

Obituary for Amadeo Bordiga

Two weeks ago, on July 25, Amadeo Bordiga, co-founder of the Italian Communist Party and its secretary until 1923, died in the small coastal town of Formia in southern Italy at the age of 81. He was one of the last survivors of the left-wing opposition within the Communist International during Lenin's time and for the two years after his death. Hardly any reference work lists his name, and even experienced historians of the international labour movement would hardly be able to say anything more than the commonplace about Bordiga's political biography. Some may have come across the name Bordiga when reading Lenin's *Infantile Disorder*, where he is listed as an Italian representative of the anti-parliamentary tendencies of early Western European communism, as the cousin of Pannekoek, Gorter, the Lukács of the magazine *Communism*, the Communist Workers' Party of Germany and the revolutionary syndicalists. But Bordiga did not want to be lumped together with them when, at the 2nd World Congress of the Communist International in 1920, he fought against Lenin's and Bukharin's theses on revolutionary parliamentarianism by saying that the examples of the behaviour of the Bolshevik Duma deputies cited by them had little validity for the developed countries of Europe with a long parliamentary tradition. In the vote, he also asked the representatives of the syndicalists not to vote for his proposal, as his views differed fundamentally from theirs.

Bordiga was then 31 years old and leader of the abstentionist-communist faction of the Italian Socialist Party. The Comintern leadership had invited him personally to this congress, a personal mandate was only held by the members of the leadership group of the Italian socialists, whose secretary Serrati¹, however strictly refused to exclude the reformist wing around Turati² from the party and rename it to the communist party, as Lenin demanded. Lenin's vote and that of the other Russian Comintern leaders finally fell for a political platform that appeared in the Turin journal *Ordine Nuovo*, edited by Antonio Gramsci, Palmiro Togliatti, Angelo Tasca and Umberto Terracini, which called for the formation of factory councils as a replacement for the party and trade unions, which in turn was contrary to the guidelines of the Comintern itself. Since no one from the official Italian delegation was prepared to give a lecture on the positions of the Ordine Nuovo group, Bordiga took on this task. At the outset, he emphasized that he could not approve of Gramsci's and his comrades' ideas, since the founding of a communist party in Italy was more urgent and only this and not the councils could provide the driving force of a revolution, but he spoke objectively about the rather Proudhonist-utopian council ideas of Turin. Out of discipline towards the other principles of the Second World Congress which he endorsed, Bordiga also accepted the theses on parliamentary tactics, but reserved the right to reopen the question of parliamentarianism for debate at a later World Congress if the recommended tactics proved to be inadequate. It was not the Ordine Nuovo group, which had Lenin's vote, whose members disagreed with each other after the Comintern Congress and the concomitant factory occupations in northern Italy, but the faction led by Bordiga, which had considerably grown in the meantime, carried out the separation from the old party at the 19th Socialist Party Congress in Livorno in January 1921.

Bordiga's stance at the 2nd World Congress of the Comintern is paradigmatic for the line he has represented all his life. Respect for Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership never prevents him from engaging with them when he saw the Comintern's revolutionary line as a world party threatened by tactical concessions. At the same time, he behaved in a disciplined manner as far as necessary, and unlike so many left-wing opposition communists, he did not fall into a utopian-abstract critique of the

¹ *Giacinto Menotti Serrati* (1874-1926) was actively involved in the reorganisation of the socialist left after the outbreak of war in 1914 (the Zimmerwald Movement) and led the Socialist Party into the Communist International after the October Revolution.

² *Filippo Turati* (1857-1932) was one of the founders of the PCd'I in 1892.

political and economic conditions in the Soviet Union, when they dramatically came to a head after Lenin's death. Bordiga was a man who was probably politically tactical, but never intrigued by exploiting the personal weaknesses of others. Even a Josef Stalin, from whose grasp Bordiga in 1926, under the horrified gaze of his Italian comrades, wrested the concession that he had spoken out against the armed uprising that led to the Russian October Revolution, even Stalin himself, who had not been lenient with his political opponents even before the purges, certified Bordiga that he never spoke the untruth in everything he said.

When he took over the leadership of the Italian Communist Party, Bordiga could already look back on almost a decade of intensive political work. Born in 1889 as the son of a professor of agricultural science, he studied engineering in Naples, his hometown of Naples, and in 1912, as a student, he first appeared at a congress of the Italian Young Socialists, where, against Gramsci's student friend Angelo Tasca, who wanted to commit the youth association to an apolitical cultural reformist line, he won the majority for a still very general class struggle programme. In April 1915, even before Italy's entry into the war, he called for the formation of a new International implementing the communist programme. As soon as the October Revolution had broken out, Bordiga published a series of articles in which he analysed its genesis and the world-political situation at that time in such a way that it could be assumed that it had arisen directly in Lenin's immediate vicinity. Without ever having had any direct contact with the Russian revolutionaries, Bordiga developed almost all the crucial points that Lenin also worked out during the First World War.

Released from military service, Bordiga and a Neapolitan comrade founded the journal *// Soviet* in late 1919, which soon became the fractional organ of the abstentionist communists within the Italian Socialist Party. Reports on the labour struggles in Naples which the Soviet Group played a decisive role in organising, ideological arguments not only with the comrades of the Socialist Party, but with almost all left-wing movements in Western Europe at that time, with the anarchists, the syndicalists, the German Communist Workers' Party, make the magazine *// Soviet* a captivating read even today if one wants to get closer to the early history of Western European communism. All this explains why Bordiga already had an independent position that allowed him to face the Russian Comintern leaders on an equal footing.

In 1923 Bordiga voluntarily resigned from the leadership of the Italian Communist Party because he considered the contradictory Comintern directives for the Western European parties to be opportunistic adjustment manoeuvres. Until the consolidation of the Gramsci-Togliatti group at the 3rd party congress in Lyon in 1926, the Italian party was still under the influence of the left wing led by Bordiga. If Bordiga had been concerned with maintaining an immediate position of power, he would not have voluntarily resigned. However, he was primarily interested in the further future of the Communist International as a world party that was to be managed centrally. He strictly rejected the autonomy of its individual sections vis-à-vis the center. When the slogan of the "Bolshevisation" of the non-Russian sections of the International was issued and "Leninism" was elevated to a complement of Marxism, Bordiga criticised the mechanical transfer of the Russian model to countries with a different tradition of class struggle. One would be wrong, he said, to pass Lenin off as a "creative enricher" of Marxism, when he had always been an orthodox Marxist. At the height of the clashes over the Soviet Union's new course within the Russian party, Bordiga called for the Russian question to be resolved by the entire Communist International. In this context, he said it was time to put the organisational pyramid of the Comintern, which was standing on its head, i.e. being dominated by the Russian section, back on its feet. In the years 1925-26 he joined forces with Leon Trotsky, but this did not prevent him from pointing out his earlier mistakes in the leadership of the International. Shortly before his arrest by the fascists in the autumn of 1926, he rejected a proposal by Karl Korsch to participate in the founding of a counter-international. In 1930 Bordiga was expelled from his party. After being released

from fascist exile, Bordiga worked in his profession as an engineer, labouriously feeding his family. After the Second World War he joined an International Communist Party, of which there are now a number of sections, mainly in Italy and France, but also in Denmark and Sweden.

He has published a series of theoretical papers, all of which appeared anonymously. The arguably most interesting analysis concerns the social and economic structure of Russia. Bordiga believes that it is a young capitalism without a bourgeois capitalist class. The collective farm structure introduced by Stalin, with its mixture of cooperative sector and micro-private rural economy, prevents it from rapidly developing the productive forces of society as a whole, makes the city dependent on the countryside, subjects the Russian industrial proletariat to the interests of "social kolkhozianism", of which the much-vaunted bureaucracy is only one element. For Bordiga, this is the quintessence of the Russian counterrevolution, which can only be regarded as part of the worldwide counterrevolution that has been ongoing since 1926. Around 1975, Bordiga predicted as early as 1957, there could be a worldwide revolutionary crisis, the epicentre of which would be in Central Europe and extend to Western and Eastern Europe, but not directly to the Soviet Union. In this crisis Russia will play more the role of a reserve of productive forces than that of a reserve of revolutionary armies. Whether this prophecy will ever come true will not be experienced by the one who probably still hoped to experience the victorious world revolution of the seventies after the end of the world revolution of the twenties.