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The PCI and the Italian Political Game: The Impact of Poland

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An Intelligence Memorandum

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The PCI and the Italian Political Game: The Impact of Poland



An Intelligence Memorandum

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted]
Office of European Analysis. Comments and queries are
welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, [redacted]

[redacted] EURA [redacted]

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**The PCI and the
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The Impact of Poland**

Summary

The Italian Communist Party's (PCI's) harsh criticism of Moscow in the wake of the imposition of martial law in Poland has:

- Driven the party's relations with the Soviets to an all-time low.
- Highlighted longtime strains between the PCI's leaders and its rank and file, many of whom are sympathetic to Moscow.
- Underscored differences at upper levels of the PCI over tactics and strategy.
- Reopened the question, not seriously considered since 1978, of PCI participation in the national government.

Senior PCI officials may have anticipated each of these developments. It is less clear that they thought much about the short- or long-term implications of dealing in some coherent way with all of them at once. The inclination [redacted] has been to go on trying to make the party an thing to an people—loyal to the "best" of the Marxist-Leninist tradition but clearly enough divorced from Moscow to qualify as a full-fledged participant in national-level politics. Thus, these leaders have arrayed themselves in a more or less orderly fashion behind Party Secretary Berlinguer's "third way to socialism" banner. This is at best an uncertain gamble, for it is not at all clear that the strains and tensions now exposed can be neatly hidden away. Nor is it certain that Berlinguer and his associates will have time to consolidate their position before they find themselves overtaken by the forces that seem to be moving Italy toward early parliamentary elections. The best they can probably hope for is that their political opponents—impressed by the uncertainties inherent in the party's disagreement with Moscow, as well as by the opportunities—will be unable to capitalize on the Communists' vulnerability.



Berlinguer and Brezhnev during 1979 talks in Moscow

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**The PCI and the
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**The CPSU-PCI
Axis on Ice**

The Italian Communist Party (PCI) has long occupied a special place in the firmament of international Communism because of its size, the prestige of its leaders, and its proximity to power. The past 10 years or so have seen a growing willingness by Italian Communist leaders to stand apart from the Soviets, as demonstrated by their stance on Czechoslovakia in 1968 and on Afghanistan in 1979. Many PCI officials believe that their party has been on a collision course with the Soviet Party (CPSU) for some time. Some would even argue that the current dispute is long overdue. The PCI statement on Poland issued last December falls short of laying responsibility for the imposition of martial law directly at Moscow's door, but by linking events in Poland to criticism of the Soviet model, Italian Communist leaders have left few doubts about where they think the blame ultimately lies.

The continuing polemics between the Italian Communists and Moscow have brought relations between the two parties to a new low; PCI criticism of the Soviet model in fact almost certainly amounts to an ideological break with Moscow. Both sides hope to avoid a formal rupture of relations, however. Despite the harsh words between the two camps and attacks on the PCI in the Czech, East German, and Polish presses, there are signs that the Soviets are seeking privately to restore ties, or at least to keep the dispute from growing larger.

While the PCI has been slow to respond positively to the Soviet overtures, there are signs that party leader Enrico Berlinguer believes the time has come to let the dispute cool. He has reiterated his view that the PCI statement should not be construed as anti-Soviet.

Berlinguer is currently weighing the possibility of a trip to Moscow some time in 1982 as a means of underscoring this point. At the same time, he is anxious to avoid the appearance of drawing too close to the Soviets. If he decides to take the trip, he will balance the visit to Moscow with stopovers in Bonn and Beijing.

It appears that cultural and nonofficial exchanges with the Soviets have been maintained at Berlinguer's direction.

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[redacted] these contacts, however, are informal and do not involve policy questions—nor is Berlinguer among the participants [redacted]

A Party in Search of an Identity

These gestures have not obscured the fact that the crisis in Poland and the dispute with Moscow have reverberated through the Italian Communist Party like few other events. This is in large part because the recent developments have laid bare more than a decade of internal tension about what the party is to become. Since the mid-1970s the PCI has been compelled by events both at home and abroad to seek a new identity. More recently it has faced the need to recapture the momentum it lost in the 1979 parliamentary elections. Berlinguer and his colleagues now face a new version of an old dilemma: how to pull the party out of its doldrums without alienating traditional supporters. [redacted]

Before the recent developments in Poland, party leaders had generally tried to be circumspect in their criticisms of Moscow. Each time they moved away from the Soviets on an issue, they hastened to reassure the rank and file that nothing had really changed. Both the reality and the perception of change were there, however, and for many party members—especially remaining members of the old guard with strong emotional attachments to Moscow—the slow shift by the leadership has been wrenching. [redacted]

Still, as long as the PCI was advancing at the polls, as was the case during the early and mid-1970s, the party base was willing to set its suspicions aside and accept the explanations it received from above. PCI leaders had the reputation during that period for being better able than their counterparts in other parties to recognize and respond to constituent concerns. Once signs began to appear that the party was on an electoral plateau or was even on the decline, the more skeptical of its supporters became less tolerant although criticism of the leadership remained diffuse. The Polish situation, however, leaves little room for smokescreens and, in effect, has exposed both the leadership's intentions and the party's critical weak point. The PCI leadership knows it would be hard pressed to retain its credibility with non-Communist voters if it failed to condemn Warsaw and distance itself from Moscow. But moving in this direction has revealed a serious gap between the ideas and goals of party intellectuals—many of them close to Berlinguer—and the PCI's more parochial elements. Having steadfastly refused to open a serious intraparty debate that would cover the entire range of differences with the Soviets, the leadership is now finding it difficult to explain its stand persuasively. [redacted]

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Reaction to the party line on Poland has been most pronounced in parts of the "Red belt" of northern Italy. The large number of letters opposing the party's Polish stand in the public and party press may be one measure of the level of discord [redacted]

L'Unita has received scores of critical letters, most of them from local sections in Milan, Turin, the Veneto, and Tuscany. In some instances it appears that every section member has written [redacted]

[redacted] PCI leaders believe this critical mail is largely "orchestrated" and unrepresentative" and have decided to ignore it. [redacted]

Despite speculation among journalists and other politicians in Italy that the dispute with Moscow could lead to a serious split within PCI ranks, Italian Communist officials close to Berlinguer still believe the situation can be contained. They have, however, redoubled their efforts to justify the party's position; they are concerned that, even if a schism is avoided, the party's stand on Poland may have damaged the ideological link between party membership and party activism. Moreover, the depth and breadth of concern in the PCI over Poland, contained or not, has created a crisis of credibility for the party leadership that will inevitably limit its room for maneuver. [redacted]

As early as last spring, PCI leaders became concerned that Moscow would use its own military forces against Solidarity. They apparently agreed that the only possible response would be a formal break in relations, and Central Committee member Paolo Bufalini [redacted] was instructed to prepare a document outlining the party's position should Soviet military intervention occur. [redacted]

The PCI, like other parties and governments in the West, was unprepared for the imposition of martial law by the Poles themselves. Lacking a clear-cut case of Soviet interference as a starting point, the party leadership quickly found itself divided about how to react. Within the upper reaches of the party there were four distinct views on the significance of the event, and the appropriate response:

- Pietro Ingrao, representing the conservative left of the party, argued that the time had come to question publicly the continued historical significance of the October revolution and to alter radically the party's relations with the USSR.
- The party's revisionist wing, associated with Giorgio Napolitano, agreed with Ingrao on the need for a break with the CPSU but insisted the party should then set off on a path toward social democracy.

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- Berlinguer, occupying the center of the spectrum, insisted on a more moderate approach. He agreed wholeheartedly with the criticism of the Soviet model but insisted that the Soviet experience did not justify a wholesale condemnation of fundamental Marxist/Leninist doctrine.
- In sharp contrast to the others, Armando Cossutta, echoing the sentiments of that 25 percent or more of the orthodox party faithful who are uncomfortable with criticism of Moscow, argued that the PCI should either support the Polish Government or remain silent. []

The existence of such divisions about policy, or even about what a policy means once established, is not noteworthy in itself. What set Poland apart from a dozen other issues in the past several years is Cossutta's decision to go public with his position after the Central Committee voted to adopt a statement that split most of the differences of the extremes on both sides. Press reports suggest that Cossutta's repeated acts of public dissent—especially his attack on the party leadership during a PCI-organized rally in Perugia—have seriously shaken the party's inner circle. []



Armando Cossutta []

Cossutta's decision to oppose the party statement in public and the reaction of party hierarchy and the rank and file provide a measure of how far the party has evolved over the past 20 years. The Cossutta episode, regardless of how it ultimately plays out, is both a triumph and a setback for "democratic centralism," the theory of unchallenged decisionmaking at the top that has guided the PCI since its founding. Dissent has long been tolerated within the inner corridors of PCI headquarters, but Cossutta's decision to carry his objections to the public—even in the face of Berlinguer's urging to the contrary—is without precedent. The agreement among party leaders to allow Cossutta to express his views in the party newspaper *L'Unita*, albeit with enough delay to prepare a tough rejoinder for the same page, is equally noteworthy. Cossutta was not the only member of the Central Committee to have reservations about the statement, but except for two committee members who abstained, in the final vote other potential dissidents chose to swallow their objections and rally to Berlinguer's side in the face of so severe a breach of party discipline. []

[]

How the Cossutta phenomenon ultimately will affect the party's decision-making process is open to various lines of conjecture. The hint of greater openness might prove so popular with the party base that the leadership would find itself unable to turn it off without raising unanswerable questions within the political class at large about the party's democratic character. It seems likely, however, that the party hierarchy would conclude that it is not yet ready to have quite so much light shed on its internal affairs. []

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Supporting this line of reasoning are indications that Berlinguer and his allies believe Cossutta is being directed in his hard line by the Soviets.

[redacted] Soon after the party statement was released, the press reported that local PCI sections were being inundated with copies of critical editorials from Eastern Europe. Moscow, however, held off. According to the press, at least some party leaders close to Berlinguer and perhaps Berlinguer himself believe that Moscow delayed its blast in *Pravda* in the hope that Cossutta would generate enough support to force the party to reverse itself.

[redacted] Berlinguer is convinced that Cossutta, who has no access to party funds, is supporting his latest activities with funds provided by the Soviet Embassy. [redacted] Apparently without Berlinguer's knowledge, Cossutta, Berlinguer's personal secretary, Antonio Tato, and Communist theoretician, Franco Rodano, have accepted \$4.5 million in financial assistance from the Soviets. These funds are believed earmarked for restructuring the financially troubled newspaper, *Paese Sera*. The three men allegedly hope to create an "independent" Communist daily that is completely detached from the PCI and the government. [redacted]

Stirring the Domestic Political Pot

It is still unclear how the electorate will respond to the PCI-Moscow polemics, but press commentary and statements by leading non-Communist politicians suggest that a sizable part of the national political elite sees the dispute as a milestone in Italian political development. A broad consensus seems to be developing that the PCI has enhanced its legitimacy and taken an important step toward becoming an acceptable coalition partner [redacted]



Bettino Craxi [redacted]

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Since the late 1940s, Italy's non-Communist parties have pointed to the PCI's ties with Moscow as a major obstacle to its acceptability as a governing partner. While the leaders of these parties are still unsure whether the current dispute will qualify as a definitive break, each is now hard at work reassessing attitudes toward the PCI and seeking clues about how these developments will affect the broader political game. At the top of everyone's list is the need to rethink the future of the current Republican-led, five-party coalition. This is especially true for Socialist leader Craxi, who is anxious to do what he can to ensure that developments arising from the dispute do not undermine either his ongoing attempt to secure the prime-ministership or his longer term efforts to increase his party's leverage [redacted]

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**Craxi:
Weighing a Crisis?**

Since mid-December the Socialists and their Social Democrat allies, with occasional support from the Liberals, have directed a steady drumbeat of criticism and threats against Prime Minister Spadolini. Several times since January, Craxi has stopped just short of pushing the government out of power. Craxi would like both a crisis that allows him to succeed Spadolini and a national election to strengthen his hand in Parliament. He has, however, been unable to find an issue that would allow him to set a crisis in motion and still escape retribution at the polls. Italian voters have a long history of punishing a party that initiates a period of instability.

The PCI-Moscow polemics pose what may be Craxi's most difficult choice to date. He believes that current tensions within the PCI represent an electoral opportunity for his party that will not be seen again for some time. He is convinced that a sizable number of PCI supporters will rally to the Socialist banner if national elections are held. But it is difficult to discern the right moment to act. He might argue that he should move immediately because it is only a matter of time before Berlinguer has the situation within his party back in hand. Furthermore, once Berlinguer has succeeded, the PCI may regain its momentum, position itself to become the principal interlocutor of the Christian Democrats (DC), and exile the Socialists to the margins of the political game. But Craxi might also calculate that things will get worse for the PCI before they get better and that he, in turn, should continue to bide his time.

At the same time, Craxi must consider the potential impact on internal Socialist party politics of the PCI-Moscow polemics, which have encouraged those members of the Socialist Party left who remain committed to the concept of a "leftist alternative" government. For traditional leaders of the party left like Francesco DeMartino, the PCI statement removed an important barrier to closer cooperation with the Communists. Craxi, who vanquished his leftwing opponents at the January 1980 Party Congress, remains wary of a deal with the Communists. At the same time, he needs to make some gesture in the direction of leftist unity to avoid reopening rifts within the Socialist ranks. Although he has for now rejected long-standing calls from the Communists for comprehensive cooperation, he has agreed to the establishment of a number of joint study groups. He is almost certainly convinced that given the relative size and organizational strength of the two parties, closer involvement would offer the PCI too many opportunities to undermine the Socialists. In addition, Craxi believes that part of his party's new appeal can be traced to its image as a substitute for the Communists on the left. Thus, moving closer to the Communists might not only leave him weaker, but it could also strengthen the Christian Democrats, Republicans, and Social Democrats.

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For now, Craxi is probably counting on the joint study groups and occasional hints about more extensive cooperation at a later date to disarm potential critics within his party, while keeping his Christian Democrat opponents off balance. The Christian Democrats know that despite his suspicions of the Communists, Craxi is perfectly capable of reversing himself.

If, following the Andreatta incident, Craxi has definitely decided to bide his time until after the DC congress in early May, he will have only six days in which to set plans both for a crisis and a spring election in motion. By law, there must be a 45-day campaign period between a dissolution of Parliament and new elections. To schedule an election for the last weekend in June—presumably the parties would not favor an electoral test during the summer—the President must dissolve parliament by 12 May. An unsuccessful bid for elections in June would not only end his enviable string of tactical victories and tarnish the Socialists' image as an up-and-coming party; it could also serve to rally disparate elements of the Socialist Party that would be only too happy to see him replaced.

The DC: Settling on a Party Line



Flaminio Piccoli UPI ©

The PCI-Moscow dispute has also complicated matters for Craxi's Christian Democratic counterpart, Flaminio Piccoli. By rendering the Communists even slightly more "respectable," the dispute has somewhat strengthened the DC's position vis-a-vis the Socialists. Even though the DC remains cool toward cooperation with the Communists, DC leaders can now remind Craxi with considerably more impact than before that his is not the only game in town. Working against the DC's ability to trade on this, however, is the impact of the polemics on relations among the warring DC factions. Perceived signs of PCI "moderation" appear to have contributed to a revival of the DC left—long an advocate of cooperation with the PCI but seriously weakened in recent years. This substantially raises the odds against agreement at the congress on an effective and rejuvenating course of action for the party as a whole.

In choosing their next secretary, the Christian Democrats will be signaling whether they will continue their current line of cooperation with the Socialists or work toward some form of accommodation with the Communists. Piccoli, already preoccupied with articulating a program of renewal for his ailing party and fending off Craxi, now finds himself at the center of that debate, subject to pre-congress challenges from both the right and the left of the party.

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Current Photo ©



Arnaldo Forlani

Piccoli's strongest challenge comes from former Prime Minister Arnaldo Forlani. Forlani, whose broad-based support includes elements from the DC right, as well as the party's Catholic left, believes that the DC's relationship with the Socialists must be made to work but that this cannot happen unless the party hierarchy is firmly behind it. He has accused Piccoli of weakening the coalition by playing upon the hostility of some DC factions toward the Socialists. Forlani acknowledges that much of the DC wants to eliminate the Socialists as a contender, and he himself agrees they must be kept on a tight rein. But he seems prepared to cede them their turn at the premiership if the survival of the governing formula can thereby be assured.

Like Forlani, Piccoli has affirmed his support for the current governing formula, but his recent tough line against the Socialists, while boosting his stock in some quarters of the DC, betrays a lack of enthusiasm for it. At the same time Piccoli has made a determined public effort to underscore the DC's right to reassume the premiership. He hopes to weaken Forlani by portraying him as soft on the Socialists, even though he himself has privately offered Craxi the prime-ministership if the Socialists will withdraw from those local governments where they share power with Communists, a demand designed to make it clear to Craxi that the DC will exact a price for the post.

Piccoli's struggle to retain his office has been dealt a setback by the decision of Ciriaco de Mita, a powerful party vice secretary from the DC left, to launch his own bid. While there is some support for Forlani on the left of the party, most left-leaning DC members worry that strengthening the relationship that involves the DC, the Socialists, and the smaller partners will push the DC toward conservative positions that could be dangerous in an election. De Mita's candidacy is especially appealing to those party members who continue to see advantages in some kind of arrangement with the Communists and are encouraged by the PCI's stand on Poland. Piccoli sorely needs the support of these members to retain his post, and it was undoubtedly with this in mind that he made his widely reported January statement acknowledging that the PCI's position on Poland had significant implications for domestic policies.

If Piccoli is reelected, the position he takes on the question of ties with the Socialists and the Communists will depend heavily upon what factions support him at the congress. A successful De Mita candidacy remains an improbable long shot, but by throwing his weight behind Piccoli at the right moment, De Mita and the left might find themselves well placed over time to draw the party toward a closer working relationship with the Communists

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**Gambling
on the "Third Way"**

Once the DC congress is out of the way, the Christian Democrats and Socialists will be ready to make their next moves. The dispute between the PCI and Moscow will figure prominently in the calculations of both parties, but neither camp is prepared to make a precipitate move toward the Communists. [redacted]

In trying both to position the PCI advantageously for possible domestic political maneuvering and to bind internal party wounds, the party leadership at Berlinguer's urging has reemphasized the concept of a "third way"—a vague notion of an Italian "socialist transformation" that would be neither West European Social Democracy nor East European-style socialism but would partake of both. PCI leaders, convinced that "Eurocommunism" is no longer a valid alternative, now hope to find interlocutors among West European Socialist parties and groups. Berlinguer and his colleagues see Europe both as an alternative point of reference for their followers at home and as a potential model for Communist parties in the Third World. [redacted]

Berlinguer's recent meetings in Rome and Paris with President Mitterrand have almost certainly boosted spirits at PCI headquarters. Berlinguer's attempts to arrange a meeting on previous occasions since Mitterrand entered the Elysee were undermined by Craxi, who insisted that the PCI would be strengthened at his party's expense. Mitterrand has expressed some sympathy for the PCI in the past, however, and sees in the Italian Communists' dispute with Moscow a new opportunity to further weaken the Communists in France. Mitterrand hopes that his gesture toward Berlinguer will rally to his own banner those French Communists who are dissatisfied with their party's subservience to the Soviets. The French President also sees similarities between the PCI's "third way" and his own desire to make France into a model from which other socialist governments and parties can learn. Berlinguer shares this assessment, and having spoken at length with Mitterrand, he is almost certain to try to arrange a meeting with West German leader Willy Brandt in the weeks ahead. The goal apparently is to have discussions with leading West European Socialist figures at regular intervals. [redacted]

The more optimistic members of the party hierarchy believe that citing the PCI's stand on Poland as a demonstration of the "third way" will enable them to reinforce their democratic credentials, rally new adherents, and win over more skeptical longtime supporters. There are inherent uncertainties, however, in setting this course, and several of Berlinguer's key subordinates lack his enthusiasm. [redacted]

[redacted] Tato—Berlinguer's personal secretary—has characterized the dispute with Moscow as the PCI's biggest gamble to date. Tato worries

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that by distancing itself from the Soviets, the PCI risks losing touch with its past before it has defined the "third way" in both concrete and theoretical terms. He is concerned that the PCI will emerge from the process as simply another Social Democratic party [redacted]

Ingrao and Napolitano [redacted] share Tato's skepticism about the "third way," but their criticism grows out of a different set of assumptions. They believe that the PCI has no other choice but to move in a West European direction. For them, the "third way," in its effort to provide a theoretical basis to the amalgamation of East and West European "socialism," complicates matters unnecessarily and can only deter the party from coming to terms with its internal divisions. [redacted]

Hard Realities

Berlinguer's enthusiasm for the "third way" notwithstanding, caution is likely to govern PCI actions in the months ahead. The polemics with Moscow and the reemphasis on the "third way" will raise many more questions than they resolve, and it is simply too soon to tell whether these developments will result in a net gain or loss for the party in terms of domestic support. Over the short term—at least the next 12 months—this probably suggests that Berlinguer will be chary of undertaking any serious new moves toward either the Christian Democrats or the Socialists. [redacted]

As for the medium term, midlevel officials at party headquarters are convinced that national elections this year will almost certainly result in a loss of votes for the party. Even a slight setback—after a disappointing performance in the 1979 parliamentary elections and more recent local elections—might overtax the leadership's ability to defend its policies with the rank and file, and a serious defeat could easily lead to extensive changes at the top, from which—over time—even Berlinguer might not be immune. Ingrao and those leaders most closely associated with the PCI's stand on Poland admit that they are uncertain about Poland's short-term impact, but they are convinced that the party will gain considerably from it over the longer term. [redacted]

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The PCI under Berlinguer's tutelage seems to have arrived at a point in its political developments where simple answers are no longer available. The Polish crisis has demonstrated the existence of philosophical and tactical gaps not only between the leadership and the rank and file, but within the leadership as well. For each new step the PCI takes toward internal democracy and each new step it takes away from Moscow, the party is likely to pay a steep price in terms of internal strain. The PCI is not in danger of losing its position as one of the preeminent players in Italian politics. If anything, Poland has underscored the Communists' importance. But Poland also suggests that the old PCI—the well-oiled, steadfastly disciplined machine—has become a thing of the past.

The PCI will almost certainly continue to evolve toward a philosophy and an image more in keeping with Western tradition, albeit by fits and starts, as the Poland situation is demonstrating. Party leaders have no choice but to continue their search for formulas that serve conflicting needs. The party's evolution has been slow and tortuous to date, and the future seems to hold nothing simpler in store.

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