There is little to quibble with in this study, even if it needs updating after some fourteen years. Ciscel is forthcoming about weaknesses in his approach, fair in his analysis, and modest about his conclusions. In the wake of the Communists’ downfall after the 2014 election, the country’s situation has changed considerably, but Ciscel’s analysis stands as a valuable overview of Moldova’s first two decades. His analysis of the linguistic debates and identity in the Republic of Moldova during that period offers a reliable and illuminating perspective.


Reviewed by Richard Drake, University of Montana

Claudio Petruccioli, a leading Communist in late Cold War Italy, first published this political memoir in 2001 about the demise ten years earlier of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the creation of its successor, the Partito Democratico della Sinistra (PDS). In a second edition appearing in 2020, he included a new introduction and concluding chapter to take account of recent developments on the post-Communist left. The book is being hailed in Italy as an outstanding history of the forces and personalities responsible for the left’s failure to find a way forward after the end of the Cold War.

The original edition recounted how PCI leaders had reacted to events from the opening of the Berlin Wall in 1989 to the disintegration of Italy’s Cold War political system in the watershed elections of 1994. The PCI, which at its founding in 1921 had taken its bearings from the Bolsheviks’ rise to power, collapsed at the end of the Cold War in 1991. Petruccioli, a protagonist in the story he tells, wanted the Communists to embrace the cause of democratic socialism. The opening chapters describe a transition that took place in the early 1990s amid bitter polemics among rival factions. At a 1991 PCI conference in Rimini, the majority formed the PDS. Under the leadership of Armando Cossutta, however, one-third of the conference members decided to create their own party, the Rifondazione Comunista (RC), destined with its hammer-and-sickle standard to make little headway in Italian politics.

Even after the RC secession, the PDS remained prey to internal dissen- sion. Petruccioli exhaustively analyzes the struggle between the last PCI secretary and founding PDS secretary, Achille Occhetto, and his chief antagonist, Massimo D’Alema. Against D’Alema’s vehement opposition, Occhetto took the dramatic step in 1993 of supporting the technical government of Carlo Azeplio Ciampi, a former governor of the Bank of Italy and president of the National Bureau of Exchange. D’Alema criticized what he called Ciampi’s slighting way of dealing with the PDS. At a deeper level of concern for anyone like D’Alema who was seeking to maintain continuity between the PCI and the PDS, a political alliance with the banks had an
unseemly aspect. Petruccioli gives Occhetto credit for large-mindedness in embracing Ciampi. It was, he argues, the right thing to do at that moment, as proof of the new leaf of democratic responsibility the PDS was trying to turn. He criticizes Occhetto for later abandoning Ciampi, who receives much praise in this book as a leader striving to overcome the crippling effects of the Tangentopoli corruption scandals of the early 1990s and to guide Italy into the new eurozone economic system. Occhetto and D’Alema, though, both ultimately fail as leaders by “thinking that the affirmation of their own leadership or electoral victory were much more important than institutional reforms” (p. 256).

Petruccioli points out that PDS leaders did not understand the constellation of political forces arising out of the wreckage of Italy’s Cold War political system. The two major parties that had held the stage, the Socialists (PSI) and the Christian Democrats (DC), soon joined the PCI on the casualty list. The old labels of left and right lost their traditional significance as unheard-of political entities filled the vacuum: Umberto Bossi’s regional Lega Nord Party (LN) and then, even more fateful, at least in the short run, media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia Party (FI). In March 2021, Matteo Salvini’s reconfigured Lega, which is now a national anti-immigration party, outpolled all other parties and could have a commanding role to play in the next election, as it did in the last one three years ago. In 1994, Berlusconi was the commanding figure. This ruinous defeat for the PDS serves as the end point of Petruccioli’s 2001 narrative. He says with a forlorn simplicity that the PDS had an inadequate idea of what they faced in the Berlusconi candidacy, with its unprecedented combination of financial power and media reach. An added problem for them, very well addressed by Petruccioli, concerned the complete absence on the left of anything resembling a coherent and unified program.

In the chapter added to the 2020 edition, Petruccioli recognizes and regrets the atrocities perpetrated by Communists worldwide. The vaunted democratic centralism of Marxist-Leninism had produced tyranny and oppression wherever people had the misfortune to live under it. The PCI could not escape the moral consequences of its deep and multifarious involvement in the tragedy of Marxist-Leninism. Yet Petruccioli closes his book with a moving plea for people to remember the PCI’s heroic struggle against fascism and its unique character in the post–World War II era as a force that helped to strengthen the democratic conscience of the Italian people. He describes the PCI as a community and a home for “il popolo comunista,” striving paradoxically against the conflicting pull of Marxist-Leninist totalitarianism in its formal ideology to create in Italy a truly democratic society. This paradox Petruccioli explains by citing a passage from a speech that he had given at a November 1989 conference at Bolognina: “the PCI, while calling itself Communist, for a long time was no longer Communist” (p. 304). It had, he claims, become a social democratic party, but with its financial and historic ties to the USSR held back by a crippling past.

First the PDS and then its successor in 2007, the currently crisis-ridden Partito Democratico (PD), had failed to create a new and effective social democratic culture for the Italian left. In the country’s current circumstances the left finds itself
overshadowed by the political populism of the strongly Trump-inclined Lega and of the much more ideologically eclectic Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S), whose leader, Beppe Grillo, also had expressed a preference for Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton in the U.S. presidential election of 2016. For the PD to be in a governing alliance today with the M5S—without initially changing the prime minister who had led the previous Lega-M5S government—reveals, in Petruccioli’s telling, the political inanition into which the Italian left has fallen. He laments the failure to replace the greatest party of the Italian left with something better: “This we had wanted to do, this we had sought to do, but this we did not succeed in doing” (p. 317).

Petruccioli argues that the underlying reason for the post-PCI left’s defeat and, worse, its ongoing identity crisis is that too many leftists failed to make a complete break with the myth of the Bolshevik Revolution as the greatest event in human history. In fact, 1917 had not witnessed “the rupture of a system and the finally possible passage to another system” (p. 339). Writing in February 2020, he uses the present tense in explaining, “This is the error to get rid of.” In other words, in the great debate on the left over the positions staked out in Karl Kautsky’s reformist condemnation of the Bolshevik Revolution, Terrorism and Communism (1919), and Leon Trotsky’s Leninist celebration of it, Terrorism and Communism: A Reply (1920), Kautsky had made the right call. To move forward today, a united Italian left would have to begin by acknowledging “with all necessary severity, sincerity, and serenity” the wrong turn made by the PCI at its founding in 1921.


Reviewed by Laurent Cesari, Université d’Artois (France)

Singapore and Malaya were of major strategic importance during the early years of the Cold War. Malaya was a major producer of tin and natural rubber, which were exported through the port of Singapore. Great Britain operated on Singapore its biggest air and naval base east of Suez. Control of the straits of Singapore and Malacca allowed an easy transfer of Western battleships between the Pacific and the Middle East, through the Indian Ocean. In the 1950s, a British strategic plan, based on the occupation of southern Thailand at the level of the town of Songkhla, at the narrowest point of the Kra Isthmus, provided for the defense of the Malaya-Singapore area against an invasion from the north.

The concentration of British military establishments in Singapore, as well the large majority of overseas Chinese among its inhabitants, explains why the UK government was slow to grant independence to the island. The British ruled the crown colony alone until 1955 and retained control of internal security until 1959, when Singapore was granted complete internal autonomy. Even then, Britain reserved the right