

## Stalin, Togliatti, and the Origins of the Cold War in Europe

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After World War II Italy was included in the Western “sphere of influence.” There is no evidence that the Soviet Union tried to forestall this outcome. In the postwar peace process Moscow attached much lower priority to Italy than to the East European countries that had been occupied by Nazi Germany. Italy was of limited significance for Soviet foreign policy, and political and economic relations between the two countries never fully developed. Nonetheless, at certain crucial junctures, Italy played a key role in the growing East-West conflict over Europe.

Several factors contributed to Italy’s importance in the nascent Cold War. It was the first European country to be reoccupied by the Allied armies, and it was therefore seen as an initial test of peacemaking and cooperation among the Allies. Soon after the coup d’état by King Vittorio Emanuele III against Mussolini on 25 July 1943 and the installation of a military government headed by Marshal Pietro Badoglio, a secret armistice was concluded between Italy and the Allies on 3 September 1943. The public announcement of the armistice five days later immediately divided the country into two parts: Northern Italy controlled by the Nazi German forces, which were supporting Mussolini in his attempt to establish a fascist republic, and Southern Italy controlled by British and American forces, which were supporting the monarchy and Badoglio after their escape from Rome. At the Moscow Conference of October 1943, the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union agreed on a political and military framework for an armistice regime in Italy. The Soviet Union was not given a role in the main administrative bodies in Italy, and the British and Americans maintained tight control of the country. This arrangement displeased Soviet leaders, who decided to counter what they saw as one-sided actions on the part of the Western governments. The Soviet Union unilaterally reestablished diplomatic relations with Italy in

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March 1944, a step that produced serious tension in Soviet relations with both Britain and the United States.

A second factor that contributed to Italy's importance in the Cold War was the rapidly growing authority of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). In the final year of the war, Communist influence spread throughout the country. When the PCI leader, Palmiro Togliatti, returned from Moscow in March 1944, he abruptly changed the course of the PCI with his so-called "Svolta di Salerno," which called for cooperation with Badoglio to pursue a policy of "national unity." This new approach fit with Stalin's decision to recognize the Badoglio government. During the fall and winter of 1943–1944, serious conflict had emerged between the antifascist parties (which banded together into the National Liberation Committee, or CLN, created in Rome on 9 September 1943) and the post-fascist institutions represented by the monarchy and the Badoglio government. The CLN had adopted a firm anti-fascist position (espoused by the Communists), opposing any collaboration with Badoglio and the king. With the "Svolta di Salerno" Togliatti defused this conflict by suggesting that Italy's institutional future should be settled only after the Germans and the Fascists had been defeated. His stance initially came as a shock to the Communists and anti-fascists, but by May 1944 all of the parties in the CLN (with the exception of Partito d'Azione) had entered the Badoglio government. In the meantime, at the beginning of 1944, the basis for a mass anti-fascist resistance movement in Northern Italy was laid by the founding of the Northern CLN in Milan. Through the resistance movement the PCI became a mass party set to expand in postwar Italian society.

Another factor that bolstered Italy's role in Soviet calculations was the widespread belief that Italy would dissolve into civil war as a consequence of the postwar turmoil and economic crisis and that this would lead to a series of unpredictable events involving the major powers. Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union's most prominent ally in Europe, was pressing its geopolitical and revolutionary objectives in northeastern Italy at the end of the war and in the immediate postwar period. The first crucial moment came in the winter and spring of 1945, when the CLN launched a final "insurrection" against fascism to maintain the resistance movement's independence from British and U.S. control. The insurgents, however, refrained from using revolutionary rhetoric, since revolution seemed undesirable not only for the United States and Britain, but also for Stalin (despite the ambitions of Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito). The second crucial moment came in the winter and early spring of 1948, when the tense atmosphere before the April 1948 elections threatened to end in violent conflict between the forces of the Popular Front (the coalition between Socialists and Communists) and the forces joined around the

Christian Democratic Party. Against the backdrop of the Cold War, in which the Italian antagonists were taking sides, the situation in 1948 was potentially even more explosive than it had been in 1945. A combination of both domestic and international events—the exclusion of the leftist forces from the government in May 1947 after three years of participation in coalition governments, the escalation of tensions between the Western powers and the USSR over the launching of the Marshall Plan, the founding of the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform) in 1947, and the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia in 1948—began to have a serious effect on Italy. The fierce clash between the opposing sides in the electoral campaign generated uncertainty and apprehension in the international community. Only the landslide victory of the Christian Democratic Party, achieved with the crucial support of the Catholic Church and financial aid from the United States, stabilized the Italian situation. Divisions in society continued for some time, and they briefly became explosive after the attempt on Togliatti's life in July 1948 brought the country to the brink of civil war once again.

If Italy was not a primary concern for Soviet foreign policy, it still could not be ignored entirely. For this reason, relations between the Soviet Union and the PCI can be seen as a case study of Soviet foreign policy and the origins of the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> Newly available archival material demonstrates that the tight link between Moscow and the West European Communist parties required the parties to subordinate their interests to those of the Soviet Union. This does not mean that historians are correct either to assume a uniform Soviet approach to West European Communism or to present Soviet policy at the end of the Second World War as a compact strategy aimed at the revolutionary conquest and Bolshevization of Europe.<sup>2</sup> In the Italian case, many scholars have depicted Soviet-PCI relations as a one-way command structure, in which the Soviet Union made all the decisions and the PCI implemented them.<sup>3</sup> This ignores substantial evidence of the complexity of Soviet strategy toward Europe. Stalin's postwar policy never seemed directed at installing Communist regimes in Western Europe. As some historians have observed, he preferred a "divided and docile Europe, rather than a Communist one."<sup>4</sup> For

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1. For a detailed analysis of the years 1943 to 1948, see Silvio Pons, *L'impossibile egemonia. L'Urss, il Pci e le origini della guerra fredda (1943–1948)* (Rome: Carocci, 1999).

2. See R. C. Raack, *Stalin's Drive to the West 1938–1945: The Origins of the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995). See also Douglas J. Macdonald, "Communist Bloc Expansion in the Early Cold War: Challenging Realism, Refuting Revisionism," *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Winter 1995/96), pp. 152–188.

3. Elena Aga-Rossi and Victor Zaslavsky, *Togliatti e Stalin. Il Pci e la politica estera staliniana negli archivi di Mosca* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997).

4. Vojtech Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 21.

these reasons, the relationship between the Soviet Union and the European Communist parties was often contradictory and ambiguous.

### **Soviet Foreign Policy and Italy: An Undefined Strategy**

Soviet leaders began to formulate their policy toward Italy during the Moscow Conference of October 1943, when the great powers had to arrive at a common position on the Italian question. The conference was held only a few weeks after the Badoglio government signed a truce. For Soviet officials, a tradeoff emerged between their desire to offset Western influence and their hesitation about working with the institutions that emerged in Italy after the downfall of the Fascists. Documentary sources reveal that different views existed in Moscow about how to deal with this tradeoff. In a letter written a short while before the Moscow Conference to Georgi Dimitrov, the official responsible for Soviet ties with foreign Communist parties, Togliatti identified isolation as the main danger facing Communists and did not mention the problem of the king's abdication, thus suggesting the adoption of a moderate approach toward the Badoglio government.<sup>5</sup> Togliatti's proposal was not reflected in the initial stance of the Soviet People's Commissariat on Foreign Affairs (Narkomindel). On 18 October 1943 the Soviet foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, sent Stalin a memorandum rejecting Britain's suggestion to link the recognition of the Badoglio government with the application of the "co-belligerent nation" formula to Italy.<sup>6</sup> During the Conference, however, Soviet leaders suggested only "re-organizing"—not liquidating—the Badoglio government.<sup>7</sup> Despite these differing views on policy toward Italy, Soviet strategy seemed to be leaning toward flexible diplomacy that would verify the

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5. Letter from Togliatti to Dimitrov, 14 October 1943, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsialno-Politicheskoi Istorii (RGASPI), Fond (F.) 495, Opis' (Op.) 74, Delo (D.) 256, Listy (Ll.) 45–47. See also Francesca Gori and Silvio Pons, eds., *Dagli archivi di Mosca. L'Urss, il Cominform e il Pci*, Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, *Annali*, Vol. 7 (Rome: Carocci, 1998), doc. 4. As early as a few months before, immediately after the fall of Fascism in Italy in July 1943, Togliatti had sent Dimitrov two letters that advanced moderate proposals. The letters had supported the formation of a government of broad alliances and a future convocation of a Constituent Assembly, but they required the king to abdicate. Letters from Togliatti to Dimitrov, 27 July, 30 July, and 14 October 1943, RGASPI, F. 495, Op. 74, D. 256, Ll. 35, 35 ob., 39–40. See also Gori and Pons, eds., *Dagli archivi di Mosca*, docs. 1, 2, 4.

6. Memorandum, Molotov to Stalin, 18 October 1943, Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii (AVPRF), F. 06, Op. 5b, Papka (Pap.) 39, D. 6, L. 22.

7. Memorandum from Molotov to Stalin, 18 October 1943, AVPRF, F. 07, Op. 4, Pap. 30, D. 37, Ll. 12–16.

effectiveness of the Advisory Council on Italy, which had been established at the Moscow Conference. Togliatti also seemed to favor this approach, which would have steered the PCI toward collaboration with the ruling classes. However, archival documents show that in the months following the Conference, Soviet and Communist policy makers continued to waver between different alternatives.

The Soviet strategy formulated at the Moscow Conference was mostly abandoned in the wake of Andrei Vyshinskii's frustrating experience as the Soviet representative in the Italian Advisory Council. Vyshinskii's mission revealed the Soviet Union's discontent with the institutionalization of the Allied regime in Italy, and it also demonstrated the Italian Communists' intransigence toward Badoglio and the monarchy. In a memorandum to Molotov on recent negotiations with members of the Italian government and representatives of the PCI in January 1944, Vyshinskii expressed concern that Britain was seeking to play a dominant role in Italian affairs, and he suggested that the Soviet Union try to use Communist influence as a wedge within the CLN.<sup>8</sup> Vyshinskii's memorandum spurred Dimitrov and Togliatti to prepare a much more hardline political program. On 24 January Dimitrov sent to Molotov a "planned response to our Italian comrades," to be forwarded to Vyshinskii. This "planned response" forbade Communists from taking part in the Badoglio government.<sup>9</sup> That same day, Dimitrov met with Togliatti and informed him of the "communications received from Italy and the questions our Italian comrades are posing."<sup>10</sup> A month later this intransigent line was adopted in a more detailed document produced by Togliatti "on the current tasks of Italian Communists."<sup>11</sup> On 1 March Dimitrov sent Molotov a letter enclosing the text of the document, which he himself had revised.<sup>12</sup> The document bore the clear imprint of the latest Soviet diplomatic line vis-à-vis Italy. A memorandum from Narkomindel for Vyshinskii on 1 March 1944 reiterated an intransigent stance toward the Badoglio government.<sup>13</sup> Thus, contrary

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8. Letter from Vyshinskii to Molotov, [January 1944], AVPRF, F. 07, Op. 5, Pap. 53, D. 230a, Ll. 1–2.

9. Letter from Dimitrov to Molotov, 24 January 1944, RGASPI, F. 495, Op. 74, D. 259, l. 3–4; and Gori and Pons, eds., *Dagli archivi di Mosca*, doc. 8.

10. Georgi Dimitrov, *Dnevnik 9 mart 1933– 6 februar 1949* (Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo "Sv. Kliment Okhridski," 1997), p. 405.

11. "O sovremennykh zadachakh italyanskikh kommunistov," 1 March 1944, RGASPI, F. 495, Op. 74, D. 258, Ll. 9–15.

12. Letter from Dimitrov to Molotov, 1 March 1944, RGASPI, F. 495, Op. 74, D. 259, L. 7. See also Dimitrov, *Dnevnik*, p. 408; and Gori and Pons, eds., *Dagli archivi di Mosca*, doc. 9.

13. S. Golunskii, "Zaklyuchenie," [written for Vyshinskii], 1 March 1944, AVPRF, F. 07, Op. 5, Pap. 44, D. 104, Ll. 1–9.

to what has always been believed, the documentation in the Russian archives belies the existence of a direct link between Vyshinskii's mission and the USSR's subsequent conciliatory "turn" toward Italy.<sup>14</sup> Although his mission had left open the possibility of diplomatic recognition through contacts established with the Italian government, it had not determined any final decision in this sense. Quite the contrary, the immediate effect was to lend Moscow's support to an intransigent approach.

Soon, however, Soviet leaders abandoned the hardline approach and returned to the moderate strategy adopted in the aftermath of the Moscow Conference. The Soviet Union suddenly decided to reestablish diplomatic relations with Italy without consulting the allied governments (a possibility that Vyshinskii himself had foreseen during contacts with Badoglio). Stalin made this decision during a crucial meeting with Togliatti in Moscow on the night of 3–4 March 1944, on the very eve of Togliatti's scheduled departure from the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, no full record of this meeting is yet available. The essential content is known only from the entry in Dimitrov's diary, which summarizes what Togliatti reported after his conversation with Stalin.<sup>16</sup> The entry suggests that the moderate line taken by Togliatti in his "Svolta di Salerno" had been decided upon in the conversation with Stalin. The radical position previously formulated by Togliatti and Dimitrov was completely abandoned. This conclusively shows, if there was ever any doubt, that the PCI was in no way "independent" from Moscow. The party's lack of independence can be inferred even without new archival documentation, given the indisputable connection between the Soviet decision to establish diplomatic relations with Italy and the PCI's decision to refrain from any conflict with the king during the war.<sup>17</sup>

More interesting, however, is the new evidence on Stalin's thinking and on Soviet decision making. As we have seen, the meeting between Stalin and Togliatti was actually the final point in the contradictory and uncertain process that gave shape to Moscow's political strategy. Stalin had to choose among the policy options presented to him by Togliatti, Dimitrov, and Soviet diplomats. It would be too simplistic to argue that the entire process consisted

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14. For the establishment of this link, see Mario Toscano, "La ripresa delle relazioni diplomatiche fra l'Italia e l'Unione Sovietica nel corso della seconda guerra mondiale," in Mario Toscano, *Pagine di storia diplomatica contemporanea*, Vol. 2 (Milano: Giuffrè, 1963), pp. 289–358.

15. "Posetiteli kremlevskogo kabineteta I. V. Stalina," *Istoricheskii Arkhiv*, No. 4 (1998), p. 199.

16. Dimitrov, *Dnevnik*, pp. 409–410. See also Letter from Dimitrov to Molotov, 1 March 1944, RGASPI, F. 495, Op. 74, D. 259, L. 8.

17. See Ennio Di Nolfo, "La svolta di Salerno come problema internazionale," in Antonio Varsori, ed., *La politica estera italiana nel secondo dopoguerra (1943–1957)* (Milano: LED, 1993), pp. 117–139.

solely of Stalin's imposition of his will on Togliatti.<sup>18</sup> The decision-making process was to a considerable extent vague and improvised.<sup>19</sup>

Dimitrov's diary provides considerable evidence of the strategy that emerged in the meeting between Stalin and Togliatti. The two men agreed that civil war and social revolution were not inevitable in Italy. They also agreed that the "two camps" dividing Italy (traditional post-fascist institutions vs. anti-fascist forces) were weakening the country and facilitating British expansion in the Mediterranean. A policy of "national unity" would thus implicitly counter British influence and avoid the risk of a civil war. This suggests that Stalin's view of Italy was driven largely by power politics. A moderate approach by the Italian Communist Party was seen as the best way to preserve a balance of power between the Soviet Union and Great Britain. Stalin adhered to this same moderate stance vis-à-vis the French Communist Party (PCF) in November 1944, developing, in effect, a European Communist strategy.<sup>20</sup> The strategy was aimed at maintaining Soviet influence in countries that, for the time being, were firmly within the Western sphere of influence. Rather than emphasizing radical goals, the Soviet Union would rely on normal diplomatic channels and encourage the involvement of left-wing parties in coalition governments. This strategy maintained a distinction between the arrangements for military occupation regimes, on the one hand, and future political developments, on the other.

The Stalin-Togliatti meeting of March 1944 was thus a paradigm of Communist policy making in the postwar years. Communist moderation in coalition building was in keeping with the joint Soviet goals of maintaining relations with the Western powers while simultaneously keeping a check on their conduct in the West's own sphere of influence. This strategy was evident in Litvinov's secret correspondence with Molotov and Stalin in 1944, but it was not always consistently applied, given the persistence of the traditional

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18. For such interpretation, see Elena Aga-Rossi and Victor Zaslavsky, "The Soviet Union and the Italian Communist Party, 1944–8," in Francesca Gori and Silvio Pons, eds., *The Soviet Union and Europe in the Cold War 1943–53* (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 161–184; and Aga-Rossi and Zaslavsky, *Togliatti e Stalin*. For a criticism of these authors' inclination to disregard the role of the Badoglio government and of Togliatti, see Ennio Di Nolfo, "I vincoli internazionali di una democrazia incompiuta," in Agostino Giovagnoli, ed., *Interpretazioni della repubblica* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998), p. 123.

19. It should be noted that at the beginning of March 1944 it was Togliatti, not Stalin or Molotov, who requested a meeting before leaving the USSR. Letter from Dimitrov to Molotov, 1 March 1944, RGASPI, F. 495, Op. 74, D. 259, L. 7.

20. "Anglichanie i Amerikantsy khotyat vezde sozdat' reaktsionnye pravitel'stva," *Istochnik*, No. 4 (1995), pp. 152–158. See Mikhail Narinskii, "Stalin, Togliatti e Thorez (1944–48)," in Gori and Pons, eds., *Dagli archivi di Mosca*, pp. 71–84.

isolationist strain in Soviet attitudes toward security.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Stalin avoided offering a detailed vision of Soviet foreign policy, leaving himself free to interpret each situation according to the latest international context.

In the final phase of World War II the strategy agreed upon by Stalin and Togliatti, and implemented by the Italian Communist leader after his return to Italy, seemed to be firmly in place. But conflicts appeared more frequently than historians have previously assumed. In fact, by September 1944, Togliatti was harshly criticized by Aleksandr Bogomolov, the Soviet representative in the Advisory Council on Italy, who played a significant role in Soviet diplomacy. In memoranda to the Narkomindel after the Soviet Union recognized Italy, Bogomolov repeatedly insisted that social revolution in Italy was inevitable, and he initially depicted Togliatti's actions as preparations toward this eventuality.<sup>22</sup> After the Red Army's entry into Eastern Europe in the summer of 1944, Bogomolov explicitly attacked the moderate tactics of Italian Communists. In particular, he claimed that the PCI was accepting "the existence of the government," that Togliatti had no plan to counter "Anglo-American domination" in Italy, and that Togliatti had "not yet found the right way out."<sup>23</sup> Even if Bogomolov was not openly calling for insurrection, his stance clearly was compatible with the intransigence of some leaders of the PCI who most likely were also influenced by extremist suggestions from Yugoslav Communists. The evidence suggests that Bogomolov's hardline attitude reflected a policy orientation shared by some Soviet foreign commissariat officials, especially S. A. Lozovskii and Dmitrii Manuil'skii, who had been arguing that conflict with Britain and the United States over Europe was inevitable.<sup>24</sup> Bogomolov was not an isolated voice.

Despite bitter criticism, Togliatti held fast to his leadership position in the PCI, and in late 1944 he defeated his opponents with an explicitly anti-insurrectionist line and a moderate interpretation of anti-fascism.<sup>25</sup> Togliatti was determined to avoid the type of bloody conflict that had overwhelmed Greece, despite pressure from Yugoslav leaders, who were exhorting the West European Communists to take a more uncompromising line. The moderate

21. See Silvio Pons, "In the Aftermath of the Age of Wars: The Impact of World War Two on Soviet Security Policy," in Silvio Pons and Andrea Romano, eds., *Russia in the Age of Wars 1914–1945*, Fondazione Feltrinelli, *Annali*, Vol. 34 (Milan: Feltrinelli Editore, 2000), pp. 277–307.

22. Letters from Bogomolov to Vyshinskii, 9 March, 6 April, and [June 1944], AVPRF, F. 098, Op. 27, Pap. 159, D. 11, Ll. 2–17, 9–32, 70–86; and Letter from Bogomolov to Molotov, [June 1944], AVPRF, F. 07, Op. 5, Pap. 44, D. 104, L. 10–15.

23. Bogomolov, Memorandum, [September 1944], AVPRF, F. 098, Op. 27, Pap. 159, D. 11, Ll. 103–108.

24. Pons, "In the Aftermath of the Age of Wars," pp. 283 ff.

25. Direzione, Verbali, 16–18 December 1944, Archivio del partito comunista italiano, Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Rome (hereinafter referred to as APC), Mf. 272.



approach of the majority of the PCI may help explain the words of assurance offered by Stalin on 9 October 1944 to Churchill after the latter requested that Stalin restrain the Italian Communists. Stalin pretended that he could scarcely exercise influence on the Italian Communists, since he did not know “the national situation in Italy” and was unable to give directives by means of the “Soviet armed forces,” as he could in Bulgaria. In a theatrical flourish Stalin expressed concern that if he tried to order the PCI to do something, Togliatti might simply “tell him to go to hell.” But Stalin noted that Togliatti was an intelligent person and that he would refrain from any “adventure.”<sup>26</sup> Mikhail Kostylev, who had been appointed the Soviet ambassador to Rome in October (replacing Bogomolov, who was now devoting himself exclusively to France), informed Molotov of his full approval of Togliatti’s actions.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, this reaffirmation of the March 1944 Stalin-Togliatti line was hardly a solid political strategy. Shifts in the balance of power affected Stalin’s calculations. His earlier distinction between the immediate arrangements for military occupation and the longer-term political future of an occupied country steadily faded. Thus, the consolidation of U.S. and Soviet spheres of influence left the West European Communist parties without significant support from the Soviet Union. Soviet officials began to use Italy as an example of how the Western allies should view Soviet involvement in countries such as Bulgaria and Romania.<sup>28</sup> Soviet leaders were cool toward Italy after the summer of 1944 and maintained this attitude at the Potsdam Conference.

Meanwhile, the dispute over the city of Trieste, which was inhabited mainly by Italians but was forcefully claimed by Yugoslavia, became one of the most difficult questions for the PCI.<sup>29</sup> During the first several months of 1945, Togliatti asked Soviet leaders to intercede in the dispute. Togliatti called for direct negotiations between Italy and Yugoslavia, and he argued that the best solution was to internationalize the city.<sup>30</sup> Having been urged to

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26. Record of the meeting between Stalin and Churchill, 9 October 1944, RGASPI, F. 558, Op. 11, D. 283, Ll. 12–13.

27. Letter from Kostylev to Molotov, 15 October 1944, AVPRF, F. 098, Op. 27, Pap. 159, D. 12, Ll. 7 and 15.

28. Bruno Arcidiacono, *Le “précédent italien” et les origines de la guerre froide. Les alliés et l’occupation de l’Italie 1943–44* (Bruxelles: Bruylant, 1984).

29. On the question of Trieste, see Giampaolo Valdevit, “The Search for Symmetry: A Tentative View of Trieste, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War,” in Gori and Pons, eds., *Soviet Union and Europe*, pp. 395–411; and Leonid Gibianskii, “Mosca, il PCI e la questione di Trieste,” in Gori and Pons, *Dagli archivi di Mosca*, pp. 85–133.

30. Dimitrov, *Dnevnik*, p. 465; Record of the meeting between Kostylev and Togliatti, 19 February 1945, AVPRF, F. 098, Op. 26, P. 152, D. 8, L. 65; Record of the meeting between Kostylev and Togliatti, 1 April 1945, AVPRF, F. 098, Op. 26, P. 152, D. 8, L. 182; and Letter from V. Dekanozov to A. Paniushkin, 20 April 1945, RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 128, D. 42, L. 10.

play a fundamental role in an issue that was crucial not only for relations within the Communist movement but also for relations between the Soviet Union and the Western allies, Soviet leaders adopted a wait-and-see attitude.<sup>31</sup> They refused to intervene until a crisis erupted in May 1945, when Yugoslav troops occupied the city, thereby placing the Italian Communists into an extremely uncomfortable position and escalating the tensions between Togliatti and Tito.<sup>32</sup> Only in late May did Stalin and Dimitrov initially inform Togliatti that Trieste would have to be ceded to Yugoslavia.<sup>33</sup> Then, a few days later, faced with the possibility of a serious conflict with the Western powers, Stalin reversed himself and ordered Tito to back down. The Soviet leader justified this decision on the grounds that another war had to be avoided.<sup>34</sup> The Trieste affair of May–June 1945 therefore exposed an erratic trend in Stalin’s foreign policy.<sup>35</sup> Stalin not only revealed an inclination to defer important decisions, but also proved ready to go back on choices already made.

Soviet behavior during the Trieste crisis in May 1945 suggested that Stalin was not actively seeking to expand the geopolitical area under Soviet control. On the contrary, his reaction signaled a much more pragmatic approach. Stalin did not yet have any clear sense of how to foster the development of Communist parties in Western Europe and to prevent the formation of a Western bloc. In his view, all that was needed was to sustain the Italian Communists while pursuing a standard policy toward Italy as a whole. This ill-defined policy highlights the limits of the moderate approach formulated by Stalin and Togliatti in 1944. Although it allowed the Soviet Union to avoid extreme and dangerous choices, it did not establish a viable nexus between Soviet foreign policy and the “nationalization” of the European Communist parties. Togliatti was doing his best to maintain Communist influence in Italy under the illusory expectation that Europe would not be divided into two blocs, but the steady emergence of spheres of influence on the continent

31. Dimitrov to Molotov, 6 March 1945, RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 128, D. 799, Ll. 2–3; Gori and Pons, eds., *Dagli archivi di Mosca*, doc. 10.

32. Togliatti’s notes in APC, Direzioni, Verballi 13 May 1945, Mf. 272. Record of the meeting between Kostylev and Reale, 23 May 1945, AVPRF, F. 098, Op. 26, Pap. 152, D. 8, Ll. 383–84. Togliatti sharply criticized Tito’s conduct in a letter to Dimitrov around mid-May 1945. Dimitrov to Stalin, 18 May 1945, RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 128, D. 716, Ll. 45–47; and Gori and Pons, eds., *Dagli archivi di Mosca*, doc. 11.

33. Dimitrov, *Dnevnik*, p. 480.

34. Milovan Gilas, *Se la memoria non m’inganna. Ricordi di un uomo scomodo 1943–1962* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1987), p. 106. The English version is entitled Milovan Djilas, *Rise and Fall* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985).

35. Vojtech Mastny, *Russia’s Road to the Cold War: Diplomacy, Warfare, and the Politics of Communism, 1941–1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 261.

deflated his hopes that the increasing power of leftist forces would gradually push Italy into the “socialist camp.”<sup>36</sup>

### **The Crisis of 1947**

From mid-1945 to early 1947 Stalin’s policy toward Italy and the PCI changed very little, and coordination between Soviet and PCI strategies remained haphazard. Although the relationship between Togliatti and Stalin showed no signs of unraveling toward the end of the war, the PCI’s attempts to reconcile the contradictory goals of obedience to Soviet dictates and the quest for political legitimacy began to cause serious internal strain. A crisis in the party arose in 1947.

In 1946 the latent tensions among Italian Communists, Yugoslav Communists, and the Soviet Union with regard to the Trieste problem came to the surface. Pressure from the West helped keep Stalin from fully supporting Yugoslav claims, perhaps affording him a means of escape from an uncomfortably intransigent position. Soviet officials, however, did not understand the urgency of the matter for the Italian Communists. This became evident when Molotov held talks with the PCI’s foreign affairs chief, Eugenio Reale, on 19 June 1946 during the Paris Conference. Molotov’s insistence that Trieste was not essential to the PCI’s “national policy” frustrated the party’s hopes for a direct agreement between Rome and Belgrade that would enable the PCI to repeat the coup de théâtre it achieved in March 1944 when relations between the Soviet Union and Italy were reestablished.<sup>37</sup> Instead, the Soviet Union merely encouraged a meeting between Togliatti and Tito, which, when it eventually was held in November 1946, turned out to be a purely propagandistic session.<sup>38</sup> Even so, harmony between Togliatti and Stalin remained intact as late as the second half of 1946. In a speech to the PCI Central Committee on 18 September 1946, Togliatti confirmed the party’s position against the formation of blocs in Europe, and he rejected all pessimistic assessments of the international situation.<sup>39</sup> These statements were generally consonant with those publicly expressed by Stalin in an interview with the French jour-

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36. Togliatti believed that this approach would also, indirectly, solve the problem of Trieste. Conversation between Togliatti and Piero Sraffa, n.d., Piero Sraffa papers, Trinity College, Diaries, E 53, September–October 1945, 20bis–21. I am grateful to Dr. Chiara Daniele of the Gramsci Foundation for the record of this conversation between Togliatti and Sraffa.

37. Palmiro Togliatti, Carte della scrivania, 19 June 1946, APC.

38. Gori and Pons, eds., *Dagli archivi di Mosca*, doc. 15.

39. Comitato centrale, Verbali, 18 September 1946, APC.

nalist Aleksander Werth.<sup>40</sup> They also were largely in accord with the summary of Stalin's thinking that Andrei Zhdanov, a high-ranking Soviet Communist official responsible for international affairs, had confidentially provided to Dimitrov a few days before Togliatti's speech.<sup>41</sup>

Later that month, however, the Soviet Union began to shift its approach to the Cold War, a shift that was heralded by a confidential report from the Soviet ambassador to Washington, Nikolai Novikov, on U.S. foreign policy trends.<sup>42</sup> According to Novikov's memoirs, this report mostly reflected Molotov's views.<sup>43</sup> PCI leaders quickly detected this shift in Soviet policy, particularly after it was reflected in speeches by Molotov and Zhdanov at the beginning of November (which, as we now know, were personally revised by Stalin).<sup>44</sup> This shift in Soviet policy would reasonably explain the abrupt change of tone in Togliatti's speech to the PCI Central Committee in November 1946, when he not only denounced "Anglo-American imperialism," but also stressed that the previous policy of moderation had to be abandoned.<sup>45</sup> This reversal, however, had few concrete effects in the near term.<sup>46</sup> Not until the founding of the Cominform a year later was the party's strategy more clearly delineated.

Until the early summer of 1947 the Italian Communists evidently suspected that Moscow's new uncompromising position was only temporary. In the meantime, however, the increasing tensions between East and West were beginning to affect Italy more directly. The PCI altered its policy after the party was dropped from the coalition government in May 1947, immediately after the PCF had been removed from the French government. On 16 June 1947 Togliatti told a Soviet diplomat, Arkadii Shevlyagin, that the PCI would forge a more appropriate link between foreign policy and domestic politics, and he decided to convene a PCI Central Committee plenum dedicated to international issues.<sup>47</sup> In a report to the Central Committee on 1 July, Togliatti

40. Interview republished in *Bol'shevik* (Moscow), No. 17–18 (September 1946), p. 3.

41. Dimitrov, *Dnevnik*, p. 535.

42. "Pervye pisma s kholodnoi voiny," *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn*, No. 11 (1990), pp. 138–154.

43. Nikolai V. Novikov, *Vospominaniya diplomata: Zapiski 1938–1947* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1989), pp. 352–353.

44. Vladimir O. Pechatnov, "'Strel'ba kholostymi': sovetskaya propaganda na Zapad v nachale kholodnoi voiny, 1945–1947," in Il'ia V. Gaiduk, Natalia I. Egorova, and Aleksandr O. Chubar'ian, eds., *Stalin i kholodnaya voina* (Moscow: IVI RAN, 1998), p. 192.

45. Togliatti's speech to the Central Committee, Comitato Centrale, Verbali, 19–21 November 1946, APC.

46. R. Gualtieri, *Togliatti e la politica estera italiana. Dalla Resistenza al trattato di pace 1943–1947* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1995), pp. 199 ff.

47. Shevlyagin to Suslov, [June 1947], RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 128, D. 1101, L. 142; and Gori and Pons, eds., *Dagli archivi di Mosca*, doc. 17.

left no doubt about his acceptance of the Cold War bipolar system and of Italy's dependent position.<sup>48</sup>

Throughout this time the Soviet Union's attitude toward the West European Communist parties was conditioned by the fear that Moscow was losing control of events in the region. As international tensions increased and the French and Italian Communist parties were removed from the governments in their countries, Soviet leaders sought to establish a tighter hold over the parties by effecting a mass mobilization that would provoke acute social conflict. During the government crisis in France in mid-1947, Soviet officials made no attempt to conceal their serious discontent with the PCF. In a letter to French Communist leader Maurice Thorez in early June, Zhdanov expressed surprise and concern over the events that had forced the French Communists out of the government.<sup>49</sup> This document underscores how precarious Soviet control over the West European Communists had been up to this point.<sup>50</sup> Zhdanov's criticisms were most likely directed at the Italian Communists as well. The decision to reestablish control over the Western parties was evident in late June 1947 during the Paris talks on the U.S. Marshall Plan, when Molotov expressed his dismay to the Yugoslav envoy Milovan Djilas, complaining that the national policies of the West European Communists were not "coordinated" with Moscow.<sup>51</sup> In a subsequent meeting, Molotov demanded an explanation from Reale regarding the PCI's exclusion from the Italian government and sought to determine whether it had occurred because of foreign pressure. When Reale said that foreign pressure had been crucial, Molotov angrily replied that the PCI had offered no such explanation in its recent political statements.<sup>52</sup> Although the minutes of the PCI's Central Committee meeting in July 1947 contain no mention of Moscow's reaction to the new political situation in Italy—even the references to the possibility of coordinating the activities of various Communist parties were rather general in nature—the problem quickly became acute.<sup>53</sup> The conditions that had forestalled the establishment of a new Communist organization a year earlier were no longer present.<sup>54</sup>

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48. Comitato Centrale, Verbali, 1–4 July 1947, APC.

49. Letter from Zhdanov to Thorez, 2 June 1947, RGASPI, F. 77, Op. 3, D. 89, L. 7.

50. Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 129. It should be noted that, as far as we know, the content of Zhdanov's letter to Thorez was made known by the Soviet Union to East European Communist leaders and to Harry Pollitt, but not to Togliatti. See Draft letters from Molotov to Dimitrov, Rakosi, Gheorghiu-Dej, Pollitt, Gottwald, and Tito, RGASPI, F. 77, Op. 3, D. 89.

51. Gilas, *Se la memoria non m'inganna*, p. 144.

52. Notes of Conversation, June 1947, RGASPI, F. 82, Op. 2, D. 1231, Ll. 26–27.

53. Comitato Centrale, Verbali, 1–4 July 1947, APC.

54. Csaba Békés, "Soviet Plans to Establish the Cominform in Early 1946: New Evidence from the

The announcement of the U.S. Marshall Plan for Europe in June 1947 therefore merely added to the tensions that already existed between Moscow and the West European Communist parties. The Soviet decision to abandon the Paris Conference was announced while the PCI Central Committee was still in session. On 3 July, Umberto Terracini, the chairman of the Italian Constituent Assembly and one of the main leaders of the PCI, warned Kostylev that Soviet rejection of the Marshall Plan might be used by the West to harm the interests of the Soviet Union and Italy alike.<sup>55</sup> Clearly, Terracini was concerned about the position Moscow wanted the PCI to take on the Marshall plan. The Italian Communists initially hoped to remain cautiously positive about the plan in order to avoid alienating Italian public opinion.<sup>56</sup> To underscore why the PCI should not flatly reject the Marshall Plan, Togliatti told Soviet officials that the new government under Alcide De Gasperi was likely to be short-lived and that the Italian Communists were apt to gain a role in a successor government.<sup>57</sup> Despite these entreaties, the Soviet position remained firm, and the West European parties were forced to reconfigure their policies. The change was apparent as early as 4 July 1947, when Togliatti again spoke to the PCI Central Committee, this time in a more alarming tone. Among other things, he referred to the possibility that the line of “progressive democracy” launched by the Italian Communists, with its emphasis on peaceful tactics, might no longer be appropriate in the new international context.<sup>58</sup> The Soviet Union’s staunch opposition to the Marshall Plan thus placed the West European Communist parties into an unwelcome position. They were now forced to contemplate the prospect of instigating political violence in their countries.

### **The Impact of the Cominform**

In a meeting with Dimitrov on 8 August 1947, Stalin confirmed his displeasure with the behavior of the French Communists, criticizing their policies as

Hungarian Archives,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 10 (March 1998), pp. 135–36; Leonid Gibianskii, “The Soviet Bloc and the Initial Stage of the Cold War: Archival Documents on Stalin’s Meetings with Communist Leaders of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, 1946–1948,” in *ibid.*, pp. 113–115 and 127; and Record of the meeting between Suslov and Frachon, 1 July 1946, RGASPI, F. 82, Op. 2, D. 1353, Ll. 71–72.

55. Record of the meeting between Kostylev and Terracini, 3 July 1947, AVPRE, F. 098, Op. 30, Pap. 170, D. 13, L. 7.

56. Renzo Martinelli and Maria Luisa Righi, eds., *La politica del partito comunista italiano nel periodo costituente. I verbali della direzione tra il V e il VI Congresso, 1946–1948*, Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, *Annali*, Vol. 2 (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1992), pp. 431–432 and 450.

57. Shevlyagin to Suslov, [June 1947], RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 128, D. 1101, L. 140; and Gori and Pons, *Dagli archivi di Mosca*, doc. 17.

58. Comitato Centrale, Verballi, 1947, 1–4 July 1947, APC.

“absolutely mistaken.” He was also critical of the Italian Communists.<sup>59</sup> Stalin’s bluntness during this meeting suggests that he was already set to denounce the line pursued earlier by the PCI and the PCF. The meeting was a prelude to Zhdanov’s notorious attack on the Italian and French Communists at the Cominform’s founding conference in September 1947.<sup>60</sup>

The decision to move openly against the Western Communists was made in late August 1947, in accordance with a memorandum submitted by Zhdanov to Stalin.<sup>61</sup> Until the first conference of the Cominform actually opened, however, Soviet preparations were shrouded in secrecy. On the very eve of the conference Communist parties outside the Soviet Union still knew very little. In mid-August two Polish Communist leaders, Władysław Gomułka and Bolesław Bierut, told Pietro Secchia, one of the PCI’s highest-ranking officials, in rather general terms about the plans to establish the Cominform.<sup>62</sup> But even Bierut and Gomułka were unaware of the Soviet Union’s intention to establish not just a consultative body, but a whole new international organization.<sup>63</sup> Togliatti could do no more than guess, based on his general sense of the deteriorating political climate, what the conference would entail. It turned out that his forebodings were amply justified. The Italian delegates, Luigi Longo and Reale, recorded Togliatti’s parting words to them:

If you are reproached that we were unable to take power, or that we let ourselves be driven from the government, tell them that we could not turn Italy into another Greece. And this was not only in our interest, but in the Soviet Union’s interest as well.<sup>64</sup>

Togliatti stressed his own interpretation of the USSR’s interests rather than seeking clarification from Moscow.

In truth, the “Greek model” of civil war was promoted by the Yugoslavs, not by the Soviet Union. Unlike the Yugoslav delegate, Edvard Kardelj, Zhdanov focused his criticism on the PCI’s alleged failure to mobilize wide-

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59. Dimitrov, *Dnevnik*, p. 556.

60. For a more detailed analysis of the Cominform’s impact on the PCI, see Silvio Pons, “A Challenge Let Drop: Soviet Foreign Policy, the Cominform, and the PCI, 1947–8,” in Gori and Pons, eds., *Soviet Union and Europe*, pp. 246–263. For the Cominform papers, see Giuliano Procacci *et al.*, *The Cominform. Minutes of the Three Conferences 1947/1948/1949*, Fondazione Feltrinelli, *Annali*, Vol. 30 (Milan: Feltrinelli Editore, 1994).

61. Memorandum, Zhdanov to Stalin, [end of August 1947], RGASPI, F. 77, Op. 3, D. 90, L. 14.

62. E. Collotti, ed., *Archivio Pietro Secchia 1945–1973*, Fondazione Feltrinelli, *Annali*, Vol. 19 (Milan: Feltrinelli Editore, 1979), p. 208.

63. See Leonid Gibianskii, “Kak voznik Kominform. Po novym arkhivnym materialam,” *Novaya i noveishaya istoriya*, No. 4 (1993), pp. 131–152.

64. Eugenio Reale, *Nascita del Cominform* (Milan: Mondadori, 1958), p. 17. The basic reliability of Reale’s memoirs, written after his abandonment of the party, has been largely confirmed by the new archival documentation.

spread opposition to the Marshall Plan, and he did not explicitly call for civil war or disavow the moderation that the Italian Communists had shown since the end of the war. Although the Soviet-orchestrated attack won vigorous support from the Yugoslavs and the other East European parties (as Zhdanov himself boasted in his reports to Stalin about the progress of the conference), the slightly more moderate tone of the Soviet criticisms was significant.<sup>65</sup> The Soviet approach left various options open for the extra-parliamentary reorientation of the West European parties. This ambiguity had a dual effect. It allowed Italian leaders to adopt a defensive strategy that was intransigent but stayed within constitutional constraints. They could do so by taking account of Zhdanov's criticisms and disregarding those expressed by the Yugoslavs. Togliatti and Longo emphasized this approach during the first meeting of the PCI leadership after the Cominform conference.<sup>66</sup> Although the PCI had to align itself with the foreign policy theses propounded by Zhdanov, notably the "two camps" doctrine, this did not necessarily imply any need to resort to violence. On the other hand, Soviet ambiguity created substantial uncertainty about the objectives and goals of the Cominform, which helped precipitate a split within the Italian Communist Party between a moderate majority and a strong radical minority. The minority wanted to steer the PCI into a potentially catastrophic civil conflict, a stance that increasingly consigned the PCI to the margins of society, despite its considerable popular base.

The French and Italian Communists sought clarification from Stalin. Thorez's mission to Moscow in November 1947 and Secchia's trip a month later were both geared toward this objective.<sup>67</sup> In neither case, however, did the Soviet Union eliminate the ambiguity. Stalin authorized the West European Communists to distance themselves from the more extreme Yugoslav position, but he was still vague about the future prospects for civil war. Secchia, for his part, seemed to hedge his bets when he met with Stalin. Secchia reported to Zhdanov that Togliatti did not deem it appropriate to embark on civil war, but Secchia also informed the Soviet leadership that an armed conflict with the forces of the right was widely expected within the party.<sup>68</sup> His comments reflected the promulgation of the "two camps" doc-

65. Now published in *Sovesbchaniya Kominforma. 1947, 1948, 1949. Dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1998).

66. Martinelli and Righi, eds., *La politica del partito comunista italiano*, pp. 498–500, 526; and Comitato Centrale, Verbali, 11–13 November 1947, APC.

67. Josif V. Stalin and Maurice Thorez, "Zapis' besedy v Kremle. 1947 g.," *Istoricheskii Arkhiv*, No. 1 (1996), pp. 4–26; and Collotti, *Archivio Secchia*, pp. 211, 422–426.

68. "Zapis' besedy Zhdanova s sekretarem TsK kompartii Italii tov. Sekkia, sostoyavshcheiya 12 dekabrya 1947 goda," RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 128, D. 1101, L. 184; Zhdanov's handwritten notes, RGASPI, F. 77, Op. 3, D. 90, Ll. 86–90. "O taktike italyanskoi kompartii v nastoyashee vremia," [December 1947], RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 128, D. 1101, Ll. 6–14; "Stenogramma vystupleniya TsK



trine as well as the growth within the PCI of radical forces that had been strengthened by the founding of the Cominform. Stalin started the meeting with Secchia by emphasizing this crucial point. He supported Togliatti's view but warned that the party must be prepared for any contingency: "We maintain that an insurrection should not be put on the agenda, but one must be ready, in case of an attack by the enemy."<sup>69</sup> Stalin merely asserted this point without offering further explanation. The conversation then shifted to such topics as the creation of a secret intelligence service by the PCI, Moscow's financial support for the PCI during the elections, and Togliatti's health.

The result was continued ambiguity. Stalin did not legitimize the more radical tendencies in the PCI, but neither did he supply precise political directives. Moreover, when Zhdanov spoke to Secchia about East-West relations, he indicated that the threat of war should not be dramatized and argued that after the founding of the Cominform, "the international situation has improved in our favor."<sup>70</sup> Another top Soviet official, Georgii Malenkov, had offered a very similar assessment in talks with the Italian Socialist leader Pietro Nenni shortly before Secchia arrived in Moscow.<sup>71</sup> The impact of the Cominform was therefore less devastating than initially feared. In a second meeting with Secchia, Zhdanov even praised the PCF's recent mass mobilization efforts.<sup>72</sup>

Two further points must be stressed here, however. First, the Cominform conference had not given a clear indication to the West European Communists of whether they should maintain their "parliamentary way." Second, even the conversations with Stalin did not resolve the question of future strategy. The Stalin-Secchia meeting was marked by ambivalence that was even stronger than in 1944. Stalin gave Secchia ample reason to believe that civil war was not on the agenda, but he left plenty of room for various interpretations to develop within the West European Communist parties, including the views espoused by forces that wanted to provoke civil war (as Stalin himself knew). The Soviet leader allowed this ambiguity to persist in part because he

kompartii Italii t. Sekkia Pietro," 16 December 1947, RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 128, D. 1074, Ll. 240–260; and Gori and Pons, eds., *Dagli archivi di Mosca*, docs. 18, 19, and 21.

69. I. Stalin, "Mozhem dat' dva meshka deneg," *Istochnik*, No. 5–6 (1993), pp. 124–126; and Gori and Pons, eds., *Dagli archivi di Mosca*, doc. 20.

70. "Zapis' besedy Zhdanova," RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 128, D. 1101, L. 185.

71. Record of the meeting between Malenkov and Nenni, 24 November 1947, RGASPI, F. 83, Op. 1, D. 14, L. 67–68; and Pietro Nenni, *Tempo di guerra fredda. Diari 1943–1956* (Milan: SugarCo, 1981), p. 400.

72. "Zapis' besedy sekretarya TsK VKP(b) tov. Zhdanova A. A. s sekretarem TsK kompartii Italii tov. Sekkia, sostoyavshchiesya 16.XII.1947g.," RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 128, D. 1101, L. 190; and Gori and Pons, eds., *Dagli archivi di Mosca*, doc. 22.

wanted to avoid tying his own hands, and in part because of uncertainty in the Soviet decision-making process. The records of the meetings between Secchia, Zhdanov, and Stalin and other archival documents on the Cominform reveal these conflicting aspects of the Soviet Union's reaction to the launching of the Marshall Plan.<sup>73</sup>

The evolution of Soviet policy toward the PCI and the Italian question in late 1947 and early 1948 did not seem fully adequate to cope with the challenge initiated by the Cominform. The Eastern bloc was shifting toward an isolationist posture and was deemphasizing the counteroffensive against Western interests that had been announced with great fanfare in September 1947. Moreover, Soviet officials continued to avoid offering an unequivocal reaction to the Marshall Plan. Their reticence accentuated the dilemma of the West European parties. In vain, the Italian Communists urged the Soviet Union to make an official pledge of economic and food aid in the event of a leftist victory in national elections. Stalin claimed that this request was dangerous and that any such move would be interpreted as a violation of Italian national sovereignty.<sup>74</sup> The Soviet Union thus adhered firmly to the rule of avoiding interference outside its own sphere of influence—interference that might prove costly in Eastern Europe. This stance implied the need for a degree of passivity vis-à-vis Western Europe.

The mixed signals conveyed by Moscow to the PCI reemerged at a secret meeting between Togliatti and Kostylev on 23 March 1948. Togliatti asked about the Soviet leadership's view of the possibility of armed insurrection. Togliatti did not exclude serious provocations against the Popular Front before and after the elections, and he reaffirmed that the PCI must be prepared for any possibility, including that of an armed insurrection in northern Italy. But the PCI leader also declared to the Soviet official that, even in the event of a positive Soviet response, the Italian party would act only in extreme circumstances. Furthermore, he noted that such a step could possibly lead to another world war in which the Soviet Union and the countries of "new democracy" would support the Popular Front against the Western countries, including the United States, who would be supporting the Christian Democrats. Molotov's response was quick: On 26 March he sent a telegram to Kostylev ordering him to inform Togliatti that the Soviet leadership believed that armed conflict would be appropriate only if the "reactionary forces" launched a military attack. At present, he added, a Communist insurrection would be a dangerous

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73. See the essays of Giuliano Procacci, Anna Di Biagio, and Silvio Pons in Giuliano Procacci *et al.*, eds., *The Cominform*.

74. Gori and Pons, eds., *Dagli archivi di Mosca*, doc. 22.

misadventure. Molotov warned the Italian Communists not to listen to Yugoslav advice.<sup>75</sup>

It is unclear whether Moscow knew of the scenarios for intervention in Italy that the United States had developed in early 1948.<sup>76</sup> More likely, Soviet circumspection resulted from a broader set of concerns. Soviet policy makers were focusing their attention on Germany, on consolidating the Eastern bloc, and on the potential for serious conflict with Yugoslavia. Stalin had concluded that any significant involvement by either the Soviet Union or the newly solidified “socialist camp” in a conflict in a Western country would be a grave mistake. The paradoxical consequence was that the PCI’s electoral defeat had no appreciable effect on Soviet-PCI relations, though it would have been easy for Stalin to claim that the outcome was further proof of the hazards of “parliamentary illusions” and of the party’s belated or inadequate compliance with Cominform directives. In private, however, the Soviet leader must have seen the Italian elections of April 1948 as a turning point—just as the United States had.<sup>77</sup> The results not only confirmed the failure of the strategy adopted by West European Communist parties after the establishment of the Cominform, but also demonstrated the tenacity of the forces of the enemy “camp.” As a result, the Soviet Union deemed it even more appropriate to define its security concerns within the narrow limits of the Eastern bloc. From this point on, the policy of attempting to prevent the formation of a cohesive Western bloc was largely abandoned.

These developments brought an end to the period of tense and volatile relations between Moscow and the PCI that emerged after the formation of the Cominform. The collapse of the mild coordination established in 1944 between the Soviet Union and the PCI did not, however, give rise to a new political strategy. The Soviet response to the Marshall Plan left the Western Communist parties isolated, while at the same time leaving open the possibility for potentially disastrous civil conflict. In accordance with Soviet directives, Communist policy in Western Europe was reduced to propaganda and to waiting for new social conflicts. The PCI would strengthen its role in Italian society and develop democratic practices, counting exclusively on its own forces.

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75. The report on the secret conversation between Kostylev and Togliatti on 23 March 1948 and Molotov’s subsequent telegram of 26 March 1948 are kept in the Archive of the President of the Russian Federation. I would like to thank Mikhail M. Narinskii for allowing me to cite these documents. On Yugoslav pressure exerted on the PCI at the beginning of 1948, see Gilas, *Se la memoria non m’inganna*, p. 154.

76. See J. E. Miller, “Taking the Gloves Off: The United States and the Italian Elections of 1948,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter 1983), pp. 34–55.

77. Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 214.

## Strategic Decline

The two main crises in the PCI after the electoral defeat were caused by the attempt on Togliatti's life on 14 July 1948 and the campaign against Italy's participation in the Atlantic Pact in early 1949. Taken together, these events underscored the PCI's anti-insurrectionist stance in domestic policy as well as its reliance on propaganda over action. The PCI's reaction to the assassination attempt was extremely cautious. Although the archives of the PCI do not contain transcripts of the meetings of the leadership bodies during the general strike that followed the attempted assassination, there is no evidence that PCI leaders ever considered working with former partisans in the North to provoke widespread violence. Conversations that Secchia and Longo had with Kostylev confirmed the prudence of both the Italian Communists and the Soviet Union. Secchia told the Soviet ambassador that "according to the PCI leadership, as well as recent assessments by friends of the Italian Communists," it was not yet time for an armed uprising.<sup>78</sup> During Nenni's visit to Moscow a few weeks later, on 5 August, Malenkov informed him of the Soviet position: Soviet leaders, he declared, believed there was "nothing new" that would alter the low probability of war they had foreseen in late 1947.<sup>79</sup>

After June 1948 yet another development made consideration of an insurrection in Italy nearly impossible. The excommunication of Tito from the Cominform meant that Yugoslavia could no longer be a springboard for a Communist uprising in northern Italy. Instead, Yugoslavia was now a frontier within the Communist world itself, and the PCI was in the forefront of the anti-Tito ranks.<sup>80</sup> Togliatti had played a major role in the second Cominform conference of 19–23 June 1948, which was the venue for the denunciation of Yugoslavia's heresy. Togliatti had condemned the Yugoslavs for their "infantile, adventuristic tendency to play with the idea of new war,"<sup>81</sup> and he recalled that "we clashed on the question of Trieste."<sup>82</sup>

The sudden shift in the Cominform's priorities was not, however, a sign of the triumph of political realism. Even Togliatti began to waver. In his first speech upon returning to active political life in September 1948, he de-

78. Record of the meeting between Kostylev and Secchia, 15 July 1948, AVPRE, F. 098, Op. 31, Pap. 180, D. 16, L. 7. See also Collotti, *Archivio Secchia*, pp. 217–218, 427.

79. Record of the meeting between Malenkov and Nenni, 5 August 1948, RGASPI, F. 83, Op. 1, D. 14, L. 96.

80. Gori and Pons, *Dagli archivi di Mosca*, docs. 26, 27, 28, 29, 31, 32.

81. Procacci *et al.*, eds., *The Cominform*, p. 579.

82. These words of Togliatti (not included in the official minutes of the Cominform Conference) are reported in Secchia's personal notes, APC, Archivio M, MF. 101.

nounced the lingering presence of “something dark” within the party that was seeking war and insurrection.<sup>83</sup> But in March 1949 he denounced the Atlantic Pact as an act of war and warned of the threat of conflict.<sup>84</sup> In subsequent years, the growing emphasis within the Communist world on the “danger of war” led to further abrupt shifts. In this context the PCI’s opposition to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) essentially became a propaganda campaign of no political efficacy. The turning point came in 1949, when Italy was included in NATO, a move that was considered largely unavoidable even by the Soviet Union.<sup>85</sup> The PCI had already played—and lost—its trump card in 1947–1948.

Stalin and Togliatti met again in December 1949, for the first time since March 1944. The content of the meeting is known only from the shorthand notes taken by Togliatti.<sup>86</sup> The most relevant feature of these notes is that they do not mention international questions except for a brief reference to Stalin’s intention of establishing a Far Eastern Informburo, a step that, as Stalin himself acknowledged, was opposed by the Chinese leader, Mao Zedong. This suggests that Stalin was still hopeful of expanding the Cominform’s functions. There is little doubt, however, that more pressing questions were on the agenda in Communist policy. Just a month earlier, Mihkail Suslov had addressed the Third Cominform Conference with a report on the “struggle for peace.” It is not clear why Stalin would not have brought this up (assuming that Togliatti’s notes are more or less accurate and complete). It may be that foreign policy had become such a secret and delicate issue that Stalin deemed it either unsuitable for discussion or too sensitive to be recorded.

After the establishment of NATO and the final division of Germany in 1949, the task of the West European Communist parties was clearly limited to propaganda and domestic issues. Togliatti’s notes show that he discussed the topic of “national paths” with Stalin. From the Soviet point of view, however, this was hardly the political issue it had been in 1944. The PCI was now reduced to being a propaganda tool against “imperialist aggressiveness.” Togliatti’s notes provide further confirmation of Stalin’s Janus-like behavior, as had emerged in his meeting with Secchia two years earlier. On the one hand, Stalin was unwilling to encourage violent social and political conflict in Italy,

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83. Comitato Centrale, Verbali, 23–25 September 1948, APC.

84. Direzione, Verbali, 28 March 1949, APC.

85. See, for example, Kostylev’s report to Molotov, 8 March 1950, AVPRF, F. 098, Op. 33, Pap. 200, D. 9.

86. Palmiro Togliatti, Carte della scrivania, 26 December 1949, APC.

a move considered to have dangerous international implications. Stalin also claimed that a “bourgeois government” with Communist participation was still feasible (though in fact the question was no longer on the agenda in Italy by 1949). On the other hand, Stalin insisted on the importance of extralegal action as a means of adequately preparing the party for future battles, despite his recognition that no such prospect was feasible in the immediate future. Stalin’s general advice emphasized tactics rather than any firm political principle, and the proposal he broached about an alliance with Catholic forces seemed even more peculiar: “Do not attack religion; even a cat-God, like the Egyptians had, can be believed in, if necessary.” Overall, then, Stalin did not have much to suggest to Togliatti. Although this was partly a consequence of Italy’s declining importance for the Soviet Union, it also was attributable to Stalin’s failure to devise a consistent strategy for Communist hegemony in Western Europe.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from the final phase of relations between Stalin and Togliatti in late 1950 and early 1951. The meetings held between Togliatti and Stalin during this period apparently were not transcribed, but we do know that the meetings focused on Stalin’s proposal for Togliatti to become head of the Cominform.<sup>87</sup> This idea was part of a plan, apparently cultivated by Stalin himself, to extend and strengthen the Cominform. Stalin hoped to consolidate Communism’s response to the international situation after the outbreak of the Korean War. Nonetheless, the political content of Stalin’s plans to reinvigorate the Cominform remained unclear, since he focused mainly on cryptic organizational measures.<sup>88</sup> On the other hand, the political and personal implications of the proposal were sufficient to generate an unprecedented conflict between Stalin and the PCI leadership.

Togliatti decided to reject Stalin’s proposal even before consulting his Italian comrades. In a letter to Stalin on 4 January 1951, Togliatti explained the move without invoking only personal reasons. He said he was mostly concerned with keeping PCI activity within constitutional and parliamentary constraints, which meant that he was not entirely pessimistic about the international prospects for his party. In a further split with the Soviet position, Togliatti claimed that there was room to continue the party’s legal activity in Italy, despite Communist propaganda’s increasing emphasis on the threat of war. At the same time, the Italian leader declared that it was preferable to as-

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87. There were three meetings between Stalin and Togliatti, on 13 January, 18 January, and 12 February 1951. See “Posetiteli kremlevskogo kabineta,” p. 173. Two of these meetings were held, as far as we know, with two subsequent delegations of the PCI. See Collotti, *Archivio Secchia*, pp. 229–232.

88. See Grant Adibekov, *Kominform i poslevoennaya Evropa* (Moscow: Rossiya Molodaya, 1994), pp. 205 ff.

sign Communists to mass movements, such as the peace movement, rather than to “a semi-legal organization, which is how we construe the Informburo.”<sup>89</sup> This reference to a link between the peace movement and the defense of the Soviet Union was certainly not a heretical one, but Togliatti’s response overall revealed a sharp difference of opinion on the prospects for Communism in Western Europe.<sup>90</sup>

This disagreement was not given great emphasis at the time, but it could not be forgotten during subsequent events. In a meeting in January 1951 with Longo, Secchia, and Togliatti, Stalin heavily stressed the dangers of the international situation. He believed that the West European Communist parties could soon be banned and that a new world war could break out at any moment.<sup>91</sup> Stalin’s position had a powerful impact on the Italian Communists. Although Togliatti was able to resist Stalin’s pressure in Moscow, the PCI leadership, after discussing what Longo and Secchia reported about their trip to the Soviet Union, backed the Soviet proposal.<sup>92</sup> Togliatti refused to change his mind, however. Stalin played his last card in February 1951 during a meeting with Secchia and Togliatti. The Soviet leader argued that a clear distinction had to be maintained between personal and political reasons, and he again invited the Italian leader to accept the post offered to him.<sup>93</sup> This effort, however, was in vain, and Stalin ultimately had to yield to Togliatti’s obstinacy.

Thus, Togliatti defended the PCI’s survival strategy of using peaceful and legal means to further the development of Communism in Italy. He pursued this strategy despite—and not because of—the existence of the Cominform. If nothing else, the strategy exposed the lack of political prospects for the West European Communist movement. No general meeting of the Cominform was held after Togliatti’s refusal, even though a session had been scheduled for some time. Indeed, the Cominform had become a spent force after the expulsion of Yugoslavia, less than a year after it was founded. By all indications the organization was never more than a tool for Soviet retrenchment and for the formation of the Eastern bloc. Its brief life was that of a shadow entity addressing internal conflicts in the Communist world. The lack of a more meaningful role reflected the strategic defeat suffered by Communism in Western Europe in 1947–1948.

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89. Gori and Pons, eds., *Dagli archivi di Mosca*, doc. 39.

90. See comments by Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity*, p. 112.

91. Collotti, *Archivio Secchia*, p. 229.

92. *Ibid.*, pp. 229–230.

93. *Ibid.*, pp. 231, 445.

## Conclusion

The interaction between Moscow and the West European Communist parties in 1943–1947 is best understood in the context of the struggle between moderate and radical forces within the Communist movement as a whole. The Soviet Union exercised its influence in favor of moderate tendencies, particularly in France and Italy, because it wished to avoid international conflicts and overexposure. The stress on moderation meant that West European Communist parties were to pursue political alliances, prevent civil war, and put forth platforms of national unity in the domestic arena and keep Europe from dividing into blocs in the international arena. But this policy was not equivalent to a consistent strategy. When the United States began to push for reorganization in Western Europe in the spring and summer of 1947, the Soviet policy of moderation collapsed. Soon there was a reversal of course, as the West European Communist parties moved toward mass, extra-parliamentary opposition, and the East European Communist parties conformed more closely to the Soviet model.

In that sense the formation of the Cominform was more a sign of retreat than a shift toward the offensive. It exposed a poor understanding of the international changes brought about by the Second World War, and it signaled a return to concepts dating back to the 1930s. The shift in Soviet policy in 1947 meant the delegitimization of the anti-fascist policy that had accompanied the growing influence of the Communist parties in Western Europe. The shift occurred not only because of Western containment strategies, but also because of political cleavages that were increasingly evident in the Communist world. The limits of Communist policy can be ascribed to the Soviet Union's inability to maintain influence outside Eastern Europe; they were therefore intrinsic to Soviet political culture. The illusory expectation that the Marshall Plan would fail was the misguided result of a deficient political culture. It reflected a basic distrust of the notion of creating a stable Europe and was an admission of the Soviet Union's inability to present a credible alternative to the U.S. aid initiative.

The Italian case exemplified the evolution of Soviet policy toward Europe. The PCI in 1943–1944 set an important precedent of a moderate Communist approach to domestic policy. This approach was essentially the consequence of a decision-making process that excluded more intransigent options. Soviet and PCI leaders understood the horrendous domestic and international consequences of civil war, and they therefore did their best to avoid it. Even after the founding of the Cominform, Togliatti retained his post, and the extremist tendencies within the PCI were unable to establish a new axis with Moscow.



Stalin's policy toward the PCI and other West European Communist parties was not part of a grand strategy to spread Communism in Europe. Instead, it was formulated entirely in response to narrow Soviet interests. The Soviet rejection of the Marshall Plan pushed the West European Communists into political isolation, which weakened their credentials as national forces and compromised their chances for governing. These shortcomings practically guaranteed the PCI's electoral defeat in April 1948. Opposition to the Marshall Plan proved to be an insurmountable disadvantage for the West European Communist parties, and it was compounded by the psychological impact on the West of the founding of the Cominform and the coup in Czechoslovakia. Although more radical options were set aside, the mass mobilization promoted by the Italian Communists produced the opposite of the desired effect. Rather than being seen as an indispensable part of the government, the PCI increasingly found itself with little more than a propagandistic role, as in the futile campaign against Italy's membership in the Atlantic Pact. The Italian Communists proclaimed that they wanted to defend Italy's "national sovereignty" against U.S. hegemony at the very time that the East European Communists had been forced to yield their sovereignty to the Soviet bloc. To ensure the cohesion of Communist identity, the PCI kept up the myth surrounding the Soviet Union, but this very myth prevented the party from expanding its influence in Italian society. Despite the mass character and social base of the PCI, it gained only a peripheral role in Italian politics during the early Cold War and after. In this manner the policies of Stalin and Togliatti from 1944 to 1948 defined the limits of Communist activity for decades to come.

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