

CHAPTER 5

1956: January – April

5.0 Chronology: international and national events, themes and developments

Jan	1 st	Sudan gains independence ending Anglo-Egyptian condominium: for Britain an expendable and no longer viable interest; for Egypt a strategic move to remove British presence in the region
	2 nd	General election in France in which political extremes do well, but delivers no decisive winner; a non-communist left-majority Republican Front coalition is only option
	6 th	Tito returns from 10 day trip to Egypt
	16 th	Nasser nominated President of Egypt, vows to reconquer Palestine
	27 th	Nicolai Bulganin, President of USSR, proposes 20 year friendship pact with US
	27 th	Guy Mollet's government is formed
Feb	2 nd	France lifts arms embargo on Israel
	5 th	Investiture of Guy Mollet as Prime Minister of France
	6 th	Mollet goes to Algeria with news of his reformist agenda for the <i>Département</i> and is pelted with tomatoes by settlers angry at the proposed installment as Resident Minister in Algeria of General George Catroux, who they suspected would negotiate with rebel leaders. This results in Guy Mollet's effecting an abrupt turn-around on policy with 'pacification' now the priority
	7 th	The FLN sets out conditions for a settlement at press conference in Cairo, recognition of the principle of Algerian independence, formation of an Algerian government and no statute of privilege for the Europeans settler population
	9 th	Mollet tables a bill that will give Special Powers to his government to restore order in Algeria and Catroux is hurriedly replaced with Robert Lacoste; a Socialist with conservative political views on French Algeria, will support repressive measures against Arab population during his tenure
	14- 25 th	XX Congress of the CPSU in Moscow; making official the process of

		de-Stalinisation with the presentation of reformist political, diplomatic and economic policies and a Secret Speech in which Khrushchev condemns what had been Stalin's leadership style and his more extreme policies. These revelations were to rock the communist movement and have irreversible consequences at the level of international political
	23 rd	Reports of attacks on military posts in the province of Constantine in Algeria resulting in 53 fatalities in all
	26 th	The last remaining French troops leave Saigon
	26 th	Italian President Giovanni Gronchi goes to US for an official visit with Eisenhower in which he reaffirms his commitment to the Atlantic Pact
	27 th	CGT Conference
	27 th	Gronchi goes to United States, declares that 'NATO must widen its remit'
	28 th	Three largest employers' federation <i>Confindustria</i> , <i>Confcommercio</i> , <i>Confagricoltura</i> make a tripartite alliance <i>Confintesa</i> to support the Italian Liberal Party and those in the Christian Democrat party who favoured economic non-intervention policies
March	2 nd	Morocco declares independence from France
	5 th	Secret Speech circulated to Eastern Bloc countries via Poland and leaked to Reuters journalists shortly afterwards (never discussed openly to Western party members by their leaders)
	9 th	Governor Field-Marshal Sir John Harding orders deportation of Archbishop Makarios under Emergency Powers regulations for pro-National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters (EOKA) activity
	12 th	vote for Special Powers for Algeria presented as vote of confidence in the French National Assembly, therefore passed 455 against 76, PCF votes in favour
	13 th	National Day of Demonstrations by <i>l'Union des Femmes Françaises</i> (UFF) against the war in Algeria in a Central Committee meeting Togliatti describes Stalin as having been 'a great Marxist', days later describing the revelations alluded to in the world press as 'quite laughable'

	16 th	News of the existence of the Secret Speech appears in New York Times
	20 th	Tunisia gains independence from France Habib Bourghiba becomes President of the country
	23 rd	Pierre Doize from the Central Committee of the PCF, delegate to the XX Congress comes to Toulon to talk to address regional membership: 130 militants attend
	27 th	Eisenhower approves the Omega project that included the suspension of funding for the Aswan Dam, expansion of anti-Egyptian radio propaganda, encouragement to Western powers to sell arms to Israel, support for Arab nations favourable to the West, pressure on states favourable to Nasser, preparations for a coup in Syria
April	4 th	Italian intellectual Carlo Cassola criticises Togliatti in a letter published in the Marxist weekly <i>il Contemporaneo</i>
	7 th	Spain relinquishes protectorate in Morocco
	10 th	Post XX Congress reform in Poland: the rehabilitation and release from prison of former Secretary of the Polish Communist Party and Deputy Premier Ladislav Gomulka and 80.000 others who had been imprisoned in 1951 for ‘Titoism’
	11 th	In France the recall of 70.000 reservists for Algeria
	12 th	Algerian Assembly dissolved Lacoste saw it as dominated by <i>pieds noirs</i> or colonists of French nationality
	17 th	USSR disbands Cominform precipitated by Khrushchev’s visit to Belgrade for further reconciliation talks with Tito
	19 th	British frogman Lionel Crabb vanishes investigating Soviet Cruiser in Portsmouth (2007 Russian soldier ‘confesses’ to killing) A new daily newspaper <i>Il Giorno</i> is launched in Milan of ‘centre-left’ orientation
	21 st	Military alliance signed by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Yemen
	29 th	Meeting in Cairo between Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) and Arab League whose Council approves resolution to support Algeria in its fight for independence

Key events in Context

	France	Italy
Jan	Legislative elections	Shared euphoria
Feb	Day of tomatoes XX Congress of the CPSU party's handling at national, regional levels	XX Congress of the CPSU party's handling at national, regional levels
March	Special Powers for Algeria	
April	70.000 reservists called-up for Algeria	

The January elections

The French legislative elections on 2nd January, 1956 were the third to be held in the history of the Fourth Republic, and they were to provide a clear picture of the instability and divisions within the French government at the time. They had been brought forward six months by Prime Minister Edgar Faure, following his defeat over electoral reform and the subsequent vote of no confidence on 29th November, 1955. The other reason for calling a general election, was that the continuing state of emergency in Algeria required decisive action.¹ Over the next three weeks election fever gripped the country. 1, 200, 000 new voters registered in the first four days of the campaign, caught-up in a collective sense of urgency and the risk of a fine for abstainers. It was a fraught affair, with the *Poujadistes* on the far right, the

¹ A State of Emergency had been declared following the Phillipeville massacre on August 20, 1955. Leaders of the ALN, the military wing of the FLN, frustrated at the lack of recognition for their cause despite measures of progress in this regard as a result of the Bandung Conference and subsequent decision to have the Algerian situation discussed at the UN, launched their own uprising that culminated in three days of street violence in and around the town of Phillipeville in Constantine in which 71 Europeans, 31 soldiers and 21 Algerians were killed. Many of the perpetrators of the violence were motivated by revenge for the Sétif massacre a decade earlier: 'As with Setif, the response was ferocious. Whole villages were subjected to collective reprisals. Quickly it was possible talk of thousands killed This was the moment when a low-level war became an all-out war,' (Evans, 2011). It was also the first indication for people in France when inevitably news reached home, and then when the first reservists were called-up the following month, of the true nature of the situation in Algeria.

Communists on the far-left, and what really mattered in French politics i.e. the middle ground, fragmented and weakened, obliged to reform around the right vs. left split within the Radical Party (RGR), which made forming effective alliances problematic (Rioux, 1989, pp. 254-63). When election day arrived, 27 million French men and women braved the worst winter for a decade to cast their votes in the hope of achieving the political stability that would bring about solutions to what concerned them most i.e. the economy, unemployment, east-west relations, and the crisis situation in Algeria, (Evans, 2006, p. 41). Key concerns for the Communists that year had been the question of German re-armament, the political and ideological orientation of 'Europe' per se, the 'pauperisation' of the French people resulting from successive governments' liberal economic policies, US foreign policy and - like everyone else - bringing about a peaceful solution to the Algerian problem. They were all too aware however, that the only chance they had of getting back into power and exerting any influence over government policy was in re-forming the Popular Front with the Socialists. Everything depended on this. The Socialists however, had other ideas.

The results of the election were inconclusive. Not surprisingly given the confused state of French politics, no party received a net parliamentary majority. However a breakthrough *was* made by the extra-parliamentary forces. The proportional representation system that had been implemented in the elections meant that the Communist Party, as the strongest and most solid contender, outperformed all other parties at national level in terms of the popular vote; 25.8% and gaining 26.8 % of the seats in parliament (an increase of 47 from 1951), whilst the *Poujadistes* did surprisingly well at 11.6% 9 (51 seats) by exploiting the system and taking votes from the right. Nevertheless, the only real option at this point of forming a new government was by way of a centre-left non-communist alliance headed by the SFIO, with its complement of 89 experienced parliamentarians. Its leader was to be socialist intellectual politician Guy Mollet, whom President of the Republic René Coty

considered would be better placed to lead it at that point, than Mendès-France, (Larkin, 1997, p. 252).²

The Communists, despite being the strongest political force in the country, were left out in the cold - again. They gave their support notwithstanding to the Republican Front government voted-in on 4th February in the belief that they shared a common aim in bringing an end to the hostilities in Algeria. For communists in La Seyne, this news was received philosophically, as evidenced by the document below issued by the Ministry of the Interior (French Home Office / Office of Internal Affairs). It reports on a CGT meeting outside the main gates of the FCM shipyards in La Seyne at which the Communist Mayor Toussaint Merle addresses the workers:

‘Merle thanked the workers for their votes ... and criticised Guy Mollet and Mendès-France for their refusal to include the Communists in the future government ... the Mayor called for all the workers to join forces to fight for a Popular Front as there had been in 1936 that would protect the interests of all French people and most of all the working classes ...’, (Ministère de l’Intérieure, 1956, January 12, p.1).

The Day of Tomatoes

The new government’s agenda included disarmament, European integration and pension increases - however number one priority, as per their mandate, was dealing with this situation in Algeria. There had been no elections in Algeria that January - it had been too dangerous.³ Nevertheless, ‘Peace in Algeria’ had been the Republican Front’s campaign slogan and now they had to deliver on that promise. Anxious to appraise the situation first-hand, Mollet scheduled a flying visit to Algiers for 6th February. It was a day he would never forget. What awaited him was a settler

² Thus Mollet was able to put into effect his ‘Third Way’ politics designed to appeal to a broad church constituency and exclude those parties on the extreme left and right. As usual, with this type of middle ground, catch-all programme, ambiguity would define much of its policies. (Evans, 2011).

³ Soustelle had deemed the decision not to hold elections as a bad move at such a time, in that it would be taken as a sign of weakness by the FLN. It also sent a message to the settler population that their opinions and interests were of secondary importance to the new Socialist-led coalition.

population incensed by his proposed reforms for the department,⁴ Mendès-France (a known de-coloniser)'s⁵ involvement in government, and the decision to replace Governor-General Jacques Soustelle with the more liberal 'Resident Minister' Georges Catroux.

From the moment France's new Premier arrived in Algiers it was obvious that things were far from auspicious. At his first port of call, the main War Memorial, the gathered crowd consisting solely of European settlers looked-on in silence as he paid his respects to those from Algeria who had fallen in two world wars. Then, suddenly, he was confronted by a mob of angry *pieds noirs* who breached police cordons to pelt him with tomatoes, sods of earth and abuse. He was immediately engulfed in a sea of jostling protestors shouting: 'Mollet to the lamppost!' The security forces were outnumbered, but hurriedly switching to full riot mode they managed, with difficulty, to get Mollet to the safety of the *Palais d'Eté* (the Governor's Mansion). What had caused this incident was the settlers' conviction that the new government was about to sell them down the river, concerned less with defending their legitimate interests in the only homeland many of them had known, than in turning an awkward situation to its own advantage.

⁴ 'Reforms' on the table included those to do with extending the franchise and land redistribution however they were limited, ambiguous, tempered by settler lobby interests and they had one crucial flaw: they effectively took little or no account of Algerian perspectives and needs, because no real attempt had been made to know them. The reforms were automatically predicated on and indeed a continuation of the French Republican model i.e. an embodiment of France's renewed, enlightened civilizing mission. The intention was to carve out a 'French-Algerian' middle or 'Third Way' (as with domestic politics) between on the one hand Muslim extremists and on the other the hard-line colonials that would enable France to hold on to this last bastion of an 'extended France', to preserve France's standing abroad and bolster moral at home. Retaining its presence in Algeria according to this new, reformist, enlightened model government that was certain, Mollet thought, to appeal ultimately to the majority of the Algerian people, would also serve as a basis to forge new post-colonial links with Morocco, Tunisia and Black Africa that would maintain French influence in the region and prevent external pressure from on the one hand the threat of Pan-Arabism and on the other, global communism. Thus as a result of the events of 6th February, there was to be no negotiation with 'terrorists', and no concessions made to the possibility of eventual independence. 'Peace in Algeria' would prove to be an interpretive notion, (Evans, 2011).

⁵ Mendès-France had of course recently orchestrated France's pullout of Indochina, then lost no time in coming to an agreement with the nationalist leaders in Tunisia and Morocco for their transition to independence in 1956. It was known that he favoured concessions to the nationalists in Algeria, although as usual, Algeria was different, and he was also known to favour its remaining part of France. As far as some in the colonial lobby were concerned, he was a milk drinking, left-wing intellectual, 'foreign', bleeding heart liberal, and member of the metropolitan political elite.

Mollet was shaken and alarmed by all of this, but he had also had a revelation. What he had seen with his own eyes, was that the majority of the settlers were white working class, many of whom certainly socialist supporters, and not, as it had been assumed in Paris, a moneyed colonial class (Evans, 2006, p. 174). Mollet had little choice but to make an urgent reassessment of the situation. He spent the next few days in consultation with Paris, in meetings with settler delegations to hear their grievances and travelling to the Constantine, the most volatile area, to get to grips with the military situation. In the space of days Mollet had replaced Catroux with Robert Lacoste, a former Resistance fighter known for his forthright manner, and had taken pains to re-emphasise to the settlers before returning to Paris that there would be no 'soft line' taken with the rebels, and indeed that a policy of 'pacification' would take precedence over 'reforms'.⁶ It was from this point onwards that the Republican Front's political imperative of achieving 'Peace in Algeria' by moderate means became a military regime of punishment and repression with the FLN as the main target. The PCF's insistence on supporting the government in the hope of reforming a Popular Front (a prospect that was seen by everyone but the Communists as being highly unlikely) had been futile and indeed counter-productive in view of the line the

⁶ To Algerians, this abrupt turn-around on policy constituted capitulation, an exercise in appeasement to the settler population. As Algiers' Mayor Jacques Chevallier commented the same day: 'The French, unfortunately, have taught the Muslims a lesson in what mob violence can accomplish ...', ('France: Algiers speaking', 1956, p.2). In Paris too, there were concerns. The fact that the date of the incident, 6th February, coincided with the attempted right-wing *coup d'état* against the Third Republic twenty two years earlier, was inauspicious. There were those within Mollet's own party who deemed it distinctly inappropriate for a Socialist-led coalition to be seen pandering to what many would see as right-wing interests. What Mollet knew he had to do, was to isolate and crush the rebels, place the blame for the ferment firmly on exterior forces i.e. Egypt, and assimilate the rest of the Algerian population into this new deal programme that would eliminate the threat in the region of both Pan-Arabism and international communism, and represent all of this skilfully back home. Mollet was anti-Soviet (although a 'Marxist'), he saw the long hand of Moscow behind Pan-Arabism (the Algerian Communist Party's not being the best channel for Soviet strategy in a Muslim country) and ultimately, he preferred to throw his lot in with the West / Israel (that country's being anyway a fledgling socialist state), in foreign policy. The rules of the Cold War were explicit. His 'pacification' / reform agenda in Algeria would distinguish France's new role overseas as legitimate and progressive, and identify the Algerian campaign as a proxy war, (Evans, 2011).

government was about to take. The Communists condemned the ‘day of tomatoes’ as a fascist coup, but failed to make a stand.

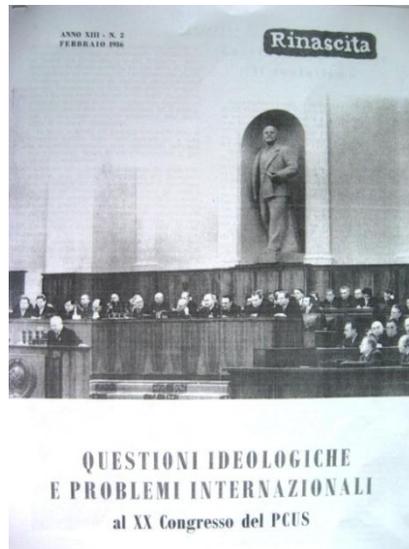
XX Congress of CPSU

‘There can be no doubt, that it was one of the most remarkable events in the whole of Soviet history,’ (2002, p.347). The XX Congress of the CPSU 14th – 25th February 1956 took the world by surprise in its revolutionary content and non-confrontational over-tones. The main themes on the agenda were the ‘non-inevitability of war’; the possibility of different countries following ‘different roads to socialism’ in-keeping with their social-cultural, economic and political conditions and including via constitutional routes; the possibility of the ‘peaceful coexistence’ of the socialist and capitalist systems; and reforms pertaining to the internal politics and organisation of the CPSU itself.⁷ If all that were not enough, what stunned the delegates present, and the whole the world when news of it began almost immediately to leak out, was the iconoclastic nature of what would become known as Khrushchev’s ‘Secret Speech’.⁸

The Congress had brought together 1.500 delegates from Communist Parties around the world, plus the world’s press. The French contingent comprised Maurice Thorez, Jacques Duclos, Georges Cogniot, Pierre Doize, and the Italian - Palmiro Togliatti, Mauro Scioccimarro, Paolo Bufalini, Rita Montagnana, and Vittorio Vidali from Trieste. None of the delegates had known of the speech before the Congress although Thorez and Togliatti had been shown the report the previous evening. It was delivered on the last night of the Congress in a closed session in the White Hall of the Kremlin in which all images of Stalin had been replaced with one large statue of Lenin set into the wall at the front of the room.

⁷ The key domestic themes were economic reforms that would increase workers’ rights and improve working conditions.

⁸ The ‘Secret’ Speech had been leaked to the West soon after the Congress as part of a deliberate process of a phased de-Stalinisation programme. The revelations were meant to de-sensitise the CPSU itself, the Soviet people (minimum exposure) other Socialist Bloc countries, the international communist movement and the West in general by June of that year when they appeared in full in the New York Times, as regards the image of Stalin and the associations attributed to it and his regime. The idea was that the void that remained would then be filled with the new concept of the Khrushchev era that would be closely linked to the other mythical figure in the collective communist consciousness Lenin. This is not to say however that Khrushchev’s declared reforms were anything other than existing policy / veritable policy proposals at the time.



9

However nothing could have prepared the rest of the invited delegates for the bombshell to come.¹⁰ Those present were transfixed during the four hour long twenty three page report in which Khrushchev spoke of the ‘cult of personality’ that had grown around Stalin and which the former leader had used to destroy the internal democracy of the party, his abandoning Leninist principles and distorting the Soviet system to his own advantage. Also disclosed was a harsh critique of Stalin that Lenin had made shortly before his death in which he had recommended that Stalin be replaced as General Secretary of the CPSU. Khrushchev went on to condemn Stalin and his closest associates (several of whom still very much in post) for a string of political transgressions that included political repressions, persecutions, deportations, atrocities committed during the Great Purges of 1936-8, mistakes the former leader had made in relation to WW2 and his links with the criminal world. (*La storia siamo*

⁹ (Togliatti, *Questioni ideologiche e problemi internazionali*, 1956, p.1).

¹⁰ It had been obvious from the beginning of the Congress that something had changed; Stalin’s name had barely been mentioned in the keynote speeches and reports whereas it would usually have saturated proceedings. Khrushchev’s report was based on the findings of the Pospelov Commission instructed by the CPSU Central Committee in 1955 to investigate Stalin’s mismanagement as General Secretary of the CPSU and his more repressive policies. Also disclosed in the speech was a harsh critique of Stalin that Lenin had made shortly before his death in which he recommended that Stalin be replaced as General Secretary of the CPSU. Khrushchev went on to condemn Stalin and his closest associates (several of whom still very much in post) for a string of political transgressions that included political repressions, persecutions, deportations, atrocities committed during the Great Purges of 1936-8, mistakes he had made regarding WW2 and his links with the criminal world, (*La storia siamo noi*, n.d.).

noi, n.d.). This was the clearest indication since Stalin's death three years earlier of Khrushchev's determination to bury a particular past and return to a political model of government based on Marxist-Leninist principles. It was also, effectively, a master-stroke in consolidating his own premiership.¹¹

Thorez and Togliatti's unpreparedness for the revelations was borne out by the *ad hoc* manner in which they responded to the perplexing situation they found themselves on returning home from Moscow and over the following months. Thorez's handling of the issue can be defined as an exercise in circumspection. The first real reference to the Secret Speech or 'the speech attributed to Khrushchev', as it would be referred to by the PCF leadership, would only be made when it could no longer stay silent on the matter after the full version appeared in France on 6th June in *Le Monde* following its publication the previous day in the New York Times. Togliatti's handling of the issue was even more guarded. He adopted a policy of silence on the criticisms of Stalin, along with a singular reticence in regard to the discussion of those matters even within the PCI leadership body itself, which exasperated several members of the Central Committee. Any allusion to the cult of personality and the Secret Speech was studiously avoided until that was no longer an option subsequent

¹¹ This was the clearest indication of Khrushchev's determination to bury a particular past and return to a political model of government based on Marxist-Leninist principles. All of the main points of the Congress were explicitly linked - in one way or another - to Lenin's theories whereas Stalin's name was barely mentioned before the speech itself. It had been the first Congress since the former leader's three years earlier, and it followed an intense power struggle between Khrushchev (the 'outsider') and the Malenkov - Molotov camp that resulted in Khrushchev's assuming the position of Party Leadership in 1955. His reasons for making the speech had been political and ideological:

- to make a symbolic and irrevocable break with the past, under the gaze of the world's media, and in so doing, restoring the Party's political and ideological integrity and legitimacy at home, in the eyes of the communist community and in those of the rest of the world
- to do this by going public with the de-Stalinisation programme, which included and was predicated on destroying the Stalinist myth
- this was politically and ideologically expedient; in one fell swoop he could turn the page on all of the terror, trappings, corruption of the previous system and free the population of false beliefs, misplaced faith and / or endemic mistrust
- to herald a new era of reformism in all areas of Soviet economic, political, cultural life; to join the rest of the international community in the second half of the Twentieth century
- to avoid insurrection at home; prisoners from the gulags were being released and Khrushchev believed that sooner or later news of Stalin's crimes would come out
- to consolidate his own position vis-à-vis the West by making this ground-breaking and statesmanlike move; and vis-à-vis his enemies within the Party leadership because by denouncing Stalin, he was implicating them.

to the publication of the full text in the New York Times on 4th June that resulted in Togliatti's giving a long overdue interview in the intellectual review *Nuovi Argomenti* (see Chapter 6).

Les Pouvoirs Spéciaux

On his return from Algeria on 9th February, Guy Mollet had tabled a bill requesting special powers for the purpose of 'maintaining peace' in the department. On 12th March the motion was passed by the National Assembly giving the government the right to take exceptional measures in restoring and maintaining order that included the call-up of reservists to reinforce the 190.000 professional soldiers already serving in Algeria, detaining Algerian nationals in France and restricting the civil rights of the Algerian population. Some might say that for a newly elected Head of State who had gone to Algeria with the professed intention to present, and a mandate to implement, a reformist agenda, it had taken relatively little for him to effect a complete turn-around on policy. The voting of special powers to this leader in what was proving to be an exceptionally volatile context therefore could be seen as having been a bold, or rash, move at this time.¹² Certainly, for the PCF, the vote in favour of the bill was the price it paid for its quest for a new Popular Front, which in the event was to prove spectacularly unsuccessful. Below is an extract from a declaration made in *l'Humanité* on 13th March by Jacques Duclos explaining the communist vote in favour of special powers:

‘... unity in the struggle of Socialist and Communist workers is necessary, and the French Communist Party is concerned above all to give this indispensable common action as much force and breadth as possible.

We are told that special powers are asked for in order to arrive rapidly at peace, and in order to, if need be, force the big landowners of Algeria to renounce their privileges; other, different, declarations have also been made. These relate to military measures, and these we cannot approve.

¹² Although, this would have been a simplistic evaluation in context because as we have seen, the situation in Algeria had been far more complex and more problematic than Mollet had imagined, and it was destined to become even more so.

We consider that what counts above all is the unity of working class and popular action, and we are convinced that it will manage to impose rapidly a cease fire and the opening of negotiation, without which the Algerian problem cannot be solved.

We insist on reminding you that these objectives are in-keeping with the electoral promises made by the men currently in power ...', (my emphasis). (Duclos, 1956, p.1).

The Communist Party leadership had had strong reservations regarding the yes vote knowing, apart from anything else, that it would engender dissent amongst the party faithful and sympathisers alike. All it could do was to step-up its campaign against the war over the next weeks and months, which it did, frequently holding the government to account as it became obvious that it was renegeing on its initial promise of ending the conflict.¹³ However, the PCF's chosen course of action on the vote was to prove counterproductive. Although it campaigned incessantly to stop the fighting, for negotiations with the 'legitimate representatives of the Algerian people', against the repressions and the torture, against conscription and extended service, and against all the funds being poured into the conflict and consequently away from social causes; it had also ignored the FLN for fear of appearing to support Algerian nationalism, it exaggerated the role of the Algerian Communist Party, and it retained the position that Algeria's future should remain within the French Union for fear of upsetting the Socialists and the thousands of French settlers. The party was irretrievably compromised by its vote in favour of Special Powers, losing credibility

¹³ Since 'Toussaint rouge' in 1954, the PCF had been reticent towards the Algerian nationalist movement. Maurice Thorez 1936 had said that Algeria was 'a nation in the process of formation', but advocated the establishing of a 'real' French Union by way of a consensual arrangement between Algeria and the metropolitan France (although it would recognise 'the question of Algerian national consciousness' at its 14th Party Conference in July). The PCF supported the grievances of the Algerian people in general terms; it condemned the repressions, including the banning of the PCA in 1955; it condemned the torture of Algerians in north Africa and internment of numbers of Algerian nationals in mainland France, it condemned the call-up of reservists and prolongation of service for military personnel already deployed in Algeria but it did not support Algerian independence, it viewed the FLN with deep suspicion and did not condone its direct action (in distinct contrast to its position during the Indochina War when it supported the Vietcong or NLF), (Courtois & Lazaar, pp. 299-301).

vis-à-vis its own members (which would, in the vast majority, keep the faith); fellow travelers including many prominent intellectuals; the Algerian nationalist movement and its supporters; and sections of the wider French public that could not understand why, on an issue of such importance, the PCF would be maintaining a position that was at once vague, contradictory, and antithetical - given all that the party stood for.

5.1 Elections in France

In La Seyne the Communists received their most solid mandate yet, leading by 36%, and in the Var region as a whole by 25% .¹⁴ This, and the increased support the PCF had received at the national level was, naturally, cause for much celebration within our community, and a sense of euphoria infused the local and national party press as the following selection of front page headlines shows:

‘RECORD PARTICIPATION - THE PCF NOW THE LARGEST GROUP IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY,’ (‘Participation elettorale record’, January 3, 1956, p.1).

‘LONG LIVE THE POPULAR FRONT ... AN IMMENSE FORCE!’ (Stil, 1956, January 4, p.1).

It was not that the results had been unexpected in La Seyne, but the campaign had been bitter, and the relief once they were over, palpable:

‘8 am at the *Bourse de Travail* (Employment Exchange) and the voters were arriving ... Toussaint Merle, the Mayor of this working-class town, received warm congratulations from members of the population, demonstrating his extraordinary popularity ... People would pass him and shout ‘Toussaint, there’re six of us – and you’ve got our votes ... Another who told him: ‘My neighbour’s a socialist but he’s voting PCF this time – he says *it’s the only way to get anything done around here* ... And in this working town of La Seyne where, since the Liberation the PCF has only grown in popularity, it was obvious from the start of the day that the Communists would be having another great success ...’, (‘Gains communistes importants’, January 3, 1956, pp. 1, 5).

¹⁴ January 3rd 1956: Communistes (P.C.F.) : 7.601 (55,6 %), Socialistes (S.F.I.O.) : 2.585 (18,9 %), Radicaux Soc. : 990 (7,2 %), Indépendants: 1.240 (9,1 %), R.G.R. : 771 (5,6 %), U.D.C.A. : 599 (4,4 %), Montfavet : 54 (0,4 %) (Marius Autran, n.d.).

Naturally, the party federation continued over the days and weeks that followed, to maximise the effects and momentum of the results via the local and regional daily Communist Party newspaper, the LPVM, and that of the CGT weekly journal *La Vie Ouvrière*. Newsstands across La Seyne reflected back to communists, sympathisers and non-communists alike the party's popular successes as these examples of contemporary front page headlines demonstrate: 'THE COUNTRY HAS VOTED LEFT! - THE LEFT MUST GOUVERN' ('Le pays a voté à gauche ', January 6, 1956, pp.1,5), 'CGT: LEFT-WING GOVERNMENT!' ('CGT: Gouvernement de gauche!'), January 22, 1956, p.1). The same newsstands, also featured robust and usually hostile disclaimers on the part of the political opposition.

On the evidence, it must be said that they the informants' memories of the election seem to have been somewhat overshadowed by those of XX Congress of the CPSU and the vote for Special Powers in February and March that year. Informants were however, understandably happy to revisit this event, to re-read and discuss the details. This general phenomenon could be due to the fact that they had remained in power locally with a healthy majority between 1947-85. Therefore, it is likely that these single successes had merged in their collective memory. Nonetheless, this succinct account of that particular conjuncture is provided her by **Elise Bernard**:

'The elections in January were great – then it started to go downhill ...',
(**Bernard**, personal communication, October 12, 2008).

In Monfalcone meanwhile, communists read of the French results in the Northern Italian edition of *l'Unità* where it was reported with the same levels of enthusiasm as it was in France, and it remained front page news for a week with headlines such as:

'FRANCE VOTES LEFT – FROM 99 TO 151 SEATS' THE PCF GAINS 600.000 VOTES – LEAVING THE WAY CLEAR FOR A NEW POPULAR FRONT ... The French Communists have had an outstanding result that will have a profound impact in all Western European countries, starting with Italy.' (La Francia vota a sinistra, 1956, p.1)

As regards the impact of the French elections on the Italian informants in the study, it is perhaps not surprising that none of them remembered this event spontaneously. Therefore, although as communists, they were extremely interested in re-reading the

coverage as presented to them in news articles in *aide mémoires*, discussion of the election results in interviews tended towards issues of principle and of the perceived differences between the nature and historical trajectories of the PCF and the PCI.¹⁵ It is interesting to note that the mention of Algeria, so crucial in the French context, often elicited blank expressions from the informants in Monfalcone. Those who had been middle level or senior cadres were able, as a rule, to recall this issue more easily when prompted, and were more able to locate it in the contemporary political context, whilst for others it had evidently constituted a peripheral issue at the time.

La formule 'Front Populaire'

In La Seyne, the Communists had campaigned on a platform of local bread and butter issues, stopping the war in Algeria, and in line with the national party / CPSU strategy, recreating the 'Popular Front' movement of 1936. In fact it is more accurate to say that all other election issues were incorporated into, or embodied in, what they saw as this 'package deal'. Their pre-election council bulletin listed two full pages of the Communists' accomplishments, which were undeniably impressive, since winning the council in 1947. This was followed by their bid for the legislative or general elections scheduled for 2nd January, 1956:

'But there's lots more to do ... Your difficulties are the consequence of the politics of poverty, war and reactionary governments, the difficulties of the council derive from those same policies, if January 2nd delivers enough Communist ministers, we will be able to obtain a majority in the National Assembly and implement our socially progressive policies, as we did in 1936 with a Popular Front ...', (La Seyne Council Bulletin, January 2, 1956, p.1).

The bulletin then set-out the council's five year plan that included safeguarding or extending the provision of: secular education, social services for children, young people and the elderly; health care for all; sports facilities and dedicated personnel; housing; water, sewage, flood prevention systems and urban planning projects.

¹⁵ I.e. the former's preoccupation with maintaining communist orthodoxy, and its losing members and the popular vote as a result, as opposed to the Italian Party's flexibility and adaptability and enduring solvency – albeit in a different 'form' (since 1991, as various 'Democratic Parties').

‘People of La Seyne, the more Communist MPs, the more chance we have of reliving the happy experience of 1936 ...

For better living conditions: workers, senior citizens, women, young people, retailers and craftsmen

For a better local council that better serves the population by diverting the millions spent on war to the works of peace

Trust us, the PCF, at the service of the working classes, and of the people ...’, (La Seyne Council Bulletin, January 2, 1956, p.1).

The election campaign can be seen as an example and summary of the party’s political strategy and activity at the local level at this moment and throughout 1956. Local and regional issues were automatically linked to an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-Western stance, and incorporated into the official PCF policy of reforming a Popular Front. In pursuing this strategy it was:

- speaking to its own constituency, reinforcing an identity, fulfilling its role of vanguard party of the left at local level; and taking its political message to the town’s wider voting public, furthering the idea of common purpose, politicising and proselytising,
- tapping into the universally positive associations of the original Popular Front era (whether or not it had, at the time, been hugely successful for the Communists in La Seyne), tapping into the anti-reactionary associations of the period that lent themselves automatically to all aspects of the party’s programme; and tapping into the wider, macro associations of what was effectively the most powerful political force in the country i.e. the PCF.

The push for the new Popular Front therefore, was the order of the day, and as would be expected, the party press seized on the opportunity presented by the election results in January to further this objective. *l’Humanité* was read by many of the informants in this study and an illustration of the party’s new all out campaign following the elections is provided below in an open letter from Maurice Thorez to Guy Mollet, urging him to collaborate fully in creating a strong left wing working alliance that was manifestly in line with express wishes of the French people as this front page headline shows:

‘THE COMMUNIST PARTY APPEALS TO THE SOCIALIST PARTY AND THE RADICAL PARTY ... FOR A LEFT-WING GOVERNMENT ... THE VOICE OF FRANCE ...’

Comrade ... in the wake of the elections a wave of hope has overtaken the working people of France. In the National Assembly there is a left-wing majority ... In voting for the PCF, PS, PRS the public has expressed its will to see the affairs of government in the hands of a left-wing government ...’, (‘Le Parti communiste s’adresse au Parti Socialiste ...’, January 7, 1956, p.1).

In an almost identical front page feature to the one above, this open letter from the Communists to the Socialists published in LPVM, read by all of the informants in this study on a daily basis, shows national party policies being applied in the regional context. It shows the Var Federation’s corresponding campaign for a Popular Front with the Socialists:

Dear Comrades,

In our department the electorate has given our two parties an important majority In giving the PCF 69.481 votes and 45.213 to the Socialists, the population of the Var region has given our two parties 58.21% of the popular vote ... We are sure that you will respond favourably to our request that at your coming Federational Congress you take into account the electorate’s wishes and support a Popular Front for *bread, peace and liberty ...*’, (‘Pour un gouvernement de gauche ...’, January 7, 1956, p.1).

The Police Intelligence document below is typical of many that report on the Var Federation directives to secretaries of sections and cells at the time. Here, Federation Secretary Le Medoc, is quoted as stating:

‘Each and everyone of us must press home the message that the Popular Front is not only possible but inevitable ... From this moment on we must reinforce this message constantly and as soon as the working classes have internalised it we will launch our action ...’,

the report concludes:

‘In conclusion, the PCF cadres in the Var are agreed to work towards the realisation of a Popular Front, as they are convinced that the political climate has never been this favourable since 1936 ...’, (Information, January 10, 1956, p.1).

Another document typical of the many Police Intelligence reports at this time, and indeed throughout the year, on the Var Federations' handling of this push for a Popular Front at national party leadership levels, talks of how this message was reinforced to its regional membership:

‘The vote for the Republican Front by the Communist MPs must be understood by the party membership as the first step to a Popular Front. However, it was stipulated that the objective will only be realised if comrades exploit this situation to the full ... “in the factories, in the shipyards, in offices, we must make the Socialists see that their leaders are betraying them – in a word – we must win them over”, (Information, February 3, 1956).

Paradox

It is easy to see why the national party leadership, and Moscow, had wanted the return of a 1936-9 style Popular Front movement and for this to be spear-headed in those countries in which it had enjoyed the most success. As far as they were concerned this was the magic formula that would bring about the PCF's political rehabilitation and give it access to political power. The PCF had been obsessed with this idea since Mendès-France had refused to accept Communists in his government of June 1954 regardless of the support they had given him. The same theme would be reiterated throughout the XX Congress of the CPSU in February that year in its emphasis on the need for left-wing solidarity in Western democracies as a way of preventing further wars in a dangerous Cold War context, and on the duty therefore of communists in these countries to do all they could to create a Popular Front against right-wing forces. It is not surprising either that on a matter of such consequence the Var Federation would comply to the letter with the democratic centralist decisions coming down from the PCF Central Committee.

The Communists in La Seyne however, had enjoyed a local power monopoly for almost a decade. What is more, if the chances of reforming the Popular Front had effectively been small at the national level, they were all but non-existent in this town, by reason of the hostile relations between the Communists and the Socialists that rested on to the historical factors already discussed. There was a major problem

therefore at the local level with regard to implementing what was at that point the mainstay of international, national and regional communist strategy.¹⁶ To give an idea of the situation that existed ‘on the ground’ between the Socialists and Communists in La Seyne and the obstacle this posed for the creation of a left-wing alliance at this level, featured below is an extract from an article in one of the local Socialist daily newspapers. It is written by the Secretary of the Socialist Section in La Seyne Henri Midon (the SFIO and the Radical–Socialists in La Seyne had just received 18.9 % and 7.2% of the vote respectively). Its tone and content allow a clear picture to be drawn of the animosity that prevailed in the town between the two rival camps, and thus the contradictory position in which local PCF cadres found themselves:

‘Following the needs and new diplomatic strategy of their masters the Stalinists who abuse our territory are now less aggressive, more conciliatory as they attempt to break free of isolation ...and this is the reason for this latest wave of propaganda going under the name of ‘Popular Front’. The Stalinists have never been so eager to woo the Socialists in the street, on their very doorsteps ... as at this moment in time ...’, (Midon,1956, January 19)

and in the one below by the same author expressing rancor towards and suspicion of the PCF and its latest strategy:

‘The Socialist Party cannot forget that an alliance with the PCF in France would bring about the same situation as that behind the iron curtain i.e. the rapid elimination of the Socialists and their organisations.

That the leaders of the PCF in La Seyne are not satisfied with their appeal and our attitude as regards the booby trap ‘Popular Front’, that’s their prerogative ...’, (Midon, 1956, January 24)

¹⁶ Although the enmity that existed at the level of party cadres and expressed via their propaganda machines was not felt in the same way across the community, the proposed new Popular Front was to be a *political campaign* of cross-party action. For it to have been achieved access to each party’s political apparatuses, organisational and operational bases would have needed to be made available to other parties; there would have needed to be collaboration in the setting-up of action committees, attendance at committee meetings, cross party liaising, participation in demonstrations, potentially engaging in strike action etc. Whether or not ordinary Socialist voters in La Seyne would have been disposed to forming a Popular Front with the Communists was a moot point at that time because such a campaign could not be achieved without their cadres, who were refusing to work alongside the Communists. For these and other reasons there seems to have been a palpable skepticism as regards the Popular Front on the part of PCF militants, and a philosophical attitude towards or simply lip-service paid to the notion on the part of cadres.

and by the same author:

‘... their pathetic appeal for a new ‘Popular Front’ is a new technique in the art of duping the public ...’, (Midon, 1956, February 26).

The above extracts convey the political context in which local Communist Party cadres were obliged to go about their daily business. At the same time, they were receiving directives from the PCF Federation in Toulon, eight kilometers away, to pursue the formation of a new Popular Front for all it was worth, as though the local situation were not common knowledge throughout the region. It was stipulated in these directives that they must communicate the message to the party faithful that the success of its overall programme depended on unity of left-wing action; and to the non-communist population locally (majority ostensibly ‘socialist’ or rather of the social democratic tradition), that only by way of a Popular Front would true social, economic and politically progressive objectives be achieved. These instructions were duly adhered to by the communist cadres in La Seyne, as is evident in the following extract from a National Security report ¹⁷ of a CGT meeting held outside the main gate of the FCM shipyard and addressed by the mayor:

¹⁷ The credibility of these Police Intelligence documents (Information / General Information / National Security / MOI etc.) is further discussed as **Josette Vincent**, who features prominently in many of the documents stated: ‘Now I understand why we could never keep things under wraps!’ (Vincent, personal communication, October 13, 2008). **Elise Bernard** on having read the documents commented: ‘We did always said that the Party had glass walls but we didn’t even know about this things ... it’s someone who’s made a summary of what was happening in the PC – they were very organised eh? I know they had files on us ...’. *Did the Party know about his?* ‘I don’t think so ...’, (Bernard, personal communication, October 23, 2008). **Jeannine Bechet** expresses satisfaction that the truth about the PCF’s inner workings and agenda was in fact documented: ‘... in a way it reassures me because the RG are a serious organisation – it wouldn’t have been in their interests to misinterpret things, and I know the type of thing we talked about in the cells and it wasn’t anything the RG shouldn’t hear ...’, *In the sections too?* ‘... yes - people often used to think we were plotting but we weren’t!’ (Bechet, personal communication, October 20, 2009). **Jean-Claude Autran**: ‘I think there will always have been people who told the RG stuff – some will have been identified but others -I think the police will have had very good ways of knowing what was going on – they were very efficient’ *But could non-members go to Party meetings?* ‘No – I don’t think so, I don’t think so ...’, (Autran, personal communication, November 1, 2008). **Charles Galfré** shares his experience of the RG: ‘Well I worked with them as a journalist and the information they gave me was more accurate than the *Préfet* – they are competent as a police body – because not all of the police are!’ (Galfré, personal communication, January 30, 2009). **Baptistin Colonna**: *What do you think about the content of these documents? Do they have credibility?* ‘Well, they usually knew what was going on - they might have put their own political analysis on things but in general they got their facts straight ... (on shown a particular document) *Was this document about public meeting?* ‘No – it’s an internal Party meeting ...’. *Where the RG at those?*

‘... the mayor of La Seyne congratulated the workers for the sweeping victory they achieved in the legislative elections. He stressed that after this victory there was still the next i.e. to achieve a Popular Front government ... as in 1936 ... in order to reestablish peace in North Africa and assure the well being of the workers ...’, (Police Headquarters, La Seyne, January 11, 1956, p.1).

It is eloquent however, that on the same day that the above-mentioned CGT meeting took place at which the Communist Mayor **Toussaint Merle** delivered the speech above on the importance of creating a new Popular Front, an open letter of his appealing directly to a number of Socialists councilors who had joined three others (Albert Lamarque, Henri Midon, Roger Miraglio) in boycotting council meetings, was published in LPVM. It should be noted that at this point there had been nine years of enmity in La Seyne between the Communist incumbents and Socialist opposition:

‘Let us say that we regret that you have got the year off to a bad start ... on 8th January, as every year, we invited you along with other parties, local companies and figures for a friendly get together Lamarque, Midon and Miraglio convened a general meeting at the Socialist section for the same time that very day! ... Remember that for 11th November commemorations they did the same thing! These three men, full of spite, aggression, envy and anger are imposing on you courses of action that ridicule you and you’re your party in the name of an irrational, pathological and desperate anti-communism ... As far as we are concerned we are ready to talk to you about working together on the local council between Communists and Socialists ... the discussion has never been so necessary ... Come and work with us. With a united government of the left that can put into practice its progressive social policies to improve the conditions of the workers, peace in North Africa, international détente, and that will make the running our council easier and more productive,’ (Merle, January 11, 1956).

‘It doesn’t surprise me ...’. *Did people know?* ‘No – it could be people we trusted ...’, (Colonna, personal communication, August 3, 2009). This type of evidence suggests that ‘informers’ for the RG, at least at the local and regional levels, were not necessarily or even usually ‘infiltrators’ (although at the time the Party was indeed held in suspicions on the part of the French government). Rather, it suggests that these people were indeed genuine members of the Party (it would have taken highly proficient intelligence operatives to fool the Party membership body, in particular at this level) but also individuals who attached as much importance to the French Republic, with whatever inconsistencies that position may imply.

appear unreasonable), and at worst given lip-service (what did they have to lose?); and by the local rank and file as being both:

- their duty, in that all members of the party were expected to exert political influence across left and centre parties memberships as the occasion arose, as stated in the party statute
- and as a futile, naive and most probably a foolhardy endeavour.

Dr. Paul Raybaud, known as ‘the partisan doctor’ due to his role in the Resistance and his continuing militancy in the post-war decades, tells us his perspective on the party’s drive to recreate the Popular Front at the time:

‘In 1956 we *were* in favour of trying for unity of action because we trusted our leaders, we had nothing to lose - we thought - but we had doubts ... but the real Popular Front (1936) was an *engagement* – I was fifteen at the time – we were all for it ...’, (**Raybaud**, personal communication, July 15, 2009).

Baptistin Colonna, party militant and shipyard worker in 1956 talks in a general way of the feeling within the communist community as regards making common cause with the Socialists:

‘The push towards a new Popular Front didn’t work – we can never be allies – socialists are the first anticommunists – the right has reason to be anti-communist because it touches their ideology, on their power, the SFIO wants to become the first party of the left so they want to eliminate us and go towards social democracy – I don’t trust them – they’re people who want power – it’s always been the same ... and when they’ve got power they pursue right-wing policies ...’, (**Colonna**, personal communication, August 3, 2009).

Robert Gourvenec was a party militant in 1956 working in the naval yard in Toulon after a period in the FCM shipyard in La Seyne. Here he explains some of the political differences between communists and socialists from the point of view of the rank and file:

‘We always fought for unity on the left but we wanted a position of class war and they wanted class collaboration so it’s understandable that the rank and file didn’t get along with the Socialists – and still don’t ...’,

What did you think of the line the party was taking?

‘There were lively discussions for and against! (the Popular Front) - but we understood basically that via a left wing alliance we could change a lot of things ... it’s in the very fabric of the trade union movement – we always strive to attain one single body – working class solidarity ...’, (Gourvenec, personal communication, July 28, 2009).

A like point of view is provided here by **Jacques Brémont** who was also a worker in the naval dockyard in Toulon at the time and rank and file party militant:

How was the relationship between Socialists and Communists?

‘They were anti-communist plain and simple ... we always wanted unity on the left – we always fight for this on the principle that unity is strength ... Midon (Henri) ran a fierce campaign against the Communists at the council in La Seyne ... and Albert Lamarque – he was poisonous ...’,²⁰ (Brémont, personal communication, October 15, 2008).

He talks about there having been a difference in attitudes between those at the base of the party and the cadres in regard to the pursuit of a close working relationship with the Socialists:

‘There’s always been resistance amongst the rank and file because we can’t trust them (the Socialists) ... the was telling us to unify but there was difficulty at the base because we knew them ... they’re still getting in the way because they don’t have a revolutionary position ...’, (Brémont, personal communication, October 15, 2008).

This reticence on the part of those at the base of the party is summed-up in a Police Intelligence report on the parallel actions of the PCF and the CGT in promoting the Popular Front:

²⁰ Another factor in this equation is that in 1956 the power relations between the Socialists and Communists had been reversed; unlike in 1936 when the Socialists were the senior partner in the equation it was now the PCF in the stronger position nationally and locally in terms of popular support; therefore if there were to be an *entente* between the two parties at the levels of cells, sections, federations across the country it would have had to have been more on the communists’ terms, despite directives from the Central Committee in Paris. In La Seyne for example, this change in the balance of power that had come about since 1945 was palpable and determinant in 1956. Therefore this pressing need expressed via the upper echelons of the Party apparatus to form a working alliance with centre-left parties was not widely felt on the ground – especially as since the Communists had come to power locally in 1947 the Socialists, as majority opposition, had made it clear that they had no intention of collaborating with them.

‘At the moment, although the cadres are still preoccupied with this objective, the rank and file show little interest in a new ‘Popular Front’. ...’, (Information, March 24, 1956, p.1).

5.2 Algeria

Daily front page coverage in the national and regional party press called for a ‘Peace in Algeria!’, (*l’Humanité*, March 1, 1956) ‘Give us back our sons and husbands alive!’ (LPVM, March 4, 1956) ‘Cease-fire and Negotiation’, (March 8, 1956) ‘Talk not force in Algeria’ (*l’Humanité*, April 23, 1956) ‘Massive reinforcements for Algeria’ (*l’Humanité*, May 18, 1956). Nationally, regionally and locally the party organised a non-stop campaign of petitions, delegations, demonstrations, public meetings, rallies and it made ongoing attempts to bring about unity of action on the left in order to be able to push more effectively for an end to the war. On April 11th an extra 70.000 reservists were called-up (and on 9th May another 50.000). The campaign for the Popular Front was always linked, if not in headlines then in substance, to ending the war in Algeria. News from, and comment and discussion on, developments concerning Algeria was *the* perennial news item that year, rarely missing from the front pages of the party press in one form or another at national and regional levels:

‘PUSH TO THE LEFT’ ‘NEW POPULAR FRONT’: ‘THE POPULAR IS POSSIBLE!’ ‘FULL STEAM AHEAD TO THE POPULAR FRONT!’, ‘VIVE LE FRONT POPULAIRE!’;
NEW REINFORCEMENTS (600.000) FOR ALGERIA?

ENOUGH YOUNG MEN KILLED IN ALGERIA!, (“La Poussée à gauche”, January 15, 1956, p.1).

MILITARY MEASURES CAN ONLY HINDER THE SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF ALGERIA – PEACE ACTION MUST PREVAIL’ (“Les mesures militaire ne peuvent que retarder ...”, March 20, 1956, p.1).

The party propaganda machine also took full advantage of the twenty year anniversary of the first Popular Front of 1936 as can be seen in these feature headlines in the national weekly CGT publication:

‘WE DID IT IN 1936 – SO WHY NOT IN 1956? TO GET THE GOVERNMENT THE WORKERS ARE WAITING FOR – GO LEFT-WING ALLIANCE! (‘‘Cela s’est bien fait en 1936 – Alors! Pourquoi pas en 1956?’’, January 3, 1956, p.10).

A continuity between pre-war and wartime fascist activities and contemporary far-right interests in France was identified and highlighted, thus reinforcing the message that unity on the left was indispensable in order to thwart the growing far-right threat that had never truly gone away.²¹ An extract from an article on Pierre Poujade in LPVM typifies message conveyed in the communist press over the course of that year:

‘Monsieur Adolf Poujade ... he doesn’t have a Charlie Chaplin moustache ... but he’s a racist as regards North Africa and talks of ‘hordes’ and ‘terrorists’ ... he’s a racist at home too, he writes: ‘Ask someone called Isaac Mendès, Servan Shrieber or Ben Said if he’s French – they’re not *French* – not really...’, (‘Monsieur Adolphe Poujade’), January 11, 1956, p.6).

The contemporary Fascist threat as epitomized by Poujade was unequivocally linked to far-right elements in Algeria as can be seen in this response to ‘the day of tomatoes’ episode on the 6th February, which happened to coincide with the attempted Fascists *coup d’état* in Paris 1934²² that precipitated the Popular Front movement:

‘DAY OF FASCIST PROTEST IN ALGIERS!’ ...

‘ALGIERS’ 6TH FEBRUARY ...

The Fascists, the ‘Ultras’ of colonisation, Poujade’s henchmen ... didn’t miss the opportunity to take their revenge for the ‘anniversary’ ... and for anyone who had been in doubt of the urgent need for unity on the left in the defense of liberty, the welcome given to Guy Mollet is a painful reminder ...’, (‘Journée d’émeutes fascistes en Alger’), February 7, 1956, p.1).

²¹ And just eleven years after the Liberation, as Elise Bernard states: ‘We were frightened the war would start again ...’, (Bernard, personal communication, October 23, 2008).

²² The attempted right-wing *coup d’état* against the Third Republic had resulted in 14 dead, 255 injured and an ensuing political crisis that forced the resignation of Prime Minister, Edouard Daladier. A broad coalition government headed by Gaston Doumergue was hurriedly installed, which endured only nine months. From this point on, the PCF launched itself into an unceasing campaign to bring about unity on the French Left.

5.3 XX Congress of the CPSU

The informants in La Seyne and in Monfalcone remembered instantly the XX Congress in February 1956 and its political and ideological significance. This is understandable given the global impact of this event, the implications it was to have for the communist movement as a whole, and the place it would therefore come to occupy in their respective community's collective memory. However, there appears to have been a qualitative difference in the way in which it was experienced by communists in each case-location in 1956, as there certainly was in its immediate effects at the regional levels in particular. For informants in La Seyne and Toulon it was essentially normative, to do with political theory, macro strategy, whereas in Monfalcone and Gorizia it was normative of course (and especially for the senior cadres), but it was also intrinsically empirical ²³ i.e. its revisionist propositions of peaceful co-existence with other nations already visible and exemplified in Khrushchev's 'thaw' ²⁴ towards those states and leaders formerly excluded from the Cominform / USSR, and including of course Marshall Jozep Tito, were starting to have direct effects for the PCI in the region (see Chapter 7), as had the Tito-Stalin split eight years before.

It is important to remember that what we are talking about at this point, is the response of ordinary communists in the West to the Congress itself, its revolutionary political content, its reception in Western Europe and the United States, and the reactions it invoked on the part of non / anti-communists, and not the responses of ordinary communists to the Secret Speech *per se*. This did not become an issue as such for communists in the West until June of that year, when the respective party leaderships were obliged to respond openly to critics following the publication of the unabridged speech in the United States in June, and therefore ordinary communists'

²³ Evidence suggest that for the French communists theory underscored political practice, whereas for Italian communists theory and practice was one and the same thing (see Chapter 8).

²⁴ In 1954 Khrushchev had made friendship visits to Beijing, Belgrade and would go to the United States in 1959. The period 1953 to the early 1960s would be known historically as the 'False Spring' because due to the power struggle within CPSU (the nucleus of the Soviet political system) between liberals and conservative pro-Stalinists, Khrushchev's revisionist agenda did not reach its full potential. Nevertheless, irreversible political, economic and cultural reforms in the Soviet Union had been implemented in that time.

responses to the revelations regarding Stalin and his regime were suspended until that moment (see Chapter 6). This general phenomenon is consistent with the more specific findings of the current project, a fact which in turn supports the view that the information contexts of communist communities in Western Europe at that time were determinant in informing their understandings of the world (as were of course but arguably to a lesser degree, the less restricted information contexts of non-communists).

The informants in both case-locations remembered that there had been a time lapse between the Congress itself in February and the publishing of Khrushchev's speech in June, and that therefore there had been a delay in the full impact of the speech on the party membership. At times during the interviews these two events would *overlap*, as indeed in terms of content and chronology they do i.e. the reformist substance of the Congress can be justifiably linked to the auto-critique implied in the revelations; and the informants in La Seyne and Monfalcone had been 'passively' exposed to comment and speculation on the speech in the mainstream media since the beginning of March. At other times these two 'moments' in their history would *actually get mixed-up* in the interviewees' thoughts as they confused the XX Congress with the revelations of the speech. However this confusion would be momentary, as the fact that there *had been a lapse* in the internal information flow of the Parties was highly significant in itself, it had not been lost on either community as that year progressed and would invariably be recalled. This, again, supports the notion of a determinant information context that kept our communities apart from the political mainstream in both the French and the Italian contexts, because for everyone else i.e. non-communists, the XX Congress and the Secret Speech had quickly and easily become synonymous.

What also becomes apparent from the oral testimonies is that for the French informants, although the importance of the Congress itself was clearly recognised on an intellectual level, it was the attack on Stalin that would come to be emblazoned onto their collective, and personal memories, and this was the case across that sample, regardless of the role individuals had fulfilled within the party structure. In La Seyne and Toulon, the importance of the Congress as such, whilst by no means ignored or

underestimated, would be overshadowed in the scheme of things by the later revelations of the Secret Speech. For the Italian informants however, because the political and ideological content of the Congress had had direct relevance to the Communist Party in Venezia-Giulia due to geopolitical factors (i.e. the injurious results in the region of Tito-Stalin split, and then the promise of change), the Congress is remembered *in its own right*, independent of the revelations made in the Secret Speech that were made known to the world months later, and this is the case across that sample (although not all of these comrades had grasped its full significance at the time or indeed would subscribed to its theses once they had). Finally, whether the Congress itself and the theoretical positions and strategy innovations it advanced would go on in due course to be as important as the revelations in June of the Secret Speech for individual informants however, depended largely on the role that individual fulfilled within the party apparatus. Generally speaking, for the rank and file, it was the attack on Stalin that was salient.

Another observation that can perhaps be explained in context, is that the French informants, on the whole, did not appear to have linked the Congress to subsequent events that year *as automatically as* those Communist Party members *in cadre positions* in the Italian case-study, who had been following the course of events with keen interest. When the question was raised in interviews as to whether the informants had perceived a link between the Congress and the uprisings in Poland and in Hungary *at the time*, the more spontaneous and qualified responses, in the affirmative and especially as regards the Soviet interventions in Budapest, came from senior party cadres in the PCI Federation of Gorizia. This is perhaps indicative of these individuals' automatically wider perspective (than the rank and file), also of their political responsiveness to, their instinctive interest in (as a political elite in a problematic border community) and understandings of change and renewal at the international level.²⁵ The rank and file and mid-level cadres' responses to the same

²⁵ From 1915 to 1947 alone this region had known at that point five 'national' flags. The region that is currently Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, as any such region, has inherent qualities and predispositions i.e. it is naturally osmotic and prone to periodic reconfiguration resulting from political developments. It has long been contested territory. Since Roman times and the Medieval period the region had known Venetian, Napoleonic and for the most part Austro-Hungarian rule before becoming part of

question in Monfalcone and Gorizia were much more equivocal as regards Poznan in June (see Chapter 6), although the Soviet actions in the Hungarian Revolution in the autumn of that year, being of a completely different dimension, made much more of an impact, obliging ordinary communists in this region to take stock of events if they had not already done so. Whilst to an extent this was true in the French case-study i.e. that the Soviet interventions in the Hungarian Revolution in October and November made much more of an impact than the events in Poznan, in the Italian study reactions to Budapest as related in interviews seem nevertheless to have been directed more towards the immediate context. This suggests that the XX Congress and *the de-Stalinisation process implicit within it held a particular interest for many of the informants in Monfalcone and Gorizia*, even if the full implications were not evident to all of the party faithful at the same moment, and even though when they were, there was not universal approval of its reformist propositions.

Reception in the Var Federation

As for the way in which internal news and discussion of the Congress was managed by the Var Federation, there is evidence that this was consistent with the principles of democratic centralism, as would be expected regarding a matter of this magnitude. The document below is a Police Intelligence report from Police Headquarters in Toulon. It relates to the content of a party federation meeting held days earlier and the message

Italy after WW2, then becoming contested territory under the Allied Military Government from 1945-7, then reverting to Italy in September 1947. Consequently it has evolved as a multiethnic, multicultural plurilingual region. In the Provincial capital Gorizia for example, governance by different foreign powers at different times, levels of internal economic migration, and the fact that it is a border town meant that in the twentieth century the main languages and dialects spoken in the town were Slovenian, Italian, Friulano and German as Italice Chiarion points out: ‘The vast majority of Italians who lived in Gorizia at the turn of the century spoke Friulian, there were some German, the Slovenians spoke Slovenian between themselves and Friulian with the Italians, but they knew Italian too (they were very adaptable people)- but my relations too - they spoke Friulian, Italian, German and Slovenian as well as the Venetian dialect we speak in Gorizia nowadays – my grandmother used to speak Bohemian – 6 languages she spoke! – but here in Gorizia everyone spoke a minimum of 3 languages - at one point we bought milk from a farmer’s wife who used to come round and with my grandmother she spoke Slovenian, my grandfather was a saddler and with his Slovenian workers he spoke Slovenian, with us grandchildren he spoke in the Venetian dialect, with my mother and my aunt he spoke Friulian, and if a cop came – from down south - he’d speak in Italian – and I mean he spoke them all well – my grandmother did high school in the German school in Gorizia ...’, (**Chiarion**, personal communication, June 1, 2010).

communicated in it is typical of that emitted from the Federation in regard to the matters arising from the XX Congress over the next weeks and months:

‘Point 1 of 2:

The first question (XX Congress of the CPSU) was only touched on as it is not yet known what the resolutions of the Congress will be. But it was indicated that all the cells will be made aware of the decisions made as soon as the Communist Party Central Committee has adapted them to the French way of thinking and to the political circumstances of this country.

Each section is planning to organise study meetings and all militants will be expected to attend these working sessions; all unauthorised absences will be considered a serious lack of commitment’, (Information, February 17, 1956, p. 1).

The document below from the same source issued four days later describes the informed response to the XX Congress on the part of the Federation Committee. It gives an account of its instructions on the due procedure to be followed in the implementation of any changes to methods and practices that may result from the Congress:

In the Var it would seem that the PCF is at a key moment in the evolution of its MO.

At the leadership level of the Var PC there is the net impression that XX Congress is set to be a turning point in communist history. It is also thought that the National Congress of the PCF that will be held in Le Havre in a few months will reflect this new tendency in its methods and practices.

More generally, the party cadres in the Var region are adopting a new model which, in terms of political logic and taking into account the situation of the PC and the Western way of thinking, will allow a more nuanced and subtle application of its fundamental principles. The more sectarian in the party will have to evolve ... It seems that until the next National Party Congress, nothing concrete can be undertaken by the Federations who are waiting precise instructions, with the conviction that “something is about to change”, (Information, February 21, 1956, p.1).

As far as the informants in La Seyne and Toulon are concerned, they seemed to have welcomed the political content of the Congress. As for mentions of ‘cult of

personality' in the mainstream media, they had clearly put their trust at the time in the party's interpretation of things and in its handling of the issue, which in both regards was to minimise its importance. In relation to comment and speculation on the Secret Speech, it seems that they remained equally skeptical until the publication of the integral version in the Western press in June obliged the PCF to address the issue and the party faithful to respond (see Chapter 6).

At the time of the Congress, the vast majority of the informants in the study saw the main political themes addressed as proof of the Soviet Union's peaceful intentions, its willingness to make a decisive step towards *détente*, its readiness to engage in internal review, and to evolve. (Still, reactions were more of an abstract nature than were those in the Italian case study.) Typical of the reactions across the sample is the one described below by **Robert Gourvenec**, who had begun his career working in the shipyards in La Seyne and later moved to the naval shipyard in Toulon where he was working in 1956:

‘There was a lot of discussion about it and of the opening that seemed to be happening in international politics - with a completely new approach in relations ... as far as we could analyse at the time we thought it was positive on an international level ...’, (**Gourvenec**, personal communication, July 28, 2009).

Dr. Paul Raybaud a medical doctor working in La Seyne in 1956, a communist activist and former *maquisard* explains what he and his comrades made of the XX Congress:

‘At the time we took it as an opening, a renunciation of the antagonistic approach, a ‘spring-time’ ...’, (**Raybaud**, personal communication, October 4, 2008).

Whereas a singular response in this context is that of **Maurice Oustrière**, a journalist in La Seyne in 1956. Here he describes his response with a degree of retrospection:

‘I wasn't ready to accept the changes that were happening in the PCSU, I thought everything was fine – in fact I wasn't very astute! We saw the bit where Khrushchev criticised Stalin – it was in all the cinemas – in the interval – and it shocked us because it was so different to all we had been

told before – it was so clearly anti-Soviet propaganda though ...’,
(**Oustrière**, personal communication, October 23, 2009).

Elise Bernard mentions the high priority the Congress was given within the party at the time (much more so than, for example, Poznan would be given in June):

Did you discuss the XX Congress in the party in February?

‘Yes – there was more made of the XX Congress at the time than problems in France! Maybe my feeling is too personal but I felt it was overstated – we had our own things to worry about!’

Was it the rank and file who wanted information?

‘It was the party that initiated discussions – always – top-down ...’,
(**Bernard**, personal communication, October 23, 2008).

An interesting if more general point was made by two of the informants, again with a degree of retrospect. It was discussed in relation to the ‘intense’ political life in the shipyards in La Seyne. **Josette Vincent** and **Francisque Luminet** indicate that if some of the communists and communist sympathisers did have doubts about the Secret Speech at that time, these would have been kept out of the workplace:

Josette: ‘... yes - another type of worker, in the town for example - you could have another way of looking at things - but in the shipyards ...’,

Luminet ‘... solidarity was all-important – what they wanted above all else was reassurance, unity, and they looked to their leaders – who were also their union leaders – to bring that about - it was more a case of: “tell us what we need to hear” ...’, (**Vincent / Luminet**, personal communication, October 15, 2008).

Jeannine Bechet remembers thinking that Khrushchev was not being given credit for his candour by the non-communist world:

‘... we were all very happy with the XX Congress – bravo Khrushchev! ... Khrushchev had courage ... what they did no other country would have – this auto-critique of their regime – and instead of (non-communists) saying ‘oh well they’re evolving’ – they attacked any weak spot they could ...’, (**Bechet**, personal communication, July 30, 2009).

Madame Bechet explains how she and her comrades simply dismissed most of the contemporary reactions to the Congress in the mainstream media that spring as the usual bourgeois slander:

‘... they used to say so much about the Soviet Union that we didn’t believe anything they said anyway ... why should we have believed the bourgeois press at that moment?’ (**Bechet**, personal communication, July 30, 2009).

Lucien Conac explains:

‘It was us against the world back then ...’, (**Conac**, personal communication, October 10, 2008).

Below is an illustration of what **Madame Bechet** and **Monsieur Conac** are referring to. It is an extract from a lead article in the local non-communist press at the time, written by Socialist Councilor and Secretary of the SFIO Section in La Seyne Henri Midon, who had refused to participate on the council with the communists. In the article Midon claims that there was more democracy in the Socialist Party than in the PCF:

‘Any member (of the Socialist Party) is able to express an opinion about any problem, to criticise, make suggestions and elaborate their personal point of view.

There’s no dictatorship as there is in the ‘foreign’ party and we’d never witness in the SFIO the spectacular u-turns such as those announced in the recent Congress of Russian communists where Maurice Thorez, Jacques Duclos went to pick-up the latest slogans to bring back for their troops camped out on French soil ...’, (Midon, February 26, 1956).

Another of his articles in the same publication talks of the ‘cult of personality’:

‘The glorious leader was mad, apparently, according to Khrushchev, and Communist Parties are now obliged to disown who until yesterday they adored as though he were an infallible God.

Now they have to condemn the ‘cult of personality’ and so communists who strut around on French soil will have to take a long hard

look at Maurice Thorez – be honest about history – and admit that he was a deserter not a patriot ...’,²⁶ (Midon, March 30, 1956).

Certainly, for the mainstream press, and for certain sectors in particular, Khrushchev’s Secret Speech had been the gift that kept on giving.

Reception in the Federation of Gorizia

The importance of the Congress’ progressive, responsive and dynamic agenda struck an immediate cord with the PCI Federation of Gorizia, because as a political organisation in a particularly sensitive border region it had had to be flexible and adaptable in order to survive.²⁷ It was its own responsiveness and dynamism that had ensured its very existence during the Fascist era when it functioned as a clandestine organisation; from 1945-7 as the Yugoslavian led PCRG; in 1947 when it became part of the PCI; and in 1948 at the time of the Tito-Stalin split or *la rottura* that decimated the regional membership for the six years. The PCI Federation of Gorizia did not border physically merely on two different countries, but on two different worlds. In the context of this thesis, *the link between the XX Congress of the CPSU and the Tito-Stalin split in Monfalcone and Gorizia is paramount*, and indeed directly relevant to many of the key reactions to the events of October and November 1956. **Italico Chiarion** describes succinctly the singular effects of the split on the region and in so doing gives an account of the way in which transnational factors takes effect:

²⁶ This refers to the fact that during WW2 Thorez had been tried *in absentia* for desertion and sentenced to death. Following the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939 and the banning of the PCF, Thorez had been stripped of French nationality. Mobilised nevertheless he had absconded to the Soviet Union. His position as General Secretary of the PCF and the close ties he had had with the Soviet leadership since 1923 meant that it had been deemed expedient from him to remain in the Soviet Union for the duration of the war (although this was not made known until several years after the war had ended). Meanwhile Jacques Duclos, as his second in command, took over the running of the Party’s affairs and the Communist Resistance movement in clandestinity.

²⁷ The region that is currently Friuli-Venezia-Giulia has long been contested territory. Since Roman times and the Medieval period the region had known Venetian, Napoleonic and for the most part Austro-Hungarian rule before becoming part of Italy after WW2, then becoming contested territory under the Allied Military Government from 1945-7, then reverting to Italy in September 1947. During the twentieth century it had known five ‘national’ flags. Consequently it has evolved as a multiethnic, multicultural plurilingual region. In the Provincial capital Gorizia for example governance by different foreign powers at different times, levels of internal economic migration, and the fact that it is a border town meant that in the twentieth century the main languages and dialects spoken in the town were Slovenian, Italian, Friulano and German.

‘We felt immediately and directly the repercussions of the Tito-Stalin split in 1948 ... when the thaw began to take effect in 1955, when Khrushchev went to Belgrade to make peace with Tito - here also - there was a parallel development ...’, (**Chiarion**, personal communication, December 14, 2009).

This illustrates the way in which the Tito-Stalin split was felt in this region before anywhere else in Western Europe, much as the way that the Cold War itself had begun here in 1945 with the communists’ fight to become part of Yugoslavia.

Signor Chiarion goes on to explain that the leadership of the federation saw the Congress as a further development in Khrushchev’s all-important thaw that had brought about the rehabilitation of Tito in 1955:

‘All this was music to our ears – the thaw – Khrushchev’s trip to Belgrade – his making peace with Tito – comrades who had left over Cominform started to come back to the party ...’

... the break in relations determined by the Cominform resolution – it was like an ideological knife, the vast majority of the communists in Gorizia were in favour of the XX Congress, it meant the end of the *rottura* ...’, (**Chiarion**, personal communication, December 14, 2009).

Consequently, in February 1956 the leadership of the federation saw the XX Congress as the next logical step in the processes of de-Stalinisation and *disgelo* or thaw, which it whole-heartedly endorsed. The development that interested the Federation of Gorizia in particular was the thaw that was already underway between the Soviet Union and Josip Tito. Gorizia bordered onto Yugoslavia and had been, as Berlin, a divided town in the post-war period until it was re-annexed to Italy in 1947. The communists in the region had a particular relationship and shared a particular history with their Slav neighbours to the east. In June 1948 Tito had been expelled from the Cominform for ‘nationalistic tendencies’ and this had devastating consequences for cells, sections and the seat of the PCI Federation itself in Gorizia due to an immediate mass exodus of Slovenian comrades from their ranks. 450 of the 600 members in the cells and sections in and around Gorizia alone left the party this point. These comrades joined Democratic Slovenian Front (FDS), the PSI, or chose not to affiliate

themselves to a political organisation.²⁸ **Nereo Battello** was a senior but relatively young cadre in the PCI Federation in charge of Press and Propaganda in 1956 (future Barrister and Italian Senator). He describes the effect at the time of the Tito-Stalin split on a party that was beginning to build its numbers in what in many ways was a politically conservative town, and after the years of being a restricted party of cadres:

‘Imagine – we were a party reborn in September 1947, after just a year *la rottura* tore a large slice of the Slovenian Population away from the party ...’,²⁹ (**Battello**, personal communication, November 17, 2009).

La rottura automatically engendered a period of intense debate across the regional party membership as a whole, between those communists who supported the Cominform resolution i.e. *i cominformisti*, who were in the vast majority but not exclusively Slovenian, and those who supported Tito i.e. *i titini*, who were in the vast majority but not exclusively Italian communists.³⁰ This internecine conflict resulted in a sustained period of ideological stalemate between these two ‘currents’ that greatly hindered the advancement of the PCI in the region, had a demoralising effect on the Federation body and presented a gift to its political rivals. More ironic is that fact that both *i cominformisti* and *i titini* were still wholly committed communists, and it is true to say that this was a reluctant split. *It was not personal*

²⁸ Losses in Monfalcone however were significantly less due to:

- a) demographics: Gorizia had a large Slovenian minority (mostly living in the outskirts of the town) and before 1948 many of these people were communist or communist voters
- whereas the Slovenian population in Monfalcone had always been significantly smaller
- b) the political and economic nature of Gorizia, which was, in essence, a middle class / state sector economy / administrative regional capital, therefore the position of the Communist Party in the town was marginal, only beginning to grow in the 1950s and 60s
- whereas Monfalcone had its own base and dynamic as the main industrial centre in the region and Communist bastion.

²⁹ The losses of the Slovenian comrades were felt acutely in Gorizia itself and its surrounding areas due to the demographics of that area, however there were important Slav minorities across the entire Province of Gorizia and in the areas surrounding Monfalcone, which was the second largest town.

³⁰ From 1945-7 Italian speaking communists in the region had fought for it to become part of and were known as Yugoslavia and were known as *titini*, whereas after the Tito-Stalin split these same people were referred to as ‘*cominformisti*’. These appellations were valid and used by communists themselves at different moments but the same terms were also used as insults on the part of ‘white’ Italian population suggesting, in both cases, that the communists were ‘traitors’ in giving their allegiance either to Tito after the war or in being preoccupied with the politics of Moscow rather than Rome in the post-war period.

but ideological and political – because such were the times.³¹ **Renato Papais**, former partisan (aka *Leone*) and party militant at the time explains the perspective of ordinary communists:

‘We were Titoists at the time (prior to ’48) – we were conditioned really – until Tito broke with Stalin and the Cominform – first it was ‘*Long Live Tito!*’ then ‘*Down with Tito!*’ our actions were coherent with the party line – some people say we made a mistake ...

And after 1948?

‘We turned over a page, followed the directives from Moscow, between you and me Stalin broke with Tito so we did too – we had to choose and we chose Cominform ...’,³² (**Papais**, personal communication, November 20, 2009).

Dino Zanuttin explains, with a certain retrospection, the complexity of the situation for communists in the province at this time, and the conscious choice they made:

‘It was obviously important for all communists because we thought that the Soviet Bloc was solid, but for us it was on our doorstep - we had a direct relationship political and geographical ...

My first reaction was not to accept the position of autonomy Tito took - convinced at the time that unity was what was needed in worked history - and that unity was represented in the Soviet Union - it wasn’t the moment to start being ‘independent’ ...’,

³¹ Along with other non-ruling Communist Parties in 1948 the PCI had been unequivocal in its support of the Cominform resolution and its consequent denunciation of Tito. This was also the position of communists in the Federation of Gorizia. Given the historical context this is comprehensible as all Western Communist Parties had realigned themselves politically to a born again Soviet orthodoxy following their own expulsion from national governments in May 1947; since September 1947 when the Venezia-Giulia region was returned to Italy and the Federation of Gorizia had become a constituent part of the PCI, it had committed itself to the Italian party’s orientation and agenda (always a delicate balance between Togliatti’s New Party route to socialism and the pragmatic need to fit-in with Moscow’s current macro strategy) and the order of the day was support of the Cominform resolution; and importantly, the Stalinist myth that was still very much alive and to all intents and purposes dictated the responses of Italian communists.

³² The historical and geographical context was one that precluded experimental political responses. Had there been any modicum of doubt expressed within the Party leadership at the regional level of the validity of the Cominform resolution in June 1948 as there would be in relation to the Soviet interventions in Budapest eight years later (see Chapter 7), perhaps the exodus of 450 Slovenian members from its ranks could have been minimised and the ensuing political impasse avoided.

Was there any dissent amongst the party membership as to whether to support Tito or not?

‘As party militants it wasn’t our place to – even if we hadn’t agreed – and that was possible because remember we’d fought along-side the Yugoslavians in the war – but that was our mentality at the time – the level of our judgment ...’, (**Zanuttin**, personal communication, December 10, 2009).

Following the death of Stalin three years earlier, Khrushchev’s new policies had reversed a raft of repressive measures, censorship and exclusions effected by his predecessor and importantly for the region these included the over-turn of the Cominform resolution and the rehabilitation of Tito in 1955. It meant that the party could normalise relations with the Slovenian comrades who had left the party in 1948 and thereby replenish its numbers and restore morale.³³ It also meant that negotiations could get underway to free those migrant workers who had gone to Yugoslavia from Monfalcone and were still imprisoned there. Whilst not all Communist Party members in the Federation, by any means, were ready in 1956 to forsake the memory of Stalin and all it stood for in the name of ‘progress’, there *were* obvious benefits at the regional level of Khrushchev’s new line, and in certain quarters there was overt support for these reforms.

From the first days of the Congress in February, senior cadres in Gorizia had been finely attuned to the theoretical and strategic propositions being discussed, because these reflected their own political orientation. There is also evidence to suggest that the main political themes of the XX Congress were well received across all levels of the party structure, although the implications of the de-Stalinisation process being discussed were not fully appreciated by the rank and file or even middle level cadres at that point. Here, mid-level cadre in Monfalcone **Silvano Morsolin**’s comments regarding the Congress reflect the general community perspective:

‘Yes, historically there was change in line – we discussed things and we agreed with the changes ... we fought a war for liberty, democracy,

³³ It had not been possible however to recuperate all losses as a certain number of *titini* had gone and would remain in the PSI.

‘unity is strength and advancement’ ... the majority (in cells and sections) were in favour of what Khrushchev did ...’, (**Morsolin**, personal communication, December 11, 2009).

Silvino Poletto, Secretary of the Federation of Gorizia in 1956 describes the thinking in the Executive Secretariat as regards the XX Congress and Khrushchev’s reforms and it is clear from this and other interviews that what is remembered by this ‘progressive’ group of cadres is very much the ‘revolutionary’ content of the Congress in February and Khrushchev as an agent for change:

What was your role at the time?

‘I was Secretary of the Federation of Gorizia - but the most important centre in terms of communist support was Monfalcone – it had 14.000 workers during the war and it was the fulcrum of the Italian Resistance ...’,

What did you make of the XX Congress in February?

‘Khrushchev talked about the new approach to socialism, new prospects, non-violent transitions, European ways to socialism ... we did our Congress in December (1956) – that was a very important one above all for the hypothesis of the development of democracy and the politics of reform ... Khrushchev’s policies were having concrete results ...

We in this area understood the unaligned stance; Tito, Nehru, Nasser – neither with NATO nor with the Warsaw Pact – we thought it was natural ... Khrushchev was revealing himself to be a great leader because he understood the problems and he confronted them head-on ... his political reforms, the economic opening-up to the rest of the world, he’s a man that got the Soviet Union out of hock ... makes the break with the old Soviet Union – he didn’t have personal interests to pursue those policies ...

The condemnation of Tito had been a grave error ... Stalin dies in 1953 two years later Khrushchev and Bulganin go to Belgrade and “Dear comrade Tito – it was Beria that led us down the wrong road – we are comrades and we’ll put things right” ...’, (**Poletto**, personal communication, November 25, 2009).

Therefore for communists in the region and especially for those in key positions of responsibility within the regional party structure, the XX Congress *linked back* to the Tito-Stalin split in 1948 *and forward* to new possibilities.

The importance of *la rottura* at the time and its lasting implications for local politics cannot be overestimated. In fact the key issue for the Federation in the time leading-up to 1956 had been the Tito-Cominform split that over that period of time appears to have engendered, essentially, two responses in the local party membership: either a) an instinctive distrust of or (a sometimes deep) resentment towards Yugoslavia depending on personal experience, an aversion to political indiscipline and dissidence in itself, *a tendency to ideological integrity and an instinctive loyalty to Moscow* as a result, or b) an awareness that the Soviet system was fallible and therefore *an increased level of detachment and a pragmatism in political attitudes*. In 1956 these mindsets are discernable in the reactions to the Soviet interventions in Budapest.

5.4 Special Powers

In La Seyne and Toulon, as might be expected, the news of the vote for Special Powers was received with ambivalence. According to local Police Intelligence documents, the official party explanation of the ‘yes’ vote reflected the overriding objective at this juncture of creating left-wing solidarity in order to effect its programme, as exemplified in this report extract:

‘Militants in the Var explain the Communist vote for special powers by citing the following reasons: a) it prevented the Socialist government from seeking support from the right-wing b) it avoided a repetition of the mistakes made in the past whereby a policy of systematic opposition and obstruction by the party resulted in its becoming separated from the masses because in certain circumstances the attitudes of Communist politicians were not understood and approved by the working class as a whole,’ (Information, March 14, 1956, p.1).

Jeannine Bechet explains how party agendas at the local level were arrived at in the late 1950s:

‘First here was a meeting of the Secretariat of the Section, 3, 4 or 5 of us – then there was a Section Committee meeting where it was discussed - political themes, decisions to be made and the Section Committee was composed of representatives from all the cells – then we went into the cells to give a report of the Section Committee meeting and so those at the base had the right to express themselves on everything – then that came back up to the Committee, to the Secretariat ...’, (**Bechet**, personal communication, May 23, 2010).

Then the complexity of the situation and the restrictions ordinary communists felt and experienced becomes a little clearer:

Did anyone say that the party was making a mistake voting for the Special Powers?

‘Well you couldn’t have had opinions that were anything else than those of the party you know ... that’s not to say we swallowed everything without thinking ...’, (**Bechet**, personal communication, May 23, 2010).

Armand Conan, life-long communist militant and in 1956 future communist mayor of Carquerianne, near Toulon. He describes the context of the communist vote in favour of Special Powers and how in his view Socialists often talk ‘left’ but act ‘right’:

‘The special powers were supposed to be ‘for peace’ there’d been important talks at the level of the party leadership and it was decided to give Guy Mollet special powers *for peace* they thought he’d go in that direction – then after he received the vote Mollet went back on his words politically ... it wasn’t an error of principle – the voting of special powers had been valid in my opinion but what muddied the waters – it has to be said – was the fact that – very often the language of the Socialists is filled with left-wing rhetoric but in reality ... and when things started to go wrong lots of communists – especially those at the base - said ‘they should have listened to us – it’s always the same with the Socialists ...’, (**Conan**, personal communication, May 22, 2010).

For ordinary communists in La Seyne and in Toulon, the communist vote for special powers was seen as yet another betrayal on the part of the Socialists. **Dr. Paul Raybaud** and **Maurice Oustrière** discuss the issue:

Raybaud: ‘I’m absolutely against the Socialists - they always betray you Jules Moch, Indochina, when Mendès-France got us out of Indochina

Mitterrand started Algeria – I always come back to Leon Blum when he said in 1946 basically that Socialists in government are ‘the loyal managers of capitalism ... Leon Blum was one of the non-interventionists on Spain ... That’s why I don’t like the Socialists Party ... It was Guy Mollet ... who asked for special powers at the National Assembly ‘for peace’ he said ... they think we’re simple ...’.

Oustrière: ‘Yes - to end the war in Algeria – ha!, (**Raybaud / Oustrière** personal communication, October 23, 2008).

René Merle is the son of **Toussaint Merle** and here he explains his father’s position at the time as elected Communist mayor, Councilor for the Var region and member of the French Parliament:

‘Well it’s one thing what he thought and another what he had to do – those people were used to following the party line, so he voted for them even though he didn’t agree...’, (**Merle**, personal communication, May 19, 2010).

Toussaint Merle was the mayor of La Seyne and Member of the French National Assembly and as a prominent Communist cadre it would have been extremely difficult for him to dissent from the party line on such a significant and high profile issue as this. However, **Dr Raybaud** recounts that he did in fact challenge **Toussaint Merle** about this at the time:

‘I told Toussaint off, and he said: ‘We had to – we’ve got to think of electoral viability and long-term success ...’, and I said: ‘We can’t abandon a position of principle - something we believe in - for a question of strategy ...’,

No doubt it was **Dr. Raybaud**’s partisan background, his reputation as a leading party militant in the region, his professional status that gave him a certain confidence; together with his lack of official position within the party structure and therefore a greater freedom of expression, that had allowed him to make this type of statement in defense of what he understood as communist orthodoxy (see Chapter 7, 8). He continues in retrospect:

‘If the communists made a mistake it was surely over Algeria ...’, (**Raybaud**, personal communication, October 4, 2008).

Robert Gourvenec who, as we have seen, was a young militant working in the naval dockyard in Toulon in 1956, explains the situation and feeling there at the time:

Did you discuss the vote for special powers?

‘Yes – a lot – there was a battle of ideas – we were for peace in Algeria and we wanted a political solution to the affair – we’d just come out of Indochina and special powers were given to Mollet to create the conditions to regulate the problem of Algeria ... a large part of the expeditionary force left from Toulon (and returned) Toulon was a revolving door - the trains would come in to the Arsenal and ships would be loaded and off they’d go and don’t forget that there’d been the Henri Martin affair that marked Toulon enormously, and the whole Indochina question ...’, (**Gourvenec**, personal communication, July 28, 2009).

Elise Bernard remembers the political context at the time:

‘Algeria was *different* - the right was jumping up and down to hold on to it – the Special Powers were actually to preserve the government – you know we were near to a civil war at that point in France ...’, (**Bernard**, personal communication, October 23, 2008).

Another young militant at the time was **Jo Pentagrossa** from La Seyne who was called-up for Algeria in February 1956:

‘I had participated in the demonstrations for the release of free Henri Martin so I was very politicised at the time – just before I left my mother took me to a protest – the mothers of Toulon were lying on the railways tracks in the station to stop the trains leaving – my mum was a militant too

... the vote for special powers was a strategic error for ‘unity on the left’ – which didn’t do us any good – error or not I found myself over there at twenty – I went for eighteen months but stayed two years ‘detained under the flag’...

... there was a ‘left’ majority in the National Assembly and the Communists numbered more than the Socialists but the Communists gave in to pressure over the question of special powers – we were sent as a ‘Policing Force’ to ‘maintain order’ – and when I got my call-up I went

to see the Secretary of the party section to ask him what does a communist have to do with a colonial war? and he said you've got to fight from the inside – but anyone who knows the army also knows that that's impossible – you either shut up or go to prison ...', (**Pentagrossa**, personal communication, August 17, 2009).

An interesting point here is made by **Jeannine Bechet**, almost as an aside. She conveys the sense that for individual party members and the membership body as a whole, being constantly 'on the wrong side' of public opinion was draining and demoralising. This psychological insight to what must have been the moral and political burden Communist Party members in the West lived with on a daily basis is, if nothing else, testament to their levels of commitment in the cause:

What did you think of the special powers issue?

'Well the party is like any other institution it can make mistakes – maybe we were naive at that moment, we believed them – you know it's not easy to be always against the powers that be – it wears you down ...', (**Bechet**, personal communication, July 30, 2009).

