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La nostra voce and the Italian Communists of Tunisia

The presence of an Italian community in Tunisia is rooted in a secular history starting at least at the beginning of the 19th century when Jewish merchants and professionals from Livorno (the so-called “Qrana”) became a powerful elite within Tunisian society. Towards the end of the century, worker and peasant migration, especially from southern Italy, progressively increased the number of Italians, which in the 1930s counted more than 100,000, the largest minority in the French protectorate. As a result of the 1896 conventions between the Kingdom of Italy and France, Italian subjects residing on Tunisian soil were granted a privileged status: in addition to the right to pass their nationality on to their children, Italians had their own schools and hospitals and were treated equally to the French in the exercise of every professional activities.¹ However, French authorities perceived the fast-growing Italian community as a threat to the power and influence of the *République*.²

The rise of fascism in Italy and Mussolini’s aggressive imperialist policy increased the tension between the two powers: everywhere an Italian community existed, the fascist regime undertook the “fascistisation” of Italians abroad through its consular network. *Dopolavoro* and *Opera Nazionale*

1. Salvatore Speziale, “Gli italiani di Tunisia tra età moderna e contemporanea: diacronia di un’emigrazione multiforme”, in *Non più a sud di Lampedusa. Italiani in Tunisia tra passato e presente*, ed. by Laura Faranda, Rome, Armando, 2016, pp. 31-35; Silvia Finzi, “Oltre i mestieri. Memorie, identità politica e rappresentazioni sociali dei lavoratori italiani in Tunisia (1930-1970)”, in *Non più a sud di Lampedusa*, ed. by Faranda, pp. 49-50.

2. Leila El Houssi, *L’urlo contro il regime. Gli antifascisti italiani in Tunisia tra le due guerre*, Rome, Carocci, 2014, pp. 19-23.

Balilla club cards becomes necessary to obtain grants for free school canteens and books, as well as for summer camps paid by the Italian government. Since the end of the 1920s, in opposition to the regime's manoeuvres, an important antifascist movement took hold within the community. A key figure was Giulio Barresi, Sicilian-born republican who in 1931 founded the Tunisian branch of the Lega Italiana dei Diritti dell'Uomo (LIDU). Furthermore, in 1921 the Tunisian Communist Party (PCT) was established with the participation of the Italian working class. As a multi-ethnic party, the PCT was not only a political school for a group of Italo-Tunisians destined for a brilliant career in the Italian Communist Party (PCI) after the Second World War; it was also a pivotal tool for the opposition against fascists' hegemonic attempts over the Italian community.³ On the wave of the Popular Front in France, since 1936 LIDU and the Italian members of the PCT were among the strongest supporters of antifascist unity and the so-called Italo-French-Tunisian friendship against the imperialism of the Axis Powers. Nevertheless, the increasing importance of antifascism within the Italian community hardly improved the relationship between the French authorities and the Italians, which was deeply influenced by fascist propaganda. Italy's declaration of war against France was a breaking point, which, after Italy's defeat in World War II, became a pretext for severe retaliatory measures against the Italian community.⁴

This chapter focuses on the presence and activity of Italian communists in Tunisia after the Second World War and aims to reconstruct some aspects of the political life and rivalries within the Italian community in Tunisia. In recent years, several works have been devoted to the Italians in Tunisia, particularly to their pivotal role in developing an important antifascist movement in the interwar years. Where scholars such as Lucia Valenzi and

3. Ibid., pp. 65-71, 139; Rim Lajmi, "Italiane di Tunisi, dette 'le Tunisine': destini incrociati, storie di vita e di militanza tra Tunisia, Francia e Italia", in *Non più a sud di Lampedusa*, ed. by Faranda, p. 76.

4. Martino Oppizzi, "Dal tradimento all'impero: gli Italiani di Tunisia e il consenso al regime dagli accordi Mussolini-Laval alla Guerra d'Etiopia", in *Storie e Testimonianze Politiche degli Italiani di Tunisia*, ed. by Silvia Finzi, Tunis, Finzi, 2016, pp. 156-158. See also *Italiani e antifascisti in Tunisia negli anni Trenta: percorsi di una difficile identità*, ed. by Lucia Valenzi, Naples, Liguori, 2008; Mustapha Kraiem, *Le Parti Communiste Tunisien pendant la période coloniale*, Tunis, Institut Supérieur d'Histoire du Mouvement National, 1997; Antonello Mattone, *Velio Spano: vita di un rivoluzionario di professione*, Cagliari, Della Torre, 1978; Bechir Tlili, *L'antifascisme en Tunisie (1939)*, Tunis, Société tunisienne des Arts graphiques, 1981.

Leila El Houssi have carefully described the social and political evolution of Italian antifascism before the war, their analysis of the antifascist front as a whole prevented them from observing communists' activities and positions in detail.⁵ In this regard, the Tunisian sociologist and communist activist Paul Sebag's book of memories, *Communistes de Tunisie*, provides an accurate reconstruction of his war experience alongside Italians in the PCT, together with an effective description of the party's structure and organisation between 1939 and 1943.⁶ The only monograph entirely devoted to the PCT under the French protectorate, Mustapha Kraiem's *Le Parti Communiste Tunisien pendant la période coloniale*, leaves out every reference to the Italian presence within the party after the Second World War when the Tunisian and French components become the majority.⁷

Here, I will first attempt to briefly illustrate the context where Italian communists in Tunisia operated in the aftermath of World War II. In particular, I aim to reconstruct the positions and political objectives pursued by the communists through an analysis of the newspaper *La nostra voce*. Beginning with the analysis of this unpublished document, I will identify three themes that emerge with significant constancy throughout the chronological span under consideration. Firstly, I will focus on Italian communists' relationship with Italy and the PCI. Secondly, I will analyse the persistent and pressing concern regarding the growing subalternity of the Italians and the attempts to negotiate with the protectorate authorities' new conditions of coexistence that were capable of stemming their decline in status. Finally, I will emphasise the internal rivalries within antifascist circles, in which the opposition between communists, socialists and republicans on the one hand reflected a rivalry related to the conquest of hegemony in the Italian community, and which on the other could be read as a mirror of the rupture of the antifascist front in the face of the assertion of tension between Blocs. The reconstruction of these events relies on issues of the newspaper *La nostra voce*, clandestinely published by Italian communists from 1943 to 1950 and held at the Amilcar Cabral Library in Bologna. I integrate this source with the papers of the General Residence

5. El Houssi, *L'urlo contro il regime*; Leila El Houssi, "Gli antifascisti italiani in Tunisia tra le due guerre", *Altreitalie*, 36-37 (2008), pp. 189-204; *Italiani e antifascisti in Tunisia negli anni Trenta*, ed. by Valenzi.

6. Paul Sebag, *Communistes de Tunisie: souvenirs et documents*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2001.

7. Kraiem, *Le Parti Communiste Tunisien*.

of France in Tunisia, which I had the opportunity to consult at the Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes.

The entry of the Allies into Tunis on 7 May 1943 was greeted by the antifascists with great hope, although it was not accompanied by an effective liberation for the Italian community. Italy's military defeat marked the opportunity for France to neutralise what for over sixty years had been a thorn in the side for the established political and cultural hegemons. Thousands of Italians, regardless of their political orientation, were interned in prison camps, subjected to compulsory labour and suffered the confiscation of their property, which took definitive legal form on 13 November 1943 with the establishment of the authority to manage "enemy property". In addition, in 1944 the 1896 Establishment Conventions, which had allowed Italians to reside and work in the protectorate for decades, were abrogated. Finally, a subsequent measure stipulated that "Italians born in Tunisia after 10 May 1940 to Italian parents, at least one of whom was born in Tunisia, shall automatically receive French citizenship, except that they may reject it during the year following the attainment of the majority".⁸

It was in this context that the Italian antifascists, united under the name of the Italian Democratic Union (UDI), tried to create space for political manoeuvring, encountering countless difficulties and continuing to act in a condition of semi-legality. Indeed, every activity was closely supervised, and a request by the UDI to publish a newspaper was declined by Resident General Mast.⁹ In the immediate post-war period, the PCT was the only organised legal party, so it was thus no accident that in 1944 the main leaders of Italian origin in the PCT choose to emigrate. Faced with the very narrow margins of action in Tunisia, figures such as Velio Spano, who has been sent to Tunisia in the late 1930s by the Foreign Centre of the PCI, but also Italians born in Tunisia such as Maurizio Valenzi, Loris and Nadia Gallico expatriated to begin a successful career in the Italian Party, which required new cadres to meet the needs of the newly formed mass party.¹⁰ The departure of these political figures and the drastic

8. Antonio Maria Morone, "Fratture post-coloniali. L'indipendenza della Tunisia e il declino della comunità di origine italiana", *Contemporanea*, 18 (2015), pp. 41-42.

9. "Gli antifascisti alla Residenza", *La nostra voce*, 24 January 1946.

10. Mattone, *Velio Spano*, pp. 66-67. On the PCI's post-war transformation into a mass party, see, for instance, Donald Sassoon, *Togliatti e il partito di massa. Il PCI dal 1944 al 1964*, Rome, Castelvechi, 2014; Alessandro De Angelis, *I comunisti e il partito. Dal "partito nuovo" alla svolta dell'89*, Rome, Carocci, 2002; Renzo Martinelli, "Il Partito

reduction of contributions by Italian comrades to the PCT's newspaper, *L'avenir de la Tunisie*, have so far led scholars to consider that the Italian interlude in the Tunisian party ended in 1944.¹¹ However, the publication of several dozen editions of *La nostra voce* until at least 1950 would lead one to think otherwise. Certainly, the semi-clandestine and sporadic nature with which the paper appeared indicated a circulation and, probably, its effectively reduced influence. In any case, the issues covered in the paper and the attention from the authorities of the Residence to which it was subject provide a rare glimpse into the demise of what had been the most influential community in Tunisia for years.

La nostra voce, born as the "organ" of the Italian communists in Tunisia, reflected the positions and addressed the Italian component of the PCT, whereas *Ettalia*, in Arabic, was linked to the Tunisian section and *L'avenir de la Tunisie*, the official and most widely circulated newspaper, presented itself as the actual "voice" of a multi-ethnic party in all respects.¹² Thus, if Valenzi, Gallico, Spano and all the most important leaders of the PCT were in Italy, who ran the newspaper and who were the animators of what by now had the form of a small cell? For security reasons, the articles were not signed, and only through a few references in the text and from the Residence's documents can we glean some names: Salvatore Cefalia, Angelo Gutierrez, Alfonso Errera, Ludovico Lombardo, militants of whom little or nothing is known, including their origin.¹³

If the personal histories of these figures are shrouded in obscurity, at least for now, what does emerge clearly from the pages of *La nostra voce* is a very close relationship with Italy, almost a model and a sort of "spiritual" home to which these communists looked with keen interest

nuovo e la preparazione del V Congresso. Appunti sulla rifondazione del PCI", *Studi Storici*, 31 (1990), pp. 27-51; Paolo Spriano, *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano*, vol. V, *La resistenza, Togliatti e il partito nuovo*, Turin, Einaudi, 1975.

11. See, for instance, Kraiem, *Le Parti Communiste Tunisien*.

12. Rim Lajmi, "'Donne Italiane, uniamoci contro la guerra!': Storia di militanza italiana femminile in Tunisia", in *Storie e Testimonianze Politiche*, ed. by Finzi, p. 218.

13. Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Protectorat Tunisie, Résidence Générale. Premier versement, 1881-1949, 1TU/1/V/2785 – Parti Communiste Tunisien (1948-1949), *Parti Communiste Tunisien, organisation*, ?/8/1948; 1TU/1/V/2790 – Colonies italiennes, organisation des Italiens de Tunisie, organisations politiques, population italienne, relations franco-italiennes (1943-1949), *Note à M. le Directeur des Affaires Politiques*, 12 June 1943, *Note sur le Secrétaire du Parti Communiste Italien*, 11 February 1948.

and whose every moment of the republican reconstruction they followed closely. The proclamation of the Republic after the referendum of 2 June 1946, the paper says, was celebrated by a “crowd of Italians”, “in a hall too small to contain it”. “The historical event”, the article follows, “has been properly celebrated in Tunisia [...]. Evoked by every speaker, the great forerunner figures of the Italian Republic, Garibaldi and Mazzini, as well as the memory of the martyrs of Risorgimento and the more recent ones of the Resistance, hovered in the room”.¹⁴ A couple of months later, the third anniversary of the fall of the fascist regime was hailed as “the second Risorgimento of our country”, which showed that it had been able to rise again after two decades of oppression. “Of this Italy”, the anonymous editor wrote, “the Italians of Tunisia will be worthy children, to the extent that they too will know how to destroy every remnant of the fascist mentality”.¹⁵ Some basic features of what can be described as a diasporic identity emerge from these few lines. While the communists claimed their Italian ancestry and explicitly referred to the tradition and history of the peninsula, they also perceived themselves as Italians *of* Tunisia and not as Italians *in* Tunisia, implicitly inserting “the community of Italian origin [...] into Tunisian society and its history” and thus going on to highlight what has been called an effective “connection with various regional and international referents”.¹⁶

Reflecting this relationship with Italy is also the connection with the PCI, whose transformation into a mass party was closely followed by the communists of Tunisia. Speeches given by the Italian party’s leaders on major national and international issues were regularly reported, as were accounts of the PCI’s fifth congress and elections in 1948.¹⁷ The enthusiastic tones which welcomed the election to the Constituent Assembly of the Italo-Tunisian Nadia Gallico are thus not surprising.¹⁸ However, the PCI

14. “In una sala troppo piccolo per contenerla, una densa folla d’Italiani ha festeggiato a Tunisi la Repubblica”, *La nostra voce*, 20 June 1946.

15. “25 luglio”, *La nostra voce*, 1 August 1946.

16. Morone, “Fratture post-coloniali”, p. 35. On Tunisian society as an ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural mosaic, see also Speziale, “Gli italiani di Tunisia”, in *Non più a sud di Lampedusa*, ed. by Faranda, pp. 17-42.

17. “Dopo il V° Congresso del Partito comunista italiano”, *La nostra voce*, 17 January 1946; “Le elezioni in Italia”, *La nostra voce*, April 1948.

18. “I nostri compagni Nadia e Velio Spano alla Costituente”, *La nostra voce*, 1 August 1946.

was not simply an ideological reference to which communists in Tunisia looked with interest, all the more so after the rise of former comrades in its ranks. Based on several testimonies and documents from the Residence, it is possible to trace, starting in the second half of the 1940s, a series of direct contacts between communists who had emigrated to Italy and comrades who remained in Tunisia. We can thus draw a line of continuity between the events of the PCT Italian group established in the late 1930s and the subsequent developments of the Tunisian party.

In 1946, for instance, Litza Cittanova, an Italo-Tunisian communist militant, returned to Tunis, where she held a series of conferences at Angelo Guttieres' home. According to French police papers, she strongly maintained that Italy would soon be communist and that the closeness between Italy and Tunisia would have great importance. In light of these expected political changes in Italy, in her opinion, the PCT would mainly rely on the support of the Italian community after Tunisia had gained independence.¹⁹ A couple of years later, in July 1948, a meeting took place at Guttieres' house between Valenzi, who had emigrated to Italy and returned for a visit, Ferruccio Bensasson, Victor Bembaron and Maurice Nizard (secretary of the PCT), in which they discussed the elections that had just taken place in Italy.²⁰ These were informal contacts that remained confined to the private sphere, probably characterised by a certain secrecy, but they were no less important for what would be the development of relations between the PCI and Tunisian communists throughout the 1950s.²¹ However, contacts with former comrades in Italy sometimes shed light on disappointment, stories of hard life and failures. Pasquale Briseda, a communist militant who had migrated to Sicily, for example, wrote to his comrade Gaspare Ciambra that nothing worked in Italy. Notwithstanding his proven antifascist militancy and faith, indeed, he was always unemployed. Similar concerns were expressed to Ciambra by the former chief of the Italian communist cell in Tunis, Antonino Vinti. Despite their verbal support, he had failed to obtain the help of ministers and comrades such as Togliatti and Amendola.

19. CADN, Protectorat Tunisie, Résidence Générale. Premier versement, 1TU/1/V/2790, *Renseignements d'activité*, 23 October 1946.

20. CADN, Protectorat Tunisie, Résidence Générale, Premier versement, 1TU/1/V/2790, *Du Parti Communiste Italien*, 21 July 1948.

21. See Daniela Melfa, *Rivoluzionari responsabili. Militanti comunisti in Tunisia (1956-1993)*, Rome, Carocci, 2019.

He lived in poverty in Palermo, where he did not earn enough to properly feed his family.²²

The issue that emerges most clearly in *La nostra voce* and that gripped the Italians of Tunisia, communists included, was certainly fear for the fate of the community. The worsening conditions of the Italians of Tunisia, who had long played an intermediate role between the colonizers and colonized, were experienced as a misfortune that they tried to curb, with no significant results. In general, communists tried to adopt an attitude oscillating between conciliation and assertion of their rights towards protectorate authorities, affirming their estrangement from the regime of Mussolini, which they had always fought tenaciously. The Italian people, they argued, had been victims of fascism, and while it was right to punish the few, wealthy and influential fascists, the majority of Italians were democrats who wished to live and work peacefully in harmony with the French and Tunisians. These were, broadly speaking, the arguments that returned frequently to materially and morally exonerate the Italians of Tunisia from the regime's sins. In particular, the communists lashed out against four of the Residence's measures: the expulsions from Tunisian territory, the loss of Italian nationality and the French naturalisations, the compulsory labour to which thousands of Italians had been subject since the end of the war, and the seizure of property. An expulsion measure issued in the last months of 1945, the paper states, had "deeply disturbed the Italian community, for two essential reasons".

The first is that a great many fascists, enemies of democracy and the Italians themselves, have been let off the hook, thanks to high and covert protections – or by the sale of their real estate – and have even been released upon the intervention of certain influential personalities. The second reason is that among the expelled too many are instead those who have no guilt to serve, or who are even known for their democratic sentiments.²³

Indeed, expulsion represented for many a trauma and the beginning of a series of migratory movements that had Italy as an almost obligatory destination. This was a passage that for many marked not only a process of economic impoverishment, as the cases of Vinti and Briseda highlight, but

22. CADN, Protectorat Tunisie, Résidence Générale. Premier versement, 1TU/1/V/2790, *Note sur l'état d'esprit de quelques communistes italiens de Tunisie*, 19 October 1946.

23. "Le espulsioni", *La nostra voce*, 14 November 1945.

also a strong social and cultural change. “Those who enjoyed a privileged and special status within colonial society precisely for being Italians”, it has been written, “suddenly found themselves in Italy to be mere Italians like so many others, or, in the worst cases, ended up being assimilated into just any other migrants”.²⁴

If the numerous episodes of expulsion from Tunisia deeply upset the communists, no less a stir was caused by the issue of naturalisations, towards which they showed, at least privately, great concern. The Residence’s trust sources, for instance, reported that communists were spreading “that if France would grant independence to Tunisian people, the French would be forced to leave the Residence, as well as naturalized Italians”.²⁵ While on one side communists like Cittanova found a crucial role for Italians in a free Tunisia, on the other it appears that this role could be played only if the community itself survived. When the strength of the Italian community was probably at its lowest historical level, without any significant support from the Italian government and far from every position of power, the communists then expressed strong claims against the persistence of compulsory labour to which thousands of Italians were still subjected at the end of 1945, more than two years after the end of the war. When rumours begin to circulate about the abolition of compulsory labour, which became operative in December 1945, the measure was hailed by *La nostra voce* as the end of an “unjust reprisal measure” because it affected workers who “participated ardently in the war effort, thus giving a magnificent example of conscience and spirit of sacrifice”.²⁶ The self-absolving theme of a “sane” and antifascist majority pitted against a handful of rich fascists, unrepresentative of the national spirit, returned prominently here.

It was, however, the issue of the seizure of property that emerged most recurrently in the pages of the paper and on which the communists lingered the longest. As mentioned earlier, since liberation the Residence had ordered the requisition of enemy property, now managed by a special authority. What seemed to take the form of a state of exception became, with the signing of the Peace Treaty in 1947, a *fait accompli*. According to Article 79, the victorious powers were indeed empowered to forfeit “all property,

24. Morone, “Fratture post-coloniali”, p. 59.

25. CADN, Protectorat Tunisie, Résidence Générale. Premier versement, 1TU/1/V/2790, Note n° 823 sur les Manoeuvres du Parti Communiste Italien, 2 July 1947.

26. “Soppressione del lavoro obbligatorio?”, *La nostra voce*, 1 December 1945.

either of Italy or Italian citizens” on national territory or in the colonies, as compensation for war damages,²⁷ a situation that for many families entailed enormous hardships, such as the inability to live in their homes. “Hundreds and hundreds of honest Italian families”, it was written in *La nostra voce*,

are still living out of their homes in unprecedented hardship. They see their apartments passing from hand to hand, allowing the various occupants and the intermediaries who are specialists in the matter lavish profits. But there is nothing to suggest that we are moving toward returning the requisitioned houses to the former Italian landlords.²⁸

Only after years of long negotiations would the Italian government succeed, in 1951, at obtaining from protectorate authorities the property release and establishment of an Italian Assistance Society. In the meantime, however, the Residence had forfeited movable and immovable properties that had for years been the pillars of an Italian community now deprived of its hospital and schools.²⁹

In the face of these repressive measures, and despite strong criticism, Italian communists nevertheless did not adopt a direct line of confrontation with the French authorities. The watchword, clearly expressed in March 1946, was indeed the establishment of a regime of “common law”, in which Italians were willing to give up pre-war privileges and be treated according to legislation that placed Italians, Frenchmen and Tunisians on the same level. “To obtain this regime”, *La nostra voce* stated,

to obtain, as the unanimously approved motion, the possibility to associate in a wide antifascist movement for our democratic rebirth and our full participation in the country’s prosperity, we must act, we must shake a certain fear [...], the legacy of fascism and the well-known regime of exception.³⁰

Under the disguise of an important, unprecedented political goal, this appeared as a position of forced compromise at a time when the Italian government, in order to gain its support and obtain a favourable arrangement

27. Lajili Marouane, *La législation coloniale française en matière de domaine de l’État en Tunisie (1881-1956)*, Tunis, Institut Supérieur d’Histoire du Mouvement Nationale, 2010, pp. 264-265.

28. “È ora di finirla col regime d’eccezione”, *La nostra voce*, 1 September 1947.

29. Finzi, “Oltre i mestieri”, in *Non più a sud di Lampedusa*, ed. by Faranda, pp. 54-55; Morone, “Fratture post-coloniali”, pp. 43-45.

30. “Dopo il comizio di domenica”, *La nostra voce*, 20 December 1945.

of the former colonies, was far more concerned with maintaining good relations with France than with protecting the interests of the Italians of Tunisia. The communists themselves repeatedly insisted on the need to establish a solid Franco-Italian-Tunisian understanding that would allow for equal coexistence. The impression given is that this “common law” regime took the form more of a political, economic and, in the long run, status rapprochement with France and the French rather than an effective democratic reform of a system hitherto rigidly divided between colonizers and colonized. “It is necessary”, the communist paper stated,

to accelerate measures in favour of the mass of honest and hard-working Italians, and bring them up to the level of the new friendly relations that bind France and Italy and that are expressed in the trade treaty and the sending of Italian labour to France. To this end, we are certain that the action of the “Comité France-Italie” being set up in Tunis, and which the Italians of Tunisia will support with all their strength, will be very effective.³¹

The communists’ compromising attitude towards France also provided the pretext for the first rifts within the antifascist front. A motion signed by socialists and communists, in which – while recognising the harshness of the conditions of the Peace Treaty – they disassociated from provocative and anti-French attitudes was rejected by republicans, in particular by the historic leader Barresi, who would thus refuse, in the communists’ view, to “disapprove of the fascists’ way of acting”.³² The clash between the various components of the antifascist movement would seem to reflect two fundamental elements of tension. The first, linked to the Tunisian context, concerned the hegemony over the Italian community, a goal pursued by the republicans as much as by the socialists and communists. Indeed, not only the competition between these political forces to become the main Italian referent in the eyes of the French authorities was emerging between the lines of the communist sheet, but it was also reported in the Residence’s documents. The second element was more directly related to the global context and, particularly, to the escalation of tension between the Blocs that characterised the outbreak of the Cold War beginning in 1946.

With regard to the attempts to establish hegemony over the Italian community, for instance, after the concession of the right to commercial

31. “Verso la normalizzazione”, *La nostra voce*, 1 March 1946.

32. “Un’indispensabile iniziativa”, *La nostra voce*, 20 July 1946.

property, granted to Italians in 1947, the communist leader Guttieres declared that “the issue of commercial property would have been solved thanks to his and his comrades’ efforts”, whereas Barresi attributed the merit to his side.³³ Furthermore, before a meeting between the antifascist leaders and the Resident-General, Guttieres had previously attempted to find a separate agreement with the Resident himself, in order to obtain the authorisation to form a delegation composed mainly of people close to the communist leader.³⁴ Whether French authorities arguably overestimated, if not actively supported, divisions within the Italian antifascists, the existence of internal rivalries is hardly deniable. In this sense, an article that appeared on the republican sheet *La rivolta ideale* – in which communist leaders such as Valensi, Spano and Gallico were accused of having run away to Italy for merely opportunistic reasons – left few doubts.³⁵ Similarly, communists were frequently accused of wanting to use for “partisan” political ends the LIDU, which was a historically democratic, formally nonpartisan association that for years brought together all the souls of Italian antifascism in Tunisia.³⁶ In this sense, the election of the communists Ludovico Lombardo and Cefalia to LIDU’s political bureau, after pressures on Barresi, created difficulties in the association. According to a Residence paper, part of the Italian members, mostly socialists or republicans, did not participate in meetings and did not pay inscription fees any longer after communists had been admitted.³⁷ Furthermore, throughout a LIDU reunion at the beginning of 1948, Barresi accused Cefalia of dealing with French politics instead of defending Italian interests. He then harshly criticised the communists’ manoeuvres, particularly Guttieres’, against him and the LIDU.³⁸

33. CADN, Protectorat Tunisie, Résidence Générale. Premier versement, 1TU/1/V/2790, *Note n° 1453 sur une lutte d’influence entre Guttieres et Barresi*, 20 November 1947.

34. CADN, Protectorat Tunisie, Résidence Générale. Premier versement, 1TU/1/V/2790, *Note sur les Italiens de Tunisie*, 22 March 1947.

35. CADN, Protectorat Tunisie, Résidence Générale, Premier versement, 1TU/1/V/2790, *Article de presse italienne La Rivolta Ideale du 17/10/46*, 8 November 1946.

36. CADN, Protectorat Tunisie, Résidence Générale, Premier versement, 1TU/1/V/2790, *De la L.I.D.U. et des communistes italiens*, 9 October 1948.

37. CADN, Protectorat Tunisie, Résidence Générale, Premier versement, 1TU/1/V/2790, *Extrait du B.J.R. de la D.S.S. du 22/12/1947*, 22 December 1947.

38. CADN, Protectorat Tunisie, Résidence Générale, Premier versement, 1TU/1/V/2790, *Note sur la colonie italienne*, 31 January 1948.

As regards the second element, instead, the tension between antifascist parties reflecting the changing geopolitical balances was clearly expressed by the position of socialists such as Nullo Pasotti, who for years had shared the political spaces of the UDI and LIDU with the communists, and who now considered the communist danger as one of the most serious problems for Italy and the Italian community. According to the minutes of a meeting of a socialist section in Tunis, even Pasotti was said to have suggested “giving a clean slate to the past and making a block against the communist danger” in the interest of the nation.³⁹ Moreover, mirroring these positions was the growing anti-Americanism of Italian communists, who after the proclamation of the Republic in Italy stated:

The Republic won, in Italy! It has won, however, after a bitter, hard struggle against the monarchy, which has resorted to every expediency, every felony, every possible alliance to save itself, helped by the powerful Vatican apparatus, by the residuals of fascism – which today is no longer “social and republican”, but ultra-monarchist and also, it is worth saying, more or less openly supported by the Anglo-American circles.⁴⁰

The breaking of the antifascist front and reshaping of alliances on a global scale thus brought the communists to consider the newly-formed Western Bloc as the true reed of fascist imperialism, going so far as to formulate the paradoxical call for their countrymen “to join with French and Tunisian democrats to prevent Tunisia from becoming an American colony”.⁴¹ This was a judgment that could be provocatively summarised as follows: it was better to be colonized by the French than by the Americans. In the face of such positions, common on the other hand in the PCT as a whole, Tunisian leaders included, it is not surprising that the communists always remained on the sidelines of the national independence movement, which always viewed the PCT’s ambiguity toward French colonialism with suspicion.

The life and activity of the Italian communist group within the PCT has provided an original angle through which to observe the post-war transformations and concerns of the Italian community in Tunisia. I have sought to briefly reconstruct the history of this community alongside the

39. CADN, Protectorat Tunisie, Résidence Générale, Premier versement, 1TU/1/V/2790, *Compte rendu de la reunion du Parti Socialiste Italien*, 15 September 1947.

40. “Repubblica!”, *La nostra voce*, 20 June 1946.

41. “No! Non ci lasceremo affamare o asservire”, *La nostra voce*, April 1948.

formation of an influential antifascist political activity in the interwar years and the aftermath of the Second World War. Following this, I analysed Italian communists' political identity and positions by focusing on three main aspects. First, their relationship with the PCI and with political life in Italy, detecting, on one side, a sort of "spiritual" connection while maintaining a peculiar, separate identity. On the other side, I have highlighted the "physical" link that communists in Tunisia kept with their comrades in Italy, a sort of network which highlighted a lively Mediterranean mobility. Secondly, I have focused on problems and issues which gripped the Italian community after the war, when it experienced a deep social, economic and political decline. Particularly, I have analysed the concerns connected to the expulsion of Italians from the Residence, the permanence of forced labour far beyond the end of the war, the increasing number of French naturalisations – which eroded the Italian community – and the seizure of property by French authorities, which brought the Italian economy to its knees. Finally, I have explored the relationship between the communists and the other elements of Italian antifascist circles. In this sense, I drew attention to the increasing tension and competition, on the one hand, due to each party's desire to assert hegemony over the community and become the main Italian political reference for French authorities. On the other hand, it seems to have been connected to the end of antifascist unity and Bloc rivalries that affected the new Cold War global order.