

The importance of the Communist parties

Source: CVCE. European Navigator. Etienne Deschamps.

Copyright: (c) CVCE.EU by UNI.LU

All rights of reproduction, of public communication, of adaptation, of distribution or of dissemination via Internet, internal network or any other means are strictly reserved in all countries.

Consult the legal notice and the terms and conditions of use regarding this site.

URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_importance_of_the_communist_parties-en-1ed40f7b-873f-469a-be97-21eb64010b92.html

Last updated: 09/07/2016



The importance of the Communist parties

The Communist parties, which had been isolated and even banned after the signature of the Non-Aggression Pact concluded between Hitler and Stalin in August 1939, emerged from the war in a stronger position. Their secret networks enabled them to slip easily into the resistance movement after the USSR entered the war in 1941. Many of their members had become victims of the conflict, prompting some Communist partisans to declare themselves members of the *parti des fusillés* (the party of those who have been shot). The anti-fascist struggle, crowned by the victory over Hitler's Germany, brought glory to international Communism. Stalin was cleverly able to use this legitimacy in his international propaganda. Once the conflict was over, Soviet diplomacy sought to establish national governments that were not hostile to the USSR in the territories liberated by the Red Army.

Basking in the prestige of the Red Army, the Communist parties could also count on a considerable number of supporters and electors. They were adept at skilfully taking advantage of the social injustices caused by the war and of the economic problems of post-war reconstruction. Being highly organised, the French and Italian Communists controlled a number of organisations which were closely linked together: labour unions, newspapers, student bodies and youth movements, women's and ex-servicemen's associations, leisure clubs and holiday villages, etc. Mass demonstrations were organised to glorify Communism and the working class. Many intellectual 'fellow-travellers' also supported them. Communists served in governments of national unity in France, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Their particular objective was to strengthen their influence in all the public sectors in order to create the right conditions for the establishment of a new Communist society. In the parliamentary elections of 1946, they took no less than 18.9 % of the vote in Italy and 28.8 % in France. The Communist Party was the numerically largest party in the French National Assembly. It had become the major party in France. It had 930 000 members on its books in France and 2 280 000 in Italy. The Belgian Communist Party, which had had 10 000 members in 1939, had 100 000 after the Liberation. Bolstered by this electoral support, the Communists succeeded in stopping strikes against the productivity targets they set to confound American plans for European reconstruction. For, while they preached the establishment of a lasting peace in Europe, the Western Communist movements did not hesitate to show their fear of the growing power and influence of Great Britain and the United States. They also feared the integration of West Germany into a European bloc that was openly hostile to the Soviet Union.

In the summer of 1947, the start of the Cold War shattered the governments of national unity that had been formed in the wake of the Liberation. Day by day, the Cold War made a deeper and deeper impression. In March 1947, the United States took certain measures that were aimed at holding in check the Soviet threat to Greece. Furthermore, between March and May in that year, Communist Ministers, torn between their loyalty to their national political coalition and Soviet orders, were ousted from governments in Belgium, France, Italy and Luxembourg, just at the time when the Communists were taking power in Hungary. One month later, the American Secretary of State, George Marshall, put forward an ambitious plan for the reconstruction of Europe. The Communists, who still held the moral high ground, immediately denounced American imperialism and called for a fight to protect national independence. Taking advantage of an explosive socio-economic situation, the French and Italian Communist Parties played an active part in triggering large-scale strikes in the winter of 1947.

In Central and Eastern Europe, the 'national front' governments also included Communists, who had been elected in the aftermath of the Second World War. They often occupied key posts, such as Ministers of the Interior or for the Armed Forces, and they slowly but surely succeeded in eliminating their adversaries from political life. They did not hesitate to use the support of the USSR to achieve this. Soon, elections no longer offered the electors an alternative, because they often boiled down to a list of candidates unanimously approved by the 'national front' which was, in practice, dominated by the Communist Party. There was a rapid crackdown on the non-Communists. Soon national Communism itself was no longer the establishment. Purges were carried out, and the Church and its representatives were persecuted. The schism between Western and Eastern Europe became more and more clear-cut. In late September 1947, the creation of the Cominform – the Communist Information Bureau in Belgrade, successor to the pre-war Comintern – only served to confirm those developments. The 'Prague Coup' in February 1948 put an end once and for all to

illusions of peaceful reconciliation on the other side of the Iron Curtain. International politics would henceforth be characterised by polarisation around the Two Great Powers.

The idea of European integration was systematically rejected by the Communists who denounced the construction of a Western Capitalist bloc under American control and refused to see Europe transformed into an Atlantic protectorate. They also feared the rebirth of a German Europe, which the resistance had fought just a few years before. From that time on, they made continuous calls for the defence of national independence and vigorously opposed the Marshall Plan – from which the USSR refused to benefit in July 1947 – and also all projects for European integration. Socialist and Christian Democrat movements, which themselves had a solid internationalist tradition, would know how to turn fear of Stalinist Communism to their own advantage.