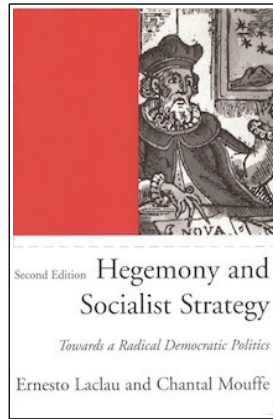


Antonio Gramsci was a leader of the Italian Communist Party in its early, revolutionary years. He was jailed by Mussolini's fascist regime from 1926 until his death in 1937. He wrote Prison Notebooks which are now famous even outside the left

Many people argue that Gramsci's thoughts were mainly about socialist strategy in conditions of broad democratic advance, as contrasted with the choppy, cramped circumstances of Tsarist Russia. We'll explore the contrary idea: that they were focused for conditions of difficulty and setback.



Italy's Socialist Party was founded in 1892. Although large-scale industry was only just getting going, by 1904 it was winning 21% in the parliamentary elections. Right-wingers split off in 1912. The dominant faction was called "Maximalist". Unlike most social-democratic parties, it opposed World War One (helped by the fact that Italy did not enter the war until later, when it had become unpopular). But its best-known leaders, like Filippo Turati and Anna Kuliscioff, were in fact reformists.

Antonio Gramsci joined the Socialist Party in 1913-4. He had come to the industrial city of Turin in 1911, at the age of 20, to attend university. Even though Socialist Party membership numbers had been cut by wartime conscription, the SP had 1000 members in Turin, equivalent to 20,000 in London today. It grew rapidly, to have 200,000 members across Italy in 1921.

There were huge workers' struggles, culminating in factory occupations in Turin and elsewhere in summer 1920. But the SP leaders limited themselves to general revolutionary proclamations, and did nothing to build on and develop the occupations. They were defeated.

The political tide shifted to the right very fast. The fascist movement grew, and attacked socialist and trade-union halls and meetings across the country. In October 1922 the fascists



seized power. They tightened their grip gradually until all labour-movement activity became illegal, and Gramsci was jailed, in late 1926.



At the start of 1921 the revolutionary wing of the Socialist Party had broken away, under the leadership of Amadeo Bordiga, to form the Communist Party. It had 40,000 at the start, but that quickly fell to 20,000. As fascist repression increased, it was down to 5,000 in early 1923.

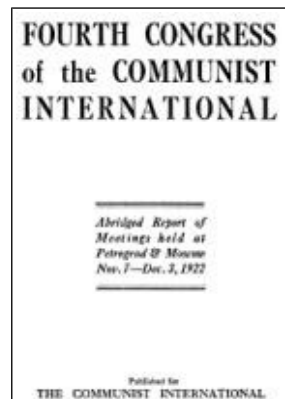


Bordiga opposed any political united fronts with the SP, even against fascism. He rejected the formula "democratic centralism", and argued instead for "organic centralism". Although when he led the CP he was democratic enough in his dealings with oppositions, he argued that the test of a revolutionary party was not its elections, but whether it stayed loyal to the "invariant doctrine" of revolutionary Marxism.



From early 1921 to mid 1922, Gramsci worked as a loyal supporter of Bordiga. In May 1922 he went to Moscow for a meeting of the Communist International. He stayed there until late 1923, and while there was won over by Trotsky and others to the policy of the united front.

Bordiga was jailed in 1923. The CP was unable to organise conferences in the usual way because of fascist repression, and the Communist International organised a new CP leadership, to which, from early 1924, Gramsci became central.



He focused on rebuilding the party (up again to about 20,000 members; then fascist repression and increasingly false policies would take it down to 2,500 after 1928); tighter organisation; much increased political education and training within the party; and an improved party press.

Even after he was jailed in 1926, Gramsci could still hope realistically that the fascist regime would fall soon. By the early 1930s, when he wrote much of his Prison Notebooks, that hope was remote. Fascism had taken power in Germany, Austria, Poland, and Portugal. And Gramsci knew that the CP was on the wrong lines politically: his closest comrades had been expelled in 1930 and formed the first Italian Trotskyist group.

"In the present epoch, the war of movement took place politically from March 1917 to March 1921; this was followed by a war of position whose representative - both practical for Italy and ideological (for Europe) - is fascism".

