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Lelio La Porta

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## Correspondence, Vol. 2, May 1922-November 1923, Davide Bidussa, Francesco Giasi and Maria Luisa Righi (eds) (in English)

### **Abstract**

Gramsci's correspondence January-November 1923 includes both political letters (to and from him, a number published here for the first time) and also personal ones, some redated and, in consequence, having as recipient not the Schucht sister (Julija) to whom they were until recently thought to be addressed. The background information supplied to the political letters, and inclusion in the volume of the letters received by Gramsci, helps to flesh out the general context of what was happening in both the Comintern and in the Italian Communist Party. In the aftermath of the Fourth Congress of the International (November-December 1922) a clarification of positions began in the PCI, with what would become the centre group around Gramsci distancing itself both from Bordiga's left and from Tasca's right (later incorporated into the centre). Further, under pressure from the International, moves – not accepted by everyone – began towards a stable alliance between the infant Communist Party and the pro-Comintern left of the Socialist Party (the Third Internationalist fraction); after the last relatively free elections, the majority of this fraction then merged with the PCI into what became a united Communist Party.

### **Keywords**

Letters 1923; Comintern; Schucht sisters; Third Internationalists; founding of "L'Unità"; centre group in PCI

## *Epistolario (Correspondence), Vol. 2, January-November 1923*<sup>1</sup>

Lelio La Porta

The second volume of Gramsci's *Correspondence* brings together the letters of the period from January to November 1923. The first part brings together the letters both from and to Gramsci, while *Appendix 1* includes the letters sent in copy and those produced by leading bodies of which Gramsci was a member, and *Appendix 2* includes his drafts of incomplete letters. There are in addition a number of private letters addressed by Gramsci to Evgenija (Ženija) and Julija (Jul'ka) Schucht, which form a small part of his correspondence as compared with the material regarding his activities as representative of the Partito Comunista d'Italia (PCd'I) on the Comintern Executive Committee.

The first Section includes twenty two letters of Gramsci, of which eight were unpublished up to the appearance of this volume. The same remark applies to the last part of the letter of 29 March 1923, which Gramsci and Egidio Gennari sent from Moscow to the Executive Committee of the PCd'I (letter 23), in which they suggested contacting Piero Sraffa and Alessandro Molinari as possible correspondents for a bulletin "dealing with all the national and international problems of the working class from a substantially communist viewpoint, but in an objective form, offering dispassionate information and discussion" (p. 80).<sup>2</sup> Some of the letters to the Schucht sisters appear here with a new dating, and sometimes also the recipient of a letter is not the sister to whom, in previous editions, the letter was thought to be addressed, a matter that will be dealt with later.

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<sup>1</sup> *Correspondence*, Vol. 2, January-November 1923, pp. 706, of the *National Edition of Antonio Gramsci's Writings*, edited by David Bidussa, Francesco Giasi and Maria Luisa Righi with additional help from Leonardo Pompeo D'Alessandro, Eleonora Lattanzi and Francesco Ursini.

<sup>2</sup> In English Antonio Gramsci. *A Great and Terrible World. The Pre-Prison Letters 1908-1926*, ed. and trans. Derek Boothman, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 2014 and Chicago, Haymarket Press, 2014, p. 151. [By an oversight the English edition's name index wrongly identifies Molinari as "Luigi Molinari", an anarchist who died five years previously to this letter – tr. note.]

*Appendix 1* includes the letters sent in the name of the Central Committee of the PCd'I to the Executive and to the Presidium of the Communist International, Gramsci as a member these bodies being a recipient of these letters. The fairly numerous letters to the Secretariat are included in this appendix only when Gramsci was one of the recipients. Again in this same appendix readers will find the letters addressed to other international bodies, to the various sections of the Comintern and to organs of communist parties of other countries. *Appendix 2*, instead, contains handwritten notes by Gramsci that are considered by the editors, with certainty, to be his drafts of letters.

The historical framework of the material contained in the volume is given by the consequences of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International (November-December 1922), with the Italian context provided by the explosion of the question of the fusion between the PCd'I with Serrati's maximalists of the Socialist Party. The PSI Congress in Rome (1-3 October 1922) sanctioned the split among the socialists. The document presented there by Serrati read that "a tendency, with its own discipline, has come to the fore in the Socialist Party, with the confessed aim of taking the party into collaboration with the bourgeoisie and the acceptance of current institutions", and on account of this "all members of the collaborationist fraction and those who approve the lines laid down [in the motion] are expelled from the Italian Socialist Party". Turati went on to found the Partito Socialista Unitario (PSU) in November 1922. Zinov'ev, president of the Communist International maintained that, since the reformists had been expelled, one could then bring to fruition the policy of fusion between the PCd'I and the PSI in order to carry forward a united front policy regarding Turati. The majority of the communist delegates at the congress were however against fusion even if Gramsci, distancing himself from Bordiga, came out in favour of accepting Zinov'ev's proposal. All this led to the formation of the fusion commission, comprising Gramsci, Scoccimarro and Tasca for the PCI and Serrati, Tonetti and Maffei for the PSI.

The commission reached an agreement on fusion, which immediately met with the opposition of the wing of the PSI led by Pietro Nenni, but the PCI Executive, which under pressure had even accepted the

fusion proposal, was to all intents and purposes unable to function, since, after the formation of the Mussolini government, Bordiga together with others of its members (Ruggero Grieco, Ennio Gnudi and Giuseppe Berti) were in prison. The 1923 Congress of the PSI in Milan came out against fusion, which led to the final break between the PSI and the International in August of that year. A new majority was formed around Nenni, putting Serrati and the veteran Costantino Lazzari in the minority; Serrati would later on be expelled from the PSI and, after having constituted the Unitary Communist fraction, joined the PCd'I. The International was of the opinion that the PCI was mainly responsible for the failed fusion and, with an act of authority bearing the stamp of Zinov'ev, took measures to change the leading group of the party. With Bordiga in prison, the Comintern Executive Committee designated Togliatti, Mauro Scoccimarro, Egidio Gennari Angelo Tasca and Umberto Terracini to lead the party: in other words a leading group favourable to fusion with the PSI. At the end of 1923, Bordiga proposed to the leaders of the party majority a letter in defence of the line the party had held, and in which the decisions of the International on the United Front question were criticized. Gramsci, who was in agreement with the line of the International, refused to sign the letter, broke with Bordiga and formed a new area in the centre between Bordiga's left and Tasca's right.

This forms the overall picture of the situation in which the *Correspondence* took place. We now pass on to look more closely at a number of significant passages of the correspondence itself. On 11 January 1923 Bordiga sent Gramsci a telegram (*Epistolario*, vol. 2, p. 9) warning him that an arrest warrant had been issued against him. In actual fact, the first arrest warrant against Gramsci was issued on 2 March by the examining magistrate in Teramo, but Bordiga, bearing in mind the provisional arrest of Grieco on 29 December, was of the opinion that the intention was to arrest the whole communist leadership. It was then Scoccimarro's letter of 2 March itself which informed Gramsci both of the arrest of Serrati and of the arrest warrant issued against him and the other two members of the Italian delegation at the International, all guilty of having signed the Comintern manifesto against fascism (*Epistolario*, vol. 2, *Appendix 1*, letters 20

and 24). In Italy there was, therefore, a police clamp-down that was taking place, which was aimed at the disintegration of the Party, already much put to the test by the immobility and sectarianism of the leading group. In his letters to the Executive Committee and Secretariat of the Comintern (*Epistolario*, vol. 2, *Appendix 1*, letters 25 and 26), Terracini deals with great effectiveness with the difficult situation faced by the communists in Italy, a situation described in even more concrete terms, if that is possible, in a letter of 13 February – the self-same day on which the letter was sent to the E.C. of the Comintern – to the Italian communist federation of the United States, in which one reads that “The fascist government has opened the great anti-communist hunt that had for some time been heralded” (published in *Alba Nuova*, organ of the Italian section of the Workers Party of America, III, no. 10, 17 March 1923). As part of this “anti-communist hunt”, Bordiga was arrested on 3 February and Serrati on 2 March, while warrants were issued for the arrest of the members of the Italian delegation to the International. All were committed to trial on 18 July, while the trial itself began in Rome on 18 October, concluding with the acquittal of all the accused on 26 October.

A second decisive moment that comes to the fore in the documents contained in the volume is the interlacing of conflicts inside the PCd'I at that precise historical moment. If, up to the Spring of 1923, Gramsci had preferred not to accentuate the differences with Bordiga, starting from the letter to Togliatti of 18 May 1923, war was declared on him (*Epistolario*, vol. 2, pp. 102-109). Gramsci began to indicate the communist leadership's ambiguity, shown in a number of attitudes they had taken towards the Comintern. These took on concrete form in what amounted to a provincialism which, in considering local factors to be pre-eminent, removed them from the necessary dialectic with international questions, thereby side-stepping one of the manifestations to which the Comintern Executive clung most of all. This was unanimity on voting which, on the one hand meant discipline and, on the other, deprived of contents the tendency to group around minorities. This ensemble of questions was proposed to the Italian party first of all in a letter (*Epistolario*, vol. 2, p. 122) replying to Togliatti who on 23 July 1923 had written to Gramsci, enclosing a

letter of Bordiga to Zinov'ev and Bukharin. Gramsci wrote expressing his distress at a situation in which the Party would soon be led by a minority "created by our errors and by our passivity"; the conclusion to the letter is bitter and almost disheartened: "... I have to confess to you that to me it is absolutely incomprehensible that revolutionaries, who are convinced of their programme, should abandon their post, which today, given the general situation, is a barricade to defend and not only against the enemies in front of us" (*ibid.*). Obviously linked with the letter quoted immediately above is the incomplete draft of a letter to Togliatti, dating to August 1923, and, for information, to all the comrades working with him, in which we read "We must get down to (...) concrete work, and demonstrate, through the Party's entire activity and a practical political engagement (*operosità politica*) that measures up to the Italian situation in Italy, that we are what we claim to be, rather than going on in the attitude adopted up to now of being 'misunderstood geniuses'"<sup>3</sup> (*Epistolario*, vol. 2, *Appendix 2*, p. 582).

What does Gramsci mean here by *operosità politica* ["political engagement"]? In fact, in that period his political engagement was concentrated between, on the one hand, the involvement that the International demanded of him to create European centres of information on fascism and the fight against it (in Berlin and Vienna) and, on the other, the discussion that had arisen from the crisis of the leadership group of the Italian Party. As Togliatti noted in a letter of 13 August to the Secretariat of the Comintern (*Epistolario*, vol. 2, *Appendix 1*, p. 462), some of the Italian comrades wanted him to come back nearer to Italy. And indeed, on 20 August the PCd'I Executive indicated Berlin as his destination, meeting the firm opposition of Terracini who in the meantime had arrived in Moscow to take his place as a member of the Presidium of the International. And it was Terracini who underlined the precarious situation of the communist press, subjected as it was to closures by the Italian authorities. In this climate, Togliatti and his collaborators began publication in August of a weekly journal *Lo stato operaio*, printed in Milan in semi-clandestine conditions. Meanwhile the relations between the Comintern and the PSI were becoming more and more tense up to the definitive break,

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<sup>3</sup> See Antonio Gramsci. *A Great and Terrible World. The Pre-Prison Letters 1908-1926*, cit., p. 168.

given that the Italian Socialist Party was no longer willing to countenance in its ranks the existence of the Third Internationalists [those socialists, or *terzini* as they were called, in favour of the Third International – tr. note], with their own organ, *Pagine rosse* [“Red Pages”]. The journal’s editorial group, among who included Serrati, Fabrizio Maffi and Ezio Riboldi, were first suspended and then expelled. On 3 September, Togliatti wrote a long letter to the Comintern Executive Committee, in which he gave a detailed description of the situation and, indeed, pointed out that it was impossible to reach an agreement with the PSI, the Third Internationalist fraction, obviously, being excluding from this estimation (*Epistolario*, vol. 2, *Appendix* 1, pp. 489-96). On 5 September, Otto Kuusinen sent a letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party and to the leadership committee of the *terzini*, communicating the Comintern Presidium’s decision that a daily newspaper should be published having two main aims: one of “counterbalancing the influence of ‘L’Avanti!’ among the masses” and the other of “being the common organ of the communists and *terzini* in view of a fusion between them” (*Epistolario*, vol. 2, pp. 128-9). On the question of the daily paper, see also letters 104 (Togliatti writing from Milan to the Comintern Secretariat on 10 September 1923, pp. 512-6) and 113 (Mauro Scoccimarro from Rome to the Comintern on 11 October 1923, pp. 562-3); both letters are included in *Appendix 1* on the pages here indicated. On 12 September, Gramsci wrote from Moscow to the Executive Committee of the PCd’I, endorsing the Comintern’s indication of creating a daily and, above all, defining a number of cornerstones of what would become his successive methodological, theoretical and political framework: the Southern question, an original analysis of fascism, the overcoming of hardline sectarianism, and the search for a complex of political and social forces that would become the expression of a workers’ and peasants’ government. On the trade union problem, the internal commissions had to be conquered without pushing the situation so far as to create a split within the union. Over the whole of the letter hovers the spirit of one word that would assume a central value for Gramsci’s entire successive reflection: hegemony (*Epistolario*, vol. 2, pp. 126-28: on setting up the daily, see also letter 40, pp. 134-36).



On 21 September a new wave of arrests of communist leaders took place in Italy, temporarily interrupting the flow of letters between them and Gramsci, who arrived in Vienna on 4 December. At this point, the main problem became that of relations with Bordiga. (This will be dealt with in the next volume of the *Epistolario*, now in preparation.)

Letters 2, 8, 12, 13, 17, 18 and 35 are addressed to the Schucht sisters. As compared with previous editions, the revised dating and recipients of the letters are explained by one of the editors of this volume of the *Correspondence*, Maria Luisa Righi, in her article *Gramsci a Mosca tra amori e politica (1922-1923)* [*Gramsci in Moscow between Loves and Politics*], in “Studi Storici”, 52, no. 4, 2011, pp. 1001-32. In essence, before the start of his relationship with Julija, who became his partner and mother of his two children, Delio and Giuliano, Gramsci had had a relationship, or in some way a more than just friendly involvement, with Evgenija. The new factors coming into the analysis of the letters clear up much of the real relations between Gramsci and these two Schucht sisters; in this sense a particular significance is assumed by letter 12, whose recipient had previously been thought to be Julija, while in actual fact it was Evgenija, as is the case for letter 35, previously dated August 1922, but which now turns out to be August 1923, in that Gramsci first met Julija in September 1922, and thus could not have written to her in August of that same year.

As one may gather from what has been written here, this second volume of Gramsci’s letters allows us, with greater adherence to the facts, to reconstruct the latter stage of his stay in Moscow and to come to a better understanding of the intensity of the political involvement of a man already subject to great physical stress. On the other hand, thanks to a painstaking operation of bringing documents to light, several hitherto little known facts regarding Gramsci’s affections and love life then come to the fore. Putting these two aspects together, a picture emerges that one may call “total” in the sense of Gramsci the political animal, and Gramsci the man. It is exactly in the period covered by this second volume that, in all its complexity, the profile appears of a communist for whom public life, punishing in its own way in a moment of utmost crisis, was entirely devoted to the management of internal relations, subtle as a spider’s web, and subjected to

the continual scrutiny of the Comintern leadership, with the goal of finding the best solution to the Italian question. This aspect was complemented by a private life aimed at seeking an “ubi consistam”, a place to stand, about which, writing about himself, he claimed that for him there existed an “absolute impossibility, almost a decree of fate, that I might be loved by someone” (*Epistolario*, vol. 2, p. 26).<sup>4</sup>

One particular aspect of the editorial work of the volume needs to be highlighted, that is the notes to each of the texts. It is precisely these notes that, in many ways, allow us to reconstruct Gramsci’s development, removing any doubts and mysteries on the dating and collocation of the facts in their context. In this sense, it would be possible even to go back to write the history of the PCI in that precise historical stage, integrating the research carried out by Paolo Spriano through the documentation that has now been made available in this second volume of the *National Edition of Antonio Gramsci’s Writings*.

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<sup>4</sup> Letter to Evgenija Schucht of 13 February 1923: see *A Great and Terrible World*, cit., p.132.