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 Reception, Reactions and Consequences**

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**"I felt as if I was faced with a French Honecker" :
 The French Communist Party confronted with a world that was falling apart
 (1985-1991)¹**

At the end of the 80s, Gratchev – with Gorbatchev – met Georges Marchais, who was the general secretary of the French Communist Party (the PCF).

Gratchev, who was Gorbatchev's adviser, is the one who said after this meeting : "*I felt as if I was faced with a French Honecker*".

Facing the reforms of Gorbatchev, the French Communist Party leadership expressed a lot of scepticism.

Then, in 1989, the same leadership has been silent when the Soviet-bloc regimes collapsed one after the other.

It was especially silent when the popular protest increased in Eastern Germany.

And, the French party leadership made no comment when, in Romania, the Ceausescu regime collapsed.

It is true that some leaders of the French party used to go to Romania for their summer holidays and often met Ceausescu during these holidays.

They also used to hunt with him (or with other Soviet bloc leaders).

¹ The sources of the paper are mentioned at the end of it. The principle source is a book published at the end of 2005 : D. Andolfatto, *PCF : mutation ou liquidation*, Paris-Monaco, Le Rocher, coll. « Démocratie ou totalitarisme » (directed by Stéphane Courtois), 2005.

The author thanks **David Palmer** who helped him to translate this paper in english.

[This custom inspired Enki Bilal, a comics trip artist, to create « *The Hunting Party* », which became very famous (in 1983)].

Finally, in 1991, the French Communist Party leadership – like the french president François Mitterrand - understood the Coup d'Etat that had just taken place in the USSR, in the name of « realpolitik »...

But the attitude of the French Communist Party leadership toward this important event remained ambiguous.

I would like to develop these different points.

So, I will come back on these different events,

and I will try to analyze them.

First of all, I will begin with the attitude of the French Communist Party toward political changes in the USSR – glasnost, perestroïka, new international policy – in the 80s.

Firstly, the French Communist Party seemed to be enthusiastic with regards to developments in the Soviet Union.

The French Communist Party said that was a « second revolution ».

But its analysis of this « second revolution » was a little bit naive.

It was an ideological approach.

And this approach was used to hide the realities of Russian society and economy.

Then, the French Party became more neutral and also critical toward Gorbachev.

It explained that the Gorbachev's reforms were only concerned the USSR.

They couldn't apply to other Communist countries.

Secondly, the French Communist party leadership was very worried.

Because it didn't share the analysis of Gorbachev about the systemic crisis and the need to change in the USSR.

For the French, the main reason of the soviet crisis was stalinism... more than thirty years before.

More largely – for the French –, the main reason for soviet economic difficulties was historical.

These difficulties dated from the nineteenth century.

That explained the October revolution... but also the crisis in the 80s !

But Gorbachev had another analysis, a most ambitious analysis.

His analysis was not historical, nor ideological.

Gorbatachev spoke about all the « errors » of the soviet system...

and, for him, stalinism, or the past, were not the problem...

These problems were more structural.

They put the Soviet system into question.

That was the reason of perestroïka and glasnost.

Gorbatchev also expected a deep renewal in the Communist party of the USSR.

For the French Communist party, regarding the Soviet communist party, the only problem was the relationship between the party and the people.

So it was a problem of communication.

In fact, the approach of the French Party remained theoretical whereas Gorbatchev's was more realistic or practical.

The French party refused to question the Soviet political system.

It only proposed some small adaptations.

But the French Party was also worried when the « Eltsin affair » came to light, in 1987.

Eltsin denounced the administrative obstructions of Gorbatchev's reforms.

He also denounced the defeciences of these reforms.

And the French Communist Party was worried because it didn't understand this public debate on Gorbatchev's reforms.

For the French, this kind of debate was unusual and even abnormal.

It looked like a serious disorder in the USSR that the French Communist Party was not able to understand.

Perestroïka would soon be seen as a deviation from the usual leninist policy line of the USSR.

So, after a short time, the French Communist Party joined the same position as most conservative communist regimes, like in Czechoslovakia, Romania, Vietnam, Cuba... and Eastern Germany.

Georges Marchais was also disappointed by the political changes in Poland, then in Hungary.

In the same way, in the summer of 89, the newspaper of the French Communist party (*L'Humanité*) was very critical of Lech Walesa who was negotiating the composition of the first democratic polish government for a very long time.

In October 89, the same newspaper published a tribute to the Chinese Communist Party, for the fortieth anniversary of the Chinese revolution.

In this tribute, we found no reference to the bloody repression of the Chinese demonstrations of the Spring of 89.

That shows the conservative choices that the French Communist Party made.

For it, the communist world was strong.

Nothing could happen to change it...

In fact, the French Communist Party was afraid of any change....

It seemed to be afraid that communism was coming to an end.

This can appear paradoxical.

Because, in the 70s, the French Communist Party experienced some democratic developments... even if we must discuss them.

For example, the French Party abandoned the dictatorship of the proletariat.

It also seemed to join Eurocommunism, with Italians.

But, at the same time, the French Communist Party purged some of its members.

The more democratic ones had to leave the party.

Therefore, the leadership of the party remained unchanged for a long time.

The same generation led the party from the 60s to the 90s.

But it lost a lot of its supporters and voters from the end of the 70s.

Now, I would like to talk about the attitude of the French Communist Party towards Gorbachev's foreign policy when the Berlin Wall came down...

Like many governments, the French Party couldn't imagine the fall of the Berlin Wall.

And it didn't want to recognize all the events living up to it.

In October 89, *L'Humanité*, the French communist newspaper, celebrated the fortieth anniversary of Eastern Germany.

The article remained very positive.

It reminded the readers that the political and economic reasons that justified the building of the Berlin Wall.

It asserted that young East German had a secure future !

It also asserted that the situation in Eastern Germany was « normal ».

But, the journalist quoted Gorbachev's speech.

And with these quotations, the newspaper – and, maybe, the Party – sent some political messages.

What did Gorbachev say for *L'Humanité* ?

Here are two examples of what Gorbachev said :

« The choice of models of political development belongs to each sovereign country »

« German questions are resolved in Berlin, not in Moscow »

With these quotations, the french communist newspaper tried to speak about the new international relations in the soviet-bloc...

And the newspaper seemed to understand these new relations.

But the French Communist Party leadership chose not to comment on that subject.

Clearly, officially, the French communist party didn't want to see changes that were taking place.

On the radio, a few days before the Wall fell, Georges Marchais repeated that socialism had very important accomplishments in Eastern Europe and in the USSR.

These countries only faced developmental problems !

That meant the political or economic system of these countries remained strong... for the French Communist.

So, the French Communist Party didn't understand the need for deep changes, such as the those Gorbachev wanted.

In 87, visiting the USSR, Georges Marchais already had the same arguments.

In a speech that he gave at the Kremlin, he referred to the significant gains through by the socialism.

PCF expressed a high of loyalty to the soviet system... but it was reserved about Gorbachev's policy.

Suddenly, on the 10th of november 1989, the French communist party leadership said it was satisfied with the opening of the Berlin Wall.

The French Communist said it had been waiting for this event for a long time.

In fact, it had never said anything on this subject before !

A few years after, Roland Leroy, who was the number 2 of the PCF, and who has been the editor of *L'Humanité*, explained in a book the gap between Gorbachev and the French communist party.

He explained that the French were more faithful to the soviet model than Gorbachev or the other soviet leaders.

He spoke about a meeting between him and Gorbachev.

In a conversation with him, he had suggested to organize « a revolution in the revolution », to organize a new October.

But for Gorbachev, the goal was no longer the revolution.

For him, the revolution belonged the past.

That shows that French Communist and Gorbachev were on two different lines.

The one looked to the past whereas Gorbachev was trying to invent a future for the USSR.

For the French Communist, it seemed impossible to escape from history, from revolution, from ideology...

For Gorbachev, the ship was sinking... So, the situation required urgent action...

Finally – I would like to talk about the Coup d'Etat of 1991... and the attitude of the French Communist Party.

While all the media spoke about the coup d'Etat in the USSR, *L'Humanité* never mention the word.

It only said that there was a lot of uncertainty in Russian Society and that people were worried...

But – in a declaration - the Party leadership said that this event, which it didn't qualify, was the end of perestroïka.

The same leadership spoke about the failure of perestroïka.

It underlined the mistakes made in a Soviet economy

It connected these imperfections with the rising nationalism in Russia.

So, « the revolution in a revolution », as some French communist saw perestroïka initially, has become a deep failure.

Finally, the French Party made a negative assessment of this experiment.

And the party understood Gorbachev's fall.

It only regretted the conditions of his fall.

We can say Gorbachev's fall liberated the PCF, enabling it to put the blame on Gorbachev.

Up until then, its criticism tended to be esoteric.

According to the testimony of one member of the political bureau of the French communist party, this event didn't break any hearts in the party.

In addition, several members of the political bureau (of the French party) knew Guennadi Ianaïev who was the new leader – only for three days – of the USSR.

But I don't know if these members appreciated him.

There were no criticisms about him.

In fact, the communist french leadership didn't want to disagree with the coup d'Etat, and they didn't approve of it, either.

The coup d'Etat put a full stop to perestroika.

That was a positive point in the French Communist Leadership opinion.

...because the perestroïka had opened the way to wild capitalism.. very far from the communist revolution...

I just want **to conclude** my paper by saying this one is based on a book I wrote a few years ago.

It was about the French Communist Party from the 70s to the present day.

The French Communist party was the leading political party in France in the 1950s, in terms of membership and of voters.

For the last ten years, only two percent of voters are still voting for it.

My book was based on many interviews of leaders, ex-leaders or simple members of the party.

It is also based on internal party documents.

In the book, I try to understand the development of the party, which was one of the conservative communist parties

... even if it pretended to be modern and democratic in the 70s (under the face of eurocommunism).

In fact, it remained very ambiguous as its attitude towards Gorbachev and Perestroïka showed.

Thank you for your attention.

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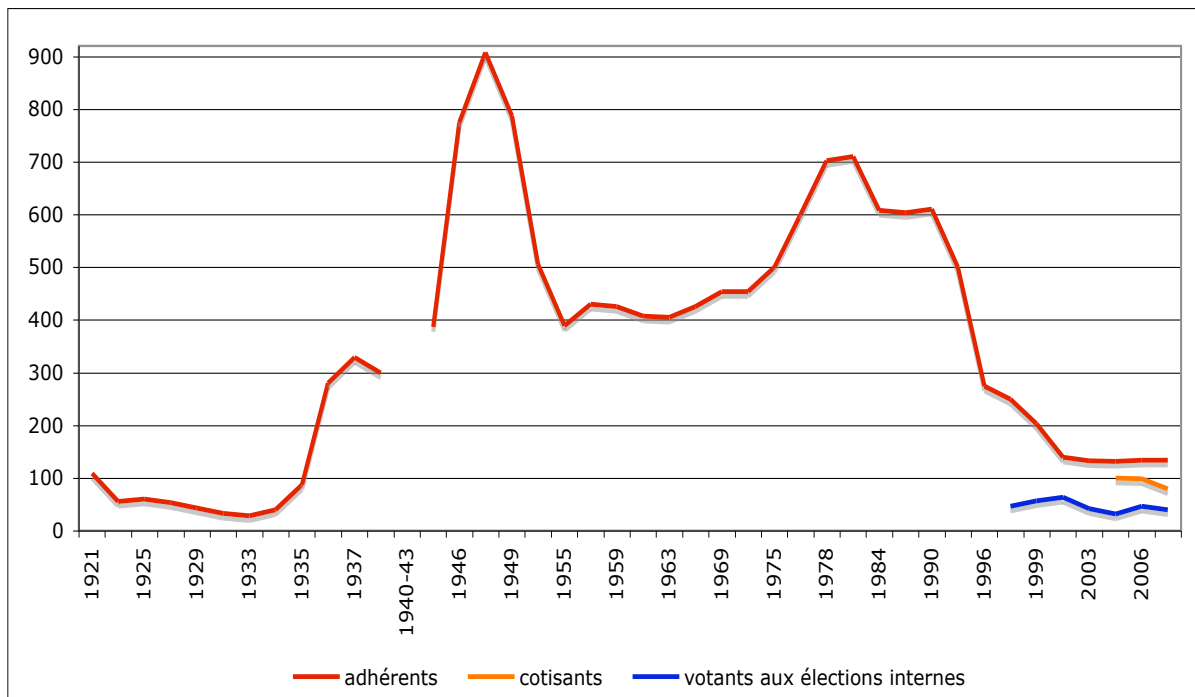
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Figure : The decline of the membership of PCF



Sources : PCF, D. Andofatto.