

ELISE ENGESLAND HALSNE

# A question of loyalty

The French Communist Party, 1976-81 – How a party's quest for democracy and ideological independence could lead to its support of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan



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*Til pappa*

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## List of abbreviations

**CCCP** – *Commission central de contrôle politique* – the Central Commission of Political Control. Section of the French Communist Party – the PCF.

**CCP** – The Chinese Communist Party.

**CFDT** – *Confédération française démocratique du travail* – France’s largest workers’ union.

**Cominform** – Communist Information Bureau, Comintern’s successor. Founded 1947, dissolved 1956.

**Comintern** – The (Third) Communist International, founded 1919 – dissolved 1943.

**CPSU** – The Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

**KGB** – *Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti* – the Committee for State Security, the Soviet intelligence agency.

**MRG** – *Mouvement des radicaux aux gauche* – Movement of the Left Radicals, French political organization, predecessor to the current PRG – *Parti radical de gauche*.

**NATO** – North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

**PCE** – *Partido Comunista de España* – the Spanish Communist Party.

**PCF** – *Parti communist français* – the French Communist Party.

**PCI** – *Partito Comunista Italiano* – the Italian Communist Party.

**PCUS** – *Parti communiste de l’Union Soviétique* – the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

**PDPA** – People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan.

**PS** – *Parti socialiste* – the French Socialist Party.

**UN** – United Nations.

**USSR** – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – the Soviet Union.

# Chapter 1. Introduction

*“L’utopie n’a pas de passé, seulement un avenir”<sup>1</sup>*

“Utopia does not have a past, only a future”

In early January, 1980, the French Communist Party – the PCF – decided to support the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that had taken place in late December, 1979. This thesis is an attempt to explain why the PCF made this decision. Such a starting point presupposes that the decision was not an inevitable course of action, and that there were indications that the PCF could have chosen differently. I will examine the decision made by the PCF by analyzing the PCF’s ideological evolution and political loyalties in the years leading up to the invasion, beginning in 1976, and the aftermath of the invasion, 1980-1981. My focus will be on the PCF’s *international* relations, i.e. its relations with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union – the CPSU – and its relations with other European communist parties, more precisely its participation in the 1970s democratization efforts of European communism known as Eurocommunism. I will also attempt to demonstrate how the organizational structures of the PCF – evidence of its power hierarchy and the practical expressions of its decision-making processes – are key elements in understanding how the PCF’s relations with the international communist movement unfolded. I will also look into the consequences of the PCF’s decision, and what these effects may reveal about the party itself.

This thesis seeks to answer one, plain question: Why did the PCF support the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan? This question prompts several more; was it as simple as many believed at the time, that the PCF did what it was told by the Soviet Union, even if it had negative consequences for the PCF? That the bond between them was so strong, and the PCF’s allegiance to the CPSU so unconditional, that the PCF despite wishes to break free from the Soviet hold proved incapable to do so? Was there a genuine attachment to the Eurocommunist project or in the very least its principles, which helped the PCF gradually turn towards the liberal Europe? Had the PCF really moved away from the CPSU, with the support of the Afghan invasion being a slight relapse, an honest mistake? Or is the picture more complex? Furthermore, I wished to analyze the political and ideological loyalties that formed PCF

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<sup>1</sup> Daix, 1978:117.

policy before and after the invasion, to find out first, in what situation the PCF found itself in when the invasion took place, and secondly, how the PCF's subsequent support of the invasion affect the party. Based on these questions I formulated my main thesis question: *how did the PCF's international loyalties and the party's own hierarchal structures contribute to the PCF's decision to support the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and how did this decision affect the PCF?*

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan caused widespread anger and disapproval in diplomatic and military circles worldwide. Violent reactions to the invasion manifested themselves in Western media and politicians the world over began discussing economic and political sanctions against the Soviet Union. The invasion has later been interpreted as the event marking the end of the *détente*, the era of careful optimism in which Soviet-US relations had improved and important arms concessions had been made on both sides. The invasion was to have great consequences also for the international communist movement, of which the Soviet Union was the leader, and the PCF in particular would feel great effects of the invasion.

The PCF had traditionally been one of the Western communist parties closest to that of the Soviet Union, the CPSU. Only once in its history had it publically criticized a foreign political decision made by the Soviet Union – when it opposed the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968<sup>2</sup> – and when faced with the choice of supporting or condemning the invasion of Afghanistan, the PCF chose to stand by its old Soviet ally. It was a controversial decision, and the PCF was subjected to heavy criticisms as a consequence of it. It lost votes and its popularity sunk to an all-time low. I wanted to find out why the PCF made a decision that ultimately served no purpose but to damage the party. Naturally, I had to narrow the field of my analysis. I decided to focus on the years immediately prior to the invasion, beginning in 1976, and ending my analysis in 1981. In 1976, the PCF held a party conference that came to be regarded widely as a turning point in the party's approach to traditional Marxist doctrine as it was interpreted by the CPSU, thus providing me with a good starting point for my analysis. In 1981, the PCF was invited to join François Mitterrand's socialist government after having been in opposition since 1947. The PCF's ascent to government came at the end of a long year in which the French communists had experienced political isolation, structural radicalization and a steady decline in popularity. I conclude my analysis of these years in PCF history with

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<sup>2</sup> Lazar, 2002:37



an analysis of the speech PCF General Secretary Georges Marchais gave to the PCF Central Committee in June, 1981, in which he denounced his party's conduct at the time of the Afghanistan invasion and regretted the PCF's weakness when faced with the might of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

1976-1981 were eventful years for the PCF, both with regards to domestic politics and its international relations, and many different approaches could have yielded satisfactory analyses of my chosen topic. However, because the invasion of Afghanistan was a foreign event, unrelated to the PCF but by the party's close ties to the Soviet Union, and because these ties were *structural* – the PCF was in essence still a Stalinist party organization – as well as *political* – the two parties had been allies since the founding of the Comintern in 1919 – I chose to emphasize two factors I believe are key to understanding the decision the PCF made. The first is the PCF's international commitments and loyalties. The PCF always stayed true to the basic Marxist principle of internationalism. It was always of a deeply internationalist nature, and the history of the PCF is intimately connected with that of the international communist movement. Founded in 1920 when the French socialist movement split over the great polemic following the Third International's adoption of the controversial "Twenty-one Conditions," the PCF was dedicated to the Comintern until the latter was dissolved in 1943, obeying its increasingly Stalinist orders and conforming to the Stalinist party system. After the Second World War, the PCF repeated its loyalty to the Soviet Union, this time to the Cominform – the Comintern's less radiant successor – until this organization, too, was dissolved in 1956. All the while the PCF remained unconditionally loyal to the idea of proletarian internationalism – to international solidarity with the communist parties of the world. After the break between the Soviet Union and China, effectively dividing the communist world into two blocs, the PCF remained by the Soviets' side where it had always had its place. This did not change after the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

However, only a few years previously, by the mid-1970s, there were indications that the PCF-CPSU relationship was not as harmonious as it had once been. The PCF began voicing its concern, publically, over emerging evidence indicating serious human rights breaches in the Soviet Union and other socialist states. Answering both to the needs of the party to adapt to the liberal French society in order to maintain its momentum, and to new impulses from the European communist movement – known as Eurocommunism – the PCF gradually began to

want for greater ideological independence vis-à-vis the CPSU. The latter, ever in fear of factionalism and perhaps also of losing the PCF to the social democrats, reacted strongly to what it perceived was a French communist rebellion against the Soviets. In turn, the PCF would use its renewed relations with the European communist parties as leverage in its ongoing conflict with the CPSU, exploiting the Soviets' fear of losing its position in the world movement.

Eurocommunism is defined as two distinctive phenomena, both of which point to a process of gradual reformation and liberalization of European – and world – communism.

Eurocommunism – a phrase originally coined by journalists – was a political cooperation primarily involving Western European communist parties and spearheaded by the Italian and Spanish communist parties – the PCI, and the PCE, respectively. Promoting a more liberal approach to traditional Marxist thought, as well as political pluralism – i.e. acknowledging the many-party political system of Europe's capitalist democracies – this cooperation sought to rejuvenate communism by lessening the Soviet influence of the international movement. This Soviet influence, both in terms of the Stalinist legacy of party structure and the Soviet Union's political control of the international movement, lies at the heart of the second definition of the Eurocommunist phenomenon. Several contemporary observers and, later, historians, interpreted Eurocommunism as the inevitable development of world communism – as the process of de-Stalinization.<sup>3</sup> Rather than interpreting Eurocommunism as a progressive stage in the evolution of communism, it was seen as a reaction to the Stalinist structures that had crippled the international movement since its earliest days.

The second key factor in my analysis is an understanding of the PCF's party structures – Stalinist in origin, and, in many instances, still Stalinist in practical application – these structures greatly influenced the party's decision-making processes. I have therefore included a chapter on the various manifestations of these essentially undemocratic structures – the party's tradition for secrecy, its dedication to the principle of democratic centralism, its rigid treatment of dissidents challenging party unity, and the personal authority and power of the top leaders – all of which serve to give an insight into how the PCF made its decisions, and who within the party influenced those decisions.

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<sup>3</sup> Tiersky, 1985; Mandel, 1979; Ross in (ed) Boggs and Plotke, 1980

In working on my thesis, focusing on the PCF's organizational structures and its international commitments, I quickly established that I had to differentiate between two very important terms; between *ideology* and *politics* in a communist context. The ideological foundations of communist thought was the *raison d'être* of the PCF, and the Marxist-Leninist doctrines interpreting party rule and envisaging revolutionary struggle formed the basis of a practical application of these communist principles. The PCF was meant to follow them, justify its actions by their validity and let its policies be guided by them. Loyalty to the communist ideology and obedience to its interpretation by Marx and his ideological successors ensured the legitimacy of PCF policy. There was a very real moral dimension to communism, which left the PCF more vulnerable to criticisms, should the party make a decision that ran contrary to the French public's sense of justice. Ideology, therefore, is a term used in this thesis as the guiding principles behind the PCF's decisions, and it was precisely these principles that the PCF sought to soften. The PCF wished to interpret these principles itself, adapting them to French reality, and to do so without the interference of other communist parties. It sought *ideological independence*, whether it was from the CPSU or the communist parties of Western Europe.

Politics, on the other hand, is a party's actual decisions and actions, not the motivations behind them. The PCF, like other parties, made decisions that were political rather than ideological, decisions that suited a specific situation, or answered to the party's current interests – decisions that could, and occasionally did, violate communist principles. These decisions were not promoted by communist considerations – the decision came first, and the appropriate communist sentence employed to justify the decision, came second. My argument is that one must see the alliance between the PCF and the CPSU in light of it being a political bond between two parties with mutual interests and sharing a common enemy – not unlike a military alliance between two countries.

My emphasis on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is directly linked to the consequences it proved to have for the PCF. Several historians, most notably French historians Robrieux, Courtois and Lazar, argue that the PCF's decision to support the invasion marked the beginning of the final decline of the PCF as a significant party in French politics.<sup>4</sup> Arguments supporting this theory are found mainly by analyzing the party's actions following the

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<sup>4</sup> Robrieux, 1982; Courtois and Lazar, 1995; Lazar, 2002

invasion and its responses to the heavy criticisms levelled at it. The PCF lost support and its popularity sunk – it reacted by building a wall between itself and the French public, media, and other political parties, as well as alienating itself from the Eurocommunist collaboration. This contributed to a radicalization of the party itself – and surrounded by enemies it withdrew to the safety of its oppositional, illiberal past.

### ***Theory***

Several theories seek to put the PCF's decision into a historical context, based on the party's ideological evolution in the years leading up to the invasion of Afghanistan. The two main theories argue *either* that the PCF's stance on the Afghanistan issue signified a *break* with the foregoing years' apparent move *away* from the ideological influence of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, *or*, that the decision was a *confirmation* that the PCF saw its natural place to be in the Soviet fold, and that it had always belonged there. Contemporary observers, such as Stiefbold and Ross, analyzing the PCF's policies in the 1970s, concluded that the PCF was making a decisive, albeit modest and gradual, move away from Moscow.<sup>5</sup> This theory considered that the PCF was genuinely impacted by or in the very least inspired by the ideas of the Eurocommunist project. The prevailing theory, however, has supported the latter idea; that the PCF remained loyal until the fall of the Soviet Union. Whatever the changes towards democracy the PCF proposed, these did not in any profound way affect the solid relationship between the PCF and its Soviet sister party. This theory, supported by historians Courtois, Lazar, and Tiersky amongst others, regard the tensions between the CPSU and the PCF in the late 1970s as an attempt on the part of the French communists to assert their independence vis-à-vis the Soviets, coinciding with a temporary strengthening of the party in France.<sup>6</sup> Courtois and Lazar argue in a same vein that when the tide turned, and the position of the PCF weakened domestically, as the party did after the election failures in 1978, the Soviet hold over the party strengthened. This would allow the Soviets to influence the PCF to a greater extent in the last couple of years leading up to the invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup>

However, so far as my research has led me to believe, these conclusions only take into account the *general* relationship between the PCF and the CPSU, and see this relationship as a solid entity. I would argue that in analyzing this rather complex relationship, one must differ

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<sup>5</sup> Stiefbold, 1977; Ross in (ed) Boggs and Plotke, 1980

<sup>6</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995; Lazar, 2003; Tiersky, 1985

<sup>7</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995: 368

between an *ideological* bond and a *political* one, as I have defined these terms above. There is very little to suggest that the PCF was anything but loyal to the Soviet political alliance, but my findings do suggest that the PCF's wish to become more ideologically independent from the CPSU was genuine. As a political ally, the Soviet Union could count on the PCF, but ideologically, the PCF was subjected to very different impulses from society and politics than the CPSU, and it belonged to a very different political system. That would of course influence ideology. The two theories, therefore, are not mutually exclusive; rather they serve to illustrate the complexity of the PCF's evolution during the late 1970s. Both must be incorporated in an analysis. I will argue that the PCF had no wish to break its political alliance with the CPSU, but wanted to free itself from the Soviets' ideological hold, an argument that echoes that of Lazar in his *Le communisme une passion française*, in which he reaches the same conclusion.<sup>8</sup>

The PCF's attitude towards Eurocommunism has also been an object of study. The PCF seemed, at first, willing to join the Eurocommunist collaboration. The PCF's decisions at the party's 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress in 1976, where the PCF rejected the principle of "the dictatorship of the proletariat" and promoted the radical new idea of "socialism in French colours" seemed to be in tune with the ideas of the Eurocommunists. Contemporary observers, such as Stiefbold and Ross, regarded the PCF as a genuine Eurocommunist party, with Ross declaring that the PCF had, in fact, converted to Eurocommunism.<sup>9</sup> There is, however, a remarkable lack of enthusiasm over this issue in the party's own documents, and the general theory today is that the PCF's part in the Eurocommunist project was never more than a mere flirtation, and that the PCF never felt dedicated to it. The conflict with the CPSU pushed the PCF closer to the Eurocommunist parties, and the PCF in turn used its relations with the Eurocommunists to put pressure on the Soviet comrades – the Eurocommunist project was, I will argue, used by the PCF as a means to force a result in its conflict with CPSU. The PCF's Eurocommunist efforts, therefore, were connected to the PCF's wish for ideological independence from the CPSU. I found, especially in reading the documents belonging to the PCF's top leadership, a clear unwillingness to enter into any international cooperation involving any kind of strong political and/or ideological commitment.

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<sup>8</sup> Lazar, 2002:43

<sup>9</sup> Stiefbold, 1977; Ross in (ed) Boggs and Plotke, 1980

However, the PCF never tired of repeating its ardent loyalty to the principle of international solidarity – its ties to the CPSU and its friendships with other European communist parties will testify to this claim. Politically, representing a communist party in an imperialist and capitalist world, the PCF would always stand alongside its communist comrades and support class struggle beyond France’s borders. But the PCF equally expressed its disapproval of any kind of commitment that would limit a party’s own independence and freedom of action. The word *independence* is key here. The PCF championed party independence – in this situation interpreted as ideological independence – from its communist brethren. That was not the same as abandoning the principle of international solidarity. The theories on the CPSU-PCF conflict are echoed in the PCF’s stance on Eurocommunism. The PCF simply did not see itself at home in the liberal, anti-Soviet world hailed by the Italian Communist Party, Eurocommunism’s greatest advocate. Led by a “Stalinist”, as Rubinstein claimed,<sup>10</sup> and being the closest party to the Soviet Union, as claimed by Stiefbold,<sup>11</sup> the PCF’s fling with Eurocommunism coincided with its relationship with the CPSU being at its most troubled, and the PCF could simply have used the Eurocommunist collaboration to put on an act of defiance, to assert its independence vis-à-vis Moscow.

This leads to the last, important element in my thesis; the party organization of the PCF itself. In analyzing the invisible, but no less real structures of a party that still defined its policy and methods by predominantly Stalinist rhetoric and principles, I came to recognize the importance of properly understanding the influences of individuals and the all-importance of the PCF leadership. There is general consensus on the issue of the structural Stalinism of the PCF amongst historians. The PCF was a profoundly undemocratic party, promoting a strong emphasis on traditional Marxist-Leninist – and Stalinist – principles such as party unity, democratic centralism and the commitment to an ideological justification of all policy. The last chapter of my thesis outlines these structures, also in relation to specific events, as an attempt to clarify and systemize the traditions of party rule as they appear in my thesis. Here, I have relied on, amongst others, Robrieux’ descriptions of PCF leader Marchais and of the party’s decision-making processes, as well as Tiersky’s arguments on the PCF leadership – as well as his theory on what he calls “ordinary Stalinism.”<sup>12</sup> This theory suggests that while the purges, the deaths and the destruction of “high Stalinism” – i.e. the Stalinism of Stalin’s own

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<sup>10</sup> Rubinstein, 1981

<sup>11</sup> Stiefbold, 1977

<sup>12</sup> Robrieux, 1982; Tiersky, 1985

day – had disappeared by the late 1970s, it had been replaced by “ordinary Stalinism,” in which the goal was the same; “monolithic unity.”<sup>13</sup> This form of communism, being illiberal by nature, also proved practically immune to change.

Many of these theories can be challenged for presenting too simplistic an explanation of the CPSU-PCF conflict and its consequences. I will also argue that the theories on the PCF-Eurocommunist relationship offer too easy an explanation for the PCF’s hesitant approach to Eurocommunism, and the latter’s subsequent failure. There are several reasons for this. Some of the theories were outlined in the Soviet era, while world communism was still a very real phenomenon. The challenge of finding recent, relevant literature on these subjects can in part also be attributed to the natural waning of any new theoretical debates on the PCF, as the fall of the Soviet Union rendered them anachronistic over night. Before the PCF opened its archives to the public in 2005, it was difficult to ascertain the considerations and judgments made by the PCF leadership before publishing its decisions. This explains to a certain extent why historical theories until recently have only generally outlined PCF motivations and political decisions. As for the Afghanistan issue, many works on the development and progress of the PCF were simply written before the invasion took place. Further, there does not seem to be much interest in the PCF’s stance on Afghanistan – viewed in connection with the PCF-CPSU relationship many undoubtedly found the PCF’s decision self-explanatory. However, this is a matter in which I believe access to the party’s own files can prove essential to make the picture more interesting and complete. And as with all closed worlds – we must agree the PCF leadership was such a world – there is a great difference between how the PCF was perceived, and how the PCF leaders perceived themselves. I wanted to find out how these men – and the occasional woman – regarded their relationship with the CPSU and their position in the European communist movement. This would ultimately influence their decision on Afghanistan, too. To this end, the PCF archives proved extremely useful.

### ***Sources and literature***

In attempting to find an answer to my thesis questions, I decided to use mainly the PCF’s own documents – and relying on secondary literature to provide me with historical context and an outlining of historical theory on the subject. In relying heavily on the PCF’s own documents, as they are available in the party’s archives in Seine Saint-Denis, Paris, I had to subject

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<sup>13</sup> Tiersky, 1985:167

myself to the judgments and evaluations made by those whose job it was – and is – to screen documents before making them available to the public. Censorship has been applied, especially with regards to documents belonging to the party leadership – and correspondence with the Soviets. Very shrewd political considerations are at the basis of the selection of documents. Documents that make the Party look modern, brave and socially responsible have been made a priority. Documents regarding internal affairs are more difficult to find. It is also difficult to ascertain the true nature of the PCF-CPSU relationship, except when it was deteriorating. I had no problems finding letters and leadership debates indicating the PCF's strong disapproval of CPSU's conduct in the instances where such disapproval was expressed. Documents debating the conflict with the CPSU in 1977-78 were therefore very easy to trace, find, and read. Documents outlining election campaigns and plans for foreign visits, however, as well as a great deal of personal correspondence were usually only referred to, if mentioned at all. Several documents have been altered; paragraphs, words or names have been omitted, some very apparently so, using cut and paste techniques. Many documents that one must assume exist have not been submitted to the archives, such as reports on meetings that took place, but whose discussions have not been published. Many reports, letters or handwritten notes are kept out of the archives; they are only referred to directly or indirectly in other documents. Many controversial issues, such as references to the much famed "Moscow money," were non-existent from the files. There were also a few gaping holes in the records, the biggest inconvenience to my own work being the omission from the archives of all Politburo documents between September and December, 1980.

The most positive aspect of these documents is that they were never meant for anyone outside the PCF, indeed outside its leadership. They therefore represent a clear, true view of the party and the world – seen through the eyes of devout communists. No euphemisms have been used, and the dedication is absolute. The documents, their wording and phrasing, are steeped in old-school communist rhetoric – an idealistic language comprising romantic elements of class struggle and grand visions of the power inherent in the masses. The sources are one-sided, naturally, but to understand why the PCF did what it did, believed what it came to believe, one must see the world from its leaders' point of view, and try to trace the motivations and beliefs guiding their decision-making processes. The documents are also the written expressions of communist leaders who may have misunderstood, been misled in or wrongly convinced of many things – as well as being occasionally misleading themselves. It



has been a challenge to find the facts in such instances, and here, I have sought the aid of secondary literature insofar as it could provide clarification. The documents also give insight into the structures, rules, traditions and customs of the PCF, clarifying its decisions and putting its decisions into a more comprehensible context.

The communist press also became important sources for my thesis. In reading the PCF's newspapers, in particular *L'Humanité* – the party daily – and *L'Humanité Dimanche*, its Sunday edition, I sought to understand how the PCF's decisions were translated to the rank-and-file of the party, and the general public. This proved especially useful when analyzing the PCF's response to the heavy criticisms levelled at it in the months following the invasion of Afghanistan in December, 1979. It was also interesting to examine how the PCF mobilized its press and how it simplified complex political issues in presenting them to the readers. It also gave an insight into how much the readers were allowed to know, and what the PCF leadership preferred remained undisclosed. This strengthened my understanding of the PCF's methods of party unity and democratic centralism in a democratic country. Finally, I have also used secondary literature relevant to the subject as a source for historical context, clarifications of historical events, and to “fill in the blanks” in the not infrequent instances when the PCF's own documents provided me with very little information on specific events.

As the historiography on this subject is predominantly limited to more general topics – Eurocommunism, the PCF-CPSU relationship, and the party structures – all of which are the important elements of my thesis – I had to form my own hypotheses based on these more general theories when discussing the specific issue of the PCF and Afghanistan. In analyzing the consequences of the PCF's fateful decision, two conclusions have been drawn from the experience the PCF went through, both relating to the long-term repercussions the decision had for the party. Firstly, as is stated most clearly by Robrieux; the Afghanistan issue and the radicalization the PCF went through in this time, marked the beginning of the end for the party as an influential factor in French politics.<sup>14</sup> Courtois and Lazar also describe the late 1970s and early 1980s as the beginning of the decline and downfall of the PCF.<sup>15</sup> Tiersky, in a similar vein, stresses the Stalinist nature of the PCF, as do Rubinstein and Ouimet. Tiersky, in his *Ordinary Stalinism*, argues that the Stalinist system of the PCF effectively prevented the

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<sup>14</sup> Robrieux, 1982

<sup>15</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995

party from reforming, or changing to the extent necessary for it to survive as a major party.<sup>16</sup> However, as the contemporary works of Ross and Stiefbold demonstrate, there were weighty arguments to support a real, ideological change in the PCF, which added to the tensions between the PCF and its communist allies.<sup>17</sup> Finally, Mandel and also Ross play down the significance of Eurocommunism as an independent phenomenon, declaring it instead to be the practical and slow-moving realization of de-Stalinization.<sup>18</sup> This would suggest that the PCF's problem vis-à-vis Eurocommunism was precisely its anti-Stalinism, running contrary to the rigid, monolithic nature of the PCF. These theories – constituting very different approaches to the subject-matter – have provided me with further insight into a very secretive party. My own hypothesis incorporates elements from all these theories.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a foreign event in which the PCF had no part. However, it involved its oldest political and ideological ally, a country and a party to whom the PCF was historically tied and extremely committed. In my analysis, therefore, an understanding of the PCF-CPSU relationship is paramount. I will argue that this relationship was politically solid – the loyalties and historical bonds between the two parties were never in danger of being severed. In this vein, an analysis of the party's structures is important, as it illustrates the inclination towards an undemocratic decision-making process in which personal authority was essential to party rule. I will argue that the power and actions of Georges Marchais contributed greatly to the PCF's problems in 1980, as his response to the invasion of Afghanistan did not echo the more careful approach adopted by the rest of the leadership.

However, the phenomenon of Eurocommunism, as it was defined and described by contemporary communists and later by historians, must also be included. It constituted the realization of liberal communism in a post-Stalinist world, and challenged the PCF ideologically in a time when it was drawn between its bond to Moscow and a profound need for change. Eurocommunist ideas were echoed in the PCF's own expressed desire for true democracy. These ideas contributed to the newfound defiance with which the PCF put forward its wishes for ideological change to the Soviets. It was hailed as an ideological triumph when the CPSU in 1980 officially, for the first time, acknowledged the existence of ideological differences – divergence – between two communist parties. The differentiation

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<sup>16</sup> Tiersky, 1985

<sup>17</sup> Stiefbold, 1977, and Gross in (ed) Boggs and Plotke, 1980

<sup>18</sup> Mandel, 1979, and Gross in (ed) Boggs and Plotke, 1980

between the ideological aspect of PCF policy and its realpolitik is the essential part of my thesis, and of the understanding of the PCF's actions in this period. The tradition of the PCF to always explain its decisions ideologically, however, clouded this differentiation to outsiders and to the French public.

Overall, my thesis focuses on the international aspect of the PCF. The PCF defined itself as an internationalist party, dedicated to the Marxist principles of international solidarity and proletarian internationalism. Therefore, I have chosen not to include domestic political considerations in my analysis, even if the PCF's relationship in particular with the Socialist Party – the PS – will have had an impact on the PCF's ideological considerations and political motivations in the late 1970s. I have merely included a few references to the PS in connection with the Common Program, the cooperative efforts between the two parties, whose breakup in 1977 contributed to the radicalization of the PCF. Furthermore, the collaboration with the PS can serve to illustrate how the PCF did make a few, moderate steps towards what may be called a more pragmatic form of socialism in this time. However, my focus remains on the international nature of the PCF, its loyalties to the international communist movement, and the Stalinist structures of the PCF, pulling it in a direction sometimes contrary to – sometimes in line with – the party's own wishes and commitments.

To conclude, I present my hypothesis. It is quite simple, as was the question that initially spurred me on to choose this topic: *the PCF's decision to support the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a purely political decision. Though it was later justified in ideological terms – using arguments from Marxist-Leninism – the decision was in reality not ideologically motivated, it was an expression of realpolitik.* Ideologically, the PCF had sought to achieve independence from the CPSU, and succeeded in it by 1980. The Eurocommunist project was used by the PCF to this effect. Politically, however, its own party apparatus – still steeped in lingering Stalinism – prevented it from escaping from an alliance that the PCF, paradoxically, did not wish to break up.

## Chapter 2. Towards democratic change?

*“Nous avons repris à la bourgeoisie la patrie, maintenant la liberté”*

“We have taken back the fatherland from the bourgeoisie, now for the liberty”<sup>19</sup>

### ***The 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress of the PCF***

The years leading up to 1976 were marked by a freer flow of information reaching Western citizens. The most freezing years of the Cold War was over – and people gradually started talking about it in the past tense. In the 1970s, the Soviet Union entered a phase of political and economic stagnation, as well as feeling the effects of a grave social crisis. Soviet President Brezhnev, though a tough leader who saw no need for change, began talks with the United States on the arms race and nuclear weapons programmes. In the meantime, the truth about the oppressive Soviet system – as it had been continued even after Stalin’s death – became known in the West. The PCF was faced with a difficult challenge of explaining its ever resilient support of a country so clearly at odds with its own ideological ideal – especially at a time when the PCF itself was changing.

On the eve of the PCF’s 22<sup>nd</sup> Party Congress, to be held in early 1976, the PCF showed signs of wanting to ease the strict adherence to traditional Leninist doctrine. The PCF was, by any standard, a large party and a force to reckon with in French politics. In 1976 it had over half a million members, three years later that figure had risen to 700.000. In such a conservative society as the French, the PCF could easily promote itself not only to the working class, but also to students, intellectuals, members of the peace and anti-fascist movements, and to women. It was held in great esteem by many former *Résistance* combatants, and for the greater part of the post-war years it represented the only viable option to people who wanted to vote socialist. Speaking for a large and highly diverse electorate, the PCF sought to challenge the teachings of a system that seemed in increasing need of reform and modernization. There was no talk of a break, neither with the CPSU nor Marxist-Leninist thought, merely a necessary change of direction.

The PCF’s 22<sup>nd</sup> Party Congress opened on 4 February, 1976, in Paris. It lasted five days, and it was a triumph. 88 Communist parties and various national movements had been present.

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<sup>19</sup> Politburo, 22.01.76

The Politburo noted with satisfaction that the Congress had, unusually, been given massive media attention, and that the rank-and-file of the Party seemed very pleased with the Congress' conclusions and decisions. Millions of people all over France now saw the PCF in a new and very different light.<sup>20</sup> The 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress represented a refreshingly new take on Communist doctrine; by discarding the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat and vowing to fight for a *socialisme aux couleurs françaises*<sup>21</sup> – the PCF took a not altogether unexpected turn away from the conservative Marxist-Leninist doctrines preached by the Soviets and towards Europe, and, in the party's own words, towards a “democratic change.”

Preparations for the 22<sup>nd</sup> Party Congress of the PCF had begun months in advance. Indications that an ideological change was brewing becomes evident when reading the reports put before the Politburo and the Central Committee on the matter of topics to be discussed at the Congress. Jean Kanapa, member of the Politburo and one of the Party's leading lights and theorists, declared that the most important issues were “the democratic path to socialism (...) and questions relating to the dictatorship of the proletariat.”<sup>22</sup> The Politburo declared that “...our position is principal; the link between socialism and democracy has a universal worth.”<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, as was stated in a Politburo meeting later in the month, the preparations for the Congress had shown that throughout the Party members and cadres were discussing the matters at hand, and that the regional and local committees were near unanimously in favour of abandoning the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat. However, Kanapa stressed the importance of continuing to promote the PCF as a revolutionary party; it had not given up on the struggle. There also seemed to be those amongst the rank-and-file who wished that the leadership should reassure the party of “our attachment to proletarian internationalism and of our appreciation of the Soviet Union's role.”<sup>24</sup>

The 22 January Politburo meeting addressed another problem that one hoped the Congress would help to alleviate. There were, “even amongst those who are in favour of abandoning the dictatorship of the proletariat, a certain lack of confidence in the masses, a certain

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<sup>20</sup> Politburo, 12.02.76 and 24.02.76

<sup>21</sup> ”Socialism in French colours”

<sup>22</sup> Politburo, 06.01.76

<sup>23</sup> Politburo, 06.01.76

<sup>24</sup> Politburo, 22.01.76

underestimation of the necessity of the Party to conquer the great masses, including the large masses of workers.”<sup>25</sup> This suggests that the PCF was influenced by a certain degree of elitist thinking – a class concept, clearly, but paradoxically also in keeping with the Leninist principle of the Party’s role as the avant-garde of the revolution. The PCF declared many times their special dedication to be precisely such a party, and saw it as one of the fundamental tasks of any Communist party. It was, however, hoped that the upcoming debates would contribute to a further assimilation of “la politique du parti” – the cadres – and “la masse du parti” – the members and the electorate.<sup>26</sup> In addition to overcoming any internal tensions, the PCF would be discussing the possibly greatest shake-up of its own ideology in its history.

The 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress was an ideological revolution. It took a bold step towards ideological independence first by acknowledging and approving the idea of there being many ways to socialism. This was not new thinking; it was rather the PCF that had finally come to terms with the truth in it. The idea had been introduced in 1948, after Marshal Tito had pulled Yugoslavia out of the Cominform and the International Communist movement in 1948. It had then been used by the Soviet Union, disguised as a valid doctrine but no doubt a ploy to conceal any display of division within the movement. Yugoslavia was not easily forgiven by the Soviets, and the latter would later strike down hard on any factionalist tendencies in parties within their reach. The experiences of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in ’68 would suggest that “factionalism” in this matter meant any significant ideological or otherwise political move away from the Moscow line. It also meant a move away from traditional Marxist-Leninist thought, of which the CPSU was the chief ideologist and maker of doctrine. To conclude, it had since the origins of the International movement been stated and believed that the principles of revolutionary struggle were universal, independent of national traditions and cultural inclinations. It was therefore an emphatic step in a new direction when the PCF declared that socialism should be built in “French colours” – *le socialisme aux couleurs français*.

Socialism in French colours was the French way to socialism. It would take into consideration the French national identity, seeking to build socialism according to French traditions, beliefs

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<sup>25</sup> Politburo, 22.01.76

<sup>26</sup> Politburo, 22.01.76

and values. France was a country of modern industry and technology, a capitalist state ruled over by the bourgeois classes that perpetuated social injustices and formed bi- and multilateral alliances which the communists feared in the long run would weaken the nation's military and economic strengths. But France was also a country of intelligent, educated people, a strong working class and an influential agricultural sector. The French is a people conscious of its history and deeply steeped in a republican and secular tradition. It has rebelled against unjust rulers more than once. France was, therefore, always judged to have a great revolutionary potential, but any profound social or political change would have to be quintessentially French in origins and expressions. The Congress realized this, acknowledged it, and made it doctrine.

The second motion settled upon by the Congress to form a basis for the continuing ideological struggle was *le changement démocratique* – “the democratic change.” It was a recognition, some would say long overdue, of a political system in which change *was* possible, but encouraged by obeying the rules rather than break them and make new ones. The French were deeply committed to democracy; understandable, since they had experienced their fair share of both anarchy and tyranny, even within living memory. Though the PCF never relinquished its revolutionary responsibility, or its revolutionary rhetoric, it understood to play the political game within the boundaries of a democratic framework. To the PCF, democracy was an essential part of socialism, and the definition of democracy – i.e. rule of the people – applied to socialism as well.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the PCF saw it as vital that it should fight for a true French democracy, as it did not exist yet. Democracy dedicated itself to the eradication of social injustices, poverty and corruption, not to enrich the already wealthy and care for the exploitative elements in society. The PCF saw itself as, in effect, “...the only party that dedicates itself to the democratic and revolutionary change in society.”<sup>28</sup>

As a consequence of the PCF's stance on democracy, the dictatorship of the proletariat was voted out and to the scrapheap of history. The ousting of the dictatorship of the proletariat as one of the guiding principles for Communist doctrine was, however, perhaps the least revolutionary move made by the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress. The Soviets, for example, were not impressed, and Boris Ponomarev, member of the CPSU's Central Committee, pointed out that

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<sup>27</sup> Politburo, 06.01.76

<sup>28</sup> Letter from the Politburo to René Andrieu, editor-in-chief of *l'Humanité*. Politburo, 24.02.76

the dictatorship of the proletariat had disappeared from ideological discussions several years previously, and that it had been replaced in the new Soviet Constitution; "...it [the Soviet Union] is the State of the entire people. Thus it is clear that the dictatorship of the proletariat is not eternal."<sup>29</sup> Neither was the PCF the first party to abandon the idea – the British communist party had dispensed with it first, as early as 1951, apparently at the personal advice of Stalin.<sup>30</sup> Other parties followed suit shortly after. Therefore one can assume that the PCF ran no risk – as indeed the pre-Congressional meetings had indicated – of offending anyone in the international communist movement, or within the party itself, by abolishing what had always been considered one of the founding pillars of Marxist-Leninist thought. Furthermore, it may also be worth noting Rubinstein's comments on the ideological changes made by the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress. He pointed out that getting rid of the phrase "dictatorship of the proletariat" was a "convenience, to avoid alienating groups to whom the term means "fascist" or "Stalinist." Far from losing his understanding of ideology, he concluded that this "adaptation to reality is pure Leninism, and Moscow can live with it..."<sup>31</sup>

However, it seemed to have been important to the PCF to *formally* lay to rest this particular ghost, even though it had not been part of PCF's practical policy for many years. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress did little more than respond to the strong ideological currents of the day, but the symbolic value of the Congress' decisions was not lost on the French, and taking into consideration the uncompromising nature of political debate in France it naturally caused sensation.

A consequence of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress' decisions seemed also to be the definite, final denunciation of *Stalinism*, the greatest single ideological problem facing the PCF when it started cleaning out the skeletons from its closet. Though it had already been denounced officially and publically by the PCF on several occasions, undead structural and ideological remnants of Stalinism haunted the Party like the ghost of Christmas past. First due to Stalin's undisputed position in communist mythology, secondly because the bureaucratic structures that Stalin had built his regime on, echoed in every communist party in Europe. It was difficult to give up on processes, ideas and methods that had taken decades to consolidate,

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<sup>29</sup> PCF-CPSU meeting, 05.11.77. *Fonds Plissonnier, I.*

<sup>30</sup> Robrieux, 1982:255

<sup>31</sup> Rubinstein, 1981, 153



intimately connected as they were with the PCF's core identity and principles on ideological struggle. Furthermore, opponents in French politics and media were not prepared to let the PCF forget the sins of its fathers. "Stalinism" became a one-word accusation that implied a whole range of other accusations, all of them designed to question the PCF's right to express itself within a democratic framework. Especially at times when controversial issues were debated, the accusation resurfaced. Finally, there were aspects of Stalinism that the PCF still *wished* to keep, because these aspects were seen to be Marxist-Leninist in origin. Though originally that might be true, they had since been altered by Stalin's ideological influence to such an extent that they had become part of Stalinist doctrine. Perhaps the best example was the principle of *democratic centralism* – one of Lenin's most important contributions to the revolutionary struggle, and soon corrupted by his successors. As will be demonstrated later, the PCF had no wish to rid itself of this vital element of communist debate.

The decisions made by the PCF during the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress, in addition to being – one must suppose – in keeping with the wishes and convictions of the party itself, brought the party more in alignment with its political partners as of 1972, the Socialist Party – the PS – as well as the Eurocommunists. The PCF approached this new line of communist thought cautiously. The modest expressions of forming new and stronger relations beyond fraternal solidarity with other European communist parties – independent of the CPSU – were seen as a move away from Moscow, and it was to challenge the ideological and political loyalties of the PCF. It was also to initiate a new era in the PCF-CPSU relationship.

## **Chapter 3. Hesitantly towards Europe – the PCF and Eurocommunism**

Towards the middle of the 1970s, there were signs that the PCF was beginning to question the social and economic realities of the Soviet Union, and gradually criticisms appeared, public displays of criticism directed at the injustices suffered by individuals at the hands of Soviet agents. These criticisms, however cautious and modest they may have been expressed, still convinced contemporaries that the PCF had reached a crossroads in its relationship with the CPSU, and in turn was looking to the democratic proposals set forth by Western European communists, as well as seemingly embracing the democratic possibilities inherent in a change of communist thought. The PCF entered a period of attempted democratization – both of its principles and its policies. At the same time the PCF joined, alongside other European communist parties, in the collaboration known as “Eurocommunism.”

According to Rubinstein, Eurocommunism “came of age” in November, 1975, when PCF leader Marchais and PCI leader Enrico Berlinguer issued a joint statement in which was incorporated many of the elements that would gradually become the ideological core of Eurocommunism.<sup>32</sup> The Eurocommunist collaboration was a genuine attempt at forging stronger ties between the communist parties of Western and Southern Europe, parties who – amongst themselves – shared much more common ground, both socially and culturally, than any of them did with the CPSU. It can also be argued that it was an attempt at saving what little ideological integrity communism had left – by redirecting its focal point to healthier foundations than the bureaucratic, stagnant colossus that was the Soviet Union, and by merging the democratic traditions of Europe with the most modern and positive aspects of Marxist doctrine. The Eurocommunists were also inspired and influenced by the social currents of the day, such as the women’s rights and peace movements. The intention was that Eurocommunism should be entirely independent from Moscow directives – although the solidarity with the CPSU should remain. Of course, the declaration was somewhat more diplomatic in wording – and thereby proving a valid point; “...these governments would (...) observe a strict independence vis-à-vis any bloc or any hegemonic country, whatever the

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<sup>32</sup> Rubinstein, 1981:152

sort.”<sup>33</sup> This also meant that the CPSU should be treated like any other Communist party, not better, not worse. There should be no “first among equals.”

The ideals that lay at the foundations of Eurocommunism, of which the principle of several paths to socialism was one, were not new. Inspiration was drawn from as different sources as the Austromarxist school and early Italian communists, of whom the legendary Antonio Gramsci became the Eurocommunists’ foremost theorist. The Italian Communist party – *il Partito Comunista Italiano*, the PCI – had always been an independent party, both politically and ideologically, and had been forced to seek out the Soviet Union for protection only after the tide turned against the European communists in the aftermath of the Second World War – even during the difficult and illegal years under Mussolini’s fascist rule had the PCI managed without them. However, this alliance was of short duration – and when the Soviets marched into Budapest in 1956, the PCI reacted violently against the Soviet Union. The PCI was not afraid of openly criticizing Soviet policy – under the leadership of Enrico Berlinguer, the PCI was known for its uncompromising stance on imperialism in all disguises and it was a *primus motor* in the European peace movement. The Spanish Communist party – *el Partido Comunista de España*, the PCE – was the second great advocate for Eurocommunism. Led by Santiago Carrillo, the party regained some momentum after the death of Spain’s general Franco, under whose long rule the PCE had been outlawed. Carrillo wrote the book outlining the basic principles of Eurocommunism; *Eurocommunism and the State*, published in 1977. It would be the closest thing Eurocommunism came to a political manifesto. Alongside the “greats” – the PCI, PCE and for the time being also the PCF – stood the communist parties of Finland, Great Britain, the Netherlands and others.

The leaders of the communist parties of Italy, France and Spain met in Madrid on 2 March, 1977. Marchais had met with both his colleagues on previous occasions, but never with them both at once. He travelled to Rome several times to see Berlinguer, and Marchais was generous enough to hail their meeting of autumn 1975 as “historic.”<sup>34</sup> The following year, Berlinguer also joined Marchais at a party rally in Paris in 1976. This meeting was scheduled for 3 June, and on 26 May, *L’Humanité* published an optimistic article by Politburo member Gaston Plissonnier in which he hailed the historical significance of the meeting, and he

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<sup>33</sup> Robrieux, 1982:257

<sup>34</sup> Robrieux, 1982:247

reminded the readers of the long traditions of solidarity between the two parties.<sup>35</sup> Carrillo had met with Marchais in Paris on his way back to Spain after his many years in exile. It was during this visit, held in August 1976, that Carrillo promised to invite Marchais and Berlinguer to the PCE's first international meeting in Madrid.<sup>36</sup> The leaders published joint statements, promises of friendship and cooperation were exchanged, and in France the PCF held solidarity meetings – many were held in support of the PCE when it still struggled to be accepted as a legal party in Spain. The PCF reports on the meetings between the party leaders were generally positive, yet not over-enthusiastic – on the encounter between Marchais and Berlinguer in October 1978, the Politburo remarked; "...it [the meeting] contributes to strengthen the bonds of friendship and of cooperation between our two parties, and confirmed a common view on a great number of issues."<sup>37</sup> It was not immediately a good sign that the PCF chose to point out that the two parties had much in common. However, the PCF had always declared its unstinting and unshakeable loyalty to proletarian internationalism and the fraternal solidarity of the communist parties in the international movement, and the party repeated several times its vow to never do anything that could jeopardize this solidarity. Therefore, the PCF took their international responsibilities seriously, and looked forward to and prepared meticulously for the conference of European Communist parties that was to be held in East Berlin in the summer of 1976.

### ***The 1976 conference of European communist parties***

There are indications that the PCF did not expect much from the conference before it opened. The conference itself was a gathering of communist parties from both sides of the Iron Curtain, which put natural strains on the debate and the possibilities of reaching common ground. Kanapa, who presented an evaluation of the conference to the Central Committee in June, 1976, was not impressed. The conference had taken more than two years to plan, and though the PCF hoped for concrete results, more cooperation and higher efficiency in the common social struggle so that the parties could put their avant-garde role to good use, the preparations for the conference were not ideal. The document to be put forward at the conference – constituting the declarations and commitments of the movement – had, after many meetings and much debate, been reduced to a compromise of vague wording and no real promise. "From meeting to meeting, its contents did not cease to deteriorate..." There

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<sup>35</sup> *L'Humanité*, 26.05.76

<sup>36</sup> Politburo, 10.08.76

<sup>37</sup> Politburo, 25.10.78

was no mention of imperialism being responsible for neo-colonialism and the threats to world peace, no mention of proletarian internationalism, no recognition of the avant-garde role of the communist parties; the document was a shallow analysis of the European situation. Especially the lack of any reference to proletarian internationalism was disappointing to the PCF. Kanapa pointed out that it was certainly not the PCF's fault that this term was left out of the final document – the party had done its best to support and defend it. All in all, the PCF could only lament that "...despite our objections and our proposals for changes, essential ideas continued to be left out of the project." But, as the report pointed out, there was nothing in the proposed document the PCF did *not* agree with, and it was therefore proposed that the PCF should participate at the conference. With an air of resignation it was furthermore suggested that, "...independently of its judgment on the document, our Party makes no objection to whatever is adopted by the Conference."<sup>38</sup>

The conference, initiated by the PCI and the Polish Communist Party, did however reveal a profound resonance between the PCF and the participating Western European parties. It was Kanapa, probably unwittingly, who touched upon this issue – one of Eurocommunism's core arguments – in his report on the conference. In expressing his dismay at the unimpressive outcome of the conference, he differentiated between two very different groups of communist parties: "...[O]n every decisive point," he lamented, "the representatives of all the communist parties of the socialist countries (...) chose to agree not on the ground of combat, but on that of weakness, [and] of abandonment." His astonishment had been all the greater as he concluded that "...furthermore, this orientation provoked both concern and confusion in the representatives of numerous sister parties from capitalist countries, that most often shared our points of view and appreciated our propositions."

In summing up the conference, the Politburo noted with satisfaction that the PCF delegation had given its views on the "anachronistic character" of conferences of this sort (the report gives no further explanation), and declared itself in favour of new forms of inter-party relations. Ouimet cites an unnamed French delegate as having said, at the close of the conference: "...conferences like this one do not appear to us to correspond any longer to the needs of our time. Since any elaboration of a strategy common to all our parties is henceforth

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<sup>38</sup>Above citations from a Central Committee report by Jean Kanapa. Central Committee, 21.-22.06.76

absolutely ruled out, it seems opportune to seek new forms of collective encounters...<sup>39</sup>The delegation had presented the new PCF policy as defined by the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress, and there had been a great interest in these new ideas. Ever watchful, the Politburo concluded that it must “...always keep well guard of the equilibrium in our statements: between the independence of each party and the internationalist solidarity.”<sup>40</sup>

### ***How the PCF saw Eurocommunism***

It would seem appropriate here to discuss what the PCF’s stand on Eurocommunism really was. How they saw their fellow European communists, and how they judged the European communist cooperative efforts over these short years. First, it is worth noting that the term itself was never quite approved of by the PCF. Marchais, for example, believed it to be almost a discriminatory term, as it ruled out non-European communist parties who might be seen as part of the movement.<sup>41</sup> It has also later been subjected to criticism. Ross disliked it because he saw Eurocommunism as a more national approach to communist thought, in which communist parties sought to adapt its policies to what Ross called “national peculiarities.”<sup>42</sup> The term Eurocommunism, then, would imply conformity and uniformity where none was meant. This argument is strengthened by a statement made by Giorgio Napolitano, one of the PCI leaders, in 1977; “...our choice of total solidarity with the socialist world resulted in casting a shadow on our prospects for the advance of socialism in Italy. It gave rise to the suspicion that those prospects were substantially similar to the type of socialist society (...) existing in the Soviet Union (...) this suspicion was costly; it slowed and limited the development of our influence and our policy of alliances.”<sup>43</sup> Courtois and Lazar pointed out that the term was invented by journalists, indicating that the name was somewhat sensationalist, and lacking in precision.<sup>44</sup> However, as Carrillo called his book *Eurocommunism and the State*, one can safely assume that the name was accepted by the Eurocommunists themselves, and that the PCF’s reluctance to approve of it was simply an expression of the party’s refusal to accept what might be seen as excluding sister parties – unacceptable if one stood by the principle of international solidarity.

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<sup>39</sup> Ouimet, 2003:86

<sup>40</sup> Politburo, 06.07.76

<sup>41</sup> *L’Humanité*, 24.06.77

<sup>42</sup> Ross in (ed) Boggs and Plotke, 1980:15

<sup>43</sup> Menashe in (ed) Boggs and Plotke, 1980:298

<sup>44</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995:363

Secondly, one must distinguish between “Eurocommunism” and “international solidarity” as these concepts were defined by the PCF. Marchais made it very clear what Eurocommunism was *not*: “...this is not about a new centre! We have left, for good, any international federation.”<sup>45</sup> We act in complete independence, that which does not exclude solidarity.”<sup>46</sup> As for the commitment to the Eurocommunist collaboration, the PCF stated that it was “...opposed to any limitation of its sovereignty.” The party declared that “...the old Internationalism (...) was a historical remnant destined to disappear.”<sup>47</sup> Commitment to the international communist solidarity, however; “...this great tradition that runs like a red thread through our [the PCF’s] history,”<sup>48</sup> remained undimmed. It was *party independence* within the movement the PCF championed. That becomes clear when analyzing the Politburo’s conclusions on the conference of European communist parties in July, 1976: “...The conference ratified a new aspect of the communist movement in asserting that there may be differences, divergences without this affecting the relations between the parties. It reconfirmed the independence of the parties, the absence of a joint strategy.”<sup>49</sup>

Whether or not the PCF was sceptical to Eurocommunism because it appeared to be disregarding the CPSU and its role in the international movement seems less important than the battle fought by the PCF to keep the communist parties independent. The most radical consequence of this battle was the party’s apparent break with important *ideological* alignments, too – as the term “socialism in French colours” implied. The wish for party independence was at this time echoed also in the PCF relations with the CPSU, with regards to the struggle for recognition of *divergences* between the two parties.<sup>50</sup> It can be concluded, therefore, that the PCF was fighting an ideological two-front war, where both opponents represented very different solutions to challenges faced by the international movement – but who were, paradoxically, strangely alike in approach – though not in methods. On one side stood the Eurocommunists, with whom the PCF shared its liberal values, on the other side the CPSU, with whom the PCF had shared almost everything else since the beginning of the Soviet era. Both asked for the PCF’s loyalty – but the PCF was no longer prepared to pledge it

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<sup>45</sup> Marchais used the French term “*organisme*” – meaning a structure of which the PCF was an integral and consequently only an autonomous part – rather than independent.

<sup>46</sup> *L’Humanité*, 26.06.77

<sup>47</sup> Robrieux, 1982:257-258

<sup>48</sup> Central Committee, 21.-22.01.80

<sup>49</sup> Politburo, 06.07.76

<sup>50</sup> This topic will be discussed in chapter 4

unconditionally, fearing that it must then give up its independence along with it. The PCF clearly saw Eurocommunism as a potential challenge to its own political *and* ideological independence, and for a large party with vast domestic interests in France, such a limitation of sovereignty would only serve to hinder the PCF in executing its own policies.

The PCF seemed to have come to the conclusion – consciously or unconsciously – that it did not *need* an international communist organization, such as a smaller, more vulnerable party might. A fair assumption, as the PCF stood well on its own. This contributes further to the idea that the PCF simply did not see the need for Eurocommunism at all, as the solidarity between the European communist parties was a *fait accompli*, expressed and respected by all, in the spirit of communist internationalism. International solidarity lay at the foundations of the PCF and every communist party. A true communist should be an internationalist – that was the most basic Marxist idea. Despite being hesitant to the idea of Eurocommunism, the PCF was not going back on its commitment to international solidarity – nor calling into question the party’s long and proud tradition of fraternal friendship with communist parties and regimes the world over. International solidarity then, was an *ideal*, a principle at the basis of a communist party’s work and foreign policy. The Eurocommunist project sought commitment, demanding dedication reminiscent of former days’ communist collaboration, and outlining greater ideological uniformity.

After the European communist conference in East Berlin, the summer and early autumn of 1976 continued in a vein of international solidarity, with the PCF having meetings with Spanish communists congratulating them on their forthcoming return to Spain, and meetings demonstrating the PCF’s solidarity with the PCE. Furthermore, the PCF sought to publish a joint statement with other European communist parties in which they protested against Israel’s war in Lebanon. And then, in September, the Politburo declared that important differences need not affect normal relations between two communist parties, so it decided to send condolences on behalf of the whole party to the Central Committee of the Chinese communist party – the occasion was Chairman Mao’s death on 9 September.<sup>51</sup> This was at a time when the PCF’s relationship with the CPSU was deteriorating, and the relationship with the PCE and the PCI was at its best. It is important to note, however, that the PCF-PCI relationship was always a fragile constellation. The two parties were almost as different from

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<sup>51</sup> Politburo, 09.09.76



one another as two communist parties could be, this naturally contributed to practical political problems – as the two parties would find it difficult to reach an agreement. Furthermore, they were rivals for the position as leader of the Eurocommunist movement.

There seemed to be an almost openly arrogant attitude being displayed by the PCF in its dedication to international solidarity. It proclaimed to be true to the friendship with its fellow European sister parties, and at the same time put itself forward as the most loyal champion of the First Socialist Country – its difficulties with the CPSU were being put down to Soviet ignorance and prejudice, as the French criticisms were genuine heartfelt concern that was being deliberately misunderstood. Furthermore, the PCF was willing to overlook grave differences and stretch out a hand to China, a fellow Socialist country – and it also expressed a wish to maintain good relations with the Japanese Communists, shunned by the Chinese and arrogantly left out of the Eurocommunist movement by sheer geographical position alone. The PCF was above all bickering and petty ideological disputes. The PCF's perhaps greatest mistake was to believe itself blameless – always – in any disagreement or misunderstanding that might arise. However, the PCF did find it very difficult to be understood when it wanted to differentiate the two most important ideological approaches to the communist movement – namely, international solidarity and party independence. Politically, the PCF would side with its communist allies – it would never leave the Soviet Union to fend for itself, and it would never go back on its dedication to Western, liberal values (insofar as they were acceptable to communist doctrine). Ideologically, however, the PCF wished to be free from all interference, from fellow communists and non-communists alike.

The Eurocommunists did not meet with the PCF's criteria in this matter, and the CPSU kept refusing to acknowledge the existence of any differences of ideology. Gradually, the PCF distanced itself from the Eurocommunist cooperation, and as for its relationship with the CPSU, it had, by the end of 1977, transcended into a game of brinkmanship. It seems safe to conclude that the PCF in this time was, in demonstrating its dedication to *socialism in French colours*, seeking a *third* path to socialism. Not the path of the Soviet Union, and not that of the Eurocommunists. A path of international solidarity, but without the commitments that were come to be seen more and more as burdens, rather than expressions of mutual support and well-meant help. It became increasingly clear that the PCF managed well on its own, and in domestic matters also preferred to be alone.

## ***Theories on Eurocommunism***

Observers and analysts who wrote about Eurocommunism as a contemporary phenomenon, came to very different conclusions than historians who studied it later. First, there seems to be two different definitions of what Eurocommunism represented in the international communist movement. In *The Politics of Eurocommunism*, published in 1980, George Ross pointed out in his article “The PCF and the end of the Bolshevik dream” that Eurocommunism was really “...part of the vast process of change involving the left everywhere in the world – that of de-Stalinization.” He argued that Eurocommunism, therefore, far from being a “new” phenomenon, i.e. a child of the 1970s, it formed part of a larger and much older process – Eurocommunism could trace its roots back to the gradual changes made to the international communist movement following the death of Stalin.<sup>52</sup> Ross’ argument seems to discard Eurocommunism as an idea based on liberal and Marxist principles, claiming it instead to be part of communism’s natural – and inevitable? – development. Made simple, his argument runs something like this; the personal authority of Stalin assured his complete control over both the Soviet Union and the foreign communist parties loyal to Moscow. His influence extended to the realms of both ideology and structure, and his rule was an exceptional brutal one. Stalin, however, would not live forever, and it was inevitable that his death would trigger some form of reaction within the communist community. Stalin’s legacy was heavy and its survival assured by the system he had created. It would take many years for any real change to manifest itself. Willingness to change would necessarily come from parties belonging to free, democratic nations.

It is difficult to argue with Ross’ basic idea, but his definition of Eurocommunism appears to be too general. In following his argument, the negative task of reforming a communist party away from its Stalinist past is equalled by the positive task of associating that same party with a new and more liberal form of communism. Seeing as to wash one’s hands of a dead tyrant is not the same as laying the foundations for democracy, Ross’ argument is too simplistic. And as the project of Eurocommunism was promoted mainly by the PCI, the most social-democratically inclined of the European communist parties, and whose ties with the Soviet Union had been very loose since 1956, his argument is also easily gainsaid. Furthermore, it must be noted that Ross declared that the PCF, in its “conversion to Eurocommunism,” has

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<sup>52</sup> Ross in (ed) Boggs and Plotke, 1980: 15

made reality of Eurocommunism, “in its specially tailored French variant.”<sup>53</sup> Ross – completely disregarding the European communist collaboration that Eurocommunism is today defined by – saw the ideological changes made by the PCF during the course of the 1970s as the definite proof of the party’s “conversion,” as spelled out in no uncertain terms by the party itself at the 22<sup>nd</sup> PCF Congress in 1976. Ross’ argument, however, is not very different in essence from the argument outlined by Ernest Mandel, in his *From Stalinism to Eurocommunism*, published in 1979. Mandel also stated that the problems faced by the communist movement in the 1970s were Stalin’s legacy, what he called the “bitter fruits of socialism in one country.”<sup>54</sup> He argued that “...the gradual emergence of the phenomenon of Eurocommunism (...) is inextricably linked to the progressive crisis of Stalinism”<sup>55</sup> – promptly declaring “that the real ideological progenitor of Eurocommunism is Joseph Stalin himself.”<sup>56</sup>

Ross, and to a certain extent Mandel, focused on the PCF’s ideological changes and wish for such a change. This wish was real, as will be argued in the following chapter, and the need for change was equally recognized by the PCF leaders. However, it was not ideology that prevented the PCF from rejuvenating its policies and regaining its footing in a post-Stalinist world. As will be discussed in chapter 7, it was the Stalinist structures, so incorporated in the PCF’s party organization, which proved to be the most important obstacle to the PCF’s attempts at introducing real, democratic change. As Ross put it: “Promoting democracy (...) was the road to socialism. Unfortunately for the PCF (...) this important change of direction occurred mainly in the realm of high principles.”<sup>57</sup>

Courtois and Lazar made the argument that the PCF’s relations with the Eurocommunist parties and its relations with the CPSU were two sides of the same coin. As one relationship weakened, the other strengthened, and vice versa. Rather than being an expression of ideological reform, Eurocommunism was a political collaboration that coincided with a predominantly ideological conflict between the PCF and the CPSU. When the Eurocommunist project appeared fruitful, the PCF took the opportunity to assert its position

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<sup>53</sup> Ross in (ed) Boggs and Plotke, 1980:33

<sup>54</sup> Mandel, 1979

<sup>55</sup> Mandel, 1979: 22-23

<sup>56</sup> Mandel, 1979:19

<sup>57</sup> Ross in (ed) Boggs and Plotke, 1980:31-32

vis-à-vis the Soviets, and when cracks appeared in the Eurocommunist fabric, the PCF sought refuge in the Soviet fold.<sup>58</sup> Courtois and Lazar also pointed out that the PCF at this time “redefined its place in the international communist movement.”<sup>59</sup> The PCF established or re-established its relations with communist parties not necessarily belonging to the Eurocommunist fold, such as the Japanese and the British Communist Parties, with whom the PCF had meetings in the spring of 1976. Its many meetings with the PCI – its *frère ennemi*, the brother and enemy – were covered widely and enthusiastically by the French communist press.<sup>60</sup> It was clear that the PCF was sincere in its attempts to improve its relations with its longest and most tenacious opponent in the communist movement – however sceptical it may have been to the potential successes of these attempts. The PCF on the whole enjoyed new-found importance in the international communist movement following its expressed intention of participating in the Eurocommunist collaboration. Courtois and Lazar describe how the PCF used the numerous communist conferences held in Western Europe to assert its position in the movement.<sup>61</sup>

The PCF championed many of the same ideals as the Eurocommunists, most notably democratic change but also the belief that there were many paths to socialism – and not one model to be employed by everyone – an idea that ran contrary to the principles always promoted by the Soviet Union. At the same time, the PCF did, in its approach to the PCI, acknowledge and apparently also accept great differences between the two parties. Their relations remained harmonious throughout 1976 and '77, despite disagreeing on many key questions – such as membership in the NATO, policy on the European Common Market and the possibility of entering into broader political alliances with social democratic and even bourgeois parties. The PCI remained positive to these issues, whereas the PCF stayed sceptical to them, as it also did to the PCI’s continued criticisms of the Soviet Union.<sup>62</sup> One important point, however, on which the PCF and the Eurocommunists did share a common view, was that of the *détente*. Mandel points out that a vital part of the Eurocommunist moderate approach to traditional communist ideology was based on the assumption that the bipolar world order – and consequently the *détente* efforts – could be jeopardized by the

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<sup>58</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995:368

<sup>59</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995:366

<sup>60</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995:368-369

<sup>61</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995:366

<sup>62</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995:367

promotion of armed resistance against the capitalist countries of Western Europe. The Americans would simply launch a nuclear attack.<sup>63</sup> This somewhat crude analysis does reveal the extreme conditions in which the Eurocommunists sought to reform an ideology that defined one half of the global terror balance. As peace activists – pacifism being at the heart of Marxism – the PCF would fully support any movement promoting continued peaceful relations between the two superpowers. However, even its strong commitment to the *détente* efforts did not prevent the PCF from supporting an invasion that put them at risk; an invasion later seen as the very event that marked the end of *détente*. Ultimately, this is a good illustration of precisely the lack of courage the PCF required should it stand firmly by its ideological convictions when faced with a controversial political decision. In the end, political considerations triumphed over the democratic ideology of the Eurocommunists.

This is echoed in Tiersky’s argument. He attributed the failure of the PCF to keep to the Eurocommunist efforts to the “panicky” reaction of the PCF leadership after the disastrous election results in 1978.<sup>64</sup> This would strengthen the argument that there were, within the party leadership, elements that when faced with a crisis preferred to turn inward, mount a radicalizing defence against the ideals they had hailed to no avail – and then gradually begin the return journey to a mindset and to comrades whose predictability seemed to be the basis of their appeal.

Several historians have argued that the PCF pulled out of the Eurocommunist project well before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Courtois and Lazar describe a speech made by Marchais at the PCF’s 23<sup>rd</sup> Congress in May, 1979, in which he hailed the positive results yielded by the socialist societies the world over, as the definite exit of the PCF from the Eurocommunist project.<sup>65</sup> This speech was made as the relations between the PCF and the CPSU gradually began to improve, and, following Courtois and Lazar’s own argument, this led to a natural reorientation on the PCF’s part towards Moscow. Other analysts, such as Rubinstein, revealed a somewhat cynical view of Eurocommunism’s potential to change the important alliances of world communism. Whilst recognizing the Eurocommunists’ efforts to enter “into the political mainstreams of their respective countries” – by adopting the principles of political pluralism and the respect for Western, civil liberties – he also argued that the

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<sup>63</sup> Mandel, 1979: 214-215

<sup>64</sup> Tiersky, 1985: 137

<sup>65</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995:386-387

Eurocommunists divided along the old alliance lines, and that the Soviets, therefore, had little to fear from a potential new Western communist bloc in opposition to Moscow.<sup>66</sup> Rubinstein believed there were several *kinds* of Eurocommunists: "...the Cunhal-Marchais breed of Eurocommunist and the self-styled democratic/libertarian Berlinguer-Carrillo breed."<sup>67</sup> The "polycentrism" created by the disagreements existing between such different types of communist leaders was of little concern to Moscow, Rubinstein claims, as it did not endanger Soviet foreign political goals in Europe.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, one should suppose that divisions within the Eurocommunist movement would have been regarded as a good thing from a Moscow point of view – as a strong, united bloc of Eurocommunist parties challenging Soviet authority could have presented the CPSU with serious problems.

Rubinstein seemed here to adopt a more pragmatic stance on the Eurocommunist collaboration than would normally be regarded as acceptable to devout communists. In writing his analysis in 1981, he clearly still saw Eurocommunism as a valid, political phenomenon, thus suggesting that he follows Ross' argument that Eurocommunism equals efforts at liberalization of a post-Stalinist international movement. However, as contemporary observers believed – the "Eurocommunist challenge to Moscow" had passed by 1980, when "Marchais reverted to uncritical endorsement of Soviet policy on virtually all issues."<sup>69</sup> I put forth the argument here that the Afghanistan issue was by far the most important of these. Had the PCF openly condemned the invasion, it is possible – indeed plausible – that other examples of "realignment" might have been overlooked, or played down. As the invasion of Afghanistan ran contrary to so many basic principles heralded by Eurocommunism, the former became a yardstick for the PCF's commitment to the latter. The PCF was subsequently found wanting.

The PCF never admitted to have broken from the Eurocommunists. And this is important to note, because it reveals the PCF's unwillingness to either admit that the project was a failure, or that the PCF itself could not conform to the criteria laid out by the majority of the participating parties, most notably the PCI. The former was simply not an option; the latter

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<sup>66</sup> Rubinstein, 1981:152-154

<sup>67</sup> Álvaro Cunhal was leader of the Portuguese Communist Party and a known pro-Soviet politician. Rubinstein, 1981: 153

<sup>68</sup> Rubinstein, 1981: 153

<sup>69</sup> Rubinstein, 1981: 154

would be an indirect admission that the PCF was effectively an obstacle to the potential efficiency and vitality of the project itself. This was neither understood nor accepted by the PCF's leaders. Whatever the real motives for entering into a European collaboration, however, and regardless of how sincere the PCF was with regards to binding themselves to it; the PCF *seemed* towards the late 1970s to be moving away from the CPSU, and consequently from the Soviet Union. Moscow didn't take long to react.

## Chapter 4. Away from Moscow – and back again

*“Le Parti communiste français est la fille aînée de l’Eglise soviétique”*

”The French communist party is the eldest daughter of the Soviet church”<sup>70</sup>

### ***The PCF and the quest for recognition of divergence***

The PCF and the CPSU were bound together by strong historical and ideological ties. They shared information, news, thoughts and beliefs, their leaders formed strong friendships and they had – most of the time – been great supporters of each other’s efforts. The PCF was a valiant warrior for the First Socialist Country, and had always been its most loyal advocate in France. But towards the end of 1975, there were indications of a deterioration in the two parties’ mutual understanding.

### ***PCF-CPSU relations deteriorate***

Both Stiefbold and Robrieux argue that a gradual shift in PCF alignments had taken place over the course of several years – and that “the watershed year” had been 1968, when the PCF led by Waldeck Rochet had taken a firm stand against the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, the 1970s brought with them new revelations regarding the human rights’ situation in the Soviet Union, damaging the country’s image in the eyes of the world. The 1975 Nobel Peace prize was awarded to Andrei Sakharov – Russian physicist and political activist. The PCF was disappointed that the Soviet authorities refused to let Sakharov receive the award in person, and made its disappointment public.<sup>72</sup> In December the same year, French television broadcast a documentary on forced labour camps in the Soviet Union. The Politburo voiced its concern, expressing its dedication to the liberty of man, and considered it “...right to disapprove of the practices (oppression motivated by political disagreements) which, in the Soviet Union, are contrary to the decisions of the CPSU’s 20<sup>th</sup> Congress.”<sup>73</sup>

In repeating the PCF’s focus on human rights and the fundamental freedoms, it may also be seen as symbolic that 1975 was the year that saw the death of Jacques Duclos, one of the PCF’s greatest leaders – second only to the legendary Maurice Thorez – and one of the

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<sup>70</sup> *L’Humanité*, 12.01.80

<sup>71</sup> Stiefbold, 1977:1

<sup>72</sup> Stiefbold, 1977:96

<sup>73</sup> Politburo, 06.01.76



party's fiercest pro-Russians. Though Duclos was not an old man when he died, his ideology belonged to a bygone era. His passing seemed an appropriate end to the PCF's Stalinist age.

Although the PCF had expressed no wish to denounce its solidarity with the CPSU,<sup>74</sup> the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress saw a torrent of criticism directed at the Soviet Union – emphasis being on its lack of democracy and on its general weaknesses – by a junior member of the party leadership, acting, no doubt, with Marchais' knowledge and approval. Henri Malberg was consequently promoted to full member of the Central Committee. The criticism was heard by the CPSU's representative at the congress, Andrei Kirilenko, leading member of the CPSU Central Committee and one of Brezhnev's closest advisors. The following month, when the 25<sup>th</sup> CPSU Congress met, the French delegation was not accompanied by Marchais. This was a definite snub, Robrieux concludes, as it was a well established tradition that the French general secretary was present.<sup>75</sup>

In April, the Politburo decided that it must; "...Help the Party to well understand that there are serious divergences, that there is a battle of ideas. We do not go back on our analysis or on our line. But, at the same time, we do not want an escalation."<sup>76</sup> The statement touched upon several core aspects of the PCF-CPSU conflict. Most important was the Politburo's mentioning of the sensitive issue of *divergence*. Divergence was in a communist context seen as ideological differences, and as such was not recognized. The principle of party unity was the beginning and end of communist struggle, both within the movement and the individual parties. The CPSU, chief ideologist of the movement, would not accept divergence - it was seen as factionalism and as undermining the communist efforts. The PCF would spend much of its time in the following three years trying to convince the CPSU that an acknowledgment of divergences was desperately needed in order to fully recognize party independence as well as stabilizing party relations.

The relationship worsened. In January, 1977, the Politburo repeated; "Any eventual political meeting (in particular with the CPSU) must have as a prerequisite the public recognition of

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<sup>74</sup> Politburo, 23.12.75

<sup>75</sup> Robrieux, 1982:263-264

<sup>76</sup> Politburo, 06.04.76

divergence.”<sup>77</sup> The following month, the CPSU voiced its concern to the PCF regarding the meeting in Madrid between Marchais, Carrillo and Berlinguer;

We find it normal that three parties meet. But (...) we cannot but be alarmed: It is worked on a Eurocommunist charter which will be marked by criticism of the USSR and signify a diversion of principle between our parties. (...) If this is true, the French comrades understand well that this is a grave matter, which could be a step towards a split. (...) We hope that the PCF finds the means to avoid this and the consequences that will follow.<sup>78</sup>

A badly concealed threat, the message also revealed real worry within the CPSU – the use of the word “split” should confirm it. It is noteworthy that the word never appeared in the PCF’s *own* documents on the PCF-CPSU relations. A word that did turn up, however, if only a few times, was *rupture*, “break.” Whereas “split” was ideological, “break” was *political* – and final – as well as ideological and therefore much more serious. In retrospect, when it becomes clear that the PCF had no real wish to break with the CPSU, it can be interpreted as an attempt to be bold; by using uncompromising language it ventured to show the CPSU that the PCF did not let itself be intimidated. In March, this became evident as the conflict turned into near full-on war.

On 18 March a letter was sent from the CPSU to the PCF. After having discussed the letter in the Politburo, it was decided to make its contents known to the Central Committee. The letter expressed the CPSU’s concern over the PCF breaking with the traditions of good relations between communist parties. It disapproved of the PCF having directed public criticism against the Soviets, questioning the democratic nature of socialism and the human rights situation in the Soviet Union. It reminded the PCF that millions of people had died for the very system the French were now criticizing, and it pointed out that the PCF’s actions could only damage the socialist cause, and benefit the enemies of the international movement. The CPSU proclaimed itself very patient, but the PCF leaders had been abusing and testing this patience, and the CPSU hoped that the PCF would take action and stay loyal to the principles that guided them both. It concluded, not without scorn, that though the PCF spoke highly of “mutual solidarity” it was clear that the PCF thought itself exempt from such behaviour.<sup>79</sup> The letter, whose transcription counted 26 pages, was read out loud to the members of the Central Committee

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<sup>77</sup> Politburo, 12.01.77

<sup>78</sup> French transcription of an oral communication from the CPSU, conveyed 14.02.77. *Fonds Plissonnier, I.*

<sup>79</sup> From the transcription of the Russian original letter, read to the Central Committee 01.04.77. *Fonds Plissonnier, I.*

on 1 April – and it caused outrage. The Politburo, having discussed the letter on a meeting two days earlier, had branded it “...an attempt at split which provokes indignation” and “an attempt at intimidation.” This was the result of the CPSU not accepting the PCF’s independence, or the ideas set forth at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress. However, concluded the Politburo, it would “...not go to a break with the CPSU or with any other communist party.”<sup>80</sup> The Central Committee was less forthcoming. It concluded; “...it [the CPSU] continues to consider that the touchstone of the internationalist solidarity is the unconditionality of the CPSU.” Jean Kanapa fumed; “The letter basically says to the Central Committee (...): You have unworthy leaders, you have leaders who treat your own Party badly, who lead your Party down a path contrary to the interests of French workers – take action against them, fight them, change direction.” He called it a “scandalous move, without precedent...” It was clear that the authors of this letters knew the PCF very badly.<sup>81</sup> With this conclusion Kanapa, probably unwittingly, touched upon the essence of the conflict.

### ***The apple of discord - the PCF’s wish for ideological independence***

Marchais summed up the letter in this way; “The Soviets in their letter tell us: you have changed; and we answer: yes, we have changed, because we had to.”<sup>82</sup> *Change* was what the PCF sought, necessary democratic and ideological change. And though the CPSU was always firmly declared against change, the PCF’s commitment to its own way to socialism was deemed by themselves to be good for the party, and good for the international movement. It could perhaps be seen as bordering to disobedience vis-à-vis the Soviets, but a small *ideological* concession on the CPSU’s part – namely, recognizing divergence – would remove the tension, and thereby the conflict. *Politically*, the CPSU was never in any grave danger of losing one of its oldest allies, but it failed to see it. When the PCF declared that it had never been disloyal to the CPSU, it meant it. When it claimed to be dedicated to international solidarity, that was true, too. When the PCF leaders reacted so violently to the CPSU’s aggressiveness, it seemed to be because they were genuinely puzzled and hurt by the accusation stemming from Moscow questioning their fidelity and their commitment to the socialist cause. This argument follows that of Lazar.<sup>83</sup> Even during the darkest moments of the PCF-CPSU relationship, the PCF never ceased to defend the Soviet Union in French

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<sup>80</sup> Politburo, 30.03.77

<sup>81</sup> Central Committee, 01.04.77

<sup>82</sup> Central Committee, 01.04.77

<sup>83</sup> Lazar, 2002:43

media and against imperialism. Even when the PCF criticised in one moment, it defended in the next. This may have been the result of a double standard, as argued by Stiefbold, but it may also have been a natural – though not necessarily a logical – consequence of the paradoxical nature of the PCF-CPSU relationship. Stiefbold argued that the PCF believed itself free to criticize the CPSU and the Soviet Union because it meant well – whereas criticism emanating from other sources was quickly dismissed as anti-Soviet and anti-Communist. Stiefbold saw it as a double standard; “...only criticism of the USSR by those whose fundamental loyalty is above question (that is, the PCF itself) is permissible.”<sup>84</sup>

To the PCF, the Soviet Union was the First Socialist Country and as such beyond reproach. It was not, however, beyond criticism. Stiefbold’s double standard argument may be correct and still offer a little too easy an explanation. The PCF had, or rather believed itself to have, great knowledge of Soviet matters – especially in domestic affairs, which were usually grimly described in Western, i.e. bourgeois, media. The PCF did not criticize as much as voicing a concern, and these concerns were based on knowledge instead of prejudice and with the intent of doing well, not to damage. However, several aspects of the letter of 18 March – as well as many of the reactions to it – showed that the PCF was willing to take a fight with the CPSU – publically if need be; “...after the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress we entered into a new phase in our relations with the CPSU, a phase characterized by conflict, struggles and public struggles. (...) The PCF will manifest, in all circumstances, including with regards to the CPSU, a complete independence of judgment and action.”<sup>85</sup> In its response to the CPSU, delivered on 4 April to Stepan Chervonenko, Soviet ambassador to France, the PCF called the accusations “intolerable” but also stated that there had never been a break in solidarity with the CPSU, and “...the existence of divergences between our two Parties weakens in no manner our willingness to entertain with the CPSU solid relations of fraternal friendship.”<sup>86</sup> The PCF fought to persuade the CPSU to acknowledge the existence of divergence – so judging by the effort it put into the process, it was clear that the PCF wished to end the conflict, wished for the Soviet Union to pay heed to the PCF’s concerns and wished for a return to normal – i.e. good – relations.

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<sup>84</sup> Stiefbold, 1977:108

<sup>85</sup> Central Committee, 01.04.77

<sup>86</sup> Copy of letter sent to the CPSU, 04.04.77. *Fonds Plissonnier, I.*

It proved very difficult to enter into dialogue with the CPSU – the reason being the specific issues on which the two parties disagreed. The main issue was *liberty* – basic rights for the collective as well as for the individual. Liberty was in its turn intimately connected with true democracy – and democracy was the essence of socialism. This had been established at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress, and the PCF – emboldened by its decisions, sought to reassert its view on these matters. There was no need to seek out a confrontational line with Moscow; stories and revelations from the Soviet Union describing human rights breaches had frequently reached Western media in later years, and the PCF gradually began to react differently to these stories than before. It had – publically as well as during debates within the party leadership – begun to worry about the overall situation in the socialist countries.<sup>87</sup> The 18 March letter proved that the CPSU was keenly aware of the PCF’s criticisms. But, as the letter made very clear; the Soviet Union guaranteed the liberties of its people. Anti-Soviet individuals simply did not exist anymore in the Union; they had belonged to groups now “liquidated.” Prominent dissidents, such as Solzhenitsyn, were described as “monarchists” and therefore counter-revolutionaries. Furthermore, the CPSU did not believe in freedom as an indivisible principle, since complete economic freedom, for example, led to capitalism.<sup>88</sup> The PCF response to this attitude was clear and to the point; “...there exists between our two Parties a profound divergence in democratic questions, and in particular regarding individual and collective freedom. Your letter confirms it.”<sup>89</sup>

A message from the CPSU sent through the Soviet embassy in May, 1977, did not help, either.<sup>90</sup> Although the wording was less confrontational than in the previous message from the CPSU, the intent was clear; the CPSU sought to insult the PCF by asking whether the PCF had changed its mind on nuclear arms. The occasion was an ongoing debate in France on the national defence systems – of which the nuclear weapons programme was an important part. The PCF judged this as an intolerable interference in what was a party matter only, and added it to the list of issues in which the CPSU had meddled in its affairs. A new low was hit at about the same time, when Marchais could inform the Central Committee of a meeting he had had with Jean Vincent – leader of the Swiss Labour Party. Upon hearing about this meeting,

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<sup>87</sup> Politburo, 24.04.78

<sup>88</sup> From the transcription of the Russian original letter, read to the Central Committee 01.04.77. *Fonds Plissonnier, I.*

<sup>89</sup> Copy of letter sent to the CPSU, 04.04.77. *Fonds Plissonnier, I.*

<sup>90</sup> Verbal communication from the CPSU. Central Committee, 11.05.77

the CPSU had sent a delegation to the Switzerland, launching a “veritable smear campaign” against the PCF.<sup>91</sup>

### ***A game of brinkmanship – the PCF fights back***

The PCF fought back. When the CPSU asked the PCF to join it in a condemnation of the Chinese Communist Party (the CCP) on 9 September - the day of the first anniversary of Mao’s death – the PCF refused. And the wording was cheeky, as well as being a clear and serious message to the Soviets; “...it is totally out of the question that the PCF should associate itself in any kind of condemnation or collective attack at any kind of communist Party. (...) ...a condemnation would only serve to aggravate the current relations with the Chinese Communist Party and the situation in the global communist movement.”<sup>92</sup> This would imply a radical change of tune – both the CPSU and PCF had treated the CCP as *persona non grata* ever since the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s – so most likely it was worded thus to act as a statement to the Soviets, a threat, almost; overly arrogant in tune to make sure the message got through to them. There is an almost condescending tone in much of the PCF-CPSU correspondence in this period – stemming from the French side, as the example above shows. The PCF clearly thought itself above the entire conflict – it struggled to understand where the conflict came from, and why the CPSU refused to see the French side of it. The PCF had therefore decided to be “the bigger person” and fought back the CPSU’s accusations by demonstrating its solidarity to all things communist, even declared enemies of the Soviet Union. The PCF reacted with anger and scorn at the CPSU’s claims, and retaliated by acting the saint, innocently condemned.

The boldness in the PCF’s replies could also be a result of a newfound freedom. In the event of a full scale war with the CPSU, the latter had few sanctions to level at the PCF in order to keep it in the Soviet fold. The CPSU could threaten to “disown” the PCF, with the political ramifications it entailed. The PCF would lose its position in the international movement and remain forever a pariah. More serious would be the economic consequences – the CPSU could cut off its financial support to the PCF – a loss that would be felt for a while, as the PCF had received this kind of aid since its earliest beginnings. Still, it is safe to assume that the PCF given some time would recover tolerably from such a blow. The CPSU could also try to

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<sup>91</sup> Central Committee, 11.05.77

<sup>92</sup> Politburo, 09.09.77

use the carrot instead of the stick – by increasing its money transfers to the PCF. Or it could simply agree to the PCF’s wishes. Though it would immediately be interpreted as giving in to pressure – a scandalous act by the CPSU! – it would satisfy the PCF and give the latter an incentive to go back to business as usual. The PCF could not dictate CPSU policy. But, as the CPSU did not want to lose the PCF, it proved possible to negotiate with it. And as a free party in a free country, far away from the Iron Curtain, the leaders of the PCF could safely state its terms – however disagreeable they seemed to the Soviets – with little or no danger to themselves.

In November, 1977, the PCF proved that it could repeat its claims and stand its ground in face of the mighty members of the CPSU Central Committee. The PCF had been invited to give its position on the problems between the two parties. A meeting was held on 5 November between Paul Laurent - member of the PCF Politburo and Central Committee – which represented the PCF, and Andrei Kirilenko and Boris Ponomarev – both members of the CPSU Central Committee – which represented Soviet interests.<sup>93</sup> Laurent spoke for a long time, defending the PCF. He pointed out that it was time to put into practice the principle of party independence, and that the international movement had changed. A debate was needed. Instead of elaborating on the matter, Laurent started on another topic, a veritable minefield. He talked about the situation regarding dissidents and ideological opponents in the Soviet Union. Laurent’s proposal was to fight dissidents with peaceful means in a political and ideological struggle, to target the dissidents’ opinions and convictions rather than their persons and families. Laurent pointed out that the CPSU had all the means of such a struggle, and he also commented on the Soviets’ claim that anti-Soviet elements did not exist in the Soviet Union by saying; “...it is inconceivable that everyone in the USSR thinks communist.” With regards to divergences Laurent stated, as the PCF had done several times already; “... [they] exist between us. It is a fact. One must admit it and one must discuss it.”

Kirilenko’s response to Laurent’s long monologue was to give one himself. He was objective and calm – but made it clear that the PCF had misunderstood several important issues. What the PCF saw as interference was, according to the CPSU, simply meant as friendly advice – advice that one was allowed to give as a sister party in the international movement. The CPSU did not close its eyes for differences, but Kirilenko felt that any Marxist-Leninist should strive

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<sup>93</sup> Transcription of PCF-CPSU meeting, 05.11.77. *Fonds Plissonnier, I.*

to achieve unity and agreement. The PCF, therefore, had taken the wrong approach. He concluded that the PCF had taken "...a step backwards and not towards cooperation." It would seem that Kirilenko did not want to discuss the issues addressed by Laurent, so instead he gently tried to persuade the PCF that its methods were wrong. Kirilenko's response had hardly been a step in the right direction, although he didn't take the confrontational line with his French comrade. And the mood only worsened when the word was given to Boris Ponomarev. Far from showing willingness to debate where his colleague had not, Ponomarev went to full-frontal assault on the PCF.

It soon became clear that Ponomarev spoke for the Soviet Union in his answer to Laurent, not as a representative of the CPSU. He accused the PCF of interfering in CPSU affairs, rather than the other way around; by criticising the Soviet Union for the whole world to hear, and by not allowing the Soviets to defend themselves. He also found it very disappointing that the PCF saw fit to criticize a sister party, but not the Chinese communists – despite the miserable track record they could present with regards to their human rights violations! Finally, he was outraged that instead of condemning the Chinese mass oppression, the PCF chose to send "an emotional message" to the CCP upon Mao's death. Whatever the PCF sought to achieve in its relations with the CPSU by sending this message to the CCP, it was clear that it had worked. The CPSU was provoked. The meeting was concluded without anyone being any the wiser. One agreed to try to solve the issues, but it was left to another time.<sup>94</sup>

1978 proved to be the year where the power balance gradually began to shift, from the CPSU to the PCF. The PCF had taken the moral high ground in its conflict with the Soviets, and every accusation hurled at the PCF, every dismissal by the CPSU to discuss issues deemed important by the PCF, and every attempt at avoiding certain subject served to convince the PCF even more that it was right in these matters and that the fault lay with the Soviets. An example of this is a meeting held in July, when Soviet ambassador Chervonenko invited Maxime Gremetz and another senior member of the PCF leadership to the Soviet embassy in Paris. The occasion was a story of two dissidents whose fates had enraged Western media. The ambassador defended the Soviets' actions in this matter for over an hour, but the two French comrades were not convinced. The report on the event concluded, not without satisfaction, that "...it appears to us that our motion and its contents produced a shock. That

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<sup>94</sup> Above citations from transcription of meeting PCF-CPSU, 05.11.77. *Fonds Plissonnier, I.*



confirms its correctness.”<sup>95</sup> The Soviets, therefore, were not to assume to everything should happen on their terms. To illustrate this is the PCF’s reaction to a proposal from President Brezhnev to meet with Marchais at some time during his official visit to France in late June, 1977. The Politburo remarked that; “...this meeting, if it takes place, cannot be concluded except with a communiqué acknowledging divergences” and that it should be taken into consideration that the CPSU was waging a campaign against both the Party and its leadership.<sup>96</sup> The meeting was never mentioned again in any PCF documents. Snubbing one of the most powerful men in the world thus, was a bold statement indeed.

### ***A change of Soviet tactics – and an improvement in PCF-CPSU relations***

Finally, it seemed to dawn on the CPSU that mere threats alone would not entice the PCF to change its mind. The CPSU, therefore, changed its approach to the PCF. During his official visit to France in October 1978, Soviet Foreign Secretary Andrei Gromyko met with Charles Fiterman, member of the PCF Politburo. Again, Marchais didn’t meet with the high-ranking politician himself. However, it soon became clear that something had changed since the parties’ last encounter. Fiterman noted that Gromyko’s speech “...was formulated to be agreeable to us” and that the latter had avoided the most difficult issues. Human rights were hardly mentioned, and the atmosphere was good. Gromyko repeated several times his conviction that the two parties would overcome their differences – he was not a “fatalist”, he said – and he was convinced that in time relations would mend. This consequently prompted Fiterman to be more forthcoming – and in his statement on divergences he pointed out that although they existed, there was plenty of time to set things right. On the short term, they were “insurmountable” he declared, and had therefore simply to be lived with. He did not enter into a debate with Gromyko, and the two men parted on the friendliest of terms.

One thing can be deduced from the meeting and was closely linked to the CPSU’s apparent decision to replace the stick with the carrot in its dealings with the PCF. Gromyko spoke a great deal about China – and he was merciless in his description of the Chinese communists. He lamented the fact that “...the politics of several States are poisoned by bacteria: the attraction to China.” It was the only time during his speech that he seemed genuinely angry.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> The invitation to the embassy was sent to the PCF on 10.07.78, at 4.30 pm. The meeting took place at 7 pm that same evening. Report, *Fonds Plissonnier, I*.

<sup>96</sup> Politburo, 15.06.77.

<sup>97</sup> Citations from this paragraph and the one above are all taken from the transcription of the Gromyko-Fiterman meeting, 27.10.78. *Fonds Plissonnier, I*.

Gromyko's attitude is a clear indication that there was real fear in the CPSU that it might actually lose the benefit of the PCF's strict anti-Chinese stance. There was no love lost between the CPSU and the CCP, and that made it easier for the PCF to use its relations with the CCP for its own ends. As stated above, nothing suggests that the CCP had anything to do with this conflict at all, but the CPSU could not afford to bet on that. In retrospect, a change of alignment from Moscow to Beijing seemed much more unlikely than a clean break with Moscow – but again, the PCF could exploit the CPSU's fear of precisely such a scenario. If the goal of this little game of divide and conquer was to be taken seriously by the CPSU, the PCF had succeeded.

### ***The origins of the conflict – and the reasons for its end***

The origins of the conflict were the new emphasis on democratic change as a path to socialism heralded by the PCF and made into official doctrine on the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress. In these matters the interests of the PCF and of the CPSU collided, and it proved extremely difficult to reach a compromise. The one way of achieving it, by declaring the existence of divergence valid between two communist sister parties, would mean a break with the fundamental Marxist-Leninist principle of party unity and unity within the international movement. The conflict itself, however, revealed that the PCF did not want to break with the CPSU, and that the CPSU did not want to lose the PCF. Their objectives were different, but their overall goal was the same. And as the conflict turned into an ideological stalemate the PCF pushed for divergence to be acknowledged and accepted. It became an ever-repeating mantra in the party's relations with the CPSU – it was declared every time the two parties met or the conflict was discussed in PCF documents. It became almost an obsession with the PCF. Moreover, the PCF leadership seemed to enjoy this newfound power. Convinced that they were right, the PCF's leaders grew more courageous in their correspondence with the CPSU, and less compromising in their proposals. This ideological game of brinkmanship eventually paid off. Lazar sums up the PCF's aim in this manner;

“Truth be told, the PCF does not want under any circumstances to break with the USSR and its system of allegiance that it strives to maintain. On the contrary. It consistently assures it of its full and total solidarity, of its belonging to the same world, of the pursuit of similar objectives, of its participation in the same values and of its struggle against identical enemies. The PCF simply wants to recalibrate the established relationship with the CPSU, to defend its freedom of decision and to adapt itself to the new conditions of political struggle in France

so as to consolidate its place as the first party of the left (...) Said differently, it seeks to redefine the nature of the existing relations in the communist family, not divorce it, even less to destroy it.”<sup>98</sup>

If relations with the CPSU gradually improved during the course of 1978 – as something resembling an understanding emerged between the two parties – then *domestically*, 1978 proved to be a veritable *annus horribilis* for the PCF. The National Assembly election results from March were far worse than anticipated, with the PCF getting only 17, 5 % of the votes, winning 86 seats out of a total 491. Though this result was better than that of the previous election in 1973, when the PCF won only 73 seats out of 490, and a vast deal better than that of the upcoming election of 1981 when the Party received a mere 8,9 % of the votes, the *législatives* of '78 marked a negative turning point of a different nature. In '73 the PS had stood in the elections together with the *Mouvement aux radicaux de gauche*, the MRG – the Left Radicals. The alliance won 102 seats. However, in '78 the PS stood alone, having gained considerable ground over the past few years. The party went on to win 113 seats, taking 23 % of the votes. For the first time in history, the PS was bigger than the PCF.

After the break-up of the Union of the Left and the abandonment of the Common Program in 1977, the PCF became vastly more isolated in the French political community. The PCF and the PS took it in turns to accuse each other of being responsible for the Common Program's failure, and gradually the PS joined the other parties in their general disapproval of the PCF's perceived Stalinist tendencies.<sup>99</sup> By 1978, it was difficult to see that the two parties had ever been friends. The PCF felt betrayed by the PS, and declared that it would not be used by the PS as a steppingstone to sole government.<sup>100</sup> The Politburo stated that the PS had “turned right” and betrayed the French working classes.<sup>101</sup> The irony of many of these statements was that they were true. The PS knew that in order to win votes, it had to steal them from the PCF. It soon became clear that the PS' goal *was* indeed to rule alone.

Paradoxically, as the union crumbled under the feet of its signatories, the PCF declared its dedication to it as emphatically as before. And now the PCF also adhered – to a much more conscious degree – to the *idea* of the union – perhaps evoking memories of the Popular Front

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<sup>98</sup> Lazar, 2002:43

<sup>99</sup> Mitterrand, leader of the PS, accused the PCF of Stalinism. Politburo, 07.11.77

<sup>100</sup> *L'Humanité*, 07.10.77

<sup>101</sup> Politburo, 10.10.77

of the 1930s. The PCF pointed out that the strategy laid out on the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress – that of a *French* way to socialism – implied “that a great political alliance must be realized.” Moreover that “...the union policy is to us a policy of principle. It is an essential and permanent component of political strategy.”<sup>102</sup> How ironic, then, that a union seemed out of reach for the PCF at home, whereas abroad the Party sought endlessly to free itself from commitments that limited its independence.

In early 1979, Gaston Plissonnier gave an interview with the leftist magazine *La Marseillaise*. In it, he repeated the claim that the PCF had done everything to make the PS come back to the Union of the Left and he put the blame for the break solely on the PS. He went on to deny that the PCF in any way was “isolated” or “in decline” – as some commentators had suggested. On the contrary, the PCF counted 700.000 members – the highest number since the communists were thrown out of government in 1947.<sup>103</sup> The interview reveals that the break with the PS and the MRG had – once again – radicalized the PCF. The defensive stand taken by the PCF was an expression of and would enhance the undemocratic traditions in the PCF in the time to come. Also, events taking place within the leadership put strains on the Party and contributed to the radicalization.<sup>104</sup> In addition to the domestic situation, international events would draw the PCF closer to the CPSU yet again. In February, the Party expressed concern over the recent Chinese aggression against Vietnam. The Politburo made it abundantly clear that such aggression by a socialist state against another socialist state was “extremely serious” and that the PCF would protest in the strongest terms.<sup>105</sup>

Robrieux and others have also argued that the death of Jean Kanapa in September, 1978,<sup>106</sup> contributed to the gradual move back towards the CPSU.<sup>107</sup> Kanapa had acted both as one of Marchais’ closest advisors and as an authority on the communist bloc – having spent years in Eastern Europe after the Second World War, he knew the culture well and spoke Russian fluently. His allegiance, however, belonged to the party, and upon his death the Central Committee wrote of his “...crucial part (...) in the development of the international solidarity

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<sup>102</sup> Central Committee, 27.-28.09.78

<sup>103</sup> The interview, of which Plissonnier had a copy, is not dated beyond the year; 1979. *Fonds Plissonnier, II*.

<sup>104</sup> This will be discussed in chapter 7.

<sup>105</sup> Politburo, 19.02.79

<sup>106</sup> Jean Kanapa died of cancer aged 56, on 5 september, 1978.

<sup>107</sup> Robrieux, 1982:361-362

of the communist Parties of equality of rights and full respect of the independence of each.”<sup>108</sup> Nobody was more provoked than Kanapa by the 18 March letter from the CPSU. With him, a strong voice arguing party independence from Moscow had silenced.

### ***Truce***

At some point during the summer or early autumn, 1979, an official visit by a delegation from the PCF to the Soviet Union was finally decided upon. Most of the autumn of 1979 was then spent preparing for the meeting – a top level meeting headed by Marchais and Brezhnev, respectively. The preparations went on for months, with party officials meeting up several times, usually in Moscow. The preparations were kept secret, they are hardly mentioned in the Politburo files, and it was as late as October, 1979 that the Politburo decided to inform the Central Committee of the details of them – *à un moment donné* – at a given time, but not yet.<sup>109</sup> The meeting was extremely important, and Marchais later recalled it as the most high-level meeting ever held between the two parties.<sup>110</sup> It was to be concluded with the publishing of a joint PCF-CPSU communiqué, the first such statement in eight years. The official PCF documents say nothing of which issues were debated during the planning of the visit, but in early December, the PCF could declare victory. The CPSU had finally accepted that the existence of divergence between the two parties was to be acknowledged in the communiqué.<sup>111</sup> At the Central Committee’s last meeting of the year, André Lajoinie’s report could also note with satisfaction that “...The conclusion, after years of efforts, of treaties on disarmament between the Soviet Union and the United States, as well as the proposals for peace, recently made by Leonid BREZHNEV, have permitted us to hope for new progress towards détente and peace.”<sup>112</sup> It was not until the 19 December that the PCF delegation of the five members who were to travel to Moscow was put together. It consisted of four men – including Marchais and Maxime Gremetz – and one woman. The visit was scheduled for 7 to 12 January, 1980. The final preparations were made, but before the delegation could leave for Moscow, the Soviet Army invaded Afghanistan and turned the international communist movement upside down.

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<sup>108</sup> Published in *L’Humanité*, 06.09.78, cited in Robrieux, 1982:362

<sup>109</sup> Politburo, 17.10.79

<sup>110</sup> Central Committee, 25.-26.06.81

<sup>111</sup> Politburo, 12.12.79

<sup>112</sup> Central Committee, 22.11.79

## Chapter 5. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan

*“...a land where your enemies will fight you forever”<sup>113</sup>*

### ***The invasion***

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan officially began on 25 December, 1979, when Soviet troops crossed the border into Afghanistan from Kyrgyzstan, one of the fifteen Soviet republics and the only one sharing a border with Afghanistan. Troops had been drafted from all over the Soviet Union and sent to Kyrgyzstan. Here, several weeks were spent preparing for an eventual invasion. At the same time, Soviet pilots and soldiers were flown in to the existing Soviet military bases in Afghanistan, apparently not knowing that they were the vanguard of a full-scale invasion. The final decision to go into Afghanistan was made only a few days before the invasion, by a handful of people in the top Soviet leadership – including President Leonid Brezhnev, Foreign Secretary Andrei Gromyko, KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov, and Defence Secretary Dmitri Ustinov. The secrecy surrounding the invasion was extremely strict, and the final go-ahead was not given to the military until a few days before the invasion was scheduled to begin. The Soviet troops were to be commanded in person by Sergei Sokolov – war hero and Marshal of the Soviet Union.<sup>114</sup>

The invasion took the world completely by surprise, and the timing was instrumental for its success. The Western world was celebrating Christmas, and government agencies operated on minimum staff. An invasion was not expected, and nobody foresaw that the Soviet Union would attack in the middle of winter, sending its troops across the snow-covered, hostile mountains of northern Afghanistan. The troops of the 40<sup>th</sup> Soviet Army marched steadily on Kabul, meeting with practically no resistance and supported by the Soviet Air Force, whose bases in the country had been operative since before the invasion – the Soviets had built them as part of their foreign aid to the Afghans. Places of strategic importance were seized quickly, and three days into the invasion the troops reached Kabul. The Afghan capital is difficult to defend, and fell in a few hours.<sup>115</sup> Parallel to these events Soviet elite soldiers landed in secret outside one of the residences of Afghan president Hafizullah Amin. Details surrounding the operation remain unclear, but the result of the assault was the death of Amin, whether by his

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<sup>113</sup> Newsweek magazine, 10.10.11

<sup>114</sup> (ed) Grau and Gress, 11

<sup>115</sup> For an account of the invasion, see (ed) Grau and Gress, 2002:15-20

own hand or those of his assailants.<sup>116</sup> At dawn the following day, Afghanistan was left without a formal head of state. Babrak Karmal became the country's new leader. Once a friend of Amin and Amin's predecessor Nur Muhammad Taraki, he had fallen into disgrace and gone into exile in Eastern Europe. In secret, prior to the invasion, Soviet agents had contacted Karmal, persuading him to return to Afghanistan when circumstances were more favourable. He was taken to the Soviet Union, from where he made a speech to the Afghan people in the wake of the Soviet invasion – calling on them to cooperate with the Soviet forces and refrain from any resistance.<sup>117</sup> Shortly after, he arrived in Kabul, and on 28 December, he was instated as head of the country's new Revolutionary Council.

### ***A defiant people – understanding the history of the Afghans***

When the invasion was completed, a new leadership installed, and Kabul, along with other important towns, communication lines and infrastructure were safely under Soviet military control, the real war started. The Afghan people in general did not acknowledge Karmal's government, seeing it as a Soviet puppet regime led by an Afghan quisling. The Afghan army experienced mass desertion and nearly disintegrated. It had to be completely rebuilt and reorganized under Soviet control. The Soviet Army had initially been designated a administrative and monitoring role – instead the burden fell on it to protect its conquered territories from the onslaught by the ever-growing threat from armed resistance fighters, organized in small, local groups.<sup>118</sup> They hid in difficult terrain, attacked only from positions of strength and employed guerrilla tactics in their warfare – including ambushes, sabotage actions and the use of snipers. In time they grew stronger, more mobilized and organized, and gained vital combat experience. Their numbers soared, and their successes were detrimental to Soviet morale. Though usually operating independently from one another and under different names, they were seen as soldiers belonging to the same army, and they were given a common name – the Mujahidin – Allah's warriors.

They fought for Islam – and a way of life that had stayed unchanged for centuries.<sup>119</sup>

Afghanistan was in 1979 one of the world's poorest and least developed countries. It lacked vital infrastructure, modern institutions, and industry and technology had taken quantum leaps

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<sup>116</sup> Collins state that the Soviet *spetsnaz* troops – elite soldiers – killed Amin. Collins, 1986:78

<sup>117</sup> Collins, 1986:78

<sup>118</sup> Ouimet, 2003:95

<sup>119</sup> On Afghan history and society, see Collins, 1986: 1-13; and (ed) Grau and Gress, 2002: xvii-xxv

past it. Virtually the entire population was illiterate – the vast majority being farmers and peasants who still lived in rural communities steeped in lingering feudalism. Society was based on ancient traditions and the religious teachings of Muslim clerics. Political rule was wielded directly by local warlords and chieftains. Sharia was the basis of law. Afghanistan was a fiercely traditionalist, tribal and decentralized country. Most communities lived independently from one another and from Kabul. There was very little contact between different regions, and trade and commerce were mostly confined within the provinces. The lack of infrastructure had also made it extremely difficult for the central government in Kabul to control the vast Afghan territory. It was openly defied by local and regional leaders if these opposed any proposed reforms or other changes.

Afghanistan, who fell into British hands during the colonial “Great Game” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had become a republic in 1973, when former Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud Khan ousted his cousin, Zahir Shah – Afghanistan’s king of forty years – in a coup d’état. Daoud’s rule would be very similar to that of his cousin’s – corrupt, illiberal and militant – though slightly less legitimate in the eyes of his subjects. Daoud entertained good relations with the Soviet Union, and bilateral agreements gave Daoud access to Soviet technology and expertise. However, Daoud did not wish to bind himself unconditionally to Moscow – he firmly stated that Afghanistan was to be considered, for all intents and purposes, as a non-alignment country.<sup>120</sup> In the meantime, the Soviets strengthened its support of Daoud’s greatest political adversaries, the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan – the communists. Collins described Soviet policy in this matter as “burning the candle at both ends.”<sup>121</sup> The PDPA was founded in 1965, and remained an illegal party until it took power. Basing itself on traditional Marxist-Leninism, it primarily appealed to workers, students and intellectuals – who combined constituted only a small minority of Afghan society. The party would soon split into two factions, *Parcham* – “the Banner” and *Khalq* – “the People.” Although the two factions reunited upon Daoud’s ascent to power, the loyalties forged during the split would influence the PDPA’s politics and leadership for the rest of its existence.

The PDPA’s coup, the so-called Saur Revolution, took place in April, 1978, and was named after the month’s name in the Islamic calendar – it was meant to be a nod to the October

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<sup>120</sup> Collins, 1986: 37-38

<sup>121</sup> Collins, 1986:47



Revolution. The coup was initiated at dawn on the 27<sup>th</sup> when PDPA partisans attacked Daoud's forces in Kabul. The fighting was of short duration, and limited itself to the capital. Daoud was killed, though it is unclear whether he was the victim of a planned assassination. The ease with which the PDPA could seize power reveals the weakness inherent in Daoud's regime, rather than the strength of the PDPA, whose members were few and the majority of which was confined to Kabul. Furthermore, the PDPA was also greatly helped, however indirectly, by the army. Many of Daoud's military commanders simply refused to send their men into action, keeping instead to the sideline, ready to pledge their allegiance to whoever emerged victorious.<sup>122</sup> As the Democratic People's Republic of Afghanistan was proclaimed, old enemies combined forces to form a new government. Nur Muhammad Taraki, former leader of *Khalq* – the radical faction of the PDPA, became prime minister and leader of the newly established Revolutionary Council. Babrak Karmal, who had spearheaded *Parcham*, was appointed vice prime minister jointly with Hafizullah Amin, Taraki's old *aide-de-camp* and head of propaganda.

### ***Soviet-Afghan relations, 1978-1979***

The Soviet Union quickly congratulated the new regime – as well as promised it its fraternal and ideological support. Being the first regime to congratulate the PDPA, Moscow also applauded the wise decision the people had made.<sup>123</sup> The Soviet leaders were astonished, however, as the coup had come as a complete surprise.<sup>124</sup> The PDPA leaders had consciously decided to keep their Soviet comrades in the dark, for fear of the Soviets' disapproval. Both Ouimet and Westad state that disapproval had assuredly been expressed had Moscow known.<sup>125</sup> It was an unmistakable indication of a lack of trust between the PDPA and the CPSU when not even Alexandr Puzanov, Soviet ambassador to Kabul, knew anything about what was about to happen. Puzanov also expressed scepticism towards the new regime, emphasising its endless in-fighting between the two factions.<sup>126</sup> However, as Ouimet points out, several Soviet leaders were enthusiastic, and both Central Committee member Suslov and Ponomarev immediately counted Afghanistan among the socialist states of the world.<sup>127</sup> And with the continued financial aid from the Soviets, the Afghan government sought to initiate

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<sup>122</sup> Collins, 1986:50

<sup>123</sup> Collins, 1986:52-53

<sup>124</sup> Ouimet, 2003: 89

<sup>125</sup> Ouimet, 2003: 89; Westad in (ed) Westad, 1997: 119-120

<sup>126</sup> Westad in (ed) Westad, 1997:119

<sup>127</sup> Ouimet, 2003: 89

several reforms in an attempt to modernize the country. It wanted to increase literacy, improve women's rights and promote trade and industry. Furthermore, it wished to rid the Afghan society of its most feudal aspects as well as liberating the legal and educational institutions from Islam influence. But Afghanistan proved impossible to modernize, because its people proved almost immune to all kinds of change. Opposition grew following the coup, especially in the provinces. In addition to an upsurge in insurgency, tensions also rose within the Afghan leadership. In the summer of 1978, a purge of the *Parcham* members of government was initiated by Amin. Karmal was expelled from the party leadership and was forced to leave the country.<sup>128</sup>

Parallel to this increase in domestic turbulence, the Afghan regime formalized its ties to Moscow. The military cooperation between the two countries was strengthened and its scope widened. In December, 1978, a bilateral Friendship Treaty between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union was signed in Moscow. Article 4 stated that,

The High Contracting Parties, acting in a spirit of the traditions of friendship and good-neighbourliness and in the spirit of the Charter of the United Nations, shall consult with each other and shall, by agreement, take the necessary steps to safeguard the security, independence and territorial integrity of the two countries. In the interest of strengthening their defensive capacity, the High Contracting Parties shall continue to develop their co-operation in the military field on the basis of the relevant agreements concluded between them.<sup>129</sup>

This article of the Treaty was to be referred to many times on later occasions. As well as given access to military technology, the Afghan regime also benefitted from Soviet financial aid and industrial expertise. Towards the end of 1978, it became clear that the ongoing Islamic revolution in Iran could destabilize the situation in Central Asia, as well as threaten the Soviets' position in the region. This gave the Afghans more leverage in their demands to the Soviets for more money and military advisors.<sup>130</sup>

In 1979 several events took place in rapid succession. The relationship between members of the leadership became strained, both due to personal ambitions and old political disagreements that resurfaced. The *Khalq* faction ruled alone, following purges directed at the *Parcham* members. Taraki – willingly or involuntarily – increasingly gave up his power in favour of the younger and much more uncompromising Amin. The number of political

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<sup>128</sup> Westad claims that the Soviets – led by ambassador Puzanov – saved Karmal's life, and saw to it that he left Afghanistan alive. Westad in (ed) Westad, 1997:122.

<sup>129</sup> Friendship Treaty concluded between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union on 05.12.78. *Internet*, 3.

<sup>130</sup> Westad in (ed) Westad, 1997:123-124

prisoners skyrocketed, and there was open disagreement and mistrust between leading members of the government. By March, there were riots and rebel forces operating in half of the country's 28 provinces.<sup>131</sup> The following month, the United States initiated their support for the rebels.<sup>132</sup> The central government in Kabul asked for increased aid from the Soviets to keep the situation under control. Joseph Collins writes: "...the insurgency prospered and army mutinies proliferated. This brought increased Soviet military aid. The presence of growing numbers of Soviet military and civilian advisers fuelled the insurgency and the mutinies, thus establishing a vicious cycle."<sup>133</sup> In 1979, Afghanistan did not merit to be called a political unity, let alone a nation. Parallel to these events, when it became clear that civil war had erupted in the country, the Soviet leadership began discussing an eventual military response to the problems in Afghanistan.

### ***Soviet's rocky path to invasion***

There were many arguments against a military operation. First, it was crystal clear to the Soviet leadership that any Soviet military operation in Afghanistan would be a highly controversial political move. Andropov pointed out Moscow's dilemma; "We must finalize the political statement, bearing in mind that we will be labelled as an aggressor, but that in spite of that, under no circumstances can we lose Afghanistan."<sup>134</sup> Furthermore, Puzanov was not impressed with the Afghan regime and expressed doubts as to its efficiency and gratitude towards the Soviets. Ponomarev was also beginning to question the vitality of the *Khalq* regime. Afghanistan was not ripe for revolution, he declared, meaning that the masses would not fight for the survival of the regime. A socialist regime that needed military help to stay in power obviously did not have the necessary legitimacy. Indeed, as Kirilenko and Soviet Premier Kosygin repeatedly pointed out, the most important question to answer before any military operation could be launched was to ascertain who the Soviet troops would end up fighting – the regime, the rebels, or the entire Afghan people? Kirilenko added a poignant element to the discussion, when he made an almost sensational remark to his comrades on the Central Committee, in which he seemed to question whether the Afghan regime was even worth saving; "We gave it [the Afghan regime] everything. And what has come of it? Nothing of any value. After all, it was they who executed innocent people for no reason and told us

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<sup>131</sup> Collins, 1986:56

<sup>132</sup> Collins, 1986:60

<sup>133</sup> Collins, 1986: 65

<sup>134</sup> Westad in (ed) Westad, 1997:294

that we also executed people in Lenin's time. You see what kind of Marxists we have found.”<sup>135</sup> Although it had no power over the political decisions made by the Soviet leadership, it is important to note that the Soviet military leadership was also firmly against an invasion – Marshal Ogarkov, head of the Soviet Supreme Command – had on several occasions warned against such a move, presumably by explaining to the political leadership why such an operation would most likely be unsuccessful.<sup>136</sup>

The Soviet leadership decided that a military operation in Afghanistan was out of the question. Despite repeated requests for troops to be sent against the rebels the Soviet Union refused, increasing instead its arms exports to Afghanistan while monitoring the situation in the country closely.<sup>137</sup> But then, only a few months later, on 12 December, 1979, the Soviet leaders signed the document entitled “Concerning the situation in A” – giving the all clear for a full-scale invasion. Not everyone was happy with the decision. Kirilenko signed the document after some hesitation, and Brezhnev only after the meeting was over and the decision was made. It is important to note that not only the Soviet president, but also Soviet Premier Kosygin was absent from the meeting, as he would “almost certainly (...) have opposed an intervention.”<sup>138</sup> However, several events had eventually pushed the Soviet leadership in favour of an invasion. Amin’s tight grip on power was one of Moscow’s worries. Any hope that Taraki would regain some of his quickly evaporating authority was crushed in September when Amin ousted Taraki from his position and formally seized Afghanistan’s highest office. Taraki was soon after killed. His death was a blow to Brezhnev, who did not like Amin – a brutal, unpredictable leader – and who had promised to help Taraki.<sup>139</sup>

The rebellion gained momentum. An unstable Afghanistan on the Soviet Union’s doorstep was a nightmare to the Soviet leaders; especially as such a regime would be vulnerable to imperialist aggression. There were indications, the Soviets felt, that the Americans were cementing their presence in Central Asia – and that they might use Pakistan or Iran, Afghanistan’s closest neighbours, as proxies to promote American foreign political goals in the area.<sup>140</sup> Westad attributes the political wish for an invasion within the Soviet leadership

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<sup>135</sup> Westad in (ed) Westad, 1997:132

<sup>136</sup> Westad in (ed) Westad, 1997:136

<sup>137</sup> Ouimet, 2003:89-91

<sup>138</sup> Westad in (ed) Westad, 1997:136

<sup>139</sup> Westad in (ed) Westad, 1997:134

<sup>140</sup> Collins, 1986:124-132

itself mainly to the ambitions of Defence Secretary Dmitri Ustinov.<sup>141</sup> He persuaded and was subsequently joined by KGB chief Yuri Andropov, who had initially been disinclined to support a military operation. The Afghanistan issue – and how different leaders chose to react to it – could be decisive in the upcoming power struggle, as it was becoming clear that Brezhnev did not have many years left. Andropov, however, did not forget that whatever plan of action was settled upon by the Soviets, they would be regarded by the outside world as the aggressive party.<sup>142</sup>

The 1979 invasion was to have profound consequences for both countries involved; it sparked widespread diplomatic fury and sent the stocks of the Soviet Union in the international community plummeting. The regime in Moscow would soon discover that it had few allies. The PCF, however, was one of them.

*“Those who live are those who fight,” said the poet... ”<sup>143</sup>*

### ***The reaction of the PCF***

The reactions of the PCF to the invasion can be traced reading the party’s documents dated January and February, 1980. Because of the Christmas holidays, the various committees of the party did not meet until after New Year, at which time the invasion had been a news item for over a week. In the Western world, the general attitude towards the Soviet Union had become extremely negative and sceptical, and France was no exception. The invasion was met with disbelief, shock and anger in the media as well as in political circles. The PCF was well aware that any decision going remotely contrary to the current public opinion would be regarded as highly controversial. Before publishing a statement outlining the party’s position on the issue the PCF, therefore, had to take into consideration the upcoming official visit to Moscow, as well as its own ideological convictions, its commitment to international solidarity, its ties with the Soviet Union – and its responsibility to its electorate.

### **The Politburo**

The Politburo of the PCF met on the 4 January. It was the first meeting of the year, and there were many topics on the agenda. The first pages of the meeting report are devoted to the

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<sup>141</sup> Westad in (ed) Westad, 1997:132-133

<sup>142</sup> Ouimet, 2003:90-91

<sup>143</sup> Central Committee, 22.11.79

social situation of France; concerns over the rise in gas and electricity prices, the unemployment rate, and the general “austerity policy” pursued by the sitting conservative government, led by Valéry Giscard d’Estaing. On page four in the report, under the heading “The international situation” is the invasion of Afghanistan finally mentioned. It does not occupy first place, though, it is third on the list following Iran – of interest due to the Islamic Revolution the previous year, as well as the hostage situation at the US embassy in Tehran, still not resolved as of January, 1980 – and Cambodia – where information was emerging casting a black shadow on the communist regime of Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge. Then, at last, a few short paragraphs describe the Politburo’s general views with regards to the “situation” in Afghanistan – it was consistently *not* referred to as an invasion. The Politburo declared its intention to “publish a declaration of the Politburo on the whole situation, and in it express our position on Afghanistan.”

For a clearer view of this “whole situation,” it is referred to a report on the subject by Gaston Plissonnier. He began his report with a poignant reminder to the Politburo, stating what its task should be; “...*Do not condemn the invasion, but do not adopt an attitude of approbation – which could resemble an alignment; and consequently, in contradiction to our position on non-interference [and] the independence of countries and peoples.*”<sup>144</sup>

In the report, Plissonnier outlined Afghan history and the history of the PDPA, describing Afghanistan as a backwards country in dire need of reform and modernization. He stated that progress was under way when political conflicts threatened to halt the positive effects of the Saur Revolution. Amin was declared the villain, the murderer of Taraki and the man personally responsible for the crimes committed and the oppression suffered by the Afghan people under his rule. The Soviets, for their part, feared an unstable, anti-Soviet regime strategically positioned in an important and difficult region, in their own back yard. Also, wrote Plissonnier, according to exiled Afghan politicians in France “would an armed insurrection have broken out against Amin” on the night of the 26 December. To sum up, Amin was about to destroy the Revolution, the Afghan people and destabilize the country. He had lost the support from his subjects. It was in this climate the Soviets decided to intervene.

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<sup>144</sup> “Ne pas condamner l’intervention, mais ne pas adopter une attitude d’approbation – qui pu ressembler à un alignement; et donc, en contradiction avec notre position sur la non-ingérence, l’indépendance des pays et des peuples.”

He continued. In the evening of the 28 December, the PCF received a spoken message – the report uses the phrase *communication orale* – from the CPSU: “We [the Soviet Union] have a treaty of friendship and military support with Afghanistan. Under the UN Charter and this treaty, the new government has asked us for military aid *to combat the rebellion and its supporters abroad*. We have accepted this demand.”

The question faced by the PCF was therefore, to support or not to support? According to Plissonnier, the party would have to make a decision based on three principles; independence and non-intervention in domestic affairs, the right and possibility of every country to ask another country for help, and the Party’s dedication to be in solidarity with all forces for progress. He then wrote, “The first reactions within the Party express agreement with what has happened.” As a precursor to this conclusion, he stated; “in acting as we do with regards to Afghanistan, we think we can assert that we are in compliance with our principles.”

Plissonnier took his time to warn and advice his comrades in the leadership. His report began with a statement of the Party’s overall responsibility: “Since the beginning we tried, the few who were there, to define the position that seemed to us most just with regards to *our position of class and the interests of our Party*.” It seems clear that this old party veteran wanted them all to keep this in mind, as he started his report. He went on to warn the Politburo of the accusations that would come from many quarters, and the nature of these attacks. Many would accuse the party of aligning itself with Moscow – in effect, of being fifth columnist and traitorous. Therefore, he recommended that the party and its press should seek to *inform* and *help* the public *to understand* what was happening. Plissonnier’s final words reveal a deep understanding of the system he was a part of:

Though our Party bears no responsibility for these events, though it is not tied to them in any fashion, it is nevertheless subjected to political assaults. It seems to us that we cannot act differently and that we shall continue to act in the spirit of responsibility and the spirit of class, and not claim responsibility that is not ours.

The report by Plissonnier addressed several issues that were to be much discussed in the weeks to follow, both by the party and by French media. Plissonnier mentioned two things in particular which became a matter of debate. First, he compared the invasion of Afghanistan with that of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Plissonnier found the two invasions very different; they hardly bore a resemblance to each other at all. He was right, of course, based on the information he had available. To Plissonnier, an invasion that sought to help a regime that

fought feudalism and promoted progress would be legitimate in a way the Soviet intervention of Czechoslovakia could never be – as in the latter event, the progressive forces were the ones who were suppressed! Secondly, he voiced his concern over the visit conducted by the PCF leadership to Moscow, which was scheduled to take place later in January. He concluded that it was vital to make it clear that this visit had been planned for some time – and it was a part of the party’s dedication to international cooperation and the global political activity in which the PCF took part. Georges Marchais and his delegation were to go to Moscow “...*ni pour accuser, ni pour s’aligner ou cautionner.*” (“..[N]either to accuse, nor to align itself or to caution.”)<sup>145</sup>

A second Politburo meeting was held only three days later, on the 7 January. It was a brief meeting, and the topic of discussion was a planned joint statement from the communist parties in Europe to declare themselves firmly against the placing of American missiles on European soil. There had been broad consensus on this matter, but now it seemed that something had changed. A shift in loyalties. The meeting report stated, not without an air of regret, that the party would “...consider, because of the views of the Italian Communist Party (the PCI) – which present difficulties for a broad initiative – it was right that our Party refuses to propose a meeting of the communist parties of Europe for a common stance on the Euro missiles.”<sup>146</sup> This was not the first time the PCI had chosen a different path than the PCF, and the tension between these two parties was tangible throughout the history of the Communist International and in later years. Here, following the invasion of Afghanistan, the conflict resurfaced, a conflict that this time had consequences for the common project of Eurocommunism. Unlike similar situations in the past, when it was the PCI that had most often been perceived to stray from the unison communist path – this time it was the PCF that abandoned their European counterparts.

Another three meetings were held in the Politburo in January, and every meeting seemed to add elements to the events that unfolded. The visit to Moscow was discussed, and plans to publish the results of the visit were put forward. A suggestion was made to organize for a Soviet parliamentary delegation to come to the National Assembly to clarify the Soviet intentions with regards to Afghanistan. This idea would naturally be at the initiative of the Franco-Soviet friendship committee in the Assembly. Towards the end of January, as the PCF

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<sup>145</sup> Above citations from a Politburo meeting report by Gaston Plissonnier. Politburo, 04.01.80

<sup>146</sup> Politburo, 07.01.80



declared with sadness that a campaign of anti-sovietism was waged by the bourgeois French media, the party now had to put their efforts into persuading the French public not to support an alarming idea that had come from Washington, namely that in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan the Summer Olympics in Moscow of that year should be boycotted.<sup>147</sup>

## **The Secretariat**

The Secretariat's first meeting in 1980 took place on the 9 January. The most important subject discussed was this; how to counter the claim set forward by the party's opponents that the PCF had changed its policies and was now aligned with Moscow? Several courses of action were decided upon; the party was to "denounce in an offensive fashion" the charges levelled at it, using the communist press – specifically *L'Humanité* – to fight back these claims, then inform the public of what really happened in Afghanistan, and finally declare that the Socialist Party – the PS – was abandoning *le Programme commun* – the Common Program – and was losing the trust of their rank-and-file. Plans were also made for membership campaigns and campaigns of enlightenment and information directed at the followers of the party as well as active members on a local level. Furthermore, the Secretariat, commenting on the international situation, stated in its report that "*the events in Afghanistan present a hard blow for the United States. In effect, all imperialist activity since the Soviet intervention shows that their plans have failed.*" The report ends in an optimistic fashion, though it voices a minor concern over those perpetual few who will always insist on rocking the boat;

In the present political situation, the vast majority of the followers approves and supports the standpoints of the Party. A small number of comrades ask themselves and try to understand the present events. A very small faction, traditionally in opposition to the Party, continues to attack it. Some even occasionally use insult.

The Secretariat also reminded the Party that the intense class struggle seen in France at this time was a direct consequence of the crisis faced by French society, and the aggressiveness shown by weakened imperialist forces worldwide.<sup>148</sup>

The next meeting in the Secretariat was held a full two weeks later, on the 24 January. The report declared that "everything shows that the Party's position is just in all political questions." It went on to state that all illusions with regards to the PS were shattered following

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<sup>147</sup> Politburo, January 1980.

<sup>148</sup> Above citations from the Secretariat's meeting, 09.01.80. The Secretariat's report is incomplete. It has been edited and paragraphs have been omitted before the document was admitted to the archives.

the statements made by the PS and its leader, François Mitterrand. The PS had shown itself to be a “profoundly anti-communist” party, and that in its dedication to the current anti-Soviet, anti-communist vogue it had moved decisively to the right and was therefore grossly misleading its electorate and the French public. The Secretariat went on to discuss how the party could make a greater effort in the French peace movement – *le Mouvement de la Paix* – following the statements made by the movement concerning the events in Afghanistan. The party also wished to attract the support of intellectuals, and benefit from their scientific standing, as well as their signatures. Focus was put on the campaign to prevent France from boycotting the Olympic Games. Finally, the Secretariat noted with satisfaction that membership numbers were rising, and wished to see the positive trend continued. It concluded; “...in the current difficult political battle, the followers of the Party behave well.”<sup>149</sup>

### **The Central Committee**

The first Central Committee meeting of the year took place on 21 and 22 January. The PCF had already been through some rough weeks, and there was a great deal of information the Committee needed to digest upon returning to party work after the holidays. A report written by Maxime Gremetz, counting nearly a hundred pages, was presented to the Committee. The report must have been a disappointing read to the members of the Committee determined to continue the PCF’s move away from the CPSU. It is remarkably meek and one-sided. On pages eight and nine in the report, Gremetz claimed that it was beyond contestation that “...the development of the socialist countries is today more than ever linked to improvement, to democratization, to the decentralization of their social organization, goals set by the various economic reforms that are under way there.” He went on to praise the positive contribution of socialism worldwide, and especially its contribution to peace. Only two years earlier, in April 1978, the Politburo had declared: “Since the 22<sup>th</sup> Congress, the situation in the majority of the socialist countries has not improved but deteriorated, as is demonstrated by a number of facts that are contrary to the socialist democracy and to the liberties.”<sup>150</sup> In his report of 1980, Gremetz repeatedly denounced the current anti-communist and anti-Soviet campaigns being waged in Western media.

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<sup>149</sup> The Secretariat, 24.01.80

<sup>150</sup> Politburo, 24.04.78

The report went on to condemn China, in a style reminiscent of Soviet rhetoric, then the United States (how dared the Americans lecture the Soviets on imperialism?), and finally, over five pages, the report argued the PCF's dissatisfaction with the PCI – one of its supposed European partners. Gremetz then moved on to the PCF's official meeting with President Brezhnev in Moscow, and the former was pleased to underline "...the exceptional importance to which the CPSU attached this visit by Georges Marchais and the delegation." Brezhnev had himself brought up the issue of Afghanistan, and he had been adamant that the invasion "...had not been an easy decision to make, (...) but, ultimately, one could not do otherwise." He said that when military aid was asked for, "...we could not continue to refuse..." Late in the report, Gremetz recounts a noteworthy conversation between Marchais and what is presumably Brezhnev himself, or another top CPSU official. Keeping in mind the beliefs of many people and organizations – including communist parties – that the Soviet Union was going back on its commitment to peace, Marchais had asked "gravely," a "question in confidence." He wanted to know if these beliefs had any basis. The answer was "...nette et affirmative: l'URSS veut la paix..."

As for the PCF's own opinion on the subject of Afghanistan, Gremetz was clear: "Should not the progressive forces of this country have the right to defend themselves (...) when Afghanistan, facing imperialist interference, invokes the Treaty it has signed with the Soviet Union!" Assumingly without noticing that he was about to contradict himself, Gremetz also repeated that "...Our Party has, in grave circumstances, made a clear and responsible decision. We have reaffirmed our unswerving attachment to the principles of sovereignty and the free disposition of peoples, [and] to non-interference." Finally he declared that "...nous, nous sommes avec tous les peuples en lutte."<sup>151</sup> The political outcome of these meetings in the PCF leadership was, despite warnings and a premonition as to what might come of it, that the PCF would support the Afghan people's struggle for progress, i.e. that it therefore stood by the Soviet Union's decision to intervene in aid of an ally. As the Central Committee itself declared,

Committed as we are to international solidarity, this great tradition that runs like a red thread through our history, there can be when people fight neither neutrality nor equidistance. We cannot confuse non-interference and non-intervention (an idea that evokes tragic memories). It is not and it never will be in question for us to leave the ground free for imperialist interference, and let people alone face the reactionary and imperialist project of

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<sup>151</sup> Above citations, except note 144, are taken from the report by Maxime Gremetz, presented to the Central Committee, 21.-22.01.80. "We, we are with all people who fight."

restoration. Yes, every people should have the right to be master of its destiny. That means to inseparably refuse both exportation of the revolution and importation of the counter-revolution.<sup>152</sup>

### ***The reaction of France – and of the world***

It soon became clear that the PCF's response was not in line with the attitudes adopted by the other political parties in France, the Western communist parties, the Western states, the communist regimes belonging to the Chinese bloc, and the non-alignment nations.<sup>153</sup> The vast majority – 104 against 18, with 30 abstentions – of the membership nations in the UN protested against the invasion.<sup>154</sup> On the 14 January, after five days of meetings concerning the invasion, the UN General Assembly passed its first in a series of resolutions expressing its discontent with the Soviets, and calling for a withdrawal of Soviet troops. The UN Security Council was prevented from officially condemning the invasion, as the Soviet Union, one of its five permanent members, vetoed any such motion. The Chinese communist bloc condemned the invasion in harsh words, and the independent communist regimes followed suit – Albania and Yugoslavia amongst others. Cuba was displeased with the invasion, and other Marxist countries, or Marxist-friendly states such as Romania and India refrained from casting their votes in the UN Assembly. The non-alignment nations were also outraged as Afghanistan was generally counted as one of them – a neutral country. Western military and political analysts found this particularly worrying – Afghanistan was not within the traditional Soviet sphere of influence, and therefore not covered by the Brezhnev Doctrine. The Doctrine, which stated that Moscow had a right and a moral duty to intervene in countries whose communist regimes were threatened by foreign or internal forces, did not apply to the non-alignment nations, regardless of them being run by communist governments. The criticisms directed at the Soviet Union at this time therefore had an element of fear in them; as well as being a violation of international law the invasion was interpreted by many as a sign that Soviet foreign policy had entered a new and more aggressive phase.

The threat that the invasion might jeopardize the *détente* efforts between the two superpowers was a chief concern also for the European communist parties. In their near-unanimous condemnation of the invasion, they focused in equal measure on the danger it posed to the peace efforts and the illegality of it. Shortly after the invasion, the PCE and the PCI condemned it publically, the PCE in an article in the *Mundo Obrero* and the PCI in an

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<sup>152</sup> Central Committee, 21.-22.01.80

<sup>153</sup> On the international reaction, see also Collins, 1986:85-89

<sup>154</sup> Collins, 1986:85

editorial in *L'Unità*, published on 29 December.<sup>155</sup> On the 30<sup>th</sup>, Paolo Bufalini, one of the PCI leaders, made a speech in Cologne where he repeated his party's stand on Afghanistan. A statement from the PCI leadership, published on 4 January, 1980, declared that "...It is not admissible to violate the integrity and the sovereignty of States to uphold reactionary regimes, neither to export the revolution, [nor] to punish, or to prevent more or less hypothetical threats."<sup>156</sup> Furthermore, the PCI pointed out, a regime that needed to seek foreign military aid in order to maintain control, could not be judged to have sufficient popular support for it to be entirely legitimate.<sup>157</sup> The PCI also stressed the importance of re-establishing and improving the relations between the USA and the Soviet Union. The PCE, though it condemned the Soviet Union, at the same time deprived the Western imperialists of any right to condemn the Soviets, taking into consideration their own miserable track records in that field. The British communist party sided with the Afghan people in an editorial in the *Morning Star* on 31 December, 1979. While it pointed out that it supported the Afghan people in its struggle against feudalism, it also made abundantly clear that a military intervention was not the best way to achieve success, and would only be used to promote the cause of forces opposed to progress.<sup>158</sup>

The French political parties were equally unanimous in their disapproval. The PS issued a communiqué on 2 January in which the party stated that it "...condemns this intervention as it has condemned the American interventions in Southeast Asia and Latin America or the interventions of the French government in Africa."<sup>159</sup> The *Mouvement radical de gauche*, the MRG, was less diplomatic in its statement, declaring that with this "flagrant interference" in Afghanistan's affairs the Soviet Union was attempting to deprive the country of its right to "master its own destiny."<sup>160</sup> The *Force Ouvrière* – one of France's leading workers' unions – believed the invasion proved "...the imperialist character of the USSR." The organization took the opportunity to call for greater authority to be given to the UN, stating that it was high time

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<sup>155</sup> The PCE's stand on the invasion was, according to a document found in Gaston Plissonnier's records, an editorial. *Fonds Plissonnier, I*. However, an article describing the different parties' position, found at Open Society Archives, suggests it was only a commentary – and that far from being a clear condemnation, it was a "veiled criticism" of the Soviet Union. *Internet, I*.

<sup>156</sup> French copy of the PCI's *Déclaration de la direction*, 04.01.80. *Fonds Plissonnier, I*.

<sup>157</sup> French copy of an article by Romano Leva – member of the foreign affairs section in the PCI. Undated. *Fonds Plissonnier, I*.

<sup>158</sup> French translation of the British Communist Party's editorial. *Fonds Plissonnier, I*.

<sup>159</sup> Copy of a communiqué from the PS Executive Bureau, published 02.01.80. *Fonds Plissonnier, I*.

<sup>160</sup> Copy of a communiqué from the MRG, published 02.01.80. *Fonds Plissonnier, I*.

this international organization was given more power.<sup>161</sup> *L'Union pour la démocratie française* – the UDF, France's largest centre-right party – considered the invasion to be a threat to world peace and to the stability of Asia. Furthermore, it soon became clear that President Giscard d'Estaing and the French government would echo US President Carter in his disappointment in the Soviet Union, the latter declaring that he had “profoundly changed his opinion of it,” as well as calling the invasion “...the greatest threat to international peace since World War II.”<sup>162</sup> On 3 January the *Bulletin Quotidien* reported that foreign secretary Jean François-Poncet was calling home Georges Perruche, France's ambassador to Afghanistan.<sup>163</sup>

As sanctions against the Soviet Union were being discussed and the invasion was condemned worldwide, French media and politicians turned to the PCF, asking it to explain itself and its position – though not always in such diplomatic terms. The PCF's decision to support the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan sparked angry debate and astonishment in France and discontent amongst the Eurocommunists. The criticisms directed at the PCF following its support for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan came from all corners of French politics and French society. The gravest accusation, from which all other accusations stemmed, was the claim that the PCF acted as a spokesperson for Soviet politics. However, the phrase in the Secretariat's meeting report from 9 January suggests that the critics accused the Party of *changing* their politics to be in alignment with Moscow.<sup>164</sup> That would presuppose that PCF politics at the time was *not* necessarily a reflection of or in tune with Soviet policy, and that the support for the Afghan invasion was indicative of a decisive and, from a French point of view, unwanted shift in PCF policy. Indeed, the PCF did its best in the turbulent weeks and months to come to convince the French public that supporting a political ally, was *not* the same as being in *ideological* alignment with it.

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<sup>161</sup> Copy of a note from the *Force Ouvrière*, published 02.01.80. *Fonds Plissonnier, I*.

<sup>162</sup> Ouimet, 2003:97

<sup>163</sup> *Bulletin Quotidien*, 03.01.80

<sup>164</sup> Secretariat, 09.01.80

## Chapter 6. The PCF, 1980-81 – the Aftermath of Afghanistan

*“Seul contre tous”*

“Alone against all”

### ***Bittersweet success – the communiqué that disappeared***

January 1980 proved to be an eventful month for the PCF. On 7 January, a PCF delegation flew to Moscow for its five day visit. Robrieux describes how Marchais was given a royal welcome, with full honours, received like a head of state by Ponomarev and Suslov, and given more time with Brezhnev than had been bestowed on Giscard d’Estaing during *his* visit to the Soviet Union. Brezhnev proved himself to be a good psychologist, as both he and Marchais were aware of the honour this was for the latter.<sup>165</sup> The visit was a success for both parties. Especially so for the PCF, as Marchais came home to France on 12 January bringing back a joint CPSU-PCF communiqué with no less than revolutionary contents. As Gremetz pointed out in his report to the Central Committee; although Brezhnev had said “... We have [our] differences (...) but one must not exaggerate them,” Gremetz went to state that “... This communiqué represents (...) an important text, as, until now, the CPSU has never signed such a text that recognized in the least the existence of divergences between the CPSU and another communist party. As such, it is the recognition of the diversity in the international communist movement and a change with regards to the monolithic nature of it...”<sup>166</sup> This was a repetition of the statement made by Politburo member Paul Laurent in a radio interview with famed French journalist Joseph Paletou earlier in the month, in which he asserted that the communiqué was in line with the policies of 23<sup>th</sup> PCF Congress (which, in their turn, were a continuation of the decisions made at the 22<sup>th</sup> Congress), and that it confirmed the independence of the PCF. He made it quite clear that there were major issues of which the two parties had differing opinions, and it is equally safe to conclude that he wished in the present situation to focus precisely on these differences – as the topic of discussion was the invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Robrieux, 1982:402

<sup>166</sup> Report by Maxime Gremetz. Central Committee, 21.-22.01.80

<sup>167</sup> Transcription of an interview with Paul Laurent for the program “Parlons clair”, broadcast Tuesday 15.01.80 on France-Inter, Radio France. *Fonds Paul Laurent*.

## ***Problems – the French reaction to the PCF’s decision***

Although the communiqué was indeed a triumph, obtained by no communist before them, the leaders of the PCF foresaw trouble. First and foremost, it was important to stress that the visit by the PCF delegation to Moscow had not been a fire-extinguishing exercise, but a friendly meeting between two sister parties. Furthermore, speaking of the anti-communist sentiments the invasion had stirred up in France, Gaston Plissonnier noted that “...It cannot be concealed that the exploitation of this situation, against the USSR, affects us, too.” And later, knowing that the PCF’s decision could cause some uneasiness amongst the party’s own rank-and-file, he added; “We will no doubt have members (Paris – intellectuals) which will try to push for a condemnation.” He went on to advise caution in which manner the visit to Moscow was to be reported in the communist press, keenly aware of the unfortunate timing of it.<sup>168</sup> The PCF went on to do its best to distance itself not only from Soviet policy, but also from the invasion itself. Marchais tried to make this point in an interview, when he said, “The Communist Party of the Soviet Union is a major party that determines its policy in complete independence; the PCF is a party that determines its policy in complete independence.”<sup>169</sup> Laurent echoed this sentiment only a few days later in his interview. “...only because we are an independent party in the European Assembly in Strasbourg,” he began, when Paletou interrupted him and asked, “Seul contre tous?” This phrase, meaning “alone against all,” was used both by and of the PCF, especially at times in French history when the communists had found themselves – politically – more isolated than usual.<sup>170</sup> Laurent’s defiant response was that “...we do not need to take advice from anyone to assert the positions of the French Communist Party.”<sup>171</sup> However, with the PCF being the only political party in France, indeed one of the few parties in Western Europe who supported the invasion, it became increasingly difficult for the PCF to hide from a rising current of more or less rational accusations.

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<sup>168</sup> Report by Gaston Plissonnier, presented to the Politburo 04.01.80. *Fonds Plissonnier, I.*

<sup>169</sup> *L’Humanité*, 12.01.80

<sup>170</sup> The PCF had always had a tradition for not admitting any loss of support. In June, 1978, following the disastrous election and the definite break-up of the Common Program, Marchais had been asked by *L’Humanité*, after the latter had spoken of the impressive 700.000 members the PCF now had, how many members left the party? There was a defiant – and somewhat ominous – tone in Marchais’ answer when he said: “Contrary to what certain journalists say and write, nobody leaves the Party. What is a fact is that, each year, because of deaths, [people] moving, layoffs, [and] factory closures, about 7 % of the members disappear. It is a normal loss against which one can do nothing.” *L’Humanité*, 23.06.78

<sup>171</sup> Transcription of an interview with Paul Laurent for the program “Parlons clair”, broadcast Tuesday 15.01.80 on France-Inter, Radio France. *Fonds Paul Laurent.*



The criticisms of the PCF started even before the party had published its official position. On New Year's Day, French news broadcast an interview with Edmond Maire, the powerful leader of the CFDT – France's largest workers' union. He was quite unequivocal in his verdict; "...we sincerely wish that the communist party stops this unconditional alignment to Soviet foreign policy." He lamented this "...regression" of the PCF, this "regrettable evolution."<sup>172</sup>

The PCF could not fully protect itself from one of their own, either. Secretary General Marchais alone was responsible for one of the most controversial incidents marking the debate of 1980, and the one who served to cement many people's view of the PCF as essentially a Soviet, and Stalinist, satellite. In defence of the PCF, however, it must be added that Marchais' actions were most likely neither pre-approved by the party leadership nor approved by it afterwards. On 11 January, Marchais was interviewed by French television from Moscow. The interview was broadcast on France's channel TF1, the result of which Robrieux, supporting the conclusion of Jean-Luc Parodi, French political scientist, declared was detrimental to the PCF, as it now faced "...un recul profond et généralisé."<sup>173</sup> The day after the interview, the PCF plunged to a record low in a popularity poll; 70 % of the French public was now negative to the PCF.<sup>174</sup> Robrieux gives an altogether damning verdict of Marchais' behaviour during the televised interview. His language was uncompromising, his air was menacing, and he even spoke like the Russian leaders he was visiting. On the issue of Afghanistan, he promptly denied that any military invasion had taken place, he claimed that the Afghan government had pleaded with the Soviets for months and years for help, and that the Soviets, after having declined several times so as to not "...aggravate the tension in that region of the world", had finally given in to the Afghans' request. Marchais then went to full-frontal assault on the imperialist forces at work in Central Asia, especially lashing out at Pakistan, who worked for the Western powers in the region.<sup>175</sup> Robrieux concluded; "...Too sure of himself, deprived of the least tact, totally cut off from popular sensitivity, the Secretary General had just, without realizing it, crossed a line: in intervening in this manner, he had committed two unpardonable mistakes, the first consisting of justifying the Soviet

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<sup>172</sup> Transcription of channel A2's interview with Edmond Maire, broadcast Tuesday, 01.01.80. *Fonds Plissonnier, I.*

<sup>173</sup> Robrieux, 1982:405. "...a profound and overall setback."

<sup>174</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995:391

<sup>175</sup> Robrieux, 1982:403-405

intervention from Moscow, the second breaking his [own] records of brutality, vulgarity and vehemence in unjustifiable circumstances.”<sup>176</sup> It is noteworthy that Robrieux added the two words *from Moscow* to his conclusion, suggesting that the fact that Marchais was in Moscow when he made his statements somehow added to the severity of his crime. It rather served to explain them.

As Robrieux pointed out, the PCF delegation was in awe over the welcome it received from the CPSU and the Soviet leadership.<sup>177</sup> Being in Moscow – the heart of the socialist world – would have had an immense impact on the French communists, immersed as they were in Soviet propaganda, standing face to face with some of the most powerful men on the planet, and surrounded by all the splendour “la Moscou sainte” could muster to sweep them off their feet. It may seem like a statement of the obvious, but it is important, especially when analyzing this situation, to stress the *relative* relationship between the PCF and the CPSU. The PCF was a modest political party with an electorate of just over 20 % of the French population. It did not represent a country, only itself and the interests of its voters. The CPSU was the political power of the Soviet Union, the world’s largest political unity and one of the two global superpowers. When President Brezhnev, ruler of more than 22 million square kilometres, nearly 300 million people and an unknown number of nuclear warheads, saw fit to receive Marchais no less than three times for talks during the latter’s five day visit, Marchais would naturally feel privileged, and grateful. When met with such benevolence, honour and warmth, it would be difficult, and perhaps also deemed unwise, to sour relations by criticizing one’s host. And when Brezhnev talked, should one not assume that he spoke the truth about issues he himself had brought up? The CPSU made the PCF feel important, by – at least pretend to be – valuing its opinions.

Although the bond between the PCF and the CPSU was ideological in origin and in essence, it was political in nature and expression. The PCF’s ties to the CPSU transcended into loyalty to the Soviet Union. Over the years, the respect for the First Socialist Country and the country of the October Revolution had cemented a cultural and historical bond – based on the courage and vision demonstrated in launching the greatest social experiment in history, and a deep respect for the paramount role played by the Soviet Union in defeating Nazism. Paradoxically,

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<sup>176</sup> Robrieux, 1982:405

<sup>177</sup> Robrieux, 1982:402

the PCF seemed to gradually have come to regard the socialist utopia not as an achievable future goal, but as a glorified version of Soviet's past. True communism had become the means, not the goal, and the means was honest, idealistic class struggle. This belief, however unconsciously arrived at, is illustrated by the revolutionary rhetoric the PCF used, and its return to the Stalinist solutions of its predecessors when challenged politically.

It was not only the CPSU that sought the confidences of the PCF. Via the Bulgarian Communist Party came a letter to the PCF from the Central Committee of the PDPA. Considering that the Bulgarian Communist Party was close to the Soviet leadership, and taking into account the wording of the letter, it is safe to assume that the CPSU was not entirely unaware of the letter's existence. In it, the PDPA addressed itself to "...you, dear friends, for help and support, for, at this moment, nothing is so necessary to us than the fraternal solidarity of revolutionaries..." It went on to inform the PCF of what really went on in Afghanistan, including giving an explanation as to why the PDPA had chosen to "...oust, convict and execute Amin," who was described as bloodthirsty, oppressive and a "...fierce nationalist." The Afghan communists had chosen to ask the Soviets for military aid, and their aim was to stabilize the country, and save the revolution. The letter finished with a heartfelt appeal: "We count on your aid and your support in word and in deed, we believe in your anti-imperialist solidarity."<sup>178</sup> The PCF clearly took the letter to heart, or, depending on when the letter arrived, *was* already perceptible to its contents, as one of the sentences in it, "...no revolutionary can remain indifferent and passive faced with the ideological and political counter-revolutionary manipulation against Afghanistan and its loyal friends," rings remarkably similar to the wording in Gremetz' report that he presented to the Central Committee on 21 January.

While the PCF's own actions were the main cause of the party's political isolation in France, it was not all the PCF's own doing. Realizing that the public opinion was massively against the PCF, its main rival for the Left electorate, the PS, did its best – and succeeded – in making political capital out of the Afghanistan issue. Its reaction to the invasion was in line with that of the Western (often conservative) governments, including the French. When President Giscard d'Estaing expressed his fear that this invasion might have made the world a more dangerous place, the PS had agreed, and the PCF scornfully attacked the PS, who, in

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<sup>178</sup> Undated letter from the Central Committee of the PDPA, sent to the PCF. *Fonds Plissonnier, I.*

“...howling with the wolves (...), participates greatly in the campaign of dramatizing the international situation launched by the Elysée...”<sup>179</sup> Paul Laurent went even further, accusing the PS of being more Catholic than the Pope, as it were, when he stated that “...now, the Socialist Party thinks that in the Afghan affair Giscard d’Estaing is soft, [and] that the French diplomacy is creeping.”<sup>180</sup> PCF documents from 1980 all testify to the profound disapproval of the PS in the communist party, and the task the PCF took upon itself in informing the French public of the PS’s true, bourgeois nature. Much of the PCF leadership debates in 1980 – as had been the case also in the previous years – would revolve around the PS. The PCF understood full well that from the moment the Common Program collaboration broke down, the two parties would become each other’s fiercest enemies. This, however, did not prevent the PCF from publically declaring its dedication to the Union of the Left on several occasions, proving that the PS had caused the split – that the PS had betrayed the Left. Marchais’ damning verdict serves to illustrate the PCF’s attitude;

You know, the fall of the Union of the Left, it was François Mitterrand who crushed it, in 1977. (...) In 1975 (...) a delegation from the Socialist Party went to the Soviet Union, led by François Mitterrand. It signed a joint communiqué with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In this joint communiqué, François Mitterrand had noted the progress made by the Soviet Union on its socialist path. And *voilà*, today, or rather tomorrow, the PS will sign a document in which it says: “Socialism does not exist in the Soviet Union. It exists nowhere. Blum was right in 1920...”<sup>181</sup>

### ***The PCF and the Eurocommunists, 1980-81***

Another important issue on which the PCF and the PS came to lock horns, was Eurocommunism. The relationship between the PCF and the Eurocommunist parties was strained already before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the different reactions to the invasion revealed how far from each other the Western European communist parties stood, especially the PCF and the PCI – two parties that had always been separated by a vast ideological gulf, particularly with regards to their respective ties to the CPSU and how they viewed the Soviet Union. On 5 January, 1980, two days before Marchais was due to travel to Moscow he had a meeting with PCI leader Berlinguer and a delegation of Italian communists. Considering both the PCF’s disapproval of the PCI’s stand on Afghanistan as outlined in Gremetz’ report to the Central Committee,<sup>182</sup> and the very diplomatic wording by Marchais

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<sup>179</sup> Report by Maxime Gremetz. Central Committee 21.-22.01.80.

<sup>180</sup> Transcription of an interview with Paul Laurent for the program “Parlons clair”, broadcast Tuesday 15.01.80 on France-Inter, Radio France. *Fonds Paul Laurent*.

<sup>181</sup> *L’Humanité*, 12.01.80 – See conclusion for Blum’s argument

<sup>182</sup> Report by Maxime Gremetz. Central Committee 21.-22.01.80

when he gave his account of the meeting to *L'Humanité*, it is safe to deduce that any great agreement did not exist between them; "...Each speaks for himself. (...) Comrade Berlinguer (PCI) informed me of his position and I informed him of mine. The fact remains that we are very good friends."<sup>183</sup> Only five days earlier, the Politburo had lamented the "difficulty" posed by the stand taken by the PCI. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, the PCF deemed the PCI to stand in the way for a "broad initiative."<sup>184</sup> This attitude was an echo of the PCF's relationship with the PS, and with the CPSU in the late 1970s: the PCF itself was blameless in any conflict. It merely wished to execute its policies in accordance with the Marxist-Leninist principles that had always been at the basis of its political and moral convictions.

The PCF seemed at this point quite detached from the Eurocommunist project. It is questionable whether the PCF ever had any serious intentions of going wholeheartedly into the collaboration. The general view amongst historians is that it had not. Indeed, Courtois and Lazar declare outright that the PCF had discarded the entire project as early as 1978, when Marchais in a speech at the PCF 23<sup>rd</sup> Congress in May had hailed the socialist world led by the Soviet Union as "presenting a "globally positive balance sheet."<sup>185</sup> Marchais' words in French – *un "bilan globalement positif"* – have become infamous in French communist history. However, if the PCF had positively decided against Eurocommunism, it is remarkable that there is not a single clear statement to that effect in the party documents. Furthermore, the PCF seemed to disapprove of statements declaring Eurocommunism to be dead, or accusations that the PCF had damaged the Eurocommunist project. However, nothing suggests that the PCF was prepared to fight for the Eurocommunist efforts, either. In undated notes by Gaston Plissonnier and Georges Marchais on foreign politics, the two leaders simply stated that an anti-PCF campaign was waged in French media, accusing the PCF of being a Stalinist Moscow puppet, and declaring Eurocommunism dead because of the differences between the PCI and the PCE, and the PCF.<sup>186</sup>

When PCF Central Committee member André Lajoinie was interviewed by Joseph Paletou on his radio program *Parlons clair* on 26 March, 1980, Paletou stated that "...les communistes

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<sup>183</sup> *L'Humanité*, 12.01.80

<sup>184</sup> Politburo, 07.01.80

<sup>185</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995:386-387

<sup>186</sup> Notes by Plissonnier and Marchais, subject Foreign politics. Undated. *Fonds Plissonnier, I.*

italiens lâchent Marchais!”<sup>187</sup> He did not receive any reply. He went on to say that the PCF must now be regarded as political isolated and alone – still no reply from Lajoinie. It is noteworthy that Paletou focuses on Marchais, and not the PCF, as he refers to the PCI. This serves to strengthen the belief that Marchais’ position in the PCF was so strong that he seemed if not alone in dictating policy, then strong enough to see his motions carried out.

The following day, the French independent radio channel Europe 1 broadcast that the relationship between the PCF and the PCI was deteriorating. Journalist Étienne Mougeotte declared: “If Afghanistan contributed to kill Eurocommunism, [then] the Berlinguer – Mitterrand meeting has sealed its burial.”<sup>188</sup> The meeting between the leaders of the PCI and the PS respectively took place in the European Parliament in Strasbourg on 24 March, and Marchais’ deep public disapproval led observers to conclude that the PCF had “made official its de facto break with the Eurocommunist line.”<sup>189</sup> It is interesting that very little is said on the subject in the PCF’s own documents. Apart from the usual, evenly distributed attacks on the PS, the PCF’s meeting reports in 1980 say almost nothing about the relations with other European communist parties – and the PCF never assumed any responsibility for the failure of Eurocommunism.<sup>190</sup> However, the prevailing opinion amongst observers was that the PCF had irreparably damaged any serious attempt at a working communist cooperation in Europe. From the PCF’s point of view, the situation looked very different. To disagree on a political issue, in the PCF’s opinion, had to be accepted as a natural occurrence between two communist parties – without it raising suspicions of a break, or a serious conflict. When it was claimed that the Eurocommunist project had suffered from the Afghanistan affair, it was clear proof to the PCF that such an acceptance was still not recognized. It was the conflict of divergence with the CPSU all over again, and again the PCF felt ideologically betrayed and politically misunderstood.

### ***Support and self-defence – the PCF mobilizes the press***

The PCF – and especially its leadership – felt victimized, not an altogether unfounded sensation, however self-inflicted it might have been. The support of the Soviet Union had yielded few positive results and given the PCF much trouble. The French communists felt

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<sup>187</sup> “...the Italian communists let Marchais go!”

<sup>188</sup> Transcription of radio program, broadcast on *Europe 1*, 27.03.80. CCCP, dossier “*Affaires Fiszbin.*”

<sup>189</sup> “Berlinguer-Mitterrand meeting provokes PCF-PCI polemics”, *Internet*, 2.

<sup>190</sup> It must be noted here that the Politburo records covering the period from September through December, 1980, have not been made available to the public as of 2011.

abandoned by the European communists, unfairly accused by the French media, and generally misunderstood. One of the ways in which the PCF sought to justify itself and present a contrasting picture to the events in and concerning Afghanistan, was to mobilize its press. The PCF and its leadership launched several major press campaigns as a response to the public outrage following its supports of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. All these campaigns were followed up in the communist newspapers, especially *L'Humanité*, and all of them focused on the perceived injustice suffered by the Soviet Union and/or the PCF in French "bourgeois" media.

The first was simply an information campaign, a series of in-depth news articles and reports on the actual situation in Afghanistan and the events that took place there. At a meeting with Afghan comrades in Paris – members of the *Parcham* faction of the PDPA – on 3 January, 1980, the PCF was invited to send a journalist to Afghanistan, to which the party accepted.<sup>191</sup> At a meeting in August of the same year, the Politburo repeated the need for information on Afghanistan, and it was decided to keep a reporter permanently in the country.<sup>192</sup> The French communist reporters present in Kabul were to paint an objective and moderate picture of a country believed by the Western world to be in a state of chaos and anarchy. The articles were also written to show that the Soviet forces were not in Afghanistan in the capacity of an invader or an occupant, but as a friend, coming to the rescue of an ally in need.

In January, *L'Humanité Dimanche* sent one of its reporters to Afghanistan. Martine Monod wrote several long articles in which she presented the “real Afghanistan,” in order to enlighten the French public. In an article series called *Dossiers Secrets*, Monod and other journalists described in detail Kabul, their journeys inland and the atmosphere of the country. In June, one could read how “...Kabul stupefies the Western traveller. He searches there in vain for the besieged capital, surrounded by Soviet troops (...) No fighting in the mountains above the city. Everything is calm...”<sup>193</sup> Earlier in the year, when the attacks on the Soviet Union were at their harshest and most frequent in Western media, Monod had also lashed out at the Western journalists in Afghanistan, who claimed to be reporting back the truth about the war. They did not travel around the country, she wrote, they did not even leave their hotel, a luxury resort in the middle of Kabul, protected by security guards, high fences and barbed wire:

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<sup>191</sup> Note on PCF's meeting with Afghan communists in Paris., 03.01.80. *Fonds Plissonnier, I.*

<sup>192</sup> Politburo, 05.08.80

<sup>193</sup> *L'Humanité Dimanche*, 20.06.80

“...The Hotel Intercontinental is on the outside of Afghan reality. To stay here, is to be very far from Afghanistan.”<sup>194</sup> In February, a French traveller in Kabul was interviewed by *L’Humanité Dimanche*. He claimed that he “...had not seen any Soviet soldiers” in the capital. The same edition quoted the correspondent from Associated Press, who had interviewed a Soviet officer; “The Soviet Command,” he concluded, “does not, it seems, have any intention of throwing itself into a guerrilla war.”<sup>195</sup>

The PCF’s press and its journalistic approach to the invasion of Afghanistan were, and should be, a reflection of official PCF policy.<sup>196</sup> On the issue of Afghanistan, the aim was clearly to play down the Soviets’ role in the country, and instead focus on the achievements of the Afghan people and regime. A picture was painted of a calm and quiet country, where, paradoxically, the struggle by the progressive forces – aided by the Soviets – against backwardness nearly drowned in the romantic sheen of a pre-modern life near the roof of the world. The journalists described Afghanistan as though they were travelling in the footsteps of Marco Polo, on an exotic journey through lands of legend where time had stood still for centuries. In addition to being strictly one-sided in its approach to the subject-matter, there was altogether a degree of immaturity, or rather naivety, over several aspects of the journalism. A prime example is Monod’s moving descriptions of the young soldiers who “...mobilize to defend the [Karmal’s] regime.” She painted them in the colours of idealist struggle, called on to defend their country and their future in a free nation; “...Chacun prématurément muri par la brusque intrusion de la lutte armée dans sa vie.”<sup>197</sup> The romantic sheen of revolutionary struggle against a superior enemy would appeal to a sense of occasion, and of history, but would to more cynical observers be seen as evidence of a journalist who had not understood the grim realities of war.

The campaign was impressive, and could convince anyone but the most well-informed reader. And, however one-sided it was, the PCF could always argue that the clear anti-Soviet agenda propagated by the bourgeois media and its journalists did not render their articles completely

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<sup>194</sup> *L’Humanité Dimanche*, 01.02.80

<sup>195</sup> *L’Humanité Dimanche*, 24.02.80

<sup>196</sup> The first of the “Twenty-one Conditions” read: “...all party publishing houses must be completely subordinate to the party executive committee..” The PCF and its press stayed loyal to this principle also beyond the fall of the Soviet Union. McDermott and Agnew, 1996:227

<sup>197</sup> *L’Humanité Dimanche*, 14.03.80. “Each too soon matured by the sudden intrusion of armed struggle in his life.”



objective, either. *L'Humanité* focused on topics that Western politicians left out when discussing the war, such as the profound illiberal and undemocratic policies advocated by the rebels that Western governments had given their support to – scornfully called *les féodaux* – the feudalists – by the communist press.

### ***The PCF between ideological considerations and political loyalty***

When analyzing the PCF's press campaign, one question springs to mind: Did the PCF – above all its leadership – believe in it? As the Politburo documents outlined in chapter 5 reveal, controversy was expected if the PCF decided to side with Moscow. Charges of a Soviet alignment would (re)surface, accusations would come. Emphasising the importance of neither openly supporting the invasion, nor condemning it, would suffice to prove that the PCF was full aware of the dilemma it found itself in. Such a display of hesitation would indicate that the PCF *did* question the legitimacy of the invasion, and felt trapped between the party's ideological beliefs and its political commitments. And therein lay the root to the predicament.

War – indeed any display of military aggression – was categorically denounced by Marxist teachings as an imperialist act that only served to enrich the already rich, impoverish the already poor, perpetuate the capitalist system and keep the smaller, vulnerable nations in subjection to the great powers. War from above – i.e. not the armed revolt of the oppressed masses, but the political tactic employed by bourgeois governments – was therefore contrary to Marxist thought, and in breach of communist conduct. The PCF had fought aggressors before, both at home and in its press against imperialist warfare the world over. But how to react when the great power invading a small country was a socialist state, and the PCF's old, political ally? The PCF had lashed out at socialist countries at war before – most recently when China sent troops into Vietnam. On the issue of Afghanistan, the PCF had to base its decision on very vague information. Had the Afghans sent a genuine, legitimate appeal to the Soviets for military aid, the invasion might be correct – though it would raise more questions on the legitimacy of the Afghan regime. Was there no such demand made, however, then the Soviet Army had crossed the border without permission from the Afghans themselves, and the invasion was clearly illegal.

Whatever the reason(s) for the PCF's hesitation, there was undoubtedly an element of genuine confusion in its leadership, and one cannot help but suspect that the French communist press, in reporting on the Afghanistan affair, intentionally or unintentionally had its facts crossed. In an interview with TF1 on 11 January, 1980 – quoted in its entirety in *L'Humanité* on the following day – Marchais was asked “who, in Afghanistan, had made the appeal to the Soviets?” To which Marchais responded that he had put precisely this question to Brezhnev, and the response had been “clear”: “Amin himself had asked the Soviet government to intervene.”<sup>198</sup> This was an extraordinary declaration, both in view of earlier assessments made by the PCF on the subject, statements by the CPSU, and the general opinion of Amin as a dictator who cared little for the Soviets and had threatened to destroy the revolution in Afghanistan. As described by Ouimet, Amin *did* request for Soviet troops to protect him while he stayed in the capital, and the request was granted. But it is highly unlikely that Amin could have foreseen that these same 500 men would storm his palace only weeks later – even less likely that he approved. Furthermore, it is clear that one must render Amin's expressed beliefs and opinions worthless, as he was deliberately misguided by the Soviet leadership immediately prior to the invasion – especially regarding the reasons for Soviet troop movements.<sup>199</sup> The PCF may have been privileged in its access to Soviet information, but in this particular instance there were many unknown factors. In his report to the Politburo on 4 January, Gaston Plissonnier claimed that a coup against Amin had been planned for 26 December, but that this had been rendered superfluous by the Soviet invasion.<sup>200</sup> This fact, originating from PDPA exiles in Paris, was meant to prove that the tide was turning against Amin, and that the Soviet intervention merely acted to help the Afghans save the revolution – and that the invasion was to be considered as a consequence, not as an *a priori* event.

It is also important to note that the PCF itself was being misinformed by the CPSU, and this of course influenced the former's decisions. In the latter's communication to the PCF on the 28 December, 1979, in which the CPSU Central Committee outlined its reasons for intervening in Afghanistan, several anomalies – or even lies – occur. Amin was described as the oppressive leader of an even more oppressive regime, and the CPSU had therefore decided to aid the new government (who?) in combating the reactionary forces that now fought Amin and sought to destroy socialism in Afghanistan. The Soviet troops would also be helping the

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<sup>198</sup> *L'Humanité*, 12.01.80

<sup>199</sup> Ouimet, 2003:94-95

<sup>200</sup> Politburo, 04.01.80

Afghans to counteract the military interventions from Pakistan. And finally, the CPSU reassured the PCF, "...in Afghanistan, there were sufficient forces to create the organization of a new power with Taraki and those who had fought against the royal regime."

The communication ended with an appeal to the PCF, an appeal that could serve to understand how the PCF could – still using communist doctrine – support the Soviet Union's aggressive war: "The Central Committee of the CPSU took into consideration a probable negative reaction from imperialist states and media, but attacks from class enemies did not incite the USSR to refuse to respond to the demand from Afghanistan's government. It is asked of the PCF to understand the necessity of carrying support to this decision by the USSR."<sup>201</sup> Ouimet writes, "...the Soviet leadership had spent the 1970s proclaiming an unshakable commitment to the political stability of its socialist allies. The national interests of the USSR, according to socialist internationalism, were indistinguishable from those of its allies. A threat to communist rule in any one nation constituted a threat to the entire community."<sup>202</sup> Though this principle would be used to justify acts under the Brezhnev Doctrine, it carried much meaning to a devout communist. Could the PCF support an invasion to help a fellow socialist country? Of course it could, as was expressed repeatedly by the PCF. The PCF had done it in the past – for example in 1956, when the Soviet intervened in Hungary.<sup>203</sup> When Plissonnier pointed out the difference of situation between the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and that of Czechoslovakia in 1968, he was most likely not aware of the historic resonance of that remark. As Lazar wrote, the PCF condemnation of the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia would be the only time in the PCF's history that it criticized a Soviet foreign political decision.<sup>204</sup>

It is possible, however, that the PCF's concerns over the invasion was not only over the legitimacy of it, but the fact that the invasion would scare the West into believing that the Soviet Union again was on the warpath. In addition to it being the Soviets' fear, too, this was indeed one of the interpretations of the invasion – as testified by US President Carter, France's President Giscard d'Estaing and others, including analysts and neutral observers.

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<sup>201</sup> Transcription of communication from the CPSU Central Committee to the PCF, sent on 28.12.79. *Fonds Plissonnier, I.*

<sup>202</sup> Ouimet, 2003:88

<sup>203</sup> Letter from the PCF to the CPSU, unsigned, declaring the PCF's support for the Soviet operation in Hungary. 12.11.56. *Fonds Plissonnier, I.*

<sup>204</sup> Lazar, 2002:39

Such a fear would spark anti-Sovietism in Western media, and again, the PCF's fears were realized. The PCF also rightly predicted that in such a maelstrom of anti-Soviet and anti-communist criticisms, the PCF would be thrown in, too. It is important to note, however, that when the PCF had made its decision – however unwilling the party might have been to do it – it could not, and did not, attempt to hide from the accusations of alignment. Several events in 1980 would have made it difficult, should the PCF have tried to alienate itself from the CPSU. In addition to Marchais' TV interview of 11 January, a conference was put together for April of that year – a conference that served to cement the PCF's stance on Afghanistan. The Paris Conference of European Communist Parties was a convention of Europe's pro-Soviet parties; many notable communist parties were not present, amongst them the PCI, the PCE, and the Romanian Communist Party, the latter being especially noteworthy as it was the governing party of a Warsaw Pact state. The 22 parties present expressed their support to the Soviet Union, and agreed to the Soviet policies in Afghanistan. Deciding to hold the conference in Paris, with the PCF as host party, would have been the result of careful consideration on the Soviets' part, taking into account both the vastly improved relations with the PCF and the potential influence of the latter in being a "legitimizing" element to Soviet policy. In a paradoxical political manoeuvre, the PCF was thus given the task of "spearheading the Soviet peace campaign" – initiated by the Soviets and designed to soften the image of the superpower in the eyes of European and global communists.<sup>205</sup> Both Rubinstein and Ouimet argue that the conference was a Soviet attempt at reasserting its position and strength in the European communist movement, as well as striking a divisive blow against Eurocommunism, burying it for good.<sup>206</sup>

However, the general view is that Eurocommunism had ceased to be a major concern for the Soviet Union even *before* the invasion of Afghanistan. The PCI and, to a lesser extent, the PCE, continued their criticisms of the CPSU and Soviet policy, but the relationship between the PCF and the CPSU was mended, and the division this caused within the Eurocommunist movement had taken place without the Soviet Union having to do more than make a political decision on which it proved impossible for the PCF, the PCI and the PCE to agree. The PCF was weak; Courtois and Lazar point out, and they hold the CPSU had over the PCF always

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<sup>205</sup> Rubinstein, 1981:154-155

<sup>206</sup> Ouimet, 2003: 97 and Rubinstein, 1981:154-155

tightened when the PCF experienced problems, predominantly domestic.<sup>207</sup> In this situation, it was the breakup of the Common Program in 1977 and the devastating election results in 1978 that had contributed to a return to the safe predictability of the Soviet fold. Courtois and Lazar claim that the political failures of the PCF gave the communists a reason – or an excuse? – to return to their revolutionary inclinations – with radicalization as almost a therapeutic exercise.<sup>208</sup> The PCF returned to the one stable relationship the party had ever enjoyed - that with the CPSU. In this regard, support for the Soviets in their war to salvage communism in Afghanistan would be deemed a natural course of action.

A second press campaign came about as a reaction to the suggestion voiced by the American government to boycott the summer Olympic Games in Moscow scheduled for July and August, 1980. The PCF's campaign was designed to support those in favour of letting the games proceed as normal, and give their arguments media attention. It also strongly rejected this blatant attack on the Olympic peace, and criticized the American government for disrespectfully mixing politics with the international solidarity and apolitical harmony of sports in this manner. The PCF could declare victory when the French Olympic Committee, after much debate, voted to participate in the Games as usual. In this campaign, the PCF seemed to be more in tune with the sentiments of the French public.

The third campaign was waged as a war, close to home. It was a reaction to the virtual hate campaign waged in its turn against the leadership of the PCF. The support for the Soviet invasion, immoral to many and incomprehensible to many more, upset a lot of people, both amongst public figures such as politicians, commentators and journalists, and members of the public. Their reactions ranged from verbal protests, based on rational arguments, to death threats and personal attacks. The PCF, through its newspapers, made it clear what it thought of these depraved actions unworthy of a democracy, and showed its unflinching support for its leaders who had become the victims of such a savage and irrational debate.

On a Central Committee meeting in late January, Gaston Plissonnier stated that the main accusation against the PCF was that it was “subservient to Moscow. Obviously the argument is simplistic. But the charge is to see us firmly on the side of the global revolutionary

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<sup>207</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995

<sup>208</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995: 388

movement and resolutely hold the national positions.” He went on to put the current situation the PCF found itself in, in a broader, historical context, thereby adding legitimacy to it: “Anti-communism is not new. It is as old and as tenacious as the Party. It is more or less virulent according to the sharpening of the class struggle, according to the difficulties of the bourgeoisie and the political stakes.”<sup>209</sup> Tartakowsky points out how the ideological triumph of the PCF in bringing about the recognition of divergences into the PCF-CPSU communiqué was completely overshadowed by the PCF’s stance on Afghanistan.<sup>210</sup> Where the PCF saw recognition of its own efforts and independence, the French media and public, to the extent the communiqué was noticed at all, saw only strengthened evidence to support their convictions that the PCF, *regardless* of the opportunity to disagree with the CPSU – with the latter’s blessing! – followed blindly where the CPSU led. To the PCF, however, the communiqué was important because it had initiated a new era in the important CPSU-PCF relations. The communiqué was an ideological breakthrough, a revolution. But the French media, it seemed, would not see the bigger picture – and focused on Afghanistan detached from any ideological considerations. To the PCF, the Afghanistan issue was clearly a burden, but no more than one matter of many – to its political opponents and critics it cemented their negative view of the PCF and gave it a historical significance. The French media put far too much focus on Afghanistan than the PCF liked. And more than anything, it put the spotlight on Georges Marchais.

Marchais was the most famous French communist of his day. He was a well-known figure in the French media and political circles, outspoken and authoritative. Perceived as the strong man of the PCF, it seems natural that the press should focus on him in its criticisms of the party. Perhaps it was inevitable that the attacks on Marchais became personal after a while – his strong personality, and his omnipresence and power within the party invited to it. The PCF could indeed lament that the bourgeois press did not stay focused on the topics of discussion, and instead degraded itself by resorting to character defamations and unsporting behaviour. The “anti-Marchais” campaign – dubbed *la machination* – the fabrication – by the PCF, sought to discredit the PCF leader as a professional politician by portraying him as a man of unsavoury credentials and connections. New charges were brought forward at regular intervals, followed by the PCF disavowing them, one by one. There was a pattern in these

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<sup>209</sup> Transcription of an intervention by Gaston Plissonnier. Central Committee, 21.-22.01.80

<sup>210</sup> Tartakowsky, 1982:108-109

charges, however, all of them evolving around Marchais' loyalties and moralities. It was claimed that Marchais had gone to the infamous "cadre school" in Moscow, where many foreign communists had been educated in the arts of the professional revolutionary. Some members of the PCF – former and current – had indeed attended the school, but Marchais, as the PCF tried to convince French media, was not one of them, as he had had political obligations in France that year he supposedly had been in Moscow. It descended to near farce when Marchais was subjected to violent accusations claiming he spoke Russian.<sup>211</sup> It was by all accounts not true, as the PCF repeatedly stated and the use of interpreters during meetings with CPSU leaders would indicate, but even if it were true, it was completely irrelevant to any objective, political debate.

The story that proved potentially most damning to Marchais' reputation, however, had nothing to do with communism – Soviet Stalinism or otherwise – but questioned Marchais' actions during the Nazi occupation of France. Whether the story is true or false has not yet been settled, although general opinion seems to favour its truth. The story declared that Marchais, who had for a time during the Second World War worked at the Messerschmitt factory in Augsburg, Bavaria, had in fact left for Germany willingly, drawn by the prospect of making money building fighter aircraft and bomber planes for the Reich's Luftwaffe. Because Marchais had left France in December, 1942, he would not have been victim of the French forced labour act – a law that was not put into effect until February, 1943. Furthermore, it remained a mystery what Marchais had done for the remainder of the war, as he only stayed in Augsburg a year. Marchais was not yet a member of the PCF, and the story was discarded by the PCF as completely irrelevant. The party was right of course, but it did however go to great lengths to discredit the supposed evidence that emerged.<sup>212</sup> The story serves to illustrate the nature of the polemic that had created a veritable abyss between the PCF and opponents in French media and politics.

### ***PCF-CPSU relations, 1980-81***

After the discussions regarding the PCF visit to Moscow were over, it is remarkable how the CPSU seems to disappear from the PCF documents, and, consequently, from the literature on the PCF in the period 1980 and '81. The Soviet Union was mentioned in connection with the anti-communist, anti-Soviet campaign that the PCF did its level best to counter, and on the

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<sup>211</sup> These issues were discussed at length by the PCF leadership. Central Committee, 21.-22.01.80

<sup>212</sup> Central Committee, 21.-22.01.80

Afghanistan issue – although not needlessly, as any unnecessary link between the two parties seemed to be played down. While the PCF had been left to fend for itself – and for the Soviet Union – the CPSU sent a message to the PCF, in June, 1980 – after several months without any discernible communication between the two parties.<sup>213</sup> The message informed the PCF of a note from the Soviet government that had been sent to President Giscard d’Estaing on the occasion of an upcoming meeting between the latter and President Brezhnev in Warsaw, at which Afghanistan was to be one of the topics of discussion. The French president had been informed of a normalization of the situation in Afghanistan, the note said, and he had been told, in strict confidence, that the Soviets therefore intended to withdraw parts of its military contingency. The CPSU had added a message to the PCF at the bottom of the page. It expressed its belief that this information would help the PCF understand that it had been right in standing its ground against the bourgeois press in the previous difficult months. The CPSU did not thank the PCF for its support – which would have indicated first, that the CPSU admitted to have needed help, and secondly, that the conduct of the Soviet government had in any way been morally questionable and it had therefore appealed to an external party – literally – for moral backup. The CPSU merely stated that the PCF had been right, and acted accordingly.

The message reveals more. It ended with the significantly worded phrase; “The Soviet comrades emphasize that the communication made to us is highly confidential.” Someone – presumably in the PCF – had underlined the last word of the typed message with a pen or pencil. Such a phrase is not uncommon in the PCF’s records, but this time, it is marked by a heightened sense of occasion. The CPSU had not needed to give the PCF this information, but in making the French communists privy to it, it gave them a sense of importance. Finally, the message, though short, and though practically alone in representing CPSU-PCF contact during this time, shows that the relationship between the CPSU and the PCF had returned to its harmonious, unbalanced equilibrium of mutual understanding.

The great highlight of the summer of 1980 was the Olympic Games in Moscow. Marchais had been invited to attend the VIP stand at the Olympic stadium, and he returned home full of praise. *L’Humanité* and *L’Humanité Dimanche* gave the Games full coverage, and the articles

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<sup>213</sup> I found no documents indicating any communication between the two parties, though that is *not* to say there was none.



especially made a point of the atmosphere of the Games, the thrill of friendly competition and the expressions of brotherly – and sisterly – respect between the athletes.<sup>214</sup> Upon returning home, Marchais and the rest of the PCF leadership began preparing for the 1981 elections, shaping up to be the most interesting political battle in France for years.

The winter of 1980-81 was a strange one for the PCF. The party had not been so politically alone, neither domestically or internationally, for many years. It turned inwards, and focused on its domestic affairs. This of course was a response to the turmoil it faced at home, but seems also to have been the result of its deteriorating relations with the European communist parties. PCF-CPSU relations were good, at least nothing suggests otherwise. Judging by the document selection in the PCF archives, it seems to be a general rule that extensive and available correspondence between the two parties indicated the presence of a conflict. The depth of their friendship can therefore be difficult to determine, but the absence of the CPSU in PCF debates can simply be attributed to the two parties being busy with domestic affairs, and the former also in Afghanistan. The PCF may also have wanted to keep the CPSU at arm's length, as this would harmonize with the PCF's wish to stress its political and now also its ideological independence vis-à-vis the other. Parallel to the dramatic events affecting both the PCF and the CPSU, important changes were beginning to take place within the Soviet leadership.

President Brezhnev had always enjoyed the respect and friendship of the PCF and its leaders – letters sent to him from the PCF testify to this; they would typically begin “Dear comrade Brezhnev,” and continue in an informal but appropriately submissive tone, suggesting the presence of real trust and mutual understanding. French journalists would make references to it, thus underlining the remarkable nature of the PCF's intimate relations with this powerful leader. Speaking of his recent visit to Moscow in January, 1980, Marchais was asked whether Monsieur Brezhnev was well, if he was “*en forme.*” Marchais promptly replied; “Leonid Brezhnev spoke for an hour and a half. He was well.”<sup>215</sup> This was not entirely true, however. Brezhnev's health was deteriorating, and the daily run of the country had gradually been left to other members of the CPSU Politburo, such as Prime Minister Kosygin, who died himself only a few months later, in December 1980, having left office two months earlier due to ill

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<sup>214</sup> *L'Humanité* and *L'Humanité Dimanche*, July-August, 1980

<sup>215</sup> *L'Humanité*, 12.01.80

health. Brezhnev followed suit in 1982, but not before having buried Mikhail Suslov, who together with Ponomarev and Kirilenko featured most often in the PCF's documents, and who appeared to have been the most important links between the PCF and the CPSU. Suslov died in January, 1982. This situation – showing all the signs of the end of a generation, as well as that of an era – would trigger cautious apprehension within the PCF leadership, too, especially as the question of Brezhnev's would-be successor was put on the agenda.

### ***In from the cold – the PCF's return to government***

The presidential election in April, 1981 was a huge blow to the PCF and Marchais, its presidential candidate. Robrieux called it “Marchais' historical failure.”<sup>216</sup> Having won only 15, 5 % of the votes in the first round, it was the worst result for a PCF candidate since the end of the Second World War.<sup>217</sup> It soon became clear that what in the past would have been assured communist votes had been captured by the PS and its candidate Mitterrand.

Interesting to note was also the high number of non-voters in traditionally red areas – areas commonly known for their ability to mobilize the electorate.<sup>218</sup> At a Central Committee meeting on 28 April, Charles Fiterman presented – with an air of resignation – his report on the first round of the election; “It is evident that presently, in France, political conditions do not exist so that a majority of voters appoint a communist to the Presidency of the Republic.” After much subsequent debate, and after declaring that he really was not worth the support, the Central Committee then agreed – at the instigation of the Politburo – to publish its endorsement for Mitterrand's bid for the presidency.<sup>219</sup> This last point is important, as it seems to contradict earlier suspicions, based on rumours and accusations, that the PCF before the second round of the election had called for its electorate to support Mitterrand's opponent – even though Mitterrand was the closest political alternative to Marchais. Mitterrand's opponent was sitting President Giscard d'Estaing, and the PCF's bitterness over the PS' betrayal would have been deep indeed, had it decided to give its support to a president whose “austerity policy” the PCF had fought for years.

On 10 May François Mitterrand won the presidential election, becoming the fourth president of the Fifth Republic and the first socialist leader of France since the legendary Léon Blum. As was his right as president, Mitterrand promptly dissolved the National Assembly and

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<sup>216</sup> Robrieux, 1982

<sup>217</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995:392

<sup>218</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995:392

<sup>219</sup> Central Committee, 28.04.81

called a general election. The PS went on to take a staggering 285 seats in the '81 *législatives* and won the national majority with 58 % of the votes. The consequence of this no less than sensational result for France, to the PCF, was the strangest events yet to emerge from the catastrophic aftermath of Afghanistan. The Central Committee stated on 15 May that, "...the new President benefits from a favourable prejudice on the part of all those who aspire to change."<sup>220</sup> On the following day, Marchais declared *à la une* – on the front page of *L'Humanité*, that: "We are ready to assume immediately all our governmental responsibilities."<sup>221</sup> Soon it became clear that the PS had invited the PCF to government talks. What transpired at these negotiations, were not disclosed, but Courtois and Lazar point out that the PCF had to agree to several strict terms, as it was in no position to state any demands that the PS did not wish to agree to.<sup>222</sup> The joint statement released to the press on 23 June, after weeks of talks, revealed the scale of the concessions made by the PCF. Of the terms agreed, the PCF fulfilled one of them the very next day, when Marchais said to the *L'Humanité*: "We say, from now on, that the Soviet troops should withdraw from Afghanistan." He went on to declare, not concealing the air of this being a forced statement, that a withdrawal was the wish and in the interest of the Afghan government, the Soviets themselves, the PS – and now, the PCF, too.<sup>223</sup> The PCF was given four ministerial posts in the new socialist government led by Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy. Only one of the four men, Charles Fiterman, member of the Politburo, was from the PCF's top leadership. It is noteworthy that Marchais himself was kept out of the cabinet.

### ***Attempt at catharsis – Marchais' speech to the Central Committee***

Returning to government for the first time since 1947 had a deep impact on the PCF. At its first meeting after the government talks were concluded, Marchais gave a speech to the Central Committee. Its transcription is a remarkable read.<sup>224</sup> Considering Marchais' own propensity for pretentiousness – echoing the rhetoric of his party – the speech incorporates rare elements both of self-reflection and acquired understanding with the benefit of hindsight, mixed with the odd twinge of what can also be described as regret. "I think," he began, "of certain of our decisions made relating to international events, like those of Afghanistan." He

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<sup>220</sup> Central Committee, 15.05.81

<sup>221</sup> *L'Humanité*, 16.05.81

<sup>222</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995:393-394

<sup>223</sup> *L'Humanité*, 24.06.81

<sup>224</sup> See appendix I for French and English versions of the relevant excerpts from this transcription. Central Committee, 25.-26.06.81

went on to summarize which principle the PCF had based its decision on – with the right of every people to ask an ally for aid outweighing the principle of non-interference. However, as Marchais was quick to point out, the decision had been made “...naturally without pretending to judge the details of the events.” Here, Marchais seemed to admit that the PCF had made its decision not knowing all the facts on the issue, but at the same time, he waived responsibility for the decision itself. Marchais’ use of words also suggests that he regretted the decision, but implied that the PCF could not have been expected to fully comprehend the situation – who did? Marchais’ catharsis lost some of its potency as the leader himself did not address his own personal conduct in the affair. Ironically, Marchais – who had championed the invasion so warmly on live television – now echoed the warning words of Plissonnier in early January, 1980, when the PCF leadership in adhering to Plissonnier’s opinion on the subject, had stressed the importance of neither to support an invasion it clearly found problematic, nor was it to condemn the actions of a political ally. Marchais’ words, then, would suggest that the PCF’s attitude had never changed – that it had always, despite supporting the invasion publically, disapproved of it and the consequences it could have for the party.

Marchais continued; “... the moment when we were confronted with this problem practically coincided with the highest level meeting we had ever had with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.” He lamented the confusion caused by “...the proximity of the events in Afghanistan and this meeting,” which served as a “...manipulation of our position on Afghanistan and the presentation of our meeting with the CPSU as a sign of our party’s total realignment with the Soviet position, which is exactly contrary to the meaning of the common communiqué.” So far Marchais did not seem willing to shoulder any responsibility on behalf of the party for the decision it had made and Marchais had cemented – in the eyes of both the party’s rank-and-file, as well as the French public. Once the PCF had made its decision, it had stood by it, and found strength and justification in the criticisms levelled at it. It had sought to distance itself from Soviet policy and in particular the invasion. But the PCF had clearly not wished to distance itself from the Soviet Union. If that were the goal, it would have been for the PCF merely to condemn the invasion, and the French bourgeois media and its right-winged politicians would have been pleased. The PCF did not stand by the Soviet Union to be popular. It gained nothing from doing it. It simply stood by an ally when nobody else did. It may not have been morally right, it was certainly not politically wise, but it was an expression of consistency and genuine dedication, however misplaced. Furthermore, ever believing in the

ideology, both Marchais and his party appeared truly saddened by the lack of attention bestowed on the PCF-CPSU communiqué, considering what an unprecedented success it represented, not only to the PCF, but to the entire communist movement. Marchais expressed his hopes that the communiqué would form a basis on which new and more positive relations could be built.

Up to this point, Marchais' speech can be judged as no more than an exercise in realpolitik, a clever introspective manoeuvre designed to re-establish political trust now that the PCF had become a governing party. It could also be that Marchais felt it was necessary to clarify the circumstances of the Afghanistan situation a year and a half earlier – as he was not happy with its outcome for the PCF. It is important to note that Marchais at no point said that the decision to support the Soviet Union was *not* the right decision; he only indicated that the PCF would most likely have chosen differently, had the circumstances been different. This would seem to suggest the idea that the PCF's decision to support the invasion of Afghanistan was a mistake, a glitch that ought not to have happened. Considering Marchais' own enthusiasm and his party's lengthy debate on the matter, this does not seem likely. It is much more plausible that Marchais instead, with the benefit of hindsight, regretted the decision the PCF had made, and this is how he chose to express it.

The next issue raised by Marchais, however, would suggest that Marchais sought to correct critics of the party who believed that as well as politically standing by the Soviet Union, the PCF had also compromised its ideological stance.

“We see it, during this whole period between the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU in 1956 and the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress of our party in 1976, [that] our party has found itself facing more and more important demands of bringing forth new answers to new problems (...) In these twenty years, the world has changed a lot. First and foremost France. (...) And what has equally changed, too, little by little, [is] the situation, the reality of the socialist countries.” Marchais had mentioned the changes in socialist countries before, but not in a wider perspective. As late as 1978, Marchais had declared Soviet socialism – despite a few bumps in the road – to be a global force for good, for progress and peace. Now, he seemed to have reached a deeper understanding. He concluded that “our party has not drawn, from that moment, the necessary lessons of the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU.” The sentence was underlined in the transcription – and one can only imagine the effect it had on the members of the Central Committee. 1956 was the year the post-Stalinist era was initiated, hailing the beginnings of de-Stalinization. Marchais clearly wished to repeat his belief in his party's

ideological independence, as well as strengthening the foundations for collaboration with the PS, with whom it had now entered government. If one feels inclined to cynicism, one could put forth the argument here that Marchais acted according to a well-known phenomenon discussed by Courtois and Lazar; that the PCF's tolerance and democratic efforts grew with domestic strength, and weakened in the face of resistance. Those were the times it sought refuge in the Soviet fold, and the Soviets' influence was at its strongest.<sup>225</sup>

The conclusion is clear – and reveals the complexity of the PCF's position, pinned as it was between the ideological demands that a decision must be in keeping with Marxist-Leninist doctrines, on whose legitimacy the PCF placed the moral worth of its decisions, and the party's political commitments – in this case international loyalties of which no bond was stronger than to the CPSU. This loyalty did not come without sacrifice, however, and situations – like the Afghan invasion – would force decisions made on the basis of *realpolitik*. This dilemma – made stronger by the PCF's inherent use of ideology to justify its decisions – is poignantly illustrated by Marchais' own evaluation of the Afghanistan issue: First, he all but admitted to regret the decision the PCF had made in January, 1980. It had been a disaster for the PCF in terms of support, and it had been a deeply ungrateful decision, yielding not one positive result for the party. It may sound like a paradox, then, that Marchais went on to deny that the PCF had made the wrong decision. However, this indirectly helps to explain why the PCF made its decision. It had simply judged it the best course of action, based on the available evidence and in honour of the party's long standing commitment to the Soviet comrades. Marchais' speech also reveals that the greatest cause for regret was the timing of the visit to Moscow – as it stole attention from the successful outcome of the visit itself – not the actual decision.

This would seem to give an explanation as to why the PCF hesitantly chose to support the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Marchais' enthusiastic praise for the invasion strengthened a view of the PCF as a Moscow puppet already shared by many Frenchmen. The PCF then cemented that view by doing its best to justify the invasion – as it had to, because it was unthinkable that such a decision could not have an ideological foundation. This conclusion still leaves us with an important question: how? Which structures allowed a primarily unwanted decision to be made?

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<sup>225</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995:368

## Chapter 7. The PCF, 1980-81 – Stalinism in practice

Although far from all of the PCF's critics throughout 1980 and into 1981 accused the French communists of being Stalinists – showing their true colours as fifth columnists of Moscow – serious questions were asked. How sincere had the PCF been in its dedication to democracy? How willing – how able – had the party been to challenge its own principles of party rule? How were decisions made in a party still presided over by leaders of the Stalinist era? The PCF had once been a Stalinist party, that was clear. It had obligingly implemented all the Stalinist structures emanating from Moscow in the Comintern era – structures that had established the PCF as an undemocratic monolithic organization. These structures proved difficult to challenge, by the PCF leaders collectively, or by individual members. In any analysis of a communist party, we find that it is not only its ideology that dictates policy – it is as much about the structures of a party, and the methods of decision-making – methods often as established and unassailable as the ideological principles themselves. And the most basic and longest-living principle of party rule was that of *democratic centralism*.

### The Stalinist system – democratic centralism

From the earliest beginnings of the Comintern, emphasis had been put on party unity as the most important basis for party efficiency, and the principle of democratic centralism as the tool to achieve party unity. The idea was to incorporate the freedom of discussion into a system of unity and discipline ensuring that the party did not degenerate into a “debating society.”<sup>226</sup> Condition twelve of the Comintern's legendary “Twenty-one Conditions” underlined the necessity of democratic centralism thus; “...the Communist Party will be able to fulfil its duty only if it is organized in the most centralized way possible and governed by iron discipline...”<sup>227</sup> The principle of democratic centralism would forever after define world communism as the manifestation of the ever-present legacy of Stalinism. Tiersky found the principle of democratic centralism so essential to and defining of communist party rule still in the 1970s, that he placed it at the core of what he called “ordinary Stalinism.”<sup>228</sup> The principle was put in place to ensure the effective implementation of party decisions – by stressing unity within a party leadership as a key to unity of action. The PCF was an ardent observer of the

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<sup>226</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “democratic centralism,” *webservice* 8.

<sup>227</sup> McDermott and Agnew, 1996:228

<sup>228</sup> Tiersky, 1985:7

principle, and in Marchais, democratic centralism had one of its greatest champions. Despite the expressed wishes to change the ideological direction of the party, it soon became clear that the structures of the PCF did not sway easily to change.

First, in hailing “the democratic path to socialism,” the PCF faced a challenge with regards to its own decision-making processes. To the PCF, democratic centralism was still the most important principle ruling party debate. Leninist in origin, Stalinist in its corruption, used and abused by communists the world over, hailed and condemned in equal measure, democratic centralism remained at the base of PCF debates. Marchais gave a speech on the necessity and virtues of democratic centralism as late as 1976, addressing the newly elected Central Committee in March of that year. Speaking to both the veterans and the newcomers, he stated that “...quand les discussions sont terminées, alors évidemment prises, et bien la loi, c’est d’appliquer. C’est d’appliquer pour tous et de le faire avec beaucoup de fermeté.”<sup>229</sup> He went on to remind the Central Committee of its responsibility to the party, and that the Committee keep in mind the privilege of sitting down and discussing policy for two whole days at a time, upon which it would make decisions that would affect the whole party. “The rest of the Party,” Marchais pointed out, “it (...) will have one page in *L’Humanité* of the report presented by comrade Piquet.” Finally, Marchais declared that “...the Central Committee should be a united bloc, a bloc welded like one single man.”

Secondly, only two years later, after having committed itself to the democratic and modernizing project of the Eurocommunist collaboration, the dedication to democratic centralism did not seem to have lost any impetus in the eyes of the PCF leaders. In April, 1978, after the PCF’s disastrous election results, Marchais called upon his comrades in the leadership to continue to fight the good fight. He declared that democratic centralism was essential to achieve a strengthening of the party: “Reinforce the Party, that means (...) to ensure the proper functioning of democratic centralism and perfect it. It is not by chance that the attacks against our party concentrate on democratic centralism: questioning it would be the surest means to achieve this weakening, this elimination of battle potential of the Party.” Marchais went on to defend the great collective and democratic traditions and routines of the PCF. He hailed what he called a “characteristic of our time” – namely the “democratic

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<sup>229</sup> “...when the discussions are over, then obviously made, and so the law, one must enforce it. Everyone must enforce it and do it with much firmness.” Central Committee, 30.-31.03.76



tendency of the masses.” However, Marchais warned; “...To have the greatest concern for the democratic life of the party is one thing; dismantling the party in the name of a petty bourgeois, anarchistic wave is something else.” Before reminding the Central Committee that the PCF was a revolutionary, vanguard party, he returned to the issue of democratic centralism, where he, according to the report presented to the Central Committee, stayed for eight pages. It is clear that the idea of democratic centralism was close to Marchais’ heart, and that he truly believed in its importance to revolutionary struggle and efficiency. It is equally safe to assume that Marchais believed in democratic centralism as Lenin had originally meant it to be applied – removing the possibility to question a decided matter ensured action, Lenin had argued, and as long as a party leadership agreed on the important issues, everything else were minor issues who could only serve to create conflict if debated. However, as Marchais’ report reveals, the PCF leader did not fully convince as a democrat, either. Likening a democratization of the party to an act that was at the same time anarchistic and petty-bourgeois, as he in effect did, is an example of a rhetorical exercise usually employed in order to discourage opponents to voice their arguments for fear of being perceived as extremists. Marchais was an intelligent and eloquent public speaker, and he succeeded in creating a plausible scenario in which democratic centralism became the means to obtain true democracy.

It was equally clear that the PCF did not automatically approve of other forms of debate. A quotation from a report on the preparations to the European communist conference in 1976, serves to illustrate this: “the “consensus” serves to reach a compromise at the lowest level. (...) We consider that it is not good to impose on the revolutionary movement a method of diplomatic negotiation such as the consensus.”<sup>230</sup> The author of the report, Jean Kanapa, revealed his deep distrust of the debating techniques applied by the communist preparation committees, of which consensus – defined here as unanimity – had been the prime basis for agreement. In analyzing the failure of the European communists to agree on an offensive stance, a manifest rife with uncompromising rhetoric in the language of the idealistic revolutionary who does not shun a fight, nor hesitates in placing blame where blame is due, Kanapa brought the Central Committee’s attention to the deplorable, petty bourgeois method of consensus. Kanapa, who has been described by biographers as a “true Stalinist,”<sup>231</sup> not

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<sup>230</sup> Central Committee, 21.-22.06.76

<sup>231</sup> Boujut, 2004 and Robrieux, 1982, et al.

necessarily as much in terms of his loyalty to Stalin as his loyalty to the latter's system and principles, had no difficulty convincing the Central Committee of his discontentment. There was, in the PCF, an overall sense of the historic importance of democratic centralism – it was a very direct link to the early days of optimistic, revolutionary struggle.

Tiersky pointed out that democratic centralism survived both the PCF's attempts at socialism in French colours and its efforts vis-à-vis Eurocommunism,<sup>232</sup> when he claimed that the decline suffered by the PCF in the late 1970s was "...in fact the historic decline of orthodox communism as an ideology. What is left is orthodox democratic centralism, but only as a practice."<sup>233</sup> The PCF had *redefined* the principle of democratic centralism, as well as placing it at the heart of the Stalinist influences over the party. Originally meant to be a party tool to ensure greater efficiency in the decision-making process, without denying party members the opportunity to voice their opinions, it had become a virtue in itself, an end rather than a means, and an instrument to stifle debate rather than encourage it. Finally, the PCF had reduced disagreement – including rational, useful and necessary disagreement – to a crime, a traitorous act. This would seem to apply regardless of the perceived dissidents' *actual* opinions, or whether these opinions challenged the leadership's decisions, or its interpretations of communist doctrine. To be right was to adhere to the principle of democratic centralism, and to obey the principle, was to be right. The PCF and its leader Marchais proved to be so dedicated to the principle that it was not discarded until 1993, having outlived both the Soviet Union and traditional Leninist thought.<sup>234</sup>

*"..un des ceux qui ont eu tort d'avoir eu raison trop tôt."*<sup>235</sup>

### **Stalinism in practice – the Fiszbin Affair**

There were times when the PCF's practical application of democratic centralism would resonate well beyond the confines of the party. When the leadership made controversial decisions, often regarded as running contrary to the interests of the PCF itself and of its members, both leaders and members of the rank-and-file would take their grievances to the leadership, or worse, to the press. One can assume that one of the reasons why some

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<sup>232</sup> Tiersky, 1985:140

<sup>233</sup> Tiersky, 1985:162

<sup>234</sup> *Le Monde*, 18.11.97; Biffaud, *Un secrétaire général à contretemps*. Websource

<sup>235</sup> "...one of those who were mistaken in being right too soon." Web blog of Roger Fajnzylberg. *Internet*, 7.

disgruntled members of the PCF took their leadership debates in the national media was simply because they could not make themselves heard elsewhere.

One of the elements of party rule in which Stalinist traditions prevailed well beyond the Stalinist policies of the PCF, was the party's stance on *dissidence*. The PCF was uncompromising and unforgiving in its treatment of and view on dissidents. Traitors of the party were expelled without mercy, often, depending on the dissident's position within the party, following a long trial in which the defendant's life and activities were put under scrutiny and thereafter condemned. Though the era of Stalinist purges was over, the PCF's dealings with dissidents serve as an illustration of the party system that every member was subjected to, making the PCF in essence a structure in which the individual (save for the leader himself) was not in a position to criticize or challenge party policy.

The "Fiszbin Affair," by some also referred to as the "Paris Affair,"<sup>236</sup> is a case in point. It illustrates the tensions within the PCF leadership around the time of the Afghanistan invasion, as well as gives a more general insight into the inner workings of the party when it was faced with members who challenged – i.e. violated – the principle of party unity. The affair began soon after the 1978 elections, when Henri Fiszbin, head of the PCF's Paris section – the largest and most influential party section – in addressing the national leadership, began expressing his concern – and that of his comrades in Paris – over an apparent dissonance between the political realities of France, and the political responses of the national leadership. He repeated his concerns at a Central Committee meeting in April, 1978. Fiszbin later recalled that "[t]his was the first time that certain members of the Central Committee had found themselves in the presence of criticisms or disagreements."<sup>237</sup> The conflict escalated. Fiszbin, who had support from many of his Parisian comrades, was summoned to a Central Committee meeting in January, 1979. Exactly what transpired at this meeting remains unclear. According to the PCF leadership, the meeting was meant to clarify certain issues with Fiszbin, ask him if he needed help with his section, and expressing the Committee's concern that an investigation into the section might be needed – in order to uncover the sources of the discontentment.<sup>238</sup> According to Fiszbin, he was attacked from all fronts, subjected to the

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<sup>236</sup> Tiersky, 1985:146

<sup>237</sup> Tiersky, 1985: 148

<sup>238</sup> Report on the Central Committee meeting, 11.01.79. Written by Plissonnier. CCCP, dossier "Affaires Fiszbin."

“four classic, Stalinist cliché accusation: “laxism,” “opportunism,” “lack of resoluteness” in defending the party’s line, and “lack of proper class spirit.”<sup>239</sup>

The meeting ended with Fiszbin stepping down as leader of the Paris section, and although he kept his seat on the Central Committee until he was officially expelled from the PCF in October, 1981, he did not attend the meetings, and eventually he gave up all his duties. His position as head of the Paris section of the PCF was kept in the family, so to speak. Henri Malberg, the “militant worker” and hero of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress designated to be Fiszbin’s replacement, was his first cousin.<sup>240</sup>

It would be wrong to say that Fiszbin was *not* purged. According to the strict communist definition of dissidence, however, Fiszbin *was* guilty, and that of a crime the PCF could not tolerate. Furthermore, he chose to voluntarily relinquish his position as head of the Paris section. This last aspect of the conflict is important, as it was from that moment that the Stalinist methods of dealing with dissidence truly began to make their presence known. On the one hand, the PCF played down the conflict by claiming that Fiszbin had asked the leadership as early as in September, 1977, to be relieved of some of his tasks, as his deteriorating health demanded it. Tiersky called Fiszbin’s illness “irrelevant” – and argued that in the process against Fiszbin and the Paris section, the PCF “adopted a classic hypocrisy of the Great Purge” by evoking the notion that “those who question the party’s line *exclude themselves* from the party...”<sup>241</sup> This argument is strengthened by Paul Laurent when he reminded the Central Committee that the PCF leadership had never asked Fiszbin to step down as head of the Paris section, he had chosen to do so out of his own free will.

On the other hand, once Fiszbin had made clear his disapproval of the PCF leadership, the latter reacted with the fury of former days. At a Central Committee meeting in November, 1979, Marchais outlined the contents of a letter Fiszbin had written to him, in which the latter stated: “You are incapable of resolving the problems of our time on the union. You are incapable of solving the problems of socialism and of liberty.” Disregarding that it was a monumental task Fiszbin accused the PCF leadership of not being able to solve, nothing suggests that there was any love lost between Fiszbin and his former communist brethren.

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<sup>239</sup> Tiersky, 1985:149

<sup>240</sup> Robrieux, 1982:494

<sup>241</sup> Tiersky, 1985:150-152

Fiszbin may have felt both misunderstood and betrayed by the PCF in seeing his loyalty called into question in this manner. The feelings were mutual.

It is difficult to ascertain exactly what Fiszbin said that would enrage the PCF leaders. According to the logic of democratic centralism, simply voicing disagreement may have been enough. Furthermore, Fiszbin was not above answering back when accused, as the bitter accounts of the January meeting in the Central Committee testify to. Marchais was deeply enraged at the insolence of Fiszbin, and he made his feelings known to the Central Committee at a meeting in November, 1979. His words reveal how badly the PCF leader reacted to resistance: “We, we are loyal. He was not loyal. He deceived the leadership of the Party. He deceived his comrades in the Politburo. He deceived everyone. As I have rarely seen in my life. I told the Politburo that the attitude of Henri Fiszbin helped me to understand how one could resort to methods belonging to Stalinism.”<sup>242</sup> Marchais’ feeling of being deceived no doubt strengthened in March 1980. The PCF and its leader were subjected to the most intense attacks from the media, and Fiszbin published a book relating the entire unflattering affair to the public; *Les Bouches s’ouvrent*. The timing could not have been more favourable to Fiszbin, or more damning to the PCF.

The Fiszbin Affair, which led to a wave of dissidents leaving the PCF in Fiszbin’s wake, illustrates the futility of individual initiative faced with the might of the PCF’s structures for political decision and its immunity for change. It strengthens the argument that the decisions made by the PCF did not necessarily reflect neither the beliefs of the rank-and-file, or all the members of the leadership. On the contrary it can be concluded that far from being ideologically justified in its decisions, the PCF leaders were left in a free position to make decisions based not on its expressed Marxist-Leninist foundations, but on political considerations answering to current affairs and events of immediate interest to the party. Finally, it contributes to an understanding of the totalitarian aspect of the PCF, and its leadership in particular.

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<sup>242</sup> CCCP, dossier “*Affaires Fiszbin*.”

*"Le Parti de Georges Marchais"*<sup>243</sup>

### **Stalinist rule – the authority of the one – and the few**

Already in 1920, the Comintern had stated that the leadership of a communist party had to be "...strong, authoritative, and endowed with the fullest powers."<sup>244</sup> Traditionally, the PCF had been led by men whose tenure lasted decades, and whose position and person eventually acquired an almost mythical aura – not unlike the cults that built around the Soviet leaders. The PCF leaders, perhaps unconsciously, identified themselves with their Soviet counterparts, both in terms of relative importance to their parties, but also through personal friendships and mutual respect. The legendary Maurice Thorez' reign nearly coincided with that of Stalin and the PCF was greatly influenced by Thorez' connections with both the Soviet Union and its great leader.

Georges Marchais – though in many aspects a hardcore Stalinist – was a man of the Brezhnev era, moulded in the same image as the Soviet apparatchiks. He was an uncompromising leader, dedicated to democratic centralism and to his friendship with Brezhnev, arrogant in public debate; he was surrounded by loyal comrades of the same convictions. In reading the PCF's documents covering the late 1970s and early 1980s, a picture emerges of a near untouchable leader. Marchais – whose ascent to power remains clouded in mystery, but according to Courtois and Lazar was a result of direct Soviet influence and happened at Brezhnev's instigation<sup>245</sup> – was an old-school communist, an orthodox Stalinist whose reign was described by Tiersky as "erratic" and the main reason for the PCF's eventual downfall, according to Robrieux, Courtois, and Lazar, amongst others.<sup>246</sup>

Several aspects of the PCF's actions and reactions illustrate the position Marchais held within the party, and the importance with which he came to be regarded by his own members, as well as by the French public as head of the PCF. When the personal attacks on Marchais were at their most violent, in early 1980, the PCF leader was fiercely defended by his comrades in the PCF leadership. Having nevertheless been forced to publically denounce the wildest accusations, Plissonnier took the opportunity at a Central Committee meeting to remind his

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<sup>243</sup> "The Party of Georges Marchais." Robrieux, 1982:431

<sup>244</sup> McDermott and Agnew, 1996:228

<sup>245</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995: 346-347

<sup>246</sup> Tiersky, 1985:136; Robrieux, 1982: 405; Courtois and Lazar, 1995:388

comrades of Marchais' personal integrity, saying of his leader; "As to his personal life, it is that of millions of Frenchmen: simple, just, [and] honest. (...) His life is quite simply that of a communist: absolutely clair."<sup>247</sup> His words were echoed by one of his comrades, Mireille Bertrand, when she declared; "...all the members of the Central Committee hold in high esteem and greatly appreciate the General Secretary of the Party."<sup>248</sup> Marchais was the face of the PCF, he was its presidential candidate and its policy personified. When he was subjected to heavy criticisms in 1980, instead of asking whether Marchais' actions may have contributed to the situation the party found itself in, whether he had in fact damaged the party, messages of support and sympathy poured in from all corners of the PCF.

Marchais led the PCF for 22 years. British daily *The Independent* summed up Marchais thus, upon his death in 1997;

"The image of a working-class Parisian lad, outspoken, aggressive, cocksure, was cultivated as a style. Marchais was the most zealous of activists and the most verbally vigorous of his contemporaries, capable of histrionics, turning on floods of tears like an old-time music-hall performer. He applied the Party's line with aggression and agility and the turns and twists of Communist policy were executed with exemplary loyalty."<sup>249</sup>

It is important to note the influence of the rest of the leadership, too. There was Paul Laurent, the quiet but extremely dedicated party functionary – loyal and methodical. There was also Kanapa – described as the grey eminence of the PCF – the ideologue and Stalinist cadre, and a firm believer in the power of the professional revolutionary. There was Fiterman, the crown prince, and Gremetz, the young and somewhat hot-headed idealist. And then there was Plissonnier, the kingmaker, and the power behind the throne. Plissonnier had been by Marchais' side since the latter's ascent to power, and served as his closest advisor. Judging by his presence in the PCF documents, Plissonnier had a hand in practically all matters that passed through the leadership. He also had the daily run of the party when Marchais was indisposed, or abroad. For this reason, he rarely joined PCF delegations to foreign communist parties.

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<sup>247</sup> Central Committee, 21.-22-01.80

<sup>248</sup> Central Committee, 21.-22.-01.80

<sup>249</sup> *The Independent*, on the death of Marchais. *Websource*

Finally, there was Jean Jérôme.<sup>250</sup> He serves as a good illustration of the PCF as being somewhat different from the other political parties of France. He is mentioned only once in all the documents covering the PCF leadership between 1975 and 1981, and though he was a member of the party, he had no official position in its top leadership. A man of shadows – there is hardly any literature on his life – he was described by Courtois and Lazar as PCF’s “man of finance” from 1945 to his death.<sup>251</sup> Marchais made a brief reference to him in 1976, in his speech to the newly elected Central Committee: “...in our Central Committee sessions the comrade Jean Jérôme has participated regularly for many years, even if he is not a member. Thus, I propose to the Central Committee that, as in the past, Jean Jérôme, for reasons of his work, continues to attend the sessions of the Central Committee without this being made public.”<sup>252</sup> It would seem plausible that Jérôme was in charge of the money from Moscow, as well as financial transactions to and from other Eastern European countries. The respect he was offered by the PCF’s leaders would suggest that Jérôme also acted as an advisor to or an unofficial leader of the party. Furthermore, more or less fanciful stories appoint him *l’œil de Moscou* – the “eye of Moscow” in the PCF, or even a KGB agent. All these stories – however untrue they may be – illustrate the imaginings he inspired, and contribute to the perception of the PCF as a mysterious, cult-like party, ruled by unwritten laws and invisible power structures.

The PCF was still in the beginning of the 1980s an example of a party whose monolithic structures – effectively ensuring the run of the party regardless of policy – were still influenced by and strengthened the authority of the leaders, as well as their systemic possibility to dictate policy. Marchais’ party presence and hands-on styled leadership, as well as the authority enjoyed by his closest advisors and comrades in the Politburo, echo the power of their Soviet comrades. There is, however, evidence to suggest that the PCF was marked by an even stronger – lingering – totalitarian tradition than the CPSU. Far from being a bold statement, and keeping in mind that the object of this analysis is *not* the decision-making processes of the Soviet communist party, it suffices to mention the process within the Soviet leadership leading up to the invasion of Afghanistan.

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<sup>250</sup> Born into a Polish, Jewish family in 1906, Jérôme’s real name was Michel Feintuch. He assumed the name Jean Jérôme in France during the Second World War, a name he kept after he became a French citizen.

<sup>251</sup> Courtois and Lazar, 1995:150

<sup>252</sup> Transcription of speech by Georges Marchais. Central Committee, 30.-31.03.76



Westad described how the decision to go into Afghanistan was ultimately made by a handful of Soviet leaders. The members of the CPSU Central Committee all signed the document expressing the party's intention – but one anomaly makes its presence known. President Brezhnev, although no doubt aware of the topic of discussion, and its most likely outcome, was not present at this crucial meeting. His illness gave good grounds for excuse, but his most natural substitute, however – Soviet premier Kosygin – was not there, either. It would seem as though the Soviet Union effectively declared war without its top leaders! Taking into consideration the personal involvement of Marchais in all important decisions of the PCF, and his hold over the party leadership, it seems safe to conclude that – given a comparable situation – a similar scenario would have been unthinkable. Marchais still evoked the young rather than the ageing Brezhnev. The totalitarian tradition of PCF rule, reminiscent of Stalin rather than the immovable system of the Soviet bureaucrats, is excellently summed up by Robrieux in his description of party power; “Tout passe par Georges Marchais.”<sup>253</sup>

### **Marxist-Leninist theory and the cult of Stalin**

Towards the end of the 1970s, the PCF stayed true to the basic doctrines of Marxist-Leninism whilst simultaneously proclaiming its right to amend these doctrines according to the needs and interests of the PCF and its electorate. Ultimately, the dedication to this expression of ideological independence proved somewhat ephemeral. The structural reasons – steeped in unchangeable Stalinism – have been outlined above. Another reason is, paradoxically, linked to Stalin himself.

It's perhaps too bold a statement to say that the admiration for Stalin was still an aspect of the PCF. But the respect was still there, even as the 1980s drew closer. Stalin, many communists believed, was despite his flaws, his brutality and his crimes, a great leader – who had shown strength in the face of dissidents, Trotskyites, Nazis and Americans – and who had presided over the Soviet Union at its most powerful and awe-inspiring. A communist simply had to relate to Stalin and his influence – and the PCF seemed for a long time unwilling to challenge the man, for fear of destroying the myth. This was much due to the PCF leaders. Lazar points out the revealing paradox that the PCF's first real disagreement with the CPSU was directly linked to de-Stalinization; the vast majority of the Thorez-led PCF delegation at the CPSU

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<sup>253</sup> “Everything passes by Georges Marchais.” Robrieux, 1982: 470

20<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1956 disapproved of Khrushchev's attempts at denouncing Stalin's crimes.<sup>254</sup> Boujut relates an anecdote in which soon after the Congress, it was discussed by Jean Kanapa and a comrade, Arthur Kriegel: "*We performed terrorism, because we judged that it was necessary. We have still not reached communism because of it!*" remarked Kriegel. Kanapa watches him coolly: "*Speak for yourself!*"...<sup>255</sup>

Kanapa's attitude echoed the core of communism's perceived legitimacy. He truly believed in communism, and he equally believed that the policy championed by the PCF was communism in its practical application. This evokes the presence of Stalin in a profound way. When the Soviet archives in Moscow were opened to historians, many of them were surprised to find that Stalin, despite having corrupted the revolutionary ideas of Marxist-Leninism into a monolithic colossus of reactionary bureaucratism, was a convinced communist.<sup>256</sup> The obvious question of course was what kind of communism – the communism also shared by the PCF – did he believe in? The answer is equally obvious; he believed in the Soviet Union – communism's first, real, and defining political and social experiment. This poignant observation echoes the true depth of Stalin's legacy within the PCF. It was not just the system he left behind – a system that the PCF had incorporated and stayed loyal to since its founding – it was also a historical bond in which were tied up the beliefs, the history, and the friendships of the PCF, its efforts and its aspirations, as well as its ability to change, reform, and see itself in relation to other communist parties and to French society.

In analyzing the PCF's quest for a more democratic organization, it is easy to assume that that was what its leadership wanted. But democracy was in its essence seen as a bourgeois invention, ineffective against capitalism and supportive of the follies of the masses. Its leaders' almost scornful remarks on issues such as consensus and total democratization would suggest that they may not have been prepared to see the "...political cultural renaissance" through to the end. Not necessarily only out of fear, as Tiersky argued, but because they simply did not regard it as of vital interest to the party.<sup>257</sup> In 1978, historian and PCF member Jean Ellenstein summed up the PCF's historical dilemma by declaring that the French Communist Party "...will have to own up to its past mistakes more openly and recognize that

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<sup>254</sup> Lazar, 2003: 37

<sup>255</sup> Boujut, 2004: 97

<sup>256</sup> See Pechatnov, 2001, et al.

<sup>257</sup> Tiersky, 1985: 137

it is having problems doing this.” He went on to pose a hypothetical question: “Why hasn’t it [the PCF] clearly admitted the influence of Stalinism in the PCF’s history, the consequences of the unconditional defence of the Soviet Union and the membership of the Comintern?”<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Cited in Menashe in (ed) Boggs and Plotke, 1980:305

## Chapter 8. Conclusion

It is clear that the PCF between 1976 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December, 1979, went through a process of gradually seeking ideological independence from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union – its long-time ally and friend within the international communist movement. The process started a conflict between the two parties, and their relations deteriorated. The reason for the conflict was the PCF's wish for the CPSU's recognition of divergence – i.e. acceptance of ideological differences between communist parties. To this effect, the PCF was inspired by the Eurocommunist project – whose aspirations for liberalization and democratization of the Western European communist parties were echoed by the PCF's own beliefs, as was demonstrated by the doctrinal changes made by the PCF at its 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress in 1976. The PCF, experiencing a strengthening of its position in this time – both domestically due to its collaboration with the French Socialist Party, and within the Eurocommunist movement – also used the Eurocommunist project as leverage against the CPSU to assert its bargaining position vis-à-vis the Soviet comrades.

However, events did not unfold as anticipated – or hoped for. The PCF's domestic position worsened as the collaboration with the socialists collapsed before the elections in 1978, and the profound differences of opinion between the PCF and the leader party of the Eurocommunists, the Italian Communist Party, were not easily overlooked when outlining strategies for a common policy. It also became clear that the very structures of the PCF itself, its leadership, decision-making processes and organization, were still of a Stalinist nature – undemocratic, monolithic, and practically immune to change. Parallel to these events, PCF-CPSU relations gradually began to mend. A month before a high-level meeting between the two parties, the PCF succeeded in its quest for recognition of divergence – effectively an acceptance of ideological differences – leaving the PCF to more freely interpret communist doctrine whilst still retaining its political bonds with the CPSU. As this would leave the PCF free to distance itself from decisions made by the CPSU that the PCF found to be in breach with its own interpretation of communist thought – and given the commitment to democracy expressed by the PCF since the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress – one would suppose the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to be a prime opportunity for the PCF to make a decision faithful to these considerations. It did not. The simple reason was, I have argued, that the PCF chose to

support the Soviet Union not because it approved of the invasion, but because it chose to stand by an ally in what it deemed to be a single, isolated political decision.

The PCF's decision to support the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, therefore, was a political decision, an expression of the PCF's own sense of *realpolitik*. Ideologically, the PCF was clearly against the invasion – it violated the communist principle of pacifism and made a mockery of the principal Marxist idea that aggressive warfare is an imperialist act, committed only by capitalist or feudal states. Afghanistan was an extremely delicate issue for the PCF – the deliberations of the leadership reveal it. The Politburo hesitated, revealing the conflict between ideological principle and political consideration. The PCF foresaw the controversies that would arise should the party choose to stand by the Soviet Union in this matter, and it tried to distance itself from the invasion once it had made its decision. It also sought to convey a very basic truth – namely that the PCF itself had nothing to do with the invasion. The PCF gained nothing from giving its support to the CPSU, on the contrary, it lost the party support and votes, and it was ultimately discredited by the affair. The PCF found itself on the receiving end of criticisms levelled at it from all corners of society, from socialists and conservatives alike, from the peace movements and the patriots. Argued as one of the key events that marked the beginning of the end of the PCF as an important political party in France, the party never quite recovered from the turmoil following in the wake of the Afghanistan affair. For the vast majority of the French people, Afghanistan strengthened a widespread belief; that the PCF's allegiance was, and always had been, to the Soviet Union. Even the Eurocommunist collaboration, which for a few brief years seemed to be successful, could not persuade the PCF to abandon the CPSU and its sphere of influence.

Eurocommunism failed, in almost all aspects, in recommending itself to the PCF. It was deemed by the PCF to go contrary to its alliance with the CPSU – with one of the expressed goals of Eurocommunism being to diminish Soviet influence within the international movement; this could easily be seen as a betrayal of or a belittlement of the First Socialist Country. Furthermore, the Eurocommunist project demanded a level of democracy within each collaborating party's organization – as the overall goal of the project was, in effect, democracy in harmony with communist ideology. The PCF simply could not meet with the required level of openness – any wish for ideological change was effectively stopped by the Stalinist structures of the PCF, by its very party system, which was immune to the structural

changes necessary to implement ideological and political change. There was a genuine wish for democratic change in the PCF which echoed the aspirations of the Eurocommunist. Ultimately, however, it did not triumph. But there were other aspects of Eurocommunism that appealed to the PCF. The party felt important when it was part of the movement, as a large party it had a great deal of impetus, its participation in the collaboration was wanted, and its significance was not lost on the PCF leaders. Furthermore, the Eurocommunists provided the PCF with needed courage and sanctuary at a time when the conflict with the CPSU was at its most intense and disagreeable. Viewed from another angle, the PCF may also simply have wished not to be left out. As one of the great communist parties of Europe, it presumably felt it had to participate in the international projects of the movement, so as to influence decisions and be part of the decision-making processes.

Most importantly, however, as I have argued in this thesis, was the PCF's use of the Eurocommunist collaboration as leverage against the CPSU in its ideological conflict with the Soviet comrades. The conflict was primarily the result of the PCF's wish for greater *ideological* autonomy vis-à-vis the CPSU. This was a consideration based on the PCF's recognition of a necessary change in its approach to democratic and liberal rights. However, the PCF had no wish to break with the CPSU. The alliance between the PCF and the CPSU was a *political* one, based as much on realpolitik as any bilateral alliance. Though the ties between the CPSU and the PCF were originally made in honour of solidarity and ideological fraternity between communists, they had through the decades become cemented in an altogether different fabric. The history shared by the two parties, the political and structural development they had in common, had created a bond neither was willing to sever. The conflict between them, therefore, was marked by a basic misunderstanding. The CPSU feared a split between the two parties, whereas the PCF sought recognition for the differences that did exist between them – and this recognition was important to the PCF because it would allow the relationship with the CPSU to continue. It *wished* for it to continue.

From this conclusion emerges another: The decision to support the invasion of Afghanistan honoured the alliance between the PCF and the CPSU. The PCF leaders may very well have thought that one cannot presume to always agree with an ally, but that does not mean that one should abandon him if he asks for help or support. The alliance had ideological roots, and an interpretation of Marxist-Leninist doctrines were used to justify the invasion but, in essence,

the PCF acted in the spirit of *realpolitik*, understanding that the decision would cause political controversy, and *be* ideologically controversial as it violated basic communist principles, but still made its decision, and stood by it. Two distinctions are important to make here, in order to clarify the picture. First, one must differ between an ideological alignment between the PCF and the CPSU – which I don't believe took place, as the PCF expressed ambiguity and disapproval of the invasion – indicating its awareness that the invasion was a violation of communist principles – and a political alignment – which did take place, as a political alignment between the two parties was already in place. Secondly, one must also differ between the PCF's decision on Afghanistan and that of PCF leader Marchais. The PCF's decision, following debate and hesitation within the leadership – in Marchais' absence! – was marked by the ideological and moral scruples the PCF experienced with regards to the situation it faced. Marchais' public statement on the invasion – especially his appearance on Soviet television – reveals the power of the Stalinist structures within the PCF that the party could not break free from, in this instance personified and illustrated by a leader whose authority was ultimately proved to be above that of the PCF Politburo, and whose own personal statement regarding the Afghanistan issue drowned out the more cautious approach adopted by the PCF Politburo and Central Committee.

Marchais' performance most likely contributed greatly to trigger what can be viewed as the PCF's biggest mistake. Once it had decided to support the Soviet Union, and Marchais had left nobody in doubt as to the sincerity of the PCF's commitment to the CPSU, the party mobilized the press in order to try to convince its own electorate and the French public that the invasion was legitimate, and justifiable. In so doing, the PCF failed to demonstrate the required measure of distance between itself and the unhappy event, and it gave the party's critics more ammunition to use against it, when they claimed that the PCF had realigned with Soviet foreign policy. It is revealing that the PCF's prime reason for supporting the invasion – adhering to the right of any people to call upon an ally for military aid – far from being a communist doctrine is a basic principle in foreign policy; indeed the very *raison d'être* of an organization so disagreeable to the PCF as NATO. The PCF's actions following the invasion illustrate how vital it was to the party to justify its decisions ideologically, by finding a Marxist-Leninist doctrine which made the act legitimate. Its declaration – that it supported all people in struggle against an oppressor – was certainly in the spirit of communist solidarity, but it was an ambiguous statement at best. Its emphasis on the feudal character of the Afghan

society, and the reactionary attitudes championed by the rebel forces, was regarded as an irrelevant sidetrack from the issue at hand – namely the general legitimacy of military operations like the Soviet invasion. The PCF had won its greatest ideological victories vis-à-vis the CPSU less than a month before the invasion, with the latter's acknowledgment of the existence of ideological divergences between communist sister parties. The PCF, however, did not use this historical opportunity to evoke the possibility of expressing its disagreement with the CPSU on this matter. That could only mean that the PCF agreed with the invasion – which it clearly did not – or that the PCF did not consider its support for the invasion an ideological matter. The PCF's attempt at using ideology to justify its position, ultimately served only to confuse the electorate, and muddle the distinction between ideology and politics that the PCF fervently tried to convey to the French public in the weeks and months after the Soviet invasion.

This distinction follows my argument in the thesis, that despite the PCF's own commitment to let ideology guide political decisions, this was not always the case. As with any other political party, the PCF also made decisions which undermined or ran contrary to Marxist-Leninist thought. This distinction, though real to the PCF, was not seen by the French public. They did not see what the PCF still clearly believed – that communism, as it was an ideal, could not be corrupted. There are at least two reasons why this distinction was not visible to outsiders. The first is that, ultimately, it may have been an artificial distinction – in communism, ideology and politics had always been intimately connected, as had ends and means – and that the PCF in championing this difference was fooling itself to believe it enjoyed greater independence vis-à-vis the Soviets than it in reality did. Secondly, the PCF never let outsiders see that it occasionally made decisions that discarded communist considerations. Ideology was put forward – sometimes as a smokescreen – to legitimize all PCF policy, regardless of the mockery some of these policies made of true communism.

Finally, the support for the invasion can also in part be attributed to the PCF's Stalinist structures. The bond to the Soviet Union was incorporated into the PCF's own decision-making processes, the alliance was perpetuated and assured by the inner workings of a party that could not – and dared not? – challenge its own foundations. There was no democracy in the party's higher circles of power, once elected or promoted to the Central Committee or the Politburo, only exclusion or ill health could prevent a member from retaining his or her seat



until death. The personal authority of the leader contributed to make the PCF a profoundly undemocratic organization. And Marchais was an old-school Stalinist, whose ascendancy to power had been at the instigation of the Soviets. His and the party's dedication to the principle of democratic centralism effectively prevented the PCF leadership from challenging the authority of Marchais, as well as being challenged by the lower ranks of the party. One can also question the PCF's apparent willingness to change its principles if it did not acknowledge the influence of Stalinism on its own party apparatus. Stalinism, whose essence is the subjection of ideology to form, and substance to structures, had shaped the PCF's dedication to the CPSU to such an extent that one may be justified in claiming that the PCF's political decisions were structurally inherent in its own party organization, only occasionally influenced by leaders whose authority could challenge or cement those structures.

On the founding congress of the PCF, in December 1920, socialist leader Léon Blum had proved himself as something of a prophet, when he, during the debate over the 21 Conditions, said to the communists who were in favour of the Comintern:

“Votre dictature n'est plus la dictature temporaire qui vous permettra d'aménager les derniers travaux d'édification de votre société. Elle est un système de gouvernement stable, presque régulier dans votre esprit, et à l'abri duquel vous voulez faire tout le travail. C'est cela le système de Moscou. (...) Cela est si vrai que, pour la première fois dans toute l'histoire socialiste, vous concevez le terrorisme, non pas seulement comme le recours de dernière heure, non pas comme l'extrême mesure de salut publique que vous imposerez aux résistances bourgeoises, non pas comme une nécessité vitale pour la Révolution, mais comme un moyen de gouvernement.”<sup>259</sup>

The system of the PCF had always echoed the system of Moscow. The PCF was defined by its alliance with and dedication to the Soviet Union and its communist party. In its essence that never changed. In its essence, the PCF was still a totalitarian structure. Herein lies at least part of the explanation as to why the party supported an invasion it was against, and stood by a regime that had long since fallen from the purer, communist faith.

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<sup>259</sup> “Your dictatorship is no longer the temporary dictatorship which will allow you to develop the last construction works of your society. It is a stable system of government, almost regular in your mind, and behind which you want to do all the work. Such is the system of Moscow. (...) This is so true that, for the first time in all of socialist history, you suggest terrorism, not as a last resort only, not as the extreme measures of public health you will impose on the bourgeois resistance, not as a vital necessity to the Revolution, but as a means of government.” Cited in Courtois and Lazar, 1995:64



## **Appendix I. Georges Marchais' speech to the Central Committee, 25/26.06.81 – excerpts**

### ***I. a - French transcription***

“Je pense (...) à certaines de nos prises de position relatives aux évènements internationaux, comme ceux d’Afghanistan. Je rappelle à ce propos que nous avons déterminé notre position face à ce dernier problème en prenant en considération d’une part le droit des peuples à disposer d’eux-mêmes, sans ingérence extérieure, et, d’autre part, le droit de chaque pays à conclure des traités et, en cas de besoin, à faire appel à l’aide d’un pays allié. C’est à partir de ces principes que nous avons pris position, sans naturellement prétendre juger du détail des évènements. Je rapelle également qu’il s’est trouvé que le moment où nous avons été confrontés à ce problème a pratiquement coïncidé avec la rencontre au plus haut niveau que nous avons eue avec le Parti communiste de l’Union soviétique. Le résultat de cette rencontre, dont la tenue avait été rendue possible après de longues discussions entre nos deux partis, fut éminemment positif. Pour la première fois dans l’histoire du mouvement communiste international, le Parti communiste de l’Union soviétique signa un communiqué reconnaissant sans ambiguïté l’existence de divergences avec un autre parti communiste.

(...)

Ces entretiens, et le texte sur lequel ils débouchèrent, permirent de rendre possible le développement des rapports entre nos deux partis sur des bases nouvelles, inédites.

On voit mieux, avec le recul, combien la proximité des évènements d’Afghanistan et de la tenue de cette rencontre rendirent possible tout à la fois une manipulation de notre position sur l’Afghanistan et la présentation de notre rencontre avec le P.C.U.S comme le signe d’un réalignement total de notre parti sur les positions soviétiques, ce qui est exactement le contraire du sens du communiqué commun.”

(...)

“On le voit, pendant toute cette période qui sépare le 20ème Congrès du P.C.U.S en 1956 du 22ème Congrès de notre parti en 1976, notre parti s’est trouvé placé devant une exigence de plus en plus impérative d’apporter les réponses nouvelles aux problèmes nouveaux qui se sont peu à peu trouvés posés. Dans ce vingt années, le monde a beaucoup changé. La France d’abord. (...) Et ce qui changea également, ce fut aussi, peu à peu, la situation, la réalité des pays socialistes.”

“...notre parti n’a pas tiré, dès ce moment-là tous les enseignements nécessaires du 20ème Congrès du P.C.U.S.”

“...nous sommes partisans de construire le socialisme en France dans le pluralisme politique, dans la coopération entre les Partis. Cette voie est du même coup la voie de l’activité indépendante du parti révolutionnaire, la voie de renforcement de l’audience, de l’organisation, de la capacité d’initiative du Parti communiste français.”

### ***I. b - English translation***

“I think (...) of certain of our decisions made relating to international events, like those of Afghanistan. I remember to this effect that we decided our position faced with this last problem taking into consideration partly the right of peoples to rule themselves, without outside interference, and partly the right of every country to conclude treaties and in case of need, appeal to an allied country for aid. It was based on these principles that we made a decision, naturally without pretending to judge the details of the events. I also remind [you] that the moment when we were confronted with this problem practically coincided with the highest level meeting we had ever had with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The result of this meeting, made possible after long discussions between our two parties, was eminently positive. For the first time in the history of the international communist movement, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union signed a communiqué recognizing without ambiguity the existence of divergences with another communist party.

(...)

These discussions and the text from which they stem, permit to make possible a development of relations between our two parties on a new and unprecedented basis. We see better, with the setback, how the proximity of the events in Afghanistan and this meeting served both as a manipulation of our position on Afghanistan and the presentation of our meeting with the CPSU as a sign of our party’s total realignment with the Soviet position, which is exactly contrary to the meaning of the common communiqué.”

(...)

“We see it, during this whole period between the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU in 1956 and the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress of our party in 1976, [that] our party has found itself facing more and more important demands of bringing forth new answers to new problems, increasingly posed. In these twenty years, the world has changed a lot. First and foremost France. (...) And what has equally changed, too, little by little, [is] the situation, the reality of the socialist countries.”

“...our party has not drawn, from that moment, the necessary lessons of the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU.”

“We are partisans of constructing socialism in France by political pluralism, in cooperation between the parties. This path is at the same time the path of independent activity of the revolutionary party, the path of strengthening the audience, the organization [and] the capacity for initiative of the French Communist Party.”

## Appendix II. List of persons

**Amin, Hafizullah** (1929-79): Became president of Afghanistan in 1979 upon the removal of his predecessor Taraki in September. Killed following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December. Belonged to the *Khalq* faction of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan.

**Andropov, Yuri** (1914-84): Chairman of the KGB, 1967-82. General Secretary of the Soviet Union from 1982 until his death.

**Berlinguer, Enrico** (1922-84): Leader of the Italian Communist Party – the PCI – from 1972 until his death.

**Brezhnev, Leonid** (1906-82): President of the Soviet Union from 1964 until his death.

**Carrillo, Santiago** (1915- ): Leader of the Spanish Communist Party – the PCE – between 1960 and 1982.

**Carter, Jimmy** (1924- ): President of the United States of America between 1977 and 1981.

**Chervonenko, Stepan** (1915-2003): Soviet ambassador to France, 1973-83. Ambassador to Czechoslovakia, 1965-73, and known for his role in the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968.

**Duclos, Jacques** (1896-1975): Leader of the French Communist Party – the PCF – during the German occupation of France, and during Thorez' illness, the 1950-53 interim. One of the party's leading politicians for half a century.

**Fiszbin, Henri** (1930-90): Leader of the Paris section of the PCF, 1973-1979. Officially excluded from the party in 1981, following a two-year conflict with the PCF leadership.

**Fiterman, Charles** (1933- ): Member of the PCF Central Committee, and Transport minister in Pierre Mauroy's 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> socialist governments, 1981-1984. Left the PCF in 1991.

**Giscard d'Estaing, Valéry** (1926- ): President of France, 1974-1981. Centre-right politician.

**Gremetz, Maxime** (1940- ): Member of the PCF Politburo in 1976, and the Central Committee in 1973. Excluded from the party in 2006.

**Gromyko, Andrei** (1909-89): Soviet minister of Foreign Affairs from 1957 to 1985, when he was promoted to the Chairmanship of the Supreme Soviet.

**Jérôme, Jean** (1906-90): Member of the PCF, in charge of the party's finances from 1945 until his death.

**Kanapa, Kean** (1921-78): Member of the PCF Politburo and Central Committee from 1964 until his death. One of the party's chief ideologues.

**Karmal, Babrak** (1929-96): President of Afghanistan, 1979-86. Belonged to the *Parcham*

faction of the PDPA.

**Khrushchev, Nikita** (1894-1971): General Secretary of the Soviet Union, 1953-64.

Succeeded by Brezhnev.

**Kirilenko, Andrei** (1906-90): Member of the CPSU Politburo, 1965-82. One of Brezhnev's closest allies within the party.

**Kosygin, Alexei** (1904-80): Soviet Prime Minister, 1964-80.

**Laurent, Paul** (1925-90): Member of the PCF Politburo, 1956-1990, and Central Committee, 1964-1990.

**Marchais, Georges** (1920-97): Joint leader of the PCF together with Rochet, 1969-1972. Leader of the PCF, 1972-1994.

**Mitterrand, François** (1916-96): Leader of the French Socialist Party – the PS – between 1971 and 1981. President of France, 1981-1995.

**Napolitano, Giorgio** (1925- ): Italian politician. Former member of the PCI, as of 2006 president of Italy.

**Plissonnier, Gaston** (1913-95): Member of the PCF Politburo, 1964-90, and Central Committee, 1950-90. One of the party's most powerful and longest-serving leaders.

**Ponomarev, Boris** (1905-95): Head of the Foreign Affairs Section in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union – the CPSU – 1955-1986. Party ideologue and one of the most powerful leaders of the international communist movement.

**Rochet, Waldeck** (1905-83): Leader of the PCF, 1964-1972, Honorary General Secretary, 1972-1979. Member of the PCF Central Committee, 1936-1983.

**Suslov, Mikhail** (1902-82): Second secretary of the CPSU, 1965-1982. One of the most important party ideologues and last remaining Stalinists in the Soviet top leadership.

**Taraki, Nur Muhammed** (1917-1979)<sup>260</sup>: President of Afghanistan from 1978 until Amin's coup in September, 1979. Killed shortly after. Belonged to the *Khalq* faction of the PDPA.

**Thorez, Maurice** (1900-64): Leader of the PCF from 1930 until his death.

**Ustinov, Dmitri** (1908-84): Soviet minister of Defence from 1976 until his death. Succeeded by Marshal Sergei Sokolov.

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<sup>260</sup> Taraki's birth date is disputed. Encyclopaedia Britannica lists 1917 as year of birth, Westad in (ed) Westad lists 1921. Further sources list 1913.

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