

1939-45

Trial by fire

8 The ordeal of war: from fraction to party?

When the war broke out in September 1939, the Italian and Belgian Fractions found themselves totally disarmed. The 'International Bureau' hardly existed any more, and contacts between the different sections and fractions had virtually ceased.

A few weeks before, the last issue of *Octobre* had appeared after a year's silence. At a time when the contacts between Russia and Germany were becoming official, announcing the imminent entry of the European continent into world war, the two Fractions saw all these feverish preparations as the equivalent of a second 'Munich':

*"... the fact that in September 1938, world capitalism resorted to a compromise instead of a call to arms seems to support the thesis that even in the present state of tension some kind of provisional solution will be found in a second Munich."*¹

Even more serious was the idea of an imperialist solidarity to prevent war in order to face up to the common enemy: the proletariat.

"When you read the papers, when you listen to the speeches, you have the impression of being on the eve of an armed conflict... When you see the different imperialisms armed to the teeth and bristling with a war economy - which cannot go on working in a void indefinitely - and when, on the other hand, you see this touching imperialist solidarity, you can get completely disoriented if you do not bear in mind that democracy and fascism have one common enemy: the proletariat"

fighting on its class terrain.”

Except for the minority which considered war to be inevitable and a matter of weeks away, the militants were themselves completely disoriented by the German army's entry into Poland. The dissident Belgian Trotskyist current, led by Georges Vereecken, and whose centre was in Brussels, wrote ironically about this paralysis:

“In the eight weeks since the war began, we still do not know what the Bordigists have been doing to put their views forward... they have perhaps been thrown into disarray by the events, by the outbreak of war, since 10 minutes before Hitler's entry into Poland they were still saying that the bourgeoisie would manage to prevent the outbreak of the conflict, thus showing that it had succeeded in overcoming its own contradictions.” (*Contre le Courant*, Bulletin of the ‘Groupe Communiste Internationaliste pour la construction de la 4^e Internationale, no. 1, Nov. 1939).

The shock of war

The ‘Bordigist’ current was the only political current not to bring out either leaflets or manifestos when the Second World War broke out. But its disarray was not unique. Union Communiste and the Ligue des Communistes Internationalistes stopped publishing their reviews and dissolved, even though they had announced the imminence of war.

Although their membership had slowly declined after 1937, the Italian and Belgian Fractions certainly did not lack the means to ensure their political continuity. The former members of the Communist Party of Italy had been tempered in the tough clandestine struggle against the Mussolini regime and had kept up underground links with Italy. It was thus their theoretical and political errors, crystallised in the

theory of the war economy and 'localised wars', which led to the organisational dislocation and effective eclipse of the two Fractions.

The immediate move into clandestinity, given the Communist Left's intransigent opposition to the war and its refusal to support any imperialist camp, led to the atomisation and scattering of its militants. The German occupation of Belgium and France, the immediate collaboration between the local political police and the Gestapo, which itself worked hand in hand with the Italian OVRA in hunting down political refugees, had a disastrous and disintegrative effect on the two Fractions. Benjamin Feingold (Jacobs or Michel), a major personality in "Bilan", who was Jewish, was arrested in 1942 in Marseilles, deported and died in a extermination camp. The best-known militant, after Vercesi, Mitchell (Jehan) was deported along with his son, also a member of the Belgian Fraction, and died of exhaustion in 1945 soon after being released from Buchenwald. Others were 'luckier': arrested by the Gestapo, Bruno Bibbi and Fausto Atti, after a period in German labour camps, were handed over to the Italian police and were exiled to the islands, where the conditions of detention were much less severe.

In Brussels it seems that Vercesi and a few elements continued to meet as a small circle. Many thought that the war had demonstrated the proletariat's social non-existence, and that in these conditions it was pointless to carry on with organised militant activity. This was not the view of a handful of Italian and French militants, members of the Italian Fraction, who fled the French occupied zone and regrouped in Marseilles, while maintaining contact with Paris. In 1940, the southern capital sheltered many emigrants of all nationalities. Without papers or with false papers, they were in an extremely difficult material situation. Many found work in a fruit-pie factory, the "Croque-fruit", that had been set up by some Trotskyist militants (Sylvain Itkine, the Bleibtreu brothers) and which soon became a rallying point for numerous, often Jews, militants coming from various political orientations. Later on, the

‘rationalisation of labour’ introduced into the factory was to result in the laying-off of certain elements who refused to abandon wage demands (2). It was in this refuge for political émigrés that a small nucleus of militants of the Italian Fraction managed to win some Trotskyist elements over to its positions. Marc Chirik contacted Jean Malaquais, who worked with him in the factory, and “recruited” some young elements : Robert Salama (Moussou) et Suzanne Voute (Frédéric), who were still influenced by the Trotskyist positions.

The ‘nucleus of the Communist Left’

This nucleus had in fact rejected the dissolution of the Fractions proclaimed by Vercesi, and, since 1940, had been trying to reconstitute the organisation, renewing contact with elements in France and Belgium.

From a circle of about 10 militants, there appeared in 1942 the ‘French nucleus of the Communist Left’ on the basis of a declaration of principles:

“In 1942, in the midst of the imperialist war, a group of comrades, breaking organisationally and politically with the confusionism and opportunism of the Trotskyist organisations and with the imperialist war, has constituted itself into a nucleus of the Communist Left on the political basis of the ICL. (3).

This declaration contained a very clear rejection of the ‘defence of the USSR’ position defended by the Trotskyists and which was to lead them to participate in the war, in the maquis:

“The Soviet state, instrument of the international bourgeoisie, has a counter-revolutionary function. The defence of the

USSR in the name of what remains of the conquests of October must be rejected and replaced by an uncompromising struggle against the Stalinism agents of the bourgeoisie.”

Equally clear was the rejection of the ‘democratic’ and ‘fascist’ camps:

“Democracy and fascism are two aspects of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie which correspond to the economic and political needs of the bourgeoisie at a given moment. consequently the working class which must set up its own dictatorship after destroying the capitalist state cannot align itself with one or other of these forms.”

Participation in the imperialist war was thus a “*class frontier*” which from now on separated “the fraction, only representative of proletarian interests, from other parties or groups representing in various ways different counter-revolutionary imperialist interests”. This position thus marked not only a break with Trotskyism, but also with the old position of the Italian Left, which up to the eve of the war had used the term ‘Centrist parties’ to define the Stalinist current and its Left - which made it seem as though these parties had something ‘proletarian’ about them.

On the question of the party and the fraction, however, the ‘French nucleus’ remained on the Leninist position of the Italian Left:

“The party is the political leadership of the proletariat of a given country, whose consciousness it represents. It is the party which, after taking power, exercises the dictatorship in the name of the working class. There can be no revolutionary movement if the party does not exist.”

The party could not be created in a voluntarist manner, since “it can only be created in a period of

revolutionary upsurge, when the masses break free of the grip of the traitor parties and the balance of forces swings in the proletariat's favour". As we shall see later on, the long debate on the moment for the formation of the party, which had developed since the inception of the 'Bordigist' current, had not been resolved. It was to lead to long discussions in the group at the time of the Italian workers' strikes in 1943, then to a split.

From the theses of 'Bordigism', the Declaration took up the position of the "Trade union united front", as against the political united front. It made joining a union obligatory for each militant. "Every militant who can do so is obliged to join a union, and consequently to defend the union policies of the organisation inside the unions

The aim of the French nucleus was to constitute a French Fraction of the Communist Left, something which had not been possible before the war. The group's weakness, composed as it was mainly of young and inexperienced elements alongside a few older mutants, did not immediately require the proclamation of a French Fraction. It would be wrong to force a premature birth by bringing in "disparate elements linked together by sentimental ties or vague recriminations against the society they live in" or through campaigns of recruitment based on "undercover" work in other groups. This warning was aimed above all at the Trotskyists who specialised in entrism, and in particular at the young elements who had broken with Trotskyism but who still had certain sentimental ties to it. After some further splits in Trotskyism, which chose to support one "imperialist camp" against the other, elements emerged who were oriented towards the internationalist positions of struggle against the war in all its forms. Contacts were rapidly established with the Italian Left. And it was easy, considering that Marc Chirik (Marco), the leader of the Group, was leader of the both Fractions.

The *Revolutionäre Kommunisten Deutschlands* an the Dutch *Communistenbond Spartacus*

This was the case with the Revolutionäre Kommunisten Deutschlands, or Revolutionary Communists of Germany (though they were mostly of Austrian origin). In 1935, several groups of young people in the communist youth and the Austrian CP formed a semi-Trotskyist fraction which transformed itself into an autonomous organisation under the name Revolutionäre Kommunisten Österreichs. The RKÖ, which published *Der Bolschewik*, and to which the first Trotskyists belonged, became in 1936 the official Austrian section of the ‘movement for the 4th International’. Repression and imprisonment led most of the group into exile, to Czechoslovakia and Switzerland, then to France and Belgium in 1938. Their opposition to Trotskyism soon came to the surface: on 3 September 1938, at Périgny (near Paris), the two RK delegates (Karl Fischer and Georg Scheuer) were alone in opposing the foundation of a ‘4th International’, proclaimed in one day by 20 people. Rejecting this move as adventurist and bureaucratic, they went into opposition (4). When the war broke out, they broke from official Trotskyism and joined the ‘International Contact Commission for the 4th Communist International’ formed by Oehler’s RWL. In contact with opposition elements in Belgium (like the Vereeken group), they published *Der Marxist* in Antwerp in 1939-40. Declaring themselves to be ‘Leninist’ on the question of revolutionary defeatism, they attracted in 1941 some elements from the German Trotskyist group Internationale Kommunisten Deutschlands (IKD). They then took the name RKD instead of RKÖ (5).

When the Russo-German conflict broke out, the majority of the RKD took position in favour of revolutionary defeatism, and no longer the “conditional defence of the USSR”. Influenced by Ciliga’s book *The Russian Enigma*, they now defined Russia as state capitalist. Even a minority which had been

reticent about the position of revolutionary defeatism against all the imperialist camps espoused this point of view after two years of discussion. As for the Trotskyists, after 1939 they had chosen their imperialist camp (6).

The French military collapse in 1940 and the internment of all German and Austrian refugees in France, restricted the RKD to Belgium, the north of France and the southern zone. They were able to renew contact with the Trotskyist milieu, and through discussion, to facilitate splits, particularly in the south-west (Toulouse, Montauban, Bordeaux) and in Paris in 1944. Before that, in 1942, groups of 'Communistes Révolutionnaires' had been formed. From 1943, in *Fraternisation Proletarienne*, they defended the same positions as the RKD. Soon after this was formed 'L'organisation des Communistes Révolutionnaires' (1944), publishing *Rassemblement Communiste Révolutionnaire* and *L'Internationale* in common with or separately from the RKD. The CR and RK groups were autonomous, even purely local, with their own positions, although identical in principle. They had their own organs: the Toulouse CR published *Le Proletaire* in 1944-45; the Paris group *Pouvoir Ouvrier* in 1944.

The RKD press (*RK-Bulletin* after '41, *Spartakus* from 43-45, *Vierte Kommunistische Internationale*) showed a considerable rapprochement with the internationalist positions of the Italian Left. At first, they were 'ultrabolshevik', treating Lenin's every position as gospel, but their break with Trotskyism made them evolve towards the positions of the Communist Left, rejecting the 'united front' and any support for 'national liberation struggles'. Discovering Rosa Luxemburg (hence the title of their agitational sheet *Spartakus*), they gradually began to defend positions close to council communism:

The democracy of the councils is the healthiest form of workers' power. The democracy of the councils means full democratic freedoms in the councils for all parties which situate themselves on the terrain of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

(*Spartakus*, June 1944).

The Italian Left in France, and the French nucleus, had much contact and discussion with the RK and the CR, and sometimes carried out joint work through leaflets against the war. Consciously or unconsciously the two tendencies influenced each other reciprocally, by acquainting each other with the positions of the Italian and German Communist Lefts. But these contacts were made difficult in 1945 because of the ‘Vercesi affair’ (see below), which the RK saw as a proof of the Italian Left’s ‘betrayal’.

Apart from the Italian Left and the RK-CR (as well as a few rare anarchists like Voline in Marseilles), the groups who also defended internationalist positions against the war were scarce. It must be noted in France the small group animated by Pavel and Clara Thalmann in Paris: the Groupe révolutionnaire prolétarien (GRP), that published his own *Bulletin*, and had some contacts with German soldats. One of his militants became famous : the Councils Communist and “Marxologist” Maximilien Rubel.

More important numerically, in Europe, was the Dutch Communist Left. On the eve of the war, the Council Communists in Holland were very divided and disorganised. The GIK ceased publication of *Räte-Korrespondenz* in 1937, but continued with the review *Raden-communisme* and the agitation sheet *Proletenstemmen*. Contact was gradually lost with Germany, where a few groups of the German Communist Left survived. *De Arbeidersraad* (The Workers’ Council) which emerged from the KAPN, and the LAO (‘Workers’ Left Opposition’, publishing *Spartacus*) had disappeared before the outbreak of war. The GIK, like all the small surviving Council Communist groups, had become very lethargic. But in January 1941, the Sneevliet group formed the ‘Marx-Lenin-Luxemburg-Front’. It brought out a bi-monthly sheet, *Spartacus* ‘organ of the third front’ - the front of the class struggle opposed to the military fronts. It worked closely with the Vereeken group in Belgium. When the German army invaded

Russia, the majority of the group declared itself against the defence of the USSR. But Sneevliet and seven other members of the MLL-Front were arrested and shot by the Gestapo in April 1942. A Trotskyist split emerged, defending the 'degenerated workers' state'. The others founded the Communistenbond-Spartacus which was joined by most members of the GIK. The group had a clear position against the imperialist war. It formed a 'Union' in the AAU tradition - the 'Eenheidsvakbeweging', which very quickly fell into the hands of the Dutch CP. The new group had very little contact with the outside world, except in Belgium. At the end of the war, it entered into discussion with the RK and the French Fraction of the International Communist Left (7).

The internationalist communist movement was therefore very limited. The RK-CR and the Dutch Left seemed more active in their propaganda against the war. Apart from the French nucleus, formed in Marseilles in May 1942, a large part of the Italian Left, especially in Belgium had fallen into lethargy and were suspicious of the new 'French' elements. The Italian Fraction in Marseilles, however, continued its efforts to rebuild the organisation, and in this was joined by militants from Lyon, Paris and Toulon. From 1941 on this effort had born fruit in annual conferences, and an Executive Commission was nominated, composed of Piccino (Otello Ricceri), Marco (Marc Chirik), Tullio (Aldo Lecci) and Butta (Giovanni Bottaioli). The basis for this reconstruction of the Italian Left in France was the rejection of the orientation adopted after 1936-37: war economy, localised wars, 'inter-imperialist solidarity', definition of Russia as a 'degenerated workers' state', 'social disappearance of the proletariat' - all positions defended by Vercesi and his friends in Belgium.

At the beginning of October 1942, a general strike broke out at FIAT in Turin. This movement, in the second working class concentration in Italy, was the prologue to the mass strikes which in March '43 hit the Italian food, chemical, and metal industries. These events led to the fall of Mussolini and his

replacement by Badoglio on 25 July 1943. The strikes had a revolutionary content: in the factories of Turin and Milan young workers, in opposition to the PCI, talked openly of forming factory councils and soviets. This movement of opposition to the war was not purely 'Italian', but international. From November 1941, strikes began among the German workers. Despite repression and above all their isolation they continued through the year 1942. The biggest struggles broke out in 1943, when all the Italian immigrant workers ceased work, supported tacitly or actively by strikes by German workers (8).

These events seemed to reveal a revival of class struggle in the midst of war and confirm the new orientation of the 'reconstructed' Italian Fraction. They encouraged the new EC to send militants (Suzanne Voute and Robert Salama) to Belgium to re-establish contacts. Despite the difficulty and danger in crossing the frontiers, the EC wanted to push the Italian and Belgian Fractions to resume activity and organisational links. Despite the opposition from Vercesi, who thought it useless, a conference of the Italian Fraction was prepared, to be held in France in August 1943. It had the task of drawing up a balance sheet of the Italian events and outlining perspectives for intervention.

A text written in July 1943, for the August '43 conference of the Italian Fraction in Marseilles, and signed by Marco (Marc Chirik) for the EC, defended the idea that the situation of Italy and Germany as a weak link opened the "era of revolution", and predicted that "the revolutionary revolts which will stop the course of the imperialist war will create a chaotic situation in Europe that is more and more dangerous for the bourgeoisie".

However it warned against the attempts of the "Anglo-American-Russian" imperialist bloc to liquidate these revolts from the outside, and against the efforts of the left parties to "muzzle revolutionary consciousness" in Italy by creating "trade unions, organisms reflecting the context of capitalist

economic relations”. It thus called for the formation of “soviets” to transform the economic struggle into a political struggle, the only way to “resist capitalist repression effectively” (9).

On the basis of the Italian events, the conference affirmed that the Fraction would inevitably be transformed into a party:

“At our August 1943 conference, the organisation unanimously recognised that ‘the course towards the formation of the party in Italy is open’; ‘the transformation of Fraction into Party in Italy is open’.”

The Fraction therefore had to strengthen its activity and prepare to intervene in a situation of working class offensive:

“In contrast to the Fraction, the Party is the specific organ of the offensive struggle of the class. To try to form the party in the course of a defeat is to try to force a premature birth.

“Yes! The Fraction has finished its specifically ‘defensive’ task. The new course opened up by the events in Italy, the course towards transforming the Fraction into a party is open.” (Internal bulletin of the Italian Fraction, no. 2, Feb. 1944, ‘Bavardage ‘révolutionnaire’ ou activité méthodique continue’ by Marco).

To this end, the conference decided to resume contact with Italy; it asked militants to prepare to return there as soon as possible. This proclamation of a “new course” came up against the opposition of the Belgian Fraction and above all of Vercesi, who was absent from the conference. Vercesi had in fact initially concluded that a revolutionary course had opened up in Italy — to the point of trying, unsuccessfully, to return to Italy (10) in July — but then went back to his previous position.

According to him, the Italian events had been overestimated and confirmed “the social non-existence of the working class” in a period of war. Consequently, any activity of intervention by the Fraction, even the continuation of its existence, was seen as pointless or purely ‘activist’.

These divergences crystallised in the following months and even widened, since they touched both on the Russian question and the Perronist theory of the ‘war economy’. With the aim of clarifying the divergences, the Italian Fraction (in fact Marco) published in French eight issues of an ‘International discussion bulletin’ throughout the year 1944. The texts, for the most part, were written by Marco.

- **‘The social non existence of the proletariat’.** The Italian Fraction and the French nucleus pronounced against this theory:

“The disappearance of the external manifestations of the social existence of the class does not at all mean that they do not exist, still less that the class does not exist socially.” (‘Notre réponse’, by Marco, 1944, *Bulletin International*, no. 5).

Indeed, “the Italian experience has proved that mass movements will arise during the course of the war, and despite the effort of the unified forces of the counter-revolution, will have a tendency to detach themselves from the capitalist programme and to take up an independent orientation, expressing a clear class content” (ibid.).

However the ‘orthodox’ tendency, as it defined itself, did not ignore the fact that Badoglio and Togliatti were getting a grip on the situation in Italy. It pointed out that while the objective and subjective conditions for the formation of the class party had matured, the party’s absence “had not allowed the

development of movements that would open a revolutionary course”.

The Italian Fraction was unaware that in Italy itself a ‘Partito Comunista Internazionale’ (PCInt: see below) had been formed at the end of 1943 (Northern Italy). Although the August ‘43 conference and the French nucleus had called for the Fraction’s immediate return to Italy, this proposal came up against insurmountable material difficulties, and until 1945 there was no contact between the new party and the Fraction in France and Belgium. It came up still more against the ‘immobilism’ of the Vercesi tendency. Against this tendency to withdrawal from the outside world, the French group warned of the danger of becoming “an academy, a club of scholars indulging in the speculation of pure theory” and of being “left behind by events” (ibid.).

Political disagreements with Vercesi

· **The Russian question** On the basis of the definition of the Russian state as ‘proletarian’, as *Bilan* had formulated it before the war, a discussion opened up on the class nature of the USSR. A part of the Belgian Fraction still affirmed its ‘proletarian’ character. The majority of the members of the Italian Fraction rejected this position, whose “fragility and incompleteness” they had always felt. They focused their efforts on the “discussion studies published in *Bilan*”. The Russian state was defined as capitalist and imperialist, and the task of the proletariat was to free itself of this great lie of the ‘proletarian nature’ of the Russian state apparatus.

“The communist vanguard will be able to carry out its task as the proletariat’s guide towards the revolution to the extent that it is able to free itself of the great lie of the ‘proletarian nature’ of the Russian state and to show it for what it is, to

reveal its counter-revolutionary capitalist and imperialist nature and function.

“It is enough to note that the goal of production remains the extraction of surplus value, to affirm the capitalist character of the economy. The Russian state has participated in the course towards war, not only because of its counter-revolutionary function in crushing the proletariat, but because of its own capitalist nature, through the need to defend its sources of raw materials, through the necessity to ensure its place on the world market where it realises its surplus-value, through the desire, the need, to enlarge its economic spheres of influence and to ensure its access routes. “ (11).

- The discussion on Russia led inevitably to a more profound analysis of the reasons behind the degeneration of the Russian revolution, in order to draw from the defeat the premises for the victory of the next proletarian revolution. Like *Bilan*, the Italian Fraction, which had been pushed to reopen this debate by texts presented by the French nucleus, rejected any kind of ‘state socialism’, which could only end up in state capitalism. It warned against the reactionary nature of the state throughout the transition period from capitalism to communism:

“During the course of history, the state appears as a CONSERVATIVE AND REACTIONARY factor of the first order. It is a fetter which the evolution and development of the productive forces constantly come up against.

“In order to carry out its dual role as an agent of security and an agent of reaction, the state relies on a material force, on violence. Its authority relies on coercion.

“While retaining and accentuating its political function, the capitalist state evolves on the economic terrain towards state capitalism.”

This position was not that of the anarchists, who proclaimed the abolition of the state as soon as the proletariat took power. Conscious of the inevitability of a state during the period of transition, and of the risk that it would be reinforced if the revolution did not become world-wide, the Italian Left saw

the possibility of a struggle against this state not in the domain of a 'socialist' economy but in the consciousness and organisation of the proletariat; not in workers' violence against individual bourgeois ('red terror') but in the proletariat's political vigilance vis-à-vis a state which would be the focus for the rebirth of capitalist relations of production. For the first time, the Italian Left talked about the impossibility of a 'proletarian' state in the period of the proletarian dictatorship:

"The destruction of the state by the proletariat is only the FIRST REVOLUTIONARY ACTIVITY. The class, opening for and its party a whole revolutionary process aimed FIRST AT THE WORLD REVOLUTION and then, ON THE ECONOMIC LEVEL, AT THE CREATION OF A SOCIALIST SOCIETY.

"In its nature as a social institution, the state set up after the victory of the proletarian insurrection remains an institution alien and hostile to socialism.

"History and the Russian experience have shown that, properly speaking, there is no such thing as a proletarian state, but a state in the hands of the proletariat, whose nature remains antisocialist and which, as soon as the political vigilance of the proletariat slackens, becomes the stronghold, the rallying point and the expression for the dispossessed classes of a renascent capitalism." ("La nature de l'Etat et la révolution prolétarienne", *Bulletin* no. 7, July 1944.)

Where would the consciousness and organisation of the proletariat, its dictatorship, be expressed, if not in the state? The text quoted above replied: in the unions, which defend the workers' labour power against the encroachments of the state, and in the councils. In the latter, all methods of violence against the workers must be rejected. It is inside these organs that the class party develops. Instead of the dictatorship of the party defended by *Bilan*, the new position was for the dictatorship of the class as a whole in the councils and unitary trade unions. It was a step towards the position of the KAPD which was the first to have talked about the 'dictatorship of the councils'. The essential difference was that the Italian Left thought that 'real workers' trade unions' could only emerge during the revolution, whereas

the German Left was for the destruction of the unions by the councils. But in fact the 'unions' advocated by the Italian Left at this point were very similar to councils.

• **The theory of the war econom** At the immediate level, however, the Italian Fraction's 'liquidation' of Vercesi's theory of the war economy had the most profound political consequences. Having claimed prior to the war that the arms economy allowed capitalism to resolve' its problems of functioning by producing non-utilisable products which were thus taken outside the laws of the market, Vercesi was led logically to affirm that war resolved the contradiction between production and the realisation of the surplus value crystallised in commodities (12).

If war was the 'solution' then the objective conditions for the revolution disappeared. For the Italian Left, this theory was unacceptable not only because it implied the impossibility of any organised existence within the proletariat, but also because it called into question the slogan that Lenin had raised as a banner for all the lefts - 'turn the imperialist war into a civil war'.

In order to explain the Italian events, Vercesi found a new theory: the 'exhaustion of the war economy due to the 'underproduction of armaments'. The contradictions of capitalism were breaking out not at the social level, providing a development of the class struggle in reponse to increasing misery, but at the level of a productive apparatus incapable of responding sufficiently to the demand for armaments.

In May 1944 a new conference of the Italian Fraction was held, and it condemned the theory developed by Vercesi and the majority that had regrouped around him before the war, as well as the new theory of the 'crisis of the war economy'. In a political Declaration, it rejected the concept of 'localised wars' and reaffirmed the concept of the imperialist war.

Taking up the Luxemburgist analysis which Mitchell had defended in *Bilan* and *Communisme*, it insisted that the war economy would not lead to a new prosperity but to “a reduction in the proletariat’s standard of living, raising the antagonism between labour and capital to the point where it will break out into a revolutionary tempest”. Finally, it envisaged that the discussion would continue “until the complete victory of the communist position, which is a precondition for the Fraction being able to carry out its historic tasks in the present course of a maturation of the revolutionary explosion” (13).

In this discussion, which was to continue for nearly another year, it is interesting to see the arguments used by Marco. This comrade disagreed with Luxemburg’s view that arms production was a field for accumulation and for the realisation of surplus value, and attempted to respond to the objection that the USA had considerably enriched itself during the war. This analysis has a striking contemporary quality in the light of subsequent developments:

“Imperialist war does not develop in response to the rising tide of revolution; it is the momentary extinction of the threat of revolution, which allows society to evolve towards the outbreak of a war engendered by the internal contradictions and conflicts of the capitalist system.

“War production is not an attempt to solve an economic problem. In its origins it is the fruit of the necessity for the capitalist suite to defend itself against the dispossessed classes and to maintain their exploitation by force, and at the same time to defend its economic positions and to expand them at the expense of other imperialist suites.

“War production, and all the value which it materialises, is destined to leave the sphere of production without being reintegrated into the cycle of accumulation - to be destroyed. After each cycle of production, society does not register an increase in its social heritage, but an overall reduction and impoverishment...

“War production is carried out through various financial operations performed by the suite, at the expense of the working

masses: taxes, loans, conversions, inflation and other measures; a new and supplementary buying power is obtained through an overall draining value... The greater part remains unrealised and waits to be realised through war, or through banditry against the defeated imperialism. A kind of enforced realisation is thus carried out. The victorious imperialism presents the bill for war production in terms of 'reparations', exacting its pound of flesh from the defeated imperialism. But the value contained in the war production of the defeated imperialism, like that of other small capitalist states, is completely and irredeemably lost. If you draw up a balance sheet of the operation for the whole world economy, the results are catastrophic, even if some sectors and imperialisms have got richer. (13)

This discussion with Vercesi had no effect. No longer participating - apparently - in any of the Fraction's activities, his departure or exclusion seemed inevitable. But the cause was not his theoretical or organisational disagreements; it was his activity in the 'Antifascist Coalition' in Brussels.

Italia di Domani: Vercesi's activity in the Brussels Anti-Fascist Coalition

At the end of 1944, the Italian Fraction in Marseilles and the French nucleus learned indirectly through a former deputy of the PSI travelling through France that Ottorino Perrone was participating in the 'Coalizione Antifascista' in Brussels, in the name of the Italian Fraction. Nor was he alone, since Ferdinando Borsacchi (Pieri) was also involved. This 'coalition' had been born in September of that year, with the approach of Anglo-American troops. It was composed of all the 'antifascist' parties: the Christian Democratic party represented by Domenico Tavano; the Italian Communist Party represented by Enrico Cominotto, the Republican party with Pietro Liuti, the PSI with Saverio Roncoroni, Giustizia e Libertà with Jacopo Brandaglia, trade unionists like Ateo Vannucci, and the Liberal party, which did not have a delegate.

Since 18th September, Ottorino Perrone had been put forward by the Italian 'antifascists' and named provisional delegate at the head of the Croce Rossa Italiana (Italian Red Cross), which managed all charity work towards Italians in liaison with the Belgian Croix-Rouge. Through an irony of history, the offices of the Coalition were situated in an occupied Italian consulate in the Rue de Livorno - Livorno being for the Bordigists the symbol of the break with 'social democracy and bourgeois democracy' of all kinds.

The Coalition published *L'Italia di Domani* in Italian, then in French, from January 1945.

Its official goals were to help Italian prisoners of war to get back to Italy and to give material aid to Italians in difficulty. In fact its aims were political. As well as the reports on charitable work and the cultural and literary debates which filled its columns, *L'Italia di Domani* defended the idea of "the real Italy, free, democratic, antifascist". To this end the Coalition appealed for financial donations to support the allied war effort. Its columns were full of the 'great deeds' of the Resistance - bombings, sabotage, guerrilla war - in support of the military camp Italy had chosen after 1943. Certain articles, signed 'Logicus', called on the allies not to begrudge Italy its share in the 'victory' and to allow it to obtain 'just frontiers' as reward for its participation in the war.

L'Italia di Domani was therefore an 'antifascist' organ in the service of the Anglo-American military camp, and not a simple 'cultural' journal as Perrone claimed later on. In its ideology of support for the war and for rebuilding the 'Italian fatherland', it resembled the *Popolo d'Italia* of 1915, which had also been animated by 'left socialists'.

Had Perrone, who before the war had so firmly and consistently denounced antifascism as an

instrument of imperialist war, suddenly become an ‘antifascist’? Had he abandoned his intransigent communist positions and gone over to the ‘democratic camp’?

To anyone reading his articles, Perrone’s role in the Coalition came out as extremely ambiguous. On the one hand, he wrote articles on the war economy, the counter-revolutionary role of Russia, the necessity for socialism and for the dictatorship of the proletariat in Italy, all of which showed that, ‘ideologically’, he remained the same; on the other hand, there were no articles by him explicitly denouncing the war and antifascism (14).

In fact, Perrone was acting as a ‘revolutionary’ cover for the Coalition, which saw him as a man of integrity, known throughout the Italian émigré milieu in Belgium for his enormous culture, intelligence and noble humanitarian sentiments. On several occasions, Perrone acted as a spokesman for the Coalition. He represented it at the meeting held by the Socialist deputy De Brouckère in November 1944. In his closing speech, Perrone said that “in the present troubled situation, where Italy’s joining the allied cause may not save Italians from the dangers of being treated as enemies, De Brouckère has opened the way for a current of sympathy among the Belgian people in favour of those who have suffered over 20 years of fascist dictatorship”. He also paid homage to Emile Vandervelde (another Belgian socialist deputy, who in 1914 had supported the Entente war effort). Equally ambiguous and incomprehensible was the assurance he gave “in the name of the political refugees”, that “once returned to Italy, the Italian exiles will do their duty” (*L’Italia di Domani*, no. 6, 11 Nov. 1944).

No less stupefying, for a member of the Italian Communist Left, was his activity in the Red Cross, where in an appeal to Italians living in Belgium (*ibid.*, no. 11, March 1945) he thanked “his excellency the Papal Nuncio” for his “support to this work of solidarity and humanity”, and declared that he was

sure that “no Italian will shame himself by remaining deaf to our urgent appeal”.

Perrone retained his membership of the Coalition and his presidency of the Croce Rossa until at least May 1945, when he began to distance himself from them, and eventually resigned.

At first the Italian Fraction in France refused to believe that Perrone had taken part in this coalition; it thought the whole thing was a lie. When it received copies of *L'Italia de Domani*, it had to accept the evidence. The Executive Commission (composed, among others, of Ricceri, Lecci, Bottaioli, Marco) reacted immediately: Vercesi was expelled on 20 January 1945. The “Résolution sur le cas Ver.” - written by Marc Chirik - which it published also called on “the proletariat to break with these left wing blocks, where antifascism is just a mask for subjecting the proletariat to the ‘democratic’ bourgeoisie”. It denounced “all the elements who carry out these policies as confusionists and auxiliaries of capitalism” (15). It is worth noting that this expulsion did not apply to Pieri (Borsacchi), whose activity in the Coalition was not known to the Fraction.

Vercesi’s activity was all the more antithetical to the tradition of the Italian Left in that the Fraction, and especially the French nucleus, had since 1943 been developing a whole work of open intervention against the war. Posters denouncing the imperialist war and all the military fronts were stuck up in several French towns. Leaflets published in German, English, Italian and French were thrown into the military trains going off to the front. After the allied landing of 6 June 1944, an Appeal was launched to all workers and soldiers calling on them to demonstrate their class solidarity across all divisions; to cease fire and unite against world capitalism, to form “an international class front” in order to ‘turn the imperialist war into a civil war’. The RK and CR were also intervening in the same way, and political relations with them grew closer, in spite of the difficulty in holding joint discussion conferences with

them (16).

Creation of the French Fraction: split with the Italian Fraction

All this work led to a numerical development in Marseilles-Toulon, Paris and northern France. Soon the “French Fraction of the Communist Left” was born, its founding Congress being held in Paris, in December 1944, where moved Marco. Alongside the Italian and Belgian Fractions, a new (but microscopic) Fraction seemed to have emerged, realising the hopes expressed by the International Bureau in 1937.

The “Liberation” did not change in the least the clandestine methods of the new Fraction, given the police surveillance against internationalist propaganda, particularly under the auspices of the PCF (in Marseilles, in spring 1944, a member of the Italian EC, Marco, narrowly escaped from the clutches of the Resistance (FFI, FTP), who knew about his activities against the war). The French Fraction was organised in territorial groups of 3 to 5 members, links being carried out through the Executive Commission. Illegality remained the rule, but despite its limited forces, this did not stop it from publishing and intervening on a wide scale.

Its programmatic bases were rigorously the same as those of the Italian and Belgian Fractions: the International Bureau resolution of 1938, the whole tradition of *Bilan*. The French nucleus’ 1942 ‘Declaration of Principles’ served as the basis for the work of the French Fraction. The Statutes defined strict criteria for membership, in order to preserve the life of the organisation. The EC elected by the congress included a member of the EC of the Italian Fraction (Marco), in order to show the non-autonomous character of the new Fraction.

However, the Italian Fraction in Marseilles, because of previous political differences (in particular the expansion of intervention), but also of the mistrust of the Marco unilateral creation of a little group in Paris, only recognised the new Fraction after some hesitation. It was moreover somewhat distrustful towards these 'newcomers' - often young, and not Italian - and was no doubt afraid of being a minority within the Communist Left. The dispersal of its members during the war, the return of many of them to Italy following the formation of the PCInt by Damen and Maffi, later joined by Bordiga's group in the Mezzogiorno, considerably reduced the membership of the Italian group in France and Belgium. There is no doubt that a certain "party patriotism" and sentimental attachment to their country of origin had a greater weight in their attitude than any political motivation. Furthermore, at a conference in May 1945 the Italian Fraction in France decided to dissolve itself and to integrate its members individually into the PCInt. This dissolution was vigorously opposed by Marco who insisted that the Fraction be maintained until more was known about the political positions of the new party, and whether they were in contradiction with those of the Fraction. In order not to be an 'accomplice' of this auto-dissolution - according to him -he resigned from the EC and left the Conference. In response, the Conference did not give official recognition to the Chirik's French Fraction (FFGC) and expelled Marco from the Italian Fraction, for "Trotskyism".

In the meantime, Vercesi (who was still a member of the Italian Red Cross and of the Anti-Fascist Coalition) declared himself in favour of the new party of Damen and Maffi and attempted to get back to Italy. It seemed that after the Marseilles resolution expelling him from the Fraction, he gradually began to reconsider. But he only went half way, because he continued with these activities, though in a more limited and prudent manner. Ideologically, he attempted to justify his past activity in the Coalition. In a text written in Spring 1945 - and which drew a biting reply from the FFGC, 'Quand

l'opportunisme divague : réponse à Ver.'- he tried to prove that his 'antifascist' militancy had been justified by the necessity to "liquidate fascism and the fascists" in order to "facilitate the clash between the proletariat and the capitalist state". Moreover, according to him, "the workers today are demanding the crushing of fascism". As to his activity, it was purely cultural and humanitarian, aimed at helping Italian workers and this was something "not limited to questions of politics and to the divergences between political parties". He also said that the Fraction could only intervene "when capitalism is being shaken up" and not now "when from the social point of view, the proletariat has not yet made its appearance" (17).

The birth of the PCI in Italy, and the influence of Vercesi, who was very hostile to the Chirik's FFGC since it had been the most intransigent against him, led to a split in the French Fraction. One militant of its EC, Frédéric (Suzanne Voute) contacted Vercesi in Brussels and seem to have been convinced by his arguments, after having been fervent advocates of his immediate expulsion.

As with the Italian Fraction, the real origin of this split was not directly political: it was a result of the prestige enjoyed by Vercesi and the new Italian party. The official motive was the FFGC's 'neo-Trotskyism' (Marc Chirik came from the French Trotskyism). In fact, the 'French Fraction' (later on the Gauche Communiste de France) had decided to issue a joint leaflet with the RK/CR for the 1st May 1945, in order to warn the French workers against anti-German chauvinism, and to call on them to support the revolutionary movements which were bound to emerge in Germany after the war. The Italian Fraction and elements of the French Fraction saw this as the politics of the 'united front', contrary to the principles of the Italian Left. In fact, the RK/CR were groups of German and French revolutionaries who had fought courageously against the war, risking deportation like their founder Karl Fischer, and shot for a few. Seeing the Coalition as a sign of the definitive 'betrayal' of the Italian

Left, the RK/CR maintained contact, in the form of discussions and conferences, with the Gauche Communiste de France, the Belgian Fraction, and the Dutch Council Communists. The public denunciation of the 'revisionism' of the Vercesi tendency by the GCF and the RK/CR, the search for a confrontation of ideas between these groups - all this, whether admitted or not, provided the unconditional partisans of Vercesi and the new party with the pretext to provoke a split. The question of the leaflet put out by the GCF and the RK was just an excuse for eliminating any criticism of Vercesi.

It seemed that the FFGC did everything it could to avoid a split, by avoiding any irreversible organisational measures. (18). Suzanne Voute with his friend Alberto Maso (Vega) - who came from the Spanish POUM and was sympathizer - tried to build (with the Italian Bordigists in France) in January-May 1945 an organisation that would be united with the PCIInt.

In July 1945 the second conference of the Gauche Communiste de France was held. It 'suspended' for one year Suzanne Voute who were no longer participating in its activities. But that kind of "decision" - decreed by 4 or 5 partisans of Marc Chirik - was nonsense. Suzanne Voute and other Bordigists in France were building the official French "section" of the Italian PCIInt, Party 2,000 strong.

Nevertheless, the GCF was definitively constituted as a group organisationally separate from the Italian Left. It took up the task of outlining the historical perspectives it faced. It was counting on the revolutionary upsurge of the proletariat in Italy and Germany where "it has suffered less from the destruction of its consciousness than from physical destruction and has only adhered to the war under the pressure of violence". But it noted that "incomparably better prepared for the possibility of a revolutionary threat, international capitalism has acted in a solid, skilful and prudent manner against a

proletarian decapitated of its vanguard”:

“From the very first signs of the revolution in Italy, in July 1943, it was capitalism which seized the initiative and implacably conducted a civil war against the proletariat, preventing by force any concentration of proletarian forces, and carrying on with the war, even taken after the collapse and disappearance of the Hitler government, Germany was urgently calling for an armistice. The aim of this was, through a monstrous carnage, a pitiless preventative massacre, to eliminate any threat of a revolution by the German proletariat.

*“The total figure of dead in Europe has risen to 40 million, two thirds of them since 1943. This figure alone shows the balance sheet of imperialist war in general and of capitalism’s civil war against the proletariat in particular. (19) (“Report on the international situation”, *Bulletin Spécial* no. 2, July 1945).*

The lack of any revolutionary upsurge was to have a centrifugal effect on the weak revolutionary forces that did exist. The RKD and the CR went through numerous splits and began to fail apart. The former “minority” of the Chirik’s French Fraction, supported by the PCInt in Italy, (20) formed another and “official” FFGC (Nr 2) and asserted that it was the only legitimate heir of the Communist Left. It published the paper *L’Etincelle* (“Spark”), a title taken from the paper the GCF had been publishing since January 1945. For over a year there were thus two *L’Etincelle*; after that, the official Bordigist FFGC began to publish its own organ, *L’Internationaliste*. For its part, the Gauche communiste de France (GCF), led by Marc Chirik, published a monthly theoretical organ until 1952: *Internationalisme* (for its relations with the PCInt see Chapter 9).

There were no longer any political relations between the two little French groups. The break was made complete when at the end of 1945 the FFGC admitted in his ranks the old minority of *Bilan* which had entered L’Union Communiste, as well as the latter’s chief representative: Henri Chazé. From now on

their paths diverged profoundly: the GCF attempted to take up and deepen the theoretical contribution of *Bilan*; the FFGC formed itself around the pre-1926 Bordigist positions, and as a prolongation of the old minority which the Italian Fraction had excluded before the war (21).

NOTES

(1) *Octobre* no. 5, August 1939 'Notes internationales' by Gatto Mammone.

(2) Cf. Rabaut, *Tout est possible*, p. 346-347

(3) 'Statut d'organisation de la Fraction Française de la Gauche Communiste Internationale', 1945.

4 Cf. *Les Congrès de la 4^e Internationale*, La Brèche, Paris, 1976.

(5) A few texts by the RKD, as well as a very succinct history, can be found in *Kommunismus* no. 6/7, May 1979, Wien: 'Der Kampf gegen den imperialistischen Krieg am Beispiel der RK'. Yvan Craipeau (*Les Révolutionnaires pendant la II^e Guerre Mondiale*, Syros, 1977, p. 168) and Rabaut mistakenly describe *Fraternisation Proletarienne*, the review of the RK/CR, as the organ of the Union Communiste Internationaliste (other name of the Groupe Révolutionnaire Proletarien, formed by Thalmann). This latter group, which was previously called Groupe Révolutionnaire Proletarien, was led by the former Swiss communist Thalmann. From 1943-45 it published *Le Réveil Proletarien*, then *La Flamme* from 1945-47. Although it referred to Rosa Luxemburg, it was very ambiguous on the question of the war.

(6) At the beginning of the war, Trotsky (*In Defence of Marxism*) called for the defence not only of the USSR, but also of the 'democratic' camp. His abandonment of internationalism was justified by the invention of a new, 'proletarian' patriotism, the patriotism of the 'kitchen', more healthy than that of the bourgeoisie. In France, the Trotskyist movement split in two: a pro-German tendency around Jean Rous, member of the international Executive Committee, founded (with Henri Molinier and Henri Barré) the 'Mouvement National Révolutionnaire' which published *Révolution Française* "for collaboration without oppression". The other part, around *La Vérité* and the 'committees for the 4. International' was pro-Gaullist and saw itself as defending "the riches that generations of French workers and peasants have accumulated... the artistic and scientific treasures of France... the magnificent contribution made by French writers and scholars to the intellectual heritage of humanity" (*Bulletin* du comité pour la 4^e Internationale, n° 2, 20/9/40). Finally, a few ex-members of *La Commune*, like Henri

Molinier and Denots, joined - but briefly - Deats pro-Nazi RNP. This also happened in Belgium: Walter Dauge, the main Trotskyist leader, engaged in collaboration.

7) Cf. F. Kools *Die Linke gegen die Parteiherrschaft* p. 527-533, as well as the (semi-Trotskyist) book by an ex-militant of the MLL Front: Max Perthus, *Henk Sneevliet, revolutionair-socialist in Europa en Azië*, SUN, Nijmegen, 1976.

(8) See Danilo Montaldi: *Saggio sulla politica comunista (1919-1970)*, Milan, 1976, p.209-260, and Karl-Heinz Roth, *Die 'Andere Arbeiterbewegung'*, p. 156-174, Trikont, 1976.

(9) Cf. *Internationalisme* no. 5, July 1945, 'Projet de résolution sur les perspectives et tâches dans la période transitoire' July 1943.

(10) Vercesi presented himself in July 1943 at the Italian Consulate in Brussels, to request repatriation. This was refused (Ministero dell'Interno, 21/8/43, busta 12784, ACS CPC 34684, Roma).

(11) See *Bulletin international de discussion*, no. 6, June 1944, 'La nature non prolétarienne de l'Etat russe et sa fonction contre-révolutionnaire', by Marco.

(12) The question of the crisis of capitalism was raised by Rosa Luxemburg in *The Accumulation of Capital*. Her position was countered by Heinrich Grossmann in *Das Akkumulations und Zusammenbruchsgesetz des kapitalistischen Systems*, Leipzig, 1929.

(13) These discussions on the war economy were published at the GCF conference in its Special External *Bulletin* n° 2, July 1945 ('Rapport sur la situation internationale'). The political declaration of the Italian Fraction in May 44 can be found in the *Bulletin International de Discussion de la Fraction Italienne*, n° 5, May 1944.

(14) *L'Italia di Domani* can be found at the Bibliothèque Royale in Brussels, as well as in the 'Perrone archives'. The Communistes Révolutionnaires (CR), in their organ *Le Proletaire*, printed extracts from it.

It should be said that this obscure period in Perrone's life was never uncovered by his party, the PCInt, which has preferred to maintain a prudent silence over it. A study being done at the time of writing, by Mme. Anne Morelli on the Italian immigration in Belgium, analyses the political orientation of *L'Italia di Domani*. She presents Perrone's activity in the coalition as purely humanitarian.

(15) *Internationalisme*, no. 7, Feb. 1946.

(16) A leaflet against the war by the Italian and French Fractions was published in the *Bulletin International de Discussion* n° 6, June 1944; the joint leaflet with the RKD-CR in n° 8.

(17) *Internationalisme* n° 4, June 1945, 'Réponse à Ver.' by Marco.

(18) *Bulletin Extérieur* nos. 1 & 3, July 1945: 'Résolution sur les rapports internationaux'; 'Rapport d'activité'; a 'special issue' on the 'split' was published in June 1945 with the resolutions of the EC of the GCF.

(19) The text alludes to the bombing of Dresden, Hamburg and Berlin which killed hundreds of thousands of workers, as

well as of the industrial towns in northern Italy. The industrial apparatus, on the other hand, was hardly touched.

(20) Officially, the PCInt did not exclude the GCF, it simply ignored it. This attitude was vigorously criticised in *Internationalisme* after the Turin conference (December 1945), which only recognised the FFGC, represented by Frédéric (Suzanne Voute) and Alberto (Albert Véga, i.e. Alberto Maso):

“You do not dare to exclude the intransigent left tendency politically, for fear of revealing your own opportunistic colours. You resort to wise ‘reorganisations’ which carefully exclude the left tendency. It’s more skilful and less embarrassing”. (Letter of 15 March, by Marco, addressed to the PCInt, the Belgian Fraction, and the official FFGC, in *Internationalisme* no. 10).

(21) The GCF had better relations with the Belgian Fraction, of which Perrone remained a member until his death in 1947. There was even an international conference in 1947 in Brussels in which the Belgian Fraction (Lucain and Robert Couthier) took part along with the GCF and the Dutch Communist Left. The Belgian Fraction published *L’Internationaliste* until its disappearance around 1949-1950. Perrone was also a theoretician of the PCInt, alongside Bordiga.