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THE ABSTENTIONIST FACTION OF
THE ITALIAN SOCIALIST PARTY.
DURING THE BIENNIO ROSSO:
A STUDY IN ABSTRACT POLITICS

Warren Wilson.

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
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ABSTRACT

THE ABSTENTIONIST FACTION OF THE ITALIAN SOCIALIST PARTY
DURING THE BIENNIO ROSSO: A STUDY IN ABSTRACT POLITICS

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This essay examines the "Abstentionist-Communist" Faction within the Partito Socialista Italiano from its inception until the formation of the Partito Comunista Italiano, concentrating particularly on the ideology the faction propounded through its journal, Il Soviet. It concludes that the group had little understanding of the dynamics of social revolution, became increasingly alienated from the existing social reality, and was therefore unable to comprehend what was going on around it.

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INTRODUCTION

This essay is a conscious attempt to read backwards into history something which only became clear at a later date. It examines one group within the "communist tendency"¹ within the Italian Socialist Party at the critical period known as the "Biennio Rosso" following World War I. The premises of the author, "speculative" in nature and always important in shaping the contours of any study, are especially essential here. They must be set out carefully.

Much confusion exists today about what socialism "really is." Rosa Luxemburg defined it as what the proletariat instinctively wants. This definition is not intrinsically wrong, but it presupposes much, especially a proletariat in (political) motion. Henri Lefebvre points out that what a proletarian or anyone else "wants", is a decent, human, "vie quotidien." Marx argued that this could not be achieved under a capitalist system, but that capitalism had been a necessary prerequisite for establishing a human society. To Marx, the essence of capitalism was commodity production, which presupposed a money economy and private control of society's productive powers. It follows that if we are to distinguish socialism from capitalism as a different stage

¹The word "tendency" is used here since communist "fraction" identifies only one specific group, in what should be seen as a heterogeneous movement within a heterogeneous movement. The paper is primarily concerned with the Communist Fraction of the Italian Socialist Party, but not exclusively.

of development in human history, a definition of socialism must revolve around a changed relationship in the categories of "everyday life" and "commodities." This, of course, presupposes an end to private ownership of the means of production, money, and a host of other capitalist accoutrements, but these should not be confused with abolishing capitalism itself. Nor does it necessarily follow that eliminating one or more of these aspects of capitalism would automatically ease the transition to a socialist system. The precocious development of mercantile capital often proved a hindrance in the transition from feudalism to capitalism in those particular areas where it flourished.² There is no "iron law" which has predetermined whether this pattern would of necessity be repeated in a transition to socialism.

By defining socialism in this manner, it becomes clear that all transitions to socialism attempted in 1917-18 (or afterwards) have "failed" or at least not yet succeeded. There is little to be gained by contrasting Italian or German failure to Russian "success." It is extremely fruitful, however, to compare the different paths undertaken, as long as it is remembered that none of these have yet been successful. The Bolsheviks took state power when the opportunity arose. As an organization, they have held it for over half

²Although it proved to be of vital importance to the general development of capitalism in Europe as a whole, even though the areas which first spawned it later became backwaters.

a century. The exigencies of power in specific circumstances forced many compromises and even clear reversals of policy. The result is not socialism, (nor capitalism, Maoist rantings to the contrary), but a hybrid state, with certain similarities to "feudal monarchy," that is, the "Absolutist" State of the early modern period.

The methodological implications of the above diversion are that it is useless to set out a list of steps taken by the Bolsheviks, compare these to the actions of the Spartacus League, the Hungarian Communist Party, and the Italian "intransigents," and mindlessly scold the latter for their failure to repeat mechanically this "success formula" in their respective situations. On the other hand, it must always be kept in mind that the Soviet failure was of a different nature, and the problems to which the Soviet experience "succumbed" cannot be assumed a priori to have been insurmountable problems, had the revolutionary situations elsewhere taken different turns.

* * *

A communist tendency here simply refers to any movement whose program could not be realized within the framework of a commodity economy.³ Therefore we do not identify a priori Leninism with communism or even, Leninism with an intransigent anti-war attitude. At the close of

³Logically, the term "socialism" would do here, except that most organizations which use that name today do not have such programs. The term "communism" is less confusing.

World War I, there were numerous types of "communist theories." Lenin's ideas conflicted on many points with those of Rosa Luxemburg, Anton Pannekoek and numerous other revolutionaries. In terms of opposition to imperialist wars, it was Luxemburg, rather than Lenin, who led the pre-war militancy on this question in the Second International. Following the outbreak of the War, Karl Liebknecht, rather than Lenin, was the hero of the proletarian resistance. To label all genuine socialist militants or sincere anti-war agitators as "Leninist" only contributes to the further fetishization of Lenin which began with his death and would clearly have revolted him. It creates a false image of Bolshevik hegemony in the international communist movement which did not exist before the twenties.⁴

There is a second problematic assumption in the historiography of the revolutions following World War I. This is related to the "natural history" approach to the study of revolution,⁵ critiqued so thoroughly by Charles Tilley and

⁴ Even at Zimmerwald, Lenin's ideas failed to gain significant support in the anti-war movement. The hesitant actions of the German "centrists" and the incarceration of Luxemburg and Liebknecht in Germany led to Lenin's gradual emergence as the most prominent anti-war spokesman. Cf. on this point Peter Nettl, Rosa Luxemburg, abridged ed. (London, Oxford, 1969) pp. 384-385. Even after Zimmerwald and Kienthal, a number of socialists like Pannekoek and Otto Kuhle opposed the war, militants who were not "Leninist" according to Lenin himself. Cf. Left-wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder, in The Essential Works of Lenin, Vol. II (Westport, Hyperion Press, 1973) passim.

⁵ In essence, this "method" starts out by taking a revolution and working backwards to find the necessary prerequisites that "caused" it. The essential fallacy lies in always starting from a revolution. It thereby overlooks the fact that these same conditions may well be present when a revolution did not occur.

George Rudé. It is the disturbing tendency of many historians, Francis Carsten for example, to argue that the weakness of the Spartacus League (that is, their lack of popular mass support) caused the failure of the German revolution. This argument involves an uncritical (or natural) reading backwards into the beginnings of the Russian revolution; it attributes a degree of strength to the Bolsheviks which they only acquired in stages as the revolution progressed. This was not at all present in those stages which correspond to the German revolution. The support for the Bolsheviks among the Russian masses before the summer of 1917 was in no way qualitatively or quantitatively different from the relationship of the Spartacus League to the German people.⁶

Most historians of the German and Hungarian revolutionary situations make comparisons to the Russian case. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this but it must be done cautiously to avoid the uncritical assumptions of the "naturalistic approach." In fact, the comparison should not simply be made "horizontally," but also in terms of previous revolutions as well. For example, comparing the German failure to the Russian "success" becomes far more meaningful when this is in turn related to the successes and failures of the French Revolution of 1789. The fact

⁶ A much more sophisticated approach to the failure of the German revolution can be found in the work of Pierre Broué. Cf. his exchange with Carsten in " 'Discussion' on Carsten's Revolutionary Situations in Europe," in C. Bertrand (ed.) Revolutionary Situations in Europe: 1918-1919, (Montreal, ICES, 1977) p. 36.

that it took two additional revolutions before a capitalist industrial economy emerged following the "Great Bourgeois Revolution" should prevent historians from oversimplifying the "successes" and failures of 1818-19.

There were revolutionary situations in several countries at the end of the First World War. Each was part of a general situation in Europe. But revolutions in the modern world are not unrelated to previous upheavals. The study of revolution must take all three dimensions into account if it is to render sensible the events they encompass.⁷

* * *

The article is divided into three sections. The first is concerned with certain socialist parties in Europe at the end of World War I. It makes certain points about the roles they played in the momentous events between 1917 and 1921. It is in no way a history of these parties, even for this short period. There are certain misconceptions about the role of revolutionary socialist or communist organizations in the making of these events which must be cleared up if the events in Italy are to become comprehensible. This is the only aim of the opening section.

Section two examines what happened in Italy during the specific periods when the Russian Revolution broke out,

⁷As Rudé says, "I want to have it both ways: to look at the general as well as the particular; to look at the general pattern of revolutions as well as the individual case histories." His article makes clear that the "general pattern" must be seen both horizontally (i.e., all revolutions in a given time span) and across time, as well. "The Study of Revolutions" (mimeograph, Concordia University, N.D.) pp. 18-19.

and the aborted German Revolution began; it then goes on to look at Italy's own crisis, which peaked in September of 1920. It is a fairly long section, but an understanding of these complex events is essential. Only then can the activities of Italy's would-be revolutionaries be appraised.

Finally, in section three the activities of one such group of socialists is examined. Some brief conclusions follow.

Leaving the case of Italy aside for the moment, we can say that there were three revolutionary situations in Europe during or immediately after World War I. The Russian Revolution ranks along with the French Revolution of the eighteenth century and the English Revolution of the mid-seventeenth as one of history's great revolutions. The German Revolution is a classic example of a revolutionary miscarriage. The Hungarian situation is not quite as clear cut as the other two cases. All three involved "communist tendencies" as we have defined the term here. What role did they play in their respective events?

The history of the Russian communists is considerably different from the others. The Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (RSDWP) was founded in 1898, but only began to function seriously around 1900. By the time of its second congress in 1903, the Bolshevik/Menshevik split had already occurred,⁸ although both groups remained factions within the same party, and a formal reunification occurred at the fourth party congress of 1906. The Bolsheviks remained organized as a faction, however, with their own executive, newspaper, and discipline. After another attempt at reunification failed in 1910, the Bolsheviks established their own training school in Paris in 1911. In 1912, they "expelled" the

⁸E.H. Carr states that the split occurred at the 1903 Congress, in the debate between Lenin and Martov over party membership. The Bolshevik Revolution, Vol. I, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973) p. 32. Charles Bettelheim implies that it had already occurred between 1900 and 1903. Class Struggles in the USSR trans. by B. Pearce (Monthly Review, New York, 1976) p. 120.

Mensheviks and declared themselves to be the Russian Socialist Democratic Workers' Party - Bolshevik.

The split occurred over the nature of the party. Was it to be a mass party (that is, a party composed of the masses) or an elite party (for the masses)?

At the outbreak of World War I, the Bolshevik and Menshevik deputies united to vote against war credits. Afterwards, the Mensheviks divided, with some supporting the war effort, and some, like Martov, opposing it.⁹ When the revolution broke out, there existed two groups of Mensheviks, a leaderless and confused group of Bolsheviks,¹⁰ and, the most important party in the early stages of the Revolution, the Socialist Revolutionaries.

If the Russian Revolution was not a direct result of Bolshevik agitation, how did it get started? No complete answer can be provided here, but it should be noted that the rickety czarist regime had been completely incapable of marshalling the resources of the empire, and had come to rely increasingly on the Zemstvoes or voluntary help organizations. These in turn became centres of bourgeois opposition to the autocracy. Throughout the early years of the war, this opposition was continually frustrated in its attempts to win political reforms which would match its

⁹Carr, op.cit., pp. 77-78.

¹⁰Basically only Alexander Shlyapnikov was actively organizing in Russia during the war. Katkov, George, Russia 1917: The February Revolution, (London, Longmans, 1967) pp. 27-33. Lenin and Krupskaya were in Switzerland, Molotov was exiled to Siberia, as was Stalin. Others were underground but inactive because of the threat of police spies.

increased importance. It turned to winning the support of the military. The subversive campaign was based on the claim that such reform would produce a more efficient war effort. There can be no doubt that the campaign did influence the actions of General Alekseev, Russian chief of staff at the time that the revolution broke out.¹¹

The primary cause of the initial outburst in St. Petersburg was fear that the bread supply would run out. Many other factors contributed to the uneasy situation, especially the lock-out at the Putalov works.

The slogan 'we want bread' figured prominently in the chanting by the mob and on the demonstrators' banners in the first of these days of unrest.... Unlike the other two slogans circulated in those days, 'down with the war' and 'down with the autocracy' it had a special emotional appeal for the troops who were called upon to disperse the demonstrators. They were reluctant to fire on a crowd that was merely asking for bread.¹²

This quasi-insurrectionary bread riot combined with the subversive campaign launched by the Russian bourgeoisie to produce a political crisis in which the government had no room to maneuver. It collapsed and the first stage of the revolution was underway. In the summer of 1917 the Bolsheviks began to emerge as the only group capable of consolidating this revolution. Their role in triggering it was negligible. The fact that the country was still at war gave them their opportunity.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 3-11, 16-23, 153-187, 247-306.

¹²Ibid., p. 251.

The Socialist Labour Party of Germany was formed in 1875. It emerged in 1890 after twelve years of "outlaw" status as the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) with twenty percent of the popular vote in the Reichstag elections of that year. It united virtually all forms of socialist opposition, except for the anarchists who had been expelled. As long as the social scene remained peaceful, and the party continued to grow, this compromise continued, with the revolutionaries appearing to be the dominant influence.

The emergence of the "communist tendency" can be traced to 1905. That year witnessed a substantial increase in the cost of living accompanied by a rise in counter-militancy on the part of the two great business organizations of the German bourgeoisie. They agreed, in December of 1904, to support each other in strikes and lockouts; these began in earnest in 1905.¹³ The upsurge in Russia that year, and a widespread and radical strike in the Ruhr coal mines, unleashed a bitter debate in party ranks, with Rosa Luxemburg personifying the radical cause and Theodor Bommelburg, head of the mason's union, defending conservative trade union tactics. At the Jena Congress, Chairman August Bebel managed to push through a compromise position in which the "mass strike" that the radical wing was urging the party to adopt as a tactic, was declared an acceptable weapon in a "defensive course," that is, if the state should attempt to

¹³Schorske, Carl E., German Social Democracy: 1905-1917 (New York, Harper, 1972) pp. 30-31.

restrict the vote or engage in illegal repression against socialism.¹⁴

Increased militancy by party radicals after 1905 produced a counter-attack by the trade union bureaucrats in the party, especially during the depression of 1907-1910. The result was the "Mannheim agreement" which virtually allowed the trade unions to veto any party proposals they did not like. The failure of the party to make any headway in the Prussian suffrage question again strengthened the radicals, but this was counter-balanced by a split into two groups, Karl Kautsky's "centrists" and a group around Luxemburg.¹⁵

The SPD voted in favor of war credits at the outbreak of hostilities. Karl Liebknecht was the only deputy to break party discipline and vote against the SPD block. Gradually, he and Luxemburg were joined by others like Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein in opposing the war. In 1916 the "Spartacus" faction was formed by the left opposition including Luxemburg, Liebknecht, and Franz Mehring.¹⁶

¹⁴Ironically, in January of 1920 a general strike called by the right-wing Social Democratic government of Weimar Germany paralyzed Berlin and defeated the "Kapp Putsch" of the crypto-fascist "Free Corps". It was the most successful general strike in history. Hafner, Sebastian, Failure of a Revolution, trans. by Georg Rapp, (London, Deutsch, 1973) pp. 182-189.

¹⁵This was precipitated by the Berlin General strike of 1912. Luxemburg called for an extension of the militant offensive, Kautsky argued that objective conditions demanded a retreat. Schorske, op.cit., pp. 184-186.

¹⁶The faction joined the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany, formed the same year, which was also composed of the right-wing socialists who opposed the war. This continued the division of 1912. Bevan, Edwyn, German Social Democracy During the War (New York, E.P.Dutton, 1919) pp.147-160.

The end of the war came suddenly. In the beginning of October 1918, the SPD were taken into the new "liberal" government. On October 30th the crew of the battleship Thuringen refused an order to sail which appeared to them to be an attempt by the naval high command to sabotage peace negotiations and the new government.¹⁷ It took several days for this event to blossom into open revolt, but it then spread quickly to the cities. The Kaiser fled to Holland (where he abdicated three weeks later) as SPD leader Fritz Ebert became Reich President.

Despite Liebknecht's immense personal popularity, the Spartacus League remained quite marginal to the revolutionary process. At this point only the SPD and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards had any real impact. There was no longer a war going on, which had given the Bolsheviks their opening, and there was little counter "revolutionary" activity, which had played such a vital role in the Bolsheviks' consolidation of power. The "freikorps," bands of armed former soldiers who played a vital role in counter-revolutionary German politics of the twenties, were quietly being formed while the revolution stood still. On December 29th the USPD left the government in the hands of the SPD. One day later the Spartacus group broke with them to form the German Communist Party (KPD). Both groups had succeeded in rendering themselves completely marginal.

¹⁷Hafner, op.cit., p. 54.

5

The forces of reaction finally went on the offensive on March 12, 1920 when the "Kapp putsch" was launched. The attempted coup d'état was thwarted, but the forces of revolution were divided and decimated by this stage, and were incapable of following up the victory.¹⁸

Only in Bavaria did the USPD and later the KPD play a leading role. There the revolution, lasted until April, when Eugen Leviné's KPD government was crushed by the Freikorps. The forces of Munich were simply no match for the forces of the federal government.

Hence the aborted revolution in Germany was started without the German radicals. Unlike Russia, however, there was never a time when they were able to intervene effectively in the events going on around them. Despite the grave error of the Kapp putsch, German reaction never put the SPD in a position where, to save themselves, they had to take more radical measures which might have paved the way for the USPD or the KPD. Open reaction came much later in Germany, when such an alliance no longer had the potential strength to resist effectively.

We can be much briefer in the case of Hungary where events were much less complex. The Hungarian Communist Party was never a faction within the Hungarian Social Democratic Party. It was organized in Russia among Hungarian P.O.W.s and was only formed after the Hungarian revolution began (October 1918). This was an extremely passive

¹⁸The USPD and the KPD in fact opposed the call for a general strike. They were ignored by German workers. Ibid., p. 188.

bloodless coup, in which the anachronistic structure of Austria-Hungary disintegrated. There was at first no opposition whatsoever, although the revolution never really established itself outside of Budapest.¹⁹

The "Hungarian Revolution" was launched by armed forces personnel as in Germany. Dissident soldiers assassinated the conservative Prime Minister, Count Tisza. At the same time, the Budapest Soldiers' Council ordered the occupation of various strategic centers. The Emperor, rather than risk civil war when the army was fraught with dissension, formed a coalition government under Count Karolyi.²⁰ This government collapsed in the face of allied intransigence, particularly that of France. The Vix note produced a bloodless change of government, the ~~Hungarian Soviet~~ Republic, which was at first a Communist-Socialist alliance, and then became simply a government of the Hungarian Communist Party.²¹

¹⁹The Hungarian C.P. was a true mélange of all tendencies which felt that the Hungarian Social Democrats were not sufficiently radical. Intellectuals and syndicalists were recruited, and the party remained a focus for real debate until 1930. Kettler, David, "Culture and Revolution, Lukacs in the Hungarian Revolutions (sic) of 1918-19" in Telos, no. 10 (Winter 1971). Tokes, R., Bela Kun and the Hungarian Soviet Republic (New York, Praeger, 1967). *passim*.

²⁰Vermes, Gabor, "The October Revolution in Hungary: From Karolyi to Kun" contained in Hungary in Revolution: 1918-1919, ed. by I. Volgyes (Lincoln, University of Lincoln Press, 1971) pp. 32, 36-37.

²¹Mayer, Arno J., The Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking (New York, Knopf, 1967) *passim*.

Bela Kun's government had had nothing to do with the initial outbreak. It was carried to power by the international situation and was swept away by the invading Romanians.

The three communist tendencies were all more or less irrelevant to the launching of their particular revolutions. In Russia, the Bolsheviks intervened decisively to preserve the revolution. In Hungary, the Communist Party attempted to do the same thing, but could do little given the international context. In Germany, the Spartacus League was never able to influence the course of events, except to a small degree in Bavaria, when the situation was already hopeless.

Having attempted briefly to place the relationship between "intransigent" revolutionary socialists and their respective revolutions in perspective, we now turn to the Italian situation.

II

In what follows we will glance very briefly at the history of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI). Having done this, we shall proceed to study the situation it faced during the war, to allow us to appreciate any differences which might have existed between Italy and Russia. We will do the same for the immediate aftermath of the war, to see the differences with the German and Hungarian situations. We must continue this analysis for another two years after the armistice, however, for reasons that should become obvious as the reader proceeds. Once we understand the Italian situation, we will have a basis for a critical appraisal of the Italian revolutionaries during this period.

The Italian Socialist Party (PSI) was formed in the 1890s. Except for the expulsion of the syndicalists in 1906, the party was not rent by factional struggles as early as the Russian or German parties. In fact, at the very same time that the Bolsheviks were consolidating themselves as an independent party (RSDP-B) and the German radicals were being outmaneuvered in the SPD, the PSI's radical left achieved a fateful victory within the party structure, when the "Bissolati wing" of the party was expelled.²²

²²This wing supported the war for the annexation of Libya in 1911. The circumstances in which this came about are quite complex. As in Germany, the economic situation of 1907-08 led to a radicalization of the party base, a growth of syndicalism in the labour movement, and as a consequence, a weakening of the Confederazione Generale del Lavoro (CGL). The latter had a relationship to the party not unlike the German unions. The Party looked after the political interests of workers, and the unions their economic ones. When it became clear that certain right-wing elements were

Although the party executive and parliamentary factions exhibited hardly any more radical tendencies than the SPD executive, their executive was far less free to maneuver than the latter was. Bebel used his prestige of long-time militancy to good advantage in the face of rank and file pressure, which no one on the PSI executive was in a position to do. This "tradition" passed on to his successor, Friedrich Ebert. On top of this, Italy did not enter the War in 1914. Hence, like the American Socialist Party, the PSI was able to remain "true" to socialism and avoid becoming embroiled in the chauvinistic frenzy which seized the German and French parties.

This revolt of the rank and file, however, should be seen as a revival of the syndicalist tendencies which had earlier failed to take root in the party. Whereas the radical left in Germany defended their flirtation with the mass strike concept through theoretical analysis²³ (and some of the parties' most noted thinkers, Luxemburg and Franz Mehring, were associated with the movement), the Italian left

seriously entertaining the idea of participating in Giovanni Giolitti's "trasformismo," an "intransigent revolutionary" faction emerged to compete with the syndicalists for the support of radical labour and fight extreme reformism in the party. It achieved significant support among party rank and file. The executive was divided between the extreme right and the group around Filippo Turati and Claudio Treves which corresponded to Kautsky's "Marxist Centre" in Germany. The revolt of the rank and file, which gained in strength from 1911-1912 under Mussolini's leadership and the division of the executive, led to the expulsion. Williams, Gwyn, Proletarian Order (London, Pluto, 1975) pp. 35-39. Such a move was precluded in Germany by the Mannheim resolution, itself (in part) a product of and further reinforced by Bebel's hold on the German party. Schorske, op.cit., passim.

²³Cf., Rosa Luxemburg, "The Mass Strike, The

remained a-theoretical, and had nothing in common with the theoretical tradition of Antonio Labriola.²⁴ While there is a direct link between the opposition of 1905 and the emergence of the Spartacus League during the war, few ties existed between the Mussolini faction and the Communist tendency which later emerged.²⁵

Although divided at the outbreak of the War, the PSI had nothing resembling the Bolshevik/Menshevik factionalism which had tormented the RSDWP before the final break of 1912, nor even the embryo of a new party like the left opposition in the SPD ranks.

As it became clear that the Italian government was flirting with the idea of entering the war, and the Party faced the threat of repression, right-wing pressure for a more conciliatory policy increased. The party adopted the slogan "neither support nor sabotage." This made it appear that there was a new threat of co-optation, and a new opposition began to emerge to carry on the true revolutionary socialist or "intransigent" position. A young militant from Naples, Amadeo Bordiga, took the lead. A number of veteran

Political Party and the Trade Unions." The complete text of P. Lavin's translation appears in Rosa Luxemburg Speaks, ed. by M.-A. Walters (New York, Pathfinder, 1970).

²⁴Mehring's "Counterpart" in Italy, the leading dialectician of the Second International.

²⁵Among those who later came to be prominent in the PCI, a few, like Antonio Gramsci, did support Mussolini briefly in 1915.

Turin socialists like Giovanni Germanetto, Francesco Barberis, and Maria Giudice were very active, particularly in the only actual uprising against the war, but it was Bordiga who was particularly active on the national level.²⁶ It required several years before Bordiga could put together an active organization, by which time the war was ending. Our purpose in this section is to see what sort of conditions Bordiga's group faced as they set about the task of making revolution.

There are two important background factors which must always be kept in mind in any study of Italy. The first is the fact that one can almost speak of "two" Italies: the advanced industrial north, and the poor, more "backward" south. The second factor is the "Catholic Fact"; an overwhelming percentage of Italians are at least nominal Catholics. These are two general considerations which hold true for the period under study.

The specific feature of the period, other than the war, was the rapid industrial concentration taking place. Although a real capitalist economy had come into existence in the cities and the north even before unification, the influx of capital into productive technology that produces the phenomenon known as "industrial revolution" began only at the end of the 1880s. The nature of Italian capitalism and technological requirements of the time produced a more "concentrated"

²⁶De Clementi, Andreina, Amadeo Bordiga (Turin, Einaudi, 1971) pp. 49-52.

industry than had appeared at corresponding periods in French, Belgian, or British history. Italian productivity skyrocketed during the war and the tendency toward concentration was greatly enhanced.²⁷

The internal situation in war-time Italy differed from that of Russia in several crucial respects. First, the patriotic fervor which had accompanied the declaration of war throughout the Russian countryside was completely absent. Only the rural bourgeoisie and landowning elements supported the war "en bloc." The Italian army was largely composed of peasants, particularly the infantry; desertion has been described as massive.²⁸ Nonetheless, there was not the disillusionment in Italy that there had been in Russia.

In the case of the urban working class, there was a certain appearance of similarity between their social situation and that of the tiny Russian proletariat. Most industrial workers were exempted from military service because of the labour shortage created by the production increases. Their daily concerns were wages and the cost and supply of food.

Despite these similarities, the workers of Petrograd revolted and sparked a revolution. The workers of Turin revolted once, but the uprising did not develop beyond the

²⁷Romeo, Rosario, Breve Storia delle Grande Industrie in Italia, 6th edition, (Bologna, Capelli, 1974) pp. 115-126.

²⁸Maier, Charles S., Recasting Bourgeois Europe (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975) p. 48.

city, and it remained a mere revolt. To a large extent, this can be explained by the greater efficiency with which Italy mobilized her resources for the war. Recall the problems of the antiquated czarist regime, which had required the aid of the Zemstvoes to mobilize. These organizations had become increasingly important cogs in the war machine as the conflict dragged on. The Italian state did not require "help" of this nature. Under General Dalcio, economic mobilization was carried out in a most efficient manner.²⁹

The politics of the Central Committee of Agricultural Mobilization were to hold food prices down. The large peasant mobilization had reduced the total output of food, while the war produced increased demand. The absence of nitrates and phosphates because of trade restrictions also contributed to the shortage, which would have caused large increases in prices. The Committee favored the towns at the expense of the countryside.

Another factor which must be taken into account is that Italians had to bear the burden of war-time shortages almost a full year less than the citizens of most other belligerent nations. The result was that the country was internally tranquil during the war, with one notable exception.

²⁹Especially when Italy's lack of coal is considered. The country had been dependent on foreign imports particularly from Germany. The war necessitated a massive switch to electrical power. (Not surprisingly, the "Associazione esercenti imprese elettriche" were strong proponents of Italy's entry into the war.) Mori, Giorgio, Il Capitalismo Industriale in Italia (Rome, Editori Riuniti, 1977) pp. 162, 166.

This was the "events of Turin" in the late summer of 1917. A protest against the fact that eight bakeries had failed to open quickly blossomed into an armed revolt against the war, lasting from August 22nd to August 26th. Fifty people were killed and two hundred were wounded before the insurrection was crushed.³⁰

The Turin events were serious in that the revolutionary anti-war left, which had remained completely isolated at the time of the Zimmerwald and Kienthal conferences, was now gaining a solid foothold in Russia. Turin had been a centre of bourgeois opposition to the war, and only days before, the Menshevik delegation to Italy had been greeted by cries of "Vive Lenin," while addressing a crowd in the city.³¹

In addition to the general factors contributing to social tranquility outlined above, there appear to be two related reasons why the Turin uprising petered out.

The soldiers remained loyal, unlike many of those in Petrograd who joined the workers in the streets. The war effort was going well at the time (Caporetto came after the Turin rebellion), the mobilization had been efficient, and, for many peasants, the food was probably better in the army than at home. Finally, the PSI had little support in the countryside, and their propaganda had little effect on the peasants

³⁰Zucàro, Domenico, "La Rivolta di Torino nel 1917 nella sentenza del tribunale militare territoriale," Rivista Storica del Socialismo, no. 10 (May-August 1960) pp. 437-438.

³¹This incident is still not clear. It was probably not a consciously anti-Menshevik act but a result of the confusion which reigned throughout Europe about the actual events occurring in Russia. Williams, op.cit., p. 63.

in the army. The peasants' anti-war attitude was more the "spontaneous" product of their situation than a result of agitation. Furthermore, it was sullen and passive and could be directed just as easily against the privileged workers who did not have to die in the trenches as against the government which had sent them there.³²

The second factor is far more complex, and can be dealt with only briefly here. This is the nature of the "bourgeois opposition" in Italy, which precluded the type of relationship which formed in Russia between right-wing socialists and the liberal opposition. This opposition was pro-war. In Italy, the urban bourgeoisie was divided over the question of intervention.³³ The Giolittian liberals had been against the war, but did little to oppose it actively. The real subversives were the "interventionist opposition", who demanded a more vigorous prosecution of the war and a more vigorous persecution of the war's opponents, particularly the socialists.

³²Cf. on this point Cammett, John, Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1967) pp. 52-55. Cammett, however, places too much emphasis on the "complete lack of leadership, either local or national." It is difficult to imagine what action could have been taken on the spot to overcome twenty years of neglect of the peasants by the PSI. Giuseppe Fiori's account largely corroborates Cammett's, despite disagreement on a minor point about the specific presence of a Sardinian regiment. Antonio Gramsci: The Life of a Revolutionary, trans. by Tom Nairn (London, New Left Books, 1970) pp. 111-112.

³³Bertrand, C.L., "War and Subversion in Italy: 1917-1918", Historical Reflections: Réflexions Historiques, Vol. III, no. 2 (Winter, 1976) pp. 105-107. Maier, op.cit., pp. 50-53, 112-113.

According to a police informer, one group, the "Committee of Public Safety"

planned to execute the king at the front and hold the royal family captive at Rome while it placed General Cadorna at the head of a dictatorial regime that would intensify the war effort.³⁴

The tendency of police spies to give wild exaggerations in order to secure further employment is well known. However, we do not have to take seriously all that is claimed here in order to appreciate that this opposition in Italy was moving in a very different direction from that of Russia. There the bourgeois opposition had demanded democratic reforms.³⁵

Not only was this "bourgeois subversion" moving in a different direction from that in Russia, it was smaller, because of the divisions within the bourgeoisie, and it was less significant to the war effort because the state did not need voluntary help organizations. It also failed to convert General Cadorna, military chief of staff. "Since only Cadorna could bring the army into (a) coup, the plotters could not hope to succeed without him."³⁶ The Russian "plotters" like Guchkov and Konuvilov did succeed in influencing Alekscev; they unintentionally subverted the war effort,

³⁴Bertrand, op.cit., p. 108. Emphasis added.

³⁵The war aims of the Russian opposition and the Italian interventionist opposition were similar. They both wanted to unleash a more efficient war effort. It was the method of accomplishing this which made them very different and prevented similar alliances forming in Italy. The leftist nature of the PSI was a vital factor in this.

³⁶Bertrand, op.cit., p. 109.

which the different alignment of forces in Italy outlined above made impossible. As already mentioned, the anarchist and socialist opposition had little effect on the (peasant) army and no hope whatsoever of winning over the high command.

The army remained loyal as a unit at Turin, despite the high rate of individual desertion with which it had been plagued. There were no further major disturbances in Italy after the "Turin events" until after the war's end. Hence, there was never any real possibility that the February events in Russia would repeat themselves in Italy.

But, as we have seen in the cases of Hungary and Germany, the period immediately preceeding and following the cease fire was also a critical one. The situation in Italy at the war's end appeared extremely unstable. Industrial production was up by 100%, primarily because of state requirements for war. While part of this increase could be channelled into consumer goods, of which there had been a great shortage, it was obvious that industry would be cutting back on jobs just when the Italian army should be coming home. In addition, there was the perennial land hunger of the peasantry -- those in the army and those who had remained at home.³⁷

Another element which added to the potential political instability of the situation was the formation of the Partito Popolare Italiano (PPI) just as the war ended.

³⁷Clough, Shepherd B., The Economic History of Modern Italy (New York, Columbia University Press, 1964) p. 189.

Though not revolutionary or even radical, the PPI's corporatist appeals for all citizens to have the influence on national politics that they had earned in blood during the war, represented and encouraged a growing politicization of many Catholics who had been "outside" the politics of Italy since the unification.³⁸ This was especially true among the peasantry, who responded to their mild appeals for land reform. Peasants were being invited into the political arena for the first time, and this was a class with a long list of grievances.

Yet despite the potentially explosive situation, Italian demobilization occurred without a hitch. Several factors combined to ensure an orderly situation. First, in the wake of the military rout at Caporetto in 1917, propaganda aimed at the army was stepped up.

The Orlando government was the first (in Europe - W.W.) to take seriously the problem of propaganda.... The policy of Orlando was marked by an increased concern for the material problems of the soldiers and their families, and by an intensified effort to persuade them that the war was worth fighting, through the promise of a just peace and a reformed society.³⁹

The ossified czarist state had been incapable of any such promises; the Kerensky government was incapable of making them for political reasons. (that is, the nature of the alliances by which it came to power). In Germany, the Kaiser's

³⁸Molony, John N. The Emergence of Political Catholicism in Italy (London, Croom Helm, 1977) passim.

³⁹Lyttleton, Adrian, The Seizure of Power (London, Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1973) p. 28.

government was too thoroughly discredited to retain credibility, but the placing of the Social Democrats at the helm of state resulted in a somewhat similar effect. In the short run it seems necessary to say that the propaganda tactics had considerable success. There was no Italian collapse.

In effect, the tactics of the Italian government were to play for time. The government, and not just the socialists, had proclaimed the necessity of change. For example, Conservative Prime Minister Salandra had declared, "Today it is authoritatively said that war is a revolution.... No one believes that with this tempest over, a peaceful return to the past is possible."⁴⁰ Much was promised with respect to land.

The slogan "land for the peasants," of which the Italian Socialist Party had made so much prior to 1915 was cried ever more insistently and more widely.... Even some of the Liberal Party supporters...and some still more conservative elements came out in favor of the state's taking over uncultivated land and placing it in the hands of individual peasant owners or associations.⁴¹

But "delay" was not merely a government strategy to keep peace. Italy was among the victor nations and 1.7 million of her troops were retained to occupy former Austrian territory.⁴² The delay in the Homecoming of many peasants

⁴⁰Quoted in Maier, op.cit., p. 52, (and in virtually every other commentary on this period).

⁴¹Clough, op.cit., p. 150.

⁴²Maier, op.cit., p. 119. In addition there were hostilities with Yugoslavia and Albania which kept up a further demand for soldiers.

and the initial hesitation when they did get back (which we attributed to effective propaganda), meant that there were no disorders like those which occurred in Hungary and Germany. The government was given a tiny bit of breathing space. The first occupations of the land began only in March 1919.⁴³

Of course, peasants taking land can be an extremely volatile event, even if it does not occur in wartime or at the actual demobilization period, as the events in 1789 in France reveal. There, however, the upsurge was quite "spontaneous" while in Italy it was mediated by the National Federation of Agrarian Workers (Federterra). Two hundred and fifty thousand braccianti had been unionized before the war. In the two years following the war, the figure soared to almost one million.⁴⁴ The effect of this organization on the movement was disastrous.⁴⁵

There were two distinct waves to the movement but both were primarily because of "il contrasto tra le speranze della guerra e la realtà di immutata miseria che accoglie il ritorno dei reduci."⁴⁶ In both cases the Federterra tactics were similar. They were characterized by reticence "about the aim of 'land to the peasants,'"⁴⁷ and a complete lack of

⁴³Vivarelli, Roberto, Il Dopoguerra in Italia e L'Avvenuto del Fascismo (Naples, I.I.S.S.N., 1967) p. 419.

⁴⁴Maier, op.cit., p. 50.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 310.

⁴⁶Vivarelli, op.cit., p. 422.

⁴⁷Maier, op.cit., p. 310.

cooperation between Federterra organizers. (who were PSI militants), and PSI municipal governments and PSI deputies.⁴⁸ The net effect of Federterra was to delay the peasants' occupations and channel them into legal forms of bargaining that it was unable to carry out because of divisions in the PSI, while allowing counter-revolutionary forces time to recover and arm for the counter-attack in 1921-22.⁴⁹

A study of the cities in this period reveals the same thing: there was always room to maneuver; delay and compromise were never impossible. Long and bitter strikes in the summer of 1919 in Lombardy, Liguria and Emilia ended in "agreements wearisomely wrung out" which were afterwards often broken.⁵⁰ Isolated strikes and even occasional occupations by workers continued into 1920.⁵¹

In 1920, the second year after the war, the general social tension appeared to be about to boil over on two different occasions. In both cases, the metallurgical workers

⁴⁸Ibid, p. 312.

⁴⁹The PSI was not happy about the nature of the occupations, since the party programme called for collectivization of the land. Vivarelli, op.cit., pp. 423-425. The sheer desperation of the Bolsheviks' position forced them to delay the integration of the peasants into the revolution for ten years, when state power was already consolidated in the Stalin era. The doctrinaire stance of the PSI forced many peasants, especially those with land, towards the PPI instead. Williams, op.cit., p. 73.

⁵⁰Spriano, Paolo, The Occupation of the Factories, trans. by Gwyn Williams (London, Pluto Press, 1975) p. 29.

⁵¹Ibid, p. 33.

of Turin were at the centre of the dispute. Both times, the same tactics were effectively employed by the state, even in the face of growing opposition among industrialists.

The first series of events took place in April. The principle immediate cause was a dispute over the role of "internal commissions"⁵² in the factories.⁵³ The next day, this developed into a general strike throughout Piedmont. There was labour unrest at the same time in Alessandria, Genoa, and Florence.⁵⁴ The other really "hot-spot" in Italy at the time was Novarra. An accord was signed with the agricultural workers there, however, and the possibility of a national general strike was averted.⁵⁵ The general strike continued until April 24th when a compromise was hammered out.⁵⁶

⁵²First established in 1906 as temporary bodies to settle particular disputes, the internal commissions were made standing committees during the war as a concession to labour. They became a bone of contention with the end of the war./ Cammett, op.cit., p. 26.

⁵³It should be noted, however, that the price of bread was unusually high, even for the post-war period. Avanti, April 1, 1920. p1 (All references are to the Milan edition.)

⁵⁴La Stampa, April 13, 1920, p. 2. Avanti, April 16, 1920, p. 1.

⁵⁵La Stampa, April 20, 1920, p. 1.

⁵⁶There had been widespread opposition to the strike among the less militant members of the PSI. Filippo Turati issued the following appeal: "Bisogna scongiurare ad ogni costo la guerra civile. Ribadisco la mia avversione all'insurrezionismo ed alla violenza, che non affretterebbero di un giorno la realizzazione del sogno socialista." Only parliamentary action could lead to socialism. Quoted in Ibid.

Again, nothing was resolved. La Stampa put it as follows:

"Da punta da vista dei lavoratori in conflitto è uno sbaglio. Per nessuna ragione dunque esso si deve poter più ripetere."⁵⁷

The only "positive" end to a general strike was revolution, according to the paper. In a compromise, no one won.

The Milan Avanti took a more optimistic view. The general strike was a defensive measure against the incursions of capital, an effort unparalleled in labour history. Despite the enormous forces of the Italian bourgeoisie, the Turin proletariat remained unbroken. Furthermore, they had resolutely raised the question of workers' control. "The battle is over, the war continues."⁵⁸

The vital question not raised by the PSI organ was how long Italian society could exist in a state of "war." There were no major "battles" in the wake of the Turin strike, but there were repeated "skirmishes." Not all the Turinese work force went back with the metal workers (although without them the strike lost most of its potency and soon died out). One week after the Turin troubles, Avanti announced yet another major strike in Naples.⁵⁹

Strikes occurred sporadically throughout the summer, as economic conditions deteriorated.⁶⁰ At the same time,

⁵⁷La Stampa, April 24, 1920, p. 1.

⁵⁸Avanti, April 25, 1920, p. 1.

⁵⁹April 30, 1920, p. 1.

⁶⁰Spriano, op.cit., p. 45. According to Luigi Einaudi, the general index of prices had declined approximately eight percent from the end of May to the end of June (calculating

however, the most influential sectors of the Italian bourgeoisie began to undergo a change of attitude -- to regain their "nerve." They too moved towards "intransigence" as it became clear that they were not likely to be expropriated by an apocalyptic revolution on the one hand, but that the continuing uneasy situation did not appear to be improving on the other hand.⁶¹ This was far more serious than the radical "interventionist opposition" during the war had been. It was larger in numbers, with much more economic clout. The April strikes were triggered by a much tougher stance by the employers than they had exhibited at any point since the war. While it is true that the strike was settled by compromise, the initial attitude was something new.

Bourgeois intransigence continued throughout the summer. On July 15th, a PSI motion to give a wider mandate to the inquiry into the political causes of the war was defeated

the prices of 1901 as a base). He also claimed that bread was being held at an artificially low price. An interesting fact revealed in Einaudi's tables (but not mentioned in the text of the article) was that while the prices of textiles, metallurgical products, and commodities in general had declined since May, the general index of food prices had risen thirteen percent. Corriere della Sera, July 21, 1920, p. 1.

⁶¹Resistance began in the countryside as early as February 1920 when landlords began to use strike-breakers against Federterra. Maier, op.cit., p. 311. Maier places the date of the radicalization of the industrial bourgeoisie at much too late a period, however. He claims that it resulted from the September factory occupations. Ibid., pp. 184-185. Spriano clearly shows that it began before the April strikes. Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano (Turin, Einaudi, 1967). pp. 51-52.

in parliament.⁶² Industrialists began to issue strong statements on price increases.⁶³ Similar arguments were presented by the Turin industrialists when they began talks with the representatives of the Federation of Metalworkers (FIOM), the Italian Syndicalist Union (USI) and the Italian Labour Union (UIL).⁶⁴

It is important to note that this new intransigence was not so inflexible as to make it obvious right at the outset that negotiation alone could not resolve the conflict. These talks were further slowed down by disputes among the rival unions involved.⁶⁵ Hence, it was only at the end of August that it became clear that an impasse had been reached. While negotiations dragged on peacefully, another significant event came and went in Rome. A demonstration by striking transport workers erupted into violence on July 20th.⁶⁶ Riots continued for three days, while cries about "political violence" came from parliament.

⁶²Corriere della Sera, July 15, 1920, p. 1.

⁶³"Gli industriali e le cause degli alti prezzi". Ibid, p. 4.

⁶⁴"L'inizio delle trattative dei metallurgici: la pregiudiziale degli industriali." Corriere della Sera, July 16, 1920, p. 2. Spriano mistakenly states that the negotiations opened on July 29th. The Occupation of the Factories, p. 41.

⁶⁵Cf. the attack on FIOM by a USI spokesman on July 17th, quoted in Corriere della Sera, p. 2. The following day FIOM demanded separate negotiations from those involving the USI. Corriere della Sera, July 18, 1920, p. 3.

⁶⁶Corriere della Sera, July 21, 1920, p. 2.

Much of the violence was in fact caused by "counter-demonstrators," who were publically supported by Turati. The PSI deputy denounced the strike as "absurd," and as being against the public, especially the old and handicapped.⁶⁷ Turati's hostility probably stemmed from the fact that there was a strong anarchist influence among the tramway workers. It is indeed possible that the sectarianism which divided the anti-capitalist movement in Italy would have prevented any coordination between the two centres, had the Turin occupations broken out at the same time. The crucial point is; however, that the political capital was extremely calm throughout the entire period of the September occupations in the "industrial capital."⁶⁸

The actual events of the occupations need not overly concern us here. The same pattern was repeated. Of course, the situation was much more complicated given the wider scope of the occupations and the growth of employer intransigence which had provoked them.⁶⁹

But this new attitude did not triumph at this point. While a future fascist like Edoardo Rotigliano could shout out threats and rhetoric, a type of bombast which came to dominate the General Confederation of Industry⁷⁰ (Confindustria),

⁶⁷Cited in Ibid.

⁶⁸Spriano, The Occupation of the Factories, p. 62.

⁶⁹The headline of Corriere della Sera the day after the occupations began explained everything. "Gli operai metallurgici prendono possesso delle officine per prevenire una serrata industriale." August 31, 1920.

⁷⁰"All discussion is useless. The industrialists will not grant any increase (in wages - W.W.) at all. Since the

the Giolittian government was not swept up by the wave of reaction. Giolitti himself stated "Should I have cleaned out the factories by force? It would have been civil war." If civil war was unacceptable, there was only one other solution. As Giolitti told FIAT chief Agnelli, "Only time can solve the problem."⁷¹ It did, although the ultimate ramifications were not what the veteran politician expected.

The argument that no revolution was possible because the workers listened to General Confederation of Labour (CGL) and FIOM spokesmen is an empty abstraction; the men who launched the Russian Revolution were similar or even more right-wing; so too were the men who began the "Great French Revolution." The key to the Italian situation is that the state never put the unions "to the wall" during the critical years, and even interceded when it appeared that Confindustria might do so. This role changed radically only after the social protest of the Biennio Rosso had receded, with Mussolini's coming to power in October of 1922.

It was only in the summer of 1922 that Italy underwent a real political crisis. From the end of the war until that time, the country had passed through a series of grave situations, but never really having to face more than one problem at a time. But during the time that there was

end of the war they've done nothing but drop their pants. Now we're going to start on you." Quoted in Spriano, The Occupation of the Factories, p. 46.

⁷¹Cited in Ibid, p. 56.

literally no government, all social protest was either spent or thoroughly intimidated by fascist violence. There was never any conjuncture of objective and subjective factors, as in France in 1789.⁷²

This section has made two points. The first is that the situation in Italy did not resemble the situation in Russia, implying that an attempt to mimic Bolshevik tactics might well be futile. (This reinforced the point made in the introduction about attempts to duplicate Bolshevik "success.")

The second point is that the Italian state always had room to maneuver and could "ride out" each potential crisis; this ability stems largely from the nature of the Biennio Rosso, during which there was not a total "conjuncture."

We have not argued that the situation was not potentially revolutionary; we do maintain that this potential had not reached a stage whence it could effectively be exploited directly by an intransigent party of pure revolutionaries. Nor does this necessarily contradict Lenin's point that in order to have a successful revolution (in the short run, that is, -- in terms of a successful transfer of power) there must be a group willing to assume power. But it must be remembered that section one pointed out the marginal role

⁷²On the explosive nature of a conjuncture of various short-term and long-term economic problems with a political crisis, cf. C.E.Labrousse, "1848-1830-1789: How Revolutions Are Born," contained in Essays in Economic History, ed. by F. Crouzet et al, (London, Arnold, 1969). N.B. in particular page 6, where Labrousse compares 1789, when there was a total conjuncture, with the two cases where the political crises did not occur when economic conditions were bleakest, that is, there was only a series of partial conjunctures.

played by such a group until the proper moment arrives.
This moment never arrived in Italy.

This is not to say that socialists and revolutionaries had no role to play. In fact, we shall see that their role in this period was of crucial importance. We turn now to an analysis of what the Bordigan faction in the PSI did (and did not do) during the Biennio Rosso.

We have briefly examined the history of the PSI up to and during the First World War, and we have studied, in some detail, the complex series of events which arose as a result of Italy's (belated) entry into the war; we have followed these events to their culmination in the Biennio Rosso. In the crucible of these two years of turmoil, two distinct political tendencies emerged within the PSI, challenging the direction the Party was taking under the leadership of Giacinto Serrati. In January 1921, these two dissident groups united with other dissenting elements in the PSI to form the Italian Communist Party (PCI).⁷³ One of these two factions has become internationally well known. It was based in Turin around the journal L'Ordine Nuovo, which was initially a joint project of the two great intellects of post-war Italian Marxism, Antonio Gramsci and Angelo Tasca.

Our concern here, however, is primarily with the other faction. It was centered in Naples, around the weekly newspaper Il Soviet, edited by Bordiga. It was this group, generally called the "abstentionist," and later called the "communist-abstentionist" faction within the PSI, which

⁷³Most notable among these other opposition elements were those who had syndicalist tendencies, like Nicola Bombacci (the future Fascist leader). They had no organized group per se. Most Italian syndicalists were outside the official socialist movement, in the USI. This organization was courted briefly by the Third International when it became clear that the newly formed Italian Communist Party had no hope of gaining the support of the CGL. The attempt failed when the syndicalists balked at the conditions which were to be imposed by Moscow on all adherents to the International of Red Trade Unions (ISR). Even those syndicalists who had supported the idea of joining the ISR chose to remain within the USI. Bertrand, Charles L., "The Unione Sindacale Italiana and the International of Red Trade Unions," (paper read to the Canadian Historical Society, June 1978) passim.

took the initiative in the series of events which led to the founding of the PCI.⁷⁴ The Bordiga faction should not be thought of as being entirely restricted to the region around Naples,⁷⁵ but their scope of operations was considerably limited elsewhere.⁷⁶

Il Soviet first appeared in December of 1918. It was the fruition of Bordiga's efforts to organize during the war.⁷⁷ While Bordiga failed to make any substantial impact on the Party during this time, he did come to dominate the weak Naples section of the PSI.⁷⁸ In conjunction with a number of militant metallurgical workers, his group took the initiative in forming "La Camera del lavoro di Napoli" to compete with the reformist dominated "Borsa di lavoro." The new organization won the support of labour in all the major industries of Naples, with the exception of the dockworkers. Il Soviet was launched to coordinate the activities of the Camera, the local section of the PSI, the local section of the CGL, and the Bordigan faction.⁷⁹

⁷⁴Spriano, Paolo, Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano, pp. 37-38, 46.

⁷⁵Ibid, p. 40.

⁷⁶Cf. Williams, op.cit., p. 80, for a brief description of the problems faced by Giovanni Boero, an abstentionist, and his problems as Turin sectional secretary of the PSI. Boero was eventually replaced by Palmiro Togliatti, also a founder of L'Ordine Nuovo but who was quite marginal to the group at this time. After the arrest of Gramsci, Togliatti became PCI leader.

⁷⁷Discussed above in section I.

⁷⁸De Clementi, op.cit., p. 62.

⁷⁹Ibid, pp. 62-63.

The newspaper was initially tied directly to the concrete struggles of labour, or at least, labour in Naples. How did it relate to these struggles throughout the Biennio Rosso? Before attempting to answer this question, a few general remarks about Il Soviet are in order.

The first issue was extremely indicative of what was to come. Giovanni Sanna began a series of articles on the Russian revolution, which continued until issue number ten in February. There was a short statement about the Spartacus movement, and several local articles and notices. The front page was devoted to two articles, one on the question of the "constituent assembly,"⁸⁰ the other on democracy in England. Although the conclusions to both articles were censored, their gist was clear.

Il nefasto affinismo che tanto danno e confusione ha arrecato attraverso la collaborazione tra i socialisti e i democratici borghesi, ha fatto perdere di vista questa fondamentale programmatica antitesi fra socialismo e democrazia.⁸¹

The struggle for "formal democracy" served to turn the attention of the proletariat from its true task.

La rivoluzione socialista si realizzerà quando il potere politico sarà nelle mani dei lavoratori, non solo perchè i lavoratori sono la maggioranza, ma perchè alla minoranza borghese verrà tolta ogni ingerenza nella formazione degli organi del potere.⁸²

⁸⁰The idea of a constituent assembly was proposed during the war as a "corporatist" parliament. The idea was seized upon by the trade unions as a labour parliament, to reconstruct and reshape Italy after the war. Il Soviet, Dec. 22, 1918, p. 1. All citations are to the Feltrinelli reprint (Milan 1966).

⁸¹Ibid, emphasis added.

⁸²"Guerra Rivoluzionaria", ibid, p. 2. As De Clementi

Furthermore, it was asserted that the war had created a revolutionary situation. The reasoning was simple. The argument did not refer at all to Italy, but was based on a purely international analysis. Capitalism laid the basis for and produced socialist revolution. The war was the supreme crisis of capitalism, a product of its deepest contradictions. It could only hasten the end of bourgeois society.⁸³

The obvious conclusions were not long in coming. The Bolshevik revolution and the Spartacus uprising were depicted as part of a great "marcia del comunismo" to which the PSI had to align itself. Issue number five opened with a broadside against the reformists.⁸⁴ Then came the news of the murders of Liebknecht and Luxemburg, which dominated number six. The next issue called on the Party to purge itself of all elements which, in a crisis, would align themselves with "the Schiedemanns."⁸⁵ Issue number eight contained an article entitled "Against the Mistakes and Traps of Reformism" which called on the Party to discard current electoral preparations.

points out, this identification of parliamentary democracy with capitalism was developed by Bordiga several years before the founding of Il Soviet, during the war. Op.cit., p. 30.

⁸³Ibid. Bordiga nevertheless insisted that even though the war had produced a revolutionary situation, those socialists who had supported the war were still guilty of class "treason." Responsibility for the war was a vital question. This was to be a revolution against all wars. Hence all those who had supported the carnage would be crushed by the proletarian reaction.

⁸⁴January 19, 1919, p. 1.

⁸⁵"Tendenze rivoluzionarie e possibilità rivoluzionarie," February 2, 1919, p. 1.

This was followed up by an article in number ten entitled "Elezioni o conquista rivoluzionaria del potere?" which repeated the abstentionist position, and an article which analyzed the prospects of revolution. In Russia, maximalist socialism was triumphant, in Austria and Germany its advance was "formidable." In the face of this advance

Il Marxismo antevide tutto questo, e chi lo invoca a difesa dinna (sic) sopravvivenza del regime capitalistico (sic) in nome della presunta immaturità delle condizioni economiche, ne è come mostreremo, non un interprete, ma un traditore.⁸⁶

Throughout the critical post-war months Il Soviet continued this line. Article after article hammered out the same themes: abstentionism, expulsion of reformers, the forging of a purely revolutionary organization. The one exception to the general rule was the strike of Naples' metalworkers, which captured the paper's headlines.⁸⁷ In the following issue, however, an article entitled "After the General Strike" reasserted the paper's general position. Direct action by workers never again captured the main focus of Il Soviet.

What was abstentionism, the dominant theme of Bordiga and his adherents in this crucial period? It was the total rejection of bourgeois democracy in all its forms, particularly parliament, which we have discussed above. Bordiga

⁸⁶"Le prospettive rivoluzionarie della situazione politica attuale." February 23, 1919, p. 1.

⁸⁷Il Soviet, April 20, 1919.

saw the history of the PSI as a series of co-optations, and rebellions against these co-optations.⁸⁸ The reformers within the Party were responsible for these diversions from the true path to socialism. Il Soviet argued that all the Party's energies should go into preparing for the revolution.⁸⁹

It should be noted, however, that if Il Soviet was making rather "abstract" demands at this time -- that is, its appeals were rather removed from the daily concerns of those for whom it wished to speak (the workers), -- the official party organ, the daily newspaper Avanti, distinguished itself by making absolutely no demands at all. It had completely abandoned the type of committed journalism it had exhibited under Mussolini's editorship in the immediate pre-war years.⁹⁰ The paper's claims to have always been at its battle station throughout the war seem rather hollow in the light of its

⁸⁸ Bordiga's opening speech in the debates at the Livorno Congress of the PSI, where the PCI was born, bear this out. "We are and we feel we are the true heirs of the Italian Marxist left. If we must go, we shall take with us the honour of your past." Cited in Cammett, op.cit., p. 149.

⁸⁹ The immediate task was to smash bourgeois political power. This could not be done by a class which was still sending its representatives to the institutions of bourgeois dominance. Il Soviet, September 21, 1919, p. 2.

⁹⁰ Part of this had to do with war time censorship, of course. However, the paper changed little with the armistice. It is true that censorship continued after the war, but the nature of some of the articles printed in Il Soviet reveal the laxity of the censors at this time.

failure to mention the Turin uprising of 1917. Its claim to vanguard status⁹¹ in the immediate post-war months seems equally absurd, as the paper blandly reported events, making occasional editorial comments.

Il Soviet must be understood as a reaction to this type of "socialist agitation" which the PSI and its organ were putting forth. During the first few critical months of the Biennio Rosso, the Party literally did nothing except accept new memberships.

The question which concerns us here, however, is not whether Il Soviet was correct to criticize Avanti and the PSI in general for failing to be more "revolutionary," but whether the Bordiga group contributed anything towards aiding the development of a revolutionary situation in post-war Italy. To answer this, we should examine briefly the other communist tendency and contrast their approaches.

For six months the Bordiga group had been the only organized left-wing opposition within the PSI. The other opposition faction began to crystallize in the summer of 1919 in Turin. On June 15th, Il Soviet welcomed the appearance of a new socialist weekly journal, L'Ordine Nuovo.⁹² Calling itself a "weekly review of socialist culture,"⁹³ its maiden

⁹¹"La fine della guerra...non avrà diminuito la gravita del nostro compito. La lotta feroce scattenata della borghesia e finito ma la lotta di classe e divenuto più intensa, più aspra, più travolgente. Noi restiamo ancora nel falta della mischia, all'avanguardia, come sempre. Avanti, November 17, 1918, p. 1.

⁹²Il Soviet, June 13, 1919, p. 2.

⁹³L'Ordine Nuovo, May 1, 1919, p. 1. All citations are to the Feltrinelli reprint (Milan 1966).

issue gave a clear indication of a number of striking differences between the two newspapers.⁹⁴ There was an article on Louis Blanc, a book review (a book by Giovanni Gentile, the future Fascist philosopher), a translation of a Max Eastman article but, above all, an analysis of the Italian situation, something which was repeated far more frequently than in the Naples paper.

A second difference lay in the different nature of its appeals for political activism. Il Soviet had demanded an end to "economism" by the political activity of the proletariat. This meant the formation of a party which refused to participate in sham bourgeois parliaments and was little concerned with day to day struggles. Issue number seven of L'Ordine Nuovo contained the germs of the "Ordinovisti" alternative. Gramsci argued that revolutionary organization had to be centered on "the centres of proletarian life" -- not just "socialist circles" (that is, party), but also shop committees and peasant community.⁹⁵

This idea developed into the "factory council" concept. To be revolutionary, the working class must not only "refuse to collaborate with the institutions of the bourgeois class,"

⁹⁴ Gramsci later argued that only with the appearance of the seventh issue of the journal did its character clearly emerge, when a coup d'etat occurred which seriously diminished Angelo Tasca's influence. Williams, op.cit., pp. 94-95. This assertion is quite questionable, as Williams points out. In any case, the differences that we are describing here are evident right from the first issue and continue throughout the two newspapers' histories.

⁹⁵ L'Ordine Nuovo, June 21, 1919.

but be capable of running a newer and better world.⁹⁶ The factory council could be the agent of both tasks.⁹⁷ While the idea was obviously inspired by the Russian example, there was at least an attempt to link it to the everyday lives of the people it was hoped would carry it out.

Like Il Soviet, L'Ordine Nuovo called for a "renewal" of the PSI, which was being blunted by "petty-bourgeois opportunists." As opposed to the pure proletarian party, it called for a party of workers and peasants.⁹⁸ Both groups demanded a revolutionary party and affiliation with the Third International. But while the Ordinovisti concentrated on Soviets as opposed to parliamentarian tactics, they did not adopt a rigid abstentionist position. Further, they did not make the distinction between socialism and democracy that Il Soviet had done. Finally, the Ordinovisti realized that in Italy a 'mass party' and a 'proletarian party' were not the same thing, because of the peasantry.⁹⁹

The Bordigan reaction to the factory council proposal of L'Ordine Nuovo was hostile. Bordiga responded in a series of signed articles in Il Soviet. He drew a clear distinction

⁹⁶L'Ordine Nuovo, June 5, 1920.

⁹⁷Factory Councils were to develop from "internal commissions" discussed above in note 52. Because of this, they would be an institution of the working class which had arisen organically from the needs of production. They were not simply an intellectual construction.

⁹⁸"Il Partito e la rivoluzione," December 31, 1919, p. 1.

⁹⁹The party's reformers had long used the argument that the large numbers of peasants in Italy made revolution impossible. Il Soviet disagreed with the conclusion, and so ignored the whole question. L'Ordine Nuovo did grapple with the problem, even though the paper did not resolve it.

between "political" and "economic" soviets. This was legitimized by reference to the constitution of the U.S.S.R. and the argument¹⁰⁰ that soviets based exclusively on the workplace would inevitably have a "sectional" character where the universal (similar) interests of workers as a class could take on a subordinate role.

Factory councils were desirable and necessary, but of much lesser importance than "political" soviets. Hence Bordiga welcomed their establishment. However, the crucial point is that he could not envisage the more important "political" soviets growing out of the factory councils.¹⁰¹

This theoretical position, worked out long before the wave of factory occupations swept Italy (and before the April strikes in Turin as well), was not the only reason that Il Soviet did not attribute as much importance to these events as the Ordinovisti did. A change was occurring in the abstentionists' concept of praxis, as it became obvious that the great "march of communism" was not sweeping the PSI along. A greater role was not attributed to human praxis in creating the new society, but only praxis mediated through the (reconstituted) party. All other forms of political activity were downgraded. The article already cited entitled "After

¹⁰⁰The word argument is used very loosely here. Bordiga was not a rigorous intellectual like Gramsci or Tasca, but his thought was particularly muddled on this issue. In fact his series of articles never really dealt with the question directly, but devoted many words to prove that trade unions could never represent the universal interests of the proletariat.

¹⁰¹Il Soviet, Jan. 1, 1920, p. 2. The parallel to Lenin's theory of praxis is striking. Cf. "What Is To Be Done" in The Essential Works of Lenin, Vol. I (Westport, Hyperion Press, 1973) pp. 174-179. Here Lenin discusses his conception of the limitations of everyday or "trade-union" consciousness.

"the General Strike" proclaimed.

I due grandi scioperi dei servizi delle comunicazione e dei trasporti sono passati, e la rivoluzione attesa da molti ansiosamente da altri paurosamente deprecata, non è ancora venuta.¹⁰²

The conclusion drawn from this was that the duty of class-conscious communists should be to dissuade the proletariat from any action which did not have as its immediate goal the seizure of state power.¹⁰³ At this point Bordiga lacked any conception of the possibility of reformist demands acquiring an insurrectionary overtone because of changing circumstances.¹⁰⁴

Hence there were two reasons why Il Soviet was becoming more and more indifferent to the type of direct action which swept Italy in September of 1920; the idea that economic demands could never lead to revolutionary action and the fetishization of the Party, with the commensurate denigration of all other forms of praxis. The abstentionist position reached its logical conclusion one month before the April events in Turin, in an article entitled "Prendere la fabbrica o prendere il potere" where all other forms of activity other than development of the revolutionary party were presented as

¹⁰² Il Soviet, April 27, 1919, p. 1. The article went on to link strikes with parliamentary activity. Neither form of activity was revolutionary, neither pointed beyond present reality.

¹⁰³ "La costituzione dei consigli operai", Il Soviet, February 22, 1910, p. 2.

¹⁰⁴ Bordiga's fear was that anything which was not purely revolutionary would immediately fall into the hands of reformers and lose its revolutionary potential. Ibid. Bordiga had a clear feeling for the strength of bourgeois hegemony, even if he did not use the word, but did not have a theoretical analysis of its development.

being totally distinct from and even running counter to the latter.¹⁰⁵

The Bordiga faction quickly became aware that the April strikes in Turin, were taking a militant turn.¹⁰⁶ Still their general line on economic (or reformist) activity did not change, although it did develop a new twist. It was now asserted that this increasing militancy could only serve to promote a murderous reaction from the Italian (bourgeois) state, which was quite prepared to tolerate strikes over wages, but not strikes to promote workers' control. Therefore there was a growing awareness on the part of the Bordighists that strikes had the potential to be dangerous to the system, as the April strikes unfolded. However, the potential of this activity was still dismissed, with the argument that they would be broken before they could develop to a point where they might be insurrectionary.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵An article written in French in a column which appeared infrequently in the first quarter of 1920, subtitled "Pour nos lecteurs étrangers" summed up this development. "Au point de vue communiste, il est absolument nécessaire de montrer aux masses, qu'il leur faut une tactique bien différente pour atteindre l'émancipation révolutionnaire. C'est seulement la conquête du pouvoir politique par le moyen de l'insurrection armée des masses qui peut constituer la base solide pour la socialisation (sic) des moyens de production, et seulement un vrai et fort parti communiste peut accomplir cette tâche." Il Soviet, March 28, 1920, p. 7.

¹⁰⁶"Scioperi ed eccidii," Il Soviet, April 25, 1920, p. 1.

¹⁰⁷In their post-strike analysis, Il Soviet hinted that it might be about to make a more sophisticated appraisal of the relation of strikes to revolution. The April strikes were described as "an undeniable failure," yet the article admitted the Turin labour movement was as strong as ever. Unfortunately, such reasoning was not pursued. "Lo sciopero di Torino," Il Soviet, May 2, 1920, p. 1.

The events of September were to prove this to be a grave error. Direct repression was not, or at least not yet, the order of the day. The Nitti government fell in the early summer and was replaced by yet another Giolittian cabinet. As we have seen, the tactics of the government during the factory occupations were to avoid confrontation at all costs.

The crucial point is that having arrived at a position where revolutionary activity was seen as being divorced from reformist activities like strikes (and then having modified this view to one where strikes could not be revolutionary because of repression), Il Soviet lost all interest in the daily struggles of the Italian working class. The paper had always tended to be removed from this reality, but this isolation reached a new zenith with the September occupations.

These began on the first four days of the month. The first issue of Il Soviet appeared on September fifth. It contained no mention whatsoever of the growing conflict. The next issue appeared when the conflict was at its height. One article, which was concerned with growing international concentration of industrial ownership, made brief reference in passing to the occupations.¹⁰⁸ The only news from Turin that the paper reported concerned the growth of abstentionism in the local youth movement: There was one paragraph devoted to the occupations in Milan. The irony of the situation lay

¹⁰⁸"Il gesto dei concentratori," Il Soviet, September 19, 1920. Again the thrust of the article was the usual, that in an age of monopoly capitalism, parliamentary tactics were useless.

in the fact that Il Soviet was then featuring a series of articles by the Dutch "Council" Communist, Anton Pannekoek entitled "Lo sviluppo della rivoluzione mondiale e la tattica del comunismo." The tactic of the abstentionists was now to abstain from seriously noticing that which was happening around them.

L'Ordine Nuovo had also begun by calling for a renewal of the Socialist Party. By the beginning of the occupations, it too was calling for the creation of a communist party.¹⁰⁹ However, they did not let the call to form a new party blind them to what was going on all around them. While Il Soviet ignored the occupations, L'Ordine Nuovo suspended publication and Gramsci temporarily assumed editorship of the Turin edition of Avanti.

The Ordinovisti had a better understanding of Italian reality, but Bordiga's group retained the political initiative throughout the crucial pre-fascist years. It was they who had first proclaimed themselves the "communist fraction within the PSI." When it became clear that the party majority would not support the demand for the expulsion of the right wing, it was the Bordighists who first proclaimed the necessity of a split. Bordiga personally undertook the task of winning Lenin's support for these tactics, long before the Comintern's "21 points" made such actions obligatory.

¹⁰⁹L'Ordine Nuovo, September 9, 1920, p.

The two factions united at the Livorno Congress of the PSI in January 1921. Both had now been proclaiming the necessity of forming a revolutionary party for some time. If there remained any doubt that a split would occur, this was removed a month before the Congress when Avanti published an article by Serrati, who still commanded a clear majority within the Party.

Serrati began by emphasizing the Party's tradition of militant opposition to imperialism. Then he pointed out its links to the Italian proletariat. What made a Bombacci more revolutionary than a Lazzari? The only real difference between them was the latter's greater tactical flexibility. Even to pose such a question was absurd however.

Tutto ciò è incomprendibile per noi, e crediamo per le nostre masse proletarie, le quali -- a giusta ragione -- temono che la crepa che si vuol portare nel blocco del partito, si allarghi a tutto il movimento operaio, e, come la scissura politica richiederebbe insperato ausilio ai partiti reazionari, quella sindacale sarebbe essenziale alle lotte del lavoro contro il capitalismo. Addio rivoluzione, allora.¹¹⁰

The separation occurred anyway. The abstentionists were not interested in tactical flexibility. It is highly doubtful that this scission had the important negative effect on potential revolution that Serrati predicted. It did, however, lead to a suicidal campaign of insult and counter-insult between the two socialist parties "at a time when only the fascists could profit from the division."¹¹¹

¹¹⁰Avanti, January 13, 1921, p. 1.

¹¹¹Bertrand's phrase, describing the consequences of the USI's refusal to join the ISR, even for defensive purposes, fits equally well here. "The Unione Sindacale and the International of Red Trade Unions," p. 2.

Serrati's "Maximalists" eventually expelled their right-wing elements¹¹² and took the initial steps towards reunification. The position taken by the PCI is clear evidence of their continued failure to comprehend the events going on around them. In a statement signed by "the Italian Communist Party," they rejected the alliance outright, addressing an appeal to the workers in the PSI to come to the PCI without their leaders.¹¹³ The Serrati faction was incorporated into the PCI in 1924, but by then it was far too late; the "Maximalists" had been shattered by Fascist violence and were no longer a mass organization.

The tragedy of the Italian Communist Party is that it did begin with legitimate critique of PSI inactivity. It could never ground its critique in concrete reality, however, for it was always "after the fact." The continued calls to follow the Russian example had a basis in reality while the war was going on. Once the fighting was over, such an appeal was no longer directly related to the daily concerns of Italian reality. Whether or not PSI inactivity was the main cause of the failure of a revolution in 1917, 1918-1919, or 1920, the refusal to allow the Serrati faction to join the PCI in the fall of 1921 shows the dangerous illusions which pervaded the thinking of the Party's leadership. They used

¹¹²Cf. Serrati's bitter attack on Turati, "Due argomenti miracolisti", Avanti, June 28, 1921, p. 1.

¹¹³"La parola del partito comunista ai lavoratori socialista," Il Soviet, October 29, 1921, p. 1.

arguments about the exigencies of offensive tactics to defend their decision not to make a defensive alliance.¹¹⁴

We saw in Section I how small was the rôle of the various "communist tendencies" in triggering revolutions. Hence the direction taken by the "abstentionists" contributed nothing to the process of revolution, for the Italian situation never reached the critical points of the German or Russian cases. The call to follow the Bolsheviks had no meaning; the Bolsheviks preserved a revolution; in Italy, this revolution had not happened.

The ultimate irony of the "abstentionists" failure to perceive their own reality is that they were guilty of the very crime that they accused the PSI's right wing of: practicing "the politics of the ostrich."

¹¹⁴Ibid.

CONCLUSION

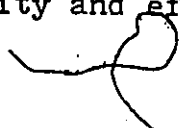
We stated above that we wished to see what the Bordiga faction did (and did not do) during this period. They did attempt to build a Bolshevik type of political party; they did not pay particular attention to Italian reality, and became increasingly alienated from this reality as time went on.

At the outset, we said that we would examine the group's activities. We have, in fact, only examined their ideology;¹¹⁵ since there was no revolution, and they took no part in the revolts which occurred during this time, this was their sole activity. We have seen how lacking this activity really was.

It was also pointed out that all transitions to socialism have failed, thus far. We therefore insisted that it made little sense to blame the abstentionists for the failure to achieve a communist society in Italy. We did, however, arrive at the conclusion that they must be held at least partly responsible for the rise of Italian Fascism, because of the increasingly narrow and sectarian attitude they took at the crucial period when the wave of Italian militancy was receding.

The question of why a revolution failed to occur in Italy during this period is a much broader one than could be answered within the framework of this paper, which was concerned only with the actions of one particular group of revolutionaries and their relation with the events of the time.

¹¹⁵It may have seemed at times that we were examining only the thought of Bordiga himself, for Bordiga dominated his group from its very inception. It began, after all, as virtually a one-man tendency during the war, and spread largely through the efforts of Bordiga. Not a great theorist, as we have seen, he relied mainly on personality and effective speaking to hold his faction together.



Our conclusions here on the more limited question completely contradict the attempt by Gwyn Williams to deal with the broader issue. He argued that the prime cause was the failure of the PSI to act as the Bolsheviks did in 1917. The different context makes these remarks as abstract as Bordiga's critiques of over fifty years ago. Rather than lamenting the absence of a Bolshevik party, it would make far more sense to bemoan the fact that there was no "Socialist Revolutionary" party to help extend the Turinese revolts into the countryside.

There are two directions for further research indicated by this paper. The first follows directly from what has just been said: an examination of the countryside. The second is a complete re-evaluation of the work of Giacinto Serrati and Angelo Tasca.¹¹⁶ Both men clearly saw the dangers of the sectarian politics being spawned by the infant PCI, yet were unable to prevent the disaster from occurring. When more work has been done in these two areas, we will be able to provide much more concrete answers to the questions of why there was no revolution, and why Fascism was able to gain power so quickly and easily, in the wake of socialism's failure.

¹¹⁶This should not be seen as an attempt to "whitewash" Serrati. The Party's failure at the end of the war (failure to agitate, not failure to attempt a coup d'état) remains. But Serrati and Tasca called for flexibility and a greater sense of reality just at the crucial moment when such tactics might have prevented the Fascist disaster. Their ideas (and their failure) merit reconsideration.

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