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# Israel and the Italian Communist Party (1948–2015): From fondness to enmity



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## ABSTRACT

Based on a wide array of archival sources of the Communist Party of Italy (PCI), the article explores the historical relationship between the Party, Israel and the Jew and focuses on the real motivations behind the current divide between Israel and the European (Communist or former Communist) Left. The article argues that Communism for Israel has not been lost for the presumed discriminatory attitude of the Jews in the Communist world, nor for historical growing Communist support of Palestinian guerrilla groups, but because of the increasing militarism and nationalism of the Zionist Left and the erosion of Communist and pacifist ideals.

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## 1. Introduction

Approaching the celebration of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its existence, Israel is as present as ever in European newspapers, although much of the coverage by the political Left is rather bitter criticism than neutral observation of its political, societal and military moves. It seems peculiar and somewhat contradictory that the European Left, given Europe's history of persecution of the Jews, is particularly critical and judgmental; yet the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has stirred their emotions more than any other conflict and brought to light a dividing and fundamental gap between the Israeli and European Left.

Israel perceives Europe's Leftists, Communists, Socialists, Labor or Social-Democrats alike, as a 'menace', a radical and unilateral pro-Palestinian cluster on the verge of anti-Semitism. This menace is physically expressed through demonstrations in European capitals and near the Separation Wall in Israel, Hebron or in East Jerusalem, and verbally by the European media, and its verbal and physical features are combined when yet another Flotilla sets sail towards Gaza causing an international media frenzy. The Israeli public eyes them apprehensively as friends of the "enemy", as Islamic groups challenging Israel's right to the land and security are openly supported. Europe's Left, on the other hand, seems completely oblivious to Israel's security fears and somewhat unforgiving to the fact that a formerly suppressed and persecuted people have become a dominating force in the playing field of Middle Eastern politics. The tension between Israel and Europe's Left is further fueled by Israel's argument that anti-Semitism has never been fully obliterated from Europe, thus leaving Zionism as the single response to simmering anti-Israeli feelings. In contrast, this has led to anti-Zionism being the core of the criticism by Europe's Left, correctly identifying it as the source of Jewish military strength.

Thus, to examine the relationship between Israel and the European Left, is to untie a political and historical knot, in which the notions of "Right" and "Left" seem to become interchangeable at different points in history. Ironically, contemporary Israeli society has a natural bent towards European Right parties, including those who have fundamentally copied attitudes of Fascist parties from the 1930s into their overall political ideology. Simultaneously, the Left parties' fierce pro-Palestinian and

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anti-Israel agenda has been widely used to cover up their own shortcomings of advancing a truly pluralistic democracy on European soil.

The history of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) with Israel serves as a good case study of why and how the European Left was lost for Israel, and how Israel was lost for Europe's Left. In my opinion, this relationship deserves attention because the strained character of mutual relations between the Israeli parties (including the Leftist ones) and the former Communist Left in Europe is explained by a critical and anti-Zionist attitude by the European Left, but neither historical evidence nor a clear-cut explanation is provided for the current state of affairs.

The PCI was central to the post-war history of the European Left and thus a closer investigation seems overdue. The PCI was the biggest Communist party in Western Europe beyond the Iron Curtain, counting already 1.700.000 members in 1945; the great majority of Italian Jews adhered to the party and became members both as party intellectuals and inside its executive ranks. The party scored regularly around 30% at elections and reached its peak in the years 1975–1978 (35%) when it was expected to enter the government and rule the country (though it never did): thus, it was the single Communist party close to power in Western Europe.

The history of the triangular relationship between the PCI, Israel and the Italian Jews, spans over seventy years, but it is a one-way story from mutual fondness to enmity, as global and local events pushed the two sides to the opposite extremes. One can argue that this negative turn has not been rectified by the diplomatic and political changes of the last twenty years, when the Communist Bloc collapsed, the PCI dissolved and the emergence of a new leadership within the Party has claimed to restore the original understanding between the Italian Left and Israel. Relying on the exploration of all primary sources available so far, mainly documents until 1985 (the current date of disclosure of the PCI Archives<sup>1</sup>), a broad examination of the daily editions of the newspaper of the Communist Party (*l'Unità*) and a wide array of secondary sources collected in Italian, English and French, the article aims to shed a new light on the divide between Israel and Communism, as well as to provide a comprehensive account of the main geopolitical events as experienced by both parties and by the Italian-Jewish Diaspora community.

The paper will retrace all the most pivotal and critical junctures of the history of the relationship between the Italian Communist Party and Israel in both an historical and chronological order and a thematic one: the first would span from the WWII's aftermath up to nowadays, whereas the second would address many critical questions such as the common antifascist legacy of the two, the 1956 colonial crisis's limited impact, the real cleavage introduced by the 1967 War and the soon after discovery by the Italian Communist Party of al-Fatah and the Palestinian resistance forces. It will cover the difficult period of peace negotiations and attempts, ranging from Camp David to the Lebanon War (1982), during which the Italian Party acted and was viewed as main mediator between Israel and the Eastern Bloc. Finally, it would tackle the years of Communist demise and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and Jewish nationalism in the 80s and 90s, as two powerful identity forces shaping the new Middle East and deeply affecting the Arab-Israeli conflict. In conclusion, it would answer the question why the dissolution of PCI (1991) and the complete disbandment of Communist forces in Europe and worldwide apparently brought both Israel and former European (and particularly, Italian) Communists to join forces again.

## 2. Antifascism as a historical bond

Historically, the Jews in Italy have a strong emotional and political bond with their nation, as many of them had been committed patriots during the three Independence Wars (1848–1870) and had enthusiastically fought for the unification of the country against the territorial power of the Church. Similarly, during WWII, many of the Jews who had voluntarily enrolled in partisan or paramilitary groups, fought against the Fascist regime. The participation of Jews in the nation-building process had linked them inseparably to Italian politics, and especially to Republican parties and movements, such as the then *Giovine Italia* of Giuseppe Mazzini, with a secular and anti-clerical leaning.

It was the introduction of the anti-Jewish racial laws in 1938 that shattered the national covenant and radicalized many Italian Jews, pushing them towards anti-system parties such as the Socialist or Communist ones, which had both openly rejected those laws. Some also started looking at the Zionist movement as the solution. Once the war was over, the partisan groups helped with the clandestine emigration of Jews to Israel on many occasions, such as in the case of the ship *Enzo Sereni*, which covertly sailed from the Vado Ligure harbor to Israel in 1946. Moreover, all former resistance fighter groups (united under the CLNAI, the Committee for National Liberation of Upper Italy) viewed the Zionism positively as a liberation movement. As *Di Figlia (2012)* postures, the Italian Jews opting for the Left were both thoroughly in line with their ethical (anti-Fascist) stance and their community interests.

The pro-Zionist stance by the Socialist and Communist parties of Europe was also in line with the Soviet Union and the Communist Bloc, which had officially recognized the State of Israel few hours after its declaration in 1948 (*Givet, 1968: 57*). However, the alignment with the Soviet Union and the anti-Fascist agenda were not the only elements appealing to the Italian Left, as they were genuinely interested in the new, 'Socialist society in-the-making' in Israel. Fascinated by the *kibbutz* model and the pioneering enthusiasm of the new immigrants, Israel was considered an advanced laboratory of democracy and anti-colonial struggle. Indeed, communists and socialists in Italy were convinced that the establishment of a truly Socialist society in

<sup>1</sup> The archival research has been carried out between 2006 and 2007. The reference is to the collections of documents stored in the Archives of the Communist Party of Italy by the Fondazione Gramsci in Rome.

Israel would highly contribute to the progress of the Arab minority too. Thus, the bond between the Socialist and Communist Left and Israel rested on a shared view of principles that were to shape the new world order in the aftermath of the war.

In their theoretical and political thinking, many Italian-Jewish intellectuals were very close to the core of the Communist platform. Amos Luzzato, writer and essayist, wrote in the Jewish community newspaper *Israel* in 1949 that “applied communism was the single (possible) answer to anti-Semitism” and that in the century of liberalism the Jews had failed to understand that “the freedom and equality introduced by the *bourgeois* society were very relative ones”. In addition, he claimed that: “the liberal regimes had exploited anti-Semitic trends in order to ( ... ) provide the working class with a fake target against which aiming their weapons, thus defusing the revolutionary forces threatening their power” (Luzzato, 1949:5).

It was the Cold War that caused the first friction between Israel and the Italian Communist Party. In 1953, the *Prague trial* (also known as “Slansky trial”) caused uproar, as 11 Jews were executed on Stalin's orders, charged with anti-state conspiracy against members of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC). Stalin's treatment of Jews, who represented a consistent religious minority, cast a dark shadow on the Communist Parties' attitude towards minorities in general. As a direct consequence, Leftist parties in Israel, such as *Mapam*, distanced themselves from the Communist Bloc. However, this was not the only reason for the growing ostracism between the Communists and the Jews. Some Communist Italian Jews who had immigrated to Israel with the *Hachalutz* movement in the aftermath of the WWII, had discovered that the Israeli authorities were already bitterly “anti-Communist, much more than the De Gasperi Government” in Italy (Valabrega, 1953) and as the Israeli Government had firmly chosen to align the new state with the West already in 1950 (Shlaim, 2004; Wistrich, 1979), despite its Socialist structure of community settlements of *kibbutzims* and *moshavims*. Israel's alignment in the Cold War was a major blow to the Communist-Zionist linkage, but other domestic arguments and ideological concerns would emerge beyond the geopolitical divide and cause them to further drift apart.

### 3. The “colonial” crisis

Despite its Western alignment, Israel was not yet a staunch ally of the US, but rather of France, its sole supplier of weapons at the time, and generally still closer to Europe. The International Worker's movement started perceiving Israel as a proxy “imperialist” country (PCI's *communiqué on the Middle East crisis, L'Unità, 1956*) because of its military alliance with France - a European colonial power rejecting the independence of Arab Maghreb countries-, which did not bode well for the peaceful character of the young Jewish State. When the Sinai War broke out in 1956, it went down in history as the “Colonial War”, as it marked the last attempt from Britain and France to regain control of Northern Africa and the Suez channel, while sending a clear message to Algeria not to push for independence. It ended as a total *fiasco*, but it was also the first direct clash between Israel and the Communist World, way beyond the breach of diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union in 1953. It saw Israel overtly militarily siding with two European colonial powers against a newly-independent country such as Egypt. The PCI reacted outraged, though the party's anger did not primarily target Israel. However, some Italian Communist began labeling Israel as a “colonial-settler State” (Rodinson, 1967).

In 1957, the Party decided to dispatch many of its members to different Arab countries in order to visit conventions of local parties and meet fellow local Communists. The interest towards the Arab world was drawing more attention within the PCI, yet it did not wish to minimize the extent of local communists' repression by Arab governments either. The issue of human rights' protection in those countries came into focus. The PCI's conduct and reasoning in international affairs was rooted in its anti-Fascist heritage, which supported the struggle for individual rights and freedom from dictatorship. Anti-Fascism and anti-Semitism as the Party's core ethical values were reinstated three years later in the “Conference of the International Resistance's Federation on anti-Semitism”, held in Rome in March 1960; it addressed the fear of a resurgent trend of anti-Semitism throughout Europe and the PCI fully subscribed to the appeal that came out of that meeting (PCI *Secretariat, 1960*). Therefore, the immediate impact of the “Colonial War” of 1956 did not seem to have caused a long-term damage to the relationship between the Party, the Jews and Israel.

The argument of the Arab refugees scattered in Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan after the War of Independence in 1948 grew stronger, but the PCI acknowledged the diversity of positions existing on the issue among Israeli parties and considered it possible to achieve a solution through negotiations. In fact, in the early 60s, the Party still held regular consultations with a number of Israeli political parties, through which it gained precious insights in Israel's domestic affairs. It was also concerned with the long-term perspective of the local Communist party. In a visit to the Israeli Communist Party in 1963, the PCI tried to break the isolation that Israeli communists were facing in respect of both the other national parties and the Soviet Union. They left with the feeling that the Israeli comrades were far too ideological and ought to act more in agreement with other forces and advised them to tone down the criticism on the presumed Jews-only “sin of origin” of the Israeli State and be rather more involved in the mainstream national debate. The PCI's mediating role was acknowledged even by the Israeli government, which considered taking advantage of the Party's services to convey a message of distension to the Soviet Union. The Israeli authorities went so far as to propose some Party members to visit Israel and meet officially with Government representatives. The Party, however, turned down this offer, as it did not want to jeopardize its ‘special relationship’ with the Soviet Union.

### 4. Was the 1967 War the real split?

The Six-Day-War marked a real and unexpected turning point in the relationship between Israel and the PCI and changed their relation thereafter. After the ceasefire, the PCI discussed at length Israel's military operations and the surprising

conquest of Jerusalem, which challenged the Party to accept a new reality on the ground. In the previous years, the common doctrine in Italy regarding the city was that ‘question of Jerusalem’, in line with the position of Vatican, might have evolved into a UN-controlled area. Now the city was controlled by Israel alone. The Party came to the conclusion that the Egyptian closure of the Straits of Tiran was not clear evidence of Nasser’s intention to go to war and that therefore, the Israeli Government had exaggerated the menace in a specious way and acted as the real aggressor. During the parliamentary debate, PCI’s foreign relations officer Giancarlo Pajetta accused the Italian Government of inconsistency in its foreign policy of “equal balance between the parties” in the Israeli-Arab conflict (Della Seta, 1967). However, even the Government backed the UN Resolution asking for complete withdrawal of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) from Arab territories just conquered in the War.

A few months later, the PCI leadership began to widen its criticism, stating that Israel was far more isolated in the Middle East than before the War and that it could never fulfill its plan to turn into the homeland of all 13 million Jews without being charged with “racist implications” (PCI Steering Committee, 1967). The two major shortcomings of Israel were outlined in an official document: the first was its aggressive territorial policy, the second the permanent character of its policy of discrimination *vis à vis* the Arab minority (PCI Steering Committee, 1967). The same document echoed concern about the growing tendency of justifying Israeli expansionism in Biblical and *meta-historical* terms, a dangerous tendency, which could have ended up denying the core aspiration of the Zionist movement, the “normalization” of Israel. Inside the Party, Jewish PCI members of the WW II generation were taken aback by this radical turn. The most authoritative members, such as Umberto Terracini, spoke out publicly and criticized the Party’s bias towards Israel, when actually the Arabs had sought confrontation by closing the Straits of Tiran, denying only to Israeli ships the permission to cross the canal (Terracini, PCI Steering Committee, 1967). Luciano Ascoli, a rank and file member, pointed out that the great majority of party supporters were Socialist, anti-Fascist and pro-Israel<sup>2</sup> (Riccardi, 2006: 303–308). He complained that the Communist Party had not fully grasped the singularity of Jewish nationalism, which rested on the uniqueness of Jewish history and not on that of Jewish religion (Ascoli Report, 1968). Ascoli even sketched a comparison between the treatment of the Arab minority by the Israelis and the North-South gap in Italy, thus toning down its racist implications, but was quickly silenced by the Party leadership.

In the end, the 1967 War was interpreted in opposite ways by the Communist leadership and most Jewish Leftists: for the former, Israel, a proxy-ally of the imperialistic USA, had attacked a third-world state such as Egypt; for the latter, Egypt had tried yet again to wipe out the young State of Israel from the map. Particularly difficult was then the situation of those Jews aspiring to reconcile their dual loyalty. Luca Zevi, then a Jewish Leftist activist, defined the conditions of his fellow Jewish Leftists after 1967 as “schizophrenic” (Di Figlia, 134), as their allegiance was perfectly split in two. Ironically, Israel and the Zionist cause started drawing consensus among the right-wing parties in Italy. The MSI (*Italian Social Movement*, a former Fascist party) turned on a dime completely in favor of Israel in the Arab-Israeli conflict, disavowing its traditional and long-term preference for the Arabs (Chiarini, 2006: 5). In Turin, the magistrate Giorgio Agosti and the journalist Carlo Casalegno, both former members of partisan groups, tried to set up a solidarity rally with Israel, but the majority of the people attending were right-wing activists (Agosti, 2005). Those two episodes were just the tip of the iceberg of a growing tendency in Italian society, which saw a turnover in the traditional positioning of political forces in the Israeli-Arab conflict. The main reason why the Right was coming closer to Israel was the fact that the Right looked at the Arab-Israeli conflict only within the context of the Cold War and Israel was perceived as the strongest anti-Communist and US-ally in a tumultuous region.

## 5. The ‘discovery’ of al-Fatah

After the Six-Day-War, the Italian Communist Party was accused by the other Italian political parties of backing corrupt and dictatorial Arab regimes instead of the single democracy (Israel) in the Middle East. The PCI leadership decided to devote more energy to monitoring Arab parties and movements, in order to identify their real agendas. On December 22, 1969, while on a regional mission, PCI representatives met for the first time with Yasser Arafat, the leader of *al-Fatah* - then only a small group partaking in the umbrella organization of the PLO. Despite the Soviet Union’s verbal denouncement of local guerilla groups, the PCI representatives were very impressed by Arafat and his companions: Giancarlo Pajetta, PCI envoy to the Middle East, told the then Party Secretary Luigi Longo on his return from a tour in the region: “I think we will hear from him for a long while” (Rubbi, 1996:15). The PCI considered *al-Fatah* a true progressive force inside the PLO and the only mass party territorially, militarily and socially organized; its members believed that the novelty represented by *al-Fatah* had disclosed an enormous potential for the Palestinian cause. The PCI did not linger over the objective of *al-Fatah*’s struggle, the complete liberation of Palestine including territories conquered in 1967, as the final goal was said to be the establishment of one secular state comprising both Jews and Arabs, a popular vision among the European Left.

Gradually, the ‘binational and multi-religious state’ catchphrase began to conquer the hearts and minds of Italian communists much more than the Zionist project, whereas socialists and republicans were siding unilaterally with Israel, claiming for the Jewish country stable and defensible borders on the basis of the UN Resolution 242. The new crack regarding Israel ran deep inside the Left, dividing the communists from other Leftists forces. This trend did not get unnoticed by the Zionist Left. The *Mapam*, for example, was angry at the PCI for its increasing patent support of *al-Fatah*, bashing those “views of the international Left ( ... ) in favor of an abstract and superficial anti-colonial idealism, drawing an erroneous comparison between

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, on June 5- the day marking the beginning of the War-many rank and file members of the Communist Party had spontaneously gathered in Rome to keep a vigil in solidarity with Israel.

*al-Fatah* and the liberation movements in Algeria and Vietnam.” The argument raised by the *Mapam* was that “there (in Algeria and Vietnam) they fought for freedom, while here (the Palestinians) are against coexistence and national equality, they are not for liberating the territories that were conquered by the army in 1967, but for hindering any political negotiation.” (Merhav, 1973: 335).

Both the *Mapam* and the *Maki*, since 1965 the pro-Zionist Communist party of Israel,<sup>3</sup> were also concerned about the negative impact the Six-Day-War had on the younger generations in Israel, who increasingly grew more disappointed with Socialism. The *Mapam* representatives pointed out that since those youth had come of age, all Socialist countries had betrayed Israel: in fact, China and the Soviet Union were both courting the Arab states and Yugoslavia was siding with Egypt in the Non-aligned movement. Only Cuba and Romania had remained on friendly terms with Israel, but that was not enough to prove that Israel was still viewed as a partner of the International Workers' Movement. Moreover, young Israelis felt betrayed by the 1968 students' movement that had blazed through the Western World and sided in its majority with the Palestinian cause (Merhav: 343). The fear was that the existing detachment might have ended up in a definite split.

Undoubtedly, the concern for a radical break of the Israeli Left with its Communist and Socialist past was justified, but the *Mapam* pushed it further and officially marked the end of this relationship by entering into a coalition Government which included the *Gahal* party (the nationalist party of Begin) in 1969. By then, the proximity between the European Communists and the Israeli Left had evaporated for a number of reasons, including the increasing relevance of the Palestinian question. These tensions were automatically transposed in the Italian domestic context, as testified by the long interview given by community Rabbi Elio Toaff to the Party's newspaper *l'Unità*, in which he declared that anti-Semitic feelings in Italy had been revived in 1972 due to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians and that the Italian Communist Party bore many responsibilities in their rise (*l'Unità*, 1972: 9).

The tensions were further exacerbated by a series of terrorist attacks occurring mainly between 1968 and 1974, starting with the hijacking of an El Al flight between Rome and Tel Aviv on July 22, 1968, and continued with the bombings of Israeli embassies and agencies in Europe, such as that in Athens in November 1969; the kidnapping of 68 Westerners on the June 9, 1970 by Palestinian guerrilla groups, and the hijacking of a Swissair flight in September of the same year. Romano Ledda, dispatched by the Party in Lebanon, interviewed Yasser Arafat in order to understand the reasoning behind the attacks and publicly call on the PLO to refrain from violence. On that occasion, Arafat declared to the newspaper *l'Unità* that *al-Fatah* did not agree with the attacks, but could not denounce them publicly without undermining the cohesion of the PLO leadership (Ledda, R., *l'Unità*, 1970). Concurrently, the PLO was facing the menace of its physical liquidation by King Hussein in the ongoing massacres in Jordanian refugee camps later known as “Black September” and the PCI was sympathetic with the PLO fight for its own survival. However, the Party did not refrain from denouncing any single terrorist attack related to the Arab-Israeli conflict in those years, the worst certainly having been the massacre of Lod Airport in May 1972 and the killing of 11 Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympic Games in September of the same year. The most shocking occurring on Italian soil being the attack carried out at the Fiumicino Airport of Rome in December 1973, which killed 32 people (Accorsi and Ferro, 2013).

Terrorism was a very controversial issue in the relationship between the PCI and *al-Fatah*: the latter justified itself by claiming that other Palestinian groups were behind their planning, but among the terrorists perpetrating them, including the attack on the Munich Olympic Games' participants, there were *Fatah* members (*l'Unità*, 1973. Lordi, S., and Giuseppetti, A., 2010. See also [Archivio Pietro Secchia, 1973](#)).<sup>4</sup> In fact, it was not always clear the role the leadership and Arafat himself had played in their realization. The PCI disapproved those episodes, but in the PCI Central Committee there was no real debate of the contradiction between the pacifist outlook of the PLO and its cynical resort to violence. Moreover, there was no trace of a serious discussion on another sensitive issue, such as the violation of the secret agreement between the Italian Government and all Palestinian terrorist factions to spare the country's territory from attacks on its soil.<sup>5</sup>

If the PCI's reaction to the Palestinian terrorist attacks in Italy and elsewhere had been firm but very restrained, not the same was true in the case of a following Israeli terrorist attack in Italy. On October 16, 1972, during a Mossad covert operation in retaliation to the Munich massacre, the Palestinian poet Wael Zwaiter, a well-known figure in Roman cultural life, was targeted by a commando and killed in the entry hall of his building. His murder was officially deplored by the Party, but, in addition, many party members went to the funeral to express their personal grief to his loss: A grief that sounded much more intense than the one echoed in Munich. For example, a Communist journalist, Ennio Polito, among others, evoked Zwaiter's figure by claiming that he had been active in the Palestinian resistance, but he had been all except for a guerrilla-man (*Liberazione*, October 16, 1992). He added that the poet had been a supporter of a pacifist solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict and had showed his discontent with terrorist attacks carried out by radical factions of the PLO. The memory of the poet was particularly dear to most of the Party members, but this was more because of the role played by Zwaiter in Italian society, than a proof of the biased reaction of the Party towards Israeli terrorism. The PCI, in fact, had a moderate reaction to Israeli

<sup>3</sup> The *Maki* – *ha-Miflaga ha-komunistit ha-yisraelit* (the Israeli Communist Party) experienced an internal split in 1965 that led to the creation of two separate communist parties: the pro-Zionist, Jewish-led *Maki*, and the pro-Soviet, Arab-led *Rakah-Reshima Komunistit Hadasha*–pro-Soviet, pro-Palestinian and composed of a majority of Arab-Israelis.

<sup>4</sup> In two occasions, at least, there had been *Fatah* members involved: the Olympic Games in Monaco in September 1972 and a foiled attack at the airport in Rome.

<sup>5</sup> This was called “Lodo Moro” (the “Moro Knot”).

terrorist attacks perpetrated on Italian territory too. This conciliatory attitude was displayed in the case of the “Argo 16” accident, a military plane crashed on November 23, 1973, in Porto Marghera minutes after taking-off: An act of sabotage attributed to Mossad agents, acting in retaliation to the previous liberation of Palestinian terrorists belonging to the Black September organization (Salerno, 2010: 192–193).

## 6. From Camp David to the Lebanon War (1982): the PCI as a mediator between Israel and the Eastern Bloc

In the 70s and 80s, the PCI's political strategy in foreign politics had two main goals. The first was the development of a strong Euro-communist movement in Europe as an alternative to the State socialism of the Soviet Union; the second was favoring the *détente* between the two Cold War blocks while advocating peace in the Mediterranean region. Thus, above all, it wished to broker a peace agreement in the Arab-Israeli conflict, under the slogan “The Mediterranean, a Sea of Peace”.

In 1976, a Party representative, Antonio Rubbi, paid a visit to Israel within an Italian parliamentary delegation and interviewed many Members of *Knesset*, as well as members of the *Mapam* and the *Rakah*. He came back with the impression that Israel was not really interested in making peace with the Arabs, as all the public opinion focused on the incoming elections. This assumption came hand in hand with a change in the Italian public opinion, as the sensitivities towards the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip had deepened. It slipped the PCI's attention that Israel was undergoing radical social changes at the time, in face of the uprisings of its *Mizrahi* Jews (second-generation Jewish immigrants from Arab countries such as Yemen, Morocco, Iraq and others).<sup>6</sup> At that time, in fact, only the extra-parliamentary Left – that is the group of opposition forces choosing not to engage in elections – took notice of the fundamental changes in the currents of Israeli society (Lerner, 2009: 135.37). However, the PCI was primarily committed to end the conflict and praised the intention expressed by the PLO to establish a national state on any part of land released (PCI minutes, 1974).

As a proof of the consistency of its pacifist outlook, the Party had strongly condemned the 1975 UN Resolution equating anti-Zionism with racism. The great opportunity to show its commitment to peace came with the Camp David Accords, initially portrayed by the U.S. administration as a comprehensive and final settlement agreement of the Arab-Israeli conflict on the basis of the UN Res. 242. The Soviet Union fiercely objected to the Accords, both because of the leading role played in them by the United States and due to the deterioration of the Egyptian–Soviet relations, which had led to the abrogation of the Friendship Treaty between the two countries in 1976, and stigmatized the efforts as a “separate peace”. The PCI, on the contrary, took a preemptive positive attitude and showed great moderation and, in response, the Egyptian government praised the PCI's attitude for its independent judgment (Segre, note to the PCI Secretariat, 1974). Rubbi declared at the time: “Our reaction was cautious ( ... ) and unlike the great majority of the Arab states that were accusing Sadat of betrayal and the Soviet Union that sternly judging the initiative of the Egyptian *rais* (“President”, in Arabic), we could not slam an act that was going in the direction of that constructive dialog we hoped for” (Rubbi: 78).

Yet the Party withdrew its initial support of the Israeli–Egyptian peace process under pressure of *al-Fatah*, when the “two-track approach” and the lack of support of the Palestinian cause became evident. This pessimistic attitude was confirmed by a visit of Moshe Dayan, the then Foreign Minister of the Begin Government, who did not even mention the Palestinians, nor any Israeli government's commitment to advance a regional peace process further. The PCI became aware of the Israeli government's obvious disinterest in peace making. Thus, the PCI reinforced its alliance with *al-Fatah* and a “Committee of Solidarity with the Palestinian People” was established, with the aim of culminating in the Italian government recognition of an official Palestinian diplomatic representation.

During the 70s, the PCI sided unflinchingly with the PLO, yet officially continued to condemn all terrorist attacks. Consequently, the rift between the PCI and all Israeli parties deepened. However, one particular channel of communication between the two parties remained open. It was the continuous flow of letters, telegrams and appeals written by Israeli citizens and addressed to the Party Secretariat, in order for the Party to plead with the Soviet Union for the emigration of their relatives still living in the Soviet Republics. Despite the hostility displayed towards the PCI, the Israelis were addressing the Party either as “the greatest Communist Party of Western Europe” (PCI minutes, 1971a,b,c: s0387), as a “believer in justice and freedom” (PCI minutes, 1971a,b,c: s0528) or as an organization of “world-wide respect as a principled and effective advocate of Socialist legality and as a positive influence in the International Communist Movement generally” (PCI minutes, 1971a,b,c: s0538). They were pragmatically kind to be more effective, but the great amount, diversity and poignancy of the letters revealed that the Party was praised as an effective intermediary between the two Blocs.

In 1982, during the Second invasion of Lebanon by the IDF, the PCI came to fear that the Israeli army's objective was to wipe out the PLO from the country. After the Sabra and Shatila massacres, in which a high number of Palestinian were killed in two refugee camps in Beirut by a Lebanese Christian militia, the great majority of Italy's public held Israel responsible, although later the IDF was accused only of having failed to prevent the killings (Further research: Agranat Commission of Inquiry Report on the massacres of Sabra and Shatila). Together with the Catholic Church, secular NGOs and other solidarity groups, the PCI funneled charity goods, money and medicine to Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

The 1982 invasion spurred a solidarity campaign with the Palestinians, with a devastating impact on the Italian Jewish community, which came out of it definitely split in two along generational lines. In fact, most of the youth belonging to the 1968 generation, felt a spontaneous identification with the Palestinian victims, whereas the generation “of the fathers” sided

<sup>6</sup> The reference is to the Black Panthers' demonstrations in Israel between 1971 and 1973.

with Israel in recognition of the national and religious bond that could not be disavowed as a result of the disputable choices of the Israeli government. The Jewish youth –among them Luca Zevi, Fiamma and Susanna Nierenstein, all members or former members of the extreme leftist movement *Lotta Continua*–launched an appeal published in the daily newspaper *La Repubblica* against the Lebanon War, whereas the generation of the fathers, in the person of Bruno Zevi, denounced the latent anti-Semitism dominant in some fringes of the Left. (Di Figlia, 135.) Episodes of anti-Zionism bordering anti-Semitism indeed flared up after the 1982 crisis in Italy. During a demonstration in Rome, members of a trade union accused all Jews of murder, while only nine days later a terrorist attack at the same synagogue killed a baby and injured many worshipers exiting the Temple (Marzano and Schwarz, 2012). The PCI, though, condemned all these episodes right away and could not be accused of sponsoring groups or opinions causing any harm to the Jews as such.

## 7. The years of Communist disenchantment: Arab resistance vs. Islamic fundamentalism (1981–1990)

The role of the PCI in the US-led Middle East peace process in the 80s remains questionable. The Party continued to support the PLO, while progressively distancing itself from the Soviet Union and all its proxy allies (the Syrian *Ba'ath*) in the Middle East. The Party's cleavage with Italian Jews became more evident during the meetings with so-called “progressive Jews”, who reprimanded the PCI for its unilateral support of the Palestinian cause, as if Israel's security considerations were not at stake. They argued that West European communists could no longer be perceived as honest brokers in the Middle East conflict, as they were ignoring the complexity of the situation on the ground, as well as the peace-driven efforts of the Israeli Left (PCI minutes, 1982). Meanwhile, Communists worldwide kept minimizing the growing influence of the US and neo-liberal policies in Israel and in the Middle East, and similarly the shrinking effect of the Soviet Union and its Communist ideals. Yet the Italian party continued to be an attentive observer of Middle East politics and start criticizing Israel on new premises and no longer through the lens of the Cold War. In its internal reports, for example, it bashed the Israeli Labor Party's conduct, particularly that of Shimon Peres, conventionally regarded as a ‘dove’. In its view, the Labor Party was subtly pushing the PLO to turn more extreme, by discrediting its more moderate members, thus preemptively draining all the potentials for negotiations (PCI minutes, 1983). For instance, Peres and his peers had rejected to meet at the Internationalist Socialist Congress a moderate PLO representative such as Issam Sartawi, later killed in Portugal by a more extremist Palestinian faction.<sup>7</sup>

However, the relationship between the PCI and *al-Fatah* was turning strained too and gradually cooled off during this decade. The main reason was that *al-Fatah* was deceived by the PCI, as the Party did not make it to the coalition Government in the years 1978–79 and was left at the margins of Italian politics. In addition, Italian media had started portraying the Palestinians as “terrorists” carrying out bloody attacks in public spaces, much in line with the US media, which had a great interest in worsening the Palestinian image throughout the West, in order to curb the consensus it enjoyed among European Leftists. Nonetheless, the two forces continued to converge on the staunch refusal of the Camp David Agreements; hence the PCI voted against the dispatch of an Italian military contingent to Sinai. Moreover, the Party was critical of all attempts to unilaterally portray Palestinians and Arabs as a terrorist threat to the West. Those actions were clearly part of a broader strategy of demonizing all Arab and Islamic forces perceived against the Cold War backdrop as “pro-Soviet”. The Lebanese historian Georges Corm ironically summarized the general political climate of the late 80s: “The fanatic Islamic terrorism played along by the Soviets through Syria against the democratic and civilized West: this is by now the way the Arab-Israeli conflict is portrayed in the eyes of international public opinion” (Corm, 2012: 545).

The PCI was alarmed by growing religious fanaticism, but did not link it exclusively to the Arab world. In one of his last interviews, Enrico Berlinguer, then Secretary of the Italian Communist Party, still voiced optimism about the future of the international peace movement and the Left campaign for the “Mediterranean, Sea of Peace”, as one of the strongest legacies of the Italian Communist Party (Berlinguer, *L'Unità*, 1983).<sup>8</sup> His words were sincere, but met less and less with the views of both European socialists and progressive Jews. The latter could harbor some criticism towards the Israeli policies, but in their majority felt a strong emotional bond with Israel, while the European Socialist parties by now drew a line between the “free world”, on one hand, and the Soviet world and Islamic Republic of Iran, on the other. The Party's anti-colonial struggle of the 50s advocating a multilateral order had evolved, but the PCI had been left alone in this fight, equally distant from Brezhnev's Soviet Union and the *Ostpolitik* of the Social-Democrats, whose new leader Helmut Schmidt was fiercely anti-Communist (Gerlini, 2012: 272).

## 8. The dissolution of PCI (1991): a new pro-Israeli and pro-democracy policy?

The PCI could not escape the developments in East Germany and the entire Soviet Bloc untouched. It dissolved just months before the collapse of the Soviet Union and split into two new parties: the “Democratic Party of the Left” (PDS), with an oak –no longer a hammer and a sickle–as its logo, and the “Hard-line Communist Party”, literally “Refoundation of the Communist Party” (Rifondazione Comunista). However, all the Communist splinter groups would have disappeared from Parliament in the 2008 elections, unable to pass the threshold. The PDS, instead, embarked on the revision of its stances in the Israeli-

<sup>7</sup> Issam Sartawi, PLO member and Arafat advisor, promoter of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Council and recipient of the Kreisky prize in 1979, was killed in Portugal in 1983 by members of the Abu-Nidal PLO-splinter group.

<sup>8</sup> In his speech, Berlinguer was expressing his concern for the growing religious and ideological fanaticism of both Khomeini's Iran and Reagan's US.

Palestinian conflict: It could not overlook now the role played by the USA in world politics and the possibility for Italy as a NATO member to go to war under the VII<sup>o</sup> chapter of the UN Charter. If it wanted to be credited to take office, then it had to wholly subscribe to the duties of both NATO and EU memberships (Napolitano, 2005: 252).

The Party's new course became tangible in a series of articles published in the official newspaper *L'Unità*. In a commentary titled "Israel 1991" (Fassino, 1991) by Piero Fassino, the Party's leadership expressed its full solidarity to the Israelis targeted by Iraqi Scud missiles. The author made an explicit reference to the principle of fairness, arguing retrospectively that Israeli security reasons had been disregarded for too long by the Italian Left to the detriment of peace and justice (*L'Unità*, 1991). Eventually, the first official visit to Israel by the new-old Party Secretary, Achille Occhetto included a meeting with Prime Minister Shamir, which took place in April 1991.

The Party pro-Atlantic commitment did not bend in front of the harsh criticism it stirred among its party members. To convince its base, the PDS leadership decided to support the Oslo Agreements as forerunners of the final solution of "Two States for Two People" supported by the Left all along. Nonetheless, it took a long while for the base to follow the leadership on the reappraisal of Israel, as the two previous generations had enthusiastically championed the Palestinian cause. The PDS leadership has stayed loyal to its reassessment of Israel up to today, meeting with Netanyahu and the *Likud*, while firmly judging Arafat for his rejection of Barak's offer at Camp David II (2000). In the last decade, the new PD or Democratic Party (since 2007) subscribed to the *Road Map* and even hailed the unilateral withdrawal of the Gaza Strip initiated by Sharon (Ranieri, 2006: 57–64). The current Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, a member of the same party, went so far to define Iran, in a 2012 debate, as the 'mother of all challenges' in the Middle East and expressed reservations on the upgrade of Palestine to UN status in November 2012.

However, for various reasons, the former Communist Italian Left did not regain proximity with Israeli parties. First, Israel considered the European, and in particular the Southern Mediterranean, Leftist parties (Greek, Italian and Spanish) as bitterly anti-Zionist, if not anti-Semitic; second, the Israelis felt that nothing had fundamentally changed in the Party's cultural base, among common members. This was proven, for example, by the lack of spontaneous demonstrations organized by the Italian Left in solidarity with the Israeli terror victims of the suicide attacks carried out in the years 2000–2008. Indeed, the unresolved question of the hardline anti-Zionism of the core Italian Left was still weighing. Some European Jews identified the anti-Zionist discourse as the new legitimate and accepted version of an else banned anti-Semitism. An example among many, which stirred a poignant public debate, was an article by renowned journalist Barbara Spinelli published in 2001, just a month after the Twin Towers' attack. She wrote: "Judaism should have felt partially guilty to Palestinians and Islam" (Spinelli, *La Stampa*, 2001), which provoked many bitter reactions from all Jewish political groups. If Spinelli's articles caused more than the usual uproar, it was due to her long and renowned career as a journalist serving civil rights and anti-Fascist values. In addition, she herself was Jewish by origin.<sup>9</sup> Thus, her example testified that for the Left muddling anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in order to express contempt towards the policies of the Israeli governments was a popular rhetorical tool.

Until today, the former Communist Left has not succeeded in "secularizing" the debate about Israel enough, whereas the Jews, even those belonging to the Left themselves, do not succeed in relating to Israel objectively. This factor alone has pushed a consistent part of the Italian Jewish communities towards the "Right" to the new populist parties such as the Freedoms' Party (PDL). Indeed, many contradictions will likely continue to arise among all kinds of people identifying themselves as "Leftists". For instance, a journalist like Rossana Rossanda could write in the newspaper of the radical Left *Il Manifesto* (Rossanda, 2003), that she cannot distinguish between a Jew and any other human being, justifying her point as a symbol of non-discrimination and an homage to universal human values. According to her, her attitude was a proof that for the Italian Left there is no specificity attached to being "Jewish, Black, Christian" or belonging to any other ethnical or religious group. However, for the majority of leftist Jews – even among those who fully acknowledge the Palestinians' right to their own state –, the defense of the "Jewish" character of Israel stays as a crucial point.

The former Communist politicians are competing with the Liberal and Rightist parties to commemorate the *Shoah* (the *Holocaust*) and its legacy for the new generations. This new pro-Israel 'dogma' is, though, far overestimated and might subtly hide new emerging social realities. Yithzak Laor, an Israeli author and dramatist, has pointed out in his essay that the universally abided memory of the *Shoah* could serve the current Western political interests more than proving a real drop in anti-Semitism (Laor, 2008: 46). The genocide of the Jews has, indeed, become a common legacy of the West, but this does not mean that racial hatred and persecution have come to an end. The *Shoah* memory, Laor argues, is confined to the past and sheds no light onto the present: furthermore, it carries no longer a universalistic message in relation, for example, to other currently discriminated groups, such as the Roma people. On the contrary, the emphasis put on the *Shoah* memory seems to be an alarming sign of a different development altogether: the fact that the Jews are now inside the "Western club" and deserve to be protected at any cost, whereas the enemy is now located in the Arabic 'East', where the term "East" has not geographical, but rather socio-political and cultural implications. This would also explain why the images of terrorist attacks carried out in Israeli towns and villages arouse identification and stick to the memory of Western TV-audiences much more than the deaths in Gaza on the Palestinian side. The attack on the Twin Towers has spurred further this identification with Western-looking victims killed by Islamic terrorists, an empathy that includes the Israelis as part of the reshuffled "Western family".

<sup>9</sup> Her mother was Ursula Hirschmann, political prisoner confined to Ventotene Island by the Mussolini regime.

## 9. Reconsidering the historical relations between the European Communist Left and Israel

The last decade has seen a steady and worldwide drift to the “Right”, especially in the political discourse on financial and social issues. Meanwhile, the ‘War against Terror’ on Arabic soils in the Middle and Far East has further divided a world that might have slowly reconciled after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Israel too has taken a sharp turn to the Right, traumatized by the failure of the Oslo Agreements and the outbreak of the Second Intifada with hundreds of suicide attacks. The faith in a “strong Right” leadership remains, one that can truly defend the country, even if its political values and policies at the core resemble those of European populist right-wing regimes. The world’s political divide is reduced to a conflict between an Islamic civilization portrayed as “irrational” and dismayed, on one hand, and a prosperous, civilized, and technologically advanced West, championing human rights, on the other. Indeed, it is hard even for the hard-core leftists to identify with Islam as a bulwark of the progressive values they proudly used to ascribe to the Communist bloc.

In this one-dimensional Western world, lacking any political alternatives, the Left has lost its *raison d’être* both in Israel and in Italy; it tries to keep afloat with the aim of distinguishing itself from the Right, though it shares many of the same political premises. The common slogan is ‘to export democracy’. As Piero Fassino, then Secretary of the DS Party (now PD), stated in a roundtable on Israel and the Left in 2005, the new guiding principle of the Left in the Arab-Israeli conflict would have been “two democratic states along each other”, instead of simply two states. These arguments could have been easily made by his colleague and Rightist MP Gianfranco Fini, who made an historical – for a member of the former Fascist extreme right Party – visit to Israel in 2003. The same goes for the current “Leftist” PM Renzi, who solemnly attended the demonstration “For the Truth, for Israel” convened by the think tank SUMMIT in November 2012, gathering in front of the Italian Parliament around 1500 people, waving Israeli and Italian flags, stressing in his speech how the accusations against Israel are potentially undermining the entire democratic civilization.

In light of the PCI-Israeli-Italian Jews triangular relation discussed in this article, the European Left for Israel has not been lost due to a change in the understanding of the workers’ universal values and interests they used to share, neither for the presumed discriminatory attitude of the Jews in the Communist world, nor for the Communist support for Palestinian guerrilla groups. It rather happened because of growing Israeli militarism and nationalism of the Zionist leftist parties and the unsustainability and the consequent erosion of Communist ideals, which emptied the political premises on which the pacifist movement could stand. Similarly, the same relationship has not been restored even after the revolutionary turn of the former PCI in the 90s and the end of the Cold War, precisely because its deterioration was not entirely related to it. In this sense, the turn to the Centre-Right experienced by the Labor party and other leftist Zionist parties in Israel has set an example for the Italian Democratic Party and even anticipated a general trend in Western politics, where the majority of left forces and parties have turned their back at internationalism, self-determination, human rights and multilateralism as genuine values to strive for.

### Short notice

All documents consulted are mainly stored in the two following archives:  
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