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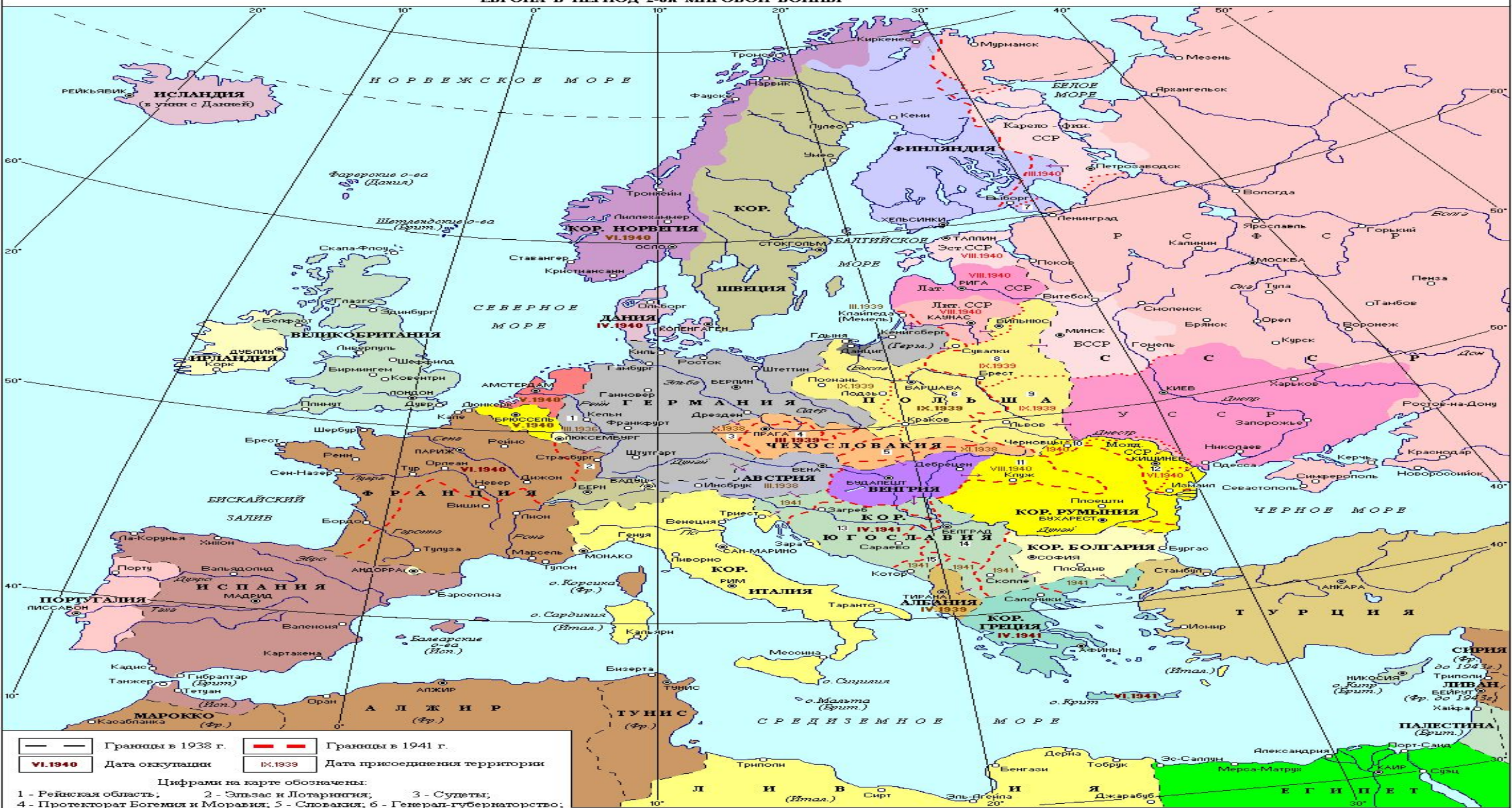
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The Comintern and the Western Communist Parties

1930-1949

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ЕВРОПА В ПЕРИОД 2-ой МИРОВОЙ ВОЙНЫ



The Comintern : The Italian Communist Party

- Following the March on Rome and the ascent of the Fascist Party to power in October 1922, the PCD'I was already working in conditions of precarious semi-legality. Its militants were persecuted and arrested; its press was proscribed.
- By 1926, once the short-lived period of political instability that seemingly opened up new opportunities for the democratic and workers' movements had come to an end (it only survived for the last half of 1924), a blanket of fascist dictatorship descended over Italy and remained for the next 17 years.

The Roots: The PCD'I

- **The Communist Party of Italy, as it was called originally, was founded in Livorno on 21 January 1921.** The First World War had radically modified both the structure and fabric of Italian society: a new working class had emerged, shaped in the militarized factories, with a different organic composition, younger and more impatient.
- **In the countryside, too, the war had deeply eroded previously established social relations.** Above all, this occurred in the share-cropping areas of Central Italy, where great strikes and agricultural agitation took place after the war, but also in some parts of Southern Italy where the movement to occupy the land developed very swiftly .

- This massive social mobilization immediately had repercussions for the *Partito Socialista Italiano* (PSI), which was simultaneously protagonist and beneficiary of the great collective experiences of conflict. It had no direct links with the masses, which it was able to reach only through **trade federations and local trade union councils**; its sections were essentially regional or provincial cultural circles interested in political agitation, with no common political line to connect them.
- The first to move decisively towards a split from the PSI was the 'abstentionist' group, led by **Amadeo Bordiga** (born in 1889), an engineer from Naples. Bordiga's first recruits had been amongst the well-connected Neapolitan dockworkers, railworkers, postal, telegraph and telephone workers, and published a newspaper, *Soviet*, to voice their point of view.

- Another fundamental component of the future PCD'I was focused around the review *L'Ordine Nuovo*, edited by Antonio Gramsci, Angelo Tasca, Palmiro Togliatti and Umberto Terracini, and was less organized in character. This review was published in Italy's most industrialized city, Turin, where the factory councils' movement became widespread after the war.
- The *Ordine Nuovo* group was firmly convinced of the need to overcome and reform the traditional structure of the trade unions and the party through the instrument of workers' self-government. For this reason, they paid great attention to the new ways in which the 'avant-garde' working class was organizing itself. **At first, such prospective reform was not seen as incompatible with continued PSI membership and the intention of renewing the party from within.** Following the political defeat of the occupation of the factories in September 1920, however, the *Ordine Nuovo* group felt a split was inevitable.

- Another significant contribution to the formation of the PCD'I came from the **Young Socialist Federation**, almost all of whose members (47,000 out of 53,000) gathered under the banner of the new party, supplying it with a sizable nucleus of **lower and mid-level cadres**. This was another reason why the creation of the PCD'I took the form of a division between generations: **youth was the common factor among the first communist militants**, both among leaders and the rank-and-file.
- Finally, the contribution of an *intellectual group (journalists, school teachers, students and very young graduates and undergraduates) radicalized by the war and uncompromisingly critical of 'bourgeois democratic' values was evident from the outset and affected the PCD'I more than any other party*. Indeed, intellectuals made up more than half of the party's first central commit.

- The Livorno Congress took place in a political period dominated by the rapidly spreading Fascist action squads, and as the social struggles that had shaken Italy in the two preceding years began to subside. A period of crisis began for all the proletarian organizations, without exception. **The PCD'I, too, was severely affected, losing about 30 per cent of those who had entered its ranks following the split with the PSI.**
- In certain Northern and Central regions (Piedmont, Venezia-Giulia, Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany), there was a **relatively strong rank-and-file, whereas in the Southern areas and in the islands (Sicily and Sardinia) membership was very much weaker.** This geographical distribution was very similar to that of the PSI, and reflected the party's fundamentally provincial structure. As such, the PCD'I was a party with roots deeply embedded in the Italian society of the time, but indicative of its scarce penetration into the large cities except, perhaps, **Turin.**

Gramsci's period:

- The general election of May 1921 put the new party's strength to the test. The results were not encouraging: whereas the PSI retained solid support, obtaining almost 1,600,000 votes and 122 seats, the PCD'I did not reach **300,000 votes and gained only 15 seats**.
- The PCD'I saw the PSI as the biggest obstacle to the victory of the revolution in Italy, and considered Fascism to be nothing more than a coherent manifestation of bourgeois reaction. Naturally, then, **it encountered serious difficulties in applying the directives of the Comintern, which made the conquest of a majority of the working class the premise for revolutionary action.**

Gramsci and The Comintern:

- Although the PCD'I declared its adherence to the discipline of the Comintern, it did not in fact make any serious attempt to apply the tactics of the 'united front' in Italy. Therefore, a further socialist split occurred in October 1922, just as Fascism rose to power, and the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) brought up the question of reunion with the PSI.
- Only a small 'right-wing' minority led by **Angelo Tasca and Antonio Graziadei** was in favour of this project and, in early 1923, the party leadership resigned amid controversy just before the government began their severe repression of the PCD'I.

- A difficult moment for the new party: with many of its leaders in prison and with dramatic organizational problems, it had to defend its line against a Comintern that apparently intended to push the policy of fusion via reliance on Tasca's minority group.
- Gramsci realized first that the situation was no longer tenable. **He was aware that the party could only survive if it remained loyal to the Comintern,** and began to try to build up a new leadership better able to head off the 'right-wing', but also capable of necessarily keeping its distance from Bordiga. Gramsci was able to bring some important leaders over to his position, many of whom had an *Ordine Nuovo* background, including Terracini, **Togliatti**, Alfonso Leonetti and Mauro Scoccimarro. This 'centre' group was still a long way from obtaining a majority consensus in the party central committee.

- the 'centre' group's influence was evident in the more flexible policies adopted by the PCD'I on the eve of the 1924 general elections. Having proposed a coalition with two socialist parties without result, the PCD'I stood as one list with the 'Third Internationalists' of the PSI.
- **Immediately after the election, Giacomo Matteotti, a reformist socialist member of parliament, was murdered by a fascist squad. This gave rise to a crisis of Fascism, as its pretension to being a constitutional party now looked hardly credible, and seemingly opened up an opportunity for the PCD'I to seize the political initiative.**
- the PCD'I's organizational success was remarkable: membership had dropped below 9,000 in 1923, but numbers increased throughout **1924 to reach 18,000 and up to 25,000 in 1925.**

Bolshevization of the PCD'I :

- The application of the Comintern's directives on Bolshevization narrowed the scope for free political discussion and forged a **conspicuous apparatus**, which became the very backbone of the party. Simultaneously, however, it was grafted onto the renewal process begun under Gramsci's leadership and translated into a form that strengthened and extended the party's roots in society.
- Bolshevization did not turn the PCD'I into a more working-class party: **the aggregation around the party of forces of differing political origins** (anarchists and republicans as well as, naturally, socialists and, in some rare cases, Catholics). This was due to the PCD'I's being recognized as the most combative and organized adversary of Fascism.

The fight inside the Party :

- Bordiga continued to question the party line and to criticize Comintern policies, and even the 'shift to the left' at the fifth world congress did not question the trust which had grown up between the ECCI and the PCD'I leadership under Gramsci. **On the eve of the PCD'I's third congress, held in Lyons (January 1926) to ensure the delegates' safety, over 90 per cent of the members sided with Gramsci and Togliatti.**
- The Lyons congress sealed the final marginalization of the left within the PCD'I. **Tension between Bordiga and the Comintern peaked at the sixth ECCI plenum in February–March 1926, at which the former gave possibly the last truly oppositional speech to be heard in an assembly of the Comintern.**

The theory of the Party :

- By then, the Bolshevization of the PCD'I was complete. However, it can hardly be argued that such a process resulted in an impoverishment of the party's political analysis, as happened in other instances (most clearly in Germany and France). **On the contrary, the analyses on the class structure of Italian society and the nature of fascism in the political theses approved by congress and presented by Gramsci and Togliatti were interesting.**
- The party was conceived as an instrument for revolution, putting in its place a rich but subtle analysis of **the circumstances** in which the party operated, of **the relationships between the various social classes**, of their political expression, and of **the contradictions which existed in the fabric of society**. The 'driving forces of the Italian revolution' were seen as being, on one hand, **the working class and the agricultural proletariat**, on the other, **the peasants in Southern Italy**.

- However, the PCD'I's leadership (and, even more, its apparatus) predicted the rapid fall of Fascism and underestimate the growing weakness of the anti-fascist front and its isolation in Italian society.
- Against the PCD'I's estimation, therefore, **1926 was characterized by the progressive and evermore rapid transformation of Fascism into open dictatorship, where in systematic and legalized state repression complemented the actions of the Fascist squads. As a result, the PCD'I was forced into semi-clandestinity and, again, its membership fell severely.**
- PCD'I was the most determined and militant of the forces opposing the dictatorship. The fascist dictatorship period in Italy represented a watershed that the French left never experienced and, somehow, for the Germans came too late.

- The PCD'I and the Comintern were not as tense as in 1922–23, the 'Italian question' continued to puzzle Moscow. There had been serious dissent between the ECCI and the PCD'I concerning the tactics to be adopted after the assassination of Matteotti and, in particular, over communist dissociation from the boycott of parliament begun by other anti-fascist parties.
- **In October 1926, Gramsci was seriously worried about the internal struggle within the Soviet party hierarchy, and warned its leaders of the risk of losing their function as reference point for the world proletariat by exhausting themselves in a power struggle.**
- **Togliatti, who was the PCD'I delegate at the ECCI in Moscow, made a more realistic evaluation of the in-avoidability of that conflict; he had no doubt about the need for the Italian party to side with the majority in the Soviet politburo.**

- In November 1926, many important leaders, included Gramsci, were arrested (Togliatti escaped arrest because he was in Moscow), communist organizations were disbanded, its press closed, and thousands of militants were denounced in a special Tribunal for the Defence of the State. For Italian communists, a long period of clandestinity was underway.
- In May 1927, communists in Italy (10,000) including party members and members of the Youth Federation, most of whom were in the North; by the second half of that year, **thousands of cadres had been imprisoned or interned**. The so-called 'internal centre', which was constituted like a network, was patiently reconstituted after each arrest but, in the end, was reduced to just a handful of militants.

The conspiratorial work of the PCD'I and the Comintern:

- Clandestinity contributed considerably to the forging of PCD'I identity. The Leninist 'model party', which had originated in the struggle against the Tsar's repressive machinery, viewed illegal practice not only as a necessary field of action, **but also as a fundamental means of political education for the cadres.**
- the mental attitude and structure of clandestinity had become the genetic inheritance of every communist party. **It had become, especially for the persecuted and weaker parties, a daily routine which permitted them to survive. Clandestinity brought with it the risk of fascist police infiltration, exacerbated suspicions.**

- In such circumstances, links to the Comintern played an increasingly decisive role for both the underground forces active in Italy and for those Italian communists in exile. The sense of belonging to a 'world party' was a factor of moral cohesion and an expression of trust in the future that helped them face a very difficult time.
- the technical equipment and the financial subsidy provided by the Comintern proved indispensable for the very survival of the party. Meanwhile, the long-term political disagreement between the Comintern and the PCD'I seemed at last to be resolved. (See also the First lecture).

The turning point: the « svolta »

- Lyons Congress had laid down a line that emphasized the 'popular' character of the Italian revolution, and did not rule out the party's fighting for intermediate democratic ends.
- the PCD'I concurred with the more flexible attitude held by the Comintern under Bukharin's leadership, with **Togliatti and Tasca both establishing a particularly close relationship with Bukharin.**
- Things changed at the beginning of 1929, when the clash between Bukharin and Stalin in the Soviet politburo was transferred to the ECCI, and Tasca **(the PCD'I representative on the ECCI) sided openly with Bukharin.**

- Tasca was recalled to Paris and his position severely criticized by the PCD'I, though the Comintern did not feel this was enough.
- At the ECCI's tenth plenum, all the Italian leaders were indicted for failing to expel Tasca.
- In September 1929, Tasca was expelled and, shortly afterwards, Togliatti emphatically embraced the extreme interpretation of the 'third period'.
- **He claimed that in Italy 'the elements of an acute revolutionary crisis were maturing', and extended the theory of 'social fascism' to Italian social democracy.**
- In December 1929, Longo presented plans to reorganize the PCD'I. These aimed to bring back to Italy both the focus of the PCD'I's political work and the 'seat of organization and direction'.

- Such proposals brought a new crisis to the PCD'I leadership, with Leonetti, **Pietro Tresso and Paolo Ravazzoli** opposing it and attacking Togliatti for his acceptance.
- *they were expelled for having made contact with the international Trotskyist opposition.*
- Terracini and Gramsci expressed their disagreement with the way in which the party dealt with its 'opponents', and criticized a political line they felt was abstract and held no prospect for progress.
- **The party's official decisions between 1929 and 1933 followed all the paradigms of the "third period" and the tactics of 'class against class'.**

- The *svolta* of 1930 was, in some ways, an important moment in the 'refounding' of Italian communism, which cannot be explained only by reference to directives from Moscow, but must also be understood in its primary location within the social and cultural milieu.
- The influence and fascination of the 'international situation' and the process of 'building of socialism' in the USSR (even when expressed in mythical terms) proved integral elements in the militants' political and cultural make up.
- Following the *svolta*, 5,000 new members joined in only a year-and-a-half. The culture of clandestinity itself enabled recruitment in socially and generationally homogeneous areas.
- **The activity of the party cells in Italy reflected this reality, while the language of 'the turn' was geared less towards theoretical issues, and more towards operational and organizational concerns.**

- the *svolta* did not provide the hoped-for results: the two rallying cries of a **general strike and an armed struggle were met with passivity on the part of the masses.**
- **Hundreds of cadres fell into the hands of the Fascist police.** A real 'parallel' party that, despite its sectarianism, kept alive a force for cultural and political change and a rigid sense of discipline that were destined to bear fruit later.
- The PCD'I's relationship with the Comintern became tense, although this time disagreement **focused more on the application, rather than the theoretical justification, of the party line.**
- Having criticized the Italian party and put pressure on it to make an 'about-turn' in its politics in 1929, **the Comintern intervened in 1930 to put a brake on the party's 'left turn'. The most frequent accusation made against the PCD'I was that of 'Carbonarism'; that is, the tendency to conspiratorial sectarianism and estrangement from the problems of the masses.**

The popular front:

- The Comintern's policy change of 1934 came at a time when the PCD'I's clandestine activity in Italy was in great difficulty.
- The Comintern is seeking to create broad alliances against the aggressive politics of international fascism from 1933–34.
- There were still many communist militants (or groups of militants), but they were isolated and forced into passivity. There were no links between them, nor with the party centre abroad.

- The leadership in exile, with Ruggiero Grieco as head of the political bureau once Togliatti travelled to Moscow in July 1934, were deeply influenced by the evolving French situation.
- The pact for common action between the French Communist Party (PCF) and SFIO was followed a few weeks later by a similar pact between Italian communists and socialists, signed by **Luigi Longo and Pietro Nenni**. This marked the renewed dialogue and collaboration between the two parties after a long period of hostility, and enabled better relations between the forces of anti-fascist emigration. (Antifascist action).
- Significant step: **The hope that Mussolini's regime would experience a crisis was crashed by the fascist victory in Ethiopia and the declaration of the Empire.**

- The impact of the Spanish civil war: The Italian communists made a very important contribution to the Republican. Over 3,000 volunteers enrolled in the International Brigades. Some of the most experienced Italian cadres took part in the war: **Togliatti himself acted as ECCI representative to the Spanish politburo** and an influential adviser to the republican government, while Longo and Di Vittorio played important military roles.
- **For the PCD'I, the Spanish Civil War was not only a very important source of cadres who were later to put their experience of political and military leadership to good use: it was also the starting point for a fresh re-evaluation of strategy.**

- In November 1936, Togliatti described and developed the effort Dimitrov had made over those months to characterize **the popular front as a transitional phase to socialism. This phase would be different from the 'Bolshevik model', and independent from it.** Togliatti indicated that the objective of the Spanish communists was 'a new type of democracy', in which the working class would have hegemony over all other anti-fascist groups.
- The foundation of this new democracy would mean the destruction of the political and social roots of fascism through a radical purge and democratization . (Theoretical attempts).
- This objective, initially set for Spain, also became **the aim of the anti-fascist struggle in Italy as designated by a new pact of united action signed by PCD'I and PSI on 26 July 1937.** Briefly, this seemed to be the first step to a wider political agreement amongst the forces of the anti-fascist opposition abroad, and actually brought some benefit to those within the country. (international anti-fascism).

From the Great Terror to the Second World War:

- The terror between 1937 and 1938 had serious consequences for the PCD'I. Repression cut down considerably the number of PCD'I cadres at intermediate level, especially amongst the most anonymous of its militants; that is, workers who had migrated to the USSR.
- The most prominent charge against the PCD'I was **that it had not followed sufficiently the Russian party's line and had shown serious shortcomings in the fight against Trotskyism.**
- PCD'I's relationship with other anti-fascist parties abroad was poisoned by new polemics and, above all, **by its obsessive suspicion that anyone could be an agent provocateur.**

- The PCD'I never lost its connection with Italy. The Italian exiles in France maintained a unity that had been able to survive longer than that of the French left. However, the party approached its ultimate challenge, the Second World War, in a position of great weakness.
- *The German–Soviet pact of August 1939 spread confusion amongst the Italian communists and affected negatively:* The attempt by the PCD'I to reconcile the Ribbentrop–Molotov pact with a continuation of a united anti-fascist politics (which was copying the PCF position in the first weeks of war) was short-lived and soon gave way to a rigid alignment *with the Comintern's resolution on the 'imperialist war'*.

- On 10 August 1940, the ECCI Presidium hard-heartedly listed all the recent errors committed by the PCD'I: the party had taken up its position on the war '**with enormous delay**'; it had produced a manifesto containing serious political errors (the use of the expression 'Hitler's aggression against Poland' was considered such); it had used language not suited to the situation in Italy ('**transformation of the imperialist war into a civil war**'); it had dropped all links with the country, for long time neglecting the task of creating a clandestine organization; it had lowered the level of vigilance, adapting itself 'to the conditions of life in a democratic country like France'. All this, the resolution concluded, 'has caused the beginning of a process of decomposition of the leading group and, finally, its capitulation and failure before the practical tasks of the struggle against imperialist war'.