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## The New Edition of Gramsci's Lettere dal carcere

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## The New Edition of Gramsci's Lettere dal carcere

### Abstract

This is the abstract of a review by Derek Boothman of the new edition of Antonio Gramsci's Lettere dal carcere, (Torino, Einaudi 2020).

### Keywords

Prison, relations with family, health, relations with party, attempts to reduce sentence, coded messages, new documentation

# *The New Edition of Gramsci's Lettere dal carcere (Prison Letters)*

Derek Boothman

## *1. Introduction.*

2020 saw the publication of a new edition of Gramsci's *Lettere dal carcere (Prison Letters)*, commissioned by the Einaudi publishing house, the main and "official" publishers of Gramsci's writings since the very first edition of the *Lettere* back in 1947. This 1947 publication, a landmark edition and the first ever collection of Gramsci's writings in volume form, was published on the tenth anniversary of his death and gained the posthumous award of the most prestigious literary prize in Italy, the *Premio Viareggio*. Over the course of the decades since the first edition, much work has been done, not only to find unpublished letters, but to better understand their whole background and integrate everything into Gramsci's complex personal, political and cultural biography. The publication, under the editorship of Francesco Giasi, director of the Gramsci Foundation in Rome, is now the fifth major one in Italian, together with all their various reprints.

The new edition contains 489 letters and, occasionally, telegrams; some letters have gone astray probably irretrievably, their loss being evident from the gaps in the otherwise regular weekly sequence of letters to various members of Gramsci's family in Sardinia or to his wife in Russia. In addition to the main text, the appendices contain another twenty two documents written by Gramsci to various prison and legal authorities, three of them published here for the first time, although one had been known in draft form (see *Quaderni del carcere*, pp. 2375-6). The last appendix contains Gramsci's request, less than a fortnight before he died, to be reunited with his wife and family in the Soviet Union (p. 1208 of the 2020 edition). As compared with previous volumes, the total number of documents in the 2020 edition is 511, of which twelve are published here in volume form for the very first time; some others included are half-hidden

away in other volumes<sup>1</sup> and not found in editions of the *Prison Letters* as such. The new edition, naturally, contains some corrections to letters where, e.g., people had been wrongly identified, and also corrected dates of some letters, most of the corrections dating to the last period of Gramsci's life, when he was writing mainly to his wife and children in Moscow.

The introduction to the volume and a series of notes form a critical apparatus that helps guide the reader through the various stages of the letters, at times their interconnections and, certainly, their political implications, some of which of course are still open to interpretation. There is by now a wide-ranging secondary literature regarding Gramsci's prison years, of varying quality; the choice was made for this volume not to make any explicit reference to these publications, except in the case of the exchanges of letters among those to whom Gramsci himself wrote. For the purposes of this review, occasional reference will however be made some of the serious and non-tendentious secondary literature. Here we shall limit ourselves to just a few of the main aspects of the prison years that emerge through a reading of the letters.

Quite a number of different major themes appear in the volume, often intertwined. We have the letters to his sister-in-law, Tat'jana (Tanja) Schucht and, by transmission through her to his wife Julija (Jul'ka) and to their two sons, Delio and Giuliano; or through her to his direct Sardinian relatives, or again through her to Piero Sraffa and thence to the PCI leaders, meaning mainly Togliatti; letters containing information about his health and state of mind; letters regarding his or others' attempts to obtain if not freedom, at least some easing of conditions. What ought not to be overlooked is the link-up between the *Prison Letters* and the *Prison Notebooks (Quaderni)* and the highly coded political messages contained in the letters, for which the critical apparatus of the editor, Francesco Giasi, is of inestimable help. Giasi with his team of co-workers have done an excellent job in their annotation to the text, supplementing it with additional information in order to make many facets much more easily understandable to all readers, specialist and non-specialist.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. *Antonio Gramsci – Tatiana Schucht, Lettere 1926-1935*, ed. Aldo Natoli and Chiara Daniele, Einaudi, Torino 1997, a volume amounting to over 1500 pages, and the far less voluminous collection of Piero Sraffa's *Lettere a Tania per Gramsci*, ed. Valentino Gerratana, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1991.

## 2. *The First Impact of the “Lettere dal carcere”*

The number of letters (218) contained in the first edition is less than half that of the new edition. The reasons for the incomplete nature of the 1947 edition are easy to identify. Due to the immediate post-war political climate within official communism, including the Italian Communist Party, the editors group expunged any mention, however minor, of the name of Amadeo Bordiga or very occasional mentions of publications by Trotsky. More strange than this was the absence of reference or letters to Piero Sraffa, who became Gramsci's main financial support and intellectual interlocutor in the prison years, though at the time still relatively unknown to a wider public. Both Sraffa and Bordiga do find their place in the much-enlarged 1965 edition, edited by two legendary figures in Gramsci scholarship, Elsa Fubini and Sergio Caprioglio;<sup>2</sup> in the meantime (1961), it may be added, Sraffa had been awarded the Söderström Gold Medal for the history of economics, which, at the end of that decade, became the “Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences”.<sup>3</sup> Then, apart from the difficulties in locating letters, some of them – to family members – were still considered by them to be too close to personal susceptibilities to be published so soon after Gramsci's death. In particular cases, they were also, indeed, too critical of actions by members of the family. In other cases there were banal omissions, due merely to what are in effect post-scripts adding little to the substance of the main part of a letter.

At the time of publication of the *Lettere*, a key event in Italian intellectual circles was the speech made on the tenth anniversary of Gramsci's death by Luigi Russo, the director of Pisa's “Scuola Normale”.<sup>4</sup> After having read not only the *Prison Letters* but also the

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<sup>2</sup> On the 1965 edition and then other letters published in the 1970s and, after Jul'ka's death in 1980, for yet more letters made available by Giuliano, Antonio's younger son, see esp. pp. XXXIII-XLIV of the *Introduction*; cf. also Francisco (Paco) Fernández Buey, *Reading Gramsci*, Leiden and Boston, Brill 2014 and its paperback edition (Chicago, Haymarket 2015), pp. 6-7. Further additional letters are found in the 1988 (Einaudi) edition and, due to the research of Frank Rosengarten, in the 1994 Columbia University Press English-language edition, the new letters in which were then included in the 1996 (Sellerio) Italian edition.

<sup>3</sup> Popularly but not officially recognized as a Nobel Prize; it was launched in 1968 on the initiative of the Swedish central bank, and is awarded in the same ceremony as the Nobel Prizes defined in Alfred Nobel's will.

<sup>4</sup> Now most easily available as *Scoperta di Gramsci* in *Gramsci Ritrovato 1937-1947*, ed. Enzo Santarelli, Abramo, Catanzaro, 1991, pp. 225-40; originally *Antonio Gramsci e l'educazione democratica in Italia*, “Belfagor”, II, 15 July 1947.

*Notebooks* (a typescript of which he had received before publication), Russo asserted that “Antonio Gramsci belongs not only to the Communist Party, he belongs to European thought”. In his commemorative speech Russo included ample extracts from Gramsci’s letters to Tanja on Croce’s *History of Europe* and, secondarily his *History of Italy*. During the period of Gramsci’s imprisonment, as was the agreement, Gramsci’s sister-in-law Tat’jana (Tanja)<sup>5</sup> copied these letters to her, and sent them to Piero Sraffa, whose comments she in reply transcribed, with some unimportant variations, and included in her letter to Gramsci of 5 July 1932. Sraffa was of the opinion that

The nexus of the matters discussed, and the fragments, taken all together, constitute a radical critique of the book. Where [Gramsci] speaks of the historical role of the intellectuals, I recognized a concept that, in embryonic forms, I had already read in an essay where Croce and Fortunato were characterized as the keystones of the Southern system. And despite the fact that it is not developed fully, I have also understood the question of cultural hegemony.<sup>6</sup>

Sraffa is here clearly referring to the famous essay published as *Alcuni temi della questione meridionale* (*Some Aspects of the Southern Question*), published in “Stato Operaio” shortly after Gramsci’s arrest. And as regards its political and cultural aspect Gramsci’s short series of letters, interrupted by the prison censorship, occupies a key position in how his thought came into the public domain, through republication in Italian just after his death in 1937 and again in a new series of “Stato Operaio” published by the Italian communists in New York during the Second World War;<sup>7</sup> on the basis of this American publication, the letters on Croce found their way in translation into English in the New York-based “Science and Society” journal in 1946.

The ground had to some extent been prepared for the public reception of Gramsci not just through these publications, but for

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<sup>5</sup> In this review we will normally use the current ISO standard for transcription from the Cyrillic alphabet (e.g. Tat’jana and Tanja rather than Tatiana and Tania; and Jul’ka for Gramsci’s wife, transcribed by him as Iulka when he does not use the Italian form Giulia); otherwise for historical figures we use what are the standard forms in English, e.g. “Trotsky” rather than the ISO “Trockij”.

<sup>6</sup> Piero Sraffa, *Lettere a Tania per Gramsci*, cit., p. 72 (letter of 21 June 1932); see also *Antonio Gramsci – Tatiana Schucht, Lettere*, cit., p. 1041.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Editor’s *Introduction* to the 2020 edition, pp. XIX-XX.

example, through military units named after him in the Garibaldi Brigade in the Spanish Civil War and then in the partisan struggle in Italy; however, not many people in Italy, and even fewer abroad, knew his name.

After World War II, the picture that emerged initially was that of a martyr to fascism. The letters that Gramsci wrote, like those of other political prisoners, had of course to be subject to strict self-censorship with no mention of politics. “Coded” messages, some still exceptionally difficult to decipher, are indeed present, but the nearest thing to comments on everyday events is the series of letters to Gramsci’s sister-in-law, Tat’jana (Tanja), to aid her in a supposed review of hers of the work of Benedetto Croce, Italy’s leading moral philosopher and literary critic.

Croce’s review of the *Lettere dal carcere* was framed differently from Russo’s, and notwithstanding Gramsci’s criticism of him in the volume, Croce was generous in his assessment:

the book [...] also belongs to those who are politically of another side or on the opposite side, and belongs to them for a double reason: for the reverence and affection that is shown for all those who held the dignity of man high and accepted dangers and persecutions and sufferings and death for an ideal, and this is what Antonio Gramsci did with strength, serenity and simplicity, such that these letters from prison give rise to horror and internal revolt against the regime that oppressed and suppressed him; — and because as a thinker he was one of ours (“egli fu dei nostri”).<sup>8</sup>

In Croce’s review what strikes the reader is the phrase at the end: “egli fu dei nostri” (literally, “he was [one] of ours”, or less literally “he was on our side”). As is often the case, one may ask who actually is being referred to by the first person plural “ours”? Some have interpreted this tribute of Croce’s as indicating the attempt to put Gramsci on a pedestal as a great thinker, like others mentioned in the review and “rewarded” in Naples with a statue (Thomas Aquinas, Tommaso Campanella, Giordano Bruno and Giambattista Vico), while at the same time removing him from the arena of class struggle. But as Gramsci wrote in 1917, several years before his imprisonment, in explaining his aversion to indifference “living means taking sides. Those who really live cannot help being a citizen and a partisan”. In the *Prison Notebooks* he criticizes those

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<sup>8</sup> B. Croce, “Quaderni della ‘Critica’” (8), July 1947, pp. 86-8.

intellectuals “who conceive of themselves as embodying the thesis and antithesis and thus as elaborators of the synthesis” (Q10ISummary, §6, p. 1208),<sup>9</sup> analogous to Croce’s operation in his review of the *Letters*.

One aspect that may come as a surprise to some readers is the relative freedom of the first letters, written during Gramsci’s brief period with other detainees on the island of Ustica, off the coast of Sicily, and then when he was in the San Vittore prison in Milan, still awaiting trial, from where he was able to write even to fellow party members such as Giuseppe Berti. This freedom is due to the fact that, although arrested, he had not been tried and was still therefore a detainee and technically not yet a political *prisoner* as such. It is in this period before the trial in late May-early June 1928 that we now have access to a certain number of things either hitherto unpublished, or published not in the *Prison Letters*, in Italian or in translation, but elsewhere, in particular in Gramsci’s correspondence with his sister-in-law Tanja (see note 6, above). A few of these are not so much letters as either a telegram (sent slightly late for Tanja’s name-day) or picture postcards from Ustica with various new year, birthday, or name-day greetings. A later telegram is also published for the first time, informing Tanja that he was to be sent, a few weeks after his sentencing, to a prison, which turned out to be the one in Turi di Bari, a “hospital prison” for chronically ill inmates.

The volume includes other unpublished material, notably two letters to his mother dating to spring 1929, which mention Gramsci’s niece Edmea (Mea).<sup>10</sup> These letters were kept within the family, though known through them to various people in what may be termed “Gramscian circles”, but not printed while Mea was still alive. In the first of these (8 April), Antonio tells his mother how one day in 1921 a group of people entered his office at the *Ordine Nuovo* journal, demanding that he “make amends” for having seduced and made pregnant the daughter of their family, Rina; the father of the child (Edmea, at that time “still very little and not yet walking”) was in fact Antonio’s brother Gennaro (Nannaro), then employed on the financial side of the paper. Other factors entered

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<sup>9</sup> English translation in *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. D. Boothman, London, Lawrence and Wishart 1995, p. 329

<sup>10</sup> Another unpublished one, to his brother Gennaro, written on 30 June 1930 and therefore falling between the three talks that they had in summer 1930, comes from the Russian State Archive for Socio-Political History (RGASPI).



the case, with claims repeated in newspapers that Antonio took part in orgies and was a cocaine addict. The threatening behaviour of the family group induced Gennaro to go around Turin in disguise, albeit a not very convincing one. But, returning to the time of the 1929 letter, Gennaro had by then legally recognized Mea as his, and she had been adopted by the Gramsci family in Ghilarza. Rina was now married to another person, but the whereabouts of Gennaro were rather uncertain until Tat'jana managed to locate him in Belgium (unpublished letter, again from Antonio to his mother, 6 May 1992) and was promising to write soon. On a number of occasions Antonio shows his interest and worries about Mea's intellectual development, here asking that an Italian dictionary be sent to her. Elsewhere he is critical both of her spelling mistakes (though capable of correction "with a little attention": see his letter to his mother, again unpublished, of 14 July 1929).

More importantly than these criticisms of a young child, still learning, are some of his comments on language itself. In an earlier letter to his sister Teresina (26 March 1927), he wrote that for him "it was a mistake [...] not to have allow Edmea to speak freely in Sardinian as a little girl. This harmed her intellectual development" and expressed the hope that Teresina's son Franco would be allowed to speak Sardinian, which is "not a dialect, but a language in itself, even though it does not have a great literature [...] it is a good thing to for children to learn several languages":<sup>11</sup> a thing he probably had in mind here is what he wrote explicitly later on in the *Notebooks*, namely "every language is an integral conception of the world": when the language issue is posed, so too is that of the reorganization "cultural hegemony" (Q29§3, p. 2346).<sup>12</sup> This attention to language is just one instance of link-ups between the *Letters* and his other writings, most of all the *Notebooks*. In this specific example, however, it calls to mind his student period, and his involvement with his historical linguistics (glottology) professor, Matteo Bartoli, in finding the pronunciation or meaning of a number of words in Sardinian dialects.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. for the English translation quoted here *Letters from Prison*, ed. F. Rosengarten and trans. R. Rosenthal, New York. Columbia University Press, 1994, Vol. 1, p. 89.

<sup>12</sup> In English, *Selections From Cultural Writings* (1985), ed. D. Forgacs and G. Nowell-Smith and trans. W. Q. Boelhower, p. 184.

<sup>13</sup> Letter or postcards of 3 January 1912 (to his father), and 24 November 1912 and 26 March 1913 (to Teresina) in A. Gramsci, *Lettere 1908-1926*, A.A. Santucci (ed.), Torino, Einaudi 1992,

### 3. *Unsuccessful Attempts at Gaining Freedom.*

Gramsci's relations with his family was not always easy. Carlo in particular comes in for criticism for what Antonio regarded as a clumsy and counter-productive attempt to obtain his freedom. Other people, including Tanja, were not exempt from criticism on this front either; it should be said that Antonio, understandably, was hypersensitive – but not always right – on this subject. As an example of attempts that fell through, we may take Antonio's letter to Tat'jana of 5 December 1932, with the editorial footnotes. Here, in relation to a decree on a remission and partial amnesty, Carlo had delayed until too late to follow instructions given him; by inform Sraffa in time, it might have been possible, through Sraffa's uncle, the President of the Court of Appeal (Cassation), to influence the parliamentary passage of the decree through the introduction of some clause favourable to political prisoners such as Gramsci. Tat'jana, too, was taken to task not only by Antonio but by Sraffa, for which see the latter's letter of 7 February 1933.<sup>14</sup> Attempts of a different type were also undertaken, such as a possible exchange of prisoners, involving priests arrested in the Soviet Union. Tanja mentioned this possibility to the new Soviet ambassador to Italy, Vladimir Potëmkin,<sup>15</sup> adding that Gramsci thought it sure that the Vatican could provide some assistance. Potëmkin did not know why Gramsci was so sure and said that “the plan does not seem very practical to me”; nevertheless he considered it his duty to inform Pjatnickij at the head of the Comintern secretariat (26 September 1933), and the latter apparently did not exclude the plan's feasibility (p. 1028; see *Communist Party Archives* 495-019-113

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pp. 61-2, 71 and 76 respectively, and in translation in other languages in selections of the pre-prison letters. See also in the National Edition of Gramsci's Writings *Epistolario. I gennaio 1906-dicembre 1922*, Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana 2009, pp. 90-1, 118 and 125 respectively. The results of the requests then saw the light of day in the authoritative romance etymological dictionary (*Romanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*), compiled by Wilhelm Meyer-Lübke, the person with whom Bartoli had studied: cf. Giancarlo Schirru, *Antonio Gramsci studente di linguistica* in “Studi storici”, LII, 2011, pp. 925-73, esp. here pp. 955-6.

<sup>14</sup> This is partially included in editorial footnote 4 to Gramsci's letter of 5 December 1932. For the whole question, see Piero Sraffa, *Lettere a Tanja per Gramsci, cit.*, pp. 100-1 (letter of 19 December 1932) and 108-12 (letter of 7 February 1933).

<sup>15</sup> Potëmkin's importance may be gauged by the fact that he later became the Soviet Ambassador in France before then becoming First Deputy Foreign Minister under Maksim Litvinov. He was acting in this instance however as “a real bureaucrat” according to Piero Sraffa (letter to Tanja of 17 September 1932: see *Lettere a Tanja per Gramsci, cit.*, p. 86.

for the correspondence in Russian between the two of them).<sup>16</sup> A similar, and vain, attempt at an exchange had been made in 1927 involving Nikolaj Krestinskij, the Soviet ambassador to Berlin, Maksim Litvinov, the Soviet deputy Foreign Minister (from 1930 to 1939 Foreign Minister), and Eugenio Pacelli, the apostolic nuncio in Berlin later to become later Pope Pius XII (see pp. LXXXII-LXXXIII); and shortly after Gramsci's sentencing there was mooted the possibility of an appeal by General Umberto Nobile who, on an expedition to the North Pole, had to be rescued in the Arctic Ocean by a Soviet icebreaker. Other attempts are not to be excluded.<sup>17</sup>

Potëmkin also sent the Comintern secretariat in his 26 September letter the Russian translation of the certificate on Gramsci's health after the medical examination made by Prof. Uberto Arcangeli in March of that year. On the basis of that certificate, in November of that year Gramsci was transferred to a prison-approved clinic by the sea in Formia, and two years later transferred to the Quisisana clinic in Rome. The publication of the certificate by the French communist daily *L'Humanité* (8 May 1933), followed up the next day by an explanation that "this declaration was sent [to the paper] by Antonio's wife" was, in Togliatti's words "a gross error, since it may have as a consequence the break-down of relations between Antonio and his wife and lead to other persecutions".<sup>18</sup> That apart, dozens of protest meetings were being held all over France in a campaign for Gramsci's release.

Mention should here be made of the mistrust expressed by Tanja of the Italian communists' attempts to obtain Gramsci's freedom, and the fact that the prisoner insisted that no attempt be made without his consent and involvement. This matter went back to the "infamous letter", dated 10 February 1928 and written by Ruggero Grieco<sup>19</sup> as if from Moscow (although in actual fact he was in Basel at the time). The letter (reproduced in its entirety as note 3 to

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<sup>16</sup> Only a short time, earlier however, according to note 6 (p. 1009) to Antonio's letter to Tanja of 10 July 1933, on the basis of several talks he had with her as from February that year, he had "not considered unrealistic Gramsci's projects". The matter perhaps requires further investigation.

<sup>17</sup> Possibly at the end of 1928 or beginning of 1929: cf. Sraffa, *Lettere a Tanja per Gramsci, cit.*, p. 211, and even earlier in 1928 in exchange for a spy (cf. note 11, p. 942) to Gramsci's letter to Tat'jana of 13 February 1933.

<sup>18</sup> Togliatti, writing from Paris under the pseudonym Italo Montanari, to Piero Sraffa (24 May 1933); letter now in the Sraffa Papers at Trinity College, Cambridge.

<sup>19</sup> Grieco, a member of the Party leadership and expert on agrarian questions, had advised Gramsci on sections of *Some Aspects of the Southern Question*.

Antonio's letter to Jul'ka of 30 April 1928) was taken very badly by Gramsci and thought it was a reason why he had been condemned to a long sentence. Opinions differ on whether the letter was written with the approval of the Party leadership in exile or not.<sup>20</sup> However, analogous letters from Grieco to two other leaders, Mauro Scoccimarro and Umberto Terracini, in their prison, did not arouse their opposition; in addition the trade union leader, Giovanni Roveda, who did not receive the letter, got exactly the same long sentence as Gramsci.<sup>21</sup>

Among other things the letter's contents referred to the situation inside the Bolshevik Party, and also commented on developments on the international front (Germany, France, India, China). During the interrogation process before the trial, the examining magistrate, Enrico Macis, told Gramsci that the letter showed that there were "friends" of Gramsci on the outside, who wanted him to remain in prison a long time. This managed to cause doubts in Gramsci's mind, in part because Macis put himself forward as a Sard wanting genuinely to help a fellow-Sard; events in Macis's life however showed him to be a highly ambiguous and untrustworthy character. Gramsci remained of the view that the letter had damaged him, as had a campaign the previous autumn in which an article by Alfonso Leonetti had been published in *International Press Correspondence* (24 September 1927, French edition) to the effect that Gramsci was dying of hunger; this was not true, but publication of the article could have led to harmful repercussions. All this happened at a time, like the later attempt mentioned above, when there seemed a possibility, however remote, of a prisoner exchange. The various campaigns and unsuccessful attempts at obtaining his freedom left Gramsci, and even more so members of his Russian family, mistrustful for a long time of the Italian communist leadership though – despite allegations in the low-level polemics of various academics over the last few years – no evidence has come forward of malign intentions and in the end good relationships were re-established between the members of Gramsci's Russian family, Tanja perhaps excepted, and the Italian party leadership. A further

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<sup>20</sup> See for example Ruggero Giacomini, *Il giudice e il prigioniero*, Roma, Castelvecchi 2014, p. 112, who points to the possible action of an agent provocateur then in Basel, while Giuseppe Vacca, *Vita e Pensieri di Antonio Gramsci*, Torino, Einaudi 2012, p. 354, is of the opinion that Grieco had the approval of the party leadership in exile.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Ruggero Giacomini, *cit.*, p. 104.

element of mistrust was the idea, lodged in Gramsci's mind, that the people who sentenced him belonged to "a much vaster organization" than the Special Tribunal, implying here leaders of both the Italian party and the International; in his view, Jul'ka was "unconsciously" among these "sentencers" but there was also "a series of less unconscious people" (letter of 27 February 1933 to Tanja, p. 949 and note 5 on p. 951; in English see *Letters from Prison*, Vol. 2, *cit.*, p. 276). Tanja cleared up with him the matter of Jul'ka in a letter of hers a fortnight later: these considerations of his "have nothing to do with, and do not refer to, her" (see the same note 5, p. 951). Gramsci however felt that he was subject to a double imprisonment, if not even a treble one due to his isolation from his family.

4. *Gramsci, the Proposal for a "Costituente": Coded Messages and the Line of the Comintern.*

A major political event in the early years of Gramsci's imprisonment, while he was still in the prison of Turi di Bari, was the turn in the Communist International policy, approved at its Sixth Congress in 1928 and in the following Enlarged Executives (Plenums) of the International. This switch from the United Front policy – with all its difficulties and interpretations – initiated at the Third Congress, then consolidated at the Fourth Congress (1922), attended by Gramsci, and the Fifth Congress (1924) and the following Fifth Plenum (1925, again with Gramsci's participation), led to an acrimonious rupture among the prisoners. The new policy, that of "class against class" saw the socialists and social democrats as a major stumbling block on the road to a proletarian revolution. Gramsci was in a minority in maintaining that intermediate steps involving alliances were necessary, and so – maintaining party discipline – suspended the talks in the prison courtyard among the prisoners to allow time for them to think, as well as not to run risks of being accused of fractional activity. His brother Gennaro was dispatched by the party leadership to sound out his views. In order not to compromise his brother, Gennaro reported back to the party leadership that Antonio supported the new line. However, this was hardly the case.

In their necessarily coded conversation, held in the presence of a prison guard, and reported in the note on pp. 478-9 to Antonio's

letter to Tat'jana of 16 June 1930, differences emerged in the perspective for future developments.

Gennaro had to convey to his brother the consequences within the Italian Party of the new Comintern policy, which foresaw the imminent collapse of the capitalist system. In what seems a quite easily decipherable exchange (though apparently a surprise to the PCI leadership until Giuseppe Fiori's 1966 biography of Gramsci,<sup>22</sup> with its translations into other languages), to Antonio's question of "when do you think we shall see each other in freedom?", Gennaro answered that "given the international situation and especially the Italian crisis, I don't think it will be long". Antonio rebutted "You're mistaken, in its general lines I am informed of everything because the many reviews that I read [...] report all the salient facts of what is happening in the world, but I do not think that the end is so close at hand. Instead, I would say to you that we have still seen nothing, the worst is yet to come".<sup>23</sup> This was one of the only two occasions in the three talks between Antonio and Gennaro when Antonio let his real political thoughts be known, the other being the question of "cigarettes from outside" (see below). It cannot have gone unnoticed by Togliatti in particular, that the longer term perspective envisaged by Antonio was totally contrary to the view accepted by the Sixth Comintern Congress, according to which the collapse of the capitalist system, succeeded by a proletarian revolution was imminent. This perspective had not in any case convinced Togliatti and in opposition to it, while remaining loyal to the majority position, he had been fighting for some sort of realistic estimate of the balance of forces.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, as Alex Höbel notes, in a meeting of the Comintern's Latin American secretariat immediately after this congress of the International, Togliatti emphasized the "need to maintain a 'dual perspective' and 'partial political demands' such as the republican Assembly",<sup>25</sup> a position

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<sup>22</sup> See Francesco Giasi's introduction, p. XXXVIII.

<sup>23</sup> See G. Vacca and A. Rossi, *Gramsci tra Mussolini e Stalin*, Roma, Fazi 2007, p. 210, which reports these words taken from Gennaro's report to the party leadership, p. 209-17, here the authors quote from the "reserved" part of the report (pp. 214-7).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century. 1914-1991*, London, Michael Joseph, p. 104 and note: "in 1933 Moscow insisted that the Italian communist leader P. Togliatti withdraw the suggestion that, perhaps, social-democracy was not the primary danger, at least in Italy". Cf. also G. Vacca, *Le lezioni del fascismo*, introduction to P. Togliatti, *Sul fascismo*, Roma and Bari, Laterza 2004, pp. XLII-LII.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Höbel, *I quaderni del carcere, la rivoluzione in occidente e la cultura politica del PCI*, Roma, Edizioni Nuova Cultura 2008, pp. 125-42, here p. 126..

very similar to the one outlined by Gramsci in his talks with the other communist inmates, to the positions outlined by Antonio to Gennaro, and to the positions approved at Third (Lyon) Congress of the Italian Party in February 1926 before Gramsci's arrest.

Antonio emphasized his position in the third and last talk that the brothers had (19 July 1930), in the presence of a prison warden with notebook at hand to jot down any suspicious phrases. Nevertheless, Gennaro reported that Antonio had told him "we have not yet reached the worst" adding that "whatever may happen, I do not think I have lived in vain". And in an exchange that might be open to different interpretations, but which ostensibly regarded the prison ban on having cigarettes sent "from outside"<sup>26</sup> ("dal-*l'esterno*"), Gennaro suggested that "you can even not smoke". To this Antonio retorted that it was a case of "either smoking a cigarette or banging one's head against a wall". This may be open to different interpretations. Gennaro for example went on in his report to the party centre to say that "it is well-known that Italy is making munitions for Germany and that almost certainly is getting ready to do so for Russia, given that not without a reason a Russian commission is visiting Italian military workshops" (footnote 5, p. 485, to Antonio's letter to Tat'jana of 14 July 1930; see also Vacca and Rossi, *cit.*, p. 215). An alternative reading might be that the phrase about cigarettes "from outside" might refer instead to the positions held by a body outside Italy, namely the Comintern. From his stay in Moscow in 1922-23 Antonio's position had been to heed carefully the line adopted internationally but adapt it to national circumstances. Could the need to smoke cigarettes mean the need to take into consideration the line of the International, however strategically mistaken it was at this time, or oppose it outright (thereby "banging one's head against a wall")? This interpretation is of course only a hypothesis advanced by the current writer, but does fit in with Gramsci's own position and the one adopted very cautiously, as was his style, by Togliatti.

The longer term envisaged by Gramsci had as a consequence the need for a "Costituente" (Constituent Assembly) of anti-fascist forces, as he had been outlining in the series of conversations with

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<sup>26</sup> This ban had been imposed presumably to prevent hidden messages on the cigarette papers, but prisoners were allowed loose tobacco, for which on one occasion Gramsci asked for a tobacco pouch to be sent him.

fellow political prisoners, then confirmed by Athos Lisa when in 1933 Lisa, now freed under the terms of an amnesty, could make a report to the foreign centre of the Italian party in Paris. Other ex-prisoners were later to add to what is known about these views of Gramsci's.<sup>27</sup> This stance of Gramsci's *may* be seen as a fore-runner of the policies adopted at the Seventh Comintern Congress (1935), but extrapolations are hazardous and – as we know from the experience of the Italian Communist Party in particular – interpretations of any given line may vary.

A follow-up to the visit by Gennaro is contained in a letter of Antonio's to his brother Carlo, dated 25 August 1930, acknowledging receipt of one letter from Gennaro, wondering whether another had gone astray, and asking Carlo to check. Carlo replied (note 1, p. 499) that Gennaro had not, on his return to Belgium, found any of the leaders (ostensibly of a firm dealing with the importation of Sardinian cheese, but meaning the Party leaders in exile in Paris). The import-export business was not going well, which might mean, metaphorically, the transmission of information but it might possibly be a reference to another eventual exchange of prisoners.<sup>28</sup> In this regard, see also the note to the letter of Antonio to Carlo of 26 January 1931 (pp. 546-7) and its accompanying note citing a letter in which Carlo says he has told their mother about the "crisis of the 'dairy industry' in Sardinia"; rather than an exchange of information, it was a prisoner exchange that lay close to Peppina Marcias's heart. It should be borne in mind that the dairy sector is also mentioned in Antonio's letters to Carlo of 3 December 1928 and 22 March 1929, apparently in its literal meaning though it may also have had a coded meaning.

What remains even more a mystery is how to decipher the meaning of Piero Sraffa's apparent dealings in the "trade of dates" and the identification, linked to this, of the "London house that, through the port of Genoa, at the end of 1926 or beginning of 1927, received 600 cases of dates". In order not to have "to pay customs duty, the insurance policy was written so as to have it seen that in the case of a collapse of the Italian house the goods would be

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<sup>27</sup> The most complete testimonies are found in the volumes *Gramsci vivo* (ed. Mimma Paulesu Quercioli [Teresina's grand-daughter] Milano, Feltrinelli 1977) and *Gramsci raccontato* (ed. Cesare Bermani, Roma, Edizioni Associate 1987, with audio cassette); the contents of both are summarized in Giacomini, *cit.*, chapter 22 ("Le lezioni di Turi"), pp. 223-37.

<sup>28</sup> There is however no other reference to this around 1930.



returned to the sender. The shipping was made after the Pesaro speech”, i.e. Mussolini’s speech there on 28 August 1928 regarding the stability of the lira, a date just after the trial and sentencing of the communist leaders, who were all arrested under warrants issued towards the end of 1926 or, in the case of the last one, on 20 February 1927.<sup>29</sup> The lines here are quoted from Tanja’s report of 13-17 April 1929, reproduced in part as footnote 9, pp. 362-3, to the letter her from Antonio of 22 April 1929;<sup>30</sup> any reply or comment from Sraffa has been lost. Tanja considered the information important enough to tell her brother-in-law that on 19 April in her last meeting with Sraffa “the date trade gives a lot to think about”; Gennaro substitutes bananas for dates, mentioning in his private (“reserved”) report for Togliatti “the affair of the bananas which arrived in Genoa, at first lost and then found again” (see the same footnote, which among the subjects mentioned here also includes Gennaro’s suggestion that a new step “should be taken in his favour”, given the “highly precarious” nature of “his conditions of health”).

The reference *might* – but only “might” – be to Terracini’s legal appeal (which has not come to light and is probably now lost)<sup>31</sup> of 14 June 1928, less than two weeks after the sentencing of the accused, made by Terracini (born in Genoa). He made another four appeals on behalf of the prisoners between autumn 1929 and spring 1931, as well as a request to the Head of Government in December 1932,<sup>32</sup> but the only one where the calendar dates fit is 14 June 1928. The matter is open to further clarification.

##### 5. Antonio and Jul’ka.

Antonio’s relation with Jul’ka had its ups and downs. At the beginning of 1930 (10 February), for example, he wrote her a letter that in Tanja’s opinion “was not a letter”; it did not meet with Jul’ka’s approval and even less so her father’s, For Apollon Schucht, it was “really a dissertation, an article, but it not a letter”: he commented there was “no other way” that Gramsci could find

<sup>29</sup> Domenico Zucàro, *Antonio Gramsci a S. Vittore per l’istruttoria del “processone”*, in “Il Movimento di Liberazione in Italia”, IV (1952) pp. 3-16, here p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> The full report is reproduced in *Antonio Gramsci – Tatiana Schucht, Lettere, cit.*, Appendix 1, Document 4, pp. 1428-44, here p. 1443; alternatively *Lettere a Tania per Gramsci*, pp. 213-23, here p. 221.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Leonardo P. D’Alessandro *I dirigenti comunisti davanti al Tribunale speciale*, “Studi storici” 50 (2), 481-553, 2009, here p. 517.

<sup>32</sup> Note 3, p. 414, to Antonio’s letter to Tat’jana of 4 November 1929.

to write (Apollon's comments, cited in a note on p. 440 and then conveyed by Tanja in a letter to Antonio). Gramsci's apparent coldness of tone may be explained by the infrequency of Jul'ka's letters and their brevity, though as was explained by Nilde Perilli, a friend of both Tanja and Jul'ka and also the former's landlady in Rome, Jul'ka "has never written a letter more than a page long", although it may be seen from the essays – equally brief – that she had to write in Italian "every word was weighed". What Antonio did not for some time realize was the seriousness of his wife's health problems, exemplified by the facts that she had been in a sanatorium and on some occasions had fainted or in any case lost consciousness (Tanja's information in her letter to Gramsci of 16 October 1930, quoted in note 2 to his reply letter to her of 20 October 1930). By 1931, the relations between Antonio and Jul'ka had, fortunately, been repaired: he then became rather apologetic in tone, much more understanding of his wife's problems, including the psychological ones, and was happy that a new phase was opening in their relationship: see, e.g., his letters to Jul'ka of 13 January, 9 February, 18 May and 1 June 1931). There is in these letters a renewed interest shown for their children's development, initially for Delio in particular but then, increasingly, also for his younger son, Giuliano, whom, it must be remembered, Antonio had seen only in photographs.

This involvement in their life comes even more to the fore in Antonio's last letters, written in the last few months from the Formia clinic and then from the Quisisana clinic in Rome, to which he was transferred in August 1935. The Rome letters are relatively few in number (partly for his increasingly serious state of health and also given that Tanja was at hand in Rome) and exclusively to his wife and sons in Moscow. Special attention has been paid by the editor to the dating of these letters, not always accurate in previous editions. The lack of letters to Ghilarza is partially due to the fact that the mother, Peppina, had died in 1932, a fact kept hidden from Antonio, but as he wrote to Jul'ka in October 1936: "Did you believe that, even in 1932, I did not sense that my poor mother had died?" (p. 1124).<sup>33</sup> Tanja, it seems, was the main channel for communicating with Ghilarza (cf. note 5 to the same October 1936 letter to Jul'ka).

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<sup>33</sup> In English, *Letters from Prison, cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 373.

The letters from the Rome clinic, written under immensely difficult circumstances are very touching in their tenderness. This time, it is Antonio who asks Jul'ka to come to Italy. In a letter of 14 December 1935, we find him writing: "you have always been one of the essential elements of my life" and that she would do "something magnificent by coming to Italy from all points of view", for him and also for her own health "which perhaps would be brought to normal once and for all". This final period is marked by letters to his two sons, Delio (Del'ko), a passion of whom at this time was animals, and Giuliano (Julik), interested in music and later a professor of music at the Conservatory in Moscow. And it is in the last phrase of the very last letter that Antonio asks his younger son "who are you taking violin lessons with?"

#### *6. By Way of a Conclusion*

Since the previous editions of the 1980s and 1990s, much work has been done – world-wide – on Gramsci, his concepts and their applications. This volume is an essential addition to our knowledge, not least through the critical editorial apparatus which, through the information contained and through a very conscientious work of referencing and cross-referencing guides us through the last ten years, the prison years, of Gramsci's life. Francesco Giasi and his team are to be highly commended for their meticulous and painstaking work not only in making all the known letters available but putting them in their historical context.