

# The cuban revolution, che and *lotta continua*

MARCO GABBAS

**Abstract:** The article analyses the influence of the Cuban Revolution and of Che on Lotta Continua (LC) – the main organisation of the Italian extra-parliamentary Left – from 1969 until 1974, through the pages of the newspaper *Lotta continua*. Che was a political and moral example for LC, which by 1974 went beyond myth and reached a balanced view on him. The issue of Che's relevance in present-day Italy is also assessed.

**Keywords:** Cuban Revolution. Che Guevara. Italian Left. Lotta Continua.



## A revolução cubana, che e lotta continua

**resumo:** O artigo analisa a influência da Revolução Cubana e do Che na Lotta Continua (LC) - a principal organização da esquerda extra-parlamentar italiana - de 1969 a 1974, através das páginas do jornal *Lotta continua*. Che era um exemplo político e moral para LC, que em 1974 foi além do mito e alcançou uma visão equilibrada sobre ele. A questão da relevância de Che na Itália atual também é avaliada.

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## 1 Introduction

The Cuban Revolution was arguably one of the crucial events of 20<sup>th</sup> century Latin American history. Researchers have dedicated much attention to the topic throughout the years (HUGH, 1977; PÉREZ-STABLE, 1999; SWEIG, 2002; VELTMAYER; RUSHTON, 2012). However, the Cuban Revolution was so important also because of the influence it exerted on the outer world, intentionally and unintentionally. This influence may be divided into two types. The first type of influence consisted of Cuban military and moral support to liberation struggles all over the world (JAYATILLEKA, 2007). The second type consisted of the inspiration it gave to the Left of many countries, both in the West and in the periphery. This last topic has been researched remarkably little. Certainly, the influence of the Cuban Revolution cannot be separated from that of its icon Che Guevara. Guevara, in fact, inspired Western Leftists even more than Fidel Castro. The figure of Guevara, however, has largely entered the realm of T-shirts and of iconic consumerism, compelling researchers to go beyond myth (CASEY, 2009; GABBAS, 2017).

One case which deserves attention is Italy. In fact, Italy was arguably the Western country which underwent the highest level of leftist radicalisation in the 1960s and 1970s. Therefore, studying the influence of the Cuban Revolution and of Guevarism on the Italian Left is certainly useful. It is safe to say that a crucial trigger for this radicalisation was the 1968-1969 *biennio rosso* (two red years). Apart from other things, the *biennio rosso* sparked the birth of many parties, organisations, and publications of the Italian New Left. The New Left was certainly more influenced by the Cuban Revolution and Guevarism than the two parties of the traditional Italian Left, the PSI (Partito Socialista Italiano) and the PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano).

However, a study on the influence of Cuba and of Guevara on the Italian Left would require a book rather than an article. Therefore, this article is more limited in scope, and deals with the reception of the Cuban Revolution and of Che's figure on Lotta Continua (LC). Lotta Continua was chosen because it was the largest organisation of the extra-parliamentary Left (BOBBIO, 1988). It can therefore

be said to be the most representative, though not entirely representative. The Cuban/Guevarian reception is analysed through the LC newspaper *Lotta continua*. The analysis spans from 1969, when LC was born, until 1974. This was chosen as an end-date because on October 8, 1974 *Lotta continua* commemorated the seventh anniversary of Che's death strongly reconsidering his legacy. Therefore, one may say that 1974 marked the end of a cycle for LC, which went from a more idealised to a more distanced and balanced view. The conclusions also contain a few thoughts on whether Guevara's legacy may be relevant in present-day Italy.

## **2 The influence of the cuban revolution and of guevarismo on *Lotta continua***

LC issued a biweekly magazine named *Lotta continua* since November 1969 – the year of birth of LC - until 1972. *Lotta continua* became a daily newspaper on April 11, 1972. The newspaper went out until 1982. However, the organisation had de facto ceased to exist with the 1976 Rimini Congress.

*Lotta continua* evidently considered the Cuban Revolution crucial since one of its first issues. In January 1970 a first mention of the Cuban Revolution can be found. The Cuban Revolution, together with the Russian Revolution and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, was worth studying from a theoretical viewpoint. Note worthily, the *biennio rosso* of 1968-1969 (the Italian “two red years”) had just passed by. They were two years of high political radicalisation which prompted further radicalisation during the 1970s. Traditionally, this *biennio* is divided into the students' 1968 and the workers' 1969. However, students' and workers' radicalisation merged in subsequent years (BALESTRINI; MORONI, 2007; VENTRONE, 2012; HORN, 2007; KATSIAFICAS, 1987). According to *Lotta continua*, the Cuban and the other revolutions had to be assimilated by workers' vanguards so that they could “develop a communist and revolutionary discourse within mass movements” (QUALE..., 1970, p. 03). There is evidence the LC local groups had the Cuban Revolution as one of their public discussion topics as early as April 1970 (I GIOVANI..., 1970).

Sometimes, *Lotta continua* reported Fidel Castro's declarations. For example, in May 1972 the newspaper reported Castro's declaration on the Vietnam War. While in Algiers, Castro said that Nixon was "committing genocide" in Vietnam (LA CRONACA..., 1972, p. 04). Moreover, Nixon should beware the 1972 was not 1962 (the year of the missiles' crisis), and that the situation was no longer in his favour.

*Lotta continua's* attitude towards Cuba, however, was sometimes contradictory, even within one issue. As we have seen, Guevara was celebrated as someone who opposed American imperialism as well as the Soviet Union. However, in the issue of May 14, 1972 *Lotta continua* negatively noted that the USSR was penetrating into Latin America and had good relations with Cuba (L'URSS..., 1972). A few pages later, the newspaper celebrated Cuban medical aid to the sieged Vietnam (L'UMANITÀ..., 1972).

*Lotta continua* was convinced that Che's spirit continued to live in Argentinian and Chilean workers' struggles of July 1973. In fact, leftist internationalism began to "walk on its own legs." LC was convinced that class consciousness and the linked duties were being felt by real South American revolutionaries. This was the "proletarian sense of the message the Che left Latin America" (CILE..., 1973, p. 04). The legacy of the Cuban Revolution, however, was not guaranteed forever. On July 22, the newspaper warned that the Brazilian "counterrevolution" could "delete for a long time the consequences of the Cuban Revolution" (LA CONTRO-RIVOLUZIONE..., 1973, p. 01).

Cuba was praised also because of its foreign policy stances. For example, in September 1973 at the non-aligned conference in Algiers Cuba broke diplomatic ties with Israel, showing its solidarity to Arab peoples. In the conference Castro allegedly played a pro-Soviet role, while Gaddafi boasted opposition to "all imperialisms". *Lotta continua* noted that Castro's pro-Soviet stance did not hinder him from being anti-American, putting therefore into question the theory of collaboration among the two superpowers. However, Cuba was "non-aligned" only by name, since de facto depended on Soviet economic aid (SI APRE..., 1973). Overall, *Lotta continua* clearly made a distinction between Guevara and

Castro. While Guevara was seen as a pure revolutionary, Castro was rather treated as a practical politician whose policies were sometimes criticised. In this precise case, the newspaper argued that Castro may have played a leading role for world revolutionary movements, but his pro-Soviet stance made that impossible (ALGERI..., 1973).

### **3 Cuba, Guevara and revolutionary violence**

For *Lotta Continua*, the Cuban Revolution and the figure of Guevara were not mere symbolical-political examples. They represented a successful takeover of power through military means, and thus inspired Italian radicals (similarly to other Third World leaders: Mao, Ho Chi Minh, etc.). Violence was deemed necessary in the Third World, but also in Italy. After all, had not Che Guevara underlined the “theoretical necessity” of a “revolutionary armed Internationale”? (LOTTA..., 1972, p. 03).

Remarkably, in October 1970, *Lotta continua* dedicated Ernesto Guevara a full-page article, significantly titled “Creare 2, 3, molti Vietnam - Che Guevara vive” (To Create 2, 3, Many Vietnams – Che Guevara Lives). The magazine quoted Guevara’s famous slogan, and thought that his ideas lived in contemporary struggles. The article praised the courage of the “Argentinian physician” who had actively taken part in 3 revolutions notwithstanding his asthma: Guatemala, Cuba, and Bolivia (CHE..., 1970). More precisely, *Lotta continua* blamed Guevara’s death both on Barrientos’s military regime and on the Bolivian Communist Party. On the one hand, Barrientos’s regime enjoyed Soviet economic aid and had good relations with the USSR. On the other, the secretary of the Bolivian Communist Party, Mario Monje, allegedly betrayed Guevara and his guerrilla movement (*Lotta continua* reported in May 1972 his arrest in La Paz) (L’URUGUAY..., 1972).

Therefore, Che’s death was “exemplary” also on a theoretical level. It was caused both by imperialism (personified by the US) and revisionism (personified by the Soviet Union and by the betraying Bolivian Communist Party), allied with “Latin American oligarchies” (CHE..., 1970, p. 05). While imperialism was the

people's declared enemy, revisionists falsely acted as friends. Here a crucial trend is detectable, typical not only of Lotta Continua but of many other Italian extra-parliamentary Leftist organisations. The USSR was no longer considered a point of reference, since it was a betraying and revisionist power (remarkably, the official Italian Communist Party – PCI – was attached to the Soviet Union). The extreme Left opposed to world (USSR) and Italian revisionism (PCI) a pantheon of international references which went from Mao to Che Guevara. In fact, the very term “revisionism” came from Maoism (NICCOLAI, 1998).

From this article one more crucial point emerges. *Lotta continua* thought that Che Guevara exemplified righteous armed struggle as opposed to opportunist, revisionist, parliamentary methods. According to the opportunist, “you can make a revolution peacefully, by voting, by using mass struggles as parliamentary pressure, etc.” No, according to *Lotta continua*, “Che's death remains exemplary [...] because millions of young and of proletarians made him resurrect before USA, USSR, RANGERS and various C[ommunist] P[arties] could bury him.” Moreover, the article argues, Che's death “strengthened revolution” and weakened the enemy. 1968, “the year of the students and [...] of the French May” spread Guevara's image “in every corner of the world. And today we see his images, his slogans, his political line, his example multiplying and appearing in the new events of Latin America, of the Middle East, of Indochina, of Europe, within the USA itself.”

At the same time, the article rejected “Guevarismo.” With a pattern similar to that adopted towards Maoism, *Lotta continua* insisted that one should not “stick labels.”

Luckily, there is no Guevarist orthodoxy and heresy. To understand “Che”, to make him live in our struggles against imperialists and opportunists is already an everyday practice of ever-increasing masses. The point is not to be Guevarists, but to be revolutionaries. And for us “Che” is especially his hatred for compromise, his being on the first line, his deeply and rightly loving the people, his militant internationalism, his rejection of material incentives, his necessity to create a new man on this shitty society.

This long quote shows that *Lotta Continua* saw Guevara as a political as well as a moral point of reference. LC liked Guevara's rejection of compromise and his courage, his selflessness and his moral rectitude: he was in favour of *moral* rather than of material incentives, and contended that nothing less than the creation of a "new man" was necessary to make life on this earth worth living. The article went on:

We think that "Che" is a "biased" dead. A "militant" dead, in the sense that he does not belong to everyone: *he does not belong to the bourgeois* (who after his death put a "saint's" halo on him creating the disgusting and deformed myth of the Don Quijote-like, stainless, fearless adventurer,... and above all, "deceased." (CHE..., 1970, p. 05).

*Lotta continua* is clearly presenting Guevara as a highly politically charged figure: not just anyone had a right to his legacy. Remarkably, the depiction of Guevara as a "Don Quijote-like, stainless, fearless adventurer" bears some resemblance to that made by one of his recent biographers (CASTAÑEDA, 1998). Moreover, Che could not belong to "opportunists" either, since they "used him [only] as a cadaver to draw the sympathy of the young who 'were fascinated by him'."

*Lotta continua* launched a further attack against the PCI, by saying that one its leaders, Amendola, had defined Guevara a "small drugstores' strategist" a few months before his death. According to Amendola, Guevara's watchword of "many Vietnams" was irresponsible. LC was drawing a clear line between itself and the PCI: the PCI hypocritically opposed the Italian proletariat and its vanguards, "in the name of 'the country's general interest, of its productive development, of peace and democracy'." Finally, the magazine stated: "Guevara, like any revolutionary, is not a 'holy card' to show off nor a (individualist and aesthetical) myth to glorify." Revolutionaries are "expressed by proletarian struggles: they emerge from them, drawing strength and humanity from them. In them they continue to live" (CHE..., 1970, p. 05). We can see that there are two levels in the interpretation of *Lotta continua*: on the one hand, they extremely respected and paid homage to Guevara.

On the other hand, they strongly rejected a personalistic and individualistic view of history and of great men/great revolutionaries. Guevara was certainly a great man and a great revolutionary, but great revolutionaries are the expression of “proletarian struggles.” They are born in them, and obtain from them the necessary force and humanity (LÖWY, 1997). What is more, the same proletarian struggles give further life to the deceased revolutionaries.

*Lotta continua* buttressed its analysis on Guevara with two texts authored by him. One was a short farewell letter written to his children, the other was an extract from his famous “Message to the Tricontinental.” In the letter to his children, Guevara underlined that he was a man acting consistently with his thought and faithful to his convictions. The letter also contains the famous phrase “Above all, always be capable of feeling deeply any injustice committed against anyone, anywhere in the world. This is the most beautiful quality in a revolutionary.”

Conversely, the Message to the Tricontinental had a completely different tone. In it, Guevara called for the destruction of imperialism through the elimination of the United States, “its most powerful stronghold.” The enemy had to be destroyed gradually by liberating one country after the other, thus depriving it of its supporting bases. This entailed a “long” and “cruel war” (CHE..., 1970, p. 05). Talking about Vietnam, Guevara said it was not enough to wish it success: one should follow its “destiny [...] in death or in victory.” According to Guevara, “inflexible hate towards the enemy” was a “struggle factor” which could convert man “into an effective, violent, selective and cold killing machine.” However, the text goes on: “The real revolutionary is led by great feelings of love.” S/he “must have a passionate spirit and a cold mind” and “idealise this love for humanity, for the most sacred causes, and make it unique, indivisible.” S/he must possess a great dose of humanity, a great dose of sense of justice and of truth not to fall into dogmatic excesses, into cold scholasticisms, not to become isolated by the masses. One must fight everyday so that this love of humanity is transformed into concrete facts [,] into acts which must serve as example, as mobilisation.



Many Vietnams meant deaths and “immense tragedies, with their part of everyday heroism” (DAL MESSAGGIO..., 1970, p. 21). Arguably, *Lotta continua* did not choose these two contrasting texts by chance. On the one hand, juxtaposing them one could see the mixture of humanism and mercilessness so typical of Guevara, exemplified by the motto: “One has to grow hard but without ever losing tenderness”. However, according to Roberto Massari (2018), this quotation has always been misattributed to Guevara, while it was supposedly created by Guevara’s contested, first biographer, the Argentinian Ricardo Rojo (1923 - 1996). On the other, here LC confirms a trend which can be similarly detected in parallel articles on Maoism. LC did not hide violence from Third World leaders. On the contrary, LC agreed with it. This agreement with violent methods used by Third World leaders went on a par with the theorisation and justification of violence at home, in Italy. Therefore, Guevarism – and Maoism – seemingly gave a contribution to the development of violence within the Italian extra-parliamentary Left.

Further proof of this can be found in a 1972, May 21 piece. *Lotta continua* published the foreword of Gian Battista Lazagna’s book *Ponte rotto – La lotta al fascismo dalla cospirazione all’insurrezione armata (Broken Bridge: The Struggle Against Fascism from Conspiracy to Armed Insurrection)*. The title of the article is: “Riprendere il cammino iniziato con la lotta partigiana” (“We Must Continue the Path of Partisan Struggle”). Gian Battista Lazagna was a former Italian partisan who in 1972 was in prison, accused of organising communist armed struggle in Italy. Both the title of *Lotta continua* and of Lazagna’s book are telling. LC is openly calling for taking up arms, to continue the fight begun by Italian Resistance. For Lazagna, to struggle against Fascism peaceful, democratic, or even conspiratorial methods were not enough: sooner or later, one had to resort to armed struggle. At the time, Lazagna but also many radicals from the extra-parliamentary Left thought that neofascism was as dangerous as historical Fascism, and had to be fought with the same means. It is here that Cuba comes as inspiration. In fact, Lazagna plainly says:

Cuba made its socialist revolution and notwithstanding the logic of the division of the world into two fields managed to be respected. Will for Italian revolutionaries, for Communists, come the moment to go out from the defensive, to let workers', poor southern peasants' and students' revolutionary will overflow from the frame allowed by the system? (RIPRENDERE..., 1972, p. 03).

Lazagna is more or less subtly calling for armed organisation of the Left, and Cuba is for him a source of inspiration. Cuba was a small island, and it managed to defend its own revolution even though it was only a few miles away from the US. Why could not the Italian revolutionary Left do the same? Lazagna's hint at the world division into spheres of influence may also have been a subtle criticism of the USSR (was Cuba alternative to both Western imperialism and the USSR?).

*Lotta continua* exemplified this connection between Guevara and the necessity of violence also regarding third countries. In October 1972 *Lotta continua* interviewed the IRA leader Sean Mac Stiofain (LC supported the IRA). According to Mac Stiofain, there was a great difference between "revolutionary socialists, like Che Guevara or general Giap, and nominal socialism." Guevara was a real fighter, and the IRA loved and respected "real fighters, revolutionaries ready to die for their cause, like Che Guevara did." The IRA made a "fundamental distinction between propagandists of Moscow-oriented parties, which teach revolution but never practice it, and those who make it, possibly with mistakes, but they make it." Sean Mac Stiofain further clarified: "I want to underline it once more: this is the difference between Che Guevara, the revolutionary of practice, and Breznev or any other general secretary of Western communist parties, who obeys to Moscow" (STIOFAIN, 1972, p. 02). By saying this Mac Stiofain – and LC implicitly agreed with his stance – was not only underlining that Guevara was a real, consistent revolutionary who was not afraid to take up arms. Mac Stiofain drew the line between real revolutionaries like Guevara on one side, and Moscow-oriented, passive communist parties on the other. Mac Stiofain's remarks to *Lotta continua* confirm the fact that Guevara was seen in the Italian Left as a revolutionary opposed to

the sclerotised, cowardly, passive USSR and its satellite parties. The USSR was no longer the leading country for Italian radicals.

By the end of 1972, *Lotta continua* thought that the developments of the Vietnam war confirmed the validity of Guevara's watchword of many Vietnams. In fact, according to the newspaper, that watchword "has lost none of the significance it had when it was pronounced; on the contrary, it has acquired the more value the more his theories, and his practice" of the guerrilla *foco* has lost it. Remarkably, this quote shows that LC admired Guevara's watchwords, but did not necessarily agree with his theory and practice of *foquismo*. Moreover, Guevara's was not the "slogan of a 'fanatic,' like Amendola and with him all the PCI leading group argued [...] but a scientific, because Marxist [,] forecast of historical development" (LA POSTA..., 1972, p. 03). *Lotta continua* insisted that Guevara's watchword had already become a reality in Indochina, and could become such in India and many other countries.

#### **4 Cuba, Sardinia and Feltrinelli**

Remarkably, in July 1971 *Lotta continua* published the letter of a convict who made a comparison between Cuba and Sardinia. This convict, writing from the prison of Volterra, was talking about the possibilities of political work in his prison. He thought he could conduct political work among Sardinian convicts, for example comparing "the present-day Sardinian conditions with other insular nations, for example the pre-Castro Cuba" (I DANNATI..., 1971, p. 32). This comparison, however short, is important and deserves special attention. Italy has always been plagued by a North-South divide. However, it is safe to say that this divide is even more evident in its two large islands, Sicily and Sardinia. Between the two, we may say in Sardinia this divide is even more evident than in Sicily, because Sardinia is much further from the Italian peninsula than Sicily. At the time Sardinia was one of the poorest and most backward Italian regions, and was characterised by what Giovanni Lilliu (2002) called the "costante resistenziale sarda", that is a sort of constant pattern of rebellion. This sub-text is fundamental to understand the letter published in *Lotta continua*.

The convict – himself not a Sardinian – is implying that Sardinia suffered from a backwardness also due to its being an island (and abandoned by the central government). This situation of insular backwardness could be compared with that of Cuba – itself a small island – and a similarly revolutionary solution could be proposed.

This may seem absurd. However, this was not solely the idea of a solitary Italian convict. In fact, a similar idea had come to the mind of Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, a rich Italian publisher and Communist. Between 1967 and 1969 Feltrinelli travelled to Sardinia and had the idea to finance a revolutionary guerrilla movement there. He allegedly had the idea to use as leader the famous bandit Graziano Mesina. Carla Frontini, who would later be part of the “Manifesto” group, remembers him saying that Sardinia should become “the Cuba of the Mediterranean”. According to the deputy public prosecutor Viola Sardinia was nothing less than a “bomb fused by Feltrinelli” (SARDEGNA, 1972, p. 02). The reason why Feltrinelli did not realise his plan is unclear. Possibly, he did not have the time, since he went into hiding after the December 12, 1969 terrorist attack in Milan, and later died on March 14, 1972 while trying to blow up an electricity trellis near Milan (MENTANA, 2017; NELLA..., 2011; MASSIDDA, 2016; FELTRINELLI, 1999).

Remarkably, in its first daily issue, on April 11, 1972, *Lotta continua* linked Feltrinelli to Guevara. Feltrinelli had died almost one month before, and many in the Italian Left were not convinced by the official version of the events. But a very important event took place between March 14 and April 11, 1972. In fact, on April 1, 1972 a woman named Monika Ertl, of the Bolivian ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional), killed the Bolivian Consul in Hamburg Quintanilla Pereira. Quintanilla had been one of the men responsible for Che Guevara’s death, therefore Monika Ertl somewhat avenged Che (RAMON, 2017). According to *Lotta continua*, Quintanilla’s death was not a murder but an execution. However, what is incredible is that the newspaper suggests that the gun used to kill Quintanilla had belonged to Feltrinelli (the gun had allegedly been confiscated from Feltrinelli by the Italian political police) (FELTRINELLI..., 1972, p. 02). In May 1973, *Lotta continua* reported on the death of one more person who was involved in Che’s

death, colonel Selich. According to the newspaper, Selich had died in suspicious circumstances. Not was that all, because he was allegedly the third man involved in Che's death who died. Before him, captain Ramos had died in 1968 of diabetes, while second lieutenant Huerta had died in a car accident in 1971. *Lotta continua* titled the article "E sono tre!" ("And there's three of them!") possibly pleased with what had happened, but also hinted that these deaths might have had something mysterious. Could someone kill them, because they had something to hide? (BOLIVIA..., 1973, p. 04).

One more execution in Guevara's name took place on year later, in April 1973, when the ERP (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo) killed an Argentinian general. In its communiqué taking responsibility for his death, the ERP said that it was "following the path opened by our comrade Che Guevara for a just, free and socialist Argentina" (ARGENTINA..., 1973, p. 03).

## 5 Cuba and Chile

Guevara's name was shouted as inspiration during the pro-Chilean demonstrations which followed the September 11, 1973 coup (DECINE..., sept. 1973), possibly even "louder than in the past" (ROMA..., 1973, p. 01). Che was present in pro-Chile demonstrations in Paris and in Panama too, with large banners depicting him (DECINE..., dec. 1973; PUGNI..., 1974). The link between Che's figure and the Chilean struggle was also made clear by initiatives organised in Rome by the Association of Latin American Students and Intellectuals. On October 7, 1973 *Lotta continua* reported that Latin American students were not granted any hall at the university of Rome to commemorate Guevara (NON..., 1973). However, they managed to commemorate him on October 17, while expressing solidarity towards the Chilean people. Delegations from Unidad Popular and Cuba were supposed to attend (MANIFESTAZIONE..., 1973).

Again on the October 7, 1973 issue, *Lotta continua* commemorated Guevara more widely by publishing a few texts written by him. As the headline reads "After six years. Che lives". The newspaper meant to present short texts which summarised the

crucial steps of Che's political experience. Apart from the Cuban Revolution, the newspaper talked about the "difficult experience" of managing the socialist state. Moreover, Guevara had to face the "first degenerations of the system," the "old problem of 'bureaucratism'," the lack of technical knowledge. By choosing to bring revolution to other countries, Che was following a "global strategic vision." According to LC, the Chilean coup demonstrated that Che's lucid forecast of a long and cruel war had proven right. Che's writings went from his first encounter with Fidel Castro in Mexico to Che's last letter to Fidel, which was read by Fidel himself on the Plaza de la Revolución on October 3, 1965. In that letter – which inspired Carlos Puebla to write his famous song – Che renounced to all his official posts and privileges as a Cuban functionary. He bade farewell to Cuba, explaining that "other sierras needed his modest efforts" (SEL..., 1973, p. 03).

Cuban behaviour was praised in the days following the Chilean coup, when Cuban government offered to welcome Chilean exiles (DEPORTATI..., 1973), and when Castro denounced US role in the Chilean coup (FIDEL..., 1973). The Chilean coup even prompted Cuba and Vietnam to release a joint declaration to strengthen the struggle "against imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism". To achieve that goal, socialist countries should unite on the basis of Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism (SI ALLARGA..., 1973). Obviously, Cuba would have no diplomatic ties with the new junta, and hosted Allende's wife for some public initiatives (LA RESISTENZA..., 1973). Large anti-junta demonstrations were organised in Cuba (CASTRO..., 1973). In October 1973 MIR secretary Miguel Enriquez underlined in an appeal published in *Lotta continua* that Cuban support was fundamental (UN APPELLO..., 1973) (*Lotta continua* published excerpts from a *Granma* commemorative article when Enriquez was killed the following year) (HASTA..., 1974). After all, the MIR had studied the experience of the Cuban Revolution (LA STORIA..., 1973) and wished to follow it, together with Che's plan of a continental Latin American revolution (SALVIAMO..., 1974). The Chilean junta replied to Cuban activism by accusing it at the UN of fomenting a revolution in Chile (ALL'ONU..., 1973).

In the aftermath of the coup, *Lotta continua* also thought that Guevara's example lived in the project of international brigades to help Chile (IL CAMMINO..., 1973). Armed Chilean resistance thought that Guevara was a relevant example of Latin American internationalism (RESISTENCIA, 1973). Chilean resistance thought that the Chilean people could win imperialism, like in Cuba. However, like Cuba, Chile needed the help of other peoples (UN COMUNICATO..., 1973). Moreover, the newspaper published a prophetic Guevara's text where he warned that when a progressive government is established through democratic elections, the armed forces are unlikely to let it carry out substantial social reforms (CHE..., 1973). The reference *Lotta continua* wanted to make to Chile is all too clear. Guevara probably wrote with the example of Guatemala and Arbenz in mind, since he was shocked by it at the time (ANDERSON, 1997). In the aftermath of the coup, even owning Cuban magazines could be dangerous (HUTTER, 1973). According to the Paolo Hutter, an activist who had been detained in Chile after the coup, copies of the *Granma* were given to detainees as toilet paper (I GIORNI..., 1973).

## 6 Cuba and the sossi case

As we have seen, *Lotta continua* reported that Cuba was a possible destination for many Chilean political exiles. However, in May 1974 a possibility arose that Cuba could be a destination for certain Italian leftist convicts. In this case the influence of Che Guevara and of the Cuban Revolution on the Italian Left intersects with the topic of the Italian *lotta armata* or *lottarmatismo* ("armed struggle"). In the specific Italian meaning, the term "lotta armata" is not generic, but indicates a wide series of leftist armed groups which were active in Italy in the 1970s (GALLI, 2007; TANTURLI, 2018; BINI, 2017; FERRIGNO, 2008; LICCIARDI, 2014; MORONI et al., 2009; NACCARATO, 2015; STECCANELLA, 2013; DONATO, 2014; LUCARELLI, 2010; TABACCO, 2010; SOMMIER, 2009; NERI SERNERI, 2012; BOCCA, 1985; BALDONI; PROVVISIONATO, 2009; FARÉ; SPIRITO, 1979). Their influence on Italian history was such that the 1970s are still remembered in Italy as the "*anni*

*di piombo*" or "lead years". The term comes from the German film director Margarethe von Trotta's 1981 film *Die bleierne Zeit* (BARRA; VENTURA, 2018; LAZAR; MATARD-BONUCCI, 2010; MONTANELLI; CERVI, 1991; RUGGIERO, 2006). Che Guevara was one of their inspirers, though there is no space here to trace in detail his influence on them. Regarding the concrete case reported by *Lotta continua*, Cuba was seen as a possible exile destination also for certain Italian leftist convicts, namely the members of the Genoa "October 22 Group" (MARIO..., 1974) – see Serafino Ospedaletto (2016) and Piano (2008).

The story, however, is more complicated. On April 18, 1974 the Red Brigades (Brigate rosse, BR) – which would become the most professional and feared armed leftist group in Italy – had kidnapped the judge Mario Sossi, who had a reputation for being a hard-handed, right-wing judge (RUGGIERO, 2007). Incidentally, *Lotta continua* will later note that Renato Curcio, one of the BR leaders, had studied Guevara during his politically active university years (ARRESTATO..., 1974). In exchange for Sossi's release, the BR requested the liberation of the imprisoned October 22 Group. The Group should have been handed over to the Cuban embassy in the Vatican. The newspaper quoted the BR communiqué, requesting that "*the eight comrades of the October 22 find asylum in the Cuban embassy of the Vatican City State [emphasis in the original] So that their safety could be guaranteed*" (LE BRIGATE..., 1974, p. 01). Really LC – which criticised the Red Brigades – noted on May 7 that the BR's "proposal" of asylum to Cuba was "very unlikely" (SI SCATENA..., 1974, p. 01).

The Sossi case presented a situation which involved the Cuban government and put them in an extremely uncomfortable position. The October 22 members were considered terrorists by the Italian state. Therefore, as *Lotta continua* explained, the Italian government had no intention to grant them passports, so that they could not leave the country. The October 22 members did not need a passport to reach the Vatican, where the principle of extra-territoriality would not have allowed the Italian state to arrest them. However, the Cuban government had refused to give them visas. Probably, the BR hoped to use the Vatican card to bypass Cuban



refusal, at least temporarily. Moreover, once in the Cuban embassy, the October 22 members would have been under the protection of diplomatic extra-territoriality within the Vatican. That means that the pope could not have handed them over to the Italian state without Cuban consent, even if he wanted to. A popular jury agreed to free the convicts, but their decision was contested by the general prosecutor Coco. On its May 24 issue *Lotta continua* lamented allegations that Fidel Castro in person had spoken against granting asylum to the October 22 militants (SOSSI-CONTINUA..., 1974). However, the newspaper was printed before knowing that Sossi had already been liberated in Milan the previous day, May 23. In the Sossi case, the BR opted for a symbolic abduction and decided not to kill the hostage, even though their requests had not been satisfied. Their behaviour was different with the 1978 Moro kidnapping (MONETTA, 2009; BIANCONI, 2008; MASTROGREGORI, 2012).

## **7 Towards a new view**

Interestingly, in February 1974 *Lotta continua* dedicated an article to Brezhnev's visit to Cuba. This visit was an occasion for the newspaper to elaborate a few reflections on Soviet-Cuban relations. According to *Lotta continua*, ties between Cuba and the USSR were growing stronger and more structured, since economic collaboration was no more limited to Soviet purchase of Cuban sugar. *Lotta continua* argued that, on the one hand, the Soviet agreement to buy Cuban sugar had saved the island from US economic blockade. On the other, it "forced the first socialist country of the continent" to stay with the "traditional and paralysing monoculture of the colonial era" (IL VIAGGIO..., 1974, p. 03). Regarding latest developments, why did Brezhnev visit Cuba? Most likely, Brezhnev had gone to Cuba to try to moderate Castro, rather than to agree on new strategic lines. However, *Lotta continua* thought that Cuban-Soviet relations were likely to grow in importance after the Chilean coup. The coup could convince the Soviet Union that peaceful coexistence was not feasible, and that is why the USSR had to align itself more closely with Cuba.

Interestingly, the newspaper thought that Cuba was “caught between two fires”: US imperialism and Soviet economic aid. In fact, Cuba owed to the USSR essential material – including military – supplies. However, Cuba’s “bargaining power” had increased. Couldn’t it be that the USSR now needed Cuba no less than Cuba needed the USSR? In a situation of increasing danger, when peaceful coexistence was becoming more and more difficult, the Cuban stronghold might have been useful.

In March 1974, *Lotta continua* reported the birth of the Revolutionary Coordination Council of Latin America, an organisation uniting several South American revolutionary groups. Unsurprisingly, the Council was based on Che Guevara’s advice as expressed in his famous message to the Tricontinental. In that text, Guevara envisioned the possibility of “Coordination Councils” to better counter US imperialism. That is precisely what Uruguayan Tupamaros, the Chilean MIR, the Bolivian ELN and the Argentinian ERP did. The Council underlined that it had given life to “one of the main strategic ideas of the Comandante Che Guevara, hero, symbol and pioneer of continental [South American] socialist revolution” (LE DICHIARAZIONI..., 1974, p. 03).

Apart from the already mentioned Chilean case, *Lotta continua* also underlined the importance of Guevara’s figure in third countries. For example, it reported that on October 8, 1974 Portuguese factories observed one minute of silence as a homage to Che Guevara, accepting a proposal of the Cuba-Portugal friendship association. Guevara was also present in Portuguese workers’ discussions. The newspaper underlined that this was all the more important since Portugal had just recently gone out of 50 years of Fascism (PORTOGALLO..., 1974) – see Green (1976), Mailer (2012) and Maxwell (2009). *Lotta continua* assured that Che Guevara’s portrait was on the desk of Serras Lopes, one the leaders of the MFA (Movimento das Forças Armadas) responsible for the Carnation Revolution (LA LOTTA..., 1974).

On October 8, 1974 *Lotta continua* commemorated the seventh anniversary of Guevara’s death publishing a few of his writings and critically reviewing his ideas and legacy in the light of subsequent events. In fact, according to the newspaper, Guevara’s death

seemingly signed the end of “an entire chapter of revolutionary struggle in Latin America”. In reality, a “myth” had died, the myth of “an imminent revolutionary blaze which would rage all over the continent following the multiplication and the spread of guerrilla movements”. *Lotta continua* was evidently criticising the *foco* theory, or *foquismo*. However, Guevara’s political and strategic contribution could not be reduced to that. *Lotta continua* admitted that “the path of the development of revolution in Latin American showed to be well longer, curvy and difficult” than that simplistic thesis would imply. Armed struggle could not be detached from the development of a mass movement. According to the newspaper, seven years after Guevara’s death it was possible to “get the less contingent and more profound sense of the deeds of the great [South] American revolutionary” (SETTE..., 1974, p. 03).

### **8 Conclusions: is che relevant in present-day Italy?**

Finally, I would like to shortly assess whether Guevara’s legacy may be relevant in present-day Italy. The biographer Castañeda (1998) underlined that Guevara is a figure belonging to the past. One may agree insofar history never repeats itself, and Guevara lived in a world which was very different from the pre present-day one. However, I argue that there might still be something relevant about Che’s deeds and thought in present-day Italy.

In his recent book on the Sino-Soviet competition for influence in the Third World, Jeremy Friedman (2015) argues that during the Cold War there were two basic models of revolution: the anti-capitalist and the anti-imperialist/anti-colonialist revolution. Inexplicably, he considers Guevara as a supporter of the first as opposed to the second. This reading of Guevara’s life and thought is extremely partial and does not see that what was remarkable about him was exactly the union of these two goals.

Today, Europe in general and Italy in particular is experiencing its darkest age since World War II. Italy is plighted by a level of racism comparable only to the 1930s - 1940s. What is worse is that this racism is under the guise of right-wing populism. Those who mostly loathe migrants in present-day in Italy are what Emilio

Quadrelli calls the “white underclass” (QUADRELLI, 2007, p. 15) that is the local as opposed to the foreign working class. This hatred comes from economic frustration and from the belief that migrants are a bunch of parasites – or that they came to steal the few jobs available. According to 2011 data, in Italy there are approximately 5.4 million migrants, of whom almost 350,000 are from South America (RINILOLO, 2012).

The problem is that migrants living in “democratic” Europe – this includes non-European citizens married with European citizens – hardly enjoy any democracy. At most, what they have to face may be termed a master race democracy (LOSURDO, 2011). Specifically, in Italy they have no political rights, and apart from societal racism they have to face aberrant forms of state racism. To legally reside in Italy, migrants have to apply for a residence permit at the police, often going through a metal detector, where their fingerprints are taken. However, relevant laws give the police complete arbitrariness, which means that they can grant or deny a residence permit without any explanation. These human beings are criminalised for the sole fact of being foreigners, and Italian policemen’s ignorance and racist behaviour make only things worse (GABBAS, 2018). Apart from racism common to all, colour matters: South Americans of black or *indio* complexion fare worse than whites. Not to speak of detention centres for migrants, real prisons where a migrant can be held for indefinite time without trial for the sole fact of being without a valid residence permit (QUADRELLI, 2007; ROVELLI, 2006). Both Quadrelli (2007) and the Italian Jewish intellectual Moni Ovadia (ROVELLI, 2006, p. 281 - 283) go as far as to say that these detention centres are veritable concentration camps. Finally, the European Union recently admitted that EU border guards have the right to shoot trespassing migrants (SI PUÒ..., 2020).

Clearly, in present-day Europe migrants face a regime of violent state racism which is in many ways a continuation of colonialism – while their countries have been robbed for centuries by European powers. Migrant communities in Italy are a sort of disenfranchised inner exploitation colony, needed to perform the most menial, underpaid and dangerous jobs which Italians simply

will not take. Moreover, this foreign proletariat is useful to divert the hatred of the Italian proletariat from the Italian bourgeoisie. It is here that Guevara's deeds and thought could be extremely relevant. Certainly, it is very difficult to defend oneself without a proper ideological base. Guevara's radical anticolonialism could be a political and moral example which could inspire migrants in general. However, studying Che's legacy could be useful especially for South American migrants, for obvious language and cultural reasons. Emilio Quadrelli (2007) already showed that Latin American communities living in Italy can sometimes unite to defend themselves, for example freeing their "brothers" from detention centres. Guevara's radical anticolonialism could be an ideological glue uniting these communities. Migrants living in Italy must face reality: they will be subject to ever growing levels of racism and violence. In this exceptional situation the organisation of self-defence is extremely relevant.

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