

November 26, 1962

Letter from Italian Communist Journalist Carmine de Lipsis to Senior Italian Communist Giancarlo Pajetta on Interview with Che Guevara

Citation:

"Letter from Italian Communist Journalist Carmine de Lipsis to Senior Italian Communist Giancarlo Pajetta on Interview with Che Guevara", November 26, 1962, Wilson Center Digital Archive, 1962 Cuba Estero 502, 2459-2467, Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) records, Fondazione Instituto Gramsci, Rome; obtained by James Hershberg, translated by Alex Barrow. <https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/115430>

Summary:

A letter from Italian Communist Journalist Carmine de Lipsis to Senior Italian Communist Giancarlo Pajetta regarding an interview with Che Guevara. De Lipsis also includes detailed reading notes on this meeting to augment the rest of the letter.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Leon Levy Foundation

Original Language:

Italian

Contents:

Translation - English

To com[rade]. Pajetta

Direction [Direzione] PCI

Dear Pajetta,

I'm taking the initiative of sending to you and to the Secretary of the Party the uncut version of the interview I had with [Ernesto] Ché Guevara, it is reconstructed with a careful reading of the notes, and it is faithful in spirit and in form, but, small and secondary variations and omissions are possible in the final version.

Comparing the two texts - the one I'm presenting to you and the one published in "Paese Sera" (for lack of space necessarily shorter: it was of 6 typewritten pages although the uncut one is of almost 15) - will show that:

1. I was faithful to the spirit and nearly always to the form given to me by my interlocutor;
2. I left out the more bitter things [i.e., statements] than the ones published;
3. That in the hurry in which I had to write the interview (the journal didn't gave me the chance to stay at home writing with more attention to the piece, but forced me - while urging me to publish rapidly all before the eventual aggression by the US - to do simultaneously the editorial work) I made some mistakes that look like small details to the sentence you quote ("but in the end what's that myth of the petit bourgeois?") was actually said: "but in the end what is this petite bourgeoisie?" and was referring not to the hint of controversy that Guevara made to Poles and Hungarians but to the situation in Latin America related to the question that I posed to him about the alliances. He said that with an irritated pitch (repeated any time he was talking about the bourgeoisie) and then the word "myth" came out like an interpretation, summing up the content of the tone of his answers;
4. That the matter of the policy of the Popular Fronts in the Latin America [word illegible] in the spirit, in the terms in which it was published, as you will understand from Guevara's view on the situation in Chile and on the policy of the communist Chilean Party. Of this last part - these were the concluding points, and so made more hurriedly - but just of this last part, I'm not completely sure of having copied down in my notes (that are for the rest stenographic) of my interlocutor's words in the same order in which he pronounced them. But I'm sure about the spirit and the form.

I took the initiative of sending you the uncut text of the interview both for dispelling the doubts that you raised about some sort of an intentional alteration of it (and what for, in the end?), and also because it could be useful for you as a documentation about the Cuban situation.

About the truthfulness of this text - with the clarifications I made - I give my honor, inviting you, in the case you would believe it necessary and in the form you would think most appropriate, to deliver it to Guevara himself. On my side I already intend to send to Havana the published text with the other articles.

I've already taken note of your assurance - repeated by Lusvardi [Luciano?] - that my dismissal from "Paese Sera" has nothing to do with my articles about Cuba and specifically with the interview, but I would like to point out that inside the newspaper and outside it, there are still persistent rumors about it being the cause of my present status; rumors that I believe come from the fact that I was dismissed (in such an inopportune way) while the publication of my articles on Cuba was still underway.

Something that, by the way, I couldn't finish! What you told me, at the end of our conversation, about the possibilities of my collaboration with the Foreign Section and the Print and Propaganda have reassured me.

There are, anyway, some expressions that you used toward me during our conversation (the little story of the "provocation") that you used many times in a kind way and that, however, I firmly reject. And the fact remains that I was paradoxically confused, even if just for a while, by that attitude of childish extremism and sectarianism, against which I fought honorably my whole life, paying dearly (even for the misguided way I behaved sometimes in similar situations) many times in person; against which I fought for the newspaper, against which I keep fighting now that I am "free" and, mainly, against which I distinctly expressed myself in Cuba with my Cuban friends - as will result from what I'll write further - and with Guevara himself - as will result from the text of the interview - risking even the personal interests I have with them.

After my dismissal several "discontented" (mainly from the left) got in touch with me, and also some "ex-journalists" settled somewhere else with big incomes, who were looking for some sympathy in the "common misfortune." I gave to all of them the same answer: what happened to me doesn't change in any way my loyalty to the party, to its direction, and mainly to its actual policy, loyalty that is not based on faith but is based on rational and intimate beliefs, passed through direct and sometimes painful experiences (read as Czechoslovakia, D'Onofrio, Rebetti, the old direction of "Unità" and, lastly, some lonely follower in "Paese Sera" and "Paese") during which I resolved any doubt - that I sincerely confess I had - about the leading group of our party, noticing that "my" demands weren't out of line with party or its leaders but were already involved in their dialogue of development. And so there are already those at the newspaper who smile about De Lipsis' affair, a "naïve conformist" who would have been hit by the same people that he was going to defend, and in private there are those who portray me as an "unreadable" character still busy defending, even with friends, just these comrades.

About this "atmosphere" and these epithets I don't give a damn, and I leave them to petit-bourgeois and sectarians, to tired and frayed ones. I put too much trust in my qualities as a militant and professional revolutionary (with or without a salary) to let myself be affected by them. But at this point I have to open a critical word on the unbelievable suspicions that sometimes were raised about some of my behaviors (but, how can one not see that they are just the fruit of my moral and idealistic reactions to unsolved and un-explained problems?) or initiatives like trips abroad dictated by necessity (when I'm unemployed) and by my own specialization. The little story of the provocative behavior already came out, even at the newspaper, mainly when I was back from Czechoslovakia and I remained for a long time unemployed (I still have to ask for an explanation from Calamandrei, and I will if necessary, about why on that occasion he asked me, with an inquiring tone, from where I was taking money for living). Or maybe, by chance, were taken as serious (not from you, I know it!) the obscure and dishonest "ideas" of the Czechoslovak security services for which it looks like, finally, the day of the reckoning, in front of the tribunal of the communist morality, has come. Still a few days ago some Italian comrades who were in Czechoslovakia in the same period as me, told me that the reason of some behaviors that were held toward me was related to the fact that I went "in a prohibited military zone." Vulgar nonsense: in Czechoslovakia, I've never been in a prohibited zone. Where did they arrive was to hide other reasons like the insane internal fight of that party and its attitude toward us, for which I was just an easy target.

I want to point out to you the following:

-- I can't see why - given my full support, many times demonstrated, to the line followed by our party - I might have "provocatively" modified the Ché Guevara interview.

-- The reason could be seen in what the comrades of Print and Propaganda told me: the interview was inserted (intentionally?) in the debate about our thesis (and now we're definitively out of this world). What does our thesis have to do with this? What do they have to do with the material of a journalist just back, after 40 days of absence, from Cuba? I just tried to provide a truthful description of a situation I saw "on-the-spot"; to make further developments understandable. So, then, should we keep writing in the old manner, pre-XX congress [of the CPSU], to have it said to us - like had happened to me at the Unità and in the party sections - that we weren't critical and truthful enough? Look at the story about missiles that I gave in my first reports (and for which, if you had asked me for direct information when I was back, you could have avoided some unpleasantry which took place in the party assemblies!): sectarians of our party would be elaborately formulating a sort of "generic Castroism" to mechanically apply to Italy. The name of "Ché" Guevara, taking advantage of the huge prestige of Cubans, would objectively serve to feed that. Not considering the fact that five days after the interview the first disagreements between Cubans and Soviets were clear (and I agree with the last ones, as I wrote in a letter, responding to comrade Conte with whom you entered in a debate too, to the Congress of the Roman Federation) and so the interview, that I agree could have been published later, at least was useful in understanding from where the disagreements were coming from; for what concerns me, I'm declaring to be against this sort of "generic" or "concrete" Castroism applied to our condition. I think that it is idiocy, the fruit of childish extremism, of political primitivism, and worse of a tired breakdown in the application of the line of revolutionary action of our party. I'll not be considered one of the "Castroists for Italy" just because I'm married to a Cuban!

To prove to you what I'm saying, I'm ready to intervene, in words and actions, in our print and in our organizations, with the modest weight of someone who, like me, has already been to Cuba twice where these kind of rallies have happened. And I make a concrete proposal: I would be ready to go to Padua to hold a conference on Cuba, entering into a debate with those expelled by that Federation who, as has been said to me, raised these stupid principles.

I want to point out to you that any time that I had the occasion to, in the context of my competences and my contacts, I disagreed with the extremist, Trotskyist, "global" (and so on) positions. And the same happened mainly at "Paese Sera" in controversy with Riccardo Minuti; with youth from "Nuova Generazione" in private discussions, arriving to the halt of any form of collaboration with their newspaper; on occasion of the Congress about Capitalism in Italy, in the controversies, transferred to "Paese sera" and to "Paese," with all of what, in that occasion, Lucio Magri (against his "Catholic-Stalinist-Trotskyist" thesis I prepared a speech that I didn't give because I got sick) had to say; in the animated cell discussion, lasting for more than a month, about the newspapers that were following the XXII congress of the C.P.S.U. in which I was the protagonist of a political battle led against the two main tendencies manifested on that occasion (from the "right" Salerno and others and, mainly, for the "left," Minuti, etc.) supporting, with some critical consideration, the declaration made by the Secretary of the Party on that occasion, in one of my written mentions that was put in circulation, and so on.

-- Mainly I want to point out to you that during my stay in Cuba, when I was forced to, I rejected stupid opinions - even if I've heard nice ones - about our party: "The P.C.I. is an equivocal party" as it appears Fidel Castro himself said: "you can't take the power without the guns, what's this pacifist strategy?"; "[Party secretary Palmiro] Togliatti is a guy who made many mistakes at the Internazionale and after that"; "the movement of the people in Italy is stronger, more radical than the party"; "the P.C.I. is a Titoist party"; etc...Rumors, I'll say, that look like [they] were coming mostly from the old Cuban communists). I rejected these opinions in the following occasions: with Nicolas Guillen [head of the National Cuban Writers' Union]: even expressing my reserve about the fact that the group of young intellectuals were hostile with him and the cultural directors would have taken advantage of some writings of our party like the

one from Togliatti, that I gave to you, for controversies and in a situation different from ours; I asked him the reason of some judgments on our party; with colleagues of "Revolucion" (among which I found a warm environment, favorably disposed toward Italians, humanly sane, even if some times superficial and politically heterogeneous). They reported to me some anti-P.C.I. opinions (I don't know of whom exactly) of some old comrades. Through them I told Fidel Castro's secretary, Celia Sanchez, with whom I should have had an interview, that in Cuba there were wrong opinions about our party due to a lack of information, and that I found contradictory the fact that there were misunderstandings [lit. incomprehensions] between two revolutionary movements: ours and the Cuban one, that have origins and some features in common (the popular character, the origin from wars for liberty, the connection with masses, the originality of the idealistic elaboration). With the Minister of Labor Augusto Martinez Sanchez and with the Foreign Minister Raul Roa to whom I expressed - in relation with the fact that I was having a few difficulties, for more than 2 years, in finding a job for my wife at the Roman Embassy [i.e., Cuban Embassy in Rome], although she was in Cuba an officer of the Revolution, difficulties that from some parts were considered caused by the prejudice toward the Italian communists - the opinion that the Roman Embassy [Cuban Embassy in Rome] could do much more, that the mistake of looking at the Italian situation with "Cuban eyes" was being made, even admitting that from some Italian comrades (I was referring to a journalist colleague), once in Cuba, the opposite mistake could have been made, With the comrades of the Cuban Institute for the Friendship with People to whom I spoke, without naming any name or going into detail, about the pervasive sectarianism at the Cuban Embassy in Rome, about the prejudices that there were (now there are many new officers) toward our party, and about the incomprehension due to superficiality and lack of study of the Italian situation. With a group of Argentine and foreign comrades, who considered the ideas expressed in the debate of "new generation" coming from the P.C.I. saying that we had rehabilitated Trotsky, explaining to them how things were, instead.

-- For two years, even through my personal friendship relations, I argued and many times entered into a debate with almost all my Cuban friends from the Roman Embassy [Cuban Embassy in Rome] replying to their extremism and their prejudices about the P.C.I., trying, often in vain, to make them understand the different peculiarities of the Italian situation, helping them to get along, and maybe compromising, with that, for last year's hiring of my wife.

-- In spite of it all I left a good impression in Havana (as it was said to me by different sources and also by the written praise coming from my Cuban friends in Rome); I obtained the hiring of my wife to the embassy and even an undefined office (external and not paid) of political counselor; I realized all of that on a sane basis, clearly, supporting always our party, and always refusing to get down to rumors and information about our internal situation, something that I was sometimes pushed to do (not from people of distinguished responsibility). I believe that this my individual action, occasional, always done using just my person (I've never feigned any right of representation) bore some fruit: Foreign Minister Roa said to me that the [Cuban] Embassy in Rome will be enhanced, with a crew [i.e., staff] which will be politically more qualified, and that he wants to keep good relations with our party, about the knowledge of which, he cares a lot.

Concerning the interview and my reports about Cuba in general I would like to add also:

-- I find correct the criticism that you made to me about the inopportune publishing, in that moment, of the interview with Guevara (but how would I have gone about not publishing it once I obtained it? How would the Cubans have interpreted, toward me and toward the party, that silence? The interview was published with a month's delay after I got it).

-- Also, the considerations made by the comrades of the Foreign Section and others related to facts and news published (originally) in some of my reports that would have been better not to say correct.

As I said, the reports were written in a hurry because as soon as I came back the Cuban crisis exploded; the newspaper didn't give me the option of staying at home concentrating on writing more carefully. I had to work 10 hours per day editing, writing the pieces in my spare time; I finished the interview with Guevara that was under editing, while I was pushed to publish it immediately. Also I was half-sick from an annoying vaccine given to me at the airport in Prague.

-- I prepared a scheme of the whole "reportage" for Coon before the crisis exploded. It was accurate and polished, right for more quiet times. The blockade, the danger of an aggression disrupted my report, I was forced to modify the tone, to make everything more bitter, and also the interview with Guevara suffered from that. I had to highlight the reasons behind the position of the Cubans more than my critics. The initial scheme, that Che approved, was more critical and distanced.

But from that to mistake me for the opposite of what I am: I'm surprised that all that happened for a one-time incident, forgetting all the rest (that I exposed to you) and mainly all my past as a militant and as a journalist, that is in a completely opposite direction from the suspicions to which I've been subject.

I want to make it apparent to you that this demonstrates how inefficient, superficial, and non-political the connection between the newspaper and your source are, if it's true that no one pointed out to you which was my real everyday attitude at the newspaper; that my relations with the party from 6 years ago to now have never been for me anything else than a sequences of administrative facts without any political or ideal nature.

This situation at "Paese Sera" was aggravated by the Regiment that was imposed on me, of just executive work, that brutalized me, leading me to a real process of alienation from any political discussion, if it's true that I ended up doing, involuntarily, in the case of the interview with Guevara, something that resulted as completely and objectively opposite, in effect, to my own convictions.

Many cordial salutes.

[signed]

(Carmine De Lipsis)

P.S. For what concerns "Paese Sera", I do not exclude the things that I said to you in the previous letter¹, I don't expect much more out of them, taking advantage of the incident and of your intervention to do what was missing to the plans they had before I arrived there: exclude me from the editorial campaign, so that the stagnant water would remain so, in a deaf hostility to new times.

Rome, 26 November 1962

1 Ed. note: Not found or further identified.