warning was aimed above all at the Trotskyists who specialised in entrism, and in particular at the young elements who had broken with Trotskyism but who still had certain sentimental ties to it. After some further splits in Trotskyism, which chose to support one “imperialist camp” against the other, elements emerged who were oriented towards the internationalist positions

of struggle against the war in all its forms. Contacts were rapidly established with the Italian Left. And it was easy, considering that Marc Chirik (Marco), the leader of the Group, was leader of the both Fractions.

The Revolutionäre Kommunisten Deutschlands and the Dutch Communistenbond Spartacus

This was the case with the Revolutionäre Kommunisten Deutschlands, or Revolutionary Communists of Germany (though they were mostly of Austrian origin). In 1935, several groups of young people in the communist youth and the Austrian CP formed a semi-Trotskyist fraction which transformed itself into an autonomous organisation under the name Revolutionäre Kommunisten Österreichs. The RKÖ, which published *Der Bolschewik*, and to which the first Trotskyists belonged, became in 1936 the official Austrian section of the ‘movement for the 4th International’. Repression and imprisonment led most of the group into exile, to Czechoslovakia and Switzerland, then to France and Belgium in 1938. Their opposition to Trotskyism soon came to the surface: on 3 September 1938, at Périgny (near Paris), the two RK delegates (Karl Fischer and Georg Scheuer) were alone in opposing the foundation of a ‘4th International’, proclaimed in one day by 20 people. Rejecting this move as adventurist and bureaucratic, they went into opposition⁴. When the war broke out, they broke from official Trotskyism and joined the ‘International Contact Commission for the 4th Communist International’ formed by Oehler’s RWL. In contact with opposition elements in Belgium (like the Vereeken group), they published *Der Marxist* in Antwerp in 1939-40. Declaring themselves to be ‘Leninist’ on the question of revolutionary defeatism, they attracted in 1941 some elements from the German Trotskyist group Internationale Kommunisten Deutschlands (IKD). They then took the name RKD instead of RKÖ⁵.

When the Russo-German conflict broke out, the majority of the RKD took position in favour of revolutionary defeatism, and no longer the “conditional defence of the USSR”. Influenced by Ciliga’s book *The Russian Enigma*, they now defined Russia as state capitalist. Even a minority which had been reticent about the position of revolutionary defeatism against all the imperialist camps espoused this point of view after two years of discussion. As for the Trotskyists, after 1939 they had chosen their imperialist camp⁶.

The French military collapse in 1940 and the internment of all German and Austrian refugees in France, restricted the RKD to Belgium, the north of France and the southern

⁴ Cf. *Les Congrès de la 4^e Internationale*, La Brèche, Paris, 1976.

⁵ A few texts by the RKD, as well as a very succinct history, can be found in *Kommunismus* no. 6/7, May 1979, Wien: ‘Der Kampf gegen den imperialistischen Krieg am Beispiel der RK’. Yvan Craipeau (*Les Révolutionnaires pendant la II^e Guerre Mondiale*, Syros, 1977, p. 168) and Rabaut mistakenly describe *Fraternisation Proletarienne*, the review of the RK/CR, as the organ of the Union Communiste Internationaliste (other name of the Groupe Révolutionnaire Proletarien, formed by Thalmann). This latter group, which was previously called Groupe Révolutionnaire Proletarien, was led by the former Swiss communist Thalmann. From 1943-45 it published *Le Réveil Proletarien*, then *La Flamme* from 1945-47. Although it referred to Rosa Luxemburg, it was very ambiguous on the question of the war.

⁶ At the beginning of the war, Trotsky (*In Defence of Marxism*) called for the defence not only of the USSR, but also of the ‘democratic’ camp. His abandonment of internationalism was justified by the invention of a new, ‘proletarian’ patriotism, the patriotism of the ‘kitchen’, more healthy than that of the bourgeoisie. In France, the Trotskyist movement split in two: a pro-German tendency around Jean Rous, member of the international Executive Committee, founded (with Henri Molinier and Henri Barré) the ‘Mouvement National Révolutionnaire’ which published *Révolution Française* “for collaboration without oppression”. The other part, around *La Vérité* and the ‘committees for the 4. International’ was pro-Gaullist and saw itself as defending “the riches that generations of French workers and peasants have accumulated... the artistic and scientific treasures of France... the magnificent contribution made by French writers and scholars to the intellectual heritage of humanity” (*Bulletin* du comité pour la 4^e Internationale, no. 2, 20/9/40). Finally, a few ex-members of *La Commune*, like Henri Molinier and Denots, joined — but briefly — Deats pro-Nazi RNP. This also happened in Belgium: Walter Dauge, the main Trotskyist leader, engaged in collaboration.

zone. They were able to renew contact with the Trotskyist milieu, and through discussion, to facilitate splits, particularly in the south-west (Toulouse, Montauban, Bordeaux) and in Paris in 1944. Before that, in 1942, groups of 'Communistes Révolutionnaires' had been formed. From 1943, in *Fraternisation Proletarienne*, they defended the same positions as the RKD. Soon after this was formed 'L'organisation des Communistes Révolutionnaires' (1944), publishing *Rassemblement Communiste Révolutionnaire* and *L'Internationale* in common with or separately from the RKD. The CR and RK groups were autonomous, even purely local, with their own positions, although identical in principle. They had their own organs: the Toulouse CR published *Le Proletaire* in 1944-45; the Paris group *Pouvoir Ouvrier* in 1944.

The RKD press (*RK-Bulletin* after '41, *Spartakus* from 43-45, *Vierte Kommunistische Internationale*) showed a considerable rapprochement with the internationalist positions of the Italian Left. At first, they were 'ultrabolshevik', treating Lenin's every position as gospel, but their break with Trotskyism made them evolve towards the positions of the Communist Left, rejecting the 'united front' and any support for 'national liberation struggles'. Discovering Rosa Luxemburg (hence the title of their agitational sheet *Spartakus*), they gradually began to defend positions close to council communism:

The democracy of the councils is the healthiest form of workers' power. The democracy of the councils means full democratic freedoms in the councils for all parties which situate themselves on the terrain of the dictatorship of the proletariat. (Spartakus, June 1944).

The Italian Left in France, and the French nucleus, had much contact and discussion with the RK and the CR, and sometimes carried out joint work through leaflets against the war. Consciously or unconsciously the two tendencies influenced each other reciprocally, by acquainting each other with the positions of the Italian and German Communist Lefts. But these contacts were made difficult in 1945 because of the 'Vercesi affair' (see below), which the RK saw as a proof of the Italian Left's 'betrayal'..

Apart from the Italian Left and the RK-CR (as well as a few rare anarchists like Voline in Marseilles), the groups who also defended internationalist positions against the war were scarce. It must be noted in France the small group animated by Pavel and Clara Thalmann in Paris: the Groupe révolutionnaire prolétarien (GRP), that published his own *Bulletin*, and had some contacts with German soldats. One of his militants became famous: the Councils Communist and "Marxologist" Maximilien Rubel.

More important numerically, in Europe, was the Dutch Communist Left. On the eve of the war, the Council Communists in Holland were very divided and disorganised. The GIK ceased publication of *Räte-Korrespondenz* in 1937, but continued with the review *Radencommunisme* and the agitation sheet *Proletenstemmen*. Contact was gradually lost with Germany, where a few groups of the German Communist Left survived. *De Arbeidersraad* (The Workers' Council) which emerged from the KAPN, and the LAO ('Workers' Left Opposition', publishing *Spartacus*) had disappeared before the outbreak of war. The GIK, like all the small surviving Council Communist groups, had become very lethargic. But in January 1941, the Sneevliet group formed the 'Marx-Lenin-Luxemburg-Front'. It brought out a bimonthly sheet, *Spartacus* 'organ of the third front' — the front of the class struggle opposed to the military fronts. It worked closely with the Vereeken group in Belgium. When the German army invaded Russia, the majority of the group declared itself against the defence of the USSR. But Sneevliet and seven other members of the MLL-Front were arrested and shot by the Gestapo in April 1942. A Trotskyist split emerged, defending the 'degenerated workers' state'. The others founded the Communistenbond-Spartacus which was joined by most members of the GIK. The group had a clear position against the imperialist war. It formed a 'Union' in the AAU tradition — the 'Eenheidsvakbeweging',

which very quickly fell into the hands of the Dutch CP. The new group had very little contact with the outside world, except in Belgium. At the end of the war, it entered into discussion with the RK and the French Fraction of the International Communist Left⁷.

The internationalist communist movement was therefore very limited. The RK-CR and the Dutch Left seemed more active in their propaganda against the war. Apart from the French nucleus, formed in Marseilles in May 1942, a large part of the Italian Left, especially in Belgium had fallen into lethargy and were suspicious of the new ‘French’ elements. The Italian Fraction in Marseilles, however, continued its efforts to rebuild the organisation, and in this was joined by militants from Lyon, Paris and Toulon. From 1941 on this effort had born fruit in annual conferences, and an Executive Commission was nominated, composed of Piccino (Otello Ricceri), Marco (Marc Chirik), Tullio (Aldo Lecci) and Butta (Giovanni Bottaioli). The basis for this reconstruction of the Italian Left in France was the rejection of the orientation adopted after 1936-37: war economy, localised wars, ‘inter-imperialist solidarity’, definition of Russia as a ‘degenerated workers’ state’, ‘social disappearance of the proletariat’ — all positions defended by Vercesi and his friends in Belgium.

At the beginning of October 1942, a general strike broke out at FIAT in Turin. This movement, in the second working class concentration in Italy, was the prologue to the mass strikes which in March ‘43 hit the Italian food, chemical, and metal industries. These events led to the fall of Mussolini and his replacement by Badoglio on 25 July 1943. The strikes had a revolutionary content: in the factories of Turin and Milan young workers, in opposition to the PCI, talked openly of forming factory councils and soviets. This movement of opposition to the war was not purely ‘Italian’, but international. From November 1941, strikes began among the German workers. Despite repression and above all their isolation they continued through the year 1942. The biggest struggles broke out in 1943, when all the Italian immigrant workers ceased work, supported tacitly or actively by strikes by German workers⁸.

These events seemed to reveal a revival of class struggle in the midst of war and confirm the new orientation of the ‘reconstructed’ Italian Fraction. They encouraged the new EC to send militants (Suzanne Voute and Robert Salama) to Belgium to re-establish contacts. Despite the difficulty and danger in crossing the frontiers, the EC wanted to push the Italian and Belgian Fractions to resume activity and organisational links. Despite the opposition from Vercesi, who thought it useless, a conference of the Italian Fraction was prepared, to be held in France in August 1943. It had the task of drawing up a balance sheet of the Italian events and outlining perspectives for intervention.

A text written in July 1943, for the August ‘43 conference of the Italian Fraction in Marseilles, and signed by Marco (Marc Chirik) for the EC, defended the idea that the situation of Italy and Germany as a weak link opened the “era of revolution”, and predicted that “the revolutionary revolts which will stop the course of the imperialist war will create a chaotic situation in Europe that is more and more dangerous for the bourgeoisie”.

However it warned against the attempts of the “Anglo-American-Russian” imperialist bloc to liquidate these revolts from the outside, and against the efforts of the left parties to “muzzle revolutionary consciousness” in Italy by creating “trade unions, organisms reflecting the context of capitalist economic relations”. It thus called for the formation of “soviets” to transform the economic struggle into a political struggle, the only way to “resist capitalist repression effectively”⁹.

⁷ Cf. F. Kools *Die Linke gegen die Parteiherrschaft* p. 527-533, as well as the (semi-Trotskyist) book by an ex-militant of the MLL Front: Max Perthus, *Henk Sneevliet, revolutionair-socialist in Europa en Azië*, SUN, Nijmegen, 1976.

⁸ See Danilo Montaldi: *Saggio sulla politica comunista (1919-1970)*, Milan, 1976, p.209-260, and Karl-Heinz Roth, *Die ‘Andere Arbeiterbewegung’*, p. 156-174, Trikont, 1976.

⁹ Cf. *Internationalisme* no. 5, July 1945, ‘Projet de résolution sur les perspectives et tâches dans la période

On the basis of the Italian events, the conference affirmed that the Fraction would inevitably be transformed into a party:

“At our August 1943 conference, the organisation unanimously recognised that ‘the course towards the formation of the party in Italy is open’; ‘the transformation of Fraction into Party in Italy is open.’”

The Fraction therefore had to strengthen its activity and prepare to intervene in a situation of working class offensive:

“In contrast to the Fraction, the Party is the specific organ of the offensive struggle of the class. To try to form the party in the course of a defeat is to try to force a premature birth. “Yes! The Fraction has finished its specifically ‘defensive’ task. The new course opened up by the events in Italy, the course towards transforming the Fraction into a party is open.”
(Internal bulletin of the Italian Fraction, no. 2, Feb. 1944, ‘Bavardage ‘révolutionnaire’ ou activité méthodique continue’ by Marco).

To this end, the conference decided to resume contact with Italy; it asked militants to prepare to return there as soon as possible. This proclamation of a “new course” came up against the opposition of the Belgian Fraction and above all of Vercesi, who was absent from the conference. Vercesi had in fact initially concluded that a revolutionary course had opened up in Italy — to the point of trying, unsuccessfully, to return to Italy¹⁰ in July — but then went back to his previous position.

According to him, the Italian events had been overestimated and confirmed “the social non-existence of the working class” in a period of war. Consequently, any activity of intervention by the Fraction, even the continuation of its existence, was seen as pointless or purely ‘activist’.

These divergences crystallised in the following months and even widened, since they touched both on the Russian question and the Perronist theory of the ‘war economy’. With the aim of clarifying the divergences, the Italian Fraction (in fact Marco) published in French eight issues of an ‘International discussion bulletin’ throughout the year 1944. The texts, for the most part, were written by Marco.

- **‘The social non-existence of the proletariat’.** The Italian Fraction and the French nucleus pronounced against this theory:

“The disappearance of the external manifestations of the social existence of the class does not at all mean that they do not exist, still less that the class does not exist socially.”
(‘Notre réponse’, by Marco, 1944, Bulletin International, no. 5).

Indeed, “the Italian experience has proved that mass movements will arise during the course of the war, and despite the effort of the unified forces of the counter-revolution, will have a tendency to detach themselves from the capitalist programme and to take up an independent orientation, expressing a clear class content” (ibid.).

However the ‘orthodox’ tendency, as it defined itself, did not ignore the fact that Badoglio and Togliatti were getting a grip on the situation in Italy. It pointed out that while the objective and subjective conditions for the formation of the class party had matured, the party’s absence “had not allowed the development of movements that would open a revolutionary course”.

transitoire’ July 1943.

¹⁰ Vercesi presented himself in July 1943 at the Italian Consulate in Brussels, to request repatriation. This was refused (Ministero dell’ Interno, 21/8/43, busta 12784, ACS CPC 34684, Roma).

The Italian Fraction was unaware that in Italy itself a ‘Partito Comunista Internazionale’ (PCIInt: see below) had been formed at the end of 1943 (Northern Italy). Although the August ‘43 conference and the French nucleus had called for the Fraction’s immediate return to Italy, this proposal came up against insurmountable material difficulties, and until 1945 there was no contact between the new party and the Fraction in France and Belgium. It came up still more against the ‘immobilism’ of the Vercesi tendency. Against this tendency to withdrawal from the outside world, the French group warned of the danger of becoming “an academy, a club of scholars indulging in the speculation of pure theory” and of being “left behind by events” (ibid.).

Political disagreements with Vercesi

- **The Russian question.** On the basis of the definition of the Russian state as ‘proletarian’, as *Bilan* had formulated it before the war, a discussion opened up on the class nature of the USSR. A part of the Belgian Fraction still affirmed its ‘proletarian’ character. The majority of the members of the Italian Fraction rejected this position, whose “fragility and incompleteness” they had always felt. They focused their efforts on the “discussion studies published in *Bilan*”. The Russian state was defined as capitalist and imperialist, and the task of the proletariat was to free itself of this great lie of the ‘proletarian nature’ of the Russian state apparatus.

“The communist vanguard will be able to carry out its task as the proletariat’s guide towards the revolution to the extent that it is able to free itself of the great lie of the ‘proletarian nature’ of the Russian state and to show it for what it is, to reveal its counter-revolutionary capitalist and imperialist nature and function.

“It is enough to note that the goal of production remains the extraction of surplus value, to affirm the capitalist character of the economy. The Russian state has participated in the course towards war, not only because of its counter-revolutionary function in crushing the proletariat, but because of its own capitalist nature, through the need to defend its sources of raw materials, through the necessity to ensure its place on the world market where it realises its surplus value, through the desire, the need, to enlarge its economic spheres of influence and to ensure its access routes.”¹¹

- The discussion on Russia led inevitably to a more profound analysis of the reasons behind the degeneration of the Russian revolution, in order to draw from the defeat the premises for the victory of the next proletarian revolution. Like *Bilan*, the Italian Fraction, which had been pushed to reopen this debate by texts presented by the French nucleus, rejected any kind of ‘state socialism’, which could only end up in state capitalism. It warned against the reactionary nature of the state throughout the transition period from capitalism to communism:

“During the course of history, the state appears as a CONSERVATIVE AND REACTIONARY factor of the first order. It is a fetter which the evolution and development of the productive forces constantly come up against. “In order to carry out its dual role as an agent of security and an agent of reaction, the state relies on a material force, on violence. Its authority relies on coercion.

¹¹ See *Bulletin international de discussion*, no. 6, June 1944, ‘La nature non prolétarienne de l’Etat russe et sa fonction contre-révolutionnaire’, by Marco.

“While retaining and accentuating its political function, the capitalist state evolves on the economic terrain towards state capitalism.”

This position was not that of the anarchists, who proclaimed the abolition of the state as soon as the proletariat took power. Conscious of the inevitability of a state during the period of transition, and of the risk that it would be reinforced if the revolution did not become world-wide, the Italian Left saw the possibility of a struggle against this state not in the domain of a ‘socialist’ economy but in the consciousness and organisation of the proletariat; not in workers’ violence against individual bourgeois (‘red terror’) but in the proletariat’s political vigilance vis-à-vis a state which would be the focus for the rebirth of capitalist relations of production. For the first time, the Italian Left talked about the impossibility of a ‘proletarian’ state in the period of the proletarian dictatorship:

“The destruction of the state by the proletariat is only the FIRST REVOLUTIONARY ACTIVITY. The class, opening for and its party a whole revolutionary process aimed FIRST AT THE WORLD REVOLUTION and then, ON THE ECONOMIC LEVEL, AT THE CREATION OF A SOCIALIST SOCIETY.

“In its nature as a social institution, the state set up after the victory of the proletarian insurrection remains an institution alien and hostile to socialism.

“History and the Russian experience have shown that, properly speaking, there is no such thing as a proletarian state, but a state in the hands of the proletariat, whose nature remains antisocialist and which, as soon as the political vigilance of the proletariat slackens, becomes the stronghold, the rallying point and the expression for the dispossessed classes of a reascend capitalism.” (“La nature de l’Etat et la révolution prolétarienne”, Bulletin no. 7, July 1944.)

Where would the consciousness and organisation of the proletariat, its dictatorship, be expressed, if not in the state? The text quoted above replied: in the unions, which defend the workers’ labour power against the encroachments of the state, and in the councils. In the latter, all methods of violence against the workers must be rejected. It is inside these organs that the class party develops. Instead of the dictatorship of the party defended by *Bilan*, the new position was for the dictatorship of the class as a whole in the councils and unitary trade unions. It was a step towards the position of the KAPD which was the first to have talked about the ‘dictatorship of the councils’. The essential difference was that the Italian Left thought that ‘real workers’ trade unions’ could only emerge during the revolution, whereas the German Left was for the destruction of the unions by the councils. But in fact the ‘unions’ advocated by the Italian Left at this point were very similar to councils.

- **The theory of the war economy.** At the immediate level, however, the Italian Fraction’s ‘liquidation’ of Vercesi’s theory of the war economy had the most profound political consequences. Having claimed prior to the war that the arms economy allowed capitalism to resolve its problems of functioning by producing non-utilisable products which were thus taken outside the laws of the market, Vercesi was led logically to affirm that war resolved the contradiction between production and the realisation of the surplus value crystallised in commodities¹².

If war was the ‘solution’ then the objective conditions for the revolution disappeared. For the Italian Left, this theory was unacceptable not only because it implied the impossibility of any organised existence within the proletariat, but also because it called into question the

¹² The question of the crisis of capitalism was raised by Rosa Luxemburg in *The Accumulation of Capital*. Her position was countered by Heinrich Grossmann in *Das Akkumulations und Zusammenbruchsgesetz des kapitalistischen Systems*, Leipzig, 1929.

slogan that Lenin had raised as a banner for all the lefts — ‘turn the imperialist war into a civil war’.

In order to explain the Italian events, Vercesi found a new theory: the ‘exhaustion of the war economy due to the ‘underproduction of armaments’. The contradictions of capitalism were breaking out not at the social level, providing a development of the class struggle in response to increasing misery, but at the level of a productive apparatus incapable of responding sufficiently to the demand for armaments.

In May 1944 a new conference of the Italian Fraction was held, and it condemned the theory developed by Vercesi and the majority that had regrouped around him before the war, as well as the new theory of the ‘crisis of the war economy’. In a political Declaration, it rejected the concept of ‘localised wars’ and reaffirmed the concept of the imperialist war.

Taking up the Luxemburgist analysis which Mitchell had defended in *Bilan* and *Communisme*, it insisted that the war economy would not lead to a new prosperity but to “a reduction in the proletariat’s standard of living, raising the antagonism between labour and capital to the point where it will break out into a revolutionary tempest”. Finally, it envisaged that the discussion would continue “until the complete victory of the communist position, which is a precondition for the Fraction being able to carry out its historic tasks in the present course of a maturation of the revolutionary explosion” (13).

In this discussion, which was to continue for nearly another year, it is interesting to see the arguments used by Marco. This comrade disagreed with Luxemburg’s view that arms production was a field for accumulation and for the realisation of surplus value, and attempted to respond to the objection that the USA had considerably enriched itself during the war. This analysis has a striking contemporary quality in the light of subsequent developments:

“Imperialist war does not develop in response to the rising tide of revolution; it is the momentary extinction of the threat of revolution, which allows society to evolve towards the outbreak of a war engendered by the internal contradictions and conflicts of the capitalist system.

“War production is not an attempt to solve an economic problem. In its origins it is the fruit of the necessity for the capitalist suite to defend itself against the dispossessed classes and to maintain their exploitation by force, and at the same time to defend its economic positions and to expand them at the expense of other imperialist suites.” War production, and all the value which it materialises, is destined to leave the sphere of production without being reintegrated into the cycle of accumulation — to be destroyed. After each cycle of production, society does not register an increase in its social heritage, but an overall reduction and impoverishment. . .

“War production is carried out through various financial operations performed by the suite, at the expense of the working masses: taxes, loans, conversions, inflation and other measures; a new and supplementary buying power is obtained through an overall draining value. . . The greater part remains unrealised and waits to be realised through war, or through banditry against the defeated imperialism. A kind of enforced realisation is thus carried out. The victorious imperialism presents the bill for war production in terms of ‘reparations’, exacting its pound of flesh from the defeated imperialism. But the value contained in the war production of the defeated imperialism, like that of other small capitalist states, is completely and irredeemably lost. If you draw up a balance sheet of the operation for the whole world economy, the results are catastrophic, even if some sectors and imperialisms have got richer.”¹³

¹³ These discussions on the war economy were published at the GCF conference in its Special External *Bulletin* n° 2, July 1945 (‘Rapport sur la situation internationale’). The political declaration of the Italian Fraction in May

This discussion with Vercesi had no effect. No longer participating — apparently — in any of the Fraction's activities, his departure or exclusion seemed inevitable. But the cause was not his theoretical or organisational disagreements; it was his activity in the 'Antifascist Coalition' in Brussels.

Italia di Domani: Vercesi's activity in the Brussels Anti-Fascist Coalition

At the end of 1944, the Italian Fraction in Marseilles and the French nucleus learned indirectly through a former deputy of the PSI travelling through France that Ottorino Perrone was participating in the 'Coalizione Antifascista' in Brussels, in the name of the Italian Fraction. Nor was he alone, since Ferdinando Borsacchi (Pieri) was also involved. This 'coalition' had been born in September of that year, with the approach of Anglo-American troops. It was composed of all the 'antifascist' parties: the Christian Democratic party represented by Domenico Tavano; the Italian Communist Party represented by Enrico Cominotto, the Republican party with Pietro Liuti, the PSI with Saverio Roncoroni, Giustizia e Libertà with Jacopo Brandaglia, trade unionists like Ateo Vannucci, and the Liberal party, which did not have a delegate.

Since 18th September, Ottorino Perrone had been put forward by the Italian 'antifascists' and named provisional delegate at the head of the Croce Rossa Italiana (Italian Red Cross), which managed all charity work towards Italians in liaison with the Belgian Croix-Rouge. Through an irony of history, the offices of the Coalition were situated in an occupied Italian consulate in the Rue de Livorno — Livorno being for the Bordigists the symbol of the break with 'social democracy and bourgeois democracy' of all kinds.

The Coalition published *L'Italia di Domani* in Italian, then in French, from January 1945.

Its official goals were to help Italian prisoners of war to get back to Italy and to give material aid to Italians in difficulty. In fact its aims were political. As well as the reports on charitable work and the cultural and literary debates which filled its columns, *L'Italia di Domani* defended the idea of "the real Italy, free, democratic, antifascist". To this end the Coalition appealed for financial donations to support the allied war effort. Its columns were full of the 'great deeds' of the Resistance — bombings, sabotage, guerrilla war — in support of the military camp Italy had chosen after 1943. Certain articles, signed 'Logicus', called on the allies not to begrudge Italy its share in the 'victory' and to allow it to obtain 'just frontiers' as reward for its participation in the war.

L'Italia di Domani was therefore an 'antifascist' organ in the service of the Anglo-American military camp, and not a simple 'cultural' journal as Perrone claimed later on. In its ideology of support for the war and for rebuilding the 'Italian fatherland', it resembled the *Popolo d'Italia* of 1915, which had also been animated by 'left socialists'.

Had Perrone, who before the war had so firmly and consistently denounced antifascism as an instrument of imperialist war, suddenly become an 'antifascist'? Had he abandoned his intransigent communist positions and gone over to the 'democratic camp'?

To anyone reading his articles, Perrone's role in the Coalition came out as extremely ambiguous. On the one hand, he wrote articles on the war economy, the counter-revolutionary role of Russia, the necessity for socialism and for the dictatorship of the proletariat in Italy, all of which showed that, 'ideologically', he remained the same; on the other hand, there were no articles by him explicitly denouncing the war and antifascism¹⁴.

44 can be found in the *Bulletin International de Discussion de la Fraction Italienne*, n° 5, May 1944.

¹⁴ *L'Italia di Domani* can be found at the Bibliothèque Royale in Brussels, as well as in the 'Perrone archives'. The Communistes Révolutionnaires (CR), in their organ *Le Prolétaire*, printed extracts from it.

In fact, Perrone was acting as a ‘revolutionary’ cover for the Coalition, which saw him as a man of integrity, known throughout the Italian émigré milieu in Belgium for his enormous culture, intelligence and noble humanitarian sentiments. On several occasions, Perrone acted as a spokesman for the Coalition. He represented it at the meeting held by the Socialist deputy De Brouckère in November 1944. In his closing speech, Perrone said that “in the present troubled situation, where Italy’s joining the allied cause may not save Italians from the dangers of being treated as enemies, De Brouckère has opened the way for a current of sympathy among the Belgian people in favour of those who have suffered over 20 years of fascist dictatorship”. He also paid homage to Emile Vandervelde (another Belgian socialist deputy, who in 1914 had supported the Entente war effort). Equally ambiguous and incomprehensible was the assurance he gave “in the name of the political refugees”, that “once returned to Italy, the Italian exiles will do their duty” (*L’Italia di Domani*, no. 6, 11 Nov. 1944).

No less stupefying, for a member of the Italian Communist Left, was his activity in the Red Cross, where in an appeal to Italians living in Belgium (*ibid.*, no. 11, March 1945) he thanked “his excellency the Papal Nuncio” for his “support to this work of solidarity and humanity”, and declared that he was sure that “no Italian will shame himself by remaining deaf to our urgent appeal”.

Perrone retained his membership of the Coalition and his presidency of the Croce Rossa until at least May 1945, when he began to distance himself from them, and eventually resigned.

At first the Italian Fraction in France refused to believe that Perrone had taken part in this coalition; it thought the whole thing was a lie. When it received copies of *L’Italia de Domani*, it had to accept the evidence. The Executive Commission (composed, among others, of Ricceri, Lecci, Bottaioli, Marco) reacted immediately: Vercesi was expelled on 20 January 1945. The “Résolution sur le cas Ver.” — written by Marc Chirik — which it published also called on “the proletariat to break with these left wing blocks, where antifascism is just a mask for subjecting the proletariat to the ‘democratic’ bourgeoisie”. It denounced “all the elements who carry out these policies as confusionists and auxiliaries of capitalism”¹⁵. It is worth noting that this expulsion did not apply to Pieri (Borsacchi), whose activity in the Coalition was not known to the Fraction.

Vercesi’s activity was all the more antithetical to the tradition of the Italian Left in that the Fraction, and especially the French nucleus, had since 1943 been developing a whole work of open intervention against the war. Posters denouncing the imperialist war and all the military fronts were stuck up in several French towns. Leaflets published in German, English, Italian and French were thrown into the military trains going off to the front. After the allied landing of 6 June 1944, an Appeal was launched to all workers and soldiers calling on them to demonstrate their class solidarity across all divisions; to cease fire and unite against world capitalism, to form “an international class front” in order to ‘turn the imperialist war into a civil war’. The RK and CR were also intervening in the same way, and political relations with them grew closer, in spite of the difficulty in holding joint discussion conferences with them¹⁶.

It should be said that this obscure period in Perrone’s life was never uncovered by his party, the PCInt, which has preferred to maintain a prudent silence over it. A study being done at the time of writing, by Mme. Anne Morelli on the Italian immigration in Belgium, analyses the political orientation of *l’Italia di Domani*. She presents Perrone’s activity in the coalition as purely humanitarian.

¹⁵ *Internationalisme*, no. 7, Feb. 1946.

¹⁶ A leaflet against the war by the Italian and French Fractions was published in the *Bulletin International de Discussion* n° 6, June 1944; the joint leaflet with the RKD-CR in n° 8.

Creation of the French Fraction: split with the Italian Fraction

All this work led to a numerical development in Marseilles-Toulon, Paris and northern France. Soon the “French Fraction of the Communist Left” was born, its founding Congress being held in Paris, in December 1944, where moved Marco. Alongside the Italian and Belgian Fractions, a new (but microscopic) Fraction seemed to have emerged, realising the hopes expressed by the International Bureau in 1937.

The “Liberation” did not change in the least the clandestine methods of the new Fraction, given the police surveillance against internationalist propaganda, particularly under the auspices of the PCF (in Marseilles, in spring 1944, a member of the Italian EC, Marco, narrowly escaped from the clutches of the Resistance (FFI, FTP), who knew about his activities against the war). The French Fraction was organised in territorial groups of 3 to 5 members, links being carried out through the Executive Commission. Illegality remained the rule, but despite its limited forces, this did not stop it from publishing and intervening on a wide scale.

Its programmatic bases were rigorously the same as those of the Italian and Belgian Fractions: the International Bureau resolution of 1938, the whole tradition of *Bilan*. The French nucleus’ 1942 ‘Declaration of Principles’ served as the basis for the work of the French Fraction. The Statutes defined strict criteria for membership, in order to preserve the life of the organisation. The EC elected by the congress included a member of the EC of the Italian Fraction (Marco), in order to show the non-autonomous character of the new Fraction.

However, the Italian Fraction in Marseilles, because of previous political differences (in particular the expansion of intervention), but also of the mistrust of the Marco unilateral creation of a little group in Paris, only recognised the new Fraction after some hesitation. It was moreover somewhat distrustful towards these ‘newcomers’ — often young, and not Italian — and was no doubt afraid of being a minority within the Communist Left. The dispersal of its members during the war, the return of many of them to Italy following the formation of the PCInt by Damen and Maffi, later joined by Bordiga’s group in the Mezzogiorno, considerably reduced the membership of the Italian group in France and Belgium. There is no doubt that a certain “party patriotism” and sentimental attachment to their country of origin had a greater weight in their attitude than any political motivation. Furthermore, at a conference in May 1945 the Italian Fraction in France decided to dissolve itself and to integrate its members individually into the PCInt. This dissolution was vigorously opposed by Marco who insisted that the Fraction be maintained until more was known about the political positions of the new party, and whether they were in contradiction with those of the Fraction. In order not to be an ‘accomplice’ of this auto-dissolution — according to him — he resigned from the EC and left the Conference. In response, the Conference did not give official recognition to the Chirik’s French Fraction (FFGC) and expelled Marco from the Italian Fraction, for ‘Trotskyism’.

In the meantime, Vercesi (who was still a member of the Italian Red Cross and of the Anti-Fascist Coalition) declared himself in favour of the new party of Damen and Maffi and attempted to get back to Italy. It seemed that after the Marseilles resolution expelling him from the Fraction, he gradually began to reconsider. But he only went half way, because he continued with these activities, though in a more limited and prudent manner. Ideologically, he attempted to justify his past activity in the Coalition. In a text written in Spring 1945 — and which drew a biting reply from the FFGC, ‘Quand l’opportunisme divague: réponse à Ver’. — he tried to prove that his ‘antifascist’ militancy had been justified by the necessity to “liquidate fascism and the fascists” in order to “facilitate the clash between the proletariat and

the capitalist state”. Moreover, according to him, “the workers today are demanding the crushing of fascism”. As to his activity, it was purely cultural and humanitarian, aimed at helping Italian workers and this was something “not limited to questions of politics and to the divergences between political parties”. He also said that the Fraction could only intervene “when capitalism is being shaken up” and not now “when from the social point of view, the proletariat has not yet made its appearance”¹⁷.

The birth of the PCInt. in Italy, and the influence of Vercesi, who was very hostile to the Chirik’s FFGC since it had been the most intransigent against him, led to a split in the French Fraction. One militant of its EC, Frédéric (Suzanne Voute) contacted Vercesi in Brussels and seem to have been convinced by his arguments, after having been fervent advocates of his immediate expulsion.

As with the Italian Fraction, the real origin of this split was not directly political: it was a result of the prestige enjoyed by Vercesi and the new Italian party. The official motive was the FFGC’s ‘neo-Trotskyism’ (Marc Chirik came from the French Trotskyism). In fact, the ‘French Fraction’ (later on the Gauche Communiste de France) had decided to issue a joint leaflet with the RK/CR for the 1st May 1945, in order to warn the French workers against anti-German chauvinism, and to call on them to support the revolutionary movements which were bound to emerge in Germany after the war. The Italian Fraction and elements of the French Fraction saw this as the politics of the ‘united front’, contrary to the principles of the Italian Left. In fact, the RK/CR were groups of German and French revolutionaries who had fought courageously against the war, risking deportation like their founder Karl Fischer, and shot for a few. Seeing the Coalition as a sign of the definitive ‘betrayal’ of the Italian Left, the RK/CR maintained contact, in the form of discussions and conferences, with the Gauche Communiste de France, the Belgian Fraction, and the Dutch Council Communists. The public denunciation of the ‘revisionism’ of the Vercesi tendency by the GCF and the RK/CR, the search for a confrontation of ideas between these groups — all this, whether admitted or not, provided the unconditional partisans of Vercesi and the new party with the pretext to provoke a split. The question of the leaflet put out by the GCF and the RK was just an excuse for eliminating any criticism of Vercesi.

It seemed that the FFGC did everything it could to avoid a split, by avoiding any irreversible organisational measures.¹⁸ Suzanne Voute with his friend Alberto Maso (Vega) — who came from the Spanish POUM and was sympathizer — tried to build (with the Italian Bordigists in France) in January-May 1945 an organisation that would be united with the PCInt.

In July 1945 the second conference of the Gauche Communiste de France was held. It ‘suspended’ for one year Suzanne Voute who were no longer participating in its activities. But that kind of “decision” — decreed by 4 or 5 partisans of Marc Chirik — was nonsense. Suzanne Voute and other Bordigists in France were building the official French “section” of the Italian PCInt, Party 2,000 strong.

Nevertheless, the GCF was definitively constituted as a group organisationally separate from the Italian Left. It took up the task of outlining the historical perspectives it faced. It was counting on the revolutionary upsurge of the proletariat in Italy and Germany where “it has suffered less from the destruction of its consciousness than from physical destruction and has only adhered to the war under the pressure of violence”. But it noted that “incomparably better prepared for the possibility of a revolutionary threat, international capitalism has acted in a solid, skilful and prudent manner against a proletarian decapitated of its vanguard”:

¹⁷ *Internationalisme* n° 4, June 1945, ‘Réponse à Ver’. by Marco.

¹⁸ *Bulletin Extérieur* nos. 1 & 3, July 1945: ‘Résolution sur les rapports internationaux’; ‘Rapport d’ activité’; a ‘special issue’ on the ‘split’ was published in June 1945 with the resolutions of. the EC of the GCF.

“From the very first signs of the revolution in Italy, in July 1943, it was capitalism which seized the initiative and implacably conducted a civil war against the proletariat, preventing by force any concentration of proletarian forces, and carrying on with the war, even taken after the collapse and disappearance of the Hitler government, Germany was urgently calling for an armistice. The aim of this was, through a monstrous carnage, a pitiless preventative massacre, to eliminate any threat of a revolution by the German proletariat.

“The total figure of dead in Europe has risen to 40 million, two thirds of them since 1943. This figure alone shows the balance sheet of imperialist war in general and of capitalism’s civil war against the proletariat in particular.”¹⁹ (“Report on the international situation”, Bulletin Spécial no. 2, July 1945).

The lack of any revolutionary upsurge was to have a centrifugal effect on the weak revolutionary forces that did exist. The RKD and the CR went through numerous splits and began to fail apart. The former “minority” of the Chirik’s French Fraction, supported by the PCInt in Italy,²⁰ formed another and “official” FFGC (Nr 2) and asserted that it was the only legitimate heir of the Communist Left. It published the paper *L’Étincelle* (“Spark”), a title taken from the paper the GCF had been publishing since January 1945. For over a year there were thus two *L’Étincelle*; after that, the official Bordigist FFGC began to publish its own organ, *L’Internationaliste*. For its part, the Gauche communiste de France (GCF), led by Marc Chirik, published a monthly theoretical organ until 1952: *Internationalisme* (for its relations with the PCInt see Chapter 9).

There were no longer any political relations between the two little French groups. The break was made complete when at the end of 1945 the FFGC admitted in his ranks the old minority of *Bilan* which had entered L’Union Communiste, as well as the latter’s chief representative: Henri Chazé. From now on their paths diverged profoundly: the GCF attempted to take up and deepen the theoretical contribution of *Bilan*; the FFGC formed itself around the pre-1926 Bordigist positions, and as a prolongation of the old minority which the Italian Fraction had excluded before the war²¹.

¹⁹ The text alludes to the bombing of Dresden, Hamburg and Berlin which killed hundreds of thousands of workers, as well as of the industrial towns in northern Italy. The industrial apparatus, on the other hand, was hardly touched.

²⁰ Officially, the PCInt did not exclude the GCF, it simply ignored it. This attitude was vigorously criticised in *Internationalisme* after the Turin conference (December 1945), which only recognised the FFGC, represented by Frédéric (Suzanne Voute) and Alberto (Albert Véga, i.e. Alberto Maso): “You do not dare to exclude the intransigent left tendency politically, for fear of revealing your own opportunistic colours. You resort to wise ‘reorganisations’ which carefully exclude the left tendency. It’s more skilful and less embarrassing”. (Letter of 15 March, by Marco, addressed to the PCInt, the Belgian Fraction, and the official FFGC, in *Internationalisme* no. 10).

²¹ The GCF had better relations with the Belgian Fraction, of which Perrone remained a member until his death

in 1947. There was even an international conference in 1947 in Brussels in which the Belgian Fraction (Lucain and Robert Couthier) took part along with the GCF and the Dutch Communist Left. The Belgian Fraction published *l'Internationaliste* until its disappearance around 1949-1950. Perrone was also a theoretician of the PCInt, alongside Bordiga.

9. The “Partito Comunista Internazionalista”

Despite the repression acted out by Mussolini, the “Bordigist” current had not disappeared. Even if Bordiga was no longer active and had withdrawn into a prudent silence, many of the rank and file militants had held on to the positions of the Livorno Congress. But they found it impossible to maintain any organised activity, even in clandestinity. It was above all in the prisons, in the island gaols (*galera*) and places of exile (*confini*) that the Bordigist left preserved its identity and kept up its organisational links. When the last core of intransigents like Damen, Repossi and Fortichiari were excluded from the PCI in 1943, the Bordigist militants did not abandon the struggle. Far from it.

It was natural that these militants should find in Onorato Damen their most resolute spokesman and also their most effective organiser. Born in 1893 in the province of Ascoli Piceno, he adhered directly to the left wing of the PSI around 1910. Conscripted during the war with the rank of sergeant, he was demoted in 1917 and condemned to two years in prison for ‘incitement to desertion’ and for denouncing ‘the imperialist character of the war’. Once released, he was with the Abstentionist Fraction in Bologna, then in Imola and Livorno. In 1921 he was secretary of the Camera del Lavoro in Pistoia and director of the communist paper *L’Avvenire*. In 1921, on returning from an electoral meeting supporting his candidature for parliament, he was arrested by the fascists, but immediately released after workers’ protest strike. Some time afterwards, in company with armed communists, he came up against the *Squadristi* — a confrontation which ended with the death of a fascist. Accused of homicide, he had to take refuge in Paris, where he stayed for three years as a director of the weekly Italian edition of *L’Humanité*. Returning in 1924, he was elected as a deputy for the Florence constituency. Hostile to Gramsci and Togliatti, in 1925 he founded the ‘Entente Committee’ with Repossi, Fortichiari, then Perrone, with the aim of creating a Left Fraction in the party. In November 1926 he was exiled to Ustica; in December a special tribunal condemned him to 12 years confinement. In 1933 he led the revolt of political prisoners in Civita-Vecchia. Released at the end of that year, he was sent to Milan where he lived under surveillance. He was arrested again in 1935 and 1937. Then, after the declaration of war, he was only released under the Badoglio government¹.

The birth of the PCInt: Damen and Prometeo

Despite the tight surveillance he was subjected to, he managed to form a small nucleus which in 1943 was to give birth to the *Partito Comunista Internazionalista*. Around him regrouped Mario Acquaviva, Fausto Atti, Bruno Maffi, Luciano Stefanini, Guido Torricelli and Vittorio Faggioni, ‘cadres’ of the new party. All these militants came both from the Italian Fraction in Belgium and from the PCI which had expelled them, with the single exception of Bruno Maffi who had been a member of Giustizia e Libertà, before moving away from it under the influence of Damen, who was his ‘mentor’ in prison. Hardened by prison, clandestinity, and long years of militancy, all these men were ready to struggle to the end for the revolution, whose first stirrings they saw in the events of March 1943, then in the strikes in September in the North.

On the 1st November, the PCInt brought out the first issue of *Prometeo*, clandestinely of course. The fact that the country was cut in two, occupied by the German army on the one

¹ On Damen, apart from his biography in *Dizionario del movimento operaio italiano*, 1975, see the issue of *Prometeo* devoted to his militant life, following his death in October 1979 (no. 14, Oct. 1979).

hand, and the Anglo-American armies on the other, limited its distribution to the north of the country. Up until 1945, the PCInt had practically no contact with the Bordigist groups which had formed in the Mezzogiorno.

Struggling against the Partisans' war and any enrolment of the workers under the banner of Italy or of Togliatti, the PCInt waged a difficult, rigorously clandestine struggle, while being denounced by the PCI as “an agent of Germany and of fascism”.²

An exceptionally interesting document — the reports on the clandestine press sent to Mussolini between 1943 and 1945 — makes it possible to sweep away these accusations, which were fabricated by the Stalinists:

“The only independent paper. Ideologically the most interesting and most prepared. Against any compromise, defends a pure communism, undoubtedly Trotskyist, and thus anti-Stalinist.

“Declares itself without hesitation an adversary of Stalin's Russia, while proclaiming itself a faithful combatant for Lenin's Russia.

“Fights against the war in all aspects: democratic, fascist or Stalinist. Even struggles openly against the 'partisans, the Committee of National Liberation and the Italian Communist Party.’”

We can see here the confusions made by Mussolini's spies and informers between the “pure communism” of *Prometeo* and Trotskyism. But on the front page of the paper was written “anno 22” (since the Livorno congress), “*Serie III*” (third series after 1924, then 1928 to 1938), “*sulla via della sinistra*” (a reference to the Italian Left). In practice there was no confusion possible between the PCInt and the Trotskyist groups. For example, *Bandiera Rossa* considered the USSR to be “the most solid rampart of the proletarian revolution”. An ardent defender of the ‘partisan’ war, this group, like the PCI, poured out anti-German, even anti-“teutonic” nationalism:

“... let us remember that our sons, our brothers, our houses are still subjected to the shame of teuton ferocity; our wives, our cities are still subject to the carnage it creates” (Bandiera rossa, no. 6, 17 March 1944, ‘Partecipare alla guerra’).

When Rome fell *Bandiera Rossa* (no. 18, 9 June 1944) saw the American victory as a “triumph for the forces of civilisation”. It is not hard to see why, from August 1944, this paper was able to appear legally. The second Trotskyist group, *Stella Rossa*, was little different from the first, except that it exalted ‘Stakhanovism’ and defined the war waged by the Russian state as ‘proletarian’.³

Prometeo was on the contrary indirect ideological continuity with Bordiga's Communist Party and the Italian Fraction in France and Belgium.

² In *La Fabbrica*, January 1944, organ of the PCI in Milan, we read: “And while the best sons of our land, our best Communists are — on the partisan Fronts of Goriza, Udine, Lecco, San Martino, Val d' Ossola and many other parts of Italy -heroically waging the war against the Germans and the fascists, while the Italian workers, peasants and intellectuals are shedding their blood in the struggle against the invader, the shady editors of *Prometeo* spew out their incongruities under the heading ‘The Trap of Partisanism’. According to them anti-German partisanism is a weapon used by the bourgeoisie to blind the workers; according to them the workers must refuse to join the partisan formations, must ‘desert the war’”. This article ends with a real incitement to murder, which was concretised in March and July 1945 by this assassination of Mario Acquaviva and Fausto Atti: “The criminal, infamous activity of these dirty individuals must be unmasked and denounced. It is an insult to and a betrayal of the heroic fighters. They must be put in quarantine, treated as spies and traitors, as agents of the Gestapo. And their press must be burned”.

³ For the history of these groups consult, with caution: R. Luraghi *Il movimento operaio torinese durante la Resistenza romana*, Rome, 1968.

The paper insisted that there was no difference in class content between fascism and democracy, and that if "fascism is dead, its inheritance has passed to democracy". (1/3/44, 'How and where to combat fascism?'). It pointed out the general tendency towards state capitalism (called 'socialisation' in the text):

"Through the fascist or democratic regimes, socialisation not only does not represent a deviation from this capitalist system, but even constitutes an extreme reinforcement of the system; not only is it not socialism, it is the expedient of the ruling class to bar the way to the proletarian revolution". (Prometeo, 1/4/1944, 'Socialisation and Socialism').

While it made no distinction between fascist Italy and Stalinist Russia, which had both installed a form of state capitalism, it nevertheless considered that the Russian state was still 'proletarian'.

The PCInt was very clear on the partisan war (*partigiani*): no support, no participation, calling for fraternisation between the workers in uniform in both camps; agitation for a revival of class struggle on its specific terrain, the factories:

"Against the slogan of national war, which aims to pit the Italian proletarians against German and English proletarians, put forward the slogan of the communist revolution, which unites the workers of the whole world across frontiers against their common enemy: capitalism." (Prometeo, 1/11/1943)

"How to crush Nazism? To overthrow the war machine that oppresses the German proletariat, do not call on the aid of another war machine (Anglo-Saxon or Russian) but sow among the ranks of the German troops the seeds of fraternisation, antimilitarism and the class struggle." (Prometeo, 4/3/1943, 'Death to the Germans or death to Nazism?')

"To centrism's call to join the partisan bands, we must reply by being present in the factories, whence will arise the class violence that will destroy the vital centres of the capitalist state." (Prometeo, op. cit., 'Sulla guerra').

The PCInt developed rapidly amongst the workers, and by the end of 1944 it had formed several federations, the most important being in Turin, Milan and Parma. It developed its activity in the factories by forming 'internationalist communist factory groups', advocating the formation of factory councils instead of the 'internal commissions' created under Badoglio, and in which the PCI took part. It also promoted a 'proletarian united front' for the struggle and against the war, in order to prevent "the workers being poisoned by war propaganda". The only groups to join this front were the revolutionary syndicalists and the libertarian communists (like *L'Azione Libertaria* and *Il Comunista Libertaria*). *Prometeo's* propaganda seems to have gained much support in the factories, among the workers who refused to join the partisan groups.

>From June 1944 however, the PCInt began to orient itself towards a work of agitation among the partisan organisations not linked to the left parties, particularly in Piedmont. While confirming its refusal to participate, the PCInt had its writings distributed within them. This policy was to lead *Prometeo* to make concessions on the non-proletarian, imperialist nature of a war integrated into the military fronts:

"The communist elements sincerely believe in the necessity to struggle against Nazi-fascism and think, once this obstacle has been overthrown, that they can march towards the conquest of power and the overthrow of capitalism." (Prometeo no. 15, August 1944).

The PCInt carried out more and more agitation against the war, in the factories and in the groups of partisan workers. In June 1944 it published its *Manifesto* to the Italian workers

which incited them to desertion from the war "in all its forms" and called for "the physical defence of the class against reaction, deportations, requisitions and forced enlistment." Its initial position on the partisans became more ambiguous since the *Manifesto* called for "the transformation of the partisan formations, where they are composed of proletarian elements with a healthy class consciousness, into organs of proletarian self-defence, ready to intervene in the revolutionary struggle for power".

Grasping the change which had taken place in *Prometeo's* activity, which was trying to develop at the price of weakening positions of principle, Mussolini's spies noted, not without finesse, that "here the communist left has adapted the language of other subversive groups, undoubtedly with the intention of creating its own mass of manoeuvre" (underlined in the report, 086713 to 087130).

Up till then the PCIInt had no programmatic platform; the extension of its influence led it in 1944 to edit an "outline programme". This outline affirmed first of all that "...the crushing victory of the Entente powers will enormously strengthen the resistance front of world capitalism and reduce the objective possibilities of the proletarian revolution". It definite its attitude towards the parties and the new 'democratic state which would arise after the war:

"...the socialist and centrist parties have acted and are acting towards this war not as forces of the right wing of the proletariat, but as real and conscious forces of the bourgeois left.

"...In the face of the democratic state the tactic of the party of the proletariat does not change: we believe neither in its elections, nor in its constitution, nor in its freedom of the press, speech and organisation."

As for Russia, which was still referred to as a 'proletarian state', it had ceased to be "the country of the first great revolutionary achievements of the proletariat". This somewhat cautious position was similar to Bordigas, who hesitated to talk about 'state capitalism' (see below).

Despite the absorption of the unions by the state and the PCI's hold over the 'internal commissions', the PCIInt's position on this question was rigorously the same as in 1926:

"Our party will pose as soon as possible the problem of the unitary reorganisation of the workers' movement, rebuilding its network of union fractions of the communist factory groups (composed of communists and non-party workers) into a national communist union committee." ("Schema di programma del Partito comunista internazionalista", 1944, republished in *Prometeo*, January 1974).

Prometeo admitted however that "the vestiges of the old clandestine union organisations have shown that they served more as a conveyor belt for political agitation linked to the war than as authentic organs of the workers' struggle". It was for this reason, which contradicted the idea of forming union fractions, that the PCIInt continued to call for the formation of 'factory councils'. In 1945 it began to publish an agitational sheet *I Consigli di Fabbrica* which made propaganda in the factories around this theme.

Much bolder was the position that the PCIInt took up on the question of the state in the period of transition, where it was visibly influenced by *Bilan* and *Octobre*. Damen and his comrades rejected the assimilation of the dictatorship of the proletariat with the rule of the party, and in the face of the 'proletarian state' called for the widest democracy in the councils. They did not rule out the hypothesis, verified at Kronstadt, of confrontations between the

'workers' state' and the proletariat, in the which case the communist party should be on the site of the latter:

"The dictatorship of the proletariat can in no sense be reduced to the dictatorship of this party, even if this is the party of the proletariat, the intelligence and guide of the proletarian state.

"The state and the party in power, as organs of such a dictatorship, bear the seeds of the tendency towards compromise with the old world, a tendency which as the Russian experience shows develops and strengthens through the momentary inability of the revolution in a given country to spread, by linking itself to the insurrectionary movement in other countries

"Our party...

"a) would have to avoid becoming the instrument of the workers' state and its policies... would have to defend the interests of the revolution even in confrontations with the workers' state.

"b) would have to avoid becoming bureaucratized, by making its directive centre or its more peripheral centres a field of manoeuvres for the careerism of functionaries.

"c) would have to prevent class politics being thought out or carried out through formalist and administrative criteria."

Taken as a whole, these positions, and the ambiguity of some of them, inevitably gave rise to disagreements within the party at the end of the war. But the bases for the constitution of the PCInt seemed infinitely more elaborated and thought out than those of the Bordigist groups of the Mezzogiorno.

In 1944, in the south, which was occupied by American troops, several groups claiming descent from the communist left were quickly formed, and began to distribute their press illegally.

Bordiga and Renato Pistone: the Frazione di sinistra dei comunisti socialisti

In Naples a group was formed, around Renato Pistone and Bordiga, that took up the tradition of the Abstentionist Communist Fraction of 1919. In this town, the new fraction had a big influence, and despite the presence of Togliatti and the PCI centre, there were many PCI militants in the south who, completely isolated from the 'centre' in exile, still held to the positions of the left, and were not fully aware of the party's evolution. The term 'Frazione' adopted by Pistone and Bordiga seemed to imply that they had not given up hope of winning over the militants of the PCI and PSI by eliminating their leaderships. This is why the Bordigist fraction did not constitute itself into a party before being absorbed by the PCInt in 1945. Its publications were, in Naples, *La Sinistra Proletaria*; in Salerno, *L'Avanguardia*; and in Rome *Il Proletario*. This last group was composed of old comrades of Bordiga, but also of former partisans, members of the PCI who had participated in the war in Spain, and a split from *Bandiera Rossa* (Movimento comunista d' Italia). Federations and sections of the PCI in Calabria and Puglie also declared for Bordiga (see below)⁴. These Bordigist groups proposed:

"1) to bring the parties back onto the terrain of class politics, as long as there is still a possibility of doing so.

⁴ On these movements, see same elements in Danilo Montaldi, *op. cit.*

“2) to transform themselves into an autonomous party, when the regeneration of the existing parties shows itself to be completely impossible, and when the situation imposes a clear separation between revolutionary and reactionary forces.” (Il Proletario, ‘La situazione dopo Roma’, 15 July 1944).

This is why up until the beginning of 1945 the Bordigist militants practised ‘entrism’ within the PCI. A militant like La Camera, a future leader of the PCInt, was for a long time at the head of the Cosenza Federation of Togliatti’s party (*La Sinistra Proletaria*, 19 Feb. 1945, ‘Nella federazione di Cosenza’).

Equally ambiguous were the relations with the partisan groups and the Trotskyist parties, despite their total opposition to Bordigist positions. On 6 and 7 January 1945, the fraction held a conference in Naples. *Bandiera Rossa* and *Stella Rossa* were represented at the meeting. The conference proposed to work towards the “constitution of the real party of the working class”. In March/April Bordiga, Libero Villone (who afterwards joined the Trotskyist party) and Pistone elaborated a series of theses ‘For the constitution of the Communist party’. These theses referred to the Italian Left’s critique of the ‘United Front’ in Germany (1923), to the critique of the French and Spanish Popular Fronts and of the ‘Resistance’ in Europe. Admitting the impossibility of ‘redressing’ the Socialist and Communist parties, the text still considered it necessary to “develop from the inside a continuous work of ideological clarification, the means through which those elements not totally corrupted by centrist degeneration can find the right path.” The end of the war, however, which the probable opening up of a revolutionary situation, “would prepare the favourable conditions for the transformation of the fraction into a party”. On this question, which had been clarified by the Italian Fraction in France and Belgium (*Bilan*), the position of Bordiga’s and Pistone’s ‘Frazione’ remained hesitant, sometimes using the word ‘fraction’, sometimes the Trotskyist term ‘left opposition’ (*La Sinistra Proletaria*, 19 Feb. 1945). The publication of letters from partisans and texts by Trotsky in its columns did not distinguish these Bordigist groups very clearly from the others.

On the question of the war, the position of the Frazione was unambiguous. It put forward the necessity for “proletarian internationalism” and for “the transformation of the imperialist war into a revolutionary civil war”. It thus attacked the ‘antifascism’ of the PCI, which was simply a cover for those who were “working for the internationalisation of Nazi-fascist methods” (*La Sinistra Proletaria*, op. cit., April 1945). Vis-à-vis Togliatti’s National Liberation Committees (CLN), the Frazione announced its opposition to participation in the partisan groups:

“These represent a compromise with bourgeois forces and thus a weakening in the class life of the proletariat.” (Il Proletario, 28 May 1944, “Dichiarazione programmatica”, probably written by Bordiga)⁵.

It was over Russia that the Frazione was least decisive. It came out not against the USSR but against the policies of the “present Russian ruling class, because they are inimical to the development of the proletarian revolution”. Nevertheless, the *‘Dichiarazione programmatica’* defined the USSR as an integral part of the new capitalist organisation. According to this text, Russia was composed of three classes: the privileged, exploiting class, allied to which were the rich and middle peasants, and the exploited and oppressed class, “constituted once

⁵ In the platform of 1945, published in 1946 and written by Bordiga, the latter remained very ambiguous on the partisan movement: “Concerning the partisans, patriotic struggle against this Germans and the fascists, the party denounces the manoeuvres of the international and national bourgeoisie who, with their propaganda for this rebirth of official state militarism (a propaganda which can have no meaning), are aiming at the dissolution and liquidation of the voluntary organisations of this struggle. In a number of countries these organisations have already been subject to armed repression.”

again by the industrial and agricultural proletariat" (ibid.). In the face of Stalinism, the 'Bordigists' proposed the foundation of a new Communist International.

On the unions, the Frazione's attitude was as uncertain as that of the PCInt. Under Bordiga's influence, it proposed the resurrection of the "glorious Camere del Lavoro".

It was not only the political attitude of the Frazione, that was uncertain and ambiguous, but also some dirigent, like Matteo Renato Pistone. This last one seemed to have "worked" for a long time for the Fascist State. During the war, in contact with the Mussolini's diplomatic offices, he acted in France — under the nickname of Jean Ollivier — as Collaborator of the German Authorities, et wrote playdoyers in defence of the Collaboration in the newspapers of Seine-et-Marne. (see Archivio centrale dello Stato, Roma, Casellario Politico Centrale, busta 4015: Pistone Matteo Renato.). How explain the brutal political change in the life of Pistone, since 1943, after leaving France, it is difficult to give clear explanation?

The Frazione continued to exist in an autonomous manner until July 1945, when it fused as a group, and not through individual adhesions, with Damen and Maffi's PCInt. This fusion between organisationally and theoretically heterogeneous groups would soon be revealed as very fragile.

The Puglie Federation and the "Partito Operaio Comunista" (POC).

The Puglie Federation of the PCI had taken Bordiga's side in 1926. Under fascism its evolution paralleled that of the Italian Fraction in exile. In 1944, while claiming adherence to the 'Lyon Theses', it declared itself in favour of a 4th International, being unaware of the 4th International founded by Trotsky. Discussions conducted by Nicola Di Bartolomeo led the group into a rapid fusion with the small Trotskyist nucleus under the leadership of Mangano. It seems that the Puglie Federation wanted to carry out 'entrism' inside the Trotskyist International. The new 'Partito Operaio Comunista' was recognised as the official section of this International. For two years, the orientation of the party was in the hands of Di Bartolomeo (Fosco) and was essentially Trotskyist. The Puglie Federation stayed on the sidelines. When Fosco died, Mangano joined the party leadership, which had moved to Milan. In 1947, Mangano and his comrades, at a national conference in Naples, nominated a new central committee and a political bureau from which the leaders of the Trotskyist tendency were excluded. The new leadership rejected any entrism in the Socialist and Communist parties and expelled those who were practising this policy. In its organ *4a Internazionale* the POC more and more openly defended Bordigist positions. It considered that only the first two congresses of the Komintern were valid. It rejected any support for 'national liberation struggles' and defined the left parties as parties of the bourgeoisie: "The forces of the right and those of the so-called left are not antagonists; bath, though using different methods, have the same objective function, that of repairing bourgeois society" (*Bulletin of the International Secretariat*, no. 17, 1947). Like the 'Bordigists', the POC argued that the USSR was just as much imperialist as the USA.

On the 'tactical' questions of Trotskyism, the POC was also in total disagreement. It rejected the 'Transitional Programme': "Against the plans of Marshall and Molotov, the world proletariat must put forward the plan of Marx: the socialist revolution" (*4a Internazionale*, 16/7/1947). It also opposed the United Front as being "counter-revolutionary", and was against the Trotskyist slogan of support for a republic and for the abolition of the monarchy. On the union question, it refused to work with the CGIL (Communist-Stalinist trade union) and at Foggia it set up its own economic organisation: 'Soviet'. Like the Bordigists, it replaced democratic centralism in the POC with 'organic' or 'revolutionary' centralism.

During the elections of 1948, it denounced the “electoral carnival”: “On 18 April, the electors will be called on to vote for war, for the third world conflict, and will have the right only to choose whether they will fight for American imperialism or Russian imperialism” (*4a Internazionale*, 10 March 1948)⁶.

Romeo Mangano and his tendency were prepared to stay for as long as possible in the 4th International, even to the point of pretending to agree to its injunctions. But in 1948, the POC and all its militants were expelled. From 1949 to 1951, the POC published its own organ from Foggia: *L'Internazionale*. After that the POC seems to have dissolved, its militants joining the Bordigist party. In the 1950's, Mangano became editorial secretary of *Prometeo*, the organ of the Damen tendency after the split in 1952 (see below).

The constitution of the Mangano's group in Puglie was so uncertain as it was ambiguous. The opening of the fascist archives gave the proof that Mangano was at the end of the 20s a fascist agent in the communist clandestine milieu. under the nickname of Achille Violino. (See Raffaele Colapietra's book, *La Capitanata nel periodo fascista (1926-1943)*, Foggia, 1978, that gives all archival references.). As in the Pistone's case, it is difficult to explain the evolution of Mangano or the return to his old political bordigist positions.

In the Mezzogiorno, the numerical expansion which went on during 1947 did not take place on a very clear basis. In particular, it included former partisans and PCI militants. There were very strong local, even localist tendencies in the Mezzogiorno, where, under the leadership of Francesco Maruca, Mario Soluri and Nicola Turano, the Calabria Federation had its own weekly, *L'Internazionale Comunista*, in Catanzaro. The numerous party factory groups, made up of members and sympathisers, also seemed to have their own life.

The PCInt's Turin national Conference (December 1945)

It was in these conditions that the first national conference of the whole party was held in Turin on 28th December 1945 and 1st January 1946. Bordiga was absent from this conference, since he did not become a member of the party until 1949, although he made individual contributions to it. Coming from Belgium, Vercesi found himself thrust directly into the PCInt ideological leadership, which did not ask him to give any account of his activities in the Brussels anti-fascist committee. In the conference he acted as the official spokesman for the thoughts of the conspicuously absent Bordiga. But the most outstanding figures were undoubtedly Damen, Maffi and Stefanini, who had rejoined the members of the Italian Fraction, Danielis and Lecci.

It is interesting to note that — after a salute to the memory of Mario Acquaviva and Fausto Atti who had been gunned down by members of the PCI — the conference emphasised and did not reject the contribution of the Fraction in France and Belgium. The reporter on organisational questions, Bruno Maffi, declared that:

“In 1928, the Left Fraction was formed at Pantin. From then on it expressed the historical continuity of the Italian Left until the outbreak of the Second World War. The party was born towards the end of 1942 on the basis of this precise historical tradition”.

Maffi then showed that the activity of the PCInt — which constituted “one of the most brilliant periods in the life of the party” — was from the end of 1943 oriented essentially towards the partisans:

⁶ In the ‘Documents et résolutions du II^e congrès mondial de la 4^e Internationale’, Paris, 1948; in *Quatrième Internationale*, March-May 1948, there are some elements on the history of the POC.

⁷ [note missing]

"This organic life of the party began, however, on 8 September 1943. In an atmosphere poisoned by the war, it was a matter of reuniting the healthy forces of the revolution against all the political formations acting in the framework of the conflict... at the same time as trying to orientate the proletarians amongst the partisans back towards a class position, we made an overt critique of the ideological policies of 'partisanism', as an arm of capitalist war against this resurgence of the class struggle." (Intervention of Bruno Maffi at the Turin Conference, 28.12.45).

This intervention in the partisan groups, because it had cost the lives of Acquaviva and Atti, and had shaken the very life of the PCInt, was violently criticised by an old member of the Fraction in France, Luigi Danielis, who had become secretary of the Turin Federation (which, after Milan, was the most important in the PCInt). This was two years later, at the Florence congress. We quote his intervention at some length here because of the clear light it on the life of the PCInt in 1945:

"One thing must be clear for everyone: the party has suffered badly from a facile extension of its political influence — the result of an equally facile activism — on a purely superficial level. I must recount a personal experience which will serve as a warning against the danger of the party exerting a facile influence on certain strata of the masses, which is an automatic consequence of the equally facile theoretical formation of its militants. In the last months of the war I was a party representative in Turin. The Federation was strong numerically; it had a lot of young activist members; it organised many meetings, leaflets, the newspaper, a bulletin, contacts with the factories; there were internal discussions which always lied an extremist tone when differences on the question of the war in general and the Partisans in particular came up; there were also contacts with deserters. The position on the war was clear: no participation in the war, refusal of military discipline by elements who called themselves internationalists. One might think therefore that no member of the party would have accepted the directives of the 'Committee of National Liberation'. Now, on the morning of 25 April (the day Turin was 'liberated') the whole Turin Federation was in arms, insisting on taking part in the crowning of six years of massacre, and some comrades from the provinces — still under military discipline — came to Turin to take part in the whole thing. As for myself, I should have declared the organisation dissolved, but I found a way of compromising and got a resolution passed, in which comrades agreed to participate in the movement only as individuals. The party no longer existed; it had liquidated itself." (Resoconto del primo congresso del PCInt, Firenze, 6-9 maggio 1948, intervention of Luigi Danielis. p. 20-21).

This point provoked no debate at the conference. Disagreements crystallised around Damen, Vercesi and Stefanini, on the question of the function of the party, on the union question, and the question of the party's participation in elections. Vercesi, without saying openly, thought that the creation of the PCInt had been premature and that it was necessary to exclude "the perspective of a development of the party such as took place in the pre-fascist period, i.e. of an extension of our influence in the present situation". He also continued to defend the idea that the "crisis of the war economy 'would today lead to a "peace economy". However, he made an implicit act of contrition for his anti-fascist activity in Brussels: "We are not antifascists, but proletarians who fight capitalism in all its social forms"⁸. Unlike the

⁸ However, in a public meeting in Paris on 6 October 1945, Vercesi continued to defend his 'anti-fascist' point of view. According to *Le Prolétaire*, organ of the CR, Vercesi continued to defend his participation in the Coalizione, presented as being limited to "aid, culture, and the denunciation of the fascists" (no. 5, June 46). Again according to *Le Prolétaire* (no. 4, May 46), Vercesi even said "I took the initiative in the formation of the committee". Vercesi's attack on anti-fascism at the Turin conference thus seems purely circumstantial and

rest of the party, he did not think that the new period was revolutionary: “... the conditions for the victorious affirmation of the proletarian class are not there. Therefore, one can only describe the present phase as one of reaction”.

Damen criticised these statements by Vercesi, declaring that “A party which limits itself to criticism and the ideological demolition of the adversary is only carrying out a part of its tasks”. He rejected the idea of the “so-called peace economy”, because “the economy that is being rebuilt will be characterised by the continuing necessity to produce (and even more intensely than before) for military needs”. Here Damen represented the ‘orthodox’ tendency in the party, but he himself moved away from the traditional one when he envisaged the possibility of participating in elections, something the Italian Left in exile had always rejected: “we remain irreducibly anti-parlamentarian, but the sense of the concrete which animates our policies leads us to reject any a priori abstentionist position”.

The conference was most divided on the nature of the unions and on whether the PCInt should participate in them. Supported by Danielis, the reporter on the union question, Luciano Stefanini, underlined the party’s incoherence: “On the one hand we recognise the unions’ dependence on the capitalist state; on the other hand, we invite the workers to struggle within them in order to take them onto a class position”. By contrast, the reporter declared “that the present unions cannot change their physiognomy as state organs, except through the definite destruction of this state itself... the idea of winning leading positions in the present union organs in order to transform them must be definitely liquidated”. This fact, he argued, was the product of the “decadence of capitalism”.

The report met with opposition from the majority of delegates. For Aldo Lecci (Tullio), it was a question “...not of destroying the unions or replacing them with other organisations... but of struggling to demolish the superstructure which is smothering the unions, like all the superstructures of the capitalist state”. This was also the position of Bordiga who had drawn up the ‘Platform of the PCInt’ submitted to the conference. For him the Italian trade union movement had to “return to its traditions of close and open support for the proletarian class party, by basing itself on the rebirth of its local organs, the glorious Camere del Lavoro...” This was also Vercesi’s view.

The Bordigist current, made up of the Italian party, the Belgian Fraction and the French ‘Fraction bis’, did not envisage the formation of an international bureau of the fractions, as had been the case in 1938. For Vercesi, who made a report on this question, “In the present world situation, characterised by the non-existence of revolutionary movements, the PCInt considers that no more is possible than the formation of an international bureau of fractions of the world communist left”. Such a bureau would forbid any relationship which Trotskyists or similar currents account of their participation in the war. The French delegation (Véga and Frédéric) was in favour of forming a bureau, while Lecci asked that “it should be shielded from a preponderant influence by the Italian party and should be based in Paris” — no doubt he was haunted by the unfortunate precedent of the Comintern in Moscow.

Theses on the agrarian question concluded the conference. The PCInt had in fact developed considerably in Calabria, where it had a by no means negligible influence on the agricultural proletariat and even on farmers. There had been big strikes in the countryside after the war, in Sicily, Basilicate and Puglie. This was an opportunity for the reporter to criticise Lenin’s theses on “land to the peasants” and “the alliance between the proletariat and the poor peasants”. Against these slogans, the conference adopted the call for the poor peasants to support the proletariat. It did not foresee the peasant forces being organised into the party, only the agricultural proletariat, and rejected any idea of a political alliance with peasant based groupings. While excluding any possibility of “mass work in the countryside”,

the PCInt retained the necessity to co-ordinate its agitation and propaganda among the rural masses, and to this end created an 'agrarian section' linked to the central committee, no doubt to fight against the localist tendencies of the Calabria Federation.

The Conference ended by accepting the principle of an international bureau of liaison between the different fractions. It rejected Stefanini's theses and called for "the conquest of the leading organs of the unions."

The Turin conference had thus simply skimmed over the political divergences. The new party, in a situation correctly defined as counter-revolutionary, could hardly justify its existence as a party. Had the Italian Fraction flac insisted strongly that the party could only arise in a revolutionary period? It was clear that the PCInt lacked theoretical and organisational unity: whereas the militants of the old fraction had joined the PCInt as individuals, the Bordigist groups of the Mezzogiorno had fused with the 'Party' as groups⁹. For this, it was criticised by the Gauche Communiste de France, which was in fact excluded from any discussion which the PCInt. Emphasising that the constitution of a revolutionary party can only take place "in a period of resurgence, of an ascendant course towards revolution", it made the most sombre prognosis about the future of the Italian 'Party':

"This new party is not a political unity, but a conglomerate, an addition of currents and tendencies which cannot fall co show themselves and cash. This present armistice can only be very temporary. This elimination of one or other current is inevitable. Sooner or later there will be a political and organisational demarcation." (Internationalisme no. 7, Feb. 1946, 'A propos du premier congrès du Parti Communiste Internationaliste d' Italie', by Marco [Marc Chirik]).

At this point the PCInt gave an impression of strength, having become virtually a 'mass party' with 13 federations, 72 sections, numerous public meetings, its implantation in the main industrial centres, its factory press, etc. In fact it was very fragile. In 1947 a number of semi-Trotskyist elements left the 'Party'. Others were excluded for political divergences, without this appearing clearly in the PCInt's press. Soon the whole Turin Federation declared itself 'autonomous'; it even looked for international political confrontation, since it took part in the 1947 conference in Brussels organised by the Dutch Left, the GCF and the CR group *Le Proletaire*.

It was above all the question of parliamentarism which precipitated the formation of tendencies in the PCInt. The PCInt had in fact put up candidates at local elections in 1946 and national ones in 1948. Other divergences were grafted on to this one. On the one hand there was the Damen tendency advocating a voluntarist development of the 'Party and participation in elections, but opposed to any support for 'national liberation' movements; on the other hand, the Vercesi-Maffi tendency, hostile to 'revolutionary parliamentarism' and supported by Bordiga, who thought that the work of the PCInt had to be essentially ideological, aimed at the formation of future 'cadres.

Bordiga's entry into the party in 1949 (this was the year his chronicle 'Sul Filo del Tempo' began to be published in *Battaglia Comunista*) was to precipitate the formation of opposition 'blocs'. Although Bordiga distrusted the new party, he at least accepted its existence. But for him what was needed was a return to Lenin and the theses of the Italian Left before 1926, which meant a rejection of *Bilan's* contributions on the national question, the unions, and the transitional state. Contrary to the Damen tendency he also considered

⁹ There is an account in French of the conference in a pamphlet of the 'Gauche Communiste Internationale', published in 1946.

that Russian imperialism was less dangerous than American imperialism, enemy number one¹⁰.

It was on all these questions (and not on the question of elections which Damen in turn rejected) that the split took place between on the one hand Maffi, Bordiga and Vercesi; and on the other Damen, Stefanini, Bottaioli and Lecci. In 1952, it seemed that a majority followed Damen, who rejected any hope of conquering the unions, any support for 'the coloured peoples' (Bordiga's terminology). This tendency considered the CPs to be not opportunist or centrist, but bourgeois. It did not accept a substitutions view of the party: the Communist party should not take power and exercise it in the name of the proletariat, because the latter "cannot delegate to others its historical mission... nor even to its political party" (Theses of the PCInt, Congress tendency)¹¹.

In 1952, in Italy, there were therefore two Internationalist Communist Parties, both laying claim to Lenin and the Italian Left. The Bordiga-Maffi group soon began publishing *Il Programma Comunista*, which is still the organ of this current in the Italian language. The Damen group held onto *Prometeo* and *Battaglia Comunista*, which are also still published today.

Outside Italy, the shock of these divergences led to serious upheavals in the Belgian and French Fractions. In 1949, the Belgian journal *L'Internationaliste* ceased to appear; the Fraction in Belgium disappeared soon afterwards. The same year, most of the militants of the French Fraction left to join the newly-formed *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. After two years of eclipse, the official FFGC resurfaced under the name 'French group of the international communist Left' (1951). It published first a *Bulletin*, then in 1957 *Programme Communiste*; in 1964, it published a paper *Le Proletaire* which still appears today as the organ of one out of the actual Bordigist currents.

The Damen group went in search of international contacts, some very eclectic (*Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Raya Dunayevskaya's *News and Letters* in the USA, libertarian Communists in Italy, the Munis-Péret group, even some Trotskyists). In 1977, it initiated a series of international conferences of groups coming from the left communist tradition. Not long after the collapse of these conferences in 1980, it formed along with the Communist Workers Organisation (whose organ is *Revolutionary Perspectives*) from Britain, the 'international Bureau for the Revolutionary Party', today still composed of the PCInt and CWO.

The *Programma Comunista* current has been through a number of splits. In 1964, in Italy, *Rivoluzione Comunista* (Lanza's group) also proclaimed itself the Internationalist Communist Party, obliging the Bordigist party to take the name International Communist Party. One of the most important splits was in 1974, with the Florence group also taking the name International Communist Party and publishing *Il Partito Comunista* and *Comunismo*, no without having today a small influence in France and Great Britain. In France in 1967 Dangeville's *Fil du Temps* and Jacques Camatte's *Invariance* came out of the ICP. In Scandinavia, in 1972, the whole ICP section split on positions close to those of the KAPD and provoked another split in the French section. The Scandinavian section, actively led by Carsten Juhl, published for no long time the review *Kommunismen*. Other less important splits gave rise to small groups trying to return to a 'pure' Bordigism, with others, especially in Italy, moving towards neo-Trotskyism (*Nuclei comunisti internazionalisti*). In 1982, after a period of rapid international expansion in the seventies, the ICP internationally was

¹⁰ The exchange of letters between Damen and Bordiga on the question of 'imperialism no. 1' can be found in Onorato Damen, *Bordiga, validità e limiti d'una esperienza nella storia della sinistra italiana*, 1977.

¹¹ Damens "theses" presented to the 1952 congress of the PCInt were translated by Véga (Alberto Maso) and published in *Socialisme au Barbarie* no. 12, Sept. 1953.

decimated by further spits, particularly in France, Germany and Italy, when its predilection for supporting national liberation struggles (Palestinian nationalism) gave birth to openly nationalist formations like the Algerian *El Oumami*. The Bruno Maffi's group *Il Programma comunista* survived in Italy, searching to maintain the old Bordigist "Orthodoxy". Microgroups survived too in France: *Le Prolétaire* group; *Les cahiers du marxisme vivant*, etc.

The French Communist Left ("Internationalisme")

In France itself, the Gauche Communiste de France, which published *Internationalisme* and had been expelled from the Italian Left, continued to publish its journal until 1952, the date of its dissolution. While in its most fundamental positions it did not abandon the traditions of the Italian Left, through contact with the Dutch Left, but also through its own process of reflection, it reappropriated certain analyses of the German Left. In particular, it took up the theory of the decadence of capitalism since 1914, which had been outlined by Rosa Luxemburg and defended by the KAPD. State capitalism, which was manifesting itself in all countries, in the form of nationalisations or complete specification, had nothing to do with socialism but expressed a universal trend in 'decadent world capital'. The proletariat in the backward countries had neither bourgeois tasks to realise nor 'national liberation struggles' to support; it had to go straight to the seeking up of its own class dictatorship, as had been shown by the Russian revolution, which was proletarian, not bourgeois. World War I had also marked the integration of the unions and Socialist parties into the state apparatus, and by the early 30's the CPs had also become agents of capitalism in the workers' milieu. These parties were not 'agents of Moscow' but the defenders of their own national capital with a pro-Russian foreign policy¹².

Concerning the form of workers' struggle and the role of the party in the period of the decadence of capitalism — which was characterised by cycles of crisis, war and reconstruction — the GCF called for the formation of non-permanent economy organs that would disappear when the struggle died down, with the exception of the revolutionary period where the workers had to organise permanently in unitary economic and political organs: the workers' councils. The role of the party in these struggles could not be to substitute itself for the workers' own action, but to push them as far as possible in a political direction, through the generalisation of struggles and a direct confrontation with the state, opening up a perspective of revolutionary conflicts. In this spirit, the GCF took part in the strike committee at Renault in 1947- through the intervention of one militant: Goupil — and tried to gain a hearing for its position, which was that the strike must not get bogged down in the Billancourt factories (outskirts of Paris) but must extend to all sectors of the working class, raising unifying political slogans¹³.

The GCF was particularly concerned with the period of transition. It argued that only the workers councils could be the unitary organs of the dictatorship of the proletariat on a world scale, and neither the party, nor the state, which was by nature foreign to socialism, could substitute for them. There could be neither a proletarian party at the head of the state, nor a proletarian state. The period of transition from capitalism to socialism could only take place on a world scale and through the permanent vigilance of the proletariat towards the

¹² cf. 'L' évolution du capitalisme et la nouvelle perspective, by Marco (Marc Chirik), *Internationalisme* no. 46, 1952, text republished in *Bulletin d' étude et de discussion*, no. 8, July 1974, and in the ICC's *International Review* no. 21.

¹³ Bookshop "La Vieille Taupe" republished in June 1972 no. 22 of *Internationalisme*, devoted to the strike at Renault, where a militant of the little group — Goupil — played a role in the Strike Committee

state, the conservative guardian of relations of production that were still marked by capitalism’.¹⁴

While the GCF held a joint conference with the Dutch Left in 1948¹⁵, expressing its concern for an international confrontation and clarification of ideas, it still preserved its specificity, insisting on the necessity both for the workers’ councils and for the communist party, defined as an organ with a necessary and decisive role to play in the process through which the working class becomes conscious of its historic goals.

The profound isolation it suffered, the common law of all the groups coming out of the all Italian and German lefts, its dispersal at the beginning of the 50’s — but too the magnetic attraction of Castoriadis group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* within the “Ultra-Left” milieu — brought the GCF to an end, and *Internationalisme* ceased publication. It was only at the beginning of the 60’s that this current resurfaced, in Caracas (Venezuela), under the leadership of Marc Chirik, defining itself in opposition to the guerrillas. From 1964 it published *Internacionalismo*, which took up the tradition of *Internationalisme*. The end of what it defined as “50 years of counter-revolution” led to a numerical development of this current after 1968, first in France with *Révolution Internationale*, then in other countries. In 1975 a number of these groups formed themselves into the “International Communist Current” (ICC), which at the end of the 90’s claimed (generally very small) sections in Italy, Sweden, the USA, Spain, Britain, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Venezuela, Mexico, India and France. But this current never escaped from the sectarian state, without obtaining so much political interest than the Dutch-German and Italian Communist Lefts, as historical currents. Caught between both antagonistic currents, involving in Leninist positions and claiming its “inconditional defence of the Russian Revolution” as “Proletarian Revolution”, it plunged finally into political contradictions. It had to be affected by series of splits (between 1977 and 1997).

Since the period opened up by May 1968, there has been a revival of interest in ‘ultra-left’ ideas. While all the above mentioned currents are descended more or less — either organisationally or politically — from the Italian Left in particular, they are in a more general sense heirs of the entire Left Communist tradition of the 20’s, the current which Lenin described as ‘infantile leftists’. Their evolution has not been ‘ideological’ but has been profoundly marked by the whole period from 1927 to the Second World War.

¹⁴ Cf. ‘Sur la nature et la fonction du parti politique du prolétariat’, by Marco (Marc Chirik) *Internationalisme*, no. 38, Oct. 1948, republished in *Bulletin d’étude et de discussion* no. 6, April 1974. Similarly, ‘La nature de l’Etat et la révolution prolétarienne’, by Marco, in *Bulletin d’étude et de discussion* no. 1, Jan. 1973; published in English in the ICC pamphlet *The Period of Transition from Capitalism to Socialism*.

¹⁵ This conference was prepared by ‘*Bulletins d’information et de discussion internationales*’, edited in French by Communistenbond Spartacus, from Nov. 1947. [position by ed.]

Conclusion

Some sceptical souls may find it strange that we should publish this book today, in a world where the “official” press exults (less and less with the economic crisis) over the death of “communism” and “socialism” (State Capitalism) in the now defunct Eastern bloc; where the definitive victory of “the market” (Private Capitalism) is accepted even by parties calling themselves “socialist”; and where the end of the world’s division into opposing blocs supposedly opens the radius prospect of capitalism’s invincible, harmonious, and endless development, bringing freedom and prosperity for all in its wake. Why, in such a world, devote any time to a tiny group of Italian émigrés, completely isolated and without any impact on social life? Besides, in the present climate, the ideas of “world revolution” or “proletariat” have gone out of fashion, and remain of interest only to a few dusty academics or retarded romantics.

History is not ‘neutral’: it is made by social classes, which give it their own orientation. Men make their own history, as Marx said last century. The fate of humanity depends on the action or inaction of revolutionary classes, whether it moves towards new progress, or ineluctable decline. World capitalism’s entry, in 1914, into its phase of historic decline, with its train of world wars, permanent crises, and generalised social disintegration, is a decisive moment in history. At stake today is nothing less than the fate of humanity itself: socialism or barbarism. Either a world revolution, which will sweep away the cause of all the local and world-wide conflicts that mankind suffers today, or the continued survival of world capitalism, which will drag humanity down into a bottomless abyss of war, famine, and destruction, even to the point of destroying humanity itself and the planet on which we live.

This terrible historic dilemma was condensed by the IIIrd International in 1919, and by the Italian Left after it, into the phrase: “war or revolution”. It took all the weigh of a crushing counter-revolution, sweeping away everything in its path in the name of “socialism in one country” and “anti-fascism” to bury in oblivion even the memory of the revolutionary wave which shook (shortly) the world between 1917 and 1921. During these years, the proletariat made the capitalist class tremble, from Russia to Germany, from Italy to Hungary. Then, the world revolution was not a “utopia” but a burning and immediate question.

The defeat of the revolution in Germany, where the Social Democratic Party drowned the workers’ insurrection in blood, and the crushing defeat of the Russian workers by Leninist then Stalinist state capitalism, left the way clear for the most merciless and thorough counter-revolution in history. Capitalism’s myths triumphed all down the line. The myth of “socialism in one country”, the “construction of socialism” and the “socialist fatherland”, and finally the myth of a “Proletarian State”.

The myth of the defence of democracy, and “anti-fascism”. The myth of the “moral” war against fascism. The myth of the Resistance. The myth of the national liberation struggle, “progressive” nationalism, and “anti-imperialism”. Since 1989, the myth of “communism” in the East has been buried under the ruins of the collapsing Russian economy, only to be replaced by still more shameless lies: that the utterly bankrupt and decomposed state capitalism of the Russian economy is the true face of the so-called (and anti-) workers’ revolution of October 1917; and the falsification of the Trotskyists, who having served faithfully all these years as Stalinism’s acolytes, now claim to have been its first, indeed its only critics within the working class.

Each new triumph of the counter-revolution was presented as a new victory for the “revolution” and “socialism”. The 50 million dead in World War II were the “price” of “democracy’s” victory over fascism. The hysterical cries of “Viva la muerte” from the both

imperialist camps submerged the faint appeals of the few groups of revolutionary workers, who called for the fraternisation of workers all over the world, and not their mutual slaughter.

In this period — the most tragic, and the most demoralising of the whole history of the revolutionary workers' movement — the Italian Communist Left appeared. Profoundly tied to the whole revolutionary movement of the 1920s, born in Italy and internationally, it was never a "sect": although after 1926 it remained numerically weak, far always kept its links with the proletariat both through its militants and above all through its internationalist positions. Far from putting its own "interests" as an organisation to the fore — which is characteristic of a sect — it aimed at the unity of all existing revolutionary forces that had broken with stalinism. More than anything, it fought for the triumph of the world revolution, not its own existence as a group. Nor was it "sectarian" in defending the positions of the only class capable of offering an alternative to growing barbarism, to war, and to the general crisis of world capital: the proletariat. Those who talk with contempt of the "sectarian" nature of the old Communist Left, whether German or Italian, are the same who, yesterday and today, have chosen their camp: alongside the so-called "socialist camp" of Stalinism and the official "workers' parties". These were certainly more numerous than the tiny communist groups. They were, and still are, "with the masses": but always with the aim of leading the masses away from their revolutionary goal.

In the 1930s, the Italian Communist Left had to take the difficult decision to isolate itself from the working class "masses" which had been won over ideologically to the counter-revolution, so as not to betray. This "purism" was in fact an unconditional fidelity to the workers' cause, even if the workers themselves had temporarily turned away from the revolution. Far from giving into the immediatism and activism which swept so many revolutionary groups into the void, it fought "against the current" with all its strength. It was working, not for immediate success, but for the long term to preserve from the wreckage all the theoretical gains of the 1920s revolutionary wave.

Such a resistance may surprise those who understand nothing about the proletariat and the revolution. They will undoubtedly see it as nothing more than a few workers' nostalgic attachment to the heady days of revolutionary events in Italy between 1917 and 1920. It is true that the revolutionary events of the period galvanised all these young revolutionaries who later were to found the Italian Fraction. This was their true theoretical school. Certainly, the counterrevolution might wear down the best, even to the point of betrayal, but the power of a proletarian movement is such that even after it is crushed, the furrow it has ploughed in the spirit remains. And it is stunning to realise, in studying the history of both Italian and Dutch Communist Lefts, that most of their militants remained revolutionaries into old age.

Even in the midst of the counterrevolution, the proletariat's class consciousness does not disappear completely. Revolutionary minorities, no matter how weak, always appear to make a balance-sheet of the past, and to prepare the conditions for the victory to come. This constant effort by revolutionary minorities to enrich and develop revolutionary theory, to subject the positions of the past to the critical acid test, is not something meaningless, or absurd. It is the proof that the proletariat continues to live even in defeat. Contrary to what Vercesi said during the war, the proletariat does not disappear. It is an exploited class, and its resistance to exploitation continues, even though it may be temporarily diverted from its revolutionary goal. It retains its revolutionary potential, however far off its realisation.

Is this belief in the future revolution nothing but a revived mysticism? The events of 1968 in France, 1969-1973 in Italy, Spain, Great-Britain, the events of 1980 in Poland, but also the unprecedented struggles waged during the 1980s throughout the world, are there to show that the proletarian revolution is not a "myth" from the past, of interest only to nostalgic of revolutionary imagery. The difficult resurgence of the proletariat (Class struggles

in France, December 1995; strikes in Korea) has there to show that the “purist” positions of the Communist Left were not and are not merely a “utopia” of a few unrepentant dreamers.

The history of the Communist Left is not “neutral”. It cannot be reduced to an inoffensive historical “science”, looking down on the social battlefield. In today’s world of terminally diseased and rotting capitalism, the alternative posed 50 years ago by the Communist Left is more valid than ever: “World Revolution, or the destruction of humanity” (and of the nature too) is the choice before us.

By rejecting all the myths developed by the greatest counterrevolution in history, by remaining faithful to internationalism, by criticising mercilessly the “weaknesses” of the Communist International which led to its betrayal, the Italian Communist Left had fulfilled partially its task. Despite its progressive Leninist degeneration after 1945 to the point of complete fossilisation or blow-up (1982), the theoretical lessons contained in *Prometeo*, *Bilan*, *Communisme*, and *Octobre*, are still reach of political lessons. If this brief history of their struggle allows all those who have thrown in their lot with the working class, to bridge the gap between their past and their present, it will have fulfilled its task also.

Today bolshevism, leninism and stalinism are fortunately dead ideologies, whose lethal effects had contributed to crush mercilessly the proletarian revolution in Russia (Workers Councils), in Europe and in Asia (China). The rebirth of a true proletarian revolution depends not only of the economic class struggles but of the appropriation of the Marxist lessons left by all communist Lefts: Italian and Dutch-German Lefts.

Philippe Bourrinet, September 1998.

Appendix 1

Communisme no.1

(April 1937)

DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES OF THE BELGIAN FRACTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNIST LEFT

1) The Party is a fraction of the proletariat. In the epoch of proletarian revolutions, the party in effect expresses the proletariat's consciousness and political capacity during a period of revolutionary flux in which the problem of power is directly posed.

The Fraction is an element of the party which may be organic or extra-organic according to the relationship between the classes. Its nature proceeds from the nature of the party itself. The fraction no more emanates from out of the wishes of individual revolutionaries than does the Party, but is above all a product of the class struggle, emerging when the proletarian movement as a whole is tracing a downward path. It must, of necessity, appear in order to ensure the survival of the Party's historic function at the point when the latter becomes prey to opportunism.

When the Party passes overtly into the capitalist camp, the fraction constitutes the basis for the formation, and the nucleus of the future Party which will again take up the historic succession of the old bankrupt party.

Because of its social composition, the fraction far from isolating itself from the class struggle, remains directly tied to all those proletarian reactions which determine it and the class is consequently rooted in all further developments of its struggle. As for the proletariat, in spite of its defeat it finds in the fraction a political focus where it can concentrate itself politically and strengthen its class consciousness, a necessary condition for its ability to act in the future when the situation becomes more favourable.

The betrayal of the Parties of the Third International gave rise to the historic conditions for the appearance of new communist parties but their creation does not depend on the arbitrary will of communists, it results from a maturation of social contrasts, opening up a phase of the transformation of fractions into parties on the basis of new historic conditions which the fractions had anticipated.

During the present period, the left fractions find themselves in a situation analogous to that experienced by the left currents and fractions of the Second International during the unleashing of the imperialist war, the period from the betrayal of 1914 to October 1917, in which the beginnings of a new International were being formed.

Now that the left fractions have had to make a total break with the parties of the Third International, and the situation prevents them from performing the function of parties, they find themselves confined exclusively or very nearly within the bounds of theoretical work, in the midst of a course which is thrusting capitalist society towards the outbreak of imperialist war. In addition to forming the cadres of the future party, the fundamental task of the fractions is to forge the theoretical weapons which will give to the proletarian struggle the means to victory in the revolution.

The nucleus which arose out of the break occurring within the Ligue des Communistes Internationalistes declares itself constituted into a fraction, drawing inspiration from the above considerations. It adheres to a communist position on the basis of the fundamental principles laid down by the first two congresses of the Communist International; it therefore situates itself within the proletarian struggle as the historic continuation of Marxist theory founded on economic determinism, dialectical materialism and the class struggle. It affirms itself as a progressive organism, setting itself the central objective of pushing the communist movement to a higher stage of theoretical development by its own contribution to the international solution of new problems posed by the experiences of the Russian revolution and the period of capitalist decadence, a solution which the Third International was not able to elaborate because of the historic conditions in which it appeared.

Over and above this, the fraction has the task of responding to the specific problems of the proletarian struggle in Belgium, in the framework of the general principles governing the world struggle of the proletariat.

The fraction, in working for the reconstruction of the proletarian party and of the proletarian International, poses as a fundamental condition of this task a categorical refusal to link itself — whether organically or not — to the political currents that have been historically condemned as reactionary and enemy forces: social democracy, the parties of the Third International, or those Communist groupings which have altered their political and ideological base by associating themselves directly or indirectly to forces belonging to those currents. By this means the fraction is safe-guarding its own development and, simultaneously, the victory of the proletarian revolution.

The fraction declares that it will only accept individual memberships on the basis of an unreserved commitment to the present declaration of principles.

The fraction, from its foundation, shows its internationalism position by affirming its desire to join forces in the elucidation of theoretical work with all political organisms that derive from another section of the world proletariat, provided that this organism acts in accordance with the principles of the fraction as set out in this declaration.

On this basis, in order to oppose the extreme confusion which is dominating the communist movement, and resolved to contribute to the strengthening of the proletariat, the fraction affirms its international links with the Italian Fraction which already supports the positions of principles affirmed above. It has thus decided to call itself the Belgian Fraction of the International Communist Left.

The following points set out the essential political ideas which are destined to be integrated into the ideological and programmatic backbone of the proletarian revolution.

2) The communist fractions can only forge the theoretical weapons that are vital to the success of the revolution if they understand the internal workings of capitalist society in its stage of historic decline and if they link their analysis of events directly to the significance of this epoch.

Imperialism — the last stage of capitalism — has led social evolution into a dead end: the productive forces as a whole can no longer develop within the framework of the capitalist system because they have attained the maximum that is compatible with the nature of this system. In other words the socialist form of production, and the bourgeois mode of production and distribution of products have entered into an irreconcilable conflict which fuels the general crisis of a bourgeois society evolving within the limits of a market saturated with goods. The regression of the productive forces poses the objective necessity for the proletarian revolution and the advent of communism at the same time as it opens a decisive phase in the class struggle, “the period of capitalist decadence is the period of the direct

struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat" (Second Congress of the Communist international).

The fundamental antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat becomes the axis of historic development around which revolve all secondary tensions, including inter-imperialist conflicts. This means that from now on the life of capitalist society oscillates between the two alternatives offered by the evolution of social relations: imperialist war or proletarian revolution.

Imperialist war is the bloody ransom for the survival of capitalism beyond its time, when the proletariat is powerless to impose its own solution — communism, through its class dictatorship.

Capitalism in decline can survive only by devouring itself, provoking enormous losses of accumulated labour (under-utilisation of machinery, destruction of products, currency devaluation) and of human labour power (unemployment, or employment in war production etc.).

When war erupts it does so because the internal contradictions of bourgeois production find no other outlet than that constituted on the one hand by the massive destruction of productive wealth which, because it must flow back into the war economy, has engendered its own negation by transforming itself into the means of destruction: on the other hand war accomplishes the massacre of the proletariat, the living antithesis of capitalist society.

It is the very nature of this society, built upon the irreconcilable antagonisms between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, which determines the fundamental movement towards imperialist war and its social content; it does not however determine the struggle between individual capitalist states or between bourgeois factions within the state: inter-imperialist rivalry simply expresses the contradiction between the tendency towards the universality of the capitalist system and its division into nations, which result from the private appropriation of wealth.

In the period of capitalist decadence, the proletariat must break away from all wars directed by capitalism or its democratic agents, whether their flag be that of the bourgeois revolution, of oppressed nations, the national emancipation of the colonies, antifascism or 'socialism in one country.

The proletariat recognises and accepts only the civil war unleashed by its own forces and under the control of its own class party, against, and for the abolition of the capitalist state.

The proletarian revolution finds its objective condition in history's death sentence upon capitalism, but the only driving force capable of propelling it forward must be sought not in the economic, but in the political arena. A society that is rotting can fall only at the push of a revolutionary class.

The proletariat, by forging its class party, becomes this revolutionary class capable of overthrowing the bourgeoisie and of preventing war and the decomposition of society.

3) Bourgeois democracy is the political expression of economic 'liberalism' which favoured the accumulation of capital during the ascendancy of the bourgeois system of production.

At the same time, behind a facade of political 'equality', it attempted to hide from a proletariat that was growing in number and political strength, the reality of a class-divided society. Although the proletariat could not yet pose concretely the problem of power, it did however oppose the capitalist state by founding its own class organisations, and by this means it also came up against the democratic principle which constitutes the backbone of the bourgeoisie's legal and political edifice. The organisms of proletarian struggle arose against the wishes of the democratic state and not by grace of this state's existence; at the same time, however, they allowed themselves to be penetrated by the corruption of the democratic idea which was all the more powerful in that it bathed in a general ambience of prosperity. At this

time, capitalism could partly satisfy working class demands when these demands were not yet a threat to the functioning of the capitalist system, but on the contrary, were able to aid its development.

In contrast the decadence of capitalism not only militates against a rise (absolute as well as relative) in proletarian living standards but demands a more intensive exploitation of the class once its struggle is stifled.

To defend its interests, the proletariat cannot attach itself to democratic institutions, as the latter are not of its own making but are bourgeois, existing only to prevent the proletariat from posing its own class demands and developing the political consciousness which enables it to discover the necessity to destroy the bourgeois democratic state.

Democracy and fascism are two forms of domination by the same class: the world bourgeoisie.

Their choice is determined not by the particular and contradictory interests of this class but by its historic, its fundamental interests: the crushing of the proletariat. The proletariat can prevent the emergence of fascist domination only to the extent that, by relying on its own class organisations, it opposes the realisation of the capitalist programme aimed at its destruction as a class, to the extent that it manages to advance towards its own objective: the communist revolution.

The experience of democracy since 1914 has shown that the defence of democracy was the negation of the class struggle. It snuffed out the consciousness of the proletariat and led its vanguard towards the betrayal — now complete — of the communist parties. It failed to prevent the emergence of fascism in those countries where this system imposed itself, and in fact contributed to that process. The tragedy of the Spanish proletariat, hurled into the abyss of the 'anti-fascist' war, has definitively exposed the defenders, conscious or otherwise, of bourgeois democracy.

The position of Communists in relation to the unions is linked to a central criterion affirming that the programme of struggle for immediate demands must be the pole of regroupment of the proletariat during a phase when the latter does not act like a class aware of its historic ends and where this programme appears as the only one which challenges the programme of capital. Proletarian consciousness can re-emerge to the extent that partial economic struggles develop to the point where they attain the greater political stage of development which poses the problem of power. "During the period in which capitalism is falling into ruin, the economic struggle of the proletariat transforms itself into a political struggle much more rapidly than in the period of the capitalist system's peaceful development. Any important economic conflict can confront workers with the question of revolution" (Second Congress of the Communist International).

Communists have a duty to fight within reformist unions which are today the sole unitary organisations of the masses. But it is on the condition that they must not renounce their activity, which is the safeguard of the proletarian struggle, that communists legitimise their presence in these unions.

Fascist unions are not working class organisations but capitalist creations which impede all revolutionary work.

When the proletariat's weapon of economic struggle has been destroyed by fascism, communists have a duty to work for the creation of new working class unions. These latter, however, can arise only through the shaking up of social relations. Likewise a new type of unitary organisation cannot be an artificial product, but is a social phenomenon arising from revolutionary situations where the proletariat advances towards the establishment of its own power and is led to create rank-and-file organs such as the soviets. The fundamental characteristics of the proletarian revolution of October 1917 determine the content of future proletarian revolutions.

Within the developments of the class struggle, it represents the progressive continuation of the Paris Commune and the Russian Revolution of 1905 and offers living historic proof of the following theoretical premises:

a) The proletarian revolution can be carried out only by the destruction of the capitalist state and the foundation of the proletarian state — the latter being inevitable in the transition period between capitalism and communism.

b) In order to attain its historic objective — the extinction of classes — the proletariat must establish its own dictatorship under the direction of its class party. As the party is nothing other than the most conscious fraction of the proletariat, its interests cannot be differentiated from those of that class. It expresses the interests of the whole of the class, their final social goal. By definition, and from the point of view of historic reality there is an absolute identification between the dictatorship of the class and the dictatorship of the party.

On the other hand there exists an irreconcilable opposition between the proletarian dictatorship and the dictatorship of the state.

The proletariat can safeguard its class dictatorship and consequently its historic programme by subjecting the state to the realisation of this programme.

The degeneration of the proletarian revolution finds its specific source not in the dictatorship of the party but in the incorporation of the party into the apparatus of the state. Alternatively the positive content of proletarian revolution, its ceaseless growth, resides in the withering away of the state and not in the development of its organs of coercion and repression.

One of the essential tasks of the communist fractions is to clarify a principled solution to the crucial problem of the administration of the proletarian state, a solution which the Bolsheviks could not give because of the proletariat's lack of experience at that time.

The lessons drawn from the Russian Revolution provide today the following elements of the problem:

The proletarian revolution cannot follow an autonomous course, based upon the originality of a particular geographic or social milieu. It is not the result of the material conditions that have developed in the country in which it arises, but is the product of a political maturation of class tensions on an international scale. The criterion of economic or cultural maturity is to be rejected as much in reference to the more developed countries as to the backward countries. The maturity of the proletarian revolution relates to the historic period, as we have described it in point 2.

The proletarian revolution takes root on a national soil but can develop only by linking up with the struggle of the world proletariat, by placing the proletarian state at the service of this struggle. The central tenet of Marxism that the political revolution must precede the economic revolution only acquires its full significance on the international arena, on the basis of a political annihilation of capitalism, at least in its vital centres.

World socialism, the preface to communism, cannot be the juxtaposition of socialist national economies but is the expression of the international division of labour such as it has appeared under capitalist development, a unitary organisation composed of independent sectors working in solidarity.

d) Even after the institution of a proletarian state and up until the victory of the world revolution, the laws of capitalist production continue to apply — to a greater or lesser extent & at the very heart of this state, under the pressure of enemy classes who have been expropriated but not destroyed, and also of global capitalism. The latter cannot be overcome on the basis of economic competition, but only on the political terrain, through an intensification of the world-wide class struggle. The tasks of a victorious proletariat with regard to its own economy must be subordinated to this international task. The limits of the

economic programme are laid down by the specific place that the proletarian economy will occupy in the organisation of world socialism.

e) Furthermore the social content of the proletarian revolution does not essentially gauge its strength by the development of the productive forces, but by the extent to which it satisfies the needs of the masses.

The USSR, by breaking away from the world proletariat on the basis of national socialism has stamped a capitalist direction upon its economy, preparing itself for the outbreak of the imperialist war; soviet industrialisation has taken the form of the building up of a war economy.

The duty of communist fractions is to reject any defence — even conditional — of the USSR, instrument of world imperialism.

Appendix 2

Manifesto of the Communist Left to the proletarians of Europe (June 1944)

(Bulletin international de discussion de la gauche communiste italienne, June 1944, no. 6)

It will soon be five years that imperialist war has raged in Europe, with all its misery, massacres and devastation.

On the Russian, French and Italian fronts tens of millions of workers and peasants are slaughtering each other for the exclusive interests of a sordid and bloody capitalism, which obeys only these laws: profit, accumulation.

In the course of five years of war, especially the last year — that of the liberation of all peoples, you have been told — many false programmes, many illusions have disappeared, making the mask, behind which the odious face of capitalism has been hidden, fall.

In each country you have been mobilised behind different ideologies, each having the same goal, the same result: to hurl you into the carnage, one against the other, brothers against brothers in misery, workers against workers.

Fascism, National-Socialism, demand “living space” for their exploited masses, but only do so to bide their fierce will to extricate themselves from the profound crisis which undermines their very basis.

The Anglo-American-Russian bloc wanted — so it appeared — to deliver you from fascism in order to give back to you your freedoms, your rights. But these promises were only the bait to make you participate in the war to eliminate — after having first begotten it — fascism, the great imperialist competitor, outdated as a mode of life and domination for capitalism.

The Atlantic Charter, the plan for the New Europe, was only the smokescreen behind which was hidden the conflicts real meaning; a war of bandits with its mournful trail of destruction and massacres, all of whose terrible consequences the working class must bear.

Workers!

You are told, they would like to make you believe, that this war is not like all the others. You are being lied to. As long as there are exploiters and exploited, capitalism is war, war is capitalism.

The revolution of 1917 was a proletarian revolution. It was the shining proof of the proletariat's political capacity to constitute itself as a ruling class and to move towards the organisation of a communist society. It was the response of the labouring masses to the imperialist war of 1914-1918.

But the leaders of the Russian state have since then abandoned the principles of that revolution, have transformed your communist parties into nationalist parties, have dissolved the Communist International and have helped international capitalism to hurl you into the carnage.

If in Russia, they had remained loyal to the programme of the revolution and of internationalism, if they had constantly called on the proletarian masses to unify its struggles

against capitalism, if they had not adhered to that masquerade, the League of Nations, it would have been impossible for imperialism to have unleashed the war.

In participating in the imperialist war together with a group of capitalist powers, the Russian state has betrayed the Russian workers and the international proletariat.

Workers of Germany!

Your bourgeoisie counted on you, on your endurance and your productive power, to win a place for imperialism, to dominate the industrial and agricultural basis of Europe. After turning Germany into a barracks, after making you work for four years at breakneck speed to prepare the engines of war, they have thrown you into all the countries of Europe to everywhere bring — as in each imperialist conflict — ruin and dislocation.

The plan of your imperialism has been foiled by the laws of development of international capitalism which has since 1900 exhausted any possibility of a blooming of the imperialist form of domination, and still more so, of every nationalist expression.

The profound crisis which wastes the world, and particularly Europe, is the insoluble crisis, the death crisis, of capitalist society.

Only the proletariat, through its communist revolution, can eliminate the causes of the distress and the misery of the labouring masses and the workers.

Workers and soldiers!

The fate of your bourgeoisie will now be determined on the terrain of imperialist competition. But international capitalism cannot end the war, because war is its last, its only possibility of survival.

Your revolutionary traditions are profoundly rooted in the class struggle of the past. In 1918, with your proletarian leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, in 1923 (despite the opportunism already arising in the Communist International) you engraved on history your revolutionary will and power.

The National-Socialism of Hitler and the opportunism of the 3rd International made you believe that your fate was linked to the struggle against the Treaty of Versailles. This false struggle could only tie you to the programme of your capitalism, which was characterised by a spirit of revenge and the preparation for the present war.

Your interests as workers are only linked to the interests of all the exploited of Europe and of the whole world.

You occupy a critical place to force an end to the monstrous carnage. Following the example of the Italian proletariat, you must undertake the struggle against war production, you must refuse to fight against your brother workers¹. Your revolt must be a manifestation of the class struggle. It must be translated into strikes and upheavals. As in 1918, the fate of the proletarian revolution is dependent on your capacity to break the chains that bind you to the monstrous machine of German imperialism.

Workers, Labourers in Germany!

They have deported you to build engines of destruction. For each worker who arrives, a German worker can be sent to the front.

Whatever your nationality, you are one of the exploited.

¹ In March 1943, the strikes of the proletariat in Northern Italy led to the fall of Mussolini and Italy's call for an armistice. This was the first the only serious breach that the European working class made in the second imperialist world massacre.

Your only enemy is German and international capitalism; your comrades are the German workers, and the workers of the whole world.

You carry with you the traditions and experiences of the class struggles of your countries and the entire world. You are not “foreigners”.

Your demands, your interests, are identical to those of your German comrades. In participating in the class struggle in the factory, at the point of production, you will effectively contribute to breaking the course of the imperialist war.

French workers!

At the time of the strikes in 1936, all the parties manoeuvred to transform your just and legitimate class demands into a demonstration of support for the war which was then being prepared. “The era of prosperity” which the demagogues of the Popular Front presented to you as a full flowering was, in fact, only the profound crisis of French capitalism.

Your ephemeral improvements in living standards and work were not the result of an economic recovery, but were bought about by the need to set the war industry in motion.

The invasion of France has been exploited by all those responsible for the conflict — from the left to the right — to instil in your minds a desire for revenge and hatred against the German and Italian workers, who no more than you bear any responsibility for starting the war, and who, like you bear the terrible consequences of a butchery willed and prepared by all the capitalist states.

The Pétain-Laval government speaks to you of a National Revolution. It is the most vulgar lie; the most reactionary method to make you accept without flinching the weight of military defeat for the exclusive benefit of capitalism.

The Algiers Committee² holds out before you the return to pre-war abundance and prosperity. Whatever the colour or form of tomorrow’s government, the labouring masses of France and the other countries of Europe will pay a heavy war tribute to the Anglo-American-Russian imperialists in the ruins and destruction caused by the two armies in struggle.

French workers!

Too many among you have been led to believe in, to hope for, the well-being bought by the armies, be they English, American or Russian.

The intrigues and contrasts which already manifest themselves within this “trinity” of thieves on the subject of the division of the spoils foreshadows the fact that the conditions imposed on the proletariat will be hard if you do not take the path of class struggle.

Too many among you have made yourselves the auxiliaries of capitalism by participating in the partisans’ war, the most extreme expression of nationalism.

Your enemies are neither the German soldier, nor the English or American soldier, but their capitalism which has led them to war, to killing, to death. Your enemy is your own capitalism, whether it is represented by Laval or De Gaulle. Your freedom is linked neither to the fate nor to the traditions of your ruling class, but to your independence as a proletarian class.

You are the children of the Paris Commune, and it is only by inspiring yourselves by it and by its principles that you will succeed in breaking the chains of slavery that link you to the outdated apparatus of capitalist domination: the traditions of 1789 and the laws of the bourgeois revolution.

² The coalition put together by Anglo-American imperialism, in Algiers, with the participation of Général De Gaulle, to rule France after its “Liberation”.

Workers of Russia!

In 1917, with your Bolshevik Party and Lenin, you overthrew the capitalist regime and established the first Republic of Soviets. Your magnificent class action opened the historic period of the decisive struggle between two opposed societies: the old, the bourgeoisie, destined to disappear under the weight of its contradictions; the new, the proletariat, constituting itself as a ruling class so as to move towards a classless society, communism.

In that period too, imperialist war raged. Millions of workers fell on the battlefields of capitalism. The example of your decisive struggle filled the working masses with the will to put an end to the useless massacre. In breaking the course of the war, your revolution became the programme, the battle flag, for the struggle of the exploited of the world. Capitalism consumed by the economic crisis — aggravated by the war — trembled in the face of the proletarian movement which burst over all of Europe.

Surrounded by the White armies and those of international capitalism which sought to eliminate you by famine, you succeeded in extricating yourselves from the counter-revolutionary embrace; thanks to the heroic support of the European and international proletariat, which took the road of class struggle, the bourgeois coalition was prevented from intervening against the proletarian revolution.

The lesson was decisive: henceforth, the class struggle will develop on the international terrain, the proletariat will form its communist party and its International on the programme confirmed by your communist revolution. The bourgeoisie will direct itself towards the repression of the workers movement and towards the corruption of your revolution and your power.

The present imperialist war finds you not with the proletariat, but against it. Your allies are no longer the workers, but the bourgeoisie. You no longer defend the Soviet constitution of 1917, but the “socialist” fatherland. You no longer have comrades like Lenin and his co-workers, but jackbooted, bemedalled generals, just as in all the capitalist countries — the symbol of bloody militarism, the slayers of the proletariat.

You are told that there is no capitalism in Russia, but your exploitation is the same as the rest of the proletariat, and your labour power disappears into the abyss of the war and into the treasuries of international capitalism. Your freedom is the freedom to be made to kill to help imperialism to survive. Your class party has disappeared, your soviets are eliminated, your unions are barracks, your links with the international proletariat are broken.

Comrades, workers of Russia!

Among you, as everywhere else, capitalism sows ruin and misery. The proletarian masses of Europe, like you in 1917, await the favourable moment to rise up against the frightful conditions of existence imposed by the war. Like you, they direct themselves against all those responsible for this terrible insanity, whether they be fascists, democrats or Russian. Like you, they try to overthrow the bloody regime of oppression which is capitalism.

Their flag will be your flag of 1917.

Their programme will be your programme, the one your present rulers have taken from you: the communist revolution.

Your state is allied with the forces of capitalist counter-revolution. You must be in solidarity with, you must fraternise with, your comrades in struggle, your brothers; you must struggle at their side to reestablish in Russia and in other countries, the conditions for the victory of the world communist revolution.

English and American soldiers!

Your imperialism is developing its plans for the colonisation and enslavement of all peoples, in order to try and save itself from the grave crisis which envelops all of society.

Already before the war, despite colonial domination and the enrichment of your bourgeoisie you were subjected to unemployment and poverty, those without work numbering in the millions.

Against your strikes for legitimate demands your bourgeoisie did not hesitate to employ the most barbarous means of repression: gas.

The workers of Germany, France, Italy, Spain have accounts to settle with their own bourgeoisie, which like yours is responsible for the filthy massacre.

You are wanted to play the role of cop; you will be sent against the proletarian masses in revolt.

You must refuse to fire, you must fraternise with the soldiers and workers of Europe. These struggles are your class struggles.

Workers of Europe!

You are surrounded by a world of enemies. All parties, all programmes, have failed the rest posed by the war; All play on your suffering, all unite to save capitalist society from collapse.

The whole band of riffraff in the service of high finance, from Hitler to Churchill, from Laval to Pétain, from Stalin to Roosevelt, from Mussolini to Bonomi, is in collaboration with the bourgeois state to preach order, work, discipline, fatherland — in the perpetuation of your enslavement.

Despite the betrayal of the leaders of the Russian state, the formulas, the theses, the predictions of Marx and of Lenin find, in the very perfidy of the present situation, their striking confirmation.

Never has the class division between exploited and exploiters been so clear, so profound.

Never has the necessity to put an end to a regime of misery and blood been so compelling.

With the killing at the front, with the massacres from the air, with five years of restrictions, famine makes its appearance

The war spreads over the whole continent; capitalism does not know how to, cannot, end this war.

It is not by helping one or the other group of the two forms of capitalist domination that you will shorten the fight.

This time it is the Italian proletariat which has blazed the trail of struggle, of revolt against the war.

As with Lenin in 1917, there is no alternative, no other path to follow outside of the transformation of the imperialist war into a civil war.

As long as capitalist rule survives, there will be neither bread, nor peace, nor freedom for the proletariat.

Communist workers!

There are many parties, too many parties. But all of them, even the Trotskyist groups, have fallen into the counter-revolution.

One single party is missing: the proletarian class political party.

The Communist Left alone has stayed with the proletariat, loyal to the programme of Marxism, loyal to the communist revolution. It is only with this programme that it will be

possible to give back to the proletariat its organisations, the weapons necessary to its struggle, to victory. These weapons are the new communist party, the new international.

Against all opportunism, against all compromise on the terrain of class struggle, the Fraction³ calls on you to aid the proletariat in extricating itself from the vice of capitalism. Against the united forces of capitalism, the invincible force of the proletarian class must be built.

Workers and soldiers of all countries!

You alone can stop this terrible massacre unprecedented in history.

Workers! In all countries stop the production destined to kill your brothers, your wives, your children.

Soldiers! Cease fire, throw down your weapons! Fraternise beyond the artificial frontiers of capitalism. Unite on the international class front.

- LONG LIVE THE FRATERNISATION OF ALL THE EXPLOITED!
- DOWN WITH THE IMPERIALIST WAR!
- LONG LIVE THE WORLD COMMUNIST REVOLUTION!

June 1944.

³ The organisation of the Italian and French communist Left ("Bordigist"): fraction de la Gauche communiste internationale (GCI).

Bibliography

(UPDATED, October 1998.)

There does not exist to our knowledge in Italy extensive work on the history of the Italian Communist Left from 1926 to the Second World War. However, since the beginning of the Seventies, there existed (at least until 1990), an interest for the Italian Communist Left, and the “ultra-Left” currents in general in Europe. Relatively abundant sources fill slowly, but still insufficiently, our gaps. We present here a short bibliography.

SOURCES

Fortunately, the materials and documents are abundant and of a relatively easy access. They exist as well in Italian as in French. To begin initial researchs, very important books exist:

- Arturo PEREGALLI and Sandro SAGGIORO, *Amadeo Bordiga (1889-1970), Bibliografia*, Colibri, Milan, 1995 (address: Cooperativa Colibri, via san Michele del Carso, 4 – 20037 Paderno Dugnano (Mi); fax 02/99042815.). This excellent bibliography contains an exhaustive list of all documents, articles, books of and on Bordiga.
- Jacques DE COCK, Thierry DELPLANCQ, Charlotte GOËTZ, Anne MORELLI, Rosa TERRIZZI, *Inventaire du fonds Perrone. Le communisme 'bordiguiste' exilé en Belgique*, “Groupe d' histoire et de sociologie du communisme”, Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), slnd, 1994?
- Anne METTEWIE-MORELLI: “Letters and documents of E. Ambrogi”, *Annali Feltrinelli*, 1977 (pages 173 to 191). This study is also a testimony of the grand-daughter of a sympathiser of the Italian Left in Brussels, Alfredo Morelli, which collected the Archives of Ambrogi, already quoted.

A. — FORMATION OF THE ITALIAN COMMUNIST LEFT

Until 1926, the Italian Communist Left identified itself with its principal spokesman: Amadeo Bordiga (1889-1970), who left a mass of documents very varied and very fertile. This political literature being a literature of party, could not however reduce itself to the only name of Bordiga, who always rejected any personalization of his current.

There is a convenient collection of texts of Bordiga of 1912 to 1920: *Storia della sinistra comunista*, T I, 1912 to 1919, *Programma comunista* (1964); T II, 1919 to 1920, *Programma comunista* (1972); T III, 1920 to 1921, *Programma comunista* (1986); T IV, 1921-1922 (1997). With a choice of articles drawn from *l'Unità*, *Avanguardia*, *Avanti*, *Il Socialista*, then of *Il Soviet* (Naples) after 1918. Some texts are preceded (Tome I) by a relevant history, written by Bordiga, displaying the genesis of the Abstentionist Communist Fraction after 1919, until the Livorno's Congress, where the Communist Left became majority. The other tomes give the point of view of the official “Bordiguists” Party (*Programma comunista*).

The current, known as “Bordiguist”, expressed itself through all the papers or reviews of the PSI before the scission, then those of the Italian CP:

- *Il Soviet*; reprint (Schio's section of *Programma comunista*, 1989?);
- *Ordine Nuovo*, founded by Gramsci in 1919;

- *I' Unità*;
- *Il comunista*;
- *Rassegna comunista*;
- *Lo Stato operaio*;
- *Il Lavoratore di Trieste*;
- *Prometeo* (1924); reprint Partito comunista internazionale, Schio, June 1990.
- *Il sindacato rosso*.

These papers can be consulted:

- * Istituto Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, via Romagnosi, 3, Milan;
- * Internationaal Instituut voor sociaal Geschiedenis (IISG), 1019 AT Amsterdam, Cruquiusweg 31.

It should be noted that the Feltrinelli editions reprinted around 68 a certain number of these reviews (of which *Rassegna comunista*) as well as documents such as: *Manifesti ed altri documenti politici (congresso di Livorno, 1921)*; *II° Congresso, relazione del comitato centrale (congresso di Roma, 1922)*.

There exist in Italian a compilation of texts embracing this period, selected by an intellectual of the Partito comunista italiano (PDS and Rifundazione comunista today):

- Franco LIVORSI, *Bordiga, scritti scelti*, Milan, 1975.

Major texts of the Italian Communist Left of the years 1919-1926, were (and are sometimes) reedited rather regularly by the Bordiguist official current (*Programme Communiste, Il Programma comunista*) or by dissidents (*Il Partito comunista* and *Comunismo; Invariance*, etc.).

Let us quote:

In Italian:

- *Dall' economia capitalistica al comunismo*, conferenza tenuta a Milano il 2 Luglio 1921 (da Amadeo Bordiga), ED. Comunismo, Naples, may 1975.
- *Relazione del partito comunista d' Italia al IV congresso dell' Internazionale comunista*, November 1922 (Iskra edizioni, Milan, April 1976).

In French (sometimes in English)

- "Over the Communist Party; Theses, speeches and resolutions of the Communist Left of Italy (1917-1925.)" (*Le Fil du Temps*, October 1971);
- the Democratic principle (1922) (ED. *Programme communiste*);
- *Party and class* (idem);
- *Communism and Fascism* (id.);
- *the parliamentary question in the International Communist* (id.);
- *the land question* (1921), reproduced in French translation by *Le Fil du Temps*, No. 2, June 1968).

To understand the political sources of divergences between Bordiga and Gramsci, one can refer to the compilation of texts chosen by Alfonso LEONETTI:

- *Dibattito sui consigli di fabbrica* (il dissenso teorico e strategico tra i due capi negli articoli di Soviet e di Ordine nuovo), Edizioni Savelli, Milan, 1973).

The political writings of Gramsci, were edited, presented and annotated by Robert Paris (Gallimard, 1974, 1975, 1980), as well as the *Cahiers de prison* (Gallimard, three volumes).

They let understand the evolution — Ordinovist, then Bordiguist and finally Zinovievist — of the former leader in Turin.

Sources of “the Italian Question” in the Comintern are Die Protokolle von der II, III, IV, V Weltkongresse der kommunistischen Internationale (reprint, Karl Liebknecht Verlag, Erlangen, 1970); “Resolution about the Italian question” (IVth Congress of the Comintern, in the first Four congresses of the International Communist, facsimile Maspéro, Paris, 1969 (in French).

From 1922, Bordiga more clearly marks its opposition to the official theses of the IC. We refer here to the articles which he wrote in the press of PCd' I, as well as in the “Protokolle”, mentioned above. The similarities and the differences with the Trotskyist Opposition, hardly being born, can be examined in:

- “la questione Trotskij” (*l' Unità*, July 4, 1925);
- “la politica dell' Internazionale” (*l' Unità*, October 15, 1925).

And especially in the last intervention of Bordiga face to face with the supreme authorities of the Comintern, at the time of the VIth Enlarged Executive, where the rupture is consumed:

- *Protokoll der Erweiterten Exekutive der Kommunistischen Internationale*, Moscow, 17 February to 15 March 1926, Hamburg, 1926. (A partial translation of the interventions of Bordiga was made by the review *Programme communiste* (Communist Program), Nos. 69-70, Paris, May 1976.)

The isolation of the Italian Communist Left which not recognise the other Communist Lefts (KAPD, then the group of Korsch around *Kommunistische Politik*) can be understand through the following articles and letter of Bordiga:

- “Le tendenze della III Internazionale” (*Il Soviet*, May 23, 1920);
- “La situazione in Germania e il movimento comunista” (*Il Soviet*, July 11, 1920).

(These two articles were translated in *Programme communiste*, “Letter from Amadeo Bordiga to Korsch” (October 26) (*Programme communiste*, No. 68, October-December 1975).

Concerning the fight of the Communist Left inside the Italian CP and the Comintern, see too an important compilation of texts:

- *Il partito decapitato. La sostizione del gruppo dirigente del PC d' Italia (1923-1924)*, edizioni l'Internazionale, Milan, 1988;
- *La liquidazione della sinistra del PC d' Italia (1925)*, Edizioni l'Internazionale, Milan, 1991.

B. — FRACTION OF THE ITALIAN COMMUNIST LEFT IN EXILE (1926-1945)

Although exiled, the Italian Left published a lot. If the majority of its texts were not easily accessible, the collections multiplied these last years.

Since 1926, the Fraction of Communist Left appears in France, with the Congress of Lyon (Third Congress of the Italian CP) and with the congress of Lille of the PCF:

- *Tese per il III congresso* (in *Diffesa della continuita del programma comunista*, Milan, 1970, ED. PC.)
- Platform of the Left (project of theses presented by a group of “Leftists” (Bordiguists) for the Fifth Congress of the PCF) (1926).

Within the Italian Left, two currents can be defined, one being attracted little by little by the German Left, the other one claiming “Bordiguist” tradition.

The first one gathered around Michelangelo Pappalardi in Lyon published *Réveil communiste* (in French), *Il Risveglio comunista* (in Italian), 1927-1929; then *L'Ouvrier communiste* (the Communist Worker) (monthly organ of the Communist workers' groups), 1929 to 1931, before disappearing. It will publish:

- Before Thermidor. Revolution and counter-revolution in Soviets' Russia. Platform of the Left in the Bolshevik party (Sapronow, Smirnow, Obhorin, Kalin), in 1928. — Response to Lenin, by Herman Gorter (1920).

- Second current was born after its congress in Pantin in 1928, around Italian militants exiled in France and Belgium, whose leader was Ottorino Perrone (1897-1957), which dominated the Fraction of the Left of PCd' I, which will last until 1943, date of foundation in Italy of the Partito comunista internazionalista. It published:

- *Prometeo* (from May 1933 to 1938), semi-monthly, Nos. 1 to 153,

- *Bilan* (November 1933-January 1938), Nos. 1 to 46;

- *Octobre*, monthly review of the Office of the fractions of the Communist Left), Nos. 1 to 5 (February 1938-August 1939).

Belgian Fraction of the Communist Left, which left in 1937 the League of the Internationalist Communists (LCI) published:

* *Communisme* (February 1937-August 1939), Brussels, Nos. 1 to 29 (ro-neoed).

A bulletin of discussion in Italian language will appear in 1938, under the title:

- *Il Seme comunista*, Nos. 1 to 5, “sotto la responsabilità della C.E.”

In French, the production of internal bulletins is richer:

* News bulletin of the Fraction of the Italian Left (published under the responsibility of the Executive Commission), 1931-1933, at least 10 bulletins.

In addition, the Fraction published also some texts in the International Bulletin of the Left Opposition (1930-1931).

During these decisive years, in the wake of the Fraction a bulletin (laying claim from Bordiga) will appear:

* *Pour la renaissance communiste*, 1933, Nos. 1-3, bulletin published in Paris, under the responsibility of the comrades Mathieu and Gandi, militants of the Italian Communist Left.

(All these reviews can be consulted in Amsterdam, Follonica and Milan; it is possible to consult photocopies of *Bilan* and *Communisme* at the BDIC of Nanterre.)

Ottorino PERRONE (VERCESI) left Archives (in fact the Ambrogi's Archives) which are deposited at the BDIC of Nanterre.

Amadeo PERRONE, son of Ottorino, yielded the Archives and books of his father to the Université libre de Bruxelles. See the work of Anne MORELLI, mentioned above.

VAN HOEGAEDEN (LE WITTE), Member of the Belgian Fraction, left Archives to the Université libre de Bruxelles (1998).

It is the same for Piero CORRADI (Piero), which yielded its Archives to the library of Follonica (Italy). Reprint texts of *Bilan* saw the day these last years in French:

- texts on the war in Spain, in *International Review* (review of the International Communist Current, or ICC), Nos. 4 and 6, 1976, "*Bilan: lessons of Spain 1936*"; No. 7, 1937, "*Bilan: the crisis of the Fraction in front of the events of Spain 1936*."

- *Bilan, Counter-Revolution in Spain (1936-1939)*, texts presented and joined together by Jean BARROT (Gilles DAUVÉ), UGE, coll. 10/18, Paris, 1977.

One can add, translated into Italian, the texts of Vercesi in *Bilan* (not signed), republished in 1958 by *Prometeo* (organ of Partito comunista internazionalista, tendency Onorato Damen):

- "Articoli di O. PERRONE, rivista *Bilan*, 1933-1938" (a choice of seven articles).

A collection of its contributions over "the transitional period to Communism" exist in Italian translation:

- *Rivoluzione e reazione (lo stato tardo-capitalistico nell'analisi della sinistra comunista)*, Università degli studi di Messina, Giuffrè editore, Milan, 1983. Texts introduced by Dino ERBA and Arturo PEREGALLI.

The Italian Fraction of 1930 to 1939 nourished its existence of confrontations with groups located at the Left of the Trotskyism:

- L'Union communiste (The Communist Union) (1933-1939), group come out of the Frank's and Molinier's Communist League, published until July 1939, 43 numbers of its monthly review *L'Internationale*. Its principal organiser Gaston Davoust, republished in 1979 a collection of articles of this review, under the nickname of Henri CHAZE, *Chronic of the Spanish revolution, Union communiste (1933-1939)*, Paris, 1977, Cahiers Spartacus.
- The League of the Internationalist Communists (LCI), came out of the Trotskyism about 1930, published a *Bulletin* until the war. This group (around Adhémar Hennaut), will come out in February 37, at the time of the events of Spain; its minority, after the scission of 1937, published *Communisme*, organ of the Belgian Fraction. You will find some of these texts in the book of Jean BARROT (Gilles DAUVÉ).

The Italian Fraction practically did not have contacts with the Dutch Left (GIC, group of the international Communists), although the LCI had closer connections with the group *Living Marxism* around Paul Mattick in the USA. To have a fast sight of the positions of these groups: — *The bureaucratic counter-revolution* (coll. 10/18, Paris, 1973).

In 1937, a Mexican group, sharing the positions of *Bilan* on the war of Spain, will come into contact with the Fraction. This group, Grupo of trabajadores marxistas (GTM), published of 1938 to 1940 the theoretical review *Comunismo*. Certain texts were translated by *L'Internationale* in 1938, then a few decades later by the *International Review*, organ of the ICC, in French (Nos. 19 and 20 (Oct. and Dec. 79).

War and thus clandestinity reduce the forces of the Fraction. It published nevertheless from 1943 eight numbers of an international Bulletin of discussion. The French group of the Communist Left, which takes the name of French Fraction of the Communist Left, or Communist Left of France, published as from May 1945 and until 1952 the monthly review *Internationalisme*, and in 1945 a printed newspaper: *l'Étincelle* (The Spark).

Some elements of this group, which joined in 1945 the new Partito comunista internazionalista, published another *Étincelle* (Spark) in 1946, then *l'Internazionaliste* (the

Internationalist) until March 1949. It took the name of French Fraction of the international Communist Left (F.F.G.C.I.).

The Belgian Fraction of the international Communist Left (FBGCI), of the same tendency, published until 1949 *L'Internationaliste* (the Internationalist).

In 1943, the PC Internationalist was formed, in Turin, and in Lombardy, around Onorato Damen. It published *Prometeo* clandestinely, in the form of newspaper, then in 1945 in the form of printed review, then at the end of the war *Battaglia comunista*. One will find the principal texts of his foundation in:

- *L'imperialismo e la guerra* (ED. *Prometeo*, Milan);
- *Program's Schema of the PCINT* (1944);
- *Piattaforma* (1945).

(Reprint of the clandestine *Prometeo*, organ of the Partito comunista internazionalista, 1943-1945, Edizioni Elf Biella, Casella postale 292, Biella (Italy), 1995. With a Preface of Roberto GREMMO.)

Over the war and post-war period, one will find elements of history in the Report of the first national conference of the Internationalist Communist Party of Italy, booklet, Paris, 1946. Several Italian republications of the *Resoconto del congresso del Partito comunista internazionalista* (Florence, 6-9 may 1948.) by the Damen's Group.

The quoted texts of the period of clandestinity are in our possession; they can be consulted in Amsterdam and Milan, or requested near the groups issuing from the Italian Left, such *Programma comunista* and *Battaglia comunista*.

C. – “BORDIGUIST” CURRENT AFTER 1945.

We refer to the bibliographical work of Sandro SAGGIORO and Arturo PEREGALLI, mentioned above. *Invariance* translated and published between 1968 and 1998 a lot of texts written by Bordiga (from 1912 to 1970), notably the articles of the Series: “Sul filo del tempo”, published anonymously in the 50s by *Programma comunista*:

See in French:

Review *Dis)continuité*, 1998:

Bordiga, *Sul filo del tempo* (1952).

Bordiga, textes sur la conquête spatiale, 1957-1967.

Bordiga: textes d' avant 1914 (ainsi que quelques textes extraits de l'*Histoire de la Gauche communiste (Storiadella Sinistra comunista)* (1912-1919).

Bordiga, textes, 1915 -1966.

Bordiga, *Sul filo del tempo*, 1953.

(Les 6 numéros contiennent une introduction de F. Bochet.)

Invariance:

Bordiga, *Sul filo del tempo*, 1949 (1), avril 1992, 104 p.

Bordiga, *Sul filo del tempo*, 1949 (2), juin 1992, 96 p.

Bordiga, *Sul filo del tempo*, 1950 (1), mars 1993, 106 p.

Bordiga, *Sul filo del tempo*, 1950 (2), mars 1993, 97 p.

Bardiga, *Sul filo del tempo*, 1951 (1), septembre 1994, 120 p.

Bordiga, *Sul filo del tempo*, 1951(2), novembre 1994, 127 p.

Œuvres d' Ottorino Perrone, août 1993, 157 p. (Il s' agit principalement du texte “Parti-Internationale-Etat” de Perrone, parus dans *Bilan*.)

Bordiga, textes, 1912-1969; juin 1994, 293 p.

Bordiga, textes (2), 1913-1965; juin 1995, 419 p.

(Présentation "Prolétariat, philosophie et Nature (suite) ou en guise d' introduction" de F. Bochet.)

Textes du mouvement ouvrier révolutionnaire 1; mai 1996, 294 p. (textes de *Le réveil communiste*, *L'ouvrier communiste*, *Bilan*).

Textes du mouvement ouvrier révolutionnaire 2; juin 1996, 344 p. (textes de *Bilan*, *Octobre*, *Communisme*, *Prometeo*,...)

Textes du mouvement ouvrier révolutionnaire 4; oct. 1996, 260 p. (textes de Rühle, Pannekoek, Bordiga, Camatte. (Ces quatre derniers numéros sont précédés d' une introduction: "Pensée, révolution réaction et catastrophe" de F. Bochet.)

STUDIES

They are rare studies concerning the period 1926-1945, except for the Italian Left before the exile.

A. — 1912-1926

Before the birth of the CP of Italy:

- Z. CIUFFOLETTI, M. DEGL' INNOCENTI, G. SABBATUCCI, *Storia del PSI; 1. Le Origini e l'età giolittiana*, Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1992.
- Leo VALIANI, *Il Partito Socialista Italiano nel periodo della Neutralità 1914-1915*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1963.

On Mussolini the "Revolutionary Socialist" before 14:

- Renzo DE FELICE, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario 1883-1920*, Einaudi Tascabili, Turin, 1995.

Add, on the birth of the communists Fractions:

- Michele FATICA, *Origini del fascismo e del comunismo a Napoli (1911-1915)*, Florence, 1971.
- Mirella MINGARDO, *Mussolini, Turati e Fortichiari. La formazione della sinistra socialista a Milano 1912-1918*, Graphos Storia, Genoa, 1992.

On the history and the structure of the Bordiguist-Communist movement:

- *Storia della sinistra comunista* (not completed, will go until 1926), 4 volumes, 1966-1996; Bordiguist point of view; see above.
- Paolo SPRIANO: *Storia del partito comunista italiano*, Tome I, Da Bordiga a Gramsci, Turin, 1967. (Point of view of a member of the Italian CP).
- Bruno FORTICHIARI, *Comunismo e revisionismo in Italia. Testimonianza di un militante rivoluzionario* (a cura di Luigi CORTESI), Tennerello editore, Turin, 1978.
- Giovanni SOMAI, in *Movimento operaio e socialista*, no. 4, Oct.-Dec. 1979, "Il tentativo frazionista nel Partito comunista d' Italia: Il Comitato d' Intesa e il ruolo di Amadeo Bordiga".

- Giovanni SOMAI, *Storia contemporanea*, no. 4-5, Oct. 1980, “La formazione del gruppo dirigente di ‘centro’ e il ruolo di Bordiga. Carteggio 1923”.
- Massimo ILARDI and Aris ACCORNERO (under the direction of), *Il Partito comunista italiano. – Struttura e storia dell’organizzazione 1921/1979*; Femtrinelli, Milan, 1982.

On Bordiga:

- Andreina DE CLEMENTI, *Amadeo Bordiga* (Einaudi, Turin, 1971).
- Bruna TESO, *Bordiga* (masters’ degree, 1972, Paris I-Sorbonne).
- Franco LIVORSI, *Amadeo Bordiga*, ED. Riuniti, 1976 (point of view enough honest from an intellectual of the PCI, which continues its study until the death of Bordiga in 1970).
- Agustín GUILLAMON IBORRA, *Militancia y pensamiento político de Amadeo Bordiga de 1910 a 1930. Orígenes, formación y disidencia del bordiguismo en el seno del Partido Comunista de Italia*, tesis de licenciatura, Barcelona, 1987.
- Agustín GUILLAMON, *Chronologia de Bordiga*, review *Balance*, Barcelona, No. 4, November 1995.

The point of view of the International Communist Party (Bordiguist) “En défense du Programme communiste, Nos. 71, 72 and 74: “Gramsci, l’Ordine nuovo et Il Soviet;” Nos. 50 to 56: “In memory of Amadeo Bordiga;” No. 68: “Communist Left of Italy vis-à-vis the debates in the Russian party”.

We can refer to the newspaper *Il Partito comunista* and the review *Comunismo*, organs of a dissenting Bordiguist group (another International Communist Party), established especially in Florence:

We can add the critical testimony of Onorato Damen, another founder of PCd’ I, then of PCINT in 1943, before his rupture with Bordiga in 52:

- *Bordiga, validità e limiti di una esperienza nella storia della sinistra italiana*, EPI, Milan, 1977.

On the relationship between Gramsci and Bordiga, in addition to the presentation of Robert Paris (op. cit.), cf.:

- Arturo PEREGALLI, *Il comunismo di sinistra e Gramsci*, Dedalo libri, Bari, 1978.
- Giovanni SOMAI, *Gramsci a Vienna. Ricerche e documenti 1922-1924*, “Studi storici”, Argalia Editore, Urbino, 1979.
- Onorato DAMEN, *Gramsci tra marxismo e idealismo. L’analisi di un esponente della prima opposizione allo stalinismo*, edizioni *Prometeo*, Milan, 1988.
- Christian RIECHERS, *Gramsci e le ideologie del suo tempo*, Graphos Storia, Genoa, 1993.

The relationship between Korsch and Bordiga is studied in:

- Christian RIECHERS, “Kommentar zu Bordigas Brief”, *Jahrbuch 1*, “Über Karl Korsch”, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1973.
- Danilo MONTALDI, *Korsch e i comunisti italiani* (Savelli, Milan, 1975).
- Giovanni SOMAI, *Storia Contemporanea* no. 2, April 1979, “La mancata ‘venuta’ di Bordiga a Mosca. Il preludio della questione russa dell’ottobre 1926”.

B. — 1926 TILL THE WAR

The studies on the history of the Fraction are extremely rare. Short, and polemic development, in: "Notes for a history of the Communist Left; the Italian Fraction, 1926-1939", ICC's *International Review*, No. 9, March 1977.

On the "inactivity" of Bordiga between 1930 and 1943:

- Arturo PEREGALLI and Sandro SAGGIORO, *Amadeo Bordiga. Gli anni oscuri (1926-1945)*,

Quaderni Pietro Tresso, Florence, 1997.

On the activity of Vercesi during this period, cf. its Archives (BDIC and ULB) and the obituary of *Programme communiste* (Communist Program), No. 1 (1957). See too:

- Anne MORELLI, "Le bordighisme en exil autour d' Ottorino Perrone", Actes du Colloque sur le Komintern, Centenaire de Jules Humbert-Droz, La Chaux-de-Fonds (Suisse), 1992.

On the ultimate political way of Virgilio Verdaro:

- Pasquale GENASCI and Bruno STOPPA, *Virgilio Verdaro (1885-1960), il comunista eretico e il socialista controcorrente, il militante internazionalista e il balernitano*, Fondazione Pellegrini-Canevascini, Lugano, 1988.

See too the general studies on the Italian immigration in France and Belgium:

- Anne MORELLI, *Fascismo e antifascismo nell' emigrazione italiana in Belgio (1922-1940)*, Bonacci editore, Rome, 1987.
- Simonetta TOMBACCINI, *Storia dei fuorusciti italiani in Francia*, Mursia editore, Milan, 1988.
- Pierre MILZA et alii, *L'immigration italienne en France dans les années 20*. Acte du colloque franco-italien, Paris 15-17 octobre 1987, Editions du CEDEI, Paris, 1988.

See some documents and works concerning the political relationship between Trotskysm and Bordiguism:

Lev TROTSKY, *Scritti sull' Italia*, Controcorrente, Rome, 1979. Texts chosen and presented by

Antonella MARAZZI.? Michel ROGER, *Histoire de la gauche italienne dans l'emigration 1926-1945*, Paris VIII, 1981. (One part of this thesis was published anonymously by the ICC: *La Gauche communiste d' Italie (complément)*).

Rapports entre la Fraction de gauche du PC d' Italie et l'opposition de gauche internationale 1929-1933, CCI,

Paris-Bruxelles, mai 1988.)? Giovanni SOMAI, in *Storia Contemporanea* No. 1, Feb. 1982, "Sul rapporto tra Trockij, Gramsci e Bordiga (1922-1926)".? Paolo CASCIOLA, *Pietro Tresso militante trotskysta (1930-1944)*, Centro Studi Pietro Tresso, Foligno, 1985. Paolo CASCIOLA, *Appunti di storia del trotskismo italiano (1930-1945)*, Centro studi Pietro Tresso,

Foligno, May 1986. Hans SCHAFRANEK, *Das kurze Leben des Kurst Kandau. Ein österreichischer Kommunist als Opfer der stalinistischen Geheimpolizei*, Verlag für Gesellschaftskritik, Wien, 1988.? (VVAA), *Revolutionary History*, Volume 5, No. 4, Spring 1995, "Through Fascism, War and Revolution: Trotskyism and Left Communism in Italy"; "Socialist Platform", London.

Concerning the splitting in the Italian Communist Left (1936), cf.:

Agustin GUILLAMÓN IBORRA, *Balance* No. 1, Barcelona, November 1993, "Los bordiguistas en la guerra civil española".? Fausto BUCCI, Rossano QUIRICONI and Claudio CARBONCINI, *La vittoria di Franco è la disfatta*

del proletariato. Mario De Leone e la rivoluzione spagnola, La Ginestra – Comitato pro ex Ilva, Follonica, 1997.

For the activity of Damen imprisoned or banned in Italy, we return to the special number of *Battaglia comunista*, No.14, Oct. 1979, which is devoted to him after its death.

(The political testimony of a former militant of *Bilan* (1938), Marc Chirik, is given in the *International Review*: preface with articles on Spain (op. cit.). The assessment of the activity of the Fraction will give place to polemic just after the end of the war. We refer to the articles of *Internationalisme* No. 7, “Resolution on the case Vercesi;” No. 8, “Letter of the GCF to the Belgian Fraction;” No. 10, “Letter to all the groups of the international Communist Left.” All these articles go back to 1948.)

To understand the framework of the rebirth of the Italian Communist Left in Italy during the war, see the important these of:

Serge LAMBERT, *Tradition révolutionnaire et ‘nouveau parti’ communiste en Italie (1942-1945)*, PhD 1985, Institut d’ Etudes Politiques, Grenoble.

Very important are the following books or articles to appreciate the activity of both PCInt and Bordiga’s Fraction in Naples, and their relationship with groups of partisans:

Arturo PEREGALLI, *L'altra Resistenza. Il PCI e le opposizioni di sinistra 1943-1945*, Graphos Storia, Genoa, 1991.? Roberto GREMMO, in *Storia ribelle* 3, Autumn 1996, Edizioni ELF, Biella, “Bordiga a Roma nel 1944 rifiutò i soldi degli agenti segreti americani e resinse le proposte politiche dei Socialisti”.

Quaderni di Battaglia comunista 6, “Il processo di formazione e la nascita del Partito comunista internazionalista”, edizioni *Prometeo*, Milan, December 1993.? *Quaderni di Battaglia comunista* 7, “Lo scontro degli internazionalisti con lo stalinismo e le sue vittime”, Edizioni *Prometeo*, Milan, March 1995.? *Prometeo* 8, December 1994, “Il PCInt e i partigiani italiani dopo la caduta di Mussolini”.? Roberto GREMMO, *L'ultima resistenza. Le ribellioni partigiane in Piemonte dopo la nascita della Repubblica (1946-1947)*, Edizioni ELF, Biella, 1995.? Roberto GREMMO, *I comunisti di Bandiera Rossa. L'opposizione rivoluzionaria del ‘Movimento Comunista d’ Italia’ (1944-1947)*, Edizioni ELF, Biella, 1996.

C. – POST-WAR

For the general framework of his opposition to the official Left, one will find elements in: Giorgio GALLI, *La sinistra italiana nel dopoguerra*, Milan, 1978.

On the evolution of the Italian Left in Italy until (and after) the rupture of 1952 between Damen and Bordiga, some books give the general political and theoretical framework:

? Danilo MONTALDI, *Saggio sulla politica comunista in Italia (1919-1970)*, Quaderni piacentini, 1976;

? Danilo MONTALDI, *Milano com’ è*, Feltrinelli, 1962, p. 215-232.

? Danilo MONTALDI, *Bisogna sognare. Scritti 1952-1975*, Colibri, Milan, 1994.

? Liliana GRILLI, *Amadeo Bordiga: capitalismo sovietico e comunismo*, La Pietra, Milan, 1982.

It is necessary to consult primarily the collections of *Prometeo* and *Battaglia comunista* until 1952, as well as the book of Onorato Damen (op. cit.). See the polemic pamphlet:

? *Un chiarimento. Fra le ombre del bordighismo e dei suoi epigoni*, Edizioni Prometeo, Milan, November

1997. And:?
Quaderni di Battaglia comunista 3, "La scissione internazionalista del 1952. Documenti", edizioni Prometeo, Milan, October 1992.

Memories of militants around Ottorino PERRONE, as the texts of his last writings after 1945 were collected in:

- Ottorino PERRONE, *La tattica del Comintern (1926-1940)*, introduction and notes of Bruno BONGIOVANNI, Edizioni sociali, Venice, 1976.

Invariance (old series, 1968-1971, new series, II-IV, 1972-1996) published many texts of this period, number 1 to number 10. One will read particularly in No. 9: "Communist Left of Italy and the international Communist Party", by a former militant of the P.C.I. (*Programme communiste*), Jacques Camatte. This last one gave an important political testimony on the internal life of the International Communist Party (ICP-*Communist Program*):? "Dialogue avec Bordiga", *Invariance*, November 1975.

The biographical notes relative to Bruno FORTICCHIARI, Onorato DAMEN and Bruno MAFFI are

in:

-*Dizionario del Movimento operaio italiano*, ED. Riuniti, Rome, 1975, by ANDREUCCI and DETTI.

Biographical Notes

ACQUAVIVA (Mario): born in 1900 in Acquapendente (Viterbo), installed very young in Asti. In 1921, he adhered to the Federation of Communist youth. He is leader of the Asti's Federation of PCd' I. He is let under arrest in 1926 by the fascist government and condemned to eight years of detention by a special Court. Released, he is strongly opposed to the Stalinist current. In January 1943, he contacted the bordiguist Communist Left. In November 1943, he became member of the central committee of the Internationalist Communist Party (Partito comunista internazionalista-PCInt), founded in Northern Italy. He assumes the secretariat of the Federation of Piedmont. Thrown in gaol after the fall of Mussolini by the republican government of Badoglio, which persecuted the revolutionary elements, he will go out of the prison only in October 1944. He gave himself to his activity of propagandist overall in Piedmont, searching contacts with groups of partisans in dissension with the Togliatti's Communist Party. Very known and estimated by the workers of Piedmont, the PCI of Togliatti decided to liquidate him: he was assassinated of six bullets of revolver on July 11, 1945, after being threatened some time before by the local leaders of the Asti's PCI. In 1979, the left municipality of Asti proposed to give his name to a street of the town.

AMBROGI (Ersilio): born in 1883 in Castagneto Carducci (Pisa), he adhered to the PSI in 1901. Lawyer studies. He is imprisoned during the war for antimilitarism. Member of the CP of Italy since 1921, he is arrested soon. He is elected deputy in 1922, but he must flee soon in Berlin, where until 1924 he represented near the KPD the Italian Party. He must move to Moscow, where he worked as translator for the GPU which will 'promote' him as major general. Present in 1926 during the sessions of the Comintern's plenum. Defender of the Bordiguist positions, he will try with Virgilio Verdaro and Silva to create a small nucleus in contact with the Italian Fraction in France and Belgium. Suspected of splitting, he is sent by the GPU to Berlin from 1930 to 1932, where he is under surveillance. He will however be active in the Fraction and will have contacts with the German Trotskyist Opposition. He will be recalled by the GPU in 1932. Relegated with his family, he capitulated in 1934 and made act of allegiance to Stalinism. Agent of the GPU, he contacted the fascist authorities to settle in Belgium and to spy the Italian Fraction. He obtained from the Russian government the authorisation to pass his records (archives) by the diplomatic way. In Brussels between 1936 and 1940, the Italian Fraction refused any contact with him. In 1940, he will make in a Belgian newspaper the praise of the Mussolini's Fascism. He returned to Italy in 1942, where he was exonerated from his former Communist activities. Between 1943 and 1945, not profiting more protection of the fascist authorities, he will be off-set in Germany. Returned to Italy, he took again his occupation of lawyer. After 1956 until his death in 1964, he was member of the PCI, which paid homage to him while overlooking his trouble past.

ATTI (Fausto): born in 1900 in Bologna. Adhered in 1921 to PCd' I, after the congress of Livorno. During the period of consolidation of the fascist regime, he escaped from Italy. In 1927, he is one of the founders of the Italian Fraction in Pantin. Installed in Brussels, he took part until the world war II in all the activities of the Fraction. He is arrested in 1940 by the German police force and is off-set initially in Germany, then in Italy. After the fall of the Badoglio's government, he will contact the Centre of Damen and Maffi. He is one of the founders of PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party) in Nov. 43, he became one of the main Party's leaders. March 11, 1945, he is assassinated in Trebbo (Bologna),

where he lived, by Partisans, members of the PCI, which will try to present his assassination as "a gangland killing between fascists".

BIBBI (Bruno), known as ALFREDO BIANCO: born in 1901, he entered very young the PSI. Member of the Federation of Communist youth in Leghorn (Livorno), then of the PCd' I. He took part of the workers' groups armed by the Party (squadri di azione), asked to resist and counteracted the attacks of the fascist gangs. He must flee in 1924 in France. At the time of the conference of Pantin (East suburbs of Paris) in 1928, he is elected member of the central committee and secretary of the Executive Committee. Living in Paris, he will form part of the delegation of the F.I. who officially spoke in the congress of the Communist League (trotskyist Opposition) in October 1931. In April 1933, in the name of the Italian Fraction, he speaks in the conference of unification of the groups of left opposition, which gave rise to the Union communiste (Communist Union). Very active in the Fraction, he will however be suspected in 1938 of being a spy fallen into the hands of the OVRA; he will be expelled from the fraction, in spite of its protests. Arrested by the Germans at the beginning of the war, he will be off-set in Germany, then in Italy. He is relegated to Carrara, where he came into contact with the anarchist milieu. After the war, he adhered to the PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party), led by Damen, Maffi and Torricelli. At the time of the scission of 1952, he will follow the tendency known as Programma comunista (Bordiga and Maffi). Until his death in December 1978, he was member of Programma comunista in Carrara.

BORDIGA (Amadeo): born in 1889 in Resina (Naples), son of a professor of agricultural economics of Portici and Zaira degli Amadei. Studies of engineer. Adhere to the PSI in 1910, where he is located immediately on the left. Member of socialist Youth, he will be in 1912 one of the most determinate adversaries of the colonial adventure in Libya. He created in Naples the "Circolo socialista Carlo Marx", after splitting away from the local section dominated by the reformists. The same year, during the congress of socialist Youth, he fought the "culturalist" current of Angelo Tasca. Firmly adversary of war and reformism, he became gradually antiparlamentarist after 1914. During the war, Bordiga worked for the organisation of the Camera del Lavoro (trade unions centre) in Naples. In 1917 he took part in the creation of the intransigent socialist Fraction, adversary of the Maximalist direction (Serrati) In December 1918, he contributed in a decisive way to the publishing of the newspaper *Il Soviet* which became the organ of the Abstentionist Communist Fraction, left fraction of the PSI. Delegate of the Italian Communist current at the Comintern's Third Congress in 1920, where he contributed to the drafting of the 21st condition of membership. Abstentionist, he accepted that the future Party took part in the elections, by discipline. Hostile to the positions of Gramsci (Ordine nuovo), he began in 1920 to work together with him, in order to found an Italian Communist Party (conference of Imola, December 1920). In January 1921, after the scission, he became the principal leader of the new section of the Comintern. He is a joint writer of the Theses of Rome, with Terracini, at the time of second congress of the PCd' I. From 1921, Bordiga is opposed to the Comintern's policy of "United Front", then to its "antifascist" policy at the time of the IVth world congress. Hostile to the admission of the "terzini" of Serrati and Fabrizio Maffi to the Party, he yielded nevertheless to the discipline of the Third International. He is imprisoned by the fascist government from February to October 1923, the "bordiguist" direction being replaced by that of Gramsci and Togliatti, subjected to Zinoviev. Although expelled by the Comintern of the leading heads of the Party, the left tendency of Bordiga will obtain majority until the congress of Lyon in 1926, where it will be put in minority. Vis-à-vis the right tendency of Gramsci and Togliatti,

Bordiga will adhere in 1925 to the Committee of agreement (Comitato di intesa) formed by Damen, Fortichiari, Repossi, Venegoni and Perrone. After the congress of Lyon, where he carries out the battle in the name of the Left by presenting the “Theses of Lyon”, he fights Stalin in Moscow at the time of the VIth Enlarged Executive (February-March 1926) and contacts Trotsky. He refused the proposal of Korsch to found a new International and new Communist Parties. Imprisoned at the end of 1926 in Italy, he is relegated to Ustica then to Ponza Island with Gramsci, of whom he remained the friend. Released in 1929, he is excluded from the PCI in March 1930 for “Trotskyism”. He is devoted then to his professional activity, and refused any contact with the Italian Fraction in Exile. He will take again its political activities in 1944 at the head of the Fraction of the Italian Communists and Socialists of Naples. Under the pseudonyms of Alfa and Orso, he will give many writing contributions to the PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party), founded by Damen and Maffi. He will be never militant until 1949, hostile to the proclamation of the Party. With Maffi and Perrone, he will enter in open conflict with the tendency of Damen until the scission of 1952. In the International Communist Party (ICP), build up around the newspaper *Il programma comunista* in Italy, and the *Programme communiste* review in France, he contributed in a decisive way to the orientation of that current towards a kind of neo-Leninism. Author, inter alia, of an anonymous History of the Communist left and of many other texts (*Property and capital, Factors of race and nation*, etc.), he left political activity after 1967 and died close to Naples in 1970.

BORSACCHI (Fernando), known as PIERI, or GALANTI (Bruno): born in Florence in December 1902, automobile mechanic. Adhere to the PSI then to the PCd' I in 1921. Exiled in Belgium, he is named member of the central committee of the Italian Fraction at the time of its congress of Pantin (1928). “Perronist”, he will always follow the positions of Vercesi. With this last one, he will take part in 1944-1945 in the antifascist Coalition of Brussels, in the name of the Italian Fraction.

BOTTAIOLI (Giovanni), known as Butta (1900-1959), farm labourer; he adhered to the PSI in 1919; émigré in 1923 in France; member of the Italian Communist Fraction in 1928. Leading member of the Fraction (C.E; Executive committee). He returned in 1945 to Italy, and became member of the PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party). In 1952, he will follow the tendency of Damen gathered around the paper *Battaglia comunista* and the *Prometeo* review. He will be active in this organisation until its death in Parma.

CANDOLI (Turiddu), known as ALFREDO: born in Cervia (Ravenna) in 1900. Worker in a baker shop. Conscript in 1917-18. Young Socialist in 1918 he adhered to the PC d' Italia in 21. Seems to have fought in Hungary in the ranks of the Soviet army of Bela Kun. He is mobilised in 1921 by the Party in the fighting groups against the Fascist squadrons. Wanted by the police and fascists, he moved to Rome. He worked 2 years as internal courier in the Russian Embassy. He emigrated after 1926 to Switzerland, then to France. He lived in Toulon in 1931, when he was expelled from the Italian CP. He adhered soon to the Bordiguist Fraction in Marseilles. He defended the positions of the Majority, when he was sent to Spain after July 1936. Militant of the Fraction during the war, he hosted Benjamin Feingold (Jacobs) between 1940 and 1943. He returned to Italy after 1946, and became active militant of the PC Internazionalista. After 1952, he remained partisan of the Bordiga-Maffi Tendency. Died in Cervia in 1985.

CAPPELLETTI (Giuseppe) (1903-1965): born in Piacenza; Revolutionary Syndicalist. In France after 1927 he belonged to the Italian Fraction. After the war he became militant of the French Bordiguist group.

COMUNELLO (Vittorio) (? — 1964): adhered in 1921 to the PC of Italy; exiled in 1926, he became militant of the Italian Fraction in Belgium; deportee after his re-entry in Italy in 1940; adhered to the PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party) in 1945.

CORRADI (Piero), known as PIERO: born in 1907, installed very early in France, metal-worker, then taxi driver, his last profession until its retirement. In 1927, he followed the group of Pappalardi gathered around the *Réveil communiste* newspaper. He adhered soon to the Italian Fraction, which he left in 1936 with the minority at the time of the events of Spain. He joined the Communist Union of Chazé until 1939. After the world war II, he became member of the French bordiguist group (French Fraction of the international Communist left) recognised by the PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party). After 1952, he follows the tendency of Bordiga, which he will leave at the beginning of the years 1960. He died in 1991 in Paris.

DAMEN (Onorato): born in 1893 in Monte San Pietrangeli (Ascoli Piceno); teacher. He adheres directly to the left wing of the PSI in 1910. Volunteer, with the rank of sergeant, he is degraded in 1917 and is imprisoned during two years for inciting to desert. After he is released, he adhered to the Abstentionist Communist Fraction. In 1921, secretary of the Camera del Lavoro of Pistoia and editor of the Communist newspaper *Avvenire*. The same year, charged with assassination of a fascist, during an armed confrontation, he must find refuge to Paris, where he is responsible for the weekly edition in Italian language of *L'Humanité*. Returned to Italy; in 1924, he is elected deputy. In 1925 together with Fortichiari, Venegoni, Perrone and Repossi he founded the Committee of agreement (*Comitato d' Intesa*), against the "bolshevisation" carried out by Gramsci and Togliatti. Dismissed from his parliamentary mandate, like the whole of the Communist deputies, in November 1926, he is relegated to the Isle of Ustica; condemned to 12 years of reclusion, he directed the revolt of the prisoners of Civitavecchia in 1933. Released, he is again imprisoned in 1935, then 1937, and 1940. He is released in 1943. He is the leading founder and organiser of the Internationalist Communist Party in November 1943 in Piedmont and Lombardy. After 1945, he clashed gradually in conflict with the tendency of Bordiga. After the scission of 1952, he is the principal leader in charge of the PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party) (*Battaglia comunista*). Active in that Party until 1980, date of his death in Milan. Author of a book around Bordiga.

DANIELIS (Luigi), known as GIGI: born in 1901 in Palmanova (Friul). Member of the PCd' Italia in 1921, he exiled himself in France, in Lyon. Adhered to the Italian Fraction in 1928. At the head of the Parisian Federation, he is Member of the Executive Commission. Refugee in Marseilles, during the war, active in the Fraction, with forged identity papers, he returned to Italy in 1944. Since 1945, he became responsible for the Federation of Turin of the PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party); he was member of the central committee and made rounds of propaganda, like lecturer. In opposition to Damen, on the trade-union question, at the time of the congress of Florence in 1948. He remained bordiguist, member of the tendency *Il Programma comunista* until his death in 1968, in Palmanova.

DE LEONE (Mario), known as TOPO: born in Naples in 1890, adhered to the PSI about 1910, then to the PCd' I in 1921. He must find refuge in Moscow, where he found Ambrogio, Silva and Virgilio Verdaro. He left Russia about 1929, and settled in Annemasse as grocer; he acted for the Fraction in developing the contacts with Italy. In 1936, in the minority, of which he was the principal spokesman, during the Civil War in Spain,. He left for Barcelona, where he died of a heart attack at the end of 1936.

FEINGOLD (Benjamin, known as Michel), known as JACOBS: born about 1907 in Antwerp, of Jewish Polish origin, having broken with its religious milieu. He adhered to the Italian Fraction in the Thirties. Member of the EC of the Fraction, he will form part of the international Office of the fractions proclaimed in 1937. During the war, he took refuge in Marseilles and worked in the cooperative Croque-Fruits, refuge of a lot of apatrids and internationalists. He defended the positions of Vercesi on the dissolution of the Fraction. Seized in 1943 by Gestapo, he disappeared in a death camp.

FERRAGNI (Rosolino): born in November 1896 in Cremona, he is in 1921 one of the founders of the Cremonese Federation of the PCd' Italia. Driven out of Cremona he moved to Rome, where he was employed in 1924 inside the administration of the daily newspapers l'Unità, then secretary of the Milanese committee of the "Red Help" (*Secorso rosso*). In 1925, he is nominated secretary of the Milanese federation. In 1926, he becomes responsible for the legal service of the PC. In September of the same year, he is under arrest at the same time as Terracini. In 1928, he is condemned by a fascist special Court to 16 years of prison. Released in 1937, he is again imprisoned in 1940 and sent in relegation. Between September 1943 and April 1945, he constantly changed from residence to escape the fascists. He adhered to the PC Internationalist since its foundation in 1943. After the scission of 1952, he followed Damen's PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party)-*Battaglia comunista*, until his death in 1973. He was member of the central committee of that organisation and directed editorial committee responsible for *Battaglia comunista* and *Prometeo*.

FORTICHIARI (Bruno): born in February 1892 in Luzzara (Reggio Emilia), he is a secretary of the Camera del Lavoro of Piacenza in 1912, then secretary of the Milanese socialist section. At the head of the provincial Federation of Milan, he directs its organ *Battaglia socialista*. In 1914, he made expel Mussolini from the Milanese socialist section. Condemned and interned in 1918, for antimilitarist activity. Partisan of a participation in the elections, he will however become in Imola secretary of the Abstentionist Communist Fraction. At the time of the congress of Leghorn he presents motion constituting the PCd' I and becomes Member of the Executive Commission of the Central Committee. He directs under the pseudonym of Loris the illegal military organisation of the Party. In 1923, he takes part in Moscow in the Third Enlarged Executive of the Comintern, and is opposed to the nomination of a new EC dominated by the right line (Angelo Tasca). In 1924, he is elected appointed of Milanese Federation. He is dismissed of its responsibilities in the Party, in 1925, for "bordiguism". Following this dismissal, the Committee of agreement will be formed, in which he takes part. Under arrest in 1926, like all the Communist deputies, he is excluded from the Party in 1929. With Venegoni, he founded during the war the group *Il Lavatore*. In 1943, he seeks to return in the PCI what will be refused to him. Member of the PCI in 1945, he deals with the co-operative and mutualist movement of Lombardy. He will leave this Party in 1956, at the time of the events of Hungary and will found his own group *Azione comunista*, which existed already clandestinely in the PCI. Fortichiari, with libertarian Communists and *Battaglia comunista* will try to create transitory Movimento della sinistra comunista (*Iniziativa comunista*). Partisan of a union of all the groups resulting from

"Livorno 1921", he continued until his death in 1980, his attempt through the review *Iniziativa comunista*. In 1978, he published in Turin an important book of political Memories, *Comunismo e revisionismo in Italia*.

GABASSI (Antonio), known as TOTO: born in 1893 in Palmanova, he adheres very young to the PSI. In 1921, among the founders of PCd' I in Turin. He becomes interregional secretary. Imprisoned in November 1921, under the charge of complicity of murder of a fascist. Under arrest again in Milan in 1924, then in 1926; he flees in France, where he takes refuge. In 1927, in Pantin, he is one of the founders of the Italian Fraction. He is several times expelled of France, where he returns many times clandestinely. Dealt with the diffusion of the Italian press he contributes to the editing of *Prometeo* under the pseudonym of Antonio. During the war, he will return to Italy, but was imprisoned. Released in August 1943, he adheres soon to the PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party). After 1952, he follows the Damen's tendency (*Battaglia comunista*), until its death in December 1975, in Palmanova.

HEERBRANT (Henri), known as HILDEN (1912-?): militant of the Socialist Youths of the Belgian POB, then of the Trotskyist Group (Lesoil), that he left, for the LCI, in Brussels. He was an active militant of the Belgian Fraction after 1937. After the World War II, he remained an active sympathiser of the bordiguist groups in Italy. Known too as Belgian Surrealist Painter.

LA CAMERA (Fortunato) (1898-1972): close to Bordiga, from the beginning; excluded from the PC in 1932; he took part in 1943 in the reconstitution of the PC in Cosenza and joined the Left Fraction of the Italian Communists and Socialists around Bordiga at the end of 1944. After its exclusion of the PCI, member of the PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party). Follows the tendency of Damen after 1952, until its death.

LECCI (Aldo), known as MARIO MARINI, known as TULLIO, known as GINO: born in Florence in 1900, he is member of the PSI in 1917, then of the PC in 1921; he takes part in the defence of the district Santa Croce of Florence against the fascist bands. He will have in 1923 to take refuge in France, not without difficulty: in 1925, he is not getting any permanent residence. From the beginning, he is member of the Italian fraction. He lives in Lyon until 1929 and becomes the principal person in charge of the Lyons Federation, and member of the central committee. He is in charge of the contacts with Italy. In 1929 he will be expelled of France, then of Belgium. He will be able to go back to Lyon. In 1937, he defends the positions of the majority during the discussions with the minority of Barcelona. He is opposed to the theories of Vercesi on the war economy and the disappearance of the proletariat in the war. During the war Member of the Executive Commission in Marseilles. Returned in 1945 to Italy, he is member of the central committee of the PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party), of which he is one of the propagandists in the meetings. Opposed to Perrone during the congress of Florence, he adheres to the fraction of Damen in 1952. He will remain member of the PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party)-*Battaglia comunista* until his death in 1974.

MAFFI (Bruno): born in Turin in 1909, he is the nephew of Fabrizio Maffi, Maximalist socialist deputy who represents the adherent faction "terzini" inside the PCd' I in 1924. At the end of the Twenties, Bruno Maffi adheres to the clandestine socialist Party. In 1930, he is member of the central committee of Giustizia e Libertà, an "antifascist" organisation led by the brothers Rosseli. As such he is arrested and imprisoned. He is charged in 1934 for

rebuilding of the socialist centre for Italy; he collaborates in *Nuova Avanti* and *Politica socialista*. He writes at that time *Appunti per una politica socialista*. He is again under arrest in 1935. Between 1936 and 1938, he moves away gradually from the socialist antifascism to join the Communist left, under the influence of Damen. In 1943, he takes part in the foundation of the PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party), of which he is one of the principal leaders. He moves away from Damen, to follow Bordiga at the end of the 40s. He is one of the authors of the scission of 1952. Thereafter, so far (1998), he was the principal leading remainder of the International Communist Party (*Il Programma comunista*) in Italy, after the 'blow-up' of 1982, and editor of that newspaper. He is known in Italy for its translation in Italian of *The Capital* of Marx. But, he was also a famous Italian translator from English, American and German authors (Thomas Mann, etc.).

MARUCA (Francesco) (1898-1962): Socialist in 1915, founder of the PCd' I in Catanzaro (Calabria), partisan of Bordiga. Drawn aside of the Party, imprisoned after 1924, then released. Inactive until the war, he directs in 1943 the federation of the Italian CP in Catanzaro. He joined the Fraction of Bordiga in 1944. Member of the PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party) he adheres to the tendency of Damen.

Carlo MAZZUCHELLI, known under the pseudonym of TRE: born in Cassano Magnago in 1902; worker. Member of the PCd' Italia in 1921. In exile he adheres in 1927 to the Italian Fraction in France. He contributes during the war, in clandestinity, to the revitalisation of the Fraction. He returns after 1945 to Italy, and will be delegated in 1948 to the congress of Florence, where he is opposed to Vercesi. With Damen, after 1952. Died in 1980.

MITCHELL, known as JEHAN, known as MELIS, of its true name Jan VAN DEN HOVEN: born in Flanders, about 1890. Economist of formation, he is a manager of Westminster Bank of London in Brussels. He contributes with Adhemar Hennaut to creation of the League of the Communists internationalists in 1929. At the beginning of the Thirties, he is in close relation with Perrone. In dissension with the majority of Hennaut, he animates a fraction which defends the positions of the Italian Fraction. At the time of the war of Spain, the scission is effective. He contributes to the creation of the Belgian fraction of the international Communist Left in 1938. Member of the International Office of the fractions, he is in disagreement with Vercesi (Perrone) on the question of war economy. His contributions to the review *Bilan* are very numerous and relate as well to the worldwide crisis as over the transitional period. With his son, he is seized in 1943 by Gestapo. He died in 1945, little time after the release of the camp of Buchenwald, from exhaustion or typhus.

PACE (Renato), known as ROMOLO; born in April 1903 in Rome; electrician, member of the Italian Fraction since 1927, leaves he in 1936 at the time of the events of Spain with the minority. Adhere to the Communist Union till the war. Thereafter, member of PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party) after 1945. In the tendency of Damen, after 1952.

PAPPALARDI (Michelangelo): born in 1896 in Calabria, he adheres in 1918 to the Abstentionist Communist Fraction. German professor, he moved at the end of 1922 in Austria, then in Germany in 1923, where he represents PCd' I. He resigns from it in November 1923. In France, in 1926, he is in contact with Bordiga, whose he translates the "Theses of Lyon" presented to the congress of Lille of the PCF. In dissension with Perrone on the trade-unions' and Russian questions, he forms in 1927 the group Réveil communiste, then from 1929 to 1931 the group around the newspaper *L'Ouvrier communiste* (Communist

Worker). Contacts with Korsch, in Germany, then rupture. Favourable to the principles of the KAPD, of which he translates the principal texts into French. Becoming ill, he gave up little by little all political activity and lived involved into material difficulties, doing all kinds of jobs, of which that of proof-reader. In 1938, he exiled himself in Argentina. He died of disease in Buenos Aires in 1940. Until the end of his life, he was always narrowly spied by the Fascist authorities, which regarded him as very dangerous.

PERRONE (Ottorino), known as VERCESI, known as PHILIPPE: born in 1897 in Aquila, on the Adriatic. Studies of right and accountancy after its military service as artillerist during the war. He is member of the PSI in 1920, then Communist Party of Italy, in Venice, where he is a secretary of the Camera del Lavoro. In 1922, he is propagandist in Padua; in 1923, writer-editor of the Communist newspaper *Il Lavoratore* di Trieste. He is charged by the Party of organising the federations of Venice and Aquila. In 1924, established in Milan, he belongs to the editorial team of the daily newspaper *l'Unità*; he prepares the clandestine conference of Como, and goes to Moscow where he took part in the Fifth congress of the Comintern. In 1925, he is member of the Committee of agreement opposed to the bolshevisation, imposed by Moscow. Installed in Milan, he ensures the connection with the foreign militants, while being a secretary of the Confederation of Communist trade-unions'. Convinced partisan of Bordiga in the congress of Lyon (1926). Assigned to residence, he flees to France, from where he will be expelled soon towards Belgium, not without contributing to the foundation of the Fraction of Communist Italian left in 1928, in Pantin, in the suburbs of Paris. Its life from now on to the war merges with the history of the Italian Fraction. He is employee of the typographers' trade union in Brussels and belongs to the trade union of the employees until his expulsion in 1938. He is the principal 'pen' and the real editor-writer for publishing *Prometeo* and *Bilan*, edited in Brussels. At the time of the break-up of the war, he sustained that any militant activity became useless, running up against the opposition of the Italian Fraction in Marseilles. Taking part in the Italian Red Cross and the antifascist coalition in Brussels, he is excluded in January 1945 from the Fraction. In December 1945, he plays an important part during the conference of Turin of the PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party), and defends his old positions on the war economy. He becomes member of the central committee of the Party, which asks him no account for his antifascist activity, at the sides of the "middle-class" parties of Italian Resistance. Determinate partisan of Bordiga, whose he is the speaker during the congresses, he considered that the foundation of PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party) was premature. Until his death in 1957 in Brussels, he took part in the activities of the bordiguist Party, as well in France and Belgium as in Italy.

REPOSSI (Luigi) born in 1882, member of the PSI in 1910, he adheres in 1918 to the Abstentionist Communist Fraction. Director in 1922 of the Communist review *Rassegna comunista*. Partisan of Bordiga, he contributes to the foundation of the *Comitato di intesa* in 1925. Under arrest in 1926. In 1929, he is expelled from the PCI. In contact with Damen in Istorio, where he is interned. But in 1944, as his friend Fortichiari, he will seek to return to the PCI of Togliatti. In the years 1950, he adheres to the Italian Socialist Party. He died in misery in 1957.

RICCERI (Otello), known as PICCINO: born in Florence in 1904, he adheres to the PSI, then to the PCd' I in 1921. Worker. He takes part in the armed fight of the Party against the fascist squads. He must emigrate in 1925 in France, in Paris, then in Lyon and Marseilles. Member of the Italian Fraction since 1927. During the war, as member of the EC, he contributes to the reorganisation of the Fraction in Marseilles and France. After 1945, he will

adhere to the bordiguist current. Until its death in 1976, in Marseilles, he is member of the “Programme communiste” (Parti communiste international) current.

RUSSO (Enrico) (1895-1973), known as CANDIANI, known as AMADEO BELLINI: born in Naples; mechanic worker; in the socialist Youths in 1910, then member of the PSI. In 1917, secretary of the FIOM of Naples, metalworkers’ trade union. Partisan of Serrati after Leghorn, joined the PC in 1924, becomes secretary of the Camera del Lavoro (“Bourse du travail”) of Naples in 1925; secretary of the Party for Campania in 1925, he emigrates in France, 1926. He adheres to the Italian Fraction at the end of the Twenties. Political refugee in Brussels, he is member of the central committee. He breaks with the Fraction in 1936 and orders the Lenin brigade of the POUM on the front of Aragon. He adheres to the Communist Union of Henri Chazé. Delivered by Vichy to the fascist authorities, he is released in 1943. Secretary of the Camera del Lavoro of Naples, leader of the CGL trade union, member of the PC of Montesanto, he animates strikes in March 1944. He leaves the PC after 1946 and adheres to the Italian social democrat Party, where he animates a left current. He remains until its death of trade unionist orientation.

SERENA (Vincenzo) (? — 1953): adhere in 1921 to the PC in Leghorn; exiled in Ponza Island, he takes refuge in Belgium and France and adheres to the Italian Fraction. During the war, from 1943 to 1945, chief of partisans. He adheres to PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party).

STEFANINI (Luciano). known as LUCIANO (1902?-1970): working class origin. Member of the PC; under arrest in 1926, makes 9 years of fortress; in France in 1935, adheres to the Fraction. He defends antisindicalist positions. Returned to Italy during the war, he will contribute to the foundation of PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party) in the north of Italy. Member of the central committee of this Party, he defends during the conference of Turin non-participation to the trade unions. After 1952, and until his death, member of the Damen’s tendency.

TARSIA (Ludovico) (1876-1976?): surgeon, member of the fraction of Bordiga in the PSI; in Naples in 1919, he is elected at the central committee of the PC of Italy in 1921; he emigrated in Brazil from 1928 to 1938. He returned to Italy, as soon he went into retirement, and renew contacts with Bordiga. Member of the bordigist Frazione in Naples in 1944, then of the PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party) after 1945. Seems to have no more political activity after 1950.

TORNIELLI (Giovanni), known as NERO: member of the PC d’ Italia from the beginning, he becomes provincial adviser. Taken refuge in France in 1926, he settles in Vincennes as builder. He becomes the accountant of the Italian Fraction; member of the C.E. In October 1931, with Vercesi, Gabassi and Bruno Bibbi, he represents the fraction to the congress of the Communist League.

TORRICELLI (Guido): born in Parma in 1899, worker. Member of PCd’ I in 1921, takes part in 1922 in the “red days” of Parma where the fascist squadrons are put to flight. In 1925-1926, he takes in hands the direction of the organisation of the Party in this city. In 1928, he is relegated in the Islands until 1932, where he adopted the positions of the Communist Left. Again relegated during two years. In 1943, he will adhere to the PC internazionalista (Internationalist Communist Party), and will soon become member of its central committee, directing the Federation of Parma. He died in 1947.

VERDARO (Virgilio), known as GATTO MAMMONE: born Swiss in 1885 in Ceresio, near Lugano (Tessin). His father, with him and the mother, settled in Florence as professor at the university. Verdaro, after graduated studies became teacher in literature, languages and history-geography. Member of the PSI since 1901, he is with his left wing. In 1909, in Romagna he met Mussolini, still extremist Socialist. Teacher in San Marino, he represented the workers of the Republic near the Basle Congress (1912). In 1915, because of his campaign against the war in Florence, he was banned to Calabria. In 1920, member of the Executive commission of the Fraction known as "bordiguist", of which he is the secretary. Persecuted by the fascists, he had to take refuge in Moscow (1924), which he could leave only in 1931, while his companion Emilia Mariottini remained in the hands of the GPU. Arrived to France, he took refuge in Brussels, and became Secretary of the Executive committee of the fraction, remunerated as permanent. With Perrone, co-editor of *Prometeo* and *Bilan*, to which he constantly gave writing contributions under the pseudonym of Gatto Mammone (he was a great friend of cats) In 1939, he took refuge in Switzerland, where he will find at the end of the war his escaped companion from Russia. Adherent to the Swiss Socialist Party (Balerna Section), for about 15 years, he died in 1960 in Pontassieve (Florence), where he lived with his wife Emilia Mariottini the last year of his life.

ZECCHINI (Bruno), known as IL BIONDO: born in 1903 in Venice, entered at 16 years the PSI, adhered to the PCd' I in 1921. Active in the fighting groups of the Party; brother-in-law of Perrone. Exiled in the Lipari Islands, he escaped from Italy and settled in France (1931). Member of the Italian Fraction, he will leave it with the minority in 1936, at the time of the events of Spain. >From 1937 to 1939 he will adhere to the Communist Union. Like the members of the minority, he will join after the war the "bordiguist" French Fraction. Until his death in 1967 in Paris, he remained member of the International Communist Party (*Programme communiste*).