## CHAPTER 7

### 1956 Sept – Dec

#### 7.0 International and national events, trends and developments

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<td>France and Britain take Suez affair to UN</td>
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<td>Soviet military pilots arrive in Cairo</td>
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<td>Battle of Algiers begins (ends ’57): FLN bomb fashionable cafés and other civilian venues in the city, from which they had been banned</td>
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<td>Oct.</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>PCI-PSI Pact of ‘Unity of Action’ is changed to a ‘Pact of Consultation’ as a result of the Secret Speech and related issues</td>
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<td>FLN leadership Ahmed Ben Bella, Mohamed Boudiaf, Khider and Aït Ahmed fly from Morocco to Tunisia - aircraft intercepted and forced to land in Algiers by Lacoste and French military, Mollet claims ignorance but l’Express dispute this – Mollet has no choice but to sanction the act</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
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<td>23rd</td>
<td>The Hungarian Revolution erupts: students and workers leading a peaceful demonstration in support of the Poles, independence and democracy at home, are joined by others as events escalated to increasingly violent protest against pro Soviet government.</td>
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<td>23rd</td>
<td>Imre Nagy hurriedly installed as Prime Minister in a move to appease the people, Janos Kadar substitutes Gerö as Secretary of ‘Party’ (plan to change its name).</td>
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<td>25th</td>
<td>Decision to ask Moscow for military support (Nagy agrees) to contain violence, but this intensifies in Budapest between revolutionary and counter revolutionary factions when shots fired from Headquarters of AVO, scores of fatalities, unrest spreads to other cities.</td>
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<td>27th - 30th</td>
<td>Suez Crisis begins, Israel invades the Sinai Peninsula and Nagy forms new government and sets out plans for reformist changes, abolition of the AVO Secret Police, the one-party system, and for Soviet troops stationed in Hungary to leave. Wyszynski freed in Poland, speaks in support of Revolution.</td>
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<td>28th</td>
<td>Anglo-French attack Suez to force re-opening of Canal and pushes CGIL Di Vittorio’s opposition to intervention.</td>
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<td>29th</td>
<td>Suez Crisis begins; Israel invades Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula and pushes Egyptian forces back towards Suez Canal. Rome: a group of prominent intellectuals sign petition to the PCI leadership to denounce Soviet interventions. USA suspends aid to Israel.</td>
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<td>30th</td>
<td>More violence in Budapest results in further fatalities, but Soviet reinforcements retreat to countryside. Hungary attempts to leave the Warsaw Pact. Soviet troops leave Budapest. UK and France bomb Egypt by air. Egyptian government breaks relations with France and UK, sequestrating all properties.</td>
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<td>Nov</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Soviet troops and tanks return to Budapest and all major cities to crush revolution, occupy airport and main road networks more than 20,000 killed, ¼ million leave country, Imre Nagy arrested (hanged 2 years later)</td>
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<td>5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Franco-British raid on Canal and Port Said</td>
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<td>5-6&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Ultimatums from SU / US to France and UK to stop the belligerence</td>
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<td>Pietro Nenni makes harsh criticism of Soviet interventions, refuses to attend October Revolution celebrations at Soviet Embassy</td>
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<td>15&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>October Revolution commemoration</td>
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<td>UN General Assembly demands that UK and France withdraw from Egypt immediately</td>
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<td>18&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary</td>
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<td>20&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Anticommunist protest in Paris, PCF Headquarters burned by fascists</td>
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<td>23&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>UN emergency forces arrive in Egypt</td>
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<td>23&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Israel denounced by UN</td>
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<td>29&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>UN censures SU over Hungary</td>
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<td>29&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Suez Crisis causes petrol rationing in UK</td>
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| Dec | 2<sup>nd</sup> | Castro and followers land in Cuba to begin campaign of guerrilla war to overthrow Bastia |
|     | 8<sup>th</sup> | Togliatti’s address to 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of PCI |
|     | 18<sup>th</sup> | Numerous intellectuals leave the PCI in protest to the Soviet interventions in Hungary, dissatisfied with Togliatti’s response of its having been a ‘tragic necessity’ (but from that point he steers the PCI in a more autonomous direction) |
|     | 23<sup>rd</sup> | Japan becomes member of UN |
|     | 23<sup>rd</sup> | British and French troops leave Suez Canal region |
|     | 24<sup>th</sup> | Froger made president of the Federation of Mayors of Algiers and virulent spokesman for colons |
|     | 29<sup>th</sup> | Paris reprisals over appointment of Froger |
|     | 29<sup>th</sup> | Lacoste gives free hand to Massu to crush insurgents |
Figures 1-6 (Szonyi, 2006).
13 Days

The Hungarian Revolution of October and November 1956 may not have succeeded in terms of resulting in a radical, immediate and permanent regime change, however it must be considered a revolutionary episode due to its truly insurrectionary nature, its significance and implications. Victor Sebestyen describes its iconic status on the post-war landscape as:

‘The story of heroic failure, of awe inspiring courage in a doomed cause, and of ruthless cruelty. A small nation, its people armed with little more than rifles and petrol bombs, had the will to rise up against one of world’s superpowers …’. (Sebestyen, 2007, p. xxiii).

It far surpassed events in Poland that summer not only in terms of mobilisation and violence but in political consequence vis-à-vis the Socialist Bloc, the communist movement as a whole and the international community (Prażmowska, 2010, pp. 184-8).

The de-Stalinisation process announced to the world by Khrushchev in February had unleashed a pent-up desire for change across Eastern Europe, and it was inevitable that those in Soviet satellite countries whose governments, to all intents and purposes, lagged behind the seemingly new-style Soviet leadership, would seek to make their voices heard. Thus on 23rd October, spurred on by events and

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2 (Szonyi, 2006).
developments in Poland, an authorised and peaceful demonstration by lecturers and students of the Technological University of Budapest, along with writers and other young people, got underway in the centre of the capital. Approximately 50,000 demonstrators that morning congregated at the monument to General Josef Bem, Polish hero of the first Hungarian Revolution 1848-9, after which, in ranks of ten, the demonstrators marched to Parliament Square. As the day went on, those gathered were joined by inhabitants of Budapest and other towns. By 7 pm, demonstrators and supporters numbered approximately 200,000, (Jenö & Horváth, 1999, p. 133).

The fact that in the time since the Poznan riots there had been certain concessions made to the Polish people’s demands on the part of their government had also given rise to optimism in Hungary. There had nevertheless been a crucial difference between events in Poland a few months earlier and those in Hungary that October. The movement for change this time had essentially been student-led, therefore a more critical and bolder approach to the problematic had been adopted from the outset, as the country’s more progressive, more radical elements had placed political reform at the top of the agenda:

Point 1 of their manifesto: ‘We demand the immediate evacuation of all Soviet troops, in conformity with the provision of the Treaty of Peace. (Sebestyen, 2006, p. 301)

Further Points stipulated demands for comprehensive economic, industrial and cultural change. However, what would start in Budapest that day as a show of solidarity with the Poles and in collective demands for a rollout of democratic reforms, would by that evening have spiraled into a determined and bloody revolt against the Soviet controlled People’s Republic of Hungary.

Imre Nagy had been unaware of the scheduled demonstration, and had travelled in to the capital from Lake Baletov during the day to lend it his support. He was a popular figure, a reformer, released from house arrest months before by the government in a
visible if token concession to de-Stalinisation. It had been Point 3 of the students’ manifesto that he be reinstated as Prime Minister. At 6 pm Nagy made an impromptu speech, addressing the crowd firstly as: ‘Comrades’ then correcting himself, as ‘Compatriots and friends’. It is perhaps not surprising, given the explicit anti-Soviet substance of the demands, that from this point, an unplanned but instinctive sentiment of nationalism introduced itself into the proceedings. At approximately 7.30 pm the students had gone to the offices of Radio Hungary to attempt to have their manifesto broadcast. The station refused, and instead a speech by communist hard-liner and General Secretary of the Hungarian Working People's Party Ernő Gerő was transmitted, condemning the demonstrations - which only succeeded in adding fuel to the fire. The Hungarian authorities had completely misread the situation and this in itself was testament to the extent to which they were at that point out of touch with the popular mood.

The first shots were fired by the Secret Police (AVO) agents - into the air initially - but then into the crowds. The response was of astonishing proportions; spontaneous yet resolute, now decidedly nationalistic in character and overtly anti-government / anti-Soviet. The uprising had begun. The Communist Party 4 Headquarters in Republic Square was attacked, fire arms appropriated by demonstrators from small groups of police, militia and arsenals as opportunities arose. That night it was decided that the only option open to the government would be in fact to give-in to popular demand by reinstating Nagy as Prime Minister the following day, and Janos Kadar as Secretary of the party. The decision to ask Moscow for help was made at the same time by the new body politik. A unanimous decision, it was seen by Nagy and Kadar at that point as a necessary measure to contain the unprecedented violence on the streets.

It was a confused situation nonetheless, for the government, the new incumbents and the people alike. The flood-gates of popular protest that had been opened could not be

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3 Nagy had served as a reformist Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the People’s Republic of Hungary from 1953–1955. On18 April 1955 he was stripped of his office after falling out of favour with the Soviet Politburo. (Sebestyen, 2006, pp.67-76).

4 I.e. The Hungarian Working People’s Party.
closed overnight. Factions were varied and entrenched as forces and interests loyal to the established authority reacted whilst many of the objectives of the revolutionaries now seemed tantalisingly attainable. Over the week that followed there was further fighting in the streets of Budapest and in other cities in Hungary involving people from a broad sociological base including young people and freedom fighters. Soviet symbols were destroyed, factories were occupied by workers’ councils and there was a call for a general strike. On the 25th October there were particularly violent clashes outside the Parliament building when shots were fired into milling crowds in the square from the AVO Headquarters, resulting in approximately one hundred civilian casualties, and a further twenty five civilians would be gunned down by the authorities on 30th October.

However on that day, Soviet troops suddenly retreated to the countryside in a deliberate manoeuvre that would buy the authorities time and instill a false sense of victory amongst the people. It worked, and a period of elation and relative calm ensued, although, as is the way with revolutions, reprisals by those in different camps

5 (Szonyi, 2006).
on their adversaries continued on the streets of the capital, and would do so for weeks. Between the 23rd of October and 4th November Britain and France invaded Suez, Nagy declared Hungary’s withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact, and all the time machinations were afoot between Janos Kadar, Moscow (hard-line Molotov pushed for intervention) and those in the new Hungarian government opposed to change.

The Hungarian Revolution had been one of the first and certainly the most dramatic episodes of its kind to be immediately televised around the globe. In cinemas, bars and the few living rooms in Western Europe that could boast a television set, it was vividly portrayed in film footage as proof of Soviet tyranny, ruthlessness and duplicity. In the Communist press, which was the only real media outlet that has ever been accessible to communists in the West, it was portrayed unequivocally as a counter-revolution on the part of Horthyists that had been aided and abetted by the Western powers, and the continued violence on the streets after 24th as a wave ‘white terror’ being meted out to a population loyal to the Communist regime.

6 Other ways of getting their position across to the party faithful and sympathisers included distributing tracts, holding public meetings and via the activities of flanking organisations (all of which are still very relevant today in the life and functioning of the party, and they support more technologically advance methods of spreading the word).

7 (Szonyi, 2006).
This was consequently used as the rationale for the second Soviet intervention on 4th November when 8 Red Army divisions backed-up by air power invaded Budapest, occupied airports, major road networks and other cities on a mission to crush the insurrection once and for all, which of course it did. The Soviet invasion had been met however, with fierce opposition on the part of Hungarian freedom fighters who, having tasted the beginnings of democratic reform, fought on valiantly against the might of the Red Army for another week in the vain hope that help would be forthcoming from the international community - as they had been led to believe by the saturation propaganda of Radio Free Europe.

The Soviet interventions in Budapest shocked the world by their expeditious and brutal nature that resulted in 2,500 dead, 13,000 wounded and 200,000 fleeing as refugees via Austria to the West. The rest of the world could only look-on in suspended animation at this latest turn in Soviet policy played-out, whilst the two most important powers in Western Europe had joined forces with Israel in attacking and invading Egypt.

7.1 Representation of events
Newspapers editors were not so much spoiled for choice in the autumn months of 1956 as to which news items should lead each day, rather they were faced with the daily dilemma of just how many dramatic situations / developments / events of global dimensions they could feasibly get onto one front page? The quickening crescendo of the Suez Crisis; the on-going turmoil in Algeria including the inception of the Battle of Algiers and the military hijacking of an airplane and kidnapping of FLN leaders on route to a summit meeting with other North African leaders, which was condoned, to all intents and purposes, by the French government; Polish October and the twists and turns of de-Stalinisation that had held the world’s attention since February that year and not least of these - the Soviet interventions in Budapest / the Suez debacle. All of these issues required up-to-the-minute and continuous reporting, debate and analysis. Certainly, the right-wing news media

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8 See Al Dib, 1985, pp. 188-92 for more information on this development.
exploited the Soviet involvement in Hungary in October and November for all it was worth and indeed, despite everything else that was occurring at the time, the situation there remained a *cause célèbre* in this sector of the media until well into December and even into the spring of 1957, in one form or another. As usual, our communities were passive recipients of this type of news coverage and the informants seem to have handled it with the usual skepticism, as exemplified here by Baptisin Colonna in La Seyne:

‘The bourgeois press jumped on it – of course – there was one example I remember ‘communism raises man up’ and there was a picture of a man who had been hanged …’, (Colonna, personal communication, August 3, 2009).

The grisly image Monsieur Colonna is referring to had also, ironically, been used in the Italian communist daily newspaper *l’Unità* on 4th November to support the Soviet claims of ‘white terror’ on the streets of Budapest:


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9 (Unità dell’Italia settentrionale, January 4, 1956)
When and where events converged, the mainstream print media invariably featured
the Soviet actions as the leading headline followed, usually, by events in Egypt. The
nature of the coverage given to each of these issues was also, of course, different,
with the former vilified and the latter given a far more sympathetic treatment. As
already stated, the local and regional mainstream publications in each of our case-
locations was less measured and more indulgent than the national press and as would
be expected, it made much of the Soviet involvement in Hungary, as the small
selection of local headlines below from the Var region and Venezia-Giulia
demonstrates:

‘HUNGARY: NEW INVASION BY SOVIETS …
More Soviet troops arrive in Hungary …
Nagy asks the 4 powers to guarantee Hungary’s neutrality …
EGYPT: PREPARATION FOR THE LANDINGS INTENSIFY ..

‘AS SOVIET TANKS HEAD TOWARDS BUDAPEST THE
HUNGARIANS PREPARE TO DEFEND THEMSELVES …

Troops at the ready in Cyprus
AS THOSE OF NASSER DEFEATED IN SINAI’ (“Mentre le forze
corazzate sovietiche si dirigono sulla capital”, November 3, 1956, p.1).

‘THE SOVIETS SHOW CONTEMPT FOR HUMANITY IN
LAUNCHING A HORRIFIC AND BLOODY SALVO ON POOR
HUNGARY!
Tens of thousands killed and injured, Nagy arrested as pro-Soviets seize
power ..

HELP US! HELP US! Hungarian patriots cry’ (“Les russes se mettent

‘PORT SAID IN THE HANDS OF FRANCO-BRITISH FORCES ...
BULGANIN IGNORES THE MASSACRE OF THE HUNGARIAN
PEOPLE BY RED ARMY TANKS, AND THREATENS TO
INTERVENE IN FAVOUR OF NASSER’ (“Port Said in mano ai
franco-britanici”, November 6, 1956, p.1).


‘The pitiless Soviet repression continues as thousands of young people are deported to Siberia’ (‘L’impitoyable répression russe continue de milliers de jeunes hongrois ont été déportés en Siberie’, November 16, 1956, p. 1).

The perpetual antagonism between the SFIO and the PCF in La Seyne at the level of local politics took on an even sharper edge at this time and as per usual, it was chronicled in the local press for all to share. 10 The mainstream publications lost no opportunity to exploit the widespread criticism of the Soviet Union at the national level, to denigrate the communist administration in local government with the Mayor, **Toussaint Merle**, the subject of acerbic personal attacks, as these article extracts that coincide with events in Hungary show:

‘Communism, far from being good and noble, is nothing other than a smokescreen that hides dark and tragic truths. It serves the fevered and frenetic ambitions of fascist dictators because your Stalins, your Hitlers, Mussolinis – Nasser – are all cut from the same cloth.

And it is both comic and tragic to watch a vulgar local wide-boy trying to emulate them.’ (Lamarque, 1956)

‘Since events in Hungary – a wave of emotion has engulfed the population of La Seyne … walls have been enscribed with blood-red slogans such as: ‘Blood-drenched Budapest’, avenues and streets have been ‘re-baptised’: ‘Remember Budapest …’, (Coulet, 1956).

Meanwhile, the Mayor himself counter-attacked with generic political argument via LPVM:

10 In such instances it could be said that fact the communists had their own daily newspaper in La Seyne and Toulon in which to make their case, unlike their Italian counterparts in Monfalcone and Gorizia, actually made matters worse, in that in this way automatic and immediate ripostes from their political opponents were guaranteed, exacerbating an existing reality.
‘It is the role of M. Coulet and of Méridionale to defend capitalism. It should not be that of Socialists Midon and Lamarque in Le Provençale and the République.

In reality, Midon and Lamarque …... cannot continue to justify their lamentable campaign against our administration vis-à-vis their readers who are at this moment enjoying the benefits of our social projects …’, (Merle, 1956).

News of events in Budapest was naturally presented very differently in the Communist press in both of our case-locations. The uprising in Hungary was presented as a ‘foreign’ affair; parallels were now made with Poznan with reports constantly stressing its counter-revolutionary nature; also stressed was that the Soviet interventions had been in response to a request for help on the part of the Hungarian government; the Soviet military’s handling of events as they unfolded was portrayed as skillful, considered and a success; and precedence was given to the contemporaneous Western imperialist adventures in North Africa, and to the neo-fascist threat in Europe as witnessed in the right-wing backlash at this time in many continental Western European cities. Below is a selection of headlines from this sector of the press in both case-locations at this time that demonstrates the way in which, as at other difficult moments, the party had turned in on itself as a reflex action:

‘THE LOYALTY OF THE POLES TO SOCIALISM RECONFIRMED

…..

THE SOCIALIST GOVERNMENT IN HUNGARY HAS THWARTED AN ATTACK BY BANDS OF COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARIES’


The PCF Polit Bureau issued a brief to its Propaganda and Communications section at this time concerning the content of press coverage: ‘Continue to underline strongly that it is the reactionary elements whipped-up by foreign imperialist powers that are at the origin of the uprising in Budapest. Remind readers that despite the attempted counter-revolution and the efforts of the imperialists, the long march to socialism continues although its path is constantly obstructed by its enemies. (PCF, Bureau Politique, 26th October, 1956)
‘TO PREVENT COUNTER-REVOLUTION AND COUNTER INTERNATIONAL PROVOCATIONS - SOVIET TROOPS INTERVENE IN HUNGARY TO STOP THE ANARCHY AND WHITE TERROR THAT STALK THE CITY ....


‘VIOLENT COMBAT AND DEADLY BOMBING RAID ON PORT-SAID’ (‘Violents combats et bombardements meurtriers à Port-Said’, November 6, 1956, p.11).

‘TENSION EVER-PRESENT IN NORTH AFRICA /
Whipped-up by counter-revolutionary forces,
UPRISING AVOIDED IN BUDAPEST,
Newly instated President Imre Nagy calls on Soviet troops to intervene and fight along-side workers and the people (‘La tension subsiste dans l’Afrique du nord’, November 24, 1956, p.1).

The lack of reliable information in the exclusively mainstream broadcast media was also a factor that had been noted and commented on at the time by informants in relation our events. 

For example, Lucien Conac makes an interesting observation regarding news footage of ‘Soviet’ tanks on the streets of Budapest:

‘One thing struck me over Budapest, when we looked at the news about the Soviet tanks that went into Hungary and I swear, with a friend from Marseille – he was called Bravo – he was the first to see it – when we saw the tanks which were camouflaged, we saw a sign ‘Carpianne’, which is the tank base next to Marseille – it was a false picture! The TV station that obviously didn’t have enough reportage from Hungary, had used a picture of tanks in a training exercise in France! It’s like once they showed post-men in shorts in the winter to say that things were working normally when there was a strike on – they often did things like that .... so regarding Hungary that was another reason to doubt the West’s version of events - so when I first saw Budapest I asked myself questions but then ..... for me, if the Soviets went in there had to be a

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12 In this way it can be seen that critical awareness in communist communities was far from lacking, in fact it could be said that in many ways it was more acute than in other communities.
good reason – to defend the socialist camp – I decided that it was a necessary evil …’,

_Do you know of anyone who left the party over Budapest?_

I’ve never heard of anyone – I really don’t think so … well there were people who left the party I know – but not at the base – it was all part of the Cold War – it wasn’t really important you know to those at the base of the party – it wasn’t ‘the revolution’ …’, (Conac, personal communication, October 10, 2008).

**Baptistin Colonna** makes the allied point that not all sources of information lend themselves to the same interpretive processes, and that visual imagery in the form of film footage in cinemas or on television for example is inherently different from the written word, in that the moving image is easier to manipulate:

‘You can re-read things but film images are fleeting …’, (Colonna, personal communication, August 3, 2009).

**Suzanne Bertrand** recalls her memories of the interventions, and she describes a context in which the ever-present spectre of Algeria eclipsed / confounded the issue:

‘We saw all the tanks and things – so we talked about it in the cell – we (communists) were strong at that time and had two in this district - but you know it was Algeria that occupied our minds at the time – our kids were going out there – they left from Toulon and Marseille – right here – mine in the end didn’t have to go, they’d been too young - but all those who did … and Algeria was different – it was part of France …’,

_Do you know anyone who left the party over Budapest?_

‘No – I know of no-one at that moment who felt strongly enough about the events in Hungary to leave the party – we might not have been happy with it all – no-one was happy about it - but to leave the party ….? Algeria was just more important to us than Soviets going into Hungary …’, (Bertrand, personal communication, October 14, 2008).

**Jacques Brémond** remembers that time, describing what was the confused representation of events in La Seyne and Toulon:
‘But we didn’t have TV – people told us (about Budapest) or we had to go to someone’s house who did (have TV) – we had radio – we heard news about Hungary, the demonstrators attacking Soviet tanks – burning them …’,

The Monsieur Brémond’s testimony highlights the polyvalence of images, language, associations, as events and developments are interpreted according to political persuasions:

‘… but the Soviets didn’t have orders to shoot – they were attacking the soldiers - at the time, a counter revolution was very feasible - we said in the Arsenal ‘that’s a counter revolution they’ve got there! what are they waiting for to intervene?! - the Soviets didn’t react for ages – we thought – what’s going on?’, (Brémond, personal communication, October 15, 2008).

He explains the thinking amongst his comrades in the naval shipyards in Toulon that autumn, talking of Stalin as though he were still alive at that point, as indeed many informants do in their interviews:

‘We believed in Stalin – and it has to be said that Hungary had been on the side of the fascists during the war … for the majority of the workers these events were non-events – the workers weren’t bothered about Budapest - they trusted the party cadres …’, (Brémond, personal communication, October 15, 2008).

He goes on to state that:

‘Everyday things were more important to us – salaries, safety at work etc. and the anti-communists (in France) were calling for the end of Communism - taking advantage of the situation – yes the Congress of Independents were calling for the outlawing of communism – all of this made the militants even more loyal …’,

Did you believe that it was a counter coup taking place in Hungary at the time?

‘Yes – it might have escalated to other states wanting autonomy – snowball – and we had a big problem of our own in France – Algeria …’,

13 It must be remembered that in 1956, the possibility of work-place injuries and indeed fatalities were a daily reality in heavy and specialised industries such as ship-building, chemicals and for port workers (and in fact, or course, in 1956 the asbestos time bomb was ticking).
So were the Soviet interventions in Budapest important for you at the time?

‘Yes - because we didn’t know how it would turn out …’,

But let me get this straight - not in the sense that you doubted the Soviet Union?

‘Yes – that’s it …’,

Were there people who left the party following the interventions?

‘Yes there were – intellectuals …’,

And amongst the rank and file?

No no no – not the rank and file – you know intellectuals are very able – no-one can deny that - but they don’t understand certain things …’,

(Brémond, personal communication, October 15, 2008).

Paule Giloux shares her recollections of 1956 and explains the intensity of her feelings at the time regarding the verbal attacks on the Soviet Union on the part of detractors:

‘My memories are very distinct - when Budapest happened it was impossible for the rank and file to have an opinion that ran counter to that of the party position – they were all convinced – including me – I remember my reactions – they were very violent – against those who criticised the Soviet Union – it was out of character for me to be that passionate – you have to understand everything that was going on – the reaction of the media – it was full of criticism – very, very harsh – of the Soviets – the right-wing howled like wolves – and so if we questioned things – even if we had had doubts – it was like we were being traitors – that was how it was for us at the base – for everyone I knew – at the time, for us, it was a counter-revolution - Hungary had participated in the war against the Soviet Union and we had the impression that it was people who wanted to re-establish fascism – so everyone was violently against them – my reaction was very violent – I could have easily hit anyone who didn’t agree – the very thought that the Soviets were the aggressors – I remember vividly …’,

Do you know anyone who left the party because of Budapest?
‘No – I don’t know any – no - I don’t know any - there were one or two who had their doubts – mind you – you couldn’t say that too loudly .. eh? you see it was that – you were either in the West camp – even Franco put his ore in asking for international intervention – or you were on the other - Prague was different however - there we asked more questions …’, (Giloux, personal communication, October 10, 2008).

**Vesel Gorazd** – a journalist from Gorizia attests that in his experience:

‘Ideology is like a drug – like the church – ordinary rank and file don’t ask questions – they believed in the party line …’, (Vesel, personal communication, May 4, 2010).

**Luisa Franco** is the daughter of **Aldo Franco** who was a mid-level cadre in Monfalcone in 1956. Here she talks with a degree of hindsight:

‘We didn’t really know what was happening – we had the information the Soviet Union gave us – and here we had the Christian Democrats saying the most awful things – and we had Il Piccolo - the United States had been involved in lots of things – at the base of the party they all thought that the interventions were right and proper because there was deviation there ...

My dad was for the interventions, that’s what the majority thought – especially dad, he’d been a shipyard worker – there was this two blocs thing – you were either on one side or the other – there was no room for doubt – for Czechoslovakia we were able to understand more although my dad kept his position on Hungary - dad was convinced that the interventions were right – that there was a counter revolution that wanted to subvert the Soviet Bloc …’, (Franco, personal communication, June, 15, 2010).

**Renato Papais** talks of the outright rejection of the notion that the Soviet Union could be the aggressors in the situation unfolding in Budapest. Like so many of the informants, makes the Freudian slip of referring to Stalin the person, as though he were still alive, as opposed to Stalinist policies:

‘It was inconceivable – no-one could believe it - that the Soviet Union would go in and occupy a satellite state … inconceivable – and anyway – we were Stalinist – we were with Stalin – the overwhelming majority
here was with Stalin …’,

(Papais, personal communication, June 14, 2010).

In Turriaco, Mario Mauchigna describes succinctly what he and his colleagues thought at this time:

‘Our conclusion was that it had been external forces, those of capitalism, that had penetrated that society and whipped-up a counter revolution …’,

he adds in retrospect:

‘Obviously it was a very narrow analysis …’, (Mauchigna, personal communication, June 13, 2010).

With regard to communist perceptions in La Seyne and Toulon during our period, Jean-Claude Autran makes a general but very germane point - that whether at party meetings or as informal debate between ordinary comrades:

‘If Budapest was discussed – the party press will have been the reference …’, 14 (Autran, personal communication, October 1, 2008).

As does Alberto Clemente, with a degree of retrospection:

‘Ordinary communists read l’Unità – or other party publications - so they couldn’t have known the background to things …’, (Clemente, personal communication, November 29, 2009).

Such testimonies also provide a clear example of the degree to which informants are able to distinguish between past and present contexts (this can be seen to greater advantage in Chapter 8).

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14 As similar example of the way in which mid-level cadres would feel confident, when in doubt, in taking l’Humanité as their reference is provided here by Giovanni Sini: ‘I’m not cultured but reading l’Humanité – the editorials – there are philosophers, economists, who address the problems the workers had in the world of work – so I used to take bits of what they said and include them in what I wrote and put it up on the walls of the factory – the boss used to tell his secretary to photo-graphs them and he used to say ‘You didn’t write that!’ and I always said I did!’ (Sini, personal communication, August 3, 2009). Jean-Claude Autran also attests to the official organ of the PCF’s being a key reference for mid-level cadres in conducting cell and section meetings ‘My dad used to underline bits of l’Humanité to read out later at meetings.
7.2 Historical references

The proximity of WW2 for our communities, both in time and space, must not be forgotten. In La Seyne, there was a constant and highly visible reminder of the war in a) the reconstruction process that was still very much underway in 1956 (making good the 60% bomb damage); and b) in the tensions and rivalry the role the communists had played during the war (and on which their post 1945 political successes were based) elicited in their main political rivals. In Monfalcone, the constant reminder of WW2 was in the post-war austerity of a defeated country that had been particularly acute in this region and particularly felt by our community due to the many and interrelated geopolitical and historical factors already discussed.\(^{15}\) It was also in the continuing presence of right-wing authority in the town and in the Province that was the result of a lack of purging in state institutions at the Liberation that was particularly pronounced in this region due to those same geopolitical and historic factors.\(^{16}\) For the populations of all participating nations and not least for

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15 The high levels of post-war austerity that persisted in continental Europe quite apart from national or regional problems of this type our communities faced must be retained. In Monfalcone, these problems were in many ways worse than in La Seyne, where even though wages were low and post-war reconstruction still very much underway, the economy was relatively buoyant, and morale was sustained by the success of the Communists’ in political power at the local level. Italy had lost the war, and as well as the particular austerity that had occasioned, the political and economic plight of communists in the region, and not least Monfalcone as the industrial hub and communist bastion, weighed heavily on our community. With regard to economic conditions between 1945 and September 1947, there was little industrial investment in the region (and indeed even after that point it was ‘calculated.’). When the region was returned to Italy in 1947, its borders were modified and half of the Province of Gorizia was ceded to Yugoslavia. As a result, its economy was adversely affected and it was designated a Free Zone in 1948 when tax restrictions on the movement of staple and consumer goods between Yugoslavia and the Province were lifted. The benefits of this new status however were not directed towards our community. As we have seen, Communists were discriminated against on the part of the established authorities in the region in terms of housing, obtaining employment, and as regards pay and conditions in the workplace housing etc. often in favour of the influxes of ‘esuli’ or Italian speaking Yugoslavian exiles from Tito’s new Republic.

16 This did not mean that all those who held positions in the public sector were former fascists or fascist sympathisers (although many were either / or), but it did mean, in a small town like Monfalcone, that many of them had been and still were anti-communists. The Togliatti Amnesty of June 1946 that had been made in the spirit of reconciliation had of course facilitated this phenomenon and had resulted in pre-war state and para-state apparatuses remaining in place. Guido Russi describes the situation he found on his return from Yugoslavia in 1947: ‘I was happy because I was home – expelled from Yugoslavia – I’d been in prison – no documents – I went to get documents in Town Hall – they knew me – and I said: ‘‘Opportunist!’’ – they’d done an about face - but they were sitting in the same seats! That’s the power of the economy for you ….’. (Russi, personal communication, December 14, 2009). Dino Zanuttin had also been imprisoned in Yugoslavia and he describes the situation he found on his return to Monfalcone in
communists at this time, WW2 was a clear and present memory, and its influence on perceptions in the autumn of 1956 cannot be overstated.  

In La Seyne René Merle talks of his father’s mindset and that of his colleagues on the local Council at that conjuncture, so shortly after their war experiences.

‘They were all Resisters – the war was still fresh in their minds – 11 years – it’s not long eh? …’,

and for them the attitude of the Western powers was further proof of the probity of the Soviet Union:

‘Budapest only reinforced their opinions – like the banning of the German Communist Party …’, (Merle, personal communication, May 21, 2010).

Hungary’s fascist past was mentioned repeatedly in the French informants’ testimonies in particular, and there is little doubt that it contributed to their evaluation of the Soviet interventions. The fact that it was referred to far less frequently by the Italian informants is perhaps indicative of the more immediate, more empirical understandings of history on the part of informants in Monfalcone and Gorizia compared to the more schematic understandings of those in La Seyne and in Toulon (see Chapter 8). When it was referred to in the Italian study, it was invariably on the part of the senior cadres in the regional party structure, several of whom were also intellectuals and who, arguably, were predisposed to taking a broad political, ideological and historical perspective (see below).  

1950: ‘In the meantime stuff had happened that we couldn’t even have imagined – around here reactionary forces had re-established themselves, there was a backlash against those who had fought in the War of Liberation – against the partisans – against communists - people came back to find that those who had fought for the region to become part of Yugoslavia were isolated, they couldn’t find work, they were “in the wrong”, and it had given a victory to those that had opposed us …’, Signor Zanuttin explains that the right-wing was firmly established, first and foremost in the public administration system: ‘Those Italians thought they were superior – they managed everything – but besides that, being in the Christian Democrat Party in that period meant that you could get a job – but those things aren’t written in books – but they determine individual choices …’, (Zanuttin, personal communication, October 15, 2009).

In continental Europe in the mid-1950s, the cautionary power of WW2 in terms of ‘clashes of civilizations’ or ‘wars of ideas’ can perhaps be compared to perceptions of ‘9 / 11’ at the time of writing.

This lack of attention to the Hungarian connection may seem a little surprising, given that the Venezia-Giulia region had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire for over a century. It must be remembered however, that the collective memory in the region of this period was largely
Another example of the way in which understandings of history seem to differ across the samples is that informants in La Seyne and Toulon would frequently and automatically offer a comparison between the Soviet interventions in Hungary in 1956 and those twelve years later in Czechoslovakia, identifying the latter rather than the former as the point at which ordinary communists in the West started to distance themselves from an automatic allegiance to the Soviet Union. Whereas again, it would be those who had held positions of responsibility within the party structure that did this in the Italian study, and the more senior the cadre, the more likely s/he would make the reference. In La Seyne, Dr. Paul Richard shares his recollections of that time:

‘I didn’t care that much about Hungary – it had been a fascist country – they fought alongside Hitler – so it wasn’t impossible that there were still people there of that opinion … the party - and all of us – we didn’t have any problems with the interventions – there was a rebellion (in Hungary) – the government called its allies to help – that’s all – and we were a long way away – it didn’t pose particular problems …’,

Was there a lot of discussion about it between communists? Did anyone leave the party?

‘No - we were all agreed - I think all communists in France reacted the same way as we did for Budapest …

… 500 members left the Federation between 1956-7?! are you sure? well if that’s right I don’t think it will be because of Budapest – maybe Algeria?’, (George, personal communication, May 21, 2010).

In La Seyne, Jeannine Bechet emphasises the implications of Hungary’s pre-war and WW2 history for the stability of that region:

‘The Soviets weren’t letting them get away with it – they (Hungarians) were in the Warsaw Pact - that’s what I thought immediately – then when I heard who was mixed-up in it – Majinski - and others – I smelt a rat …’,

positive. The Empire had been a relatively liberal and progressive political entity, and certainly when compared to the Fascist regime installed in 1920, had been eminently preferable.
Madame Bechet also expresses the widely held view across the extended sample that the revolt had been very much the concern of the Soviet Union, and that that country had been more than justified in dealing with it in its own way. It was, after all, occurring in its own backyard:

‘… it didn’t bother me at all – I said – it’s one government coming to the aid of another – they’d been on Hitler’s side just a few years earlier! I said ‘this trouble must be related to the Horthyists pure and simple’ – and it was the very existence of the Soviet Union that was in question – it was right next door! – imagine if the same thing happened in France, that we decided to have a revolution, do you think that the Americans wouldn’t have swarmed in? – they’d have been down on us like a ton of bricks – and that includes the Germans!

So you believed the Soviet version concerning the Hungarian Revolution?

‘I never met a communist who had doubts about it …’.

Did you discuss it?

‘We didn’t discuss it – or hardly at all – it didn’t concern us – they (non-communists) were always accusing us of having our eyes on the Soviet Union – but the Eastern Bloc countries – it was their problem – not ours …

When a friend of mine ’phoned me about Budapest I remember I said: ‘I won’t lose any sleep over it!’

and continuing in retrospect (see Chapter 8):

‘I probably wouldn’t have answered like that now because I’ve evolved too! - when we’re active politically we don’t always have time to think – we don’t always have our heads in books you know … when I saw the violence there against communists – nothing at the time made me think that the Hungarians could have been trying to gain their freedom – nothing …’, (Bechet, personal communication, August 18, 2009).

Baptistin Colonna (La Seyne) gives a matching account:

‘We can’t exonerate the history of Hungary during the war – things don’t come out of nowhere – counter-revolutions can happen at any moment … and remember that the Hungarian bourgeoisie had been terrible …’, (Colonna, personal communication, August 3, 2009).
Maurice Oustrière describes another contributing factor to the informants’ reluctance to find fault with the Soviet Union:

‘You have to think that at that time – who was criticising the Soviet Union and international communism? - it was groups who were for the most part affiliated with Nazism, so if you opened your mouth, you were suspect … we didn’t want to criticise the Soviet Union was because often people who did were the same who killed and tortured in Algeria – and there was the fact that Hungary had been on the wrong side in the war … and there was a CIA connection in the Hungary issue …’, (Oustrière, personal communication, October 23, 2008).

What is evident is that antipathy towards the United States was paramount in all of the informants’ thinking at this time, as attested to here by Andrian Gastone in Aquilea:

‘90% of Italian communists were against the revolution in Hungary because we considered that it was a manoeuvre on the part of international imperialism that had agitated things over there and this was the result - we discussed it and even though we thought that the communist government over there should have seen that there was malcontent due to specific problems – economic – and not taken measures to fix things - I think they underestimated the West’s intentions and capacity to sabotage things in Eastern Block against Soviet Union …

We said ‘He (Khrushchev) criticises Stalin saying he had been dictator etc. and look what he’s doing now!’ - he didn’t give enough importance to the part the imperialists played and the capitalist press in undermining Soviet Union and making a split between it and these people - Khrushchev himself sent tanks into Hungary …. he couldn’t blame Stalin for that!’

19 Delka Dornic talks of her instinctive loyalty to Moscow at the time because of the heroic role that country had played in the war, the sacrifices made by the Red Army and the consequent debt Europeans owed to the Soviet Union. She was therefore disinclined to doubt their intentions at the time of the interventions. She expresses a widely felt frustration at the dominant historical discourse in the West that privileges the role the Allies played in the Liberation of Europe: ‘Whenever they do any commemorations of WW2 they always talk about the Normandy landings – 10.000 dead – not Stalingrad! the Soviets lost 25.000! (20 million circa) they suffered the most! I’ve got nothing against American soldiers – they just follow orders – but what were they waiting for in Montecassino all that time? After the war the Soviets had nothing – not a thing – nothing to eat, no roofs over their heads, do you know how many died in concentration camps? at least some Jews survived – but not the Soviets – if it hadn’t been for them …’, (Dornic, personal communication, June 4, 2010).

20 In a shared interview Silvano Morsolin and Mario Candotto discuss the time of the interventions. Signor Candotto was one of the very few anarchists in the shipyards in 1956.
How many people left the party over Budapest?

‘Very few – actually I can tell you straight away - almost no-one – in Aquilea for example just one – Loris Fortuna – a doctor – joined the PSI - went on to become a Senator oh, and there was Zigainer the painter from over in Cervignano – both intellectuals …’, (Andrian, personal communication, December 7, 2009).

Paule Giloux

‘The Americans would have kept Petain - they could have got their hands on the colonies or something like that - they had already named governors for all the cities in France – AMGOT – but the town halls and préfectures had already been taken by the Resistance even before the Liberation …

On the walls in Toulon people used to write ‘US GO HOME’ - I never wanted to learn English because I didn’t like them …

For us, at the time, it (Hungarian Revolution) had been a counter-revolution - you were either in the West camp – even Franco stuck his o"re in calling for international action – or you were on the other …’, (Giloux, personal communication, October 10, 2008).

Dr. Raybaud also talks of the America’s plans for Europe during WW2:

‘They’d already prepared 7.000 civil servants that would fit-in well all over Europe … there was an AMGOT for Greece and look what happened there – civil war, massacres everywhere – and the first person killed was the resistor who put up a Greek flag …’, (Raybaud, personal communication, August 31, 2009).

and as such is part of the extended and not core sample for this study. He was / is however, a respected Resistance fighter and long-standing friend and co-worker of many of the participating informants in this study, sharing with several of them similar experiences in German concentration camps as a prisoner of war (where he lost most of his family). His testimony is valuable as a perspective on how communists in the shipyards reacted at the time: ‘I’ve always been a rebel – if I saw something not right I’d say so – nearly everyone round here looked to mother Russia - for Hungary I immediately opposed the interventions … You were in the minority? You can say that again! Madonna! They thought I was mad - in the shipyards – in the breaks - the Stalinists would defend the Soviet Union but I’d say ‘How can you accept tanks being brought in to fire on the people? – that’s not socialism! They used to say to me ‘you’re infatuated with America, with individualism …’, (Morsolin / Candotto, personal communication, June 15, 2010).
The fact that it was the Allied bombings, and in particular the low level bombing on the part of the Americans during WW2 that had caused the 60% destruction of the town and the complete destruction of the shipyards, further exacerbated this antipathy, and constituted a permanent reminder of it. The proximity of the war, the Cold War context and the categorical stances people were obliged to take is mentioned by Jean-Claude Autran:

‘It was just 10 (11) years after the war – we were still haunted by the idea of fascism in Europe – all those who weren’t distinctly left were ‘fascists’ …’

Who called then fascists?

The party, the party press …’, (Autran, personal communication, August 11, 2009).

Robert Gourvenec, who, as Jacques Brémond, was working in the naval shipyards in Toulon at the time, describes the part historical experience played in the reactions to the interventions:

What did you say about Budapest in the naval shipyard?

‘We naturally defended the socialist camp …’,

But did you discuss it?

‘Yes – but the predominance at that time was that - we thought – “here we go – they (the Horthyists)’re taking the counter offensive to take back what they had” … we defended the position of the communists fiercely and from every angle – especially as the criticism from anti-communists was bitter …’, (Gourvenec, personal communication, July 28, 2009).

In the case of the Italian study, post-war historical reference played just as important a part in the informants’ reactions to the Soviet interventions. 21 This is obviously due

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21 As Natalina Marini, CGT representative, prominent member of UDI and wife of Party cadre Vincenzo Marini, recalls her response to a comrade’s concerns on hearing news of the interventions it appears that she automatically linked historical experience to her immediate reactions: ‘That morning I went out to get bread and I met a teacher – a comrade – who said ‘Did you hear what they’re saying about the Soviets in Budapest? What shall I say in school today to all the Christian Democrats? So I said ‘Look, don’t take any notice of them’ and I don’t know
to this period’s being punctuated by a series of dramatic and significant events and developments in the Venezia-Giulia region that affected our community directly and disproportionately. Here, Alberto Clemente expresses a point of view that is directly linked to the Tito-Stalin split in 1948:

‘For Budapest – we’d gone through la rottura no? - so we were all on the side of the Soviet Union …’, (Clemente, personal communication, November 26, 2009).

All of the interviewees in Monfalcone and Goriza mentioned the Tito-Stalin split in relation to their reactions to Budapest, but not all in the same way. In addition to spontaneous references made to la rottura / il ‘Cominform’ during interviews, informants were also invited to reflect on whether and in what ways their experiences of that episode had influenced their reactions to our events. This was the first time they had been asked that question. Findings indicate that the Tito-Stalin split and its aftermath had engendered diverse stances amongst the party faithful in the Venezia-Giulia region, and that these can be defined essentially as the following:

1 as exemplified by Signor Clemente above, a mistrust of Tito and by extension, any deviation from the Soviet system, its principles and values (it must be remembered that several of the informants had been imprisoned in Yugoslavia before being expelled, and that there were still members of their community imprisoned in Yugoslavia in 1956)

2a a sense in which there had already been a split in the Socialist Bloc, and that therefore no ideology or system was unassailable, infallible - as exemplified here by Dino Zanuttin:

‘La rottura with Cominform (the Tito-Stalin split) is the first step for us – that made us a bit different to others - you have to take into account that we had already had a precedence of a split in the Socialist Bloc … a stand-off between powers that ended in a split - so we could confront certain things with a bit more objectivity …’, (Zanuttin, personal communication, December 19, 2009).

where I got the words from ‘After all the party has been through around here – and yet we’re still here! Look them straight in the eye!’ (Marini, personal communication, November 29, 2009).
2b and as Khrushchev’s ‘thaw’ took effect, the sense that communists in the Venezia-Giulia region, and particularly in Monfalcone and Gorizia, had paid dearly for the ‘errors’ of the Stalinist era, and that their significant sacrifices had in fact been in vain, as exemplified here by Silvino Poletto:

‘When this thaw happened it was exasperating because it highlighted the bad politics that had brought it about but good because we were back on track … it was Stalinism that had done all that …’, (Poletto, personal communication, November 27, 2009).

7.3 Anti-communist backlash

The second Soviet intervention in the Hungarian Revolution on 4th November, which had been decisive, incited a wave of anti-communist attacks in France and Italy, however these were most notably in Paris and Rome, where the party headquarters in both cases were attacked. The Communist press in both countries naturally focused attention on the phenomenon at this time in order to a) engender a heightened solidarity in the ranks b) to deflect attention from the interventions in Hungary b) to associate in people’s minds the far-right at home with that in Hungary, in order to give weight to the Soviet version of events and e) to mobilise militants in France and Italy to protect party premises against any opportunist far-right aggression that might occur and to bolster their camp vis-à-vis the exterior with a show of force.23

Armand Conan explains the attitude of communists at that time:

‘We thought Budapest was a capitalist intervention – and the fascist attacks in France made us close ranks even more …’,

he adds:

‘Budapest didn’t shake our faith in communism …’, (Conan, personal communication, May 29, 2010).

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22 Monfalcone had paid heavily for the split because most of the migrant workers had been skilled workers from the shipyards who had gone to work in the less advanced shipyards of Pula and Fiume, therefore they had felt the effects when thousands returned in a counter-exodus. Gorizia had felt the effects of the split because at once 600 Party members (80% of the memberships of cells and sections in and around Gorizia) had quit the party overnight.

23 The duty of Communist Party members to defend Party premises in historically difficult time was a stipulation of the generic Communist Statute.
In the event, the anti-communist backlash to the Soviet interventions was relatively minimal and easily contained in both of our case-locations. The Communists were simply too strong in La Seyne for there to have been a significant reaction, and in Toulon, apart from a demonstration by students from the local *Lycée de Toulon*  the presence of party militants guarding the Federation Headquarters and the Communist party newspaper LPVM were enough to deter potential assailants. **Jacques Brémond** was amongst those defending party premises:

> ‘The events triggered in France a fierce anti-communist campaign – violence 7th November attacks at Headquarters of PCF and *l’Humanité* - sectors of police were in on it – 3 dead in Paris – in Toulon we were there to defend party premises …’, *(Brémond, personal communication, October 23, 2008).*

as was **Dr. George Richard:**

> ‘There was hostility towards communist in the population at the time of Budapest – the media – Cold War stuff - young college students in Toulon – but we mounted the guard – we didn’t have any trouble in the end – but we were ready for it …’, *(Richard, personal communication, May 21, 2010).*

In Monfalcone the communists were, and always had been, a redoubtably militant force. There were consequently many amongst the population who were wary of them.  

24 The Lycée was predominantly middle class at the time, and there were also teenagers from the Marine School. The demonstration is described here in a Police Information document: ‘Anti-communist demonstration in Toulon - 500 to 600 students aged between 14-18 - Some toubles at 17.15, minimal damage …’, *(10th November, Toulon, 1956, p.1).*  

25 By way of a contrast to the situation in the Gorizian Province, there had been a demonstration on the part of young students from the local *Liceo Classico* in the nearby well-to-do city of Udine (which had not been affected in the same way by the campaign to make the region part of Yugoslavia, only becoming part of the region of Friuli-Venezia-Giulia in 1963), as **Professor Alberto Buvoli** describes: ‘The procession of students was headed towards the party Federation headquarters in Via Vittorio Veneto – and that’s where I met Bacicchi – the party was on alert at that moment – and there were lots of ex-partigiani on guard - at the ready - big sturdy ones - but it was only students in the end …’. This near incident was followed by a more serious incident a few days later, as explained below by **Professor Buvoli.** ‘The PCI organised a counter-information exercise regarding Hungary in the cinema that was in *Piazza Libertà* (Udine). It was full of communists – Party members, former Resistance fighters - and when we came out the police circled us – there were people in the square protesting against our meeting – quite a few of them – when we came out of the cinema, the police started to hit us with batons – I was young so
as an impressive and effective partisan movement during WW2 was very much intact in the region (if minimised / denied in some quarters), whilst memories were still vivid of their unflinching and unswerving fight to become part of Yugoslavia in the face of the many right-wing provocations and attacks that they had been confronted with on a daily basis between 1945-7 (which by 1956 had mutated to more sophisticated forms of anti-communism in the local context). In the town of Gorizia itself, where the communists had been prevented from holding any type of meetings until 1953 (see p. 60), the population was effectively as guarded vis-à-vis the communist community, and indeed no significant threat to party premises was made at this time.

Nevertheless, this instinctive readiness on the part of party members to mobilise instantly and defend party premises in the face of right-wing attacks at this time, which was not based solely on a statutory requirement, is indicative of the universal finding in the context of this research that the more militant the subject, the more fervently s/he supported the Soviet interventions – contrary to what might be expected.

7.4 Distance, disconnection, discontinuity
Counter to the conventional wisdom that communists think and act in unison as part of an overarching international movement, and therefore that macro events would be perceived and responded to in the same way by Communist Party members worldwide; a recurring theme in the informants’ testimonies in both case-studies was their feeling that the events in Hungary were disconnected from their everyday lives. Giuseppe Ferfoglia explains that for Slovenian communities outside Monfalcone, Budapest seemed distant and that this matter was not really relevant to them. Consequently it was given a low priority in the scheme of things.

Do you remember Budapest in 1956?

I fared worse than the others – it wasn’t long after the war and so there were lots of ex-partigiani with us – they gave as good as they got …’, (Buvoli, personal communication, June 12, 2010).
‘Not really, it was a long way off – we were very busy – supporting our families, rebuilding the houses that had been destroyed in the war – around here they were agricultural workers – they didn’t have time! Didn’t have the information … those in Gorizia – Poletto, Battello – they were really in the thick of politics - but not around here – it was all happening a long way away …’, (Ferfoglia, personal communication, June 16, 2010).

Dr. Raybaud and Maurice Oustrière:

Raybaud: ‘For me – it was a long way off - we weren’t concerned about Hungary – we had our own problems – with the Socialists for example … you know, at the time I didn’t really have a lot of time to think about these things – I was a very busy doctor remember …’,

Were there people who didn’t renew their card or who left over Budapest?

‘Not party members - we swallowed that whole …’,

he adds in retrospect:

‘The communists who had been through the war – instead of questioning - it was blind trust – 20 million lost and all – we were thinking about principles when really it was politics …’,

Oustrière: ‘There was such hope in the Soviet Union – and it was so far off – there wasn’t really any proof – so we believed the PCF’s explanation …’, (Raybaud / Oustrière, personal communication, May 21, 2010).

Vergilio Cernic from Doberdò (outside Monfaclone), gives a corresponding account and again, loyalty to the Soviet Union appears to have prevailed automatically in his reasoning:

What did you think about the interventions in Budapest?

‘It was far away for us – no-one wanted to address it – only the right-wing – they had a field day – the Left didn’t want to discuss it – but it wasn’t an issue really – it was nothing you know – we didn’t discuss it at meetings – we didn’t know enough about it …’,

Did you have doubts?
The doubts we had were – is it true? You know - when the war ended lots of prisoners – Italians, Slovenians were freed by Soviet troops …’, (Vergilio / Russi, personal communication, December 15, 2009).

In the same interview, Guido Russi is of the same opinion:

So how did you respond to the news of the Soviet interventions in Budapest?

‘We heard about it through l’Unità and on TV but in the party we didn’t really discuss it or confront that problem – because we didn’t really know enough about it — and anyway we spoke about other things – in Italy at that time we had a fight to keep our jobs …’,

You didn’t discuss it in the party?

We discussed it but only briefly - because it wasn’t our problem –we didn’t have a vote on it – I remember they did stuff at the national level but it’s not that we discussed that afterwards in our section – we had other problems– those were things for the higher echelons to think about – we weren’t interested - we trusted Russia …’,

Do you know of anyone who left the party because of Budapest?

‘No.’

Silvano Morsolin was Secretary of the party section in Staranzano at the time, and he had had to mediate the situation presented by our events in party meetings. He mentions with a degree of hindsight that he neither nor the rank and file were always au fait with the complexities of issues, and it is clear that he had trusted the party hierarchy to guide him on this type of macro issue:

‘We thought everything was great in the Eastern Bloc countries – we didn’t think any of this could be happening …’,

Did you discuss Budapest?

‘We discussed it but we weren’t really up to it – we didn’t have an advanced political culture – we saw the Soviet Union like a God – like a guiding light – some people had their say – but the party stood firm – the names were new to us – Nagy – it wasn’t like ‘Stalin’ or ‘Lenin’… and they’d been on the wrong side in the war … and we thought the
Americans were in on it – that our enemy was taking advantage – and we thought the Hungarians aren’t revolutionary people – not people with strong political convictions – we thought reactionary forces were tying take over …

Our reference was the Soviet Union – we thought these countries didn’t put up much of a fight when the Germans invaded – at least we did something – we rebelled against Fascism – France capitulated too but they had a Resistance movement - so we didn’t hold those states in high regard …

For politicos it was different but for someone like me who worked in the shipyards but had to speak about politics – because we did speak about politics – it wasn’t easy – they knew you were a cadre – a bit higher up than they were so you had to have the answers – they’d ask you for your opinion, your advice …’, (Morsolin, personal communication, December 1, 2009).

Dino Zanuttin

*Did you discuss Di Vittorio’s response to Budapest?*

‘I don’t think we addressed it at party meetings … but it’s not that ordinary party members had much knowledge about these things – it was difficult for us to address this sort of thing – to have an opinion about it – to understand the issues and underlying reasons …’,

*Did anyone leave the party over Budapest?*

‘I don’t remember anyone leaving over Budapest …’, (Zanuttin, personal communication, December 10, 2009).

**7.5 Democratic Centralism**

Directly related to reactions to the Soviet interventions that year is the question of how the issue was handled by the Parties at regional and local levels. This depended largely on the ‘nature’ and ‘extent’ of the system of democratic centralism in operation in each of them, despite the fact that this principle / mechanism was a core organisational feature of all communist parties and would therefore, in theory, have
functioned uniformly. From the evidence provided, there appears to have been a more rigorous internal dynamic that determined the levels of free and frank discussion in the PCF Var Federation than there was in the PCI Federation of Gorizia in 1956. This is both in relation to discussions of the issue in question, and in general. Although many of the French as well as the Italian informants said that they had been able to raise the points and ask the questions they had wanted to at party meetings, the impression conveyed in oral testimonies nonetheless, is that there was a divergence in this regard.

What comes across in the evidence is that this assertion on the part of the French informants was in fact automatic, because on reflection it was usually modified. There were also informants in La Seyne and Toulon who stated from the beginning that there had been little opportunity for them to insert their voices into the debate. Responses across the French sample were differentiated to an extent, although distinctly less so than in the Italian sample. This differentiation manifested itself according to occupation, with shipyard workers more sure of their answers and especially pertaining to discussions in workplace cells (not places of policy making, it should be remembered), than the sum of the other informants, who stated that formal discussions were effectively micro-managed by the party hierarchy. Overall, there seems to have been a general reluctance in La Seyne and in Toulon to make certain observations or raise contentious issues in formal situations, and ultimately, a moral onus on the party faithful not to question the ‘official’ line.

In the Italian case, the informants’ responses to the question were more coherent, unchanging. As to differentiation, this was marked: those informants who had been rank and file militants at the time stated that they had in fact been able to express themselves freely and did so, or had not been concerned or informed enough at the

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26 With regard to internal dynamics, all Communist parties at the time operated according to the principles of democratic centralism; a mechanism that ostensibly delivered a democratically elected leadership, free political discussion and debate by members at all levels of the party that would lead to democratically agreed consensus combined with a strict hierarchical structure and discipline in the implementation of any majority decision. In this way the formation or facilitation of factions within the party was prevented, and for good measure they were prohibited.
time to do this, that they had accepted or been in accordance with the explanations given to them and actions taken by the Secretaries of their cells and sections, and all them said that they had duly and consensually complied with democratic centralist process of decision making. Those in mid-level cadre positions such as Secretaries of sections and cells often stated that they had felt that their positions had precluded making spontaneous and unexamined comments regarding the interventions, and that they had felt a responsibility to ‘manage’ the internal information flow at section and cells meetings. (In the French study, only one of the informants who had occupied a mid-level cadre position in Toulon mentioned feeling unease at the situation at the time, although this did not, apparently, have a bearing on how that individual managed the internal information flow at meetings.) The former senior cadres in the PCI Federation Committee said that they had felt no restraint in voicing their opinions at the time, whatever these had been (see below). Overall, what is communicated in interviews is a sense in which the Italian informants had felt able to raise difficult questions in formal contexts with relative impunity, but within the consensus forming framework of democratic centralism. What is important here, is that the informants were satisfied at the time and since, with the system of democratic centralism as it functioned in the PCI Federation of Gorizia in 1956, as Italiano Chiairon affirms:

‘Yes, democratic centralism was important and here it worked well – in fact you can see that in how the manifesto issue was handled (see pp.265-9) ...’

adding, in retrospect:

‘... but it became more centralist than democratic because it only works when the political life of the party is intense – when there are lots of meetings, discussion, debate – when people start staying away from meetings - you can’t make proper decisions with a few party leaders – the democratic process dissappears – it needs intense, continuous political life ...’, 27 (Chiarion, personal communication, December 14, 2009).

27 The conversation continues: Rousseau said the same thing regarding direct democracy ... ‘So did Lenin – he said: ‘Every cook should know how to govern the state ...’, (Chiarion, personal communication, December 14, 2009).
Silvano Morsolin gives an analogous account of how things were in Monfalcone:

*Could party members ask the questions they wanted to in formal situations?*

‘As well as we could – I’m trying to go back to that time – yes yes – we could definitely express ourselves freely – we could say what we wanted but of course there was a certain line – it was quite a central line as well – I mean – we might not all have been able to understand if fully – but we trusted it … there was democracy – you did have the right to express your opinion even if you were frightened of making mistakes – you were allowed to think!’ (Morsolin, personal communication, June 28, 2010).

By way of contrast, there seems little doubt as regards the more authoritarian nature of the Var Federation in general at this time. This is visible in the Police Intelligence report below of a meeting in which militants are criticised for choosing to do overtime instead of dedicating themselves to party activity:

‘Overtime’ at work is held responsible for the lax attitude of militants. All responsibilities are to be withdrawn from all those militants engaging in overtime …’, (Information, no. I 642/2.4, April 6, 1956, p.1).

In Monfalcone, Renato Papais’ response, when shown this document was:

‘This is extremism! That won’t get new recruits - and it’ll reduce the numbers you have got – if a worker feels the need to do overtime, he won’t join the party – or the union (CGT) …’, he continues, describing the thinking behind the Partito Nuovo:

‘We’ve always been ‘open’ – like we are now – you can’t go against the current – you have to get people on side …’, (Papais, personal communication, December 17, 2009).

Another allusion to the difference between the levels of internal discipline in the two parties is made in the extract below from a Police Intelligence report on a Var Federation meeting describing what the senior cadres see as the lax attitude of party members:

‘ … too many comrades leave it to the militants to make their political points for them, forgetting that they too are communists …”
there is a lack of initiative ... a lack of assiduity at cell meetings ... if this situation continues it will soon end in degeneration ...

Every section is to organise study meetings and all militants are formally invited not to miss a session: all non-authorised absences will be considered a serious misdemeanor 

(Information, February 17, 1956, p.1)  

This type of evidence suggests that the unbending life of the PCF may well have deterred its members in La Seyne and Toulon from raising issues of a contentious nature. Another way in which the Var Federation distinguished itself from the Federation of Gorizia was in its recruitment policies and practices. Evidence points to these being more rigorous and more exclusive in the PCF than in the PCI. Charles Galfré gives a personal account of this process:

‘When I joined the party .... I had to fill-in a CV and I was well and truly interrogated about my family’s political ideas, who my friends were and so on - and I said that I had been against Munich Pact and he marked all that down …’, (Galfré, personal communication, January 30, 2009).

Robert Gourvenec’s account is not dissimilar:

‘Oh yes - they asked me extremely searching questions about my family background – whether I liked it or not – I personally didn’t mind – but I was a bit – not shocked but – I mean it was like a police interrogation – if I hadn’t agreed to that I couldn’t have joined the party …’, (Gourvenec, July 28, 2009).

The party was not only difficult to join, but becoming a communist was not an easy step for all to make, as Jeanine Bechet attests:

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28 René Dauban is part of the extended sample for this study as he was a Christian militant, CGT representative, President of the Peace Movement in La Seyne and life-long communist sympathiser. The reason Monsieur Dauban cites for not joining the party was what he saw as the draconian discipline and censorship in effect that would have prevented him retaining his independence of thought and expression. Here he says that a close friend and Party member once said to him: “Don’t join whatever you do because you enter a mould” … not being a member allowed me to say what I wanted – and in fact what I had to say about Hungary a Party member could never have said … I said to them ‘How can you protest about Algeria and Suez and not for Hungary?’ An extract from the tract he had drawn up for distribution in the shipyards opposing the interventions:‘The Peace Movement is not for peace just for Algeria and Egypt. The day of action scheduled for the 18th of November ignores the problems in Hungary. The position of the CGT, is therefore partial …’, (Dauban, personal communication, July 39, 2009).
‘You know, it’s not easy being a communist – it’s exposing yourself to a lot of criticism and if our leaders make mistakes they judge us all …’,
(Bechet, personal communication, August 18, 2009).

Such factors may help explain the reluctance of individuals or even groups of comrades to question the French party line, or to leave the fold once they had been accepted into it. It should perhaps be remembered also that for communists in France, and especially in La Seyne, leaving the party did not mean an automatic transition to ‘the other party of the left’ i.e. the SFIO. This course of action was problematic in the French context in general and fraught with problems in a small community such as ours. Unlike the situation in Italy in which a transition to the PSI would have been a logical step for an individual who felt that his or her political convictions no longer tended towards communism but to social democracy - in La Seyne there was no-place for a communist to go.

Conversely, Senatore Silvano Bacicchi talks of the inception of the PCI in 1945 and Togliatti’s Salerno Turn (see Chapter 4) in which sectarianism, exclusivity and a preoccupation with theory had been formally rejected in favour of the practical concern of creating a communist-led socialist hegemony on a national scale: 29

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29 This was not a response that pleased all in the party however, and there existed a visible tension between Togliatti and the more conservative elements within the party leadership, and its membership. These elements often comprised those who had suffered during the Fascist period and / or been most prominent in WW2 Resistance and who favoured a more Leninist programme based on the international class struggle. Senatore Silvano Bacicchi: ‘If you want to understand the PCI you have to go back to the War of Liberation and the Salerno Turn – then a decision was taken – to fight fascism there had to be collaboration of all the anti-fascist parties – the Resistance developed on that basis and directly after the war there was also a unitary government with a Republican parliament and constitution and in effect a progressive agenda’. (Bacicchi, personal communication, December 8, 2009). The communists had played a major role in the Italian Resistance, therefore at the Liberation they would make a significant contribution to the construction of the Republic (even though they would be side-lined within two years). The New Party therefore had to be electorally viable, reasonable, credible, and a mass party of integration in order to fulfill its role. This understanding of the PCI, this working model, endured until the dissolution of the party itself in 1990 despite the changing fortunes of post-war communist electoral politics (and it took-on a heightened importance after the Soviet interventions in Budapest). At the level of Italian local politics in the context of the current study, the immediate post war political situation was very different in Monfalcone to that in La Seyne and it was one that affected the PCI directly. Questions of unity and nation were effectively crucial to our constituency but not in the sense of ‘unity on the left’, and ‘national’ political options did not
‘The PCI is based on Marxist-Leninist principles but membership was not based on ideology – and something the PCF can’t understand is that there were Catholics in the PCI – you joined the PCI agreeing to adhere to the programme - not the ideology!’ 30 (Bacicchi, personal communication, December 8, 2009).

To illustrate the open and inclusive nature and orientation of the PCI in Venezia-Giulia from 1947 onwards, Signor Bacicchi describes his transition from the PCRG which, as we have seen, had been a restricted party of cadres for security and operational reasons before the hand-over to Italy:

‘They put me in the Federation of Goriza because of my Resistance record and I was given a stack of files and told to make contacts with all sorts of organisations – it was called lavoro di massa or ‘linking the masses’ and I said – ‘Where am I - the Liberal Party?! because compared to PCRG - things were completely different! - the PCI had a policy of

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30 That is not to say that Togliatti’s Partito Nuovo was ideologically vacuous. Quite the contrary. Ideas of creating national cohesion around a new collective self-awareness and a new reality based on a socialist hegemony dictated what was in key ways its Gramscian blueprint, function and form. Togliatti had worked closely with Gramsci in the early years of the PCI before it was disbanded by the Fascist regime in 1926. His pre-prison writings already contain ideas of a less ‘reductive’ interpretation of revolutionary theory as this excerpt from a letter to Togliatti in 1926 demonstrates: ‘today, nine years after October 1917 it is no longer the fact of the seizing of power by the Bolsheviks which can revolutionise the western masses – because this has already been taken into account and has produced its effects; today ideologically and politically the conviction is active (if it exists) that once power is seized the proletariat can construct socialism’, (Urban, 1946 p. 210). The objective was that via this vanguard party the Italian working classes would form a new ‘historic bloc’ by assuming their national identity and make it theirs, bringing about ideological consensus at all levels of Italian society in forming and maintaining working alliances with those of other political parties and especially the Socialists but also by proselytising on a community level, leading the transition to socialism in a ‘soft’ revolution by using and not smashing the institutions and forces of their own industrially advanced state, in their own interests, and from within. A party structure to accommodate and facilitate the New Party was rapidly effected and an extensive system of federations, sections and cells was constructed / consolidated. This notion of the working classes should be understood in this context as a self-conscious and empowered collective of independent human actors. The active role of the subject in social theory is central to this understanding; as is, therefore, the essentially independent role of the super-structure vis-à-vis the base-structure. The idea of soft revolution should not be confused with reform: the transition to socialism may have been conceived as consensual and constitutional but it was to be a revolutionary nonetheless in that its objective was to effect a complete and radical transformation of the economic, political, social and ideological structure of society as opposed to modifying the existing one.

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creating the highest level of unity possible …’, \(^{31}\) (Bacicchi, personal communication, December 8, 2009).

Here, **Dino Zanuttin**, describes his brief experience of the PCF youth organisation (JC) compared to those of the PCI. He had come to Italy for the first time as a young adult with his parents who were returning to the region after having emigrated to find work:

‘From my little experience in the PCF youth organisation I’d say that they were dogmatic, closed minded - when I arrived in Italy I saw that there was a freedom in the PCI – in regard to new ideas or cultures – even though there were rules – which there were of course – but there was an open-mindedness too …’, (Zanuttin, personal communication, June 17, 2010).

The role of the individual therefore in the PCI appears to have been more significant than it was in the PCF, which in turn suggests that there was less institutional pressure to conform in the Italian party. Another aspect of the inclusive nature of PCI recruitment policy at this time is addressed by **Evelina Chiarion**, who explains that an individual’s right to personal philosophical or religious beliefs was enshrined in the PCI’s statute. What was crucial was that members accept and agree to further the party’s *programme*. Never, **Signora Chiarion** attested, had she felt, or been made to fell less of a communist because of her Christian faith – indeed the question

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\(^{31}\) The influence and effects of the French Revolution in Italy and many other European countries had essentially been a) in direct exposure (1805-14) to its central tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity (at least nominally / notionally) that fed into and drew on their own Enlightenment (*l’Illuminismo*) philosophical heritage and which remained core values and key objectives for liberal - radical and democrat-reform socialist currents of 18\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) century Italian political thought b) in a rise in ideas of national unification or nationalism that took divers political forms following the Napoleonic era and the Congress of Vienna and centred on the desire to be free of from foreign rule. A lack of identification with Italy as a coherent nation or nation state resulted in Italian communists thinking in terms that were at once regional and internationalist. It was quite natural for them to favour a supra-national perspective that reflected the horizontal nature of class war and the reality of the international workers’ movement as opposed to the ‘national’ perspective that to all intents and purposes reflected the interests of those with the largest stake in that society. However the fragmentary nature of Italian rule prior to Unification and the protracted nature of that process had led to a general sense to a heightened importance of regional identities and affiliations and even communists tended to conceive of political praxis as intrinsically relevant to regional contexts. (It was Gramsci’s understanding of this phenomenon that influenced aspects of his political thought and ultimately made the contribution it did to Italian communism.)

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had never arisen.\(^\text{32}\) This has to do with, on the one hand the cultural Crocean liberalism of Italian society and on the other the core tenets of Togliatti’s *Partito Nuovo*,\(^\text{33}\) whereas this could not have been the case in France, where the French Revolution and the separation of Church and State underpin and are enshrined in the French Republic - from which the PCF had never felt estranged.\(^\text{34}\)

\(^{\text{32}}\) On the other hand, her relationship with the Catholic Church i.e. the priests, nuns as well as non-communist members of the congregation, was not so ‘liberal’: ‘In those days they were all ‘mangia-comunisti’ (communist eaters) ’...’, *At the time of the ex-communication of communists?* ‘I didn’t attend church for a long time – 20 years I think - I prayed at home ...’, (Chiarion, personal communication, December 14, 2009).

\(^{\text{33}}\) Croce’s anti-positivist, heuristic understandings of the role of subject in social and political theory is directly relevant to Gramsci’s concept of cultural of hegemony and critique of economic determinism (see Setta, 1979).

\(^{\text{34}}\) Clearly this was the revolutionary proletarian republic and not the bourgeois version that certainly existed but in bad faith as they saw it, and not the Social Democratic reformist version, which they saw as misconstrued and missing the point. The French Republic was inherently linked to the French (if unfinished) Revolution and to Enlightenment values of progress and emancipation. It was after all the political expression of French revolutionary values; and in a sense as they saw it the communists were the rightful heirs of the French Revolution via the Jacobin tradition, the Paris Commune and Marxist-Leninist ideology and the Congress of Tours. Who better to defend the French Republic than the vanguard party of the radical French left? The communists had defended the Republic in 1934 at the time of the far-right attempted *coup d’état* during which police killed six communists and injured 100, as they would during WW2 Resistance and in so doing giving the lie to the accusations of treachery in connection to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, in 1939, and as they were ready to in 1958 from fear that De Gaul would install himself as a dictator. This was the reason that questions of national identity and national loyalties did not pose the problems for the PCF that they may have for other communist parties, as long as this was not associated with ideas of ‘nationalism’. True French ‘national’ identity was intrinsically linked to universalist, secular, humanist principles and abstract concepts as was Marxist-Leninist ideology (at least on the levels of politics and human affairs, and this is what interested communists). On an instinctive and intellectual level French communists felt at once French and internationalist – they saw no contradiction in this. If others failed to recognise this condition it was because they had not grasped, or not chose not to acknowledge, a basic historical truth. By definition these associations of the PCF WW2 Resistance and the defense of the Republic were made by communists in general, with little scope for regional variation. However there was an intensification of this concept in the eyes of the informants in this study in that it was also linked to the concept of *Le Var Rouge* or the Red Var. More general historical reference is also made to *Le Midi Rouge* in general. This alludes to the insurrection against the *coup d’état* by Napoleon Bonaparte 3\(^\text{rd}\) in 1851 and consequent left-wing identity of the region and in particular as regard the important contribution to the insurrection of the working classes across the region rather than in the town of Toulon itself. The term ‘red’ here denotes socialist tendencies linked to the revolutions of 1848, however as a more general political reference in the region it has come to have either socialist or communist connotations depending on interpretation and associations attributed to it. Troops from Toulon were instrumental in putting down the uprising against Napoleon 3\(^\text{rd}\)’s the *coup d’état* in the region. Notable contributions to what was essentially a working class response included those of agricultural workers in the north of the region and those of shipyard workers and other working class people in and around La Seyne.
When asked to describe the way in which the issue of the Soviet interventions was handled by the two Parties, the informants often slip in and out of conscious retrospection, as they share their recollections but at the same time evaluate a past state of affairs, past practices. Here, Maurice Oustrière, Elise Bernard and Dr. Raybaud talk about their experiences in La Seyne and Toulon:

*Do you remember if you discussed Budapest in the Section?*

**Maurice Oustrière:** ‘It was more a an ‘information’ exercise than a discussion – we had the right to ask questions of course – but we didn’t even do that for Budapest …

It was presented to us as a ‘Hungarian’ problem – they isolated it – and that rang true in part because Eastern Europe was the place in which lots of conflict originated – 1914, 1939 … they said it was a counter-revolution – and logically the Horthy lot took advantage – that’s what we were told anyway …

We had the right to a special assembly because we were journalists and they told us that the demonstrations in Budapest had been utterly contemptible, there was a member of the Central Committee there, when there were assemblies of this type there was always a member of the CC there, and everyone ended-up agreeing that it had been a serious deviation from the spirit of communism …

**Elise Bernard:** ‘When people asked us about events at the time we just repeated what we were told – we felt foolish, uncomfortable, but that’s what we did, but we did speak about it in our small groups - we used to meet often at my house and we considered ourselves a bit like *des contestateurs*… do you remember when you used to come to the house and we’d talk about these things? It was called a ‘réunion fractionnelle’ but only we knew about it …

**Maurice Oustrière:** ‘When I look back the party wasn’t at all democratic - it was all centralism and no democracy!’

**Raybaud:** … democratic centralism destroyed the party …

*Do you know anyone who left the party over Budapest?*

‘No – not really - there will have been people who tiptoed away … it’s difficult in a small community … but it wasn’t a big thing amongst
militants you know - I think people who minded were intellectuals - teachers and the like – whatever – they didn’t want to publicise it – no public demonstrations or anything … Sartre and all that is just a big pantomime – to do with their careers – mind you he wasn’t wrong to distance himself over Budapest …’, (Bernard / Oustrière / Raybaud, personal communication, October 4, 2008).

Jean-Claude Autran describes more generally the nature of the democratic centralism in operation in the PCF in the 1950s:

‘In the PCF there was only one line – it was criticised internally but no-one knew that – you either accepted the party line or you left the party – it was probably effective at a certain time and in a certain context – probably the rank and file wouldn’t have understood 40% for this and 20% for that – at the time people didn’t read much – didn’t watch TV - so the party line was what guided them – they were convinced it was the truth …’, (Autran, personal communication, August 15, 2009).

Dr. George Richard in La Seyne adds in retrospect:

‘Democratic centralism is one of the reasons I left the party in ’81 …’, (Richard, personal communication, May 21, 2010).

Renato Papais at the time held positions in both the CGT and the PCI in Monfalcone and he describes the responsibility he had felt to be considered in what he said to the membership body. He also describes a context in which individual members could bring-up difficult questions at party meetings and assemblies but that democratic centralism would ultimately prevail in the unanimous acceptance of the majority decision. Again, what is conveyed in interviews such as this, is that there was more transparency in the Italian party, more of a shared understanding of things – even though he freely admits that not all matters were for general consumption:

‘In cells could you discuss things?’,

‘Yes – absolutely – there was the agenda, it as the Secretary who did the introduction, then we’d chew things over – someone said something, then someone else – you could say what you wanted – but then ‘l’operativa’ i.e. theory to action …
Some things were discussed at the level of cadres – some subjects are not to be discussed openly because you just created concern amongst the members – demoralise them – we had to know when to draw the line … cadres are not there to spread their own opinions …’,

_But party members could say and ask what they wanted to?_

‘You could make a point that was contrary to the party line, it could be voted on, but then you had to go with the majority – if you kept on about it – you were basically marking yourself out as ‘incompatible’ – you could raise a point but not create dissent – that’s own way of identifying a false member …’,

_But what if the majority vote went against the party line?_

‘That couldn’t happen for the simple reason that the party line got sanctioned at the Congresses …

First the party at national level sends the debates down to regional level so that they can be discussed at that level, then on the basis of the regional consultations, at national level these would get modified and sanctioned – at the Congresses there are debates about this that last 5 days or more - also in the union it works like that today – the party line gets decided, it confirmed, modified, new objectives set …

So the Congress process begins in the sections 35 then in the Federations and then obviously to national level – the debate starts from the bottom and goes up …’,

_It has been said that the party line came from Moscow?_

That was to do with international issues, our credo was to sustain the line of the CPSU – it was our line too - we wanted the same things as they did, same things as they’d given their workers …’, 36 (Papais, personal communication, August 13, 2009).

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35 Cells being places of work-related deliberations.
36 Perhaps because Signor Papais has spent most of his working life in the CGT, he makes an automatic and intrinsic link between the CPSU, Soviet foreign policy and the socio-economic objectives of the international communist movement (which in essence / principle in fact makes perfect sense).
What is conveyed in this discussion of party culture, is that even in the case of ‘incompatibility’, 37 this would have constituted less of a moral dilemma than an informed choice.

An important distinction to make here is that the incompatibility referred to by Signor Papais would effectively have pertained more to those in the party who did not fulfill a role of responsibility 38 and it would be more to do with immediate, pragmatic issues such as an individual’s no longer sharing the basic values of the party, not adhering to the democratic centralist decision making process, and / or failing to engage with and further the party programme. Mid-level cadres such as Secretaries of cells and sections, would not normally, by dint of their intermediary position between the base and the Federation, have taken a stance that was incompatible with the party line, unless that dissent was a collective alternative action in a moment of crisis, such as in the case of the reactions to our events (see 8.6). 39 Senior cadres at federation level, to all intents and purposes, applied the national party line in regional contexts and in that capacity would not normally be open to accusations of incompatibility – incompatibility with what - their own line?

Alessandro Visintin who was Secretary of the Communist Youth Movement (FGC) in 1956 in Ronchi, on the outskirts of Monfalcone, talks about democratic centralism:

37 This is not to be confused with the ‘incompatibility’ law passed in the 1970s that state that those that held positions of responsibility in the unions could not also hold similar positions in political parties.
38 That is to say those who were not cadres as understood as those militants who took part in specialist trainings courses organised by the Parties as well as Secretaries of cells or sections those in other key roles at this level.
39 Indeed ‘cells’ in their original Leninist sense, and ‘cadres’ per se were indeed intended to take over in times of crisis. Cells were designed as vertical units that were impenetrable and uncontaminated by bourgeois culture and ideology so that they would be able to function as revolutionary units in revolutionary contexts. Cadres were supposed to fulfill a similar function in serving as vanguard role models in life of the party and as leaders in times of crisis or revolution.
40 This is in contrast to the party culture that prevailed in the French Party in which senior cadres at all levels of the party structure were no less at risk than anyone else of running foul of Party discipline and being expelled from the party as a result. Only in January that year Pierre Hervé had been expelled for ‘revisionism’ i.e. publishing his pamphlet; La Révolution et les fétiches (see Sartre, 1956, pp. 1153-1164) in 1956, which constituted the first criticism of the party by one of its members since Stalin's death in 1953. (Hirsh, 1982).
Was there any difference in the responses to Budapest between those cadres who had been in the PCRG and the younger ones who went straight into the PCI?

‘There wasn’t any difference as far as that’s concerned – to be a communist was to be in favour of the Soviet Union – it’s as simple as that – any differences came out during the Congresses – democratic centralism – that’s how it works – united front after decisions were made …’.

But there was free discussion in the party in general? At section meetings for example?

‘Not only free but lively debate! I used to participate in the Federation Committee in Gorizia where everyone would meet up – all the Secretaries of the Sections – 100-200 people – we used to stay until 2-3 a.m. – there were arguments put forward and a secret vote on each …’,

Signor Visintin makes the same point as Signor Papais in regard to cadres having to be more considered than the rank and file in what they said and how they reacted to events:

‘In the shipyards and in the party you have to be cautious in your responses – reasonable …’, (Visintin, personal communication, June 15, 2010).

The distinct impression however, is that this approach adopted by mid-level cadres in Monfalone and Gorizia, regardless of whether it had been prescribed by the Federation or whether it came directly from individual conscience, had its origins in a shared sense of collective responsibility rather than an institutional reticence.

Luisa Franco describes the internal organisation of the party in Monfalcone in the mid 1950s. Evidence suggests that even when there were clear guidelines given by cadres as to how members should respond to certain issues, they were based on practical political decisions, and received as such by the party membership. This is in contrast to the situation in La Seyne and Toulon, where there seems to have been an air of mystery to proceedings together with tacit understandings and assumptions:

‘The party was different then – you could put your point of view but the party line was the party line – they told you that you had to follow it because on the other side you had America that was supplementing all
the anti-communist activity because it was in their interests to break the front – that was the climate …’, (Franco, personal communication, June, 15, 2010).

Closely linked to the issue of democratic centralism is the way in which former Resistance fighters were regarded in their respective parties after the war. Evidence points to there having been a marked difference between the situations in La Seyne and Toulon, and in Monfalcone and Gorizia. In the Italian study, only those to have distinguished themselves in the War of Liberation were considered to have the authority to lead the party at the local and regional levels in 1945, and these people continued to command such authority in the party throughout the post-war period. 

There was a similar situation in France at the Liberation and in the immediate post-war period, in that positions of responsibility within the party structure were given as a matter of course to former resisters. However, there also appears to have been a degree of reserve vis-à-vis certain individuals in La Seyne and Toulon that emanated from the Federation body and that took on definition in the post-war period. Apart from any other considerations, not all regional party cadres in the 1950s had participated in the Resistance - some had been too young. Some were suspicious of the influence wielded in the party by the maquisards and especially those individuals who had, in one way or another, made an exceptional contribution to the Resistance movement and / or those who were, by nature, outspoken – as was often the case. Local heroes could be a problem, they did not always fit easily into what

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41 Although there were organisational changes that took place after September 1947 when the former cadres of the PCRG who had been compromised by their previous internationalist stances were redeployed temporarily in other Federations in Venezia-Giulia or the nearby Veneto region whilst the party re-formed and regrouped, this move was purely an expedient, and not in any way a reflection on these individuals. It was because nothing at that point should compromise the Togliattian project of becoming an Italian mass party of integration.

42 Dr. George Richard was a younger colleague of Dr. Paul Raybaud who had joined the party after the war. He explains the difference as he sees it between former resisters and those who had not had this experience, from the perspective of an ordinary communist. He says that whilst he considers himself to have been a militant during the post-war decades, participating in as many manifestations and attending as many reunions as his worked permitted, he did not have the level of political engagement as those who had been formed during the war: ‘In time, positions adopted lose their edge – whereas Raybaud was in the Resistance so he kept a coherence of thought – resistance is another reality that changes you ..’. This recognition and awareness of the specific formation and often the role of former partisans was expressed time and time again – by former partisans themselves, and by others.
could arguably be described as the Jacobin centralist mould of the party. In a post-war 1945 context that imposed its own demands on the PCF, maintaining internal discipline was paramount. As Dr. Paul Raybaud states:

‘They didn’t like former Resistors – by definition!’

(Raybaud, personal communication, October 4, 2008).

Whilst Charles Galfré recognises the respect former Resistance fighters commanded in the community and in the party after the war, he also points out that there were some at federation level who had mixed feelings about them:

‘Resistors were suspect because to be a resistort you have to have a mind of your own …’, (Galfré, personal communication, January 30, 2009).

René Merle:

‘Those guys wouldn’t hold back in saying for example “Well we fought in the Resistance” if the other hadn’t - like those who had fought in the Spanish Civil War (International Red Brigades) – and for the same reason – because they were des têtes brûlées (daredevils) … at the time they were popular – it was afterwards that there was a bit of sour grapes …’, (Merle, personal communication, May 21, 2010).

The PCF was nothing if not highly disciplined and highly centralised, and in many ways inherently conservative. 43 It had never been an experimental organisation – either in its raison d’être nor in its modus operandi. As the post-war period progressed and the world began to divide visibly into two opposing blocs, the PCF

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43 The conservatism of the PCF leadership was a marked phenomenon in all ideological and organisational areas of Party life at this time. Most visible in its insistence that members adhere to the democratic centralist principle of collective decision making. It was also prescriptive in matters of personal conduct such as in its insistence that members lead an honest and exemplary life so as not to bring the party into disrepute (stipulated in the statutes of all Communist Parties), in its attitudes towards women’s role in society and in the party, and to non-conventional lifestyles in general. This conservative, disciplined, traditional mindset was reiterated in the style of dress of the senior cadres (les permanents or those employed by the party) who invariably dressed formally for Party meetings and assemblies; and in style of expression, which should entail speaking standard French and formulating discussion using set expression and vocabulary of the party. The reasons for this conservatism lie in the intrinsically and inevitably disciplined nature of the party itself, the mores of France at that time, and in the underlying and ever-present mindset of French communists that they had to prove that they were as capable and worthy as anyone else of running the Republic, and in fact more so. The party’s conservatism became a caricature of itself in 1968, when it not only failed to seize the initiative of for social and political change but denigrated the students and others, calling them adventurists, upstarts and their politics akin to a ‘folk’ movement.
found itself marginalised in the national context. Maintaining the internal coherence and cohesion of the party, remaining focused in its strategies and ‘running a tight ship’, were no less important at a time like this – and this was as important to the cadres in Toulon as it was in Paris. Suzanne Bertrand attests to this phenomenon:

‘Many cadres were authoritarian in the way they handled things in the party …’, (Bertrand, personal communication, May 24, 2010).

The democratic centralism of the PCF is discussed in retrospect by an informant who was a cadre in Toulon in 1956 who wishes to remain anonymous:

‘We used to decide things at the bottom, send it up through the party structure and then they’d send what they wanted down again – that’s not what I’d call democratic centralism – they’re (were) supposed to find out what we wanted – my dad used to say: “You’ll find out what you’re supposed to be doing” … there were such levels of devotion – I always discussed things – at home we always did - I wasn’t always in agreement whereas most people - they didn’t discuss enough … they accepted, we used to go along to find out what we had to do what not to do – they didn’t question things …’, 44

Which party members do you mean here – those at the base of the party or cadres?

‘The cadres – they didn’t ask questions – the base didn’t either …’,
(Anonymous, personal communication, October 16, 2008).

44 The various subject pronouns used in the informant’s testimony to refer to what is essentially the same issue, the same process, is worth noting here:

’J’ai toujours beaucoup discuté moi – donc je n’étais pas toujours d’accord – mais la plupart des gens – ils ne discutaient pas tellement - ils acceptaient - on allait effectivement écouter ce qu’on fallait faire - ce qu’on fallait dire – on ne posait pas des questions ….‘ (I always used to ask questions – I mean I wasn’t always in agreement – but most people – they didn’t really debate things – they accepted – basically we used to go along (to Party meetings) to learn what we had to do, what we were supposed to say – we didn’t really question things …’).

Apart from ‘I’ and ‘they’, the French impersonal ‘one’ is also used. This is often used in spoken French in place of ‘we’, and it is the context of such as statement that indicates whether it is truly impersonal or not. The mixing of all four subject pronouns (I, they, one / we) in this particular context and in view of the content of the testimony, does convey a certain ambivalence - at the time and in retrospect – felt by the informant as regards both the meetings themselves and the nature of the informant’s engagement in and contribution to them.
Here Charles Galfré, who indeed left the party over the Budapest issue (see below), describes the climate in the Var Federation during our period with regard to the free flow of information and discussion:

‘Some of us in the party read Le Monde and changed our ideas but we had to be careful – it was almost clandestine – if certain Stalinist militants heard us – I wasn’t supposed to read Le Monde in my job – mostly teachers were critical entre nous at that point, but they didn’t leave the party after Budapest - they became more critical – it was Czechoslovakia that did it for them …’

*What about the rank and file - did any leave in the autumn of 1956?*

‘They didn’t leave the party over Budapest …’, (Galfré, personal communication, January 30, 2009).

**Paule Giloux and Richard Aguado:**

‘We had to follow the direction of the party – some people had doubts but they didn’t talk about them too much – the PCF wasn’t democratic – if you dissented you were excluded – terrible for a communist – you lost everything – banished – outlaws - it was like excommunication for Catholics …’, (Giloux / Aguado, personal communication, October 10, 2008).

As regards exclusion from the PCI for whatever reason, Renato Papais is able to provide information, although he does not recall individual cases, and neither can any of the other informants in the sample:

*Was anyone ever excluded from the party to your knowledge?*

‘Provedamenti Disciplinari? ‘Yes – it was rare but it did happen …’,

*At that time – in the 50s?*

‘Yes – as President of the Federation Committee we had those cases – we were elected to deal with those cases …’,

*What were typical reasons for being excluded?*

‘To be succinct ‘incompatibility’ that meant anything and everything – it used to happen in the union too – you could have your own thoughts but you had to follow the decision of the majority and if you didn’t you
were incompatible – you’d go on the list of incompatibles …’, (Papais, personal communication, June 18, 2010).

Monsieur Galfré was the only informant to have made a stand regarding the interventions that autumn – firstly in the form of a letter to the PCF Regional Federation Committee protesting the Soviet actions, and then by quitting the party altogether. He was to pay dearly on a personal level for his actions. As Deputy Editor at the Communist regional daily newspaper LPVM in Toulon, he had overseen the national and international coverage of events and written articles on an almost daily basis. He was known and respected in both the communist and the wider community, and within his profession. His high media profile, his influence, his status as an intellectual and reputation as a former Resistance fighter meant that his defection was particularly galling, and damaging, for the Var Federation. The fact that it did not boast the numbers of intellectuals that certain other federations, in less ‘far-flung’ locations could, exacerbated the problem. It could ill-afford to lose individuals of this caliber.

45 Monsieur Galfré had originally been a member of the SFIO, becoming a communist during the Resistance (see Chapter 4, p. 110), which may well have meant that he was more able to be objective in matters such as these than for example long-standing, ideological communists who had joined the party before the war, perhaps at the time of the Popular Front, or before that. This is in contrast however, to the example of Toussaint Merle, post-war Communist Mayor of La Seyne, who had also been a socialist before the war, had joined the communist Resistance during hostilities but who quickly developed an orthodox communist perspective.

46 Communism as a world view and political practice is based on stringent Marxist economic and socio-political analysis. It is nothing if not if not an intellectual project. It is also revolutionary (as interpreted). It is nothing if not permanently engaged in class struggle (in the Togliattian / Gramscian interpreted as the creation of a mass left-wing consciousness throughout society, see Gramsci ‘soft’ revolution pp. 76-7). Communism, based the first principles of Marxist theory, was, by definition, political practice predicated on a rigorous theoretic approach.

47 The Var region was characterised in socially economically terms on the one hand by its agricultural communities and on the other the industrial working classes; whilst in political terms it was characterised on the one hand by its militant communism in its industrial base in La Seyne and in the naval dockyards in Toulon and on the other by an important right-wing military presence. Therefore, it could be said that intellectuals were relatively thin on the ground and the Federations could ill afford to lose examples of this caliber. Here, Jacques Girault describes the situation: ‘There weren’t the major intellectuals like there were in other places – professors and such – it wasn’t like that in LS - we’re a bit cut-off – we’ve got music and that type of thing – there’s Opera in Toulon – but we don’t have really famous artists and so on from this regional – not like in les Alpes Maritimes where you have a whole series of painters – LS there aren’t privileged people …’, (Girault, personal communication, July 27, 2009).
On leaving the party, and LPVM, Monsieur Galfré took-up the only option available to him at that time – in accepting the invitation becoming Deputy Editor at Socialist newspaper in Toulon, République. With him went four other journalists from LPVM:

‘It was hard because there were anti-communists on that paper and my reputation was as a communist – and have you read my articles for LPVM?! (Galfré, personal communication, January 30, 2009).

His defection and the ensuing polemics it set in train were of major interest in the region for months and even years, thus the affair has remained a key moment in regional and local communist history. Here he recounts his distressing experiences of this time:

‘When I left LPVM there were four other journalists who came with me – all former resisters – there were others who didn’t agree (with the interventions) but didn’t dare leave …

From one day to the next all my comrades turned their backs on me – they called me a traitor in the street, it was hard, I felt very alone, they talked about me – the cadres were awful to me, even to the point of skewing my Resistance record to minimise my contribution, and when the case was looked into they said that their word was enough – I took them to court and won against all odds to be justly recognised – they were vindictive – they did all they could to thwart me … 48

It has to be said that the communists were great in the Resistance, but afterwards they put Party interests before all else …’, (Galfré, personal communication, January 30, 2009).

A socialist before the war he did not, however, re-join the SFIO following his defection from the PCF, and he would effectively remain official political affiliation from that point on.

48 The denial of his Resistance record was the worst thing the party could have done, such was the importance of this testimonial to an individual in the post-war period. It was important on a purely personal level in terms of self-identity, and on a community level - in this case vis-à-vis both the communist and the wider community, as the Resistance was a key reference in the French psyche. The denial or minimising of his contribution to the cause was also damaging in the material sense in that financial compensation was paid to former Resistance fighters after the war, and for this of course proof of their contribution and of the extent of that contribution was required. This documentation was for the most part in the PCF’s hands due to the leading role the Communists had played in the movement.
7.6 The Parties’ handling of the events

The Parties’ strategy in relation to the Soviet interventions, both internally and externally, can be characterised in La Seyne and Toulon as one of avoidance and diversion, but it was also coherent and cohesive. In Monfalcone and Gorizia it is a question that pertains:

- in the first instance to the PCI Federation Committee in Gorizia, which took a decisive stance against the interventions
- and then to the way in which this stance was accommodated, mediated, opposed by Secretaries of the Sections across the Province.

The PCF Var Federation

With regard to the PCF Var Federation’s handling of the issue, there is no evidence in the party literature, Police Intelligence Reports or newspaper articles of its having addressed the Soviet interventions per se other than to reinforce the national party line of its being a counter-revolution, and to deflect the attacks leveled at the Soviet Union and the PCF by extension, on the part of mainstream political interests. It appears very much as though it continued to focus its attention at this time on the stock issues of Algeria, Unity on the Left, Suez, and living standards. This premise is also substantiated in personal interviews. Below are a small but representative selection of the Var Federations’ many activities in that autumn and including at the time of the Soviet interventions in Hungary, as reported in a range of PCF and national security documents:

‘The Ministry of the Interior to the Police Commisioner of the Var region.

My attention has been directed to the participation of a number of certain civil servants in a demonstration on the 20th October in La Seyne, organised by the Town Council, during which overt anti-French themes were addressed …’. (Le Ministère de l’Intérieur, December 25, 1956).
‘The Var Federation has printed 10,000 tracts entitled ‘Stop the War! It’s the Hour of Unity and Action! and reproducing the declaration of the Central Committee against the Franco-British action in Egypt. All day yesterday, 1st November, PC militants distributed a large number of these tracts, for the most part into private letter boxes …’,
(Sûreté Nationale, Toulon 2nd November 1956).

‘People of La Seyne!
Everyone on their feet to stop the war …
In violation of the United Nations, the French Constitution and against the will of the immense majority of the French people, the government has taken our nation into a war that can only have dire consequences.

49 (e.g. Ministère de l’Intérieur, 25th December, 1956)
The inexcusable aggression against the Egyptian people – it’s a black day for our nation.
La Seyne on Monday, 6.30 pm, 5th November
Workers … Mothers … Youth … All those who fought in WW2 … French people …
Toussaint Merle & Jean Bartolini \(^{50}\) will address the public (La Section de la Seyne, November 5, 1956, p.1).

“Progress report on our mandate on the part of MP – Mayor Toussaint Merle”
The government is violating the promises it made, betraying the expressed will of the people for:
- Peace in Algeria
- Improved living standards for workers
- International détente
- Respect for democratic freedoms
Communists – Socialists – Republicans – Unite!
( La Seyne Council Manifesto, November 9, 1956, p.1).

\(^{50}\) Jean Bartolini was the Communist Deputy Mayor of Toulon at the time.

\(^{51}\) (e.g. PCI, Nov. 9, 1956)

‘The Communist Party ... considers events in Hungary to be a tragic diversion staged by counter-revolutionaries in the employ of the ex-ruler Horthy, designed to divert public attention away from the attack on Egypt ... in the second part of the tract entitled: ‘France – Remember, a parallel is drawn between events of 1939 and the current situation, reminding readers of the PCF’s role in the Resistance, Gabriel Péri, Guy Moquet, Stalingrad etc.’ (Ministère de l’Intérieur, November 9, 1956, p.1)

Below is a selection of extracts from Police Intelligence documents reporting on the state of things in the PCF Var Federation at the time:

‘Subject: Unease in the Var Federation of the CP.
‘Poor attendance of militants at party meetings and a drop in sales of LPVM – above all in rural communities ...’, (Information, October 12, 1956, p.1)

‘Subject: the internal life of the Communist Party in the Var.
Difficulty in handling the intellectuals.

The cadres are evasive and each tries to hide behind the authority of another.

It seems that it will be difficult to handle the intellectuals who are more and more reticent since the events in Hungary.’

‘Subject: Unease amongst CGT membership.

No mass resignations but deep confusion.
Communist Party militants are as resolute as ever, but a number of union members are troubled by the Soviet repression (in Hungary). Nonetheless, apart from a few resignations, in particular in the banks, there have been no symbolic gestures on the part of the union membership as yet. Time will tell. (Ministère de l’Intérieur, November 22, 1956, p.1).
‘Subject: Matters of concern for the Var PCF.
Recruitment for 1957 PR campaign
A return to normality.

The Secretariat of the PCF Var Federation had decided to ... concentrate on popularising its positions in tracts, posters, press articles. This propaganda will be accompanied by a campaign to explain and convince the people, by word of mouth at first, to create the right psychology, and then by holding public meetings. Nevertheless, it has been noticed that during internal meetings, the issue of Hungary is glossed-over in favour of our interventions in Egypt and the ‘bloody pacification’ in Algeria.’ (Ministère de l’Intérieur, December 1, 1956, p.1).

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52 (e.g. MOI, November 22, 1956)
‘Subject: Instructions from the Polit Bureau of the PCF to all Federations.
Cut down on the number of party meetings at this time.

The Secretariats of each Federations will continue to run the party.
The PCF wants to leave the way free for the CGT at this moment in time …

In fact, at the heart of the PCF there is a more or less self-confessed move, that is the result of events in Hungary, to keep a low profile. Its leaders are making every effort to alleviate the unease and most probably in this way avoid awkward questions …’. (Information, December, 8, 1956, p .1).

The PCI Federation of Gorizia

What appears to have been the more democratic climate within the PCI Federation of Gorizia is substantiated by the action taken on the part of its General Secretary and a number of other senior cadres in the Federation Committee, in their bold and in many ways ground-breaking response to our events that constituted in itself a contestation to the Soviet interventions and to the pro-Soviet stance adopted by the PCI leadership in Rome. It is also substantiated by the polemic this action generated across the regional party structure, and in the way the issue was resolved at the local and regional levels via the democratic centralist process. What is more, although the actions were certainly not without consequence for the Federation body and for the individuals concerned, the proposition that the PCI was more flexible than the PCF overall, nevertheless seems to be borne-out in the relatively lenient manner in which the affair was handled by the national party leadership.

The position adopted by the Federation was expounded firstly in a manifesto opposing the interventions, expressing solidarity with the Hungarian insurgents and reiterating the themes of XX Congress of the CPSU, and secondly in its solid defense of that position as it came up against resistance from sectors of its regional membership.

News had broken in Italy of the Hungarian uprising on 24th October:
‘FIGHTING ON THE STREETS OF BUDAPEST INITIATED BY ARMED COUNTER REVOLUTIONARIES …

The Central Committee of the Polish Workers’ Party convened in an emergency meeting …’. (Scontri nelle vie di Budapest, October 24, 1956, p.1).

Just five days after the above report appeared in l’Unità, six days before the second Soviet intervention, the manifesto was distributed to the twenty five PCI sections across the Gorizian Province. It had not been the only or indeed the first declaration of protest to be made since the 24th October. There had been open letters and statements published where possible in the communist press, and otherwise in the mainstream media, on the part of communist student bodies (the Socialist national

53 After his initial response that the uprising had been a right-wing conspiracy and nothing more, Togliatti modified his position, ceding that it may well have been in part a popular movement occasioned by the misgovernment of the Hungarian authorities. In l’Unità on 3rd November, he criticised the regime for not having understood what needed to be changed within their Party in order for the necessary democratic reforms to be made in their country in-keeping with the spirit of the XX Congress, as indeed had been the case in Poland. This, he stated, had enabled right-wing interests to step-in and do their worst: ‘Whatever had been the sentiments and grievances of the masses and of contingents of the workers who, as a result of past wrongs, were drawn into uprising, in that moment, what was at stake was a potential return to a capitalist regime …’. Nevertheless, the counter revolutionary situation that ensued, he stated, had regrettably but unavoidably necessitated an armed response on the part of the Soviet Union, at the request of the Hungarian government itself. The second Soviet interventions on 4th November were similarly given the party’s leadership’s full support. (l’Unità on November 3, p.3, 1956)

54 The students of the University of Rome had been the first to make their position known in an open letter that was published in Socialist newspaper Avanti! (having been rejected by l’Unità and Paese Sera) on 25th October that expressed their full support for the popular campaigns for democracy playing-out in Poland and in Hungary. This was followed by academic staff at the Assembly of Communists at the University who produced a motion expounding their theoretical position against the line assumed the PCI leadership on 27th October. This coincided with the declaration of the CGIL Executive Committee in l’Unità deploring the request on the part of the Hungarian authorities for Soviet intervention, plus Di Vittorio’s own statement published in the Corriere dells sera (rejected by l’Unità) supporting the populist movement in Hungary. A comprehensive and strongly worded motion in full support of the de-Stalinisation process and indeed recommending change and renewal in the PCI leadership, was signed by 101 prominent intellectuals and addressed to the Central Committee of the PCI with intention to get it published. On its presentation to l’Unità on 29th October it was immediately rejected for publication, however it was diffused via radio that night. This action on the part of the intellectuals in the capital engendered the solidarity of student and academic bodies around the country with the Communist cells and University Assemblies of Palermo, Perugia, Pisa, Torino, and Mantova producing their own manifestos, however these protests were essentially spontaneous, unco-ordinated and thus lacked impact (D’Amelio, 1960). In the case of Mantova, it was the only other PCI Federation to produce such a document in the form of a letter to the national Party leadership (and it remains unclear as to whether a copy had been published in a local newspaper at the time), however evidence suggests that the letter was retracted almost immediately under pressure from the national Party Secretariat in Rome. (Segreteria della Federazione di Mantova, 1956, pp. 1-3).
daily newspaper Avanti! 25th October), the CGIL (l’Unità 28th October) and Di Vittorio (what was then the right leaning national daily newspaper Corriere della Sera 28th October). There was also the ‘Letter of the 101 intellectuals concerning Hungary’ that was rejected by l’Unità but broadcast on radio on the 29th October. What distinguishes the Federation of Gorizia’s declaration of protest in the national context is that it was the only one of its kind in the country that was produced and distributed by a Communist Party Federation (see Mantova below).\(^5\)

The content and tenor of the manifesto written and distributed by the Federation of Gorizia on 29th October was similar to the others. The following extracts give a sense of its line of argument, which was sustained over the course of the events and in the weeks that followed. It denounces not only the Hungarian government’s handling of the situation but its very authority:

‘The Federation Committee of the PCI of Gorizia expresses its heartfelt sorrow at the bloody events in Hungary, which have been aggravated by the irresponsible request for the intervention of Soviet troops on the part of certain members of the Hungarian government’ who, it stipulates, ‘have proved themselves to be out of touch with the masses and incapable of functioning as leaders …’,

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\(^5\) In France, only one Communist deputy quit his post as a result of Budapest, Pablo Picasso was amongst several Party members to make made an official protest, a group of former communist intellectuals based in the capital founded a journal devoted to Marxist critique entitled Arguments, and fellow traveller Jean-Paul Sartre distanced himself with the Movement pour la Paix.
It dismisses the Hungarian / Soviet version of events as simplistic and misleading, stating that the protestors had shown that:

‘… whilst they do not want a return to a Hitlerian Horthyist regime, there is a real aspiration on the part of workers and the people, with whom we give all our support, to break the suffocating and anti-democratic chains …’,

What was needed at that point, it argues, was a government:

‘ … such as existed during WW2 Resistance … that acted as a guide and an example, equal to the new international context of détente, of peaceful co-existence and free competition with the capitalist world …’,

It refers directly to ‘the historic importance of the XX Congress of the CPSU’, thereby situating the federation’s opposition to the interventions firmly within that framework. It talks of the new international situation that has ‘finally allowed people

56 (Il manifesto, October 29, 1956) provided by Dr. Alberto Mauchigna, from the Istituto regionale per la storia del movimento di liberazione nel Friuli e Venezia Giulia (IRSML) in Trieste.
to come out of the troubled period of Cold War’ as being the result of the Congress, and describes this event as having made a:

‘… huge contribution to the demolition once and for all of forms and methods that are today outmoded, to build a new society in which a working class hegemony invites the full participation of all its citizens, with respect for human dignity and in a climate of open debate ...’,

It talks of the ‘current dynamic very much in evidence towards national roads to socialism’, it claims that national / regional \(^57\) / societal orientation as its own, and it makes clear that the Federation’s position on the issue of the Soviet interventions was in no way incongruent with and did not detract in any way from its core values and objectives - which were, in principle, also those of Togliatti’s Partito Nuovo.\(^58\)

‘Faithful to its traditions, in the continued objective of linking itself with the masses - from agricultural workers to the middle classes – and no more so than in the run-up to the very important Administrative elections, Communists in this Province reaffirm their commitment to the noble cause of socialism, for which they will continue to fight, in the ranks of the glorious PCI, alongside all progressive forces in the country …’, (PCI Federazione di Gorizia, 1956 October 29).

As the other protest documents produced at that time, this manifesto had been put together, approved by the Regional Party Secretariat and distributed in a matter of days. In this particular case, the reason why the senior cadres at the Federation of Gorizia had been able to do this with such alacrity was because the issues in question had had particular relevance to them. What was so obviously at stake in Hungary at that moment was the de-Stalinisation process itself, which was also central to the politics of the Venezia-Giulia region - at least in the view of the Communist Party leaders of that region. De-Stalinisation had been foremost in the thoughts of Silvino Poletto, Nereo Battello and others in the Federation Committee since February that

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\(^{57}\) The ‘national road to socialism’ orientation was understood in this region of Italy in particular due to its historical and geopolitical specificity. It could be described as a microcosm of the larger reality of the nation within international communism.

\(^{58}\) Creating a party of mass appeal and representation and not one targeted solely or even substantially at the working classes was not only intrinsically Gramscian but particularly important to the town of Gorizia, which on a socio-economic level must be characterised as middle class / state administrative, rather than industrial.
year when it was sanctioned at the XX Congress of the CPSU. In fact it had been in their thoughts since 1953.

Stalin’s death in March 1953 had heralded the dawn of a new era vis-à-vis the politics of the Soviet Union itself and its relations with the rest of the world. A key moment in that evolution, and for communists in the Venezia-Giulia region and in the border town of Gorizia especially, had been Khrushchev’s friendship visits to Belgrade in May 1955 welcoming ‘caro compagno Tito’ back into the fold. This development had been anticipated and welcomed by many in the region, and monitored closely by those at the vertices of politics at this level. The disbanding of the Cominform in April 1956, along with the beginnings of democratic reforms in a number of Socialist Bloc countries in the months that followed, were further developments that had been similarly welcomed by the senior cadres in Gorizia as further proof of this crucial ideological and political shift. As far as they were concerned, the Soviet interventions in Budapest were a contradiction to the ideas expounded at the Congress, and they threatened to de-rail its progressive agenda.

**Silvino Poletto**

‘When we did that manifesto – I mean – it wasn’t an extraordinary act – it was natural – it came from our understanding of democracy in a party that was one of the most advanced – the PC (PCI) i.e. Togliatti’s ‘New Party’ – we had another perspective on things – we were more objective because of the border (between Italy and Yugoslavia) …’. (Poletto, personal communication, June 15, 2010).

**Italico Chiarion** had been Secretary of the FGC in Gorizia at the time, an intellectual, and one of those very much in favour of the manifesto. Here he explains the point at which the ‘international’ becomes ‘regional’ / ‘local’:

‘In this region we were particularly sensitive to international politics – for us, the hostility between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia signified the semi-destruction of our party, and this is why when the Soviets invade Hungary in 1956 the Federation of Gorizia immediately takes-up a position in favour of the revolt with that manifesto – precisely because we have a broader conception of communism … we were border people, capable of reading international events …
… we were more worried about Budapest than we were by Suez – you can see that by the manifesto …

*Had you been influenced by Di Vittorio’s stance, or that of the communist intellectuals?*

‘No, neither – what did it for us was our closeness to Yugoslavia, our understanding of their ‘autonomy’ Yugoslavians and most of all our complete adherence to the themes of the XX Congress …’, *(Chiarion, personal communication, June 12, 2010).*

In this last testimony, **Signor Chiarion** describes of course the perspectives of the Federation elite.

One thing at this point that should be noted is that **Silvino Poletto**, who as Federation Secretary had been the main exponent of the position articulated in the manifesto, was no political maverick seeking notoriety in a moment of difficulty for the party – in fact quite the opposite. In interviews, all of the informants, without exception, express esteem and indeed liking for this former Federation Secretary who had been, apart from anything else, a battalion commander in the WW2 Resistance movement (when referring to him they would invariably mention his *nome di battaglia* ‘Benvenuto’). Added to which, they stipulate that far from being an adventurist, or an opportunist, he had always shown a deep respect for party procedure and was indeed a humble and conscientious individual (to a fault, see below):

**Alessandro Visintin:**

*Was Poletto a rebel?*

‘No – he was always quiet, got on with his job …’, *(Visintin, personal communication, June 15, 2010).*

**Alberto Clemente:**

*Was Poletto a rebel?*

‘No he wasn’t – quite the contrary - but he’d felt an urgent need to oppose those interventions …’, *(Clemente, personal communication, November 25, 2009).*

**Elda Soranzio** expresses a common sentiment:
‘Poletto was well-liked in the party …’, (Soranzio, personal communication, June 12, 2010).

Guido Russi:

‘Poletto was a good partisan – he and Battello were my friends – but they were pro-Italy …’, (Russi, personal communication, December 15, 2009).

The more Stalinist or ‘workerist’ in the community may have been affronted and exasperated at his course of action regarding Budapest, but that did not alter the essential regard in which they held him, and this was clearly evidenced at the Federation Congress a month later at which he was re-elected for a further term on a near unanimous vote. 59 He did pay for his actions however in the longer term by being ‘called’ to work in the PCI Headquarters in Rome at the first opportunity, which in the event occurred two years later, rather than being left to his own devices in the region (see below).

No more a maverick however, had been the young law student and promising cadre Nereo Battello, 60 who as head of Press and Propaganda in the Federation had had editorial responsibility for the manifesto and who up until that moment had led a relatively short but blameless political career. What is expressed in interviews is that his actions that autumn had been seen by many in the regional party membership in much the same light as those of the Federation Secretary i.e. as stemming from ‘theoretical’ conviction, which was sincere, but wrong. Although he was not as high profile a personality as Silvino Poletto (at that point) Nereo Battello was valued as a rising star, a home-grown intellectual but also as un compagno:

Renato Papais:

59 Reasons given in interviews for Poletto’s not having interpreted the workers’ perspective by informants who were not themselves inhabitants of the provincial capital included his being an ‘intellectual’ (by dint of his post-war activity as a journalist) and the fact that Gorizia was essentially a ‘bourgeois’ town, removed from any significant site of industrial concentration and therefore not the key point of reference for Communist activity on the region.

60 There had been a preponderance of young cadres being pushed forward in the PCI following the dissolution of the PCRG in September 1947, purely for symbolic reasons. These young cadres were always mentored and ‘backed-up’ within the party apparatus vis-à-vis the party membership by senior cadres (ironically, in this instance it was the most senior cadre in the Federation who had instigated a ‘rebellious’ stance that might normally be associated with younger members).
'Battello? - un cervellone!' (a highly intelligent person) …’, (Papais, personal communication, June 14, 2010).

Vilma Braini mentions the help he had always given the Slovenian community in Gorizia:

‘Battello was very good to us - he did a lot - he always defended us against the Christian Democrats - when we couldn’t get houses and things …’, (Braini, personal communication, December 12, 2009).

Here, Avv. Battello, explains the particular reasoning behind the senior cadres’ reactions to the interventions at that conjuncture:

‘This business of Hungary hit us really hard in Gorizia because we were pursuing a steady policy of consolidation, 61 so we understood that we needed to explain somehow - and so we did that blessed manifesto – in the Federation there was an understanding of why we did it – but in the sections it came up against a bit of opposition … those who still saw the Soviet Union …. there’d already been the de-Stalinisation issue - but it continued to be a myth …’, (Battello, personal communication, December 1, 2009).

He had been surprised at the reception it received from certain sectors of the party membership:

‘I went to Grado – I remember it clearly – I thought it would be OK but instead I got attacked “No – we’re not going to accept it because we’re for Stalin!”

“You know – those Hungarians …” he explains ‘and it was true because there were reactionary forces at work in the revolt – the Hothyists were present – but it was a popular uprising - and you had to understand the complexities involved – but instead they kept on at me ‘No no no – they’re killing communists over there!’’

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61 For communists in the town of Gorizia events in Hungary had been a particular blow. At the time they had been engaged in a gradual process of:
- establishing credibility vis-à-vis a wider community that harboured resentments towards them dating back to the immediate post-war period when Tito’s troops held the town for forty days, in which time there were serious reprisals against fascists incidents of anti-fascist reprisals and the PCI was, rightly or wrongly, associated with them
- rebuilding the party membership following the mass defections of Slovenians from Sections in this border town.
And I hadn’t been in the Resistance – I was 15 at that time – in college – so I didn’t have this authority - not like the others - so I came under fire …’,”

_Did people leave the party over Budapest?_

‘The rank and file didn’t leave – nor others …’,

*My data indicates that perhaps as many as 500 members left?*

‘500 left?! well - I can’t be exact about membership because I was involved with propaganda, cultural initiatives – but the only _battosta_ hit we took as far as I know was in the administrative elections here in Dec ’56 and we lost circa 2000 in the Province - in the Federation of Gorizia there weren’t people leaving …

… at the national level there were 100 (101) intellectuals who left …

*So can we say that ideologically you (in Gorizia) were avant guard?* 62

‘Yes, in fact …

*It was an historic document, and in the end – right*

Yes, it was …’, (Battello, personal communication, December 1, 2009).

Another fact that is intrinsic to the contextualisation of the manifesto affair in terms of the political motives and purpose of its authors, and its long-term legacy in the Province (and / or in the rest of Italy) _is the astonishing lack of attention it has received to date in the national, and therefore the international context_. This is despite, as is surely undeniable today, its having been proven ‘a document before its time’. 63

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62 *Etta Comar*, a prominent militant and senior cadre in Gorizia at the time explains the way in which the inner circle of the Federation Committee had been the prime movers in the protest against the Soviet interventions but that it was not appreciated by all in the Federation body or the wider regional membership: ‘No – I’m afraid the others didn’t understand what we were trying to do, they lagged behind essentially …’, (*Comar*, personal communication, June 26, 2010).

63 Giorgio Napolitano, for one, has stated in his autobiography that the line adopted by the PCI leadership at the time had been erroneous and that he regretted having supported the Soviet actions.
Democratic centralism

The precipitous action of the senior cadres in drafting and printing the manifesto in a matter of days had meant however, that the document had not been approved by the Federation Committee i.e. it had not been submitted to the full democratic centralist process. The fact is, that when news of the proposed manifesto reached the Secretaries of sections across the Province, a number of those Secretaries protested, in the knowledge that it would not be accepted by the rank and file. Italicco Chiarion describes the decision to put it to the Federal Committee that was convening the next day:

‘In general it wasn’t necessary to do that, but in this case, when Gradisca, Monfalcone and other sections objected, they decided to put it to the Federal Committee – it was put to the vote and passed by a majority – it wasn’t unanimous – but then all the Sections put it up …’, (Chiarion, personal communication, December 1, 2009).

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64 Other sections across the Province that had been opposed to the manifesto included those in and around Monfalcone. Gastone Andrian: ‘Those in Monfalcone weren’t in agreement with Poletto – it has to be said - not at all – Gorizia is very different to Monfalcone – Poletto got it wrong – he hadn’t understood those people …’, (Andrian, personal communication, December 7, 2009). Alessandro Visintin: Did you receive directives from the Federation as regards how to deal with things? ‘Yes – as a rule - for the operativa - actions to take – always – but for Budapest there wasn’t time - it all exploded – their response was instinctive …’. Do you think that for Budapest the reactions of the cadres were different to those of the rank and file? ‘From what I remember about Budapest people around here were very oriented towards the Soviet Union – our rank and file thought the interventions were just …’. Were intellectuals in the party less Stalinist? ‘Those who had academic qualifications and things – who could think for themselves, who read a lot, were more in favour of a Gramsci typed Party – I remember that our cadres over there supported the ideas of Khrushchev – the cult of personality was a big shock for us - tremendous – but on the other hand (he adds in retrospect) the Soviet Union couldn’t go on like that … I remember at a particularly tense reunion at which Battello came to speak – he was sent away quite brusquely because he and Vico Bergomas supported the manifesto whereas the majority of us supported the Soviet Union – America’s policies had always been against the Soviet Union – like with Germany …’. Not all sections put the manifesto up? ‘No – people around here are majority working class – they wouldn’t put it up – to be a communist was to be in favour of the Soviet Union full stop …’. Not even after it had been sanctioned by the Federation Committee? ‘No …’. Alessandro Visintin: The manifesto is unequivocal … ‘That’s why he never got on in his career! He adds in retrospect: ‘Poletto saw things with a lot of lucidity, he already understood that the invasion was wrong …’, (Visintin, personal communication, June 15, 2010). Aldo Volpato remembers this time, but states that as far as he was concerned, compared to the Tito-Stalin split, the Soviet actions in Budapest was not important: Do you remember Poletto’s manifesto? ‘Yes – we have some discussion about that – we said it’s far off – let’s concentrate on our own problems – I don’t think we put it up in Ronchi – but those interventions didn’t bother us much – we did speak about it but it wasn’t a big problem – it’s not like they resulted in a rottura! (Volpato, personal communication, June 24, 2010).

Whether all of the Sections in the Province did in fact go on to display the manifesto for the days in question is unclear, and this may be a point at which that the normally smooth-functioning
The Federal Committee was scheduled to meet the next day, 29th October, to discuss the agenda for the 8th Congress of the PCI in December scheduled for 23rd – 25th November. In the event, the whole session was taken-up by a litany of critiques of the Soviet interventions that were harsher and more explicit than those made in the manifesto. Also very much in question was Togliatti’s handling of the matter, his immediate support of the interventions (although he would ‘backtrack’ in the period between the first and the second intervention) which threw a new emphasis on his earlier handling of the ‘cult of personality’, and of Poznan. Silvino Poletto recalls the debate in the Federation Committee:

‘We debated it in the Federation Committee, some of them didn’t accept the manifesto but we approved it in majority … those comrades said that we couldn’t go against the Soviet Union – twenty million dead, Leningrade, Stalingrad – we know that … in their opinion we should have defended a ‘Stalinist’ position … all those who had been condemned by Special Tribunals under Fascism and had consequently spent time in prison tend to sustain the revolutionary principles of the Soviet Union …’, (Poletto, personal communication, November 27, 2009).

Below are a small selection of extracts from the reports given from the sixteen members present (of 32):

Silvino Poletto:

‘Events in Hungary have engendered much commotion, irritation, confusion, internal debate and a deep sense of mistrust. Also vexation casting doubt on the very nature of our own party …. Regarding Hungary: …. popular forces of this magnitude indicate real
dissatisfaction and consequently comrades do not accept the official version put forward of a putsch ...’,

**Fulvio Bergamas:**

‘There is a general sense of mistrust … there needs to be radical change in the leadership of our party. There is a fresh wind blowing and we need to breath … there needs to be renewal at the top and at the base …’,

**Franco Raffaele:**

‘Regarding the situation in Hungary all political leaders have given their opinion, but Togliatti has said nothing. A captain has to steer a ship, especially in a storm …. All men who make mistakes should be replaced …’,

**Avv. Battello:**

‘It is my view that something must be changed in the party … in a new situation new methods should be applied so as not to dislocated from the masses …. For example the substitution of Togliatti could be a sacrifice that would save the party …’, (Minutes of Federation of Gorizia Committee meeting, October 29, 1956).

Just one report given by the fifteen Committee members present went against the ‘current’ that evening in its support the interventions. At the end of the session the majority vote decreed that the manifesto should indeed be distributed and displayed in all of the twenty five sections across the Province.

As well as being a close and long-standing comrade of all those in the Federation of Gorizia, **Senatore Silvano Bacicchi** was **Silvino Poletto**’s counterpart as Secretary of the neighbouring Federation of Udine, and in that capacity was completely *au fait* with what was happening in Gorizia at the time. He talks of the difference between the perspective of the cadres in Gorizia and the rank and file as regards the manifesto:

‘The reaction at the base of the party was different - it wasn’t received well at all by the rank and file …

*Do you know how many people left the party in the Federation of Gorizia in because Budapest?*
‘No – hardly anyone – I think, no-one … there wasn’t the phenomenon of people leaving – not even in Udine where there was this group that adopted the same position as Fortuna – but only he left the party - but he was a high profile politician that’s certain …

…. it was one thing to speak your mind but quite another to go counter to the party – that was the situation in general but there was ferment …

500 left?! I don’t know who they would have been – I don’t think it will have been over Budapest …

… basically it was a group of intellectuals who didn’t agree with the party leadership’s position – but we didn’t have many of those - they wanted things to go further – to take a tougher stand – which would have effectively split the party in two at that moment – we’d just done badly in the Administrative elections (in May) - no committed communist would have deserted the party …’, (Bacicchi, personal communication, November 16, 2009).

Comeuppance

Naturally, the national party leadership could not let Poletto’s actions go unchallenged, and disciplinary measures were duly taken. The Federation of Gorizia received an official visit from trouble-shooter Enrico Bonazzi, the former Secretary of the Federation of Bologna (the definitive Communist strong hold in national terms) who had been promoted to the Secretariat of the national party leadership body in Rome along with Palmiro Togliatti, Mauro Scoccimaro, Edoardo D’Onofrio, e Luigi Longo. He came to Gorizia to preside over the Federation’s IV Congress due to take place 23-5th November, 1956.

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What is evident in the findings of the Italian case study is to a large extent a replication of what Togliatti had recognised and had described in a letter to the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the CPSU on October 30, 1956 i.e. ‘Two opposed and mistaken positions have emerged within our Party. At one extreme there are those who that the entire responsibility for what has been occurring in Hungary rests with the abandonment of Stalinist methods. At the other extreme are those groups who accuse the leadership of our Party of not having taken in defense of the Budapest uprising …’, (Abse, 2007, p. 134). What distinguishes the Federation of Gorizia in this context are the historical reasons it had for taking the stance it did against the Soviet actions, and that fact that it was the only PCI Federation to make such a formal protestation.
His objective was twofold a) to obtain a formal ‘auto-critique’ from the Federation Committee that would entail their admitting to having made a ‘serious error’ in writing and distributing the manifesto and in this way bring it back in line with the national party and b) to oversee the substitution of Silvino Poletto as Secretary. Italico Chiarion was present at the Congress:

‘When the manifesto went down to Rome the Central Committee took a position – that we had made a mistake – and in the next reunion of the Federation Committee we had to engage in an auto-critique, sort out our ideas, which entailed recognising that we had been in the wrong …’, (Chiarion, personal communication, December 1, 2009).

As Gastone Andrian - a self-confessed Stalinist - explains the procedure:

‘If someone makes a mistake you couldn’t really ‘punish’ him but you can’t leave him there either because he would influence the politics of the region in the wrong way - they couldn’t do it immediately – although

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(IV Congress of the Federation of Gorizia, 1956) Photograph provided by Italico Chiarion: front row 1st left (in situ); Franco Raffaele, 2nd left; Silvino Poletto, 5th left, Nereo Battello; end right; Fulvio (Vico) Bergamas.
they tried to – they saw that he hadn’t interpreted correctly the thoughts of those at the base of the party – nor those in the shipyards in Monfalcone – because they didn’t agree with the manifesto …’, (Andrian, personal communication, November 30, 2009).

Testimonies such as the one above do seem to indicate there having been a stronger democratic process at work in the Italian Communist Party than in the French at this time.

In Bonazzi’s report to the Central Committee of the party leadership in Rome he describes his visit as having been a success in terms of the Federation’s ideological and political re-alignment with the national party line. However, paradoxically, he also expresses reservations in this regard:

‘Apart from one or two firebrands (Trevisan, Chiarion e some others) everyone at the Congress recognised the serious error the Federation Committee had committed in assuming, in the first instance, a misguided position, one that went contrary to that of the party, regarding Hungary. Nonetheless, on that point, the auto-critique was weak …

In conclusion I am convinced that the Federation of Gorizia and its leaders have emerged stronger and more united from their Congress, knowing that the working classes of Monfalcone are their touchstone and driving force … ’, (Bonazzi, 1956, pp. 2-3).

As for getting rid of Silvino Poletto, he failed. Much to Bonazzi’s surprise, the Federation closed ranks – Stalinists or otherwise – and its Secretary was re-elected with near unanimity. This meant that no action could be taken to remove him for two more years. (Again, this is indicative of a distinct contrast to the modus operandi of the PCF at this time.) In 1958 he was transferred to Rome, and he would not hold the position of Federation Secretary again, or go on to become an M.P., as can be the case for those who hold this position.

Italico Chiarion expresses a common opinion regarding this matter:

‘Poletto made a big mistake – a lot of us say this – he could have refused to go to Rome – but he accepted it and stabbed himself in the back …’, (Chiarion, personal communication, December 1, 2009).
Alberto Clemente describes how Poletto handled being summoned to Rome:

‘They sent him to work in a commission with Napolitano – the current President - in Via Boteghe Oscure (Communist Party Headquarters in Rome) – Poletto paid for his deviation all right ... he never said anything about being sent to Rome - because he would have made a great M.P. - but instead he never did anything like that – it’s a bit of a contradiction that he was brought to heel in that way because otherwise he was always coherent with the party line …’, (Clemente, personal communication, November 25, 2009).

Avv. Battello and the other prime movers in the manifesto affair were transferred to alternative positions within the party hierarchy between 1958-9 i.e. after a ‘decent’ interval had elapsed. In the case of Avv. Batello he would go on to have a stella political career working closely with the Communist Party. 68 All involved remained members of the party, and then, as the majority in the region, became members of the Democratic Party of the Left in 1991. However, no-one was expelled from the party because of the manifesto, there is no evidence of rancor towards the party leadership on the part of surviving protagonists even if, in the case of Signor Poletto, his career did not take the course he might have chosen as a result. All things considered, the PCI does not seem to have been an vindictive organisation, at the very least, least not in this instance. 69 Avv. Battello agrees:

‘The re-organisation happened in ’58 – but it was handled well – we’d been well prepared for it – as would be expected from a responsible political party – not like ‘You’re out!’ – that wasn’t the style of the PCI …’, (Batello, personal communication, December 1, 2009).

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68 He was elected town Councilor for Gorizia 1956-76 and Speaker for the Communist group of Councilors, then elected regional Councilor for Friuli Venezia-Giulia 1978-92 and again Speaker for the Communist group of Councilors, and then Senator of the Italian Republic 1983-87. Senatore Avvocato Battello was also known nationally for his part in the Peteano case in 1972, in which six men from Gorizia had been falsely accused and wrongly imprisoned for a terrorist attack resulting in the deaths of three police officers. The attack was in fact carried out by neo-fascists. Senatore Avvocato Battello conducted an appeal on their behalf that resulted in their acquittal and the subsequent conviction of the head of the original investigation Chief of the Carabinieri Dino Mingarelli.

69 Certain younger members of the Federation Committee who had made their voices heard during the manifesto affair had their promotion within the Federation held back; one such individual was Italico Chiarion, who had to wait three years before becoming Secretary of the Section in the town of Gorizia.
as does **Italico Chiarion**:  

*Can we say then that the PCI is more flexible than the PCF?*

‘Yes – because the PCF would have thrown us out! Instead I remained in the Secretariat for years …’,

*Did many people leave the party around here as a result of the interventions?*

‘In Gorizia no-one left the party - but probably because of the autonomous position the regional party leadership took with the manifesto – they didn’t feel as though they had to make a stand - any doubts they may have had about the interventions had been addressed …’,

*But the data says differently?*

‘No – that will be an organisational problem not a political one …’,

(Chiarion, personal communication, December 1, 2009).  

With regard to the handling of the manifesto affair on the part of the party leadership in Rome, this does seem to have been relatively flexible, and low key, when compared to the PCF which had expelled even high-profile party members for less, and had treated Charles Galfré extremely harshly for his internal letter of protest to the Var Federation and subsequent departure from the party over the Soviet interventions. On the other hand, it would have been an awkward moment in a difficult year for the national party leadership to make more of this affair, and in so doing draw attention to dissent of this nature within the party following that of the 101 intellectuals, CGIL Secretary Giuseppe Di Vittorio, Communist Deputy Antonio Giolitti, and in view of the widespread condemnation of the Soviet actions across

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70 The unequivocal response above that no-one in fact left the party in protest to Budapest is typical of those from informants across the sample, regardless of position they had held in the party in 1956, or since. When shown the data indicating otherwise, Signor Poletto was at first puzzled, but then, as others, concluded that it must be an incomplete figure.

71 As well as Pierre Hervé that same year, other high profile expulsions had included those of Andre Marty and Charles Tillon in 1952, and Auguste Lecoeur in 1954.

72 It was the second time that year that Di Vittorio had made a stand against Soviet policy, the first in opposing its actions in Poznan. Togliatti in fact saw him as his rival within the party leadership’s ‘revisionist faction’. Antonio Giolitti, grandson of Giovanni Giolitti, Liberal politician and statesman, made it clear in the PCI 8th Congress in December that year that it was absurd to maintain that the errors and crime highlighted in the Twentieth Congress had not done.
the Italian population. Togliatti no doubt considered that discretion was the best part of valour. However, the fact that the man himself would, to all intents and purposes, vindicate Poletto’s stance in support of the themes and policies announced at the XX Congress of the CPSU by focussing on ‘the Italian road to socialism’ at the PCI 8th Party Congress in December that year (even though he would be obliged to return to the rhetoric of Communist orthodoxy for the next two years) proves - the Italian leader’s doppiezza perhaps?

irreparable harm to international communism and that the party’s description of the Hungarian government as ‘legitimate, democratic and socialist’ was equally absurd (VIII Congresso del PCI Atti e risoluzioni 1956, pp. 229-34). Giolitti was to quit the PCI in 1957 to join the PSI.