Western Communists, Mikhail
Gorbachev and the 1989 Revolutions

SILVIO PONS

Abstract

Western communists reflected two opposing responses to the final crisis of communism that had matured over time. The French communists represented a conservative response increasingly hostile to Gorbachev’s perestroika, while the Italians were supporters of a reformist response in tune with his call for change. Thus Gorbachev was the chief reference, positive or negative, against which Western communists measured their own politics and identity. In 1989 the French aligned with the conservative communist leaderships of eastern Europe, and ended up opposing Gorbachev after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Accordingly, the PCF became a residual entity of traditional communism. On the other hand, the Italian communists agreed with all Gorbachev’s choices, and to some extent they even inspired his radical evolution. But they also shared Gorbachev’s illusions, including the idea that the fall of the Berlin Wall would produce a renewal of socialism in Europe. Unlike the PCF, the PCI was able to undertake change in the aftermath of the 1989 revolutions, thus standing as a significant ‘post-communist’ force. However, if conservative communism was destined to become marginal, reform communism also failed in its objective of renewing the Soviet system and the communist political culture.

Relations with the USSR were a founding element of Western communists’ history and identity until the 1980s. The very role played by the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the French Communist Party (PCF) in their respective national societies was inseparable from their international association with Moscow, which represented a political, ideological, organisational, financial and symbolic resource. This link underwent significant change during the post-war era. With the declining image of the USSR in the 1970s, the crises of ‘real socialism’, and the crumbling of the international communist movement, organic loyalties established in the era of Palmiro Togliatti and Maurice Thorez gradually weakened under Enrico Berlinguer and
Georges Marchais. However, albeit in different ways, the partnership between the two major Western communist parties and the USSR was maintained.

Even in the early 1980s the PCI preserved considerable strength in Italian society (garnering almost 30 per cent of the electorate) as it moved away from ‘real socialism’ and followed its own ‘Eurocommunist’ calling. Berlinguer firmly criticised the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the coup d’état of General Jaruzelski in Poland. But the very fact of defending a reform communism led the Italian communists to safeguard some relationship with Moscow, because a break would have annihilated their chance of influencing change in eastern Europe and would have diverted the PCI towards social democracy.1 The case of Marchais’s PCF was decidedly different. In the same period, the French communists saw their national popularity decline dramatically (falling to around 10 per cent of voters), as they liquidated the Eurocommunist experience and took orthodox, pro-Soviet positions on both Afghanistan and Poland.2

The domestic contexts of the PCI and the PCF also differed in decisive aspects. In France the tough competition launched by the Socialist Party leader François Mitterrand against the communists had by the early 1980s produced a political balance favourable to the socialists. Tense relations did not prevent the two forces of the left from alliance-building. The outcome was Mitterrand’s election as president in 1981 and the formation of a government including communist representatives, although in an obviously subordinate position. Under Mitterrand’s rule, the PCF would continue its decline in subsequent years. In Italy, after the end of ‘national solidarity’ governments and the return of the communists to opposition in 1979, the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) leader Bettino Craxi challenged the PCI on the pattern employed by Mitterrand against the PCF. There was, however, an important difference. The two major forces of the Italian left remained harshly conflictual and could not build an alliance. The communists successfully defended their hegemony over the Italian left but were permanently excluded from government, while the socialists joined the Christian Democrats and other moderate forces in a renewed anti-communist alliance, achieving the premiership of the centre-left coalition in 1983. Such endless and mutually destructive competition would last up to the end of the decade, while the relative strengths of the two parties were not really reversed, despite the slow decline of the PCI. In other words, the two major Western communist parties followed diverging trajectories. As early as the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev, the very notion of a politically homogeneous and autonomous ‘Western communism’, born in the previous decade, had fallen by the wayside.

Memoirs and scholarship speak above all of the special relationship between Gorbachev and the Italian communists. The attendance of Gorbachev, then unknown to the international public, at Berlinguer’s funeral in June 1984 has taken on symbolic meaning in retrospect. Gorbachev himself recalls that the enormous popular sentiment he saw ‘revealed a mentality and a political culture quite different from

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1 Silvio Pons, Berlinguer e la fine del comunismo (Turin: Einaudi, 2006).
ours’. Archie Brown has stated that when Gorbachev, after funeral of the Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko, decided to meet a single European communist leader – the PCI secretary – this was one of the signs that times were changing. Jacques Lévesque has remarked that the period after 1985 saw not merely a mending of fences between the USSR and the PCI after years of tension, they also saw a trend towards change in Moscow, as it drew inspiration from the ‘Eurocommunism’ it had previously so harshly opposed.

However, this was the result of evolution, not an immediate choice. Gorbachev’s course was more contradictory than we often assume in hindsight. In fact, relations with the two major Western communist parties faithfully reflected two distinct phases of his power. Between 1985 and 1987 Gorbachev, still bound to traditional Soviet conceptions, showed himself to be more in harmony with the French communists than with the Italians. He reversed this attitude from 1988 on, when he impressed upon perestroika a radical character, especially with his ‘New Thinking’ in international relations.

In the first phase the Italian communists, conditioned by past experience, were sceptical of the new Soviet leadership, although increasingly hopeful about its developments. The French communists, to the contrary, supported perestroika as long as the continuity of Soviet foreign policy prevailed in Moscow. In the second phase, the PCF’s reaction to the Soviet leader’s evolution proved wary and distrustful. The PCI, on the other hand, finally saw its hopes for reform vindicated, and threw its support fully behind Gorbachev.

The revolutions of 1989 were the decisive test. The Western communists reflected two opposing responses to the final crisis of communism that had matured over time. On the one hand, the French represented a conservative response, aimed at saving what could be saved, but weakened by the end of orthodox legitimisation from Moscow. On the other hand, the Italians represented a reformist response – one that invoked the need for change and the defence of identity, reflecting the contradictions and inconsistencies of Gorbachev himself. The collapse of the European communist regimes and the dissolution of the USSR were to put an end to both trends, although they gave rise to different legacies.

The end of the ‘international communist movement’

In his first years in power Gorbachev inherited the old conception of the international communist movement, one that was in many aspects more in line with the French communists than with the Italians. In his first meetings with leaders Alessandro Natta and Georges Marchais, the leaders, respectively, of the PCI and the PCF, Gorbachev emphasised the traditional picture of unity in the international communist movement.

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Although diplomatic with the Italians, he reiterated on a number of occasions that the communist movement, while weakened, was still a global player, and that it had to return to its original principles without reducing itself to the role of being a variant of social democracy. With the French, he praised traditional relations and criticised the Italians for their ‘pro-social democratic’ inclination.

The emergence of a critical vision of the international communist movement in Moscow was gradual. On 15 May 1986, in a confidential note for Anatoly Dobrynin, who had been called upon to replace Boris Ponomarev as the head of the Foreign Department of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), Gorbachev revealed his misgivings, invoking an analysis of the communist movement that was ‘not routine, as occurred under Ponomarev, but sincere’. He stated that

\[W\]e have showered the international communist movement with praise. In our analysis, we have to weigh it against other movements: first of all the social democrats, and the greens, who have found their position in the contemporary process. The communist parties have yet to find theirs.

But the traditional vision of the communist movement that held sway in Moscow can be clearly seen from a note of Vadim Zagladin, a prominent official of the CPSU Foreign Department, dated 19 May 1986. This document stated that towards the end of developing ‘the potential of Socialism’ and promoting the ‘struggle for peace’, the line of the parties’ autonomy, although ‘right in principle’, would be detrimental if carried to extremes.

This point of view changed radically in the following two years. In international policy Gorbachev’s language appeared increasingly detached from the anti-Western axioms of Soviet tradition. At the same time, contacts with western Europe, conceived as a central aspect of the New Thinking, intensified considerably. The PCI took on an increasing significance in Gorbachev’s views. His interview with the official newspaper of the PCI, L’Unità, of 20 May 1987 marked a turning point in presenting his ideas to the European public. The Soviet leader appeared as a reformer recovering the myth of Khrushchev but also following in the footsteps of Berlinguer. On the seventieth anniversary of the October Revolution he was celebrated as a new symbolic resource for Italian communism. From that moment Moscow’s relations

9 Fond Gorbacheva, Moscow (hereafter FG), f. 3, op. 1, k. 4825.
11 Chernyayev, Sest’ let s Gorbachevym, 141.
12 Antonio Rubbi, Incontri con Gorbaciov: I colloqui di Natta e Occhetto con il leader sovietico (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1990), 120–1.
with the two major Western communist parties, which until that time had privileged the French as interlocutors, changed and reversed course.

In a March 1988 memorandum from Italy Zagladin recorded his impressions of a ‘deep and radical change’ in the Italian communists’ attitude towards the Soviet Union. But his note was also a sign that the opposite was also taking place. According to Zagladin, the conflicts of the past – going back to the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and to the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 – could be considered to have been cleared up. It was possible to acknowledge that Eurocommunism had been an attempt to work out the specific nature of socialism in the West, and that Moscow had failed to understand this. On the other hand, the PCI’s initial mistrust of Gorbachev had been overcome, although demands for greater freedom of expression in the USSR persisted.14

The opening between Gorbachev and the Italian communists now took solid form. Antonio Rubbi, the head of the PCI foreign section, recalls the lively participatory emotions with which the PCI leaders concluded their meetings with Gorbachev in Moscow on 29–30 March 1988.15 Giorgio Napolitano, at the time one of the senior leaders of the PCI, also remembers the ‘extraordinary interest’ sparked by those meetings.16 Natta’s references to the ‘errors’ of Soviet foreign policy in the late Brezhnev era, to the impact of Eurocommunism and to the PCI’s positive stance towards the European Communities, were taken for granted by Gorbachev. The Soviet leader acknowledged that the ‘CPSU acutely feels how closely the prospects for which it works are linked to the developments of the situation in western Europe’, observing that ‘integration is indeed a trend’ but wondering, ‘does the European left have a design for governing it, and rebuilding it for its own purposes?’ He affirmed that the USSR ‘considers itself first and foremost a European country’, and maintained that ‘if interdependence is advancing in the world, this is all the more true for Europe’.17

As for the ‘international communist movement’, the Italians confirmed their thesis that this notion no longer held significance: bilateral relations had to be conceived within the context of – and not separately from – the forces of the European left.18 Gorbachev completely ignored the old vision of the communist movement. He preferred to stress that the only alternative to perestroika would be the USSR’s declining presence ‘in world affairs’, and that therefore ‘the very destiny of socialism’ was at stake. When the Italians asked what effects perestroika would have in the other socialist countries, particularly in Czechoslovakia, Gorbachev’s response was

14 FG, f. 3, op. 1, k. 7125.
15 Rubbi, Incontri con Gorbaciov, 196.
17 Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Roma, Archivio del partito comunista italiano (hereafter FIG APC), record of the meeting between a delegation of the CPSU and a delegation of the PCI, Moscow, 29 March 1988.
18 FG, f. 3, op. 1, k. 7128.
that while the CPSU did not intend to impose the ‘objectives and methods’ of perestroika on anyone, these countries had entered a phase of change.\(^{19}\)

However, the Soviet leadership’s optimistic view concealed somewhat pressing concerns and dilemmas. A few days prior to the meeting with the Italian communists, on 23 March 1988, Gorbachev had sent a note to Dobrynin, maintaining that the signals originating from the communist parties appeared ‘alarming’, and that ‘they do not understand much of the new thinking, or do not wish to’. Therefore, even looking forward to a possible renewal of the communist movement, one had to understood ‘how this may take place, and on what basis’. Change was unlikely without the CPSU’s intervention because the parties ‘are confused, and it could get even worse’.\(^{20}\) It is unclear whether Gorbachev was also referring to the communist parties in power, but certainly his assessment of the communist movement as a whole was quite critical. After the meeting with Natta he reported to the Politburo that with the Italians he had spoken about ‘the gravely and dangerously backward conceptions of many communist parties . . . and foremost of those most faithful to us’.\(^{21}\) Things came to a head right after the nineteenth conference of the CPSU in July 1988, which marked a decisive passage in the radicalisation of Gorbachev’s political thought, including his conceptualisation of foreign policy and the attitude towards the communist world.\(^{22}\)

Significant from this standpoint is a note written on 26 July 1988 by Anatoly Chernyayev, a so-called shestidesyatnik (Khrushchevian reformer from the 1960s). One of the men closest to Gorbachev, he was probably his entourage’s most influential in the field of international policy, right from his appointment in 1986.\(^{23}\) Here he comments on a document written over the previous two months by Dobrynin and containing a simple description of the situation of the various communist parties.\(^{24}\) Chernyayev’s judgement was pitiless: ‘it is clear to all that the communist movement, which we traditionally have been used to seeing as a movement, in fact does not exist’. He added, ‘As long as we continue pretending that this is not the case, we will be unable to work out a realistic line towards the foreign communists.’ This judgement led Chernyayev to a historical assessment that was, to say the least, heterodox, although he still defended Leninism. The roots of the ‘absence of vitality in the communist movement as an international force’ were taken to have originated in the 1920s. During the period of the popular fronts and the Second World War, communists may have acted as an anti-fascist force, but not in the name of their original purposes. The problem was to explain historically ‘why communists have been unable promptly

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19 FIG APC, record of the meeting between a delegation of the CPSU and a delegation of the PCI, Moscow 29 March 1988.
20 FG, f. 2, op. 1, k. 1110.
21 V Politburo TsK KPSS, 312 (31 March 1988).
22 Brown, Gorbachev Factor, 175, 248.
24 FG, f. 2, op. 1, k. 1166.
to modify their theory and strategy and have thus led the movement to lose true political strength’. In the light of the fact that ‘new thinking’ had liquidated the thesis of ‘peaceful coexistence’ as a ‘form of class struggle in the world arena’, defining a role for the communist movement was now an impracticable task. According to Chernyayev, the solution to ‘global problems’ could not be the task of a revolutionary movement, and thus, after years of mere inertial ‘conservation’, the time had come to liquidate the very idea of the international communist movement as a ‘political category’. The idea that the communists were by definition the USSR’s ‘allies’ also had to be abandoned: the author raised the example of the French communists, and wondered how and ‘towards what end’ they could be considered ‘allies’. Instead, what was needed was ‘a rebirth of ideological community’ which would take time and required the Soviet reformers to take on a role of guidance.  

Symptomatic of the evolution of the Soviet leadership, Chernyayev’s memorandum showed harmony with the PCI and an explicit distancing from the PCF. The links between Europeanism and the European left as indicated by the Italian communists, and the consequent abandonment of the very notion of a ‘communist movement’, were now adopted by the Soviet reformers. In summer 1988 the drafting of a common PCI–CPSU document on Europe was begun. Parallel to this, organisational preparations commenced on a pan-European ‘round table’ to be attended by political forces of various orientations, including those outside the left-wing coalitions. The Italian communists held up perestroika as a process for reforming communism. By contrast, in late 1988, Marchais publicly distanced himself from Gorbachev, declaring that perestroika was not a model for the other communist parties.

The impact of 1989

The repudiation of the notion of ‘international communist movement’ outlined by Gorbachev and Chernyayev was not fully reflected in the CPSU’s conduct. After a trip to Moscow in January 1989, Rubbi reported that he had perceived ‘much confusion and uncertainty on the road to follow’ regarding western Europe’s communist parties. As he saw it, a ‘strong and prior link with even the smallest and most insignificant communist parties’ was maintained in current affairs by the Soviets, while relations with the social democratic parties, although pursued, were still ‘on a different plane, distinct from the privileged relation with the communist parties’. However, the orientation adopted by the Soviet leadership appeared firm. This can be deduced from Chernyayev’s opinions, reported in the same note by Rubbi. Chernyayev acknowledged that the PCI had expressed, ten years in advance, ‘ideas, judgements, and criticisms that have been fully confirmed by the facts’. At the same

25 FG, f. 2, op. 1, k. 1163.
28 Courtois and Lazar, Histoire du Parti communiste français, 408.
29 FIG APC, Sezione Esteri, 11 January 1989.
time, he complained of the serious difficulties caused to the reform process both by internal resistance and by the ‘branch of certain allies’, including above all Fidel Castro, the Cuban leader, the GDR and Romania. Chernyayev now insisted that the failure of perestroika would be a hard blow for all communists:

 Alejandro we do not wish to bind anyone to our experience, how can it be said that perestroika is something that concerns the Soviets alone? We need to change – all of us, and quickly – if we still wish to have prospects for the future.

 The Soviet official was, in essence, appealing to perestroika’s international mission in the face of its serious internal difficulties – an appeal that was to be carefully heeded by the Italian communists, but far less by the French.

 While the French and the Soviets held no more summits, the first meeting between Gorbachev and the new PCI secretary, Achille Occhetto (elected as a result of generational change, much like the Soviet leader), was held in Moscow on 28 February 1989. The realism that had marked the Italian communists’ earlier conduct had now yielded to full-blown identification with perestroika. Occhetto placed the new bilateral relationship outside the context of the ‘communist movement’ and within the prospect for a ‘re-composition of all the forces of progress moving upon the terrain of Europeanism’. Gorbachev replied speaking the same political language:

 If I am not mistaken, you think of a movement in a way that brings more democracy: economic, social and political. It will therefore be a process, if I understand correctly. Question: is the party dissolving, becoming social democracy? It is my impression that this is not the case.

 And he added that he himself had asked Willy Brandt, ‘after 1914, do we not wish to start down a new road?’ Gorbachev maintained that the communist world was also witnessing a ‘general rethinking of what socialism is today’, and, showing optimism bordering on naivety, stated that the only exception was Romania.

 In fact, Gorbachev was wavering between a strategic vision of change and a more prudent one. As he put it,

 Here is the danger of throwing explosive material as well on to the fire of perestroika. We must avoid destabilising eastern Europe, because otherwise opposing phenomena and decisions could be produced. But we must be open to change: otherwise, socialism will lose. We are advocates of the democratisation processes and we support the research that each party does.

 In other words, he made it clear that, from his point of view, reform ‘from above’ in the countries of ‘real socialism’ should move forward. On this point as well, there was harmony with the Italian communists, who declared their appreciation for the development of political pluralism in Poland and Hungary. But Gorbachev and the Italian communists shared the same contradiction. Both feared a destabilising crisis.

 30 As Rubbi noted, he was referring to Marchais.
 32 FIG APC, Sezione Esteri, record of the meeting between Occhetto and Gorbachev, Moscow, 28 February 1989.
 33 Ibid.
in eastern Europe, and at the same time believed that only political change could prevent it.³⁴

In his memoirs Chernyayev recalls the dialogue between Gorbachev and Occhetto as noteworthy, but also points to the increasingly acute uncertainty felt by the Soviet reformers.³⁵ On the other side, the Italian communists were much more aware of the Soviet leader’s intentions of reform than his hesitation and fragility. They wanted to work as a ‘bridge’, no longer between East and West, but between perestroika and the European left. The French communists’ position was quite different. In March 1989 René Andrieu, one of the editors of the PCF’s official newspaper, *l’Humanité*, expressed to Zagladin his party’s reluctance to position itself on the road of change.³⁶ For reasons of internal policy linked to competition with Mitterrand, but also because of ideological resistance to change, the PCF now took the rearguard in the communist movement, and showed de facto opposition to perestroika similar to that of the East German or Czechoslovakian communists. Gorbachev’s closeness to communists from Italy and distance from those of France were clear when he gave a speech in Strasbourg in July 1989 borrowing from the CPSU–PCI bilateral document on Europe, particularly on the issue of security and human rights.³⁷

The Italian and French communists differed greatly in their opinions of what was happening at the ‘round table’ in Poland in 1989 and, subsequently, the birth of eastern Europe’s first government led by a non-communist premier. In July the PCI decided to separate its delegates to the European Parliament from those of the PCF; thus putting an end to the communist group that had been created in 1973 in Strasbourg. This decision had an obvious symbolic intention, and was motivated by the irreconcilable positions of the two parties on the role of European integration and the future of eastern Europe.³⁸ On the eve of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Italian communists held positions similar to those of the Socialist International in support of change in eastern Europe. However, their perspective, of building a ‘new PCI’ and of a gradual reform of the course of Soviet communism, would be seen as self-deceptive in the light of the revolutionary pacific upsurge of November–December 1989.³⁹

**After the Wall came down: in search of identity**

In November 1989, just after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Gorbachev made his first visit to Italy. The Soviet leader’s international prestige had reached its zenith: the liquidation of the ‘Brezhnev doctrine’ (as demonstrated by non-interference in the ‘velvet revolutions’) was the benchmark of his New Thinking. Gorbachev’s visit had been prepared with the contribution of the Italian communists,⁴⁰ but from the PCI’s standpoint, the meeting with Gorbachev was loaded with new meanings in the light

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³⁵ Chernyayev, *Sest’ let s Gorbachevym*, 282.
³⁶ Quoted by Rey, ‘La gauche française’.
³⁸ FIG APC, Direzione, Verbali, mf 8908, 2–4; ibid., Sezione Esteri, 7 July 1989.
of the political turn decided upon by Occhetto. A few days after the Wall fell, the Italian leader launched a proposal to establish a new party of the left that aimed to drop the communist tradition. On 14 November 1989, the PCI started a transformation process that was to be concluded only a year and a half later.

In the domestic context, the party had recently suffered political marginalisation and a loss of votes. Generational change was undertaken in the party leadership after defeat in the general election of 1987 and the regional elections of 1988. Although the PCI was still supported by more than a quarter of the national electorate, the spectre of decline became increasingly menacing as an apparent crisis of traditional political identities and mass-based parties emerged in the Italian Republic. Occhetto had tried to modify the party’s defensive attitude by sponsoring institutional reforms in the political system. But defence of their own identity as a consequence of unrelenting confrontation with Craxi’s PSI still prevailed in the Italian communists’ position.41

It was only in the aftermath of the fall of the Wall that Italian communists acknowledged the ‘crisis’ under way in ‘real socialism’, until then largely overlooked because of the hope placed in Gorbachev’s reforms. Although domestic confrontation with the socialists continued, communist identity in question. By creating a new post-communist party, Occhetto and the young generation of leaders around him intended to challenge their national competitors to play a dynamic role in the political game and become definitively a legitimate component of the European left.

The approach of the PCI leaders was, however, weak and contradictory. They still laid claim to the ‘original identity’ of Italian communism and its national legacy, thus refusing to endorse the social democratic tradition and avoiding the main challenge that had just emerged.42 Their special relationship with Gorbachev did not help cope with this problem, however. In fact the PCI found itself having to deal with the collapse of communism and the end of the cold war in Europe while in a state of serious uncertainty as to its own international references and bases of identity, halfway between detachment from the communist movement and the still incomplete relationship with European socialism. The only certainty was identification with perestroika.

Talking to Gorbachev, Occhetto maintained that it was ‘entirely insufficient’ to state that one was no longer part of the communist movement. He agreed with Gorbachev that it would be appropriate to accelerate the PCI’s convergence towards the Socialist International.43 The meeting of November 1989 thus took on dual significance: a legitimisation of Occhetto’s ‘turn’ – in the face of the conflict that had been opened in the party by an opposition that held views similar to those of the French communists – but also linkage with the destiny of Gorbachev’s reforms. A few days later Occhetto wrote to the Soviet leader to request a meeting in Moscow before the PCI’s last congress that was to take place a month later.44 Although the

43 Rubbi, Incontri con Gorbaciov, 295.
44 FG, f. 2, op. 1, k. 8161.
meeting did not take place, such a request shows the priority that Italian communists gave to the relationship with Gorbachev, even after the Berlin Wall had collapsed. He was seen as the main political leader opening the path to a renewal of socialism, a peaceful international order and a ‘third way’ between capitalism and communism.45

The travels of Occhetto and Rubbi to Poland and Czechoslovakia in December 1989 showed that the old regimes were inescapably collapsing. The Italian communists therefore established dialogue with the emerging political forces. Occhetto’s central meeting was with Tadeusz Mazowiecki in Poland,46 while in Prague Rubbi met Alexander Dubček, understanding quite clearly that even the leader of the ‘Prague Spring’ would not represent an alternative option, being ‘too much linked to 1968’, and that Vaclav Havel was more popular.47

The meetings of PCI representatives with east European communists were limited. The Polish communist Cassandras warned that even Gorbachev would soon fall.48 To say the least, this prophecy reflected bitter feelings towards the Soviet reformers. Nevertheless, such a catastrophic scenario should have worried the PCI more than it did. Instead it was largely ignored. The political discourse of the Italian communists was focused on the idea that the fall of the communist regimes would help in ‘building a new Europe’ and forging a new European left.

The position of the French communists was completely different. Having abandoned the government in 1984, the PCF vote had fallen to 5–7 per cent in the presidential and legislative elections of 1988. The contest with Mitterrand was lost and the PCF had definitively become a small party entrenched in its outdated ideological orthodoxy. In the collapse of the communist regimes French communists saw their apprehension regarding perestroika confirmed. Harbouring fewer illusions and taking a more conservative attitude than their Italian counterparts, the French – just like most east European communists – perceived above all the destabilising nature of Gorbachev’s reforms. However, this attitude was not motivated by realism, but rather by nostalgia for the ‘international communist movement’. In March 1990 Roland Leroy, director of l’Humanité, appeared to Zagladin to express the ‘ambivalence’ of the PCF, which officially supported perestroika while actually fearing its destructive consequences for communism.49 By then, the possibility of dialogue and understanding between Gorbachev and the French communists had run its course. They took part in the opposition front against Gorbachev, like the Portuguese communists in the west and the German communists in the east, and even supported the August 1991 attempted coup in the Soviet Union.50

45 Possieri, Il peso della storia, 275.
46 L’Unità, 10 December 1989.
47 Note by Rubbi on his visit to Prague, 11–13 December 1989, FIG APC, Direzione, Allegati, mf 9001, 110–14.
48 Note by Rubbi on meetings in Poland, 7–9 December 1989, FIG APC, Direzione, Allegati, mf 9001, 139–44.
49 Quoted by Rey, ‘La gauche française’.
a world now falling apart, French communists maintained a traditional language and upheld a function of bearing witness.

However, the destiny of the reformers in Moscow and Rome did not hold much promise, either. Gorbachev was in many respects a crucial personality in the events that were putting an end to the cold war. The 1989 peaceful revolutions would have been inconceivable without Moscow’s direct pressure for change and its determination to avoid violence. But Gorbachev’s idea that the USSR would maintain its capacity for influence in central and eastern Europe even after the collapse of communist regimes and the reunification of Germany was illusory. In the meantime, the limited reforms introduced inside the Soviet Union had been blocked. To many observers, including some Italian communists, the Twenty-Eighth Congress of the CPSU in summer 1990 appeared confused and contradictory, revealing crisis much more than a confident determination for reform. Nevertheless, the PCI’s uncertainties about politics and identity reflected those of the Soviet leadership.

While perestroika entered its final critical phase, the Italian communists made the leap into their transformation – albeit at the price of a minority split that would give rise to a small communist party. On 15 November 1990, Occhetto presented Gorbachev with the political outcome of the PCI’s conversion into a ‘democratic party of the left’, with these words: ‘A new left, a new culture of the left, is needed. We wish to go beyond the communist and social democratic traditions. We do not propose passing from one to the other.’ Gorbachev gave his unconditional support. He declared himself to be ‘a convinced advocate of socialism’, despite the growing conflicts and problems he had to face within, which were clearly corroding his energetic optimism.

At the same time, his idea of socialism now repudiated much of the Soviet experience. Gorbachev defined the Soviet model of socialism as a ‘system that suffocated individuals, a totalitarian regime, a state monopoly over everything’ – one not merely imposed by the Cold War, because ‘there was also, within it, a dominant group that sought embitterment, pursued utopia, yearned for War communism [the 1918–20 period], and thought it could govern with continued repression.’ His hope was that ‘perhaps for the first time we will be able to avoid what has always happened in this country: that the attempts at reform end up leading to even harder, more severe regimes’. His concluding statement to Occhetto was that ‘we and you are travelling down similar roads, albeit with each having complete autonomy and responsibility’.

And thus it was to be, but only for a few more months. On the eve of the anniversary of the October revolution, Gorbachev had confided to Chernyayev, ‘with all that it meant, the October Revolution divided the world. The current

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53 Boffa, Memorie dal comunismo, 233.
54 FIG APC, note by Giuseppe Boffa on a meeting with Gorbachev, 15 November 1990.
55 Ibid.
For Western communists, Gorbachev was the chief reference, positive or negative, against which they measured their own politics and identity. In this respect they showed the limits of their secularisation process and the living influence of their long devotion to the Soviet Union. The PCF was rather linear in its evolution. Unlike the Italian communists, the French were not interested in integration into the European left or cultural interaction with social democracies. Their dependence on the USSR and their adherence to the communist movement went largely uncontested. But they did not identify with perestroika, and refused to take up Gorbachev’s challenge. In 1989 they aligned with the conservative communist leaderships in eastern Europe, and ended up opposing Gorbachev after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The PCF thus represented a residual entity of traditional communism, destined to remain a minority force in its national society, devoid of international standing. The political culture of communism would leave significant traces in the French radical left even after 1989 and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. But as a political force, French communism would not play a significant role.

The PCI’s course was more contested and contradictory. Although they considered the international communist movement obsolete, Italian communists re-established an axis with the USSR through Gorbachev without having constructed an alternative axis with the European social democracies. Consequently, they identified strongly with perestroika and nurtured confidence in the reformability of the Soviet system – a conviction justified by their political faith, but certainly not showing an adequate awareness of the deep crisis of communism as a system as well as a political culture. The majority of Italian communists agreed with all the Soviet leader’s choices, including the decision to let the 1989 revolutions take their course. But they also shared Gorbachev’s illusions, including the idea that the fall of the Berlin Wall would produce a renewal of socialism in Europe and in the Soviet Union. The Italian communists, unlike the French, were able to undertake change in the aftermath of the 1989 revolutions, thus remaining a significant political force in their national society.

However, their ‘post-communist’ course – to be followed later in a number of ways by certain communist parties in eastern Europe – was clearly affected by their inability to abandon their communist identity. In a more limited sense, the relationship between Gorbachev and the Italian communists meant forging a way out of communism – an empirical and eclectic transition to ‘humanist socialism’. But the fleeting outlines of this transition were not well defined: the end of the Gorbachev era and the collapse of the USSR left the Italian post-communists alone

56 Chernyayev, Sest’ let s Gorbachevym, 379.
in their search for identity. Although they safeguarded a leading role in the Italian left, the post-communists’ limited change and their underestimation of the legacy of Italian anti-communism later prevented them from benefiting from the collapse of the Christian Democratic party and Socialist parties.\textsuperscript{57}

Gorbachev ended up liquidating Marxism-Leninism and acknowledging that communism was obsolete.\textsuperscript{58} The majority of the PCI did the same, while the PCF remained stubbornly anchored to its conservative position. Conservative communism was destined to become marginal and marked for extinction. But reform communism also failed in its objective of renewing the Soviet system and communist political culture.

\textsuperscript{57} These occurred in the aftermath of the so-called ‘tangentopoli’ corruption scandal.

\textsuperscript{58} Francesco Benvenuti and Silvio Pons, ‘The End of Soviet Communism: A Review’, in Pons and Romero, \textit{Reinterpreting the End of the Cold War}. 