

# Revolution in ITALY 1943-48

**An Irish Socialist Network pamphlet**  
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**Between 1943 and 1948 Italy was rocked by a massive protest movement that shook the foundations of its social structure. Although not as well known, the abortive revolution of these years can be compared with the upheavals of the Russian revolution or the Spanish Civil War. The ultimate defeat of the Italian movement can still tell us a lot about the failure of the socialist movement in the twentieth century - and how we can avoid repeating that failure.**

The resistance to fascism in Italy was spearheaded by the parties of the Left, above all the Italian Communist Party (PCI). The Mussolini regime began to crumble in March 1943 when factory workers in the northern cities took part in a strike wave that mobilised 100,000 workers. Nothing of the sort had ever been seen in a fascist state.

In July, Allied troops landed in Sicily, and the ruling elite decided

it was time to abandon Mussolini's ship before it sank. He was deposed by the king and the army command, who formed a new government and signed a separate peace with the Allies. Mussolini fled north with the help of the Nazis, and a full-scale German occupation of northern Italy began.

The new government, based in the liberated south, wanted to preserve the old social order as much as

possible: it was known as the "Kingdom of the South". But in the north, a mass resistance movement was organised by the left-wing parties. It was led by the PCI, the Socialists (PSI) and the Action Party, a middle-class radical party sympathetic to the workers' movement.

The northern partisans suffered heavy casualties – much higher than those sustained by regular armies during the war. Although not

as formidable as Tito's partisans in neighbouring Yugoslavia, they led a highly effective campaign of resistance to the German occupation. As the Allied armies marched north, the partisans were able to stage uprisings in April 1945, liberating Genoa, Turin and Milan with little or no help from the US-UK forces.

By the end of the war, there were 100,000 people involved in the resistance. The military

resistance had been combined with a revival of labour militancy after two decades of repression. At the same time, Committees of National Liberation (CLNs) had been formed all over northern Italy to challenge the authority of the occupation regime. In some areas, they had assumed many of the functions of government.

The US-UK authorities were greatly worried by these developments. They wanted to contain the resistance movement and preserve what Churchill called “traditional property relations”. In Yugoslavia, the communist-led partisans had already moved to abolish capitalism and establish a communist state: the western Allies were determined to prevent a similar outcome in Italy. In this task they had the full support of the “Kingdom of the South”.

## **Togliatti and the PCI**

The policy of the Italian Communists was to prove crucial. The Socialists were no match for the PCI in terms of discipline and organisation: although they narrowly out-pollied the Communists in the first post-war elections, they were

always subordinate to the strategy of the PCI. While the Action Party played a key role in the resistance and contained many outstanding leaders, it was unable to translate this presence

that we want has not got the aim of imposing social and political transformation in a socialist or communist sense. Its aim is rather national liberation and the destruction

already furious about the steps taken by Tito in Yugoslavia. Any bold steps by the Italian communists would have compromised relations between Moscow and the western powers even further.



**Female partisans in action during the liberation of Italy**

into mass support after the war.

So it was inevitable that the PCI would determine what course the Left as a whole would follow. The dominant figure in the PCI was its leader Palmiro Togliatti, who returned from Soviet exile in 1944 and laid out his stall. He ordered the party militants to postpone any reckoning with the capitalist system until the war had been won: “Remember always that the insurrection

of Fascism. All the other problems will be resolved by the people tomorrow, once Italy is liberated, by means of a free popular vote and the election of a Constituent Assembly.”

This cautious strategy was partly determined by the needs of the Soviet government. Stalin had agreed to carve up Europe with his western allies and Italy had been placed in the western sphere of influence. The British government was

But it also reflected the views of Togliatti himself. Having witnessed shattering defeats for the Left in Italy, Germany and Spain, the PCI leader was extremely cautious and averse to risk-taking of any sort. He was unwilling to sanction any moves to challenge the Italian social structure as long as the country was under Allied occupation, fearing that the PCI would be driven underground once again.

Togliatti drew on the prison writings of his dead comrade Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci had been the leader of the PCI in the twenties until he was jailed by the fascist regime. While in prison he filled several dozen notebooks with his political observations – when these notebooks were published after the war, Gramsci was recognised as one of the great social thinkers of the twentieth century.

Gramsci argued that the working class needed to build a network of alliances with other

social groups, forging an “historic bloc” that could take on the capitalist class. He also stressed the need for the revolutionary party to wage a lengthy struggle in civil society, challenging the dominant ideology and establishing its own “hegemony” in the battle of ideas. These concepts had a major influence on the PCI’s strategy.

But Togliatti added his own ideas to the mix. Whereas Gramsci had talked about building social alliances from below through political struggles, Togliatti was also in favour of political alliances negotiated between party leaderships from the top downwards. While Gramsci had urged the working class to construct its own state, based on workers’ councils and other forms of popular organisation, Togliatti put the emphasis on conquering the existing state machine through the ballot box.

The formula used to justify this emphasis was “progressive democracy”. As the PCI’s theoretical journal put it: “Progressive democracy is a new road to socialism. It is a road which unites all the healthy elements of the population behind an advanced democratic regime

which is open to every possible progressive development. Precisely for this reason, it is a strategy for socialism which is less painful, less costly and less bloody than that which in Russia, because of historical circumstances, had to be the way of



**Mussolini after his capture and execution by left-wing partisans**

the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Togliatti was right to believe that revolution was impossible in 1945. The Italian peninsula was under Allied occupation. Any insurrection launched by the partisans would have been confined to the north and soon crushed. The British government had already showed its determination to block communist advances in Greece, crushing an uprising in Athens with a

great deal of bloodshed. But the strategy of the PCI was still a great deal more cautious than it needed to be – and this reflected the major flaws in Togliatti’s thinking. It was naïve to believe that social questions could simply

be postponed until Italy was liberated. The conservative forces in Italian society were busy organising to defend the social structure, with the backing of the Allies.

### **The old order fights back**

One of their priorities was to ensure the continuity of the Italian state. The “Kingdom of the South” had preserved the state apparatus of the fascist regime as much as possible. Judges,

police chiefs and civil servants who had served under Mussolini were allowed to carry on in their posts.

The Action Party called for a radical reconstruction of the state, using the Committees of National Liberation as the foundation. Its leaders wanted the CLNs to be integrated into the new political system, as instruments of radical, participatory democracy. These proposals were bitterly opposed by the conservative camp. The PCI’s support for the Action Party was lukewarm, and its programme fell by the wayside.

The Communists were driven largely by a desire to appease the Christian Democrat party (DC). The DC, although it played a negligible role in the resistance, was fast emerging as the dominant conservative force in post-war Italy. The Liberals were the traditional party of the business class, but their support base was too narrow to protect the interests of Italian capital effectively.

The Christian Democrats were founded during the war under the leadership of Alcide De Gasperi, and won the endorsement of the Pope when he realised that democracy was

inevitable. This backing from the Vatican transformed the DC into a mass party almost overnight. Although they continued some genuinely left-wing elements, the dominant current was deeply conservative and hostile to any proposals for radical change. With this in mind, the business elite gave the DC its full support. But Togliatti was unwilling to recognise the conservative nature of the Christian Democrats.

Because his strategy for building social alliances was geared towards top-down agreements with political parties, Togliatti was desperate to reach an understanding with the DC. He believed that it was essential for the PCI to win the support of the Italian middle classes, so this meant forming a government coalition with their chief party, the Christian Democrats. Togliatti described the DC as a party that contained “a mass of workers, peasants, intellectuals and young people, who basically share our aspirations because like us they want a democratic and progressive Italy.” In this he was largely right – but he was wrong to attribute the same aspirations to the DC leadership.

An alternative strategy would have attempted

to win over the “mass of workers, peasants, intellectuals and young people” who wanted Italian society to change after the war. This would have involved taking the lead in social struggles that drove a wedge between the DC’s supporters and the party



**Antonio Gramsci, the founder and chief theorist of the PCI**

leadership. But there was no serious attempt to do so by the PCI.

Instead, Togliatti made compromise after compromise for the sake of preserving the coalition with the Christian Democrats, telling a doubting comrade in the PCI: “De Gasperi and I agree on a host of things, from

agrarian reform to trade union unity. You’ll see, we’ll achieve a lot together.” De Gasperi himself was far more realistic than Togliatti. He recognised the need for a short-term alliance with the Communists, but never saw this arrangement as anything

more than a necessary evil. His intention was always to break with the PCI at the earliest opportunity.

Having shot down the idea of a role for the CLNs in the new political order, De Gasperi then insisted on delaying elections until 1946, hoping that popular radicalism

would have cooled down by then. He also demanded that the new assembly would have no legislative power. The left-wing parties grumbled, but De Gasperi got what he wanted.

## **Building a mass party**

Meanwhile, the PCI expanded spectacularly and became a true mass party. When the fascist regime had crumbled in 1943, there had been a few thousand Communists, most of them in jail or in exile. By 1947, the PCI had two million members. Its militants were active in communities all over Italy, from the factories of the north to the poor peasants of Sicily.

In the northern cities, workers set up factory committees that demanded a role in the management of the plant. They forced the employers to change the rhythms of the production line and to abolish piecework. Foreman disliked by the workforce were often driven out. The actions of the factory committees prompted Angelo Costa, the president of the Confindustria (Italy’s business federation), to insist that “there is a fundamental factor: the principle of authority which must perforce

be respected ... the concept of workers' control threatens that principle of authority; it is the superior who must control the inferior, never the inferior who controls the superior."

But the PCI made no attempt to link this grassroots agitation into a national movement that could win significant reforms. As the Socialist trade union leader Vittorio Foa later put it: "The constant characteristic of the whole reconstruction period was the separation of a political programme from working-class struggle. Militancy was confined to issues concerning the immediate needs of the workers, while the transformation of the balance of class forces was entrusted to the future parliament."

The new trade union federation, the CGIL, was affected by Togliatti's alliance strategy. The programme adopted by its first congress in 1945 called for the nationalisation of major industries and the equalisation of wages at a national level. But even though the majority of CGIL members were supporters of the PCI, the three parties (Communist, Socialist and Christian Democrat) were given an equal

say in the leadership of the federation. As a result, the CGIL's positions were usually watered down so that the DC would find them acceptable: the trade



**Palmiro Togliatti**

union movement became an extension of the government coalition, and was unable to offer alternative leadership to the working class.

It must be said that even the most radical workers were not aiming to carry out a revolution

at the time. There was widespread discussion of socialism in working-class communities, but the revolution itself was generally seen as something that would come from the outside – brought by the tanks of the USSR. Just as national liberation had been the gift of the Allies, class liberation would be the gift of the Red Army. This notion of revolution from above cherished by Communist and Socialist militants was a barrier to the development of a strategy that relied on the strength of the Italian workers' movement itself.

### **The first post-war battles**

While the left-wing parties waited for elections to bring them to power so that they could change society, the conservative forces were busy securing their control over the state apparatus.

Not only the structure, but also the personnel of the state remained unchanged. Any move to purge the judiciary, the police and the civil service of Fascist elements was strongly resisted.

In fact, the only clear-out

that took place targeted partisans who had joined the state administration just after the liberation. Christian Democrat ministers gradually forced them out of their posts. They were especially keen to drive anti-Fascists out of the police force.

The elections held in 1946 were a disappointment for the left. The DC emerged as the biggest party with 35% of the vote. The Socialists had 20%, the PCI 19%. Although their combined strength in the Assembly was greater than the Christian Democrats, they lacked an overall majority. The Action Party won a negligible 1.5% of the vote, and dissolved soon after.

Although the PSI had the edge over the Communists by a small margin, they were unable to challenge the dominance of the PCI. Soon after the elections, they were damaged by a right-wing split that took almost half their deputies in the assembly. After 1946, they never came close to matching the PCI's share of the vote, and remained subordinate to its strategy until the late fifties.

The left did, however, win an important victory in the referendum on the monarchy. The Italian

people voted to establish a republic, doing away with the power of the royal family (who had collaborated with the Fascist regime). The vote revealed a divide between North and South: while the North was strongly republican, the Southern electorate voted in favour of the monarchy.

This political divide reflected the different experiences of the period between 1943 and 1945: while the North had been radicalised by the resistance struggle, the “Kingdom of the South” had kept the lid on pressure from below. Conservative values were still dominant, especially in the countryside. The DC received much of its support from rural areas.

As the assembly drafted Italy’s new constitution, the conservative camp won an important victory over the Lateran Pacts. Mussolini had negotiated an agreement with the Vatican in 1929, making Catholicism the state religion and imposing compulsory religious education in Italian schools. The church hierarchy wanted the Pacts to be included in the new constitution unchanged. The secular parties resisted their demands. But Togliatti changed course at the last moment, ordering the Communist deputies

in the assembly to vote in favour of the Pacts. His hope that this conciliatory move would ensure a smooth relationship between the PCI and the Catholic Church proved hopelessly naïve.

Meanwhile, the DC continued to frustrate



**DC leader Alcide De Gasperi**

any attempt by the left-wing parties to implement reforms. One of the PCI’s main leaders at the time, Pietro Secchia, later remarked that Togliatti had always posed the choices available to the Communists “in terms of insurrection or acquiescence. Instead there existed a third way, which was that of making braver use of pressure from the rank and file, for all the risks

that entailed.” There was one major exception to this pattern: the agrarian reform promoted by the Communist minister for agriculture, Fausto Gullo. Gullo’s approach showed the potential of “making braver use of pressure from the rank and file”

## **The Gullo decrees**

Gullo had issued a series of decrees from July 1944 that attempted to shift the balance of class forces in the Southern countryside. Peasants were encouraged to form co-operatives and take over poorly cultivated land. Agrarian contracts were to be reformed so that the peasants’ share of the crop would be at least 50%.

At the same time, the CGIL began organising in the rural South, targeting farm labourers in particular. Its programme sought to regulate the terms on which labourers were hired, ending the demeaning practice whereby workers were chosen by the landowners’ hench-men every morning. The combination of the Gullo decrees and the CGIL’s agitation unleashed the greatest wave of unrest the Southern countryside had ever seen. The wealthy landowners were enraged by the challenge to their privileges, and often hired Mafia gunmen to fire on peasant demonstrations.

The conservative parties were also bitterly hostile to the movement for agrarian reform. The Liberal press described Gullo’s decrees as “more deadly than the destruction caused by war, or by military occupations, or by natural disasters.” The Christian Democrats were terrified that Gullo’s popularity might undermine their electoral strongholds in rural areas (on which they were heavily dependent).

More than a thousand co-operatives were formed, involving a quarter of a million people. But their efforts were undermined by a

measure insisted on by the Liberals and the DC. Local commissions had to decide whether occupations of the land were legal. Thanks to the conservative parties, these commissions included three members: a landowners' representative, a peasant representative and the local magistrate. Unless the magistrate was sympathetic to the peasantry (which is to say – almost never), the landowners had an automatic majority. The vast majority of land occupations were ruled illegal by the commissions.

Togliatti was unwilling to force the issue, in case it undermined the government coalition. As the PCI's official historian later wrote, the Communist leadership "encouraged the movement but at the same time wished to avert a radicalisation which could become an element of disturbance to the difficult governmental equilibrium."

But without "radicalisation", the rural movement could not win. When it came to the key issues, the Southern

peasants were defeated. A valuable opportunity for the PCI to establish a popular base in the South and undermine the DC's electoral support was also lost.



**De Gasperi on the campaign trail in 1948**

## **The election of 1948**

The DC-Communist-Socialist coalition was bound to collapse sooner or later, despite Togliatti's moderation. Alcide De Gasperi came under increasing pressure from the business class and the Vatican to end his unnatural alliance with the Communists. As the US-Soviet clash on the global stage began heating up, similar pressure was brought to bear by Washington.

In May 1947, De Gasperi took the leap and broke up the coalition. He quickly formed a new

government that drew support from all the right-wing parties. De Gasperi's government moved quickly to repress social agitation all over the country, using force

to break up protests.

The new realities of the Cold War also forced the PCI to change direction. Its leaders were summoned to a conference of European communists in Poland that September, where Stalin's new line of confrontation with the west was handed down. The French and Italian Communists were criticised for being too willing to compromise with the bourgeois parties. Togliatti accepted the instructions from Moscow with a great deal of reluctance.

Most PCI militants were relieved to find themselves in opposition

to the Christian Democrats. They no longer had to restrain protest movements in which they were active. In September, 600,000 farm labourers in the northern plains went on strike for twelve days, led by the Communists. They won an eight-hour working day and had their wages linked to the rate of inflation.

But Togliatti was suspicious of extra-parliamentary struggles, and channelled the energy of

the party activists into electioneering. The parliamentary elections due to be held in April 1948 were eagerly anticipated and bitterly fought. On the one hand, the Christian Democrats had the strong backing of the US government. Large sums of money were funnelled to the DC by Washington (in excess of \$10m) and promises of huge material aid under the Marshall Plan were made – as long as the Communists lost the election.

While the DC had the support of Washington, the PCI was hampered by its links with Moscow. In February

1948, the Czech Communist Party staged a coup in Prague, driving the non-Communist parties underground and establishing a one-party state. The Italian left-wing press endorsed the Czech coup. But many wavering voters agreed with the conservative argument that if the PCI won at the polls, Italy would experience the same fate as Czechoslovakia.

Although it had spoken of “a strategy for socialism which is less painful, less costly and less bloody” than the path followed by the USSR, the PCI was a strong defender of the Soviet model. Reporting from the Soviet Union, the correspondent of the party newspaper described it as “the first country in the history of the world in which all men are finally free.” Togliatti himself wrote of Stalin: “The role that Stalin has played in the development of human thought is such that he has earned himself a place which until now very few have occupied in the history of humanity.”

Most PCI militants took this misleading propaganda at face value, knowing very little about real conditions in the USSR (Togliatti, of course, was in a position to know better, having spent

years living in Moscow). But for many outside the ranks of the PCI, its endorsement of the Soviet regime meant that it approved of a brutal tyranny implicated in mass murder. The DC capitalised on this feeling, putting the word *libertas* at the heart of its propaganda, warning the electorate that a Communist victory would mean the end of freedom for Italy.

The DC won a crushing victory, with 48.5% of the vote. The Communist-Socialist alliance got 31%, having won almost 40% just two years earlier. While the PCI actually made gains, the Socialist vote collapsed. The victory of the Christian Democrats determined the balance of power in Italian politics for years to come.

## **A revolution that failed**

In July 1948, a right-wing fanatic attempted to murder Palmiro Togliatti outside the parliament building in Rome. As Togliatti recovered from the shooting in hospital, news spread and left-wing activists feared that the government was moving to repress the workers' movement. There were violent clashes in many towns and cities as trade union militants and ex-partisans occupied

factories and took over government buildings.

The Communist leadership moved quickly to pour water on the fire. Togliatti later dismissed the view that the PCI should have attempted to seize power: “Certainly, an insurrectionary attack – and its inevitable defeat – either in 1946 or 1948 would have suited some comrades very well. No danger of the bureaucratisation of the party in that case! And the so-called “revolutionary cadres” could have gone off happily to schools of tactics and strategy in prison or in exile!”

Togliatti was surely right to believe that an armed uprising would have been defeated – the protest movement had been confined to the North, and the government had 180,000 armed police ready to crush its opponents. But the brief explosion of left-wing anger was the product of three years of frustration. The hopes for radical change raised by the resistance movement had been dashed, and Togliatti's own strategy was partly to blame – something he would never acknowledge.

This raises a final point about the PCI's approach in the years between 1943 and 1948. The

influence of Stalinism in the PCI meant that its own internal structures replicated the hierarchies of the Soviet Communist Party. Debate was confined within narrow limits, and all major decisions were transmitted from the leadership cadre to the base. Togliatti himself was the unquestioned leader, a sort of “mini-Stalin”.

The CGIL leader Giuseppe Di Vittorio once spoke of his “great faith in the creative and organisational capacities of the popular masses.” No doubt he was sincere – but the structures of the PCI gave little room for those capacities to express themselves. This helped ensure the defeat of the workers' movement by the conservative forces in Italian society – a defeat that was settled for good by the summer of 1948.



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