

Italian Communism and Anti-Masonic Action: The Polemics of Amadeo Bordiga, 1912–1922

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Abstract

In the early twentieth century, the political status of freemasonry was increasingly called into question. In Italy, a key aspect of these discussions revolved around the perceived contradiction between masonic affiliations and working-class political commitments. A key figure within this context was the Italian writer Amadeo Bordiga, a Marxist who became one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party. In a series of polemical articles written between 1912 and 1922, Bordiga argued that freemasonry was based on bourgeois and conservative foundations, while calling for the expulsion of freemasons from socialist organisations.

This article examines these polemics, as well as the events surrounding their publication. We will see how Bordiga's engagement with anti-masonry intersected with significant moments in his political career—spanning from his youthful intransigence within the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) to his eventual role as the internationally recognised leader of the Leninist movement in Italy. Bordiga's relationship with Benito Mussolini will be discussed, as well as the way in which the two men carried over their early anti-masonic efforts into the development of new political directions in the 1920s. Finally, some attention will be given to how these findings fit into the current historiography on the topic.

Keywords: Amadeo Bordiga; communism; socialism; freemasonry; anti-masonry

Introduction

Freemasonry originated in the associational milieu of urban London in the early eighteenth century.¹ It was based on a mixture of heterogeneous philosophical, esoteric, and religious elements, blended into a system of ritual and live performance, in which members would undergo initiations with the goal of obtaining intellectual insights. This eclectic blend of ideas and practices proved compelling, facilitating freemasonry's global diffusion and establishing it as one of the largest non-governmental secular organisations.

An important source for early masonic philosophy was the Enlightenment—consequently, themes such as progress, perfectibility, and cosmopolitanism played a key role.² As a result, freemasonry in the early eighteenth century was marked by relative tolerance and inclusivity, promoting values that enabled the establishment of lodges across a wide range of cultural, social, and religious contexts. Integral to this philosophy was the idea that the fraternity should bridge different social strata. Thus, in masonic literature we find “the rhetoric of equality, universal brotherhood, and liberty from all class distinctions.”³

However, while freemasonry maintained this “fraternal egalitarianism on the level of ideas,” it also cultivated an “aura of elite sociability, which nurtured the perception of there being a close affiliation between the fraternity and other influential groups in society that were in positions of political or economic power.”⁴ These perceptions of social elitism are closely connected to freemasonry's practices of secrecy, through which the fraternity creates a social-epistemic gap between insiders and outsiders.⁵ Perceptions of freemasonry as an elite phenomenon would persist, and lead to widespread distrust of the fraternity in the public press.

On a related note, we can observe freemasonry's political ambiguity. Since its

1. Jacob, *The Origins of Freemasonry*, 11–25.

2. For an overview of Enlightenment influence, see Önnersfors, *Freemasonry*, 46–62.

3. Urban, “Elitism and Esotericism,” 9.

4. Önnersfors, *Freemasonry*, 107.

5. On the social-epistemic implications of secrecy, see Urban, “The Torment of Secrecy”; Urban, *Secrecy*.

emergence in the eighteenth century, it has encompassed a tension between an inward-looking, ostensibly apolitical orientation—where individual refinement would take place *intra muros* (within the walls)—and a more outwardly engaged, radical strain, in which freemasonry was seen as necessitating socio-political action.⁶ Whereas Anglo-Saxon Freemasonry tended to favour the former, continental freemasonry frequently adopted a more radical orientation, challenging church and crown. In Southern Europe especially, anti-clerical perspectives were popular among freemasons, which placed them in conflict with their predominantly Catholic environment.⁷

In societies marked by significant inequality and political corruption, perceptions of freemasonry as an obscure and influential network often reinforced anxieties that critical political decisions were being made within informal economies, beyond the reach of public accountability or electoral oversight.⁸ This provoked a variety of responses from religious and political movements, who felt they had to reckon with freemasonry's power and influence. By the early twentieth century, elements of anti-masonic rhetoric had been absorbed into various political movements.

This article is about one particular wave of anti-masonic campaigning within socialist and communist organisations in early twentieth-century Italy.⁹ This period saw two major purges of freemasons from socialist organisations—first in the Italian Socialist Party (Partito Socialista Italiano, PSI) in 1914, and secondly, in all organisations affiliated with the Third International in 1922, including the newly established Communist Party of Italy (Partito Comunista d'Italia, PCI). These anti-masonic campaigns and measures will be examined through the role of one of their principal advocates and legitimisers: the Italian writer and political theorist Amadeo Bordiga.

6. Önnersfors, *Freemasonry*, 23–24.

7. Lyttelton, “An Old Church,” 230; Önnersfors, *Freemasonry*, 18.

8. On the perceptions, prejudices and persecutions of freemasonry, see Önnersfors, *Freemasonry*, 105–24.

9. The broader relationship between freemasonry and socialism, labour, and trade unions is ambiguous and complex. Scholarship on the topic is relatively scarce, for some studies, see Halstead and Prescott, “Masonry, Fraternity and Labour”; Arvidsson, *The Style and Mythology*.

The Early Life of Amadeo Bordiga

Amadeo Bordiga was born in Naples on the 13th of June 1889.¹⁰ Oreste Bordiga, his father, was well-known in the area as a professor of agricultural science. His mother, Zaira degli Amadei, was an aristocrat who claimed descent from Italian nobility, naming her son Amadeo in honour of this heritage.¹¹ As a consequence of this, the backdrop of Bordiga's youth was characterised by an affluent and intellectual domestic environment, where the young Bordiga often found himself surrounded by well-educated and progressive individuals. This early exposure to the privileged sphere of intellectual study would notably impact the course of his life, instilling within him a great appreciation for both the natural sciences and historical progress.

Over the course of his secondary education, Bordiga studied philosophy and was there first exposed to the theories of Marxism.¹² This particular system of socio-economic analysis resonated deeply with him, both as a theoretical method and as an ideological outlook. For Bordiga, Marxism held the potential to illuminate the underlying dynamics of the world, with its implicit power structures and complicated history, in a manner both scientific and profoundly meaningful.¹³ Henceforth, he fully immersed himself in an extensive study of the Marxist classics.¹⁴

His passion for this endeavour was matched by a natural talent for mathematics and science, which led him to commence a course of study in engineering at the University of Naples. Bordiga understood his keen interest in engineering and mathematics to be fully compatible with his strong attraction to Marxism, as he firmly believed that the very same materialist underpinnings

10. Chiaradia, "The Spectral Figure," 9. For a biography of Bordiga, see De Clementi, *Amadeo Bordiga*, for a bibliography, see Peregalli and Saggiorno, *Bibliografia*.

11. Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 138–39.

12. Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 138–39.

13. Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 138–39. This duality was the inspiration for the title of the recent translation of his work into English: Bordiga, *The Science and Passion of Communism*.

14. Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 139.

of physicalist science reinforced Marxist social analysis.¹⁵ In 1910, he officially became a member of the PSI.¹⁶

As a political organisation, the PSI embodied the dual nature of Marxism in the early twentieth century, which served as both a foundation for reformist policies and revolutionary fervour. Bordiga became a standard-bearer for the revolution, firmly allying himself with the so-called “intransigents” within the PSI.¹⁷ This faction, a steadfast minority, clung to the idea that an intransigent (inflexible) Marxist system should be the guiding principle of the party, setting themselves against the dominant reformist elements.¹⁸ They rejected alliances with similar leftist parties, striving instead for ideological purity and demanding the removal of reformists from their ranks.

Benito Mussolini (1883–1945), at the time a notable figure within the PSI’s radical faction, quickly became a favourite of Bordiga.¹⁹ As the supreme hope for the intransigents, Mussolini fully aligned himself with radical socialism.²⁰ He was a provocative character in this milieu, branding himself “a real heretic” and the messenger of “absolute intransigence.”²¹ Mussolini notably opposed many of his own party’s members, asserting that professions such as law and priesthood were fundamentally at odds with the principles of authentic socialism. With regards to this issue, he prioritised the need for action over contemplation, vigorously calling for the expulsion of these “impure elements” from the organisation.²² Bordiga praised him as the only national leader who fully understood the warlike truths of Marxism, and subsequently a deep

15. In 1912 Bordiga wrote: “We believe in revolution, not as the Catholic Church believes in Christ, but as the mathematician in the results of his research,” as cited in Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 140.

16. For an overview of Bordiga’s involvement with the PSI, see De Clementi, *Amadeo Bordiga*, 9–58.

17. Craver, “The Third Generation,” 210.

18. Hoare and Smith, introduction, xxix.

19. When considering Mussolini in this period it is important to caution against anachronism, of “manufacturing a coherent Fascist chief (if there ever was such a person) well before the event.” See Bosworth, *Mussolini*, 76.

20. Robsworth, *Mussolini*, 76–99; Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 111–37.

21. Bosworth, *Mussolini*, 77–78.

22. Bosworth, *Mussolini*, 88.

friendship formed between them.²³ This burgeoning association was poised to steer a forthcoming shift within the party.

The Beginnings of Bordiga’s Anti-Masonry

In 1910, Bordiga’s affiliation with the PSI coincided with a notable period in the party’s history. As the historian Christian Palmieri has pointed out, this juncture was notably marked by an emerging opposition to freemasonry.²⁴ At the Milan congress organised by the PSI in October of that year, Mussolini and Gaetano Salvemini (1873–1957) attempted to confront this perceived issue through the introduction of an anti-masonic motion. This initiative sought to compel congress attendees to publicly renounce any ties with the fraternity, with freemasonry being defined, as per Salvemini’s account, as “an occult disease against which there is no remedy.”²⁵ Though the proposal was ultimately not adopted, this incident sheds light on the concerns within the PSI at the precise juncture that Bordiga became of member of this organisation.

Bordiga began his foray into political commentary in late 1911, a move that marked the beginning of his revolutionary career.²⁶ March 1912 witnessed an important development with the release of one of Bordiga’s earliest articles—his first to explicitly address the topic of freemasonry.²⁷ This article, titled “C. Malato e la Massoneria” (“C. Malato and Freemasonry”), featured in the socialist periodical *L’Avanguardia* and took the form of an interview with the Italian-French anarchist Charles Malato (1857–1938).²⁸

23. Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 140.

24. Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 24.

25. Salvemini, as quoted in Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 24.

26. Peregalli and Saggiaro, *Bibliografia*, 23. This article is concerned with signed articles by Bordiga; unsigned, anonymous anti-masonic articles attributed to him are not included in this study. For speculation about which anonymous articles might have been written by Bordiga in the period under consideration, see the table of contents in Gerosa, ed., *Scritti 1911–1926*, vol. 1.

27. Peregalli and Saggiaro, *Bibliografia*, 23; Bordiga, “C. Malato.”

28. Bordiga had the erroneous impression that Malato was of Spanish origin. This is corrected in a footnote added by Luigi Gerosa, the editor of his published works. See Gerosa, ed., *Scritti 1911–1926*, 1:32, footnote 1.

In this article, a youthful Bordiga assumes the role of the interviewer, entering into dialogue with Malato, an experienced “old militant of revolutionary ideas” now in his mid-fifties.²⁹ Throughout their exchange, Malato shares anecdotes of his personal encounters with freemasonry, as well as offering his analysis of freemasonry’s role in modern social life. Notably, he discloses his former membership of the fraternity to Bordiga, a bond he severed following its response to the so-called “Ferrer trial.”

Francisco Ferrer y Guardia (1859–1909) was an anarchist educator and friend of Malato, who was condemned in a mock trial for inciting a popular uprising and executed on 13 October 1909. Ferrer, though not widely known beyond radical groups, became the centre of an international outcry following his death, prompting responses from many prominent intellectuals of the time. In the realm of European libertarian socialism, the Ferrer case became a *cause célèbre*, with Ferrer venerated as a martyr for the cause.³⁰

According to Malato’s testimony, the freemasons had responded to this incident quite differently from the libertarian socialists. He asserted that the fraternity sought to suppress the unrest sparked by the Ferrer trial.³¹ This decision prompted Malato to withdraw from freemasonry, as he believed that its attempts to pacify this situation made it complicit in both maintaining the status quo and stifling genuine expressions of proletarian outrage.³² In the end, Malato viewed the conservatism of freemasonry in this matter as antithetical to his own revolutionary spirit.

Throughout the interview, Malato articulated an ambiguous view of freemasonry. While he praised the virtuous socialists among its members and its legacy in prior revolutionary history, his current “best hypothesis” suggested that the freemasonry of his own time had become an enclave predominantly composed of bourgeois elements. Malato stated that, in his opinion, these bourgeois elements actively functioned as a deterrent or “buffer” to revolutionary

29. Bordiga, “C. Malato.”

30. Park, “The European Reaction”; Laqua, “Freethinkers, Anarchists.”

31. Bordiga, “C. Malato.”

32. Bordiga, “C. Malato.”

proclivities.³³ Despite the interview’s overall critical and conspiratorial stance towards freemasonry, Malato’s reflections on his former associates were notably mixed, suggesting that his departure from freemasonry stemmed from growing scepticism and increasing critique rather than any fervent opposition.

Nevertheless, the campaign against freemasonry within the PSI proceeded undeterred. At the PSI’s regional congress in Emilia Romagna on 16 June 1912, a referendum advocating for the expulsion of freemasons from the party was prepared.³⁴ Approximately a month later, at the congress held in Reggio Emilia, the decision to expel freemasons was put to vote. While a considerable majority supported the expulsion, the low turnout—less than half of those present—caused the vote to lack the necessary weight to effectuate it.³⁵ As a result, the matter was postponed to be revisited at the forthcoming national congress in Ancona.³⁶

As anti-masonic discourse gained prominence within the party, it became clear that the congress in Ancona would play a crucial role in determining the PSI’s official position on this contentious issue. Amid the fervent discourse which followed, in July 1912, Bordiga seized the opportunity to articulate his stance on the issue publicly. At the height of this debate, he presented his second anti-masonic article, titled “Combattiamo i massoni!” (“Let’s fight the freemasons!”), which, like its predecessor, found publication in *L’Avanguardia*.³⁷

Anticipating the Congress of Ancona, 1912–1914

In “Combattiamo i massoni!,” Bordiga articulates his personal opinion of freemasonry for the first time in writing, opening the article with a bold and passionate stance, drawing attention to his fears surrounding what he refers

33. Bordiga, “C. Malato.”

34. Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 25. For the primary text proposing the referendum, see the appendix at De Felice, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario*, 672–74.

35. Out of 29,971 members, 13,120 voted, out of which 9,514 voted for incompatibility, see Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 25.

36. Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 25.

37. Bordiga, “Combattiamo.”

to as the “masonic danger” and its perceived escalation. Adopting a polemical tone, he calls for an unambiguous and direct challenge to this imagined threat, proclaiming, “we must directly attack the enemy that threatens us.”³⁸ In contrast to Malato’s restrained and more ambiguous perspective, Bordiga’s own discourse is distinguished by its emphatic severity, highlighting a divergence in their approaches to this perceived issue.

Bordiga characterises the Freemasons as proponents of a vacuous ideology, riddled with incoherent bourgeois ideas.³⁹ He portrays freemasonry as a blend of pseudohistorical and quasi-religious beliefs, aligned with the patriotism and democratism endemic to the ruling ideology. In contradistinction to these “confused beliefs,” he positions Marxism as a distinguished and principled philosophical system, tangibly anchored in historical and scientific analysis. Socialism is, therefore, portrayed as a force intent on transforming society’s foundational structures rather than preserving them, juxtaposed to the conservative tendencies of freemasonry.⁴⁰

The broader context of Bordiga’s critique becomes more apparent as he reflects on the prevailing perception of freemasonry within the PSI. In one section, he illuminates the backdrop against which his polemic took shape, remarking that “it has become an unfortunate habit to shrug one’s shoulders when one hears this word [freemasonry] and to brand as exaggeration those comrades who draw attention to the masonic question.”⁴¹ This observation reveals the tendency to dismiss concerns regarding freemasonry among his peers and hints at the fact that a significant portion of the party may not have regarded freemasonry as a serious menace. This is supported by the evidence of previously aforementioned voting trends, wherein motions to curb masonic influence were not always able to achieve adequate backing.

38. Bordiga, “Combattiamo.”

39. Bordiga, “Combattiamo.”

40. Bordiga, “Combattiamo.”

41. Bordiga, “Combattiamo.”

When viewed in this context, Bordiga's heated arguments against freemasonry can be interpreted as an attempt to convince or persuade the unmoved majority about the seriousness of his cause. In anticipation of the upcoming Congress of Ancona, with its crucial referendum on freemasonry, we witness an urgency in Bordiga's anti-masonic discourse. Significantly, most of this takes the form of polemics intended to irrefutably demonstrate the incompatibility between socialism and freemasonry, with Bordiga again portraying the latter as an empty and conspicuous bourgeois ideology conclusively at odds with the core tenets of socialism.

Bordiga would continue these efforts with the publication of his third and last anti-masonic polemic prior to the Congress of Ancona, "Ferrer e la Massoneria" ("Ferrer and freemasonry"), which was printed in *Avanti!* on 22 October 1912.⁴² This article was intended to build upon the argument for the incompatibility of freemasonry and socialism that he had previously developed that same year, forming a bridge between his interview with Malato and his own polemic.

In this piece, Bordiga repeatedly asserts his belief in the complicity of freemasonry in the death of Ferrer, whom Bordiga characterises as having been abandoned by the fraternity due to his sincere but dangerous revolutionary tendencies.⁴³ He utilises this incident in an attempt to illustrate his argument that "freemasons - in good or bad faith - come in reality from a body of conservation and defence of the bourgeois class," an ideology fundamentally opposed to the core principles of socialism.⁴⁴ Bordiga continues by arguing that, while freemasonry creates the illusion of philosophical radicalism, the fact that its radical activities are carried out in secrecy evinces its inherent conservatism and incompatibility with revolutionary action. He concludes the article by writing that the final decision regarding this issue was in the hands of the referendum which would soon take place at Ancona.⁴⁵

42. Bordiga, "Ferrer."

43. Bordiga, "Ferrer."

44. Bordiga, "Ferrer."

45. Bordiga, "Ferrer."

The Congress of Ancona, 1914

From 26–29 April 1914, the Congress of Ancona convened, earmarking the relationship between socialism and freemasonry as the eighth point on its agenda.⁴⁶ This topic, delayed from the previous referendum in Reggio Emilia, promised contributions from delegates representing the PSI's numerous regional divisions throughout Italy.

Representing the delegation from Naples at the congress, Bordiga, by then a rising star within the PSI, took to the podium at a national congress for the first time. He commenced his address by lauding his colleague Mussolini as the party's most dependable authority.⁴⁷ Throughout the congress, Bordiga vocalized his recurrent apprehensions regarding freemasonry, linking specific political confusions in Naples to reformist “blockades” and the surreptitious presence of freemasons within the party ranks.⁴⁸

The congress dedicated its second day, 27 April 1914, to addressing the contentious question of freemasonry's compatibility with socialism. The session began with speeches from various representatives, laying out the spectrum of opinions on this issue. Giovanni Zibordi (1870–1943) and Mussolini presented arguments supporting the notion that freemasonry and socialism were incompatible and advocating for the expulsion of freemasons from the party. Conversely, the prominent socialist and freemason Alfredo Poggi (1881–1974) would argue in defence of their compatibility.⁴⁹

With much fervour, Mussolini delivered a speech which forcefully linked freemasonry to the spheres of banking and law, prompting extended applause from his captivated audience. Mussolini's address culminated in an appeal for transparency and openness which he figuratively associated with light, positioning these qualities in direct opposition to the secrecy and darkness he equated with freemasonry:

46. De Felice, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario*, 177.

47. Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 143.

48. Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 39.

49. De Felice, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario*, 191.

“More light, more light!” said Goethe as he died. And we too say: “More light, more light!” Enough of the darkness of the lodges; let us face each other!⁵⁰

Among the 34,152 voters, a commanding majority of 27,378 endorsed the Zibordi-Mussolini proposal to expel Freemasons, while a mere 1,819 supported Poggi’s thesis on compatibility.⁵¹ This decisive outcome led to freemasonry being officially declared incompatible with socialism, sanctioning the removal of those within the party who would not adhere to this ruling. After years of anti-masonic campaigning, the aspirations of Mussolini and Bordiga were finally achieved.

A Parting of the Ways

The collaboration between Bordiga and Mussolini was not to last, with the outbreak of World War I just a few months later playing a crucial role in their estrangement. Always a staunch opponent of war participation, Bordiga found himself at odds with Mussolini when the latter shifted towards interventionism in the war and began to espouse nationalist views. This divergence of positions caused Bordiga to become a vocal critic of his former ally.⁵²

Eventually, Mussolini resigned from his position as the editor of *Avanti!*, a move that left Bordiga feeling disheartened, as reflected in his writings: “In this moment of unhappy separation for all, we can only send our deeply felt salutation to Benito Mussolini, expressing the sentiments of all socialists.”⁵³ Three weeks after stepping down, Mussolini’s establishment of his own newspaper, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, cemented the final break between him and Bordiga.⁵⁴ Bordiga, now regarding Mussolini as a traitor and adversary, advocated for his expulsion from the PSI and proposed a boycott of his newly founded periodical.⁵⁵

50. Mussolini, “La discussione.” A full reproduction of the text can be found in Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 40–42.

51. De Felice, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario*, 191; Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 43.

52. Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 147.

53. Bordiga, as cited in Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 147.

54. This newspaper would later, from October 1922 onwards, become the official press organ of Fascist Italy. See Robsworth, *Mussolini*, 106.

55. Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 147.

In his formative years, Bordiga regarded Mussolini as the beacon of hope for the workers' movement, yet these events signified a permanent break between the two former allies as their paths diverged irrevocably. Mussolini began to promote a brand of socialism that was “national” and “anti-Marxist,” before ultimately discarding the label altogether in favour of fascism.⁵⁶ At the same time, Bordiga moved in a starkly different direction, exchanging Mussolini for a new ideological champion. He found renewed hope for the future of Italian communism in the figure of Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924). Lenin's revolutionary leadership and unwavering commitment to orthodox Marxism positioned him as Bordiga's newfound inspiration, a figure capable of guiding Italy towards a classless and stateless society.

The Origins of Leninism

Leninism would become the defining aspect of Bordiga's political outlook from this point onward. We must now turn our attention to Russia, the birthplace of Leninism, as it was here that “Marxism was transformed into a dogmatic system of dialectical and historical materialism, combined with innovative theories of party and revolution.”⁵⁷

It is important to acknowledge the historical setting in which Russian Marxists were writing. The Tsarist regime of the nineteenth century had attempted to eradicate and outlaw almost all political action and thought, yet it was also unable to enforce its ban on ideas.⁵⁸ Within Russian Marxism, this situation sparked a debate on the optimal type of party organisation for success in the face of political repression. Marx himself was of little guidance here, as he had lived in nineteenth-century Germany, a society in which the working

56. Robsworth, *Mussolini*, 120.

57. Van der Zweerde, *Russian Political Philosophy*, 37.

58. Meyer, *Leninism*, 20.

class possessed the right to vote, as well as freedom of speech and association.⁵⁹ This problem of how to achieve a classless and stateless society across vastly different political contexts forced an innovation which would be crucial in settling the political nature of Marxism in Russia.⁶⁰

As the twentieth century dawned, this debate attained a heightened sense of urgency. The Russian Social Democratic Labour Party found itself divided into two opposing wings—subsequently known as the Menshevik and Bolshevik factions. The Mensheviks favoured a party with a broad membership, dedicated to organising the working class for legal political action in line with the social-democratic models of Western Europe.⁶¹

In opposition, Lenin introduced his most significant innovation to Marxist strategy with the proposal of a novel type of party organisation.⁶² Advocating for an essentially illegal and covert party characterised by a robust, military-like organisation, Lenin introduced the concept of the vanguard party. This group was to consist of the most advanced sector of the working class: intellectuals trained in scientific socialism who would serve as professional revolutionaries. To fully grasp the critical role of these professional revolutionaries and their connection to the broader working class, a deeper exploration of Lenin's perspective on the masses is essential. This inquiry sheds light on the underlying rationale for such a party structure and its intended function within the revolutionary movement.

Lenin contended that, if left to their own devices, the working class would remain inert and unable to achieve its historical destiny. While recognising the workers' awareness of their suffering under capitalism, Lenin often characterised

59. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, 810. Besides that, important to note is that a lot of Marx's texts, such as *The German Ideology*, and the *Paris Manuscripts* were unavailable to Lenin. He rather relied on *The Communist Manifesto*, *Capital*, and texts by Friedrich Engels, which were much more readily accessible in Russia at the time.

60. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, 810–11.

61. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, 812.

62. Van der Zweerde, *Russian Political Philosophy*, 51.

this awareness as a “nonrational revolt,” marked by mere feelings or “spontaneity.”⁶³ These feelings, he believed, possessed destructive, formidable, and fertile qualities, but if not properly directed, they would result in senseless violence.

Lenin juxtaposed the notion of spontaneity with a pivotal element of his philosophical framework: “consciousness.”⁶⁴ He posited that the elite cadre of revolutionaries within the vanguard party was essential for harnessing the raw spontaneity of the masses, guiding it in accordance with historical determinism. This principle underpins the Leninist conceptualisation of the party as the tangible manifestation, or institutionalisation, of consciousness.⁶⁵ Within this framework, the party assumes a role of intellectual and scientific authority, exerting control over the unstructured spontaneity of the working class and thereby channelling it towards revolutionary objectives.

The Emergence of the PCI

The year 1917 was a watershed moment in political history as the world was shaken by the force of the Bolshevik Revolution. As the first architects of a majorly successful socialist uprising, the Bolshevik Revolution was recognised within communist circles as an influential model which could potentially be replicated by revolutionaries all over the world.⁶⁶

As reports of the purported success of the Bolshevik Revolution began to circulate throughout Italy, a renewed revolutionary fervour ignited within the PSI. The prospect of emulating this triumph in an Italian context ceased to be a mere ideal. Rather, it transformed into something concrete, tangible, and seemingly within grasp:

The idea of “doing the same as in Russia” spread like wildfire. By May the prefect of the city was asking the Government to proclaim the province of Turin a “war zone”.

63. Meyer, *Leninism*, 29.

64. Meyer, *Leninism*, 28–29.

65. Meyer, *Leninism*, 32–33.

66. Conversely, Mussolini described Leninism as entailing “autocracy, bestiality, terror and chaos.” See Robsworth, *Mussolini*, 120.

Socialist speakers urged workers to “come to meetings in the future . . . with revolvers . . .” to use against the police, and stressed that “it is imperative not to waste time, but to work actively for a general insurrection, get hold of bombs . . .”, etc.⁶⁷

Apart from energising the Italian socialists, the Bolshevik Revolution would also significantly shift the emphasis from the developed European nations to lesser-developed countries as the centre of revolutionary action. This paradigm shift, which reallocated attention from affluent countries to the global periphery, deeply influenced Bordiga, a native of southern Italy—a region whose poverty stood in great contrast to the wealthier north.⁶⁸ All of this provided both the inspiration and the initiative to transpose the strategies of the Bolsheviks into the context of an Italian political framework.⁶⁹

In 1919, the PSI expressed its desire to affiliate with the Third International (the Comintern), a global communist organisation directed by the Soviet Union.⁷⁰ Shortly thereafter, the Third International demanded that, if the PSI desired to be affiliated with the organisation, it must expel all reformist and moderate elements from the party. Bordiga, with his appetite for revolutionary change, championed this expulsion and proposed that the PSI should abstain from electoral politics, instead transforming itself into a select and militant revolutionary force.⁷¹ Despite the PSI’s eagerness to join the International, a considerable segment of the party resisted Bordiga’s radical proposals. Their lack of cohesion and cautious stance ultimately left them unable to meet the prerequisites for membership.⁷²

The left wing of the party, the stringent communists, were unsatisfied with this result. Between 1919 and 1920, they began to make plans to split from

67. Hoare and Smith, Introduction, xxxii.

68. Chiaradia, “The Spectral Figure,” 51–58; Grenville, *A History*, 31–36.

69. Bordiga for instance called the Bolshevik Revolution a “glorious and shining example” for the Italian situation. See his 1919 article “Il bolscevismo.” See also De Grand, *The Italian Left*, 35; Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 138.

70. De Grand, *The Italian Left*, 36.

71. De Grand, *The Italian Left*, 38.

72. De Grand, *The Italian Left*, 40–41.

the greater party.⁷³ Yet the communists were also internally divided, owing to significant disagreements regarding how to structure the new organisation. There were two key groups defending two very different political strategies. One was headed by Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), who saw the factory occupations in Turin as the foremost edge of revolutionary action, being more so influenced by syndicalism and council communism.⁷⁴ The other faction was headed by Bordiga, who, once again, found himself heavily influenced by the Leninist model and emphasised the formation of a strong and unified party.

Despite their initial differences, these factions found common ground at the 1921 Livorno Congress, leading to a decisive split from the PSI and the subsequent formation of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) under Bordiga's leadership.⁷⁵ This newly established party quickly garnered support, attracting approximately 42,000 members. Within less than a month of its inception, the Third International endorsed the PCI as the sole legitimate communist party in Italy, solidifying its status in the international communist movement.⁷⁶ The founding of the PCI under Bordiga's leadership marked a significant milestone in his political career. Under his guidance, the party would adopt a firmly "orthodox" communist position, backed by the Soviet Union and now unencumbered by the influence of the reformists whom Bordiga had so deeply opposed. This significant moment in the party's history was celebrated with enthusiastic commendations from the wider international communist movement. When in December 1921, Bordiga applied for a passport, a government official described him as "the soul of the communist movement in Italy."⁷⁷

73. De Grand, *The Italian Left*, 45.

74. El-Ojeili, "Communism," 347.

75. De Grand, *The Italian Left*, 45.

76. De Grand, *The Italian Left*, 46.

77. Chiaradia, "The Spectral Figure," 185.

Anti-Masonry in the Third International, 1922

From 5 November to 5 December 1922, the Fourth World Congress of the Third International convened, with eight distinct resolutions tabled for debate. One noteworthy resolution, the “Political Resolution on the French Question,” included a section which addressed “freemasonry, the League for the Rights of Man, and the bourgeois press.”⁷⁸ Here, a proposal was put forth, seeking to prohibit party members from holding affiliations with freemasonry. In the 28th session, held on 1 December 1922, Lev Davidovich Bronstein (1879–1940), better known as Leon Trotsky, presented his personal viewpoint on the matter:

What must be stressed is the complete, absolute, and irreconcilable incompatibility of the revolutionary spirit with that of petty-bourgeois freemasonry, which is a tool of the big bourgeoisie.⁷⁹

Moreover, Trotsky would argue during the congress that, “we made an error of criminal laxity by allowing valuable comrades to belong to the masons. But as soon as we recognised this error, we launched an irreconcilable struggle against this apparatus for preventing revolution.”⁸⁰

The resolution was adopted, compelling any “communist freemason” to publicly renounce his ties to freemasonry by 1 January 1923.⁸¹ Should it be revealed past this deadline that a member of the Communist party had maintained affiliation with freemasonry, they would face expulsion. Additionally, the resolution stipulated that individuals severing their masonic ties were ineligible to occupy significant roles within the party for a two-year period, ensuring a clear demarcation between party allegiance and masonic association. Once this

78. For an English translation of the proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Third International, see Ridell, ed., *Towards the United Front*. For the specific resolution on the “French Question,” see 1123–32; on “Freemasonry, the League of the Rights of Man, and the bourgeois press,” see 1128–30.

79. Trotsky as cited in Ridell, *Towards the United Front*, 995.

80. Ridell, *Towards the United Front*, 997.

81. Andrés, “Aproximaciones,” 44.

decision was formalised, the press organs affiliated with the Third International initiated the publication of a series of anti-masonic articles. This move was strategically aimed at countering any dissent regarding the decisive policy of masonic expulsion which had been ratified at the congress.

On 24 December, an earlier anti-masonic article by Trotsky, “Communisme et franc-maçonnerie” (“Communism and freemasonry”), was reprinted in *L’Humanité*, the official newspaper of the French Communist Party (Parti communiste français, PCF).⁸² In a closely timed sequence, the very next day saw the republication of the first segment of Bordiga’s extensive anti-masonic article, “Le mouvement ouvrier italien et la franc-maçonnerie,” in the same newspaper—this time addressing the issue from an Italian perspective.⁸³ In 1922, Bordiga was at the zenith of his influence and authority; therefore the juxtaposition of his article with Trotsky’s from the previous day saw them form an imposing two-pronged persuasive force. This argumentative strategy was designed to quell scepticism surrounding the anti-masonic resolutions and measures enacted at the Fourth Congress.

Bordiga’s 1922 article, which addresses a French readership, escalated his critique beyond his previous anti-masonic polemics.⁸⁴ Now, adopting a more conspiratorial tone than before, Bordiga argued that freemasonry served within the early years of the PSI as the “occult centre,” orchestrating the diversion of the proletariat from its class struggle.⁸⁵ Recounting his interpretation of the PSI’s recent history, he asserted that freemasons had, at one point, exercised

82. Trotsky, “Communisme et franc-maçonnerie.” The original article was published on 25 November 1922. See the bibliography for the different versions.

83. The text has a complicated publication history. It was first published in *La Correspondance Internationale* on 16 December 1922. The first part of the text was then reproduced in *L’Humanité* on 25 December 1922. The first text in its original form is lost, while the second is available in the archive of *L’Humanité*. A digital retranslated version of the lost original version was published on the website marxists.org. See the bibliography for the different versions, Bordiga, “Le mouvement.”

84. Bordiga, “Le mouvement.”

85. Bordiga, “Le mouvement.”

complete control over the party, ushering in an era in which reformism had weakened the revolutionary fervency of the workers' movement.

This polemic also discusses the broader implications of freemasonry's influence on socialism, suggesting that it led to a dilution of socialist principles into a form of bourgeois democratism. Bordiga adopts a dramatic tone, striving to persuade his readership vis-à-vis the absolute opposition of freemasonry and socialism:

Socialism had forgotten that it was forged out of a powerful critique which was directly opposed to bourgeois democracy and to the mountain of hypocrisy and lies on which it was built thanks to the ingenuity of those who were its proponents and to the dishonesty of those who were its leaders. We have been able to re-establish for our own part and for the proletariat, these rich truths regarding doctrine and propaganda which is informed by an iconoclastic drive which sheds light on the dark recesses of the temple of the Great Architect.⁸⁶

An interesting aspect of this citation lies in its employment of the light-darkness metaphor, in which communism's iconoclastic zeal is likened to a beacon of light, contrasted with freemasonry's depiction as an obscure, dark force. This specific metaphor echoes Mussolini's rhetoric at the 1914 Ancona Congress, a speech witnessed first-hand by Bordiga.⁸⁷ This parallel raises the possibility that Bordiga may have borrowed a metaphor with distinctly "Mussolinian" connotations.

Continuing his narrative, Bordiga proudly recounts his initial anti-masonic endeavours between 1912 and 1914. He underscores key moments, such the Socialist Congress of Reggio Emilia in 1912 and the subsequent gathering in Ancona in 1914, where freemasonry was unequivocally declared to be incompatible with the principles of socialism. Bordiga writes that, during the purge following the Congress of Ancona, the "parasites" left the party, while the true workers remained.⁸⁸ In light of this, he urged his French counterparts to acknowledge the importance of the Third International's anti-masonic

86. Bordiga, "Le mouvement."

87. Cf. with the passage cited earlier from Mussolini, "La discussione."

88. Bordiga, "Le mouvement."

decision. Bordiga recommended that, in the same manner the PSI conducted its purge after the Ancona Congress, the PCF must now expediently implement the purge mandated by the Fourth Congress.

In arguing that the PSI's purge should serve as an inspiration for the PCF, Bordiga recounts his anti-masonic activities between 1912 and 1914. However, in this narrative, he conspicuously excludes any mention of his erstwhile comrade Mussolini, despite Mussolini's key importance as a driving force behind these efforts. This omission can hardly be said to be surprising, as any favourable mention of the then-leader of Fascist Italy would have been extremely contentious in communist circles. Consequently, it would appear that Bordiga strategically employs the PSI's previous anti-masonic actions to endorse the resolution of the Third International, while deftly omitting any mention of Mussolini's role in these historical events.

Yet Bordiga was not alone in revisiting the anti-masonic efforts of 1912-1914. On 16 May 1925, following the enactment of the "Law on Associations," which outlawed freemasonry in Fascist Italy, Mussolini also reminisced about the early anti-masonic efforts within the PSI.⁸⁹ He anachronistically cast himself as a "fascist militant in the Socialist Party," praising the decision to expel freemasons at the Congress of Ancona.⁹⁰ In this way, Mussolini framed the fascist legislation as a natural extension of his earlier anti-masonic efforts which took place in a socialist context. Consequently, the campaign left a favourable impression both on Mussolini, who connected it to fascist ideology, and on Bordiga and the Third International in 1922, who regarded it as categorically in continuity with the orthodoxy of the global communist movement. Ultimately, it seems that the idea of an invisible masonic enemy obstructing the progress of the PSI would prove to be convenient for the retrospective narratives of both ideologies.

89. For the primary text, see Mussolini, *Scritti*, 67-70, reproduced as Appendix in Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 187-89, here 187.

90. Mussolini as cited in Palmieri, *Mussolini e la massoneria*, 187.

Bordiga after 1922

Despite the fact that anti-masonry played an important role in Bordiga's politics from 1912 to 1922, this particular dimension has not been treated much in historical studies. Contemporary scholarship on Bordiga tends to consign his passionate polemics on this subject to the periphery, often confining them to brief footnotes or fleeting acknowledgments.⁹¹ In order to explain how our findings fit into the larger historiography, it is important to explicate how Bordiga's legacy evolved after 1922.

Our story culminated with Bordiga as the leader of the PCI. However, Bordiga's tenure at the helm of this organisation was to be short-lived. By 1930, he faced expulsion from the party amidst accusations of Trotskyism, marking a critical juncture in his intellectual and political journey.⁹² This event holds particular significance for our inquiry due to its impact on subsequent historiography. Indeed, Bordiga's expulsion relegated him to the status of *persona non grata*, setting in motion an effort to erase him from the annals of history, particularly as most histories of the communist party were then being penned by party loyalists. This act of exclusion serves as a stark illustration of communist historical revisionism, whereby Bordiga's contributions (especially between 1921–1922) were obscured to align the historical narrative with the evolving political directives of the party, showcasing the manner in which historiography was manipulated to conform to prevailing ideological currents.⁹³

Within the history of the Italian communist movement, the contrast between the portrayal of Bordiga and Gramsci is striking. Although both held each other in high regard, they nevertheless followed divergent ideological paths regarding the direction of the movement. Beyond 1930, Bordiga's person and ideas were

91. For example: Chiaradia's study spanning 392 pages and Goldner's study spanning 27 pages do not mention Bordiga's anti-masonic views at all, Drake's chapter spanning 27 pages and Basso's introduction spanning 98 pages both spend one sentence mentioning Bordiga's anti-masonry.

92. Chiaradia, "The Spectral Figure," 12–13.

93. Chiaradia, "The Spectral Figure," 11.

increasingly sidelined and subjected to criticism, while Gramsci was elevated as his theories found favour within communist orthodoxy as well as with leftist intellectuals more broadly. This development has led to what historian John E. Chiaradia has termed the “myth of Gramsci,” a historical misrepresentation that positioned Gramsci as the founding father of Italian communism, while effectively marginalising Bordiga by diminishing both his contributions and his presence in historical accounts.⁹⁴ This has resulted in a series of historical readings of the period with a discernible bias, leading to a historiographical trajectory that marginalises Bordiga’s influence on the Italian communist movement.

This trend persisted in scholarship until recent decades, when certain scholars from the 1970s onwards began to re-evaluate the conventional narrative surrounding Bordiga.⁹⁵ This historiographical shift redresses past misrepresentations by acknowledging Bordiga’s historical influence, particularly during the PCI’s nascent stage in 1921–1922.⁹⁶ The year 2020 witnessed a noteworthy advancement in this evolving area of research, when a scholarly translation of selected works by Bordiga, published by a team of translators and an editor, was released under the title *The Science and Passion of Communism*.⁹⁷ In the introduction, Bordiga is portrayed as “one of the most brilliant and forgotten Marxists of the 20th century.”⁹⁸ This continual scholarly reassessment endeavours to overcome the limitations of earlier research and presents a more nuanced portrayal of Bordiga’s role in the history of Italian communism.

94. Chiaradia, “The Spectral Figure,” 7.

95. An important text in that regard was a doctoral dissertation from 1972: Chiaradia, “The Spectral Figure”; another was an article from 1995: Goldner, “Bordiga,” 73–100. The most recent instance dates to 2020: Basso, introduction, 1–98.

96. Another aspect that is highlighted in this historiographical trajectory was Bordiga’s challenge to Stalin; see Basso “Amadeo Bordiga Was the Last Communist,” Goldner, “Bordiga,” 73–100.

97. Bordiga, *The Science and Passion of Communism*.

98. Loren Goldner, as quoted and affirmed by Basso, Introduction, 95. A similar claim is made in the description of the book, in which Bordiga is described as a “brilliant Italian communist.” Goldner makes a similar statement in “Bordiga,” 75, calling him “one of the most original, brilliant and utterly neglected Marxist theorists of the century.”

Yet in this effort to rehabilitate Bordiga's reputation, there has been a tendency to ignore aspects of his personal and political history that contradict a more laudable portrayal. The manifestation of this selective recall becomes particularly apparent in the treatment of Bordiga's early association and formative experiences with Mussolini. For example, *The Science and Passion of Communism's* introduction omits any reference to Bordiga's once-favourable views of Mussolini.⁹⁹ This is not an isolated phenomenon but falls into a bigger pattern in which certain histories of the Italian workers' movement routinely omit the perhaps discomfiting reality that Mussolini was once a prominent and beloved figure in radical socialist circles.¹⁰⁰

Although the new tendency of scholarship to correct Bordiga's image by setting straight some of these older distortions is laudable, there also remains a side to his life and work that might not fit this rehabilitated image. This article hopes to have contributed something to highlighting this other side of Bordiga's story: his early anti-masonic politics in collaboration with Mussolini and, more broadly, his often paranoid pre-occupation with party purity, particularly directed towards fellow members of his party who happened to be freemasons.

Conclusion

Bordiga's stance against freemasonry is emblematic of his larger ideological commitments, shedding light on the occurrence of contentious debates surrounding this topic within the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and, subsequently, within the Third International. This article has demonstrated how Bordiga's engagement with anti-masonry intersected with significant moments in his political career—spanning from his youthful intransigence within the PSI to his eventual role as the leader of the Italian Communist Party.

99. Basso, Introduction, 1–98.

100. This omission has, for instance, been highlighted by the historian of fascism, Renzo de Felice, who deliberately titled the first part of his circa 6000-page biography of Mussolini, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario* (Mussolini the revolutionary) as a provocation against those who would dismiss Mussolini's involvement with socialism. See Richard Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 112.

Bordiga's opposition to freemasonry was rooted in a belief that its bourgeois foundations were fundamentally at odds with the communist cause. This perspective did not exist in isolation but echoed wider party sentiments and reflected the political atmosphere of the time. Through his prolific writings and political activism between 1912 and 1922, Bordiga sought to underline freemasonry's supposed conservative nature and incompatibility with socialism—anticipating the expulsion of freemasons at the Congress of Ancona in 1914 and legitimising the anti-masonic measures taken at the Fourth Congress of the Third International in 1922. Apart from highlighting this supposed theoretical irreconcilability, Bordiga's polemics also exhibited conspiratorial discourse, such as the idea that political action would be coordinated from the secrecy of the lodges in order to block the revolutionary tendencies of the proletariat.

While Bordiga and Mussolini initially bonded over their shared intransigent socialist beliefs and mutual opposition to freemasonry, their camaraderie unravelled as Mussolini veered towards interventionism in World War I and subsequently laid the ideological foundations of fascism, prompting Bordiga to publicly renounce Mussolini as a traitor to their once-shared ideals. Although Bordiga and Mussolini subsequently came to represent the two opposite ends of the political spectrum, they kept defending the legacy of their earlier anti-masonic efforts in the 1920s: Bordiga defended them within the context of the international communist movement in 1922, and Mussolini drew on the same history in order to legitimise the fascist Law on Associations in 1925.

While contemporary research has commendably begun to challenge the historical marginalisation of Bordiga in earlier research, this rehabilitation has at times produced its own form of selective memory. Aspects of Bordiga's trajectory, such as his early collaboration with Mussolini and his fervent anti-masonic campaigns, are often confined to brief footnotes or fleeting acknowledgments, while Bordiga himself is presented as a brilliant political theorist. This article hopes to have contributed something to the reconstruction of that other part of Bordiga's story.

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