

## Roads to Reconciliation

People's Republic of China, Western Europe and Italy  
During the Cold War Period (1949-1971)

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# International Political Activism in the '50s The World Federation of Democratic Youth and Bruno Bernini's Encounter with Mao's China

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**Abstract** This paper examines the role played by adult-led youth groups in providing avenues for early encounters between Italian and Chinese Communists in the '50s. In particular, it focuses on the links built up within international organisations linked to the Soviet-sponsored peace movement at a time when direct exchange between the Italian and Chinese Communist parties had yet to start. Relying on a large variety of primary and secondary sources, some of which have never been used before, I provide evidence of how participation in Soviet-led international organisations made early political contacts and interactions possible. The focus is on Bruno Bernini, whose personal experience in China is examined within the context of the World Federation of Democratic Youth's policies and initiatives in the early and mid-'50s.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Communist Youth Groups and Early Opportunities for Sino-Italian Exchange. – 3 Participation in the WFDY. – 4 The WFDY Initiatives in China. – 5 Encountering Maoist China: Bruno Bernini's Experience and Memories. – 6 Conclusion.

**Keywords** Chinese Communist Party. China's Communist Youth League. China-Italy relations. World Federation of Democratic Youth. Cold War. Bruno Bernini.

## 1 Introduction

In the '50s the Italian Communist Party (ICP) played a crucial role in the unconventional party-to-party diplomacy between Italy and the People's Republic of China (PRC). As the largest Communist party in Western Europe, the ICP had considerable influence in Italian society and thus could play an important role in forging public opinion, building up awareness in

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civil society actors of the importance of the 'New China'. As a matter of fact, it provided a privileged channel for unofficial Sino-Italian exchanges in the absence of diplomatic relations between the two countries (Samarani, De Giorgi 2011).

Relations between the Italian and the Chinese Communist parties passed via Moscow and were inevitably shaped by the developments taking place within the world Communist movement. Indeed, positive relations developed up until 1957, largely based on solidarity and similarity of judgements. Beginning in the late '50s, however, ideological differences between Italian and Chinese Communists slowly started to emerge: both parties began to develop clearly distinct positions, and - in the wake of the Sino-Soviet split - their relationship eventually fell apart (Samarani, Graziani 2015; see also Höbel 2005).

Exchange of delegations was one of the most important forms of direct interaction among party leaders. Yet, only in 1956 did the first bilateral exchange of delegations take place on the occasion of national party congresses, thereby laying the foundations for subsequent contacts, the most prominent taking place in 1959 when the ICP sent its first high-level delegation to China to meet the leaders of the CCP (see Samarani's chapter in this volume).

Until 1956, links had been created through other channels: mainly at an individual level, or through national organisations affiliated with, or somehow gravitating around the Communist parties. Contact among Communist leaders arose also within international left-wing coordination bodies, such as the World Federation of Democratic Youth, the International Union of Students, the World Federation of Trade Unions, the Women's International Democratic Federation, and the World Peace Council.

In point of fact, since the early years of the PRC up to the early '60s, at a time when China's contacts with the outside world were limited by the logic of the Cold War and the PRC found itself isolated, these organisations provided a crucial window for China's international exposure both within and beyond the Soviet bloc, representing privileged avenues of dialogue and exchange between the newly established PRC and various foreign political groups and individual representatives.

This article examines the role played by adult-led youth groups in providing avenues for early encounters between Italian and Chinese Communists, focusing on the links built up within international political organisations linked to the Soviet-sponsored peace movement at a time when direct exchange of delegations between the Italian and Chinese Communist parties had yet to start. Elsewhere I have investigated 'people-to-people' diplomacy between the early PRC and different youth groups in Italy from both perspectives, providing a detailed narrative of the extent and type of contacts undertaken in this period (Graziani 2017). In this article, I provide evidence of how participation in Soviet-led international youth organisa-

tions made early political contacts and interactions possible, by relying on a large variety of primary and secondary sources, some of which have never been used before. The focus is on Bruno Bernini, whose personal experience in China is examined within the context of the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY)'s policies and initiatives in the early and mid-'50s.

## 2 Communist Youth Groups and Early Opportunities for Sino-Italian Exchange

As far as it is known, the first time an Italian Communist representative visited China was in 1949 shortly before the proclamation of the PRC. The prominent Italian Communist Velio Spano (1905-1964), then a member of the ICP's highest ruling body, travelled to China (from September 1949 to January 1950) as a correspondent of the official party newspaper *L'Unità* and witnessed the Communists' seizure of power (Spano 1950; on Spano's experience in China see De Giorgi's chapter in this volume). Although this first visit was paid by a delegate in an individual capacity, it laid the foundation for subsequent contact, and would be remembered by Chinese leaders as the first contact the victorious Chinese revolution had with a European Communist representative.<sup>1</sup> In the following years, it was through the Centre for the Development of Economic and Cultural Relations with China (or 'Centro Cina') especially that contacts between Italian and Chinese Communists were developed. Created in 1953 as an autonomous institution aimed at promoting cultural and economic exchange and at pushing for Italy's recognition of the PRC, it was nonetheless an organisation close to the Italian left and its members included a large number of ICP members (Samarani 2014). Early indirect contact was also made possible through a network of mass organisations that, despite being formally autonomous, were somehow 'collateral' to the ICP, and more generally to the political parties of the Italian left. Some of these organisations were able to send delegations to China at that time, especially on the occasion of annual celebrations. One such instance was the 1954 visit to China made by an Italian labour union delegation guided by Bruno Trentin, and composed of members of both the ICP and the Italian Socialist Party, which was invited to participate in the 1st May labour celebration.<sup>2</sup>

1 "Brevi note per la Segreteria del PCI della delegazione inviata a Pechino per assistere alla celebrazione del X anniversario della fondazione della RPC", Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Archivi del Partito comunista italiano, Estero, mf. 0464, Cina, 1959, 2973-81 (2981).

2 "Comunicazione di Bruno Trentin alla Segreteria del PCI" 1/7/1954, Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Archivi del Partito comunista italiano, Partiti esteri, mf. 0424, Cina, 1954, pagina 0429.

The ICP's junior partner, the Italian Communist Youth Federation (ICYF) provided a direct channel for contacts since it was part and parcel of the Communist party's organisational structure. In the early '50s its political initiatives concerned, among other things, the struggle for peace and national independence (cf. Bruno Bernini and Renzo Trivelli's contributions in Berlinguer et al. 1976, 51-68). A 1955 national document entitled *The Youth Initiative for a Foreign Policy of Independence and Peace* and issued by the ICYF's highest leading organ, stated that when it came to Italy's relations with the socialist world, the national interest required a new basis of cooperation and friendship and that ties of friendship among the peoples should be strengthened and diplomatic relations with the PRC established (Federazione giovanile comunista italiana 1957, 49-52). By then, contacts between the ICYF and its Chinese counterpart, the Communist Youth League (CYL), had already been established. In 1953 the 28-year-old, anti-fascist partisan, Ugo Pecchioli, then member of the National Secretariat of the ICYF, was sent to Beijing to attend the 2nd National Congress of the New Democratic Youth League (the forerunner of the CYL), and spent almost a month in China (20th June-18th July) (Gongqingtuan zhongyang guoji lianluobu 2000, 9). Pecchioli travelled across the country, visiting important cities (i.e. Mukden [Shenyang], Fushun, Hangzhou, Nanjing and Shanghai), and having talks with Hu Yaobang who, by Pecchioli's account, spoke frankly about the variety and complexity of the problems China was facing in the countryside in its march toward socialism. Pecchioli returned to Italy armed with a positive image of the New China. He praised both the land reform, which he called "a document of political wisdom and humanity", and the extraordinary qualities of the Chinese people. "I think - he wrote in the Italian Communist Party's official newspaper *L'Unità* - that one of the greatest [qualities] is their capacity to be forward-looking, to be patient, to carefully avoid rushed decisions that can lead to serious mistakes" (Pecchioli 1953, 3). In the same period, the All-China Youth Federation also held its 2nd National Congress, which was attended by Piero Pieralli, a young Italian Communist who was invited as a representative of the WFDY (Gongqingtuan zhongyang guoji lianluobu 2000, 8).

In the very early days of the PRC, youth organisations played an important role in the realm of China's foreign relations, being responsible for "building good relations with foreign youth and students' organizations and developing people's diplomacy so as to break the imperialist blockade against China and let the whole world understand the New China, and sympathize with and support the righteous cause of the Chinese people" (Liu 2011, 2). The Communist Youth League through its International Liaison Department built up contacts with various national youth groups and individual representatives, including those from Western capitalist countries who had not recognised the PRC, thus becoming involved in China's people diplomacy and political outreach in different parts of the

world. At that time, the main avenues for early exchanges between China and Western countries were offered through international 'front organisations', such as the WFDY and the International Union of Students (IUS) (Cao 1999, 1). International activities thus provided the framework upon which early links between Italian and Chinese Communist youth groups were established and developed.

### 3 Participation in the WFDY

Both the WFDY and the IUS were born out of the desire for peace soon after the end of World War II. The WFDY was founded in 1945 in London with the aim of establishing international youth cooperation for the cause of freedom, democracy and equality. However, with the outbreak of the Cold War, non-Communist groups withdrew from the WFDY, which soon developed into a Soviet-dependent 'front organisation' with a partisan character. The IUS, founded in 1946 in Prague, suffered a similar fate (Cornell 1965, 73-95; Kotek 1996, 62-167). Both organisations ended up being dominated by Communists even though references to Communism – as Pia Koivunen (2011, 177) noted – were generally avoided in favour of new slogans calling for democracy, peace and friendship that could appeal to many people who after the upheavals of World War II desired a peaceful world. Crucial in this respect was the organisation of the biannual World Festival of Youth and Students for Peace and Friendship, a key event in the Soviet-sponsored transnational campaign for peace (Koivunen 2011; Kotek 1996, 189-99). By the early '50s the WFDY had become a large organisation with a transnational character: its membership grew from 30 million young people representing 65 countries in 1945 to 83 million young people from 90 countries in 1953 (World Federation of Democratic Youth 1953, 291). Thus, despite being highly dependent on the Soviet Union, it did represent a place where young people from countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain could get together and also meet representatives of the Third World.

Chinese youth were represented within both organizations up to the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. While in 1945 groups as diverse as the Guomindang-affiliated Three Principles of the People Youth Corps, the youth association of the liberated areas, the Young Men's Christian Association, the Young Women's Christian Association and the Federation of Young Writers joined the WFDY (Gongqingtuan zhongyang guoji lianluobu 2009, 281), following the Communist victory and the establishment of the PRC, the All-China Youth Federation was the sole Chinese organisation officially represented within the WFDY (302). The All-China Youth Federation was a national umbrella organisation whose membership included, among the others, the CYL, which had a key role in the Chinese political system as an 'assistant' and 'reserve force' of the CCP (Graziani 2013). As a matter

of fact, its national leaders often overlapped with those of the CYL.<sup>3</sup> With the unfolding of the crisis of the world Communist movement, both the WFDY and the IUS developed into two of the main outposts of the political struggle between the Chinese and Soviet Communist Parties. In 1966 the PRC eventually withdrew its delegates (cf. Gongqingtuan zhongyang guoji lianluobu 2008, 2009). In those years, Italian Communists ended up taking on a prominent role within the organisation. In point of fact, with the outbreak of the Cold War, Italian non-Communist groups withdrew from the WFDY, leaving the FGCI and other extreme left-wing groups in the organisation.<sup>4</sup> Italian Communists would soon assume a prominent position, holding the presidency for almost a decade: Enrico Berlinguer (1950-1953)<sup>5</sup> was indeed followed by Bruno Bernini as president of the organization from 1953 up to 1959.<sup>6</sup> Then, in August 1959 the Italian Communist Piero Pieralli replaced him (*Pieralli eletto Presidente della FMGD* 1959).

By the early '50s, the Italian Communist strategy had highlighted the struggle for peace and national independence as one of the main tasks assigned to young people post-World War II. Recognising that the wish for peace allowed the young to transcend class as well as religious and ideological differences and, moreover, as they saw the young as uncorrupted as yet by adult logic, Italian Communists searched for a strategy that could appeal to as many young people as possible in their political struggle for freedom and independence. As such, the Italian Communist Youth Federation soon took on a pivotal role in the partisans of peace movement, organising and mobilising the young against the Atlantic treaty to which De Gasperi's Italy adhered, against American weapons arriving in Italy, in favour of Korea in the early '50s, and in the struggle for a foreign policy of peace, against Italy's subordination to US policy. Yet, the propaganda of peace was by no means neutral in the sense that it emphasised anti-Americanism and linked it with the defence of the USSR, celebrated

3 For instance, in the second half of the '50s, Liu Xiyuan was both a member of the Central Secretariat of the CYL and the President of the All-China Youth Federation. Liao Chengzhi, a well-known figure in the realm of Sino-Japanese relations, overseas Chinese affairs and peace movements, was also heavily engaged in the youth movement in the early and mid-'50s, occupying a high position in the executive bodies of both the Youth League and the All-China Youth Federation (see Zhonggong zhongyang zuzhibu, Zhonggong zhongyang dangshi yanjiushi and zhongyang dang'anguan 2000 and the following official website at [http://www.cnpeople.com.cn/ql/sj/1167\\_20160303100015.html](http://www.cnpeople.com.cn/ql/sj/1167_20160303100015.html)).

4 Such as for instance, the Italian Young Pioneers Association, the Italian Union for Popular Sport, Youth Commission of the CGIIL (Gongqingtuan zhongyang guoji lianluobu 2009, 320).

5 On Berlinguer's role in the youth movement see Barbagallo (2014, 21-30).

6 "Relazione sulla partecipazione italiana al IV Festival e al III Congresso Mondiale della Gioventù". Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Archivi del Partito comunista italiano, mf. 233, Commissione centrale giovanile e FGCI, Fondo Mosca 1948-1953.

as a peaceful country by definition (Cerrai 2011, 135-52 and Bernini and Trivelli's contributions in Berlinguer et al. 1976).

In January 1950 the Italian experience in, and contribution to, the international front of the partisans for peace was tabled for the WFDY executive committee meeting in Bucharest. It was the first time that the situation and experience of a national youth movement would be examined in detail by the executive committee. The young Enrico Berlinguer, then president of the Italian Youth Alliance of the Popular Democratic Front delivered a report entitled *La lotta della gioventù democratica per la pace e per i suoi diritti politici ed economici*, summarising the experience of the Italian youth in the struggle for peace and for their economic and political rights. In his report, Berlinguer celebrated the Soviet Union as the flagship of world peace and democracy and emphasised the importance of popularising the achievements of the Soviet youth and of other people's democracies as well as the victory of the Chinese people among the young masses (*La gioventù italiana nel fronte mondiale della pace* 1950, 24). The representative of the newly established PRC, Wu Xueqian,<sup>7</sup> praised the Italian experience and initiatives as a model for other Communist parties in capitalist Europe but also stated that the task of Chinese youth at that time was 'peaceful edification', thus mainly underlying that their focus was inward, as young builders of the New China (*La gioventù italiana nel fronte mondiale della pace* 1950, 39-40). This statement brought the attention on the differences in the struggle of youth between Socialist China and the capitalist countries. In China the attention was on domestic reconstruction, given the dramatic socio-economic conditions and the emergencies facing the leaders of the newly founded PRC.

The importance of China was recognised by the WFDY as early as 1950 when a youth delegation – the largest ever organised since the establishment of the Federation – was sent to the newly proclaimed PRC to honour the success of the Chinese revolution but also to show – as reported at that time – the solidarity of world youth not just in their work of constructing a New China but also in their struggle against American aggression and imperialism in East Asia (Boccaro 1951). The Cold War had already turned hot on the Korean peninsula and the PRC would soon decide to intervene to aid Korea. CCP leaders attached extreme importance to this visit, in view of the situation, and warmly received the foreign guests, "believing that this initiative might be significant in strengthening the links and unity

7 Wu Xueqian was the Chinese representative within the WFDY during 1949-1950 and would hold the position of deputy-director and then director of the CYL Central Committee International Liaison Department until 1958 when he entered the External Liaison Department of the CCP Central Committee and was made responsible for the activities directed towards Southwest Asia and Africa (Gongqingtuan zhongyang guoji lianluobu 2009, 94; Zhu 2012, 123-5).

of China's youth with the young from every country of the world and in broadening the influence of the victory of the Chinese revolution, inspiring the young in their struggle and strengthening internationalist spirit among Chinese youth" (Gongqingtuan zhongyang guoji lianluobu 2009, 29).

The WFDY delegation was in the PRC for 40 days (10th September-20th October), with 42 delegates from 32 countries (Soviet Union, People's Democracies, capitalist countries and the colonial and semi-colonial countries) and led by Enrico Boccara, an Italian anti-fascist partisan who was secretary-general for the WFDY (Boccara 1951). It included leading members of the organisations as well as young journalists: among them the Italians Tutino Saverio, a journalist of the ICP newspaper *L'Unità*, and the young women's representative Lidia Maiorelli (Gongqingtuan zhongyang guoji lianluobu 2009, 29; Young Builders of New China 1951, 60).<sup>8</sup> In the words of He Zhenliang, a former cadre of the Youth League, "the political weight of this large-scale delegation was very great" (Liang 2007, 22). The delegation travelled across the country (embarking on a 40-day tour), visiting 18 cities, addressing 13 mass meetings and 30 welcoming meetings, coming into contact with young workers, students, and young peasants (Boccara 1951). They were also received by Mao Zedong on 30th September and were invited to the ceremony for the first anniversary of the PRC (Gongqingtuan zhongyang guoji lianluobu 2009, 31). At the end of the journey, they addressed a message to the United Nations asking it to recognise the PRC as the only genuine representative of the Chinese people (Boccara 1951). At the same time, the delegation further promoted the peace movement that followed the launching of the Stockholm Appeal by the World Peace Council. The campaign for collecting signatures and popularising the Stockholm Appeal in China was launched on 1st May and the delegation would witness how the campaign for peace was gaining momentum in China against the backdrop of the Korean War and American raids on Chinese territory (Young Builders of New China 1951, 59-61). A year later, in summer 1951, the Youth League Central Committee sent a youth delegation to participate in the Third World Youth and Student Festival in Berlin: it was the largest delegation sent out since the founding of the People's Republic and was headed by the first secretary of the Youth League Central Committee Feng Wenbin (Liang 2007, 24).

Yet, it was only after the end of the Korean war and following the creation of permanent state institutions at the domestic level that the PRC could assume a more prominent role within the WFDY, increasing its international activism and presenting to the world the image of China as a peaceful country (Qian 2009). At the Third World Youth Congress held

8 Tutino Saverio left a diary of his personal experience in China (ARCHIVIO Diaristico Nazionale, Pieve Santo Stefano, Arezzo).



in Bucharest in July 1953, Hu Yaobang, the newly elected First Secretary of the Youth League, delivered a speech on the same day the Korean War ended and the armistice agreement was signed (27th July), arguing that China was committed to peace, friendship and solidarity among the young of the whole world.

We hold that all countries of different social systems can coexist peacefully. The spirit of negotiation should and certainly will triumph over aggression and intervention. [...] We are convinced that the mutual understanding, friendship and solidarity between the peoples of all countries are the best means to realise the young people's desire for peace. Thus, the development of cultural exchanges between the people and youth of all countries and the strengthening of friendship among world youth will break through all artificial barriers and help to further the cause of peace. [...] it is indeed the most important problem in our work today to strengthen the solidarity of the peace-loving youth of the whole world and to win the thousands upon thousands youth of good-will who are still staying outside the peace movement to participate in the ranks for the defence of peace. We are convinced that it is completely possible for all young people, irrespective of nationality, social strata, religious belief, political opinion and affiliation, to find common language and common ideas in the common cause of defending peace. (World Federation of Democratic Youth 1953, 137-8)

The PRC's weight within the WFDY increased after joining the Secretariat at the Bucharest meeting that voted in new leaders, with Hu Yaobang as vice-President and Qian Liren as Secretary (Qian 2009). Qian Liren's responsibility as Secretary in the following three years (until August 1956) coincided with new developments in both China's international attitude and the WFDY policies. Firstly, a new turn took place in both the internal politics and foreign policy of the Chinese government, which, with the end of the Korean war, began to move away from the antagonistically anti-imperialist approach to international relations, favouring a more conciliatory and peaceful line that allowed the expansion of the PRC's relations beyond the Soviet bloc (that is, participation in the 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung) and the opening of a limited dialogue with Western Europe. Secondly, in the post-1953 period, following the death of Stalin, efforts were undertaken to make the WFDY more pluralistic and less isolated (Cornell 1965, 97-135). The formulation of a more moderate policy aimed at broadening its membership among non-Communist groups and expanding its influence globally (especially among youth from non-bloc countries, that is from newly independent states in Asia, Africa and Latin America) coincided with profound international changes (decolonisation and emergence of newly independent third world countries) and far-reaching events

that shook the Communist world (1956 repression of the Hungarian revolt, 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union).

Moreover, it should be noted that in the mid-'50s, especially after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union – which sanctioned the thesis of the plurality and diversity of the roads to socialism and opened up new opportunities for Communist party autonomy – the ICP's leaders started to feel that “‘the strongest communist party in the capitalist world’ could become itself an *international political subject*” (Höbel 2005, 516). With a perspective aimed at overcoming military blocs, and firmly anchored in the strategy of peaceful coexistence, Italian Communists tried to formulate their own political agenda. In particular, Palmiro Togliatti elaborated a new original conception based on ‘polycentrism’, which implied a re-assessment of the traditional leadership role of the Soviet Union within the Communist movement and also led to the ICP's interest and action towards the extra-European world and what came to be known as the ‘non-aligned’ movement (Galeazzi 2011). Thus, in the mid-'50s the PRC's search for a more autonomous role internationally intertwined with Italian Communists' desire to carve out their own space of action vis-à-vis the USSR.

It is in this context that Hu Yaobang and especially Qian Liren (who was based in Budapest) worked side by side with the President Bruno Bernini. Since his appointment as President of the WFDY in 1953, under the instruction of Togliatti himself, Bruno Bernini strove to make the WFDY representative of different political groups in the world (not necessarily Communist) with the ultimate aim of overcoming international tension and military blocs through the promotion of a dialogue with different forces (such as the non-aligned social democratic youth in Western Europe).<sup>9</sup> Bernini was well aware that such a dialogue and collaboration in the struggle for peace against colonialism, aggression and violence, required the WFDY to overcome any ‘partisan’ political notion. As it will be further discussed below, these ideas were supported by the leaders of the PRC, whose international status was greatly enhanced at this time.

9 For instance Bernini talked with Olof Palme, the future prime minister of Sweden, who at that time was the leader of the Swedish social democratic youth and favoured cooperation among different youth organisations for the benefit of overcoming military divisions that threatened world peace. Bernini tried for an agreement on cooperation but Palme clearly stated to Bernini that there were still reservations that could be overcome only if the WFDY assumed a more autonomous position internationally and left behind its partisan character [Bruno Bernini autobiographical manuscript, Istituto Storico della Resistenza e della Società Contemporanea, Livorno (ISTORECO), Fondo Bernini, 81/1].

## 4 The WFDY Initiatives in China

In 1954 the PRC hosted an important international meeting. In August 263 people from 68 countries, including representatives of affiliated youth organisations as well as observers and guests of different political convictions, gathered in Beijing to take part in the work of the WFDY Council.<sup>10</sup> This meeting called for peace and the easing of international tension, the strengthening of the world youth struggle and unity against colonialism, as well as improvement of the living conditions of the young people of newly independent countries in the Third World (World Federation of Democratic Youth 1954).

It was the first time that a WFDY Council was held in Asia and it focused on the problems of the youth movement in colonial and dependent countries. That the choice fell on Beijing was mainly due to recent developments in national liberation movements in colonial countries and, especially, of the Geneva Conference on Korea and Indochina, which had brought Asian countries to the centre of world attention and, at the same time, greatly enhanced the international prestige of the 'new China' (Gongqingtuan zhongyang guoji lianluobu 2009, 36-7). Moreover, the place and agenda of the meeting reflected a shift in WFDY work with greater attention reserved for extra-European countries (Gongqingtuan zhongyang guoji lianluobu 2009, 6).

During the WFDY Council, Bernini stressed in his official speech that the establishment of the PRC had been a fact of historical importance – a 'shock for the colonialist world' (World Federation of Democratic Youth 1954, 8) –, and that the victory and constructive endeavours of the Chinese people provided an example and inspiration for colonial countries (Calamandrei 1954, 6). Bernini's analysis fell within the context of renewed attention for the struggle for national liberation in Third World Countries and reflected the views then shared by ICP leaders, who were looking at the victory of the Chinese revolution "not just as an 'extension' of the socialist experience [...] but also for the diversity of the process and results", and thus for the intrinsic peculiarity of being "a colonial revolution, a great peasants' rebellion [...] which suggested new experiments, new roads to be followed" and, in their opinion, "also seemed to offer new models for a Third World that was experiencing the moment of decolonization" (Pajetta 1976, 7).<sup>11</sup>

Bernini also addressed the question of the specific characteristics of youth in colonial and semi-colonial countries, a point then elaborated upon

<sup>10</sup> Among the Italian participants, there was Claudio Vecchi, the delegate of the Youth Commission of the CGIL (World Federation of Democratic Youth 1954, 46).

<sup>11</sup> This appreciation for the distinctive features of the Chinese revolution clearly reflected Italian communists' (especially Palmiro Togliatti's) attention for the plurality of the roads to socialism.

by the Chinese delegate Liu Daosheng who talked extensively about the national question in these countries, with reference also to the Chinese experience (World Federation of Democratic Youth 1954, 18-20). Liu Daosheng spoke of the need for the youth movement in these countries to be subordinated to the people's struggle for national independence:

The essential question confronting the broad masses of youth in colonial and semi-colonial countries is a question of oppression by foreign imperialism, a question of national existence. [...] the cause of their miserable life lies, first of all, in the lack of national independence and the cruel oppression and exploitation by imperialism. In our country, there were in the past also a number of patriotic youth who held that as long as they developed industry and promoted education, their wishes to make their country strong and prosperous and their people happy could be realized. But the living facts made them gradually realize that only by linking up their individual lot with the lot of the nation as a whole, and by actively participating in the movement for national independence could the nation be saved from perishment and the bright and happy future of youth ensured. (World Federation of Democratic Youth 1954, 18)

Liu went on to stress that "in colonial and semi-colonial countries the struggle against imperialism is inseparable from the struggle for democracy and against feudalism" which is based "on the feudal ownership of land and the oppression of peasants by landlords" (World Federation of Democratic Youth 1954, 18). As such he also touched upon the question of the peasants with whom "all patriotic forces should sympathise" as well as upon the specific role of students within the youth movement:

Without the peasants' active participation and persistence in the struggle, it would be impossible to win complete victory for the national liberation and democratic liberties of these countries.... The central theme of the youth movement in colonial and semicolonial countries is to organize the broad masses of youth into the struggle against imperialism and feudalism. At the same time, however, it is necessary to pay attention and attach importance to the young people's everyday political, economic and cultural demands... in colonial countries, the young people's most fundamental demands are related to the question of national existence, the question of the right to live, and the question of fundamental democratic rights. [...] It is necessary to pay attention to the position and the role of the student movement [...] and to understand the characteristics of the young students of these countries. [...] They are comparatively more sensitive politically and are full of patriotic ardour, so they are an important force in the movement for national independence. The experiences of China show that the upsurge of the

broad patriotic student movement is combined with the workers' and peasants' movement, as the general aim of both is one and the same. (World Federation of Democratic Youth 1954, 18-19)

These issues were also addressed in an internal document drafted by the CYL Central Committee, entitled *Suggestions and Opinions on Some Questions Related to the WFDY Work in Asian Colonial and Semi-colonial Countries*, which for the first time presented in a systematic way China's opinions regarding the WFDY's work, underlying the importance of adopting methods and approaches that suited the specific conditions and features of Asian countries (Gongqingtuan zhongyang guoji lianluobu 2009, 7, 38-9). The question of the WFDY's work among the peasants became a central theme. Not by chance, soon afterwards (December 1954), young representatives of forty countries (Italy, France, Soviet Union, India, Japan, China, among them) came together at an international gathering on rural youth in Vienna (Gongqingtuan zhongyang guoji lianluobu 2009, 40-2).

Another major initiative was launched by the WFDY two years later. In autumn 1956, an international youth delegation arrived in China following an invitation from Chinese youth organisations. It was not the first time that the WFDY undertook such an initiative. Yet, compared to the 1950 one, the 1956 initiative occurred in a very different context and consisted not only of young activists driven by political ideals but also involved non-affiliated youth and members of youth groups external to the WFDY.

Invited to visit China in November, the delegation – led by Bruno Bernini – was composed of 33 young delegates from different parts of the world (including African and Western European countries), the majority of whom were external to the WFDY. Among them there were representatives of youth organisations of Socialist parties in Belgium and Italy as well as members of Western and Japanese centre or right-wing organisations such as national and international Christian youth associations who despite being sceptical about WFDY intentions – tending to see it as “the tool of the Soviet group to infiltrate the West” – were curious to see the PRC. These invitations were made thanks to the collaboration of the WFDY, which as mentioned above – was striving to come out of isolationism and broaden its membership and influence at that time (Gongqingtuan zhongyang guoji lianluobu 2009, 42-3). As Qian Liren put it in his memories, “without the mutual cooperation between China and the WFDY, it might have been very difficult to form such a largely representative delegation at that time” (Qian 2005, 65-6). The British youth delegate Michael Croft, founder of the National Youth Theatre, soon after his visit wrote that for the leaders of the WFDY, the initiative represented “a major prestige effort, [...] to gather under one roof ‘all shades of religious and political opinion’” (Croft 1958, 14).

For China, the initiative was undoubtedly a great opportunity in its efforts to impress Western delegates with its achievements in the construc-

tion of socialism, to make them appreciate its weight and importance as a world power and to show – especially to those delegates who tended to equate communism with limited freedom – the human side of the Communist regime. Visitors were thus allowed a certain degree of freedom in the travel plan (Gongqingtuan zhongyang guoji lianluobu 2009, 43). Not by chance, this initiative took place at a time of unfolding intellectual liberalization in China and in coincidence with the Hungarian crisis that shocked the world, projecting a negative image of the Soviet Union worldwide. At the same time, it was part of China's renewed openness to the outside world. In point of fact, the mid-'50s saw a spectacular increase in exchanges of delegations between Communist China and Western countries (including Italy) involving different sectors of society (on exchanges between China and Western Europe see De Giorgi 2014).

During his stay in China, the young Michael Croft clearly got the impression that the delegation business was a major development in the Chinese campaign to win friends and influence public opinion in foreign countries. He defined it a 'national advertising' effort driven by China's desire to be seen in the world as a respectable country:

Respectability is the precursor to expanding trade, to a place in the United Nations, to the evacuation of American troops from Taiwan... [...] So the delegate is a vital import, whether he comes to talk business, to examine churches, to investigate intellectual freedom or, like myself, merely to look around. He may be one of many, but he is one who matters. (Croft 1958, 38-9)

As such, in the '50s the WFDY offered the newly established PRC a crucial avenue for contacts with the external world, not limited to the People's Democracies and Communist groups in the West. At the same time, it offered foreign youth the opportunity to develop links with Chinese youth and its leaders as well as to visit China at a time when travelling to the PRC was generally not possible, unless it occurred within the framework of formally organised delegations. It is within this framework and thanks to the WFDY initiatives in the PRC that Bruno Bernini had the chance to meet and talk to Chinese leaders such as Zhou Enlai, Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, and to visit the PRC. It is to his experience and memoirs that we now turn our attention.

## **5 Encountering Maoist China: Bruno Bernini's Experience and Memories**

As mentioned above, Italian Communists held a prominent position within the WFDY, holding the presidency for almost a decade: Bruno Bernini

followed Enrico Berlinguer as president of the organisation from 1953 to 1959. As an antifascist partisan from Livorno, Bernini joined the ICP in 1943. With World War II at an end, he became a member of the National Secretariat of the Youth Front, and in 1950, a leading member of the reorganised FGCI. In 1953, after the death of Stalin, he was appointed president of the WFDY and from that point until 1959, he lived in Budapest where the organisation's headquarters is located. Holding such a position, he developed a passion for international issues and worked side by side with the leaders of the youth of different countries, including the Chinese Qian Liren, who in the early 1950s served as director of China's CYL International Liaison Department, as well as the national secretary of China's Youth League, Hu Yaobang, who became vice-president of the WFDY in 1953 at the time when – as mentioned above – China joined the Secretariat. In addition, Bruno Bernini was to visit Mao's China twice during his mandate in the early and mid-1950s, first on the occasion of the WFDY Council in Beijing and then as part of the 1956 international youth delegation to the PRC.

Bernini could thus personally witness China's assuming a more active role within the WFDY but also see disagreement emerging between Chinese and Soviet representatives as early as 1954 over issues such as the priorities of the youth of the Third World. In his efforts towards making the WFDY more open and pluralistic, while encountering resistance from Soviet leaders, he got instead full support by CCP leaders with whom he was able to talk during his sojourns in China. In 1954, during a meeting he had with Zhou Enlai (then Minister of Foreign Affairs and Premier of the PRC) – a man he described as “extraordinarily affable” – Bernini was first reassured that China's CYL fully supported the WFDY's policy of openness.<sup>12</sup> Later, in the autumn of 1956, when Bernini returned to China as part of the joint international youth delegation, he met Mao Zedong, who also expressed his support for the renewal of the WFDY, stating that a federation that was a rough copy of the Cominform had no reason to exist. Instead – as Bernini recalls – Mao expressed himself in favour of transforming the WFDY into an organisation that could unite Communist youth with all those youth forces in the capitalist world that, despite not aspiring to socialism, did not tolerate American domination and wanted to affirm the autonomy of their people and safeguard world peace.<sup>13</sup>

Conversations with Chinese leaders also covered the theme of the Italian Communists' policy, albeit marginally. During the meeting with Zhou Enlai in 1954, Bernini discovered a profound interest in the ICP's historical experience of the united front among the youth in Italy, as well as an ap-

12 Bruno Bernini autobiographical manuscript, ISTORECO, Fondo Bernini, 87.

13 Bruno Bernini autobiographical manuscript, ISTORECO, Fondo Bernini, 97.

preciation for Togliatti's contribution to overcoming Communist isolationism or sectarianism at the 7th Congress of the Communist International (summer 1935).<sup>14</sup>

The conversation also touched upon issues relating to the current political debate at that time, including the theme of nuclear war and the end of civilisation, about which Togliatti had spoken only a few months earlier when addressing the ICP Central Committee. As it is known, this question would become a crucial point of divergence between Moscow and Beijing later in 1957 when, at the Moscow conference, which Shen Zhihua and Xia Yafeng defined as a turning point in Sino-Soviet relations, Mao expressed his reservations about the policy of 'peaceful coexistence' being promoted by the new Soviet leadership, pointing instead to the possibility of war and stating that in case of a nuclear war the whole world would become socialist (Shen, Xia 2009).<sup>15</sup> Mao's attitude reflected a radical turn in Chinese politics. By the time of the Moscow conference, Mao's awareness of the PRC's newfound confidence and influence in the international Communist movement, and his determination to raise his 'continuous revolution' to a higher level within the country had, to a large extent been enhanced by Beijing's experience of both the Polish and Hungarian crises, which had a profound impact on the orientation of China's domestic and international politics (Chen Jian 2001, 68-71, 145-62). Mao's famous speech of 18 November 1957 in Moscow, especially his speculation about a nuclear war and its consequence, stirred confusion and caused strong reactions after the meeting (Shen, Xia 2009, 111). Disagreements on this theme would intensify over the next decade not just with the Soviet leadership, but also with important protagonists of other Communist parties in Europe. Of all the party leaders, Togliatti was certainly a strong supporter of the need for peace. In fact, having been persuaded of the need to appeal to Catholic masses, and to find a common ground that could unite the Communist and Catholic groups within Italy, Togliatti had adopted the thesis that a thermonuclear war would lead to global destruction and mark the end of civilisation as early as April 1954, one month after it had first been discussed by Malenkov (Agosti 2003, 416-17; Pons 2012, 285-6).

Interestingly, according to Bernini's memoirs, Zhou Enlai told him that the "safeguarding of peace assumed a new importance in the atomic era", but also pointed out that such a war would not necessarily and inevitably

<sup>14</sup> Bruno Bernini autobiographical manuscript, ISTORECO, Fondo Bernini, 87. Indeed, Togliatti had played an important role in reorienting the communist movement in the mid-'30s, pushing forward a new strategy based on 'popular fronts' against fascism and linking communism with anti-fascism (Agosti 2003, 191-7).

<sup>15</sup> For an annotated translation of the complete texts of Mao Zedong's speeches at the Moscow Conference see Schoenhals (1986), in particular Mao's remarks on the theme of a nuclear war (speech of 18 November) at the pages 118-19.



mark the end of humanity and of socialism, thus leaving the question open for further discussion.<sup>16</sup> Bernini's memoirs therefore suggest that the theme of war and peace was an issue over which divergences might have existed, albeit still hidden, well before 1957.

Working side by side with Chinese representatives also gave Bernini the opportunity to gain more knowledge of China's approach to and conception of international relations at a time when – as he wrote in his memoirs – during meetings with different leaders of the Socialist countries he could perceive emerging drives towards national autonomy, despite the Soviet leaders' continued rally-call for the USSR to take the leading role.<sup>17</sup> It was during a visit to Korea where he went in 1954 as head of a youth delegation that he would learn from the Chinese Liu Xiyuan,<sup>18</sup> who accompanied him, what he would define as “a conception of friendship and internationalism, heavily anchored to the respect for the principles of autonomy and national sovereignty”, a notion that Bernini appreciated and with which he could fully identify.<sup>19</sup> On 17th November 1956, at a time of both unfolding intellectual liberalization at the domestic level and renewed openness towards the outside world, Bernini was present when Deng Xiaoping, then Secretary General of the CCP, met and talked to the delegation members (*Gongqingtuan zhongyang guoji lianluobu* 2009, 43). According to the available Chinese transcript, the first topic covered by Deng concerned the meaning of being a Communist party member and the nexus between Marxist universal principles and the specific Chinese context (Deng 1956). The British delegate Michael Croft then asked two main questions that brought up disputable topics. Aside from the Chinese government policy towards Hungary and Egypt (both the Hungarian crisis and the Suez crisis broke out during the delegation's visit), he enquired about the Chinese leaders' conception of the freedom of the press (Croft 1958, 251-6). Years later, Bernini would remember that Deng Xiaoping replied to the question by the British delegate on the lack of freedom of the press in China, stating that

‘every country has its particular internal rule, related to current difficulties’ and ‘today the essential thing – internationally – was not the concern over internal limits of other countries but rather the cooperation based on mutual respect and interest, so as to overcome the backwardness and facilitate the progress of every people’: and ‘this is

16 Bruno Bernini autobiographical manuscript, ISTORECO, Fondo Bernini, 87.

17 Bruno Bernini autobiographical manuscript, ISTORECO, Fondo Bernini, 84/3.

18 Liu Xiyuan in 1952 had been deputy head of the youth department of the political office of the People's Liberation Army.

19 Bruno Bernini autobiographical manuscript, ISTORECO, Fondo Bernini, 85-6.

the meaning of our government's international commitment, aimed at developing relations of collaboration and exchange with every country, that, besides being of mutual interest - is also decisive to overcome prejudices and build world peace'.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, Bernini's travels to China also allowed him to appreciate the enormity of the task Chinese leaders had undertaken for the development of the country, as well as their willingness to show foreigners not just the achievements in the construction of socialism but also the conditions of extreme poverty in which the population lived:

For me, it was the first World Council in which I participated as President and it was the first time that an important meeting of the WFDY was held in the People's Republic of China. I remember that we were received with large youth demonstrations; then, the unforgettable visits to Monuments and historical sites in Beijing - in particular, the Imperial Palace and the Great Wall; and at last, the tours in the most decayed areas of the city, with so many people, women and children, who lived in shanties in conditions of backwardness beyond words: this in order that we understood - Hu Yao Ban [Hu Yaobang] told me - the enormous endeavour of reconstruction and development 'the New China was striving for'.<sup>21</sup>

From his travels to China, Bernini clearly was left with a profoundly positive impression of the country and the potential of the PRC's contribution to peaceful international change. As he put it,

From those travels in China, from the unforgettable experiences I had - of an immense people, exhausted by backwardness and poverty from which it was determined to free itself - and from the relations I had with the leaders of the youth and the Party - Hu Yao Ban [Hu Yaobang], Ciu En Lay [Zhou Enlai] and Die Xiao Pin [Deng Xiaoping] - I became convinced not only of the importance of the contribution that would come for the WFDY renewal, but also of the important contribution that the New China would make to the development of new relations of international collaboration and, especially, between the industrialised North and the Countries of the Third World, crucial for both the progress of the peoples and of world peace.<sup>22</sup>

20 Bruno Bernini autobiographical manuscript, ISTORECO, Fondo Bernini, 88.

21 Bruno Bernini autobiographical manuscript, ISTORECO, Fondo Bernini, 86.

22 Bruno Bernini autobiographical manuscript, ISTORECO, Fondo Bernini, 88.

## 6 Conclusion

In the '50s Chinese and Italian Communists could rely on a wide network of national and international organisations that allowed the establishment and development of early contacts and exchanges. This article has shown that international political activism played an important role in this respect: the WFDY provided a few Italian Communists with the opportunity to visit Mao's China and gain direct insight into the approach and policies of Chinese leaders. These early experiences contributed to laying the groundwork for party-to-party bilateral exchanges in the mid and late-'50s. At the same time, left-wing international activities allowed China to create personal links with foreign leaders at the very early stage of their career that could eventually prove useful years later. This can be seen for example in the fact that at the beginning of 1979, when the CCP laid the basis for resuming its relations with the ICP after sixteen years, Wu Xueqian, then deputy-director of the CCP External Liaison Department, was chosen as the most suitable person to be sent to Rome for a secret meeting with ICP representatives because of his youthful experiences at the international level, which had allowed him to become acquainted with Enrico Berlinguer, who had since become the national secretary of the ICP (Wang, Zhu 1992, 376-7). Early contacts among young representatives also turned into long-lasting bonds of friendship. According to Antonio Rubbi's memoirs, in the '80s - when relations among Communist parties had been resumed - Hu Yaobang never missed the opportunity to invite both Ugo Pecchioli and Bruno Bernini to China. At the end of every meeting of party representatives, he would ask the Italians to tell Pecchioli and Bernini he wished to see them (Rubbi 1992, 299).

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