II. Reflections on the 20th Congress

The 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union took place in February 1956, nearly three years after the death of Stalin. At the time of the Congress, the main interest as reflected in the western media centred on the new emerging Soviet leadership, headed by the ebullient Nikita Sergeievich Khrushchov.

But the Congress turned out to be far more than a ritual for parading new leaders. It dealt in a new way with such questions as the possibility of preventing world war, socialist democracy, diverse roads to socialism including peaceful transition, relations among socialist countries and overcoming the consequences of the "cult of personality" of Stalin.

And a time-bomb had been set ticking at the Congress. At a "closed session" from which foreign delegates and journalists had been excluded, Khrushchov had delivered his famous "secret speech". News of this speech at first gradually filtered out until, by a process that is still unknown, the New York Times obtained a copy and published it in full.

The "secret speech" was never published in the USSR, but it was read out to closed meetings of party members. Outside the USSR its publication had an electrifying effect on communist parties, revealing as it did something of the enormous power that had become concentrated in Stalin's hands and the abuse of that power.

Reactions to the 20th Congress included resentment that the revelations should have been made at all, attempts to stifle real discussion on the implications of the Congress, disillusionment and an exodus of members from communist parties, and genuine attempts to debate the issues and extend the debate in a creative way. The approaches of the various parties was to have a profound effect on their futures.

The following article is a reflection by veteran Italian communist leader Gian Carlo Pajetta, written at the time of polemics earlier this year between the CPSU and the Italian Communist Party. It was published in the Italian communist weekly journal Rinascita of March 5, 1982 and has been translated and edited by Dave Davies.

The 20th Congress of the Soviet communist party — even if it has been deleted from the history books in several socialist countries — represents a turning point which cannot be removed or forgotten.

Its great importance, the hopes it raised and dashed, are being felt today in current events. It is felt in the state of more or less latent crisis in those countries which did not want to proceed along the road opened up by the 20th Congress and make adequate use of the break it made.

The Congress of 1956 was certainly a trauma for the whole communist movement: because of the way it was conducted it came as a complete surprise. Even the way in which Khrushchov's "secret speech" came to us was strange, because it was not known how it
came to be published in the outside world and many communist parties kept on calling it "the so-called secret speech", almost doubting its authenticity.

The clumsy way in which the crimes of Stalin were revealed and condemned were of concern to some as a sign of "crudity" and a lack of analysis of the causes and methods behind the degeneration of the life of that system. But it is difficult to imagine how the 20th Congress could have had a decisive effect or brought about a real turn in events without it happening as it did, with all its clumsiness and "crudity".

But for the Italian communists (and, I believe, not only for them) one thing was clear. In order that such a trauma should have a salutary effect and help work out a different perspective, it was not just a matter of correcting some errors or of making condemnations in vague terms such as "cult of personality" or pointing purely to individual responsibility (of Stalin, Beria, Abakumov or others). It was necessary to look back with courage, to comprehend the historical origins and the reasons for what Togliatti called precisely the degeneration of the system.

A quarter of a century later we must say that those responsible for the policies of the socialist countries have not gone ahead along the road but have, in more than one way, gone backwards. If Khrushchov's denunciation seemed to some to be "crude" or inadequate, today in those countries it seems even illicit, an episode, a personal initiative which is better forgotten.

At the same time, someone (perhaps regretting that the "secret report" had revealed those terrible truths) reproached the Italian communists for wanting to probe and uncover events of a past that was too recent and too fresh; today that past is regarded as "too distant" to be talked about. The name of Khrushchov has been deleted. How many people know that in the film of Togliatti's funeral that we presented to the Soviet comrades, the frames showing the then General Secretary of the CPSU lifting the coffin have been cut?

The need for change

The 20th Congress was not a passing event. Three years previously, at the time of Stalin's death, it was immediately clear to the Soviet leading group that things had to change. Moreover, I believe that this conviction of a need for change had already matured during the last period of Stalin's life.

In any case, it is certain that in 1953 the idea that there had to be a change asserted itself within the leading group as a whole. (This was said even by Molotov in information which must remain confidential.) It was not just a matter of a return to legality, of seeking to emerge from a state of arbitrariness and generalised terror. It was to reform economic management, social relations above all in the countryside and policies on national minorities. (In the previous years several autonomous republics had been abolished.)

And yet, in those years, the problems were confronted only with partial measures, without going to their roots. That which was positive, and it was not just a little, seemed fragmentary, partial. The fundamental problem, moreover, could only be resolved with wide publicity, with popular participation and collaboration — in short, by making the whole country jointly responsible. Besides, between 1953 and 1956 one continued to speak of the Soviet Union and its internal life in a way that was substantially identical with the past.

Between 1953 and 1956 there were neither public statements nor more profound changes in Soviet society and no real democratic participation took place. The responsibility for this must fall back on the Soviet leading group and the explanation is to be sought in its divisions, in the way the country had lived for so many years, and in the way its government was conceived.

A certain share of the responsibility regarding the Italian response in those years
belongs to us, the Italian communists, because of the way in which we continued to represent the Soviet Union and for not grasping that those first signs of the post-Stalin "thaw" had to be better understood, to be matters of information and explanation. We are still feeling the effects of that share of the responsibility today in our party.

A quarter of a century later the problem is not one of celebrating a great liberating event, despite those who would consign it to oblivion. It is a matter of understanding why the change did not make way for a real and lasting process of democratisation and of development of Soviet society.

At first, the liberating elements of the 20th Congress seemed to be favoured by the existing situation. For example, there were real signs of a reduction in armaments in 1956 in a situation which even included a kind of convergence between the USSR and USA to stop the Suez war. Also, relationships with other socialist countries were considered from a new viewpoint, with open talk of wishing to respect to a large degree their political and economic autonomy (even if 1956 was the year of armed intervention in Hungary).

In 1955, a year before the 20th Congress, Khrushchov had made his trip to Yugoslavia and repudiated the calumnies against the Tito "clique". There was an effort to facilitate relations of equality with the Chinese communists; there was the approach to Egypt and India. All this tells us what kind of international framework was sought at the time and which seemed possible in accord with the new elements put forward by the 20th Congress.

Inside the Soviet Union

Yet, as regards the internal situation in the country, the fact remains that the innovations remained largely disjointed and impulsive, never managing to tackle the problem of really democratising Soviet society in a coherent way.
attempted on a regional scale (with economic councils) to break the centralism of the ministries. But in the factories, at the point of production, the problem of the participation of the workers, their more direct responsibility in management was not confronted. Behind the concept of "collective leadership" (which at first served essentially to hide the divisions in the leading groups and maintain a precarious balance) it was believed that a wider degree of tolerance could be maintained together with a large degree of party control over the police (until then practically all-powerful) to overcome the arbitrary way in which the system functioned.

Certainly, this relative normalisation of social life was quite different from the nightmare which had weighed on Soviet society for a long time. However, the fact remains — and today it is necessary to recognise it — that such a normalisation retained some important aspects of the system of the preceding period.

Let us consider the flourishing of culture and literature which took place in those years of the "thaw". For example, Solzhenitsyn's book on the concentration camps One Day in the Live of Ivan Denisovich was published and praised. But that was due to the personal intervention of Khrushchov and not to a different conception of freedom of expression and the right of citizens to communicate with each other. The struggle against the "anti-party" group and the removal of Molotov, Kaganovich, Malenkov, Shepilov and others was carried out (and how could it have been done otherwise at that time?) by an appeal to the Central Committee, which was unanimous. But perhaps the Central Committee was not completely, but only formally convinced if, a few years later, it was to be unanimous in abandoning Khrushchov.

It was, however, a period in which new forces emerged, new hopes inside and outside the USSR were awakened and a revival of the world revolutionary movement was recorded. This vehement demand for a new direction was made in an emotional way. (At the end of his speech at the 22nd Congress (1961), Khrushchov called for the building of a monument in memory of the victims of Stalinist terror — a monument that was never to be.) If this demand for change was gradually exhausted and almost extinguished, it was due partly to the fact that Khrushchov did not have around him, nor did he seek, capable people disposed to follow him. But certainly not only for this reason.

Today we can understand what we did not understand then; that it was not just a matter of penetrating some "degenerations of the system" (to use again Togliatti's expression) but also those elements of the system which had permitted or, moreover, brought about those degenerations. In other words, what was never confronted was the very problem of the organisation of social power, commencing with the factories, the local Soviets, through all the organisations of the party, up to the Central Committee, and to the Supreme Soviet. It was a matter of questioning also the way elections were...
conducted, to give citizens the chance — which they did not have and do not have today — of really choosing their own representatives and investing them with authority. This authority was not, and is not, recognised because it is not enough to have elections which are really a kind of installation.

So a quarter of a century later we should neither celebrate nor still less condemn the 20th Congress, but try to understand how we can go more deeply into the limitations of this attempt to emerge from the nightmare of Stalinism. In this regard, we should again recall the position of the Italian Communist Party not only at the time of the 20th Congress but in the following years.

Facing the problems

Some people then talked (and some have gone back to talking) of Togliatti’s “annoyance” in relation to Khrushchov, or of his residual Stalinism. Certainly we all came through that experience and our behaviour then could be related to that tradition. But I think it is enough to refer to Togliatti’s last piece of writing, the famous Yalta Memorandum (1964), prepared for a meeting it was hoped to have with the Soviet leaders (and of which he had informed the leadership of the party). This document was not concerned with protesting at the way in which the 20th Congress had revealed the crimes of the past and abandoned the method of presenting a too rosy picture of socialism.

The Yalta Memorandum instead called for a more decisive following of the road of the 20th Congress, pointing out the hesitations which were apparent. The problem of democracy was posed explicitly, as was the problem of relationships with other socialist countries in the context of the hostile gesture towards the Chinese in depriving them of Soviet technicians. From that time our party initiated, although not always with the necessary incisiveness, an elaboration and an investigation of the problems posed by the 20th Congress, and we have never abandoned it.

So we cannot go back, either with respect to positions taken then or still less with respect to those acquired in the course of time. If today, rather than celebrating that Congress, we prefer an historical consideration which also goes into its limitations, the limitations of the person Khrushchov, the limits of that “failed revolution” without heroes (also because many who perhaps could have been the heroes could not take part), we have to say that there was not the courage then in the USSR to talk more openly to the country, to allow the men and women to decide more freely, to give life to a real political democracy. “Gulash socialism” (this was Khrushchov’s vivid expression) is certainly not something that can satisfy a people who have waited patiently; it is not for the General Secretary or the Politburo alone to guarantee it; the people must be involved in deciding on what kind of socialism and even what “dish” is to be on the menu.

The 20th Congress, even with its limitations, is now a part of history even if there are those who would like it forgotten. It is strange indeed that Pravda which published the Yalta Memorandum word for word after Togliatti’s death, replies to the Italian communists today, when we offer criticisms and point out errors and limitations in the policies of the Soviet communists, with phrases about the socialist reality which could have been copied from the captions on the rosy pictures of the Stalin epoch. When we say that the USSR of today is not the same as a quarter of a century ago, it is stating the obvious.

And if, in fact, things have changed, then they have changed so much that the contradictions today seem more glaring.

Things have changed so much that one cannot stand still, and what Togliatti demanded in 1964 on the eve of his death, with weighty words like “stagnation” and “delay” must now be demanded with new terms. When we say “phenomena of regression” it is precisely this that we mean.

Our words belong to those who have believed in the October Revolution, in the
importance of the USSR in the Second World War and also, with that degree of utopianism that distinguishes the revolutionary, those who believed in the 20th Congress.

But today, our polemical position in relation to the CPSU is linked also to the conviction that crises are produced when social forces cannot tolerate the burdens of the present and are not satisfied with comparisons with the past. The result is that the political inertia of those responsible leads to a breaking point as much as does the just impatience of those who know that history does not stand still.

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**Putting Victoria on the rails ....**

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*Julius Roe interviews John Alford*

Julius Roe interviews John Alford on the industrial strategy of the Australian Railways Union (ARU) in Victoria.

What is happening to the Victorian rail industry?

A lot of very serious things have been happening to the rail industry in the past few years. Basically, you could describe it as a restructuring rather than just a cutting back or running down.

There are, of course, major areas of the system that are being reduced: those parts of the service that meet the needs of the ordinary people. I am talking about the passenger services, both suburban and country, and about the small freight services that are used by small business people in country towns. These services are all being cut back, staff are being reduced and, generally, such services are being run down and made more inefficient.

On the other hand, however, there are some areas of the railways that are receiving a boost. They tend to be those areas that meet the needs of large corporations, particularly the freight-forwarding companies. Here we have seen new investments in track up-grading on the main lines between Sydney and Melbourne, and Adelaide and Melbourne. We have seen investments in major container terminals and in new freight vehicles. We are also seeing investments into areas such as bulk freight, and particularly grain, fertiliser, cement and the like; they are getting a boost.

So, really, what it amounts to is a shift of resources away from ordinary people towards large companies, and it is affecting staff very seriously in terms of their job prospects.