

CHAPTER 7

THE COMMUNIST PARTY IN THE RESISTANCE – 1943-45

by Aldo Agosti

Nobody has so far tried to provide a history of the Communist Party in Turin in the period following the big strikes of March 1943 and the Liberation. This topic has an intrinsic importance: Turin was significant as a key focus of the struggle against Fascism, as a remarkable showcase for the inter-relationship between social struggle and national struggle that made up the Italian Resistance, and as a particularly instructive indicator of the political line of the Italian Communist Party. The extraordinary breadth of material available [...] would justify a very broad ranging study.

Turin had suffered particularly heavily the consequences of the disastrous progress of Mussolini's war. And it was the working class in particular which felt the effects of the worsening economic situation and the distress associated with the bombings and evacuations. The cost of living index (taking 1928 as 100) had risen from 109.22 in 1939 to 164.99 in 1942, while in the same period, the national real wage index (taking 1921 as 100) had fallen from 90 to 83. In the space of 3 weeks (18 November to 9 December 1942) Turin was bombed six times, with a terrible loss of life: 527 dead and 500 wounded).

The organisation of the Party

What was the state of the Communist Party's organisation in Turin in those months? In August 1941, Umberto Massola had returned to Italy with the job of rebuilding the Party's organisation. He began by rebuilding links between Turin and Milan, and renewing a series of contacts with former comrades. The distribution of communist publications was also stepped up – *Il Quaderno del Lavoratore*, *Il Grido di Spartaco*, and, from July 1942, *L'Unità*, began to arrive fairly frequently and fairly regularly in the factories. Communist activities received a decisive thrust in the second half of 1942, with the collapse of the military situation. In the months that followed, they developed along two paths: on the one hand, the reorganisation of a first embryonic party structure in the city; on the other, a series of contacts with representatives of other anti-Fascist currents.

As regards the nature and strength of the Communist Party's presence in the factories, actual members numbered a few hundred. There were about 80 communists in Mirafiori, 30 in Lancia, 60 or so at Viberti, and around 70 at Aeronautica. These figures are tiny, when you bear in mind that Turin numbered around 150,000 workers: however, it is worth noting that the network of sympathisers, of workers who collaborated in the Party's clandestine actions without actually being Party members, was a lot larger. One should remember that in 1942, the Party was still a strictly vanguard party: before new militants were accepted into membership, their position was carefully examined, their private lives were looked into, and infinite precautions were observed.

In addition, the composition of the working class had changed a lot since the period 1921-26. On the one hand, the older worker-cadres who had led the struggles of that period had, for the most part, disappeared. Those who had not been forced to emigrate to escape the repression and who had managed to escape prison or internment [*confino*] were discriminated against or blacklisted on the job market, and were forced either into unemployment, or, if they were lucky, into *boite* – small factories, with very few workers, operating on the margins of the capitalist cycle of production. On the other hand, following the "rationalisation" of the 1930s and the

introduction of assembly-line production, the figure of the highly qualified skilled worker, who had traditionally been the hub of the Communist Party's factory organisation, had been ousted from the large plants – particularly in FIAT – by a new intake of young workers, who had no experience of struggle and organisation, and who were relatively integrated through the fascist unions. Thus the communist presence, while it remained fairly strong in the small and medium-sized factories, was proportionately weaker in the large plants.

Beside the factory cells, there were also created, in late 1942, street cells, bringing together Party members on a geographical basis. In these, as in the factory cells, strict conspiratorial discipline was maintained. Comrades only had contact with other comrades if it was absolutely necessary – in other words, as a rule, with one organiser and with two people then organised by themselves.

In Turin there were also a considerable number of working-class base groups which had no contact with the "centre", and were made up of old militants who had renewed their clandestine activity and young (and very young) people with no political experience, but forged through the harsh conditions of the struggle at that time. These groups proudly defined themselves as "communists", and periodically managed, with the aid of rudimentary means such as duplicators, to produce propaganda material. [...]

At the same time, the Communist Party's efforts were being directed to making stable contacts with the other anti-Fascist forces: in fact, in June 1942, they reached agreement with the Turin Socialists on the basis of the unified appeal launched from Toulouse in 1941 by the PCI, the PSI and the GL. In September, this call was also taken up by members of the Action Party, by the Liberals and the Christian Democrats. Thus Turin was the first city in Italy to establish a "National Action Front Committee". This body met, albeit sporadically, in order to coordinate joint initiatives by the anti-Fascist forces in the event of a government crisis. [...]

A programme of action for the strike movement

So, by the second half of 1942, the Communist Party was beginning to reap the fruits of its factory work, where discontent with worsening living standards was reaching breaking point. Spontaneous episodes of struggle had already erupted in August and September, in Turin, at the Tedeschi and FIAT-Mirafiori factories. In the final months of 1942, the Party threw the whole weight of its (still weak) organisation into promoting fresh agitation. A circular from the leadership, dated 5 December, gave the following directives:

"Put forward the demands which are most important at this moment: 1) generous and continuing assistance for evacuees; 2) financial assistance for workers left without work as a result of the bombings; 3) categorical refusal to permit transfer of workers to Germany; transfers within Italy only to be accepted if higher pay, housing etc are guaranteed; 4) work to cease during air raid alerts, and to be paid as normal working hours; 5) refusal to work more than 8-9 hours; ensure that this action is collective, and force the Fascist unions to take up the issue and resolve it favourably. All this propaganda and agitation must have the aim of: stoppages of work in the factories; solidarity stoppages with workers in other departments of the factory or in other factories; demonstrations at factory gates; street demonstrations seeking support from the civilian and military populations; all this with one aim: to bring the mass of workers to demonstrate in front of the Town Hall in each Italian city, and to shout at the tops of our voices that we want Peace, Peace, Peace."

Ermes Bazzanini has written:

"By mid-February (1943) we were well organised in all the factories. No work bench was without our leaflets. The Party leadership then told us to increase our activities in the areas where we were strongest, and then move on to small protest stoppages, to

test the resistance. The objectives of the stoppages were to be demands for food, means of transport, safety measures, etc. Many stoppages of this sort happened – e.g. at Mirafiori, Spa, Lancia, Materiale Ferroviario, etc. This test enabled us to improve our links with the masses and make the preparations for a strike whose objectives were economic, but with political slogans.”

Photo: “Where is this happy train going? These are men and women from all the regions of northern Italy. On 5 December they left from Verona, heading to Germany. They had understood that working in Germany meant: to be well, and to be able to maintain decently their loved ones in their Motherland.”

Photo: “Italian workers – Do not work for the German murderers. Do not labour in order to prolong the life of the moribund Hitlerian monster. Refuse to go to Germany. There you will find only hunger, slavery and death under the bombing. Defend your bread through struggle. Demand 75% payment for unemployed workers, and an end to sackings. Sabotage production for the Germans.”

This economic/political strike movement, linking the demand for the 192 hours (i.e. the evacuation indemnity) for all, and for a cost-of-living bonus, together with slogans calling for Mussolini to go, and for peace, effectively began on 5 March, when, at 10.00am, FIAT-Mirafiori came to a complete standstill. Within a few days, the movement had spread to practically every other factory in Turin, until, according to reliable estimates, something like 100,000 workers were involved. The dynamic of this great struggle of the Turin proletariat, its first after 15 years of silence, has been described many times by those who took part, and has been accurately reconstructed by historians. By now everyone realises its great political importance at three distinct levels: as the first big mass struggle of the urban proletariat in Fascist and Nazi Europe; as a direct and indispensable factor contributing to the collapse of the regime in Italy; and as a forerunner of the armed insurrection. [...]

Reaction and repression: the Party caught off guard

The Turin communists were able to fulfil in every detail their role as a class vanguard, and they paid dearly for this ability, because, when the strikes ended, on 18 March, they were scythed down by the repression set in motion by the police and the employers.

The wave of reaction and arrests (37 communists, including Leo Lanfranco were brought before Special Tribunals) was a serious blow to the Party, but it did not stop its activities, nor did it block the process of radicalisation of the Turin working class. The March strikes provided a first, still tiny, intake of new communists, and furthermore the role openly played by the Party in the organisation of the struggle inevitably increased its prestige in the eyes of the other anti-Fascist currents. However, there was undoubtedly a slowdown in the Party's capacity to take initiatives and to expand: for example, the call from the national leadership for a May Day mobilisation in the factories went almost unheeded. [...]

This slowdown of activity was noted with some alarm by the national leadership. In a document of April 1943, produced from internment by Mauro Scoccimaro, one reads:

“But the crisis of Fascism is not yet being matched by the rise of a political force capable of setting up a counter-position and opening the way to a struggle to defeat it. Fascism's break-up is not matched by an adequate and efficient organisation of the anti-Fascist forces. We still lack a power-centre capable of polarising the multiple anti-Fascist currents and tendencies into a single front of struggle, capable of overcoming their dispersion and lack of organisation, and transforming them into an effective and efficient political force.” [...]

Thus, in Turin too, the fall of Fascism and the formation of the Badoglio government caught the Party, in part, in a state of unpreparedness, and in the first few days it was almost dragged along by events, split as it was between the necessity of maintaining at any cost their leadership of the insurrectionary movement (which meant not falling behind the hectic and often confused thrust of the masses) and the necessity of posing itself as a central hegemonic force within the anti-Fascist coalition, in its position as a large and respected national political party. In the first feverish days after the fall of Mussolini, the Communists in Turin, as elsewhere, lived out the trauma of a political force that, having operated for seventeen years in conditions of the utmost clandestinity, suddenly found itself projected into a state of more or less semi-legality. As Ernesto Ragionieri has written:

“One of the most relevant aspects of the Party's fortunes in those weeks was a swelling of its ranks, an increase in membership, a growth of contacts which are more the result of having a historical presence in a decisive moment of the country's history, rather than a result of an organisational directive.”

Photo: Turin 1943: Women demonstrating for food rations

Photo: War production. Mussolini visits the factories

It was hard to channel, make use of, and coordinate all the new energies that were being attracted to the Party: this explains why, during the demonstrations that followed the fall of Fascism on 26 and 27 July, one saw the emergence of numbers of different centres of initiative, some of which were not directly connected with the official communist organisation. [...]

With the passing of the first few enthusiastic days, the openly reactionary and anti working-class nature of the Badoglio regime became clear, and the anti-Fascist committees began to revise, slowly and unsurely, the earlier policy of “wait-and-see” that they had adopted towards the Marshal. In Turin, this process developed faster than in other cities: already by 6 August, the communists had proposed producing a leaflet for the population, demanding, in the face of government inertia, an end to the Fascist war, the restoration of constitutional liberties, and the immediate release of political prisoners. This proposal was approved unanimously. [...]

Regrouping against the Nazis: The National Action Front

In this situation, with a growing radicalisation of the masses, the question of the trade unions became increasingly important – i.e. the problem of enabling the old anti-Fascist trade union leadership to be taken into the leadership positions of the ex-Fascist unions, in order to liberalise and de-bureaucratise them. [...]

While discussions were going on about how to approach the union elections, political activity was being directed more and more clearly to agitation for peace and against the German threat. The dreadful new wave of bombings of 3, 13 and 16 August 1943 (which killed 1,175 people, wounded 1,615 and rendered 37% of Turin's housing uninhabitable) sharpened the impatient anger of the masses. In this situation, the Party, albeit with some backtracking and uncertainty, succeeded in regaining the initiative and mobilised for the preparation of a new strike. Thus, when, on 17 August, troops opened fire on workers from Grandi Motori who had left their factory, the communists were able to act as a mouthpiece for the mass rising, and put out a call for a general strike, which resulted in Turin's factories coming to a standstill for several days.

The events of August 1943 had one important result, among others: they speeded the release of the political prisoners still held in jail. Many old working-class militants

and trade union organisers began to turn to the Communist Party, which then found itself with the problem of how to absorb them into the organisation. [...]

At the same time, having no illusions about the intentions of the Germans once it came to the armistice that was presently being aired, the PCI set about forming a combat organisation, made up of groups of armed workers.

In the dramatic events of 8-10 September 1943, the Communist Party organisation in Turin, by now firmly rooted and implanted in the city, was called on to show its capacities for initiative and leadership. On the evening of 8 September, as soon as the news of the armistice was heard, the federated committee decided the next day to hold workers' meetings at the gates of the major factories in Turin. The meetings were a success, and the slogan for a struggle, side by side with the army, for a defence of the city, was well accepted. At least a part of the working masses were ready to fight, and several times called loudly for arms. Obviously, there has been a tendency to overplay this readiness to fight (given the general state of mind, which was of disorientation and confusion), but there is good reason to think that if the military authorities had not capitulated to the Germans, working-class participation in the defence of the city would have been massive and decisive. [...]

The PCI now turned all its energies in this direction, but it was greatly hampered by the "wait-and-see" attitude adopted by the moderate parties, and also by a large section of the socialists. Furthermore, within its own ranks, there were signs of political disorientation and organisational shortcomings: in the public meeting that was held on 10 September in front of the Camera del Lavoro, the Party was not able to give precise directives, and the mass of workers that attended the meeting (estimated at 11,000 people) went home with no clear indications of how to struggle. A call for a general strike was only issued later, on 13 September; furthermore, its content was not particularly clarificatory (it called for workers to start sabotaging and even destroying factories). [...]

The Communist Party organisation in Turin, despite uncertainties, managed to hold together, and was able to adapt itself fairly rapidly to the new situation of absolute clandestinity and the extremely difficult conditions of all-out war against the Germans and the Fascists. In a report prepared for the Party's organisation office, Arturo Colombi was able to draw cautiously optimistic conclusions, stressing the "unchallenged and perhaps increased" influence of the Party, the rapid formation of cell and area committees, and the promising development of the partisan movement".

However, the reconstruction of the Party's organisational network faced severe difficulties, not only in Turin, but in Italy as a whole. Ernesto Ragionieri has described them well:

"In a period of just a few months, the communists had to set about reconstructing, in each province of occupied Italy, leadership bodies which, alone, would permit the development and realisation of a policy of mass mobilisation in the struggle against the Germans and the Fascists; and also arrange to send many of their best elements into the mountains, in order to lead the beginnings of the partisan war. This difficult situation revealed a dangerous disproportion between the availability of cadres and the requirements of political action, which demanded simultaneous development at the level both of mass struggle and armed struggle. At this level, the aftereffects of a long period of illegality began to make themselves felt." [...]

Photo: FIAT-Mirafiori being bombed, photographed from above.

DAYLIGHT RAID ON TURIN, *The Times*, 1944

ALLIED FORCES H.Q., NORTH AFRICA Nov. 8 – United States bombers attacked a Turin factory today. This ball-bearing factory, situated in part of the FIAT plant, was the target of the first raid of Mediterranean-based Fortresses on Turin. It was the first time that Turin had been hit in daylight. Rome wireless said that Turin was attacked at 2.15 this afternoon by two consecutive waves of Flying Fortresses, consisting of 50 aircraft each. The wireless asserted that great damage was done to the districts between the Corso Stupinigi and the Barriera Nizza, and that there were many casualties. – Associated Press.

Photo: The Lingotto factory after the bombing

“Decentralisation” at FIAT

The FIAT Company in Turin, in their annual report issued yesterday, and quoted by the German wireless, stated that “during the air raids and the resulting decentralisation of the Fiat workshops” the company’s staff gave proof of high discipline. The annual profit has sunk to 38,000,000 million lire compared with 59,000,000 in the previous year. The firm is, however, still paying a 10 per cent, dividend out of the profits made in earlier years. – Reuter, 1944.

[In this period, communists were involved] in the organisation of armed struggle in Turin, which, in September and October, saw some extremely bold initiatives taken by the GAP (Partisan Action Groups) led by Giovanni Pesce; also, after a brief period of delay and disorientation, they began the work of rebuilding a clandestine Party network in the factories. Following an almost exclusively PCI initiative, a network of clandestine workers’ committees were set up, which, in many instances, effectively deprived of authority the Internal Commissions which republican Fascism had demagogically tried to create. These committees built on the worsening conditions of the working class, in order to give important backing to the renewal of struggle in Turin’s factories.

A document from the national leadership which reached the Turin communists around 8 November 1943, clarified the tasks of these organisations, described as secret “factory trade union committees”, and the role to be played within them by communist militants. [...]

The strikes of November-December 1943 reflected at one and the same time the influence that the Communist Party exercised on the working class, and the limits of its organised strength. Again, Arturo Colombi:

“Our political forces are damnably small: we lack middle-range cadres, and our leadership has been impoverished by removing the best comrades from Turin and transferring the rest to military work. We now only have a handful of men, who, among other things, are wholly new to this environment, or have been absent for many years. None of us has ever led big strikes, or edited newspapers, etc.” [...]

A trial of strength: German troops intervene

At the end of December, in a circular to militants, Colombi described the shortcomings that had become apparent in the preceding weeks: the Party was caught unawares by the situation and found itself left behind; it was not able to stress sufficiently the link between trade union and economic struggles, and the struggle against the Germans; also, the coordination between the workers’ action in the factories and the action of the GAP and partisan fighting forces in the Resistance was wholly inadequate.

These shortcomings had serious effects on the development of the strikes, which were split into 3 successive waves, uncoordinated and lacking a unified leadership. Nevertheless, at the level of demands, considerable gains were won. Also, it was precisely the strikes in November-December, which had begun as the least politicised, which for the first time saw the direct intervention of German occupying troops. The result was that the working class identified increasingly clearly the enemy to be fought, as well as a further loss of space for fascist demagoguery, and the increasingly close bond between the questions of class struggle and of national liberation.

January and February 1944 saw a strengthening and ramification of the Communist Party's organisation in Turin; this came in the course of patient, careful preparation for a new strike, which was intended to hit the whole area of the "industrial triangle" simultaneously. While work went on to reorganise and extend the trade union committees, proper agitational strike committees were also being set up. These too were open to workers from every tendency, but within them the initiative and dynamic action of the Party generally assured a hegemonic role for the communists. [...]

The communists were effectively able to lead the movement during its preparatory phases too. It is true that there were sporadic protests in individual sections, when workers' discontent at their mistreatment by management exploded uncontrollably, but these spontaneous struggles did not spread fast, as had happened in November. The workers persuaded themselves to concentrate all their energies for the pre-arranged day of March 1st. At the decisive moment, the slogans with which the strike was announced were very clear: "Germans out of Italy!", "Death to the Fascist Traitors!", "We Want Bread and Freedom!" Staying away from work under the banner of these slogans meant throwing down an open challenge to the Fascists and the Germans, and risking serious reprisals. But workers' militancy was running extremely high, and even before the Piedmont regional CLN gave the word for strike action, that militancy exploded in isolated instances of struggle. March 1st saw, finally, the trial of strength in all of Turin's factories, which for the first time involved sections of the working class and strata of the Turin citizenry, who, until that moment, had remained outside any trade union or political movement. The important and qualitatively new fact was that the actions of the GAP and the partisan formations now played a part alongside the struggle in the factories:

"The intervention of the patriotic armed forces," in the words of a March 15th report on military activity in Piedmont during the course of the strike, "has given a new tone and colouring to the struggle of the working masses; it has enthused the workers and the broad masses of the population, who have commented and approved each action by the partisans and the GAP. With each announcement of the occupation of a village by the partisans, of meetings, of attacks carried out by patriots in the city, etc, one has noticed a strengthening of the will to fight among the masses, as well as favourable comments and hopes for great events to come."

From 1944 to the Liberation

The strikes of March 1944 were the highest and most conscious point of the first phase of the Resistance in occupied Italy; but, precisely during this phase of development, the actions of the anti-Fascist parties in liberated Italy ran aground in an exhausting debate on the institutional question, which risked paralysing the action by the CLN and its capacity for initiative in relation to the Badoglio government. If the situation had continued in this vein for long, it would certainly have had an effect on the resistance movement in the North.

It was in this situation that Togliatti, returning to Italy, took the initiative which has become known as the "Salerno turn": in other words, he aligned himself in favour of the anti-Fascist forces participating in the Badoglio government, on the basis of a programme which would subordinate everything to an intensification of the war against the Germans. [...]

The picture in Turin by this time was, in general, similar to that in the rest of the country. However, in Turin, the already difficult problems of explaining to militants the importance of the “turn” were aggravated by an already delicate pre-existing situation. In fact, the political orientation of the Turin federation was repeatedly criticised by the national leadership in the latter months. In a letter to the federation, dated 29 January 1944, Colombi summed up the criticisms that had been conveyed to him by Pajetta:

“The organisation in Turin, as a whole, has not assimilated the present policies of the Party, and the national front policy, as well as the policies regarding the Liberation Committee and the patriotic war, are tolerated rather than accepted.”

The Turin secretariat rejected these accusations, and cited the particular characteristics of the Turin situation, the presence of a strong and radicalised working class, and the responsibilities which the Party had to that class. With the big success of the March strikes, the polemics became sharper; however, the weight of a strong class tradition continued to make itself felt in Turin, in its own particular way. The older militants were extremely wary that the Party ran the risk of becoming too “open” (this was even before the “Salerno turn”), and they were wary of Togliatti’s talk of the “new party”. As a worker from Grandi Motori complained, it is not enough for a person to be an anti-Fascist and to pay his Party subscriptions for him to be called a comrade. [...]

The problem of the political line was always of prime importance in Turin. Thus one can say that the concept of the “new party”, precisely because it was not simply accepted as an unconditional act of faith in the national leadership of the Party, but was discussed in depth and even argued against, was finally accepted in Turin in ways that were more conscious and aware than elsewhere.

Furthermore, the problem of building the “new party” meant coming to terms openly with the organised groups who were expressing political positions counter to the Party’s own positions. In Turin, the question was posed in a particularly delicate manner: late Autumn 1943 had seen the formation of an organisation called Stella Rossa [Red Star], made up in large part of communist factory workers, who criticised what they saw as the excessively “soft” line taken by the Party leadership, its excessively free interpretation of a policy of alliance with the forces of the anti-Fascist bourgeoisie, and the phenomenon of “corporatism” in the internal life of the Party. Towards May 1944, the dissidence of this group was increasing, and it was growing in organised strength. However, the thrust of the working class around the PCI as a mass party, and the work of explaining the political turn taken by the communist leadership, meant that, already in September, this dissent was being reabsorbed. The militants of Stella Rossa came back into the PCI. This fact is not merely to be explained by conspiratorial motives (although these too undoubtedly played a part); rather it meant that the construction of the “new party”, albeit encountering many difficulties, exercised a polarising and attracting function for all the anti-Fascist forces involved in the class struggle.

Armed struggle: actions of the SAP and GAP

But this unificatory thrust was apparent above all in terms of concrete events, in the tensions of the daily struggle in the factories. With the early days of June 1944, after the Liberation of Rome, the opening of the Second Front and the advance of the Red Army, the decisive moment seemed near. Furthermore, the German occupation and the progress of the War had further worsened the living conditions of the working class. After the success of the March strikes, communist organisation in the factories had run into a period of difficulties and organisational standstill. As Colombi noted, in a report of 4 May:

“From March to the present day we have lost many hundreds of vanguard workers from the factories (52 from Spa alone, taking into account those who have been deported, those who have gone underground and joined the partisan formations, and three who have been shot). The lack of energetic members is felt sorely.”

The demonstrations called for May 1st succeeded only partially. However, the PCI continued to promote very energetically the formation and the consolidation of agitation committees in all the factories, unified bodies, which were, however, not parietic, and which were to reflect the existing balance of forces between the various anti-Fascist currents inside each factory.

Within a short period, these bodies began to develop throughout the city; rank and file Communist Party militants tended to predominate in them, and were able to act effectively as a stimulus and a focus of struggle against “wait-and-see” attitudes.

The agitation committees with which the factory CLN committees began to align themselves were the principal structure and driving force behind the big new strikes in June, which broke out when the Germans attempted to transfer machines from No. 17 Shop at Mirafiori, to Germany. For 10 days, Turin’s factories were the scene of an extremely hard-fought and determined struggle, which ended in victory. The Germans decided against the transfer of the machinery and of the workers who were to have accompanied it.

Giovanni Nicola, member of the insurrectional three-man committee for Piedmont, drew the following conclusion from the June strike:

“The events of the past ten days [...] show that we are capable agitators and organisers, but that we still lack that degree of audacity and initiative in action which is necessary in order to defend and to attack. [...] The posting and distribution of leaflets, and slogan-writing on walls, is well and good, but it is not enough. We must intensify our disarmament activities, attacking the slave-drivers when they come to search working-class communities, organising ourselves so that every evening we have defence-squads capable of providing armed protection, carrying out acts of sabotage, and destroying lorries.” [...]

This posed explicitly the problem of the inter-relationship between the factory struggle (which had broken down into hundreds of isolated actions based on extremely diverse demands, and was not to regain a sense of continuity until the Liberation), and the development of urban guerrilla warfare: it was essential to strengthen the GAP and to break their isolation. In the most acute phase of the struggle, beginning in May, the GAP had been extremely active, but they had suffered very heavy losses, including, on 18 May, Dante di Nanni. As of that moment, the Communist Party had directed that Communist Party political organisations should only exist inasmuch as they created within themselves a body for armed struggle; but it was only in July that the concrete steps were taken to set up the Patriotic Action Squads (SAP).

Expanding organisation: Liberation and insurrection

The SAP were the organisational means which enabled armed struggle in the city to be transformed into mass struggle. Compared with the GAP, which remained more highly selected and trained vanguards (formed, so to speak, of “professionals”), the SAP were intended to draw on a broader range of energies, and to carry the struggle against the Germans and the fascists into every community, into every street. As from July 1944, armed struggle and street fighting was becoming more active by the day.

The summer of 1944 was a period of feverish preparation and great hopes for the communist movement in Turin. In September, the situation had reached a point of extreme high tension: working-class ferment in the factories showed no signs of abating, the actions of the GAP and SAP in the city were multiplying, and the situation had an air of pre-insurrection. The execution of workers, carried out by the Germans,

led to protest stoppages in a number of FIAT plants, while an impressive strike of railway workers succeeded in paralysing all communication for several days. The Party grew in political ability and organisational influence: on 30 June, the Turin federation included 4,700 members, of whom 3,000 were in city and street cells, and 200 among the local railway workers. By the beginning of August, these figures were "far exceeded". In the same period, the SAP comprised 2,860 members, while between 1 August and 8 September, something like "180,000 copies of leaflets and newspapers (37 separate items, almost one a day)" were distributed, together with 11 zonal or sectoral newspapers (most of them weekly) and small publications for youth and for women, as well as the publications of the partisan brigades.

The developing military situation and the delayed advance by the Allies posed serious problems, but, as we shall see, they did nothing to affect the growing expansion of communist organisation: Colombi wrote, in a report dated 27 October 1944:

"The slowness of military operations on the Appenines is creating a delicate situation for us, both within the Party organisation and within the partisan formations. The intensification of agitation in the factories, plus our economic and political agitation, have ended by legitimating many of our activities. The atmosphere in the factories has become democratised; people meet, discuss, and strike, and all this is now done in the open, and it would be impossible to do otherwise. Now, while from a political point of view this is a great success, the factor which has allowed us to increase the federation's effective membership to something like 10,000, also means that we are now offering an extremely broad surface, vulnerable to attacks by the police. In the recent period, our casualties have been increasing at a rather alarming rate, particularly among the SAPs that have gone into action, but also within the political organisation". [...]

Photo: Italian workers taken prisoner by the Nazis

In Autumn 1944, a difficult period opens: repression by the Germans increased, while in the factories one saw an increased employers' offensive, which directly threatened the victories won by the workers in the struggles of the preceding months; it was inevitable that within the population as a whole and the working class itself, there should be a degree of disheartenment, and this was shown in the increase in "wait-and-see" attitudes of the moderate parties. However, it was precisely during these months that the PCI saw the largest expansion in its organisation, reaching 14,600 members by January 1945.

How are we to explain this organisational boom, taking place in a winter of extreme difficulties for the Resistance, and in a period when, because of the progress of the war, the prospects for insurrection appeared to recede into the distance? Obviously, the factors are many-fold. Undoubtedly the successes of the Red Army played their part, increasing the mythical aura which surrounded Stalin and the USSR in the eyes of broad strata of the working class; another factor was the firmness of the communist leadership, their ability to "hold firm" in the face of defeatism and resignation. However, in our opinion, the principal factor remained the broadening of the mass base of the CLN, which was arrived at by the constitution of the largest possible number of periphery committees (village, community and company-based committees) and through the inclusion within already-functioning CLN committees of representatives of the mass bodies – i.e. of the Agitation Committees, the peasant committees, the skilled workers' organisations, the youth front and the women's defence groups. [...]

One result of enlarging the base of the CLN was to provide a fertile ground for what was later christened the "insurrectional intake", and which allowed the PCI to achieve a membership of 90,000 in occupied Italy as a whole by the end of 1944.

Invigorated by the influx of these new energies, the Party in Turin prepared itself for a final, decisive effort. In February, Arturo Colombi took over editorship of *L'Unità* in Milan, and was replaced on the insurrectional three-man committee for Piedmont by Giorgio Amendola. [...]

The conditions of struggle in those last months of that terrible winter of 1945 were becoming increasingly difficult. Within the factories, basic trade union activity continued incessantly, and came to comprise a decisive factor in the preparation of the insurrection, as well as the best antidote for any "wait-and-see" attitude:

Photo: Front cover of *L'Unità* newspaper, calling for insurrection – 8 October 1944

"In no other city like Turin did the inter-relationship of trade union struggle in the factory, armed struggle, and political initiative, appear so clear and direct; here the phrase 'hegemony of the working class' took on a concrete and physical character."

The Nazi-Fascists reacted by alternating terroristic repression (the number of executions in January and February ran into dozens) with demagogic manoeuvring. In March, elections were held at FIAT for "experts" to examine the programme of socialisation. These elections were a resounding failure for the fascists (only 405 valid papers out of a total of 32,620 voters), but this did not discourage the fascists from enormous attempts to involve workers' shop stewards in a direct relationship with their puppet trade union organisations. [...]

In this period, Amendola wrote that: "With a political mobilising campaign of the whole Party, with a broad mass agitation, and in particular by immediately intensifying all the forms of armed and mass struggle" it would be possible to break out of this phase of partial stagnation. To this end, he re-proposed the decision, which had initially been opposed within the PCI itself, to prepare a new general strike "against hunger and against Nazi-Fascist terror", a strike which was effectively called by the Piedmont region CLN on 18 April, only seven days prior to the insurrection.

"The results," wrote Amendola, two days after the strike, "have exceeded all our hopes. The older comrades say that such successful strikes in Turin have not been seen since 1920, and that even then one never saw such a complete solidarity with the manual workers, on the part of white collar workers, technicians, professionals, teachers, and even magistrates. This was the fundamental characteristic of 18 April, a unity of action against the fascists and the Germans by all the national and popular masses. The insurrection is truly national. What we might have feared, the danger that on occasions we have noticed an isolation of the Turin working class from the rest of the population, appears to have been overcome." [...]

On 26 April, the insurrection began. The Allies, fearful of its possible political consequences, tried to the last to postpone its beginning, citing the delay with which their troops would have reached the Piedmont capital, and they attempted to reduce the movement to a few actions and disturbances under their direct control. However, the battle flared up as soon as the Anglo-American forces had just passed Piacenza. While the partisan brigades were liberating the city, area by area, the workers on strike, supported by GAP and SAP detachments, were fighting to defend the factories, resisting the last sudden attacks by the destructive fury of the Nazis in flight. One can state without party chauvinism that the Turin communists were the keystone and the vanguard of the insurrection. In the last few days alone, 300 comrades fell in the struggle to liberate the city.

On 28 April 1945, Turin was victoriously liberated, bringing to an end a struggle that had begun over 20 years previously, against fascist terror and oppression; it was a

glorious ending to the epic resistance of a city which had paid its contribution in a large number of victims and sacrifices.

[Translated from *I comunisti a Torino 1919-1972*, ed. E. Ragionieri, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1974]

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Photo: CLN supporters on a lorry

Translated by Ed Emery

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