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The Biennale of Dissent 1977: Power and Culture in the Cold War

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The Biennale of Dissent 1977: Power and Culture in the Cold War

Introduction

The following thesis aims at analysing the cultural and political consequences of the 1977 edition of the Venice Biennale, dedicated to cultural dissent in the countries of the Eastern bloc, as well as the dynamics it revealed and what this initiative can tell us, forty years later, about the Italian politics and intellectual tendencies of that period. When the Biennale's President Carlo Ripa di Meana (member of the Italian Socialist Party, PSI) proposed the theme of Soviet and Eastern Dissent for the cultural manifestations in Venice, it triggered a series of reactions, firstly from the Central Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), and consequently from the political representatives, economic stakeholders and intellectual exponents of Italy, that threatened the relations between Rome and Moscow on the one side, while affecting the internal equilibria between the Italian and Socialist party on the other. Following the pressures exerted by the Soviet authorities and ambassador Nikita Rizhov's explicit admonishments, the Italian government reacted by blocking the annual budget of the Biennale (which was a state cultural institution, at the time). Severe criticism towards the initiative originated from communist politicians in the opposition and leftist intellectuals from different cultural circles, filling the newspapers for months. Finally, in June the budget was confirmed and preparations for the festival started immediately, postponing the events from the traditional summer period to the end of the year: the festival took place from 15th November to 15th December 1977. The USSR maintained its reproaching position: correspondence with the intellectuals living in the Eastern bloc was impeded, letters and invitations were returned. Publishers and distributors were prevented from sharing rights, scores and films requested by the festival. However, numerous émigré artists, writers, musicians and intellectuals, as well as several Western European thinkers and theoreticians, slavophiles and Sovietologists, were present at the event. Within thirty-one days there were seven different

conferences, three exhibitions, and an endless list of concerts, recitals, film screenings, debates and seminars in Venice. The events attracted 220 000 visitors and included 350 participants from 24 different countries[1].

In the first chapter the history of Soviet Dissent in the two decades preceding the Biennale (i.e. following Iosif Stalin's death and the end of the cult of personality) will be retraced in order to better contextualize the Venetian event and its participants. Thus the development and organization of the dissenting movement between the end of Nikita Khrushchev's 'Thaw' and the rise to power of Leonid Brezhnev, with the resulting tightening of censorship and controls, will be recalled. Space is devoted to the phenomenon of *samizdat*, the network of illegal publications and diffusion of forbidden material across the Soviet bloc explored in the context of the Biennale with a permanent exhibition, but also to the vicissitudes behind the most prominent figures of the political opposition, invited in Venice. Finally, the last paragraphs are centred on the 1975 Helsinki Accords, defined by the same President Ripa di Meana as 'the legal foundation' of the Biennale and representing a potential weapon in the hands of the Eastern dissidents in order to have more respect for human rights implemented in their countries. The international agreement, in fact, originally advanced by the USSR and its satellites with the aim of cementing the bloc's status quo, ended to favour, at least in its third basket, those principles of openness and human rights' protection dear to the Western democracies.

In the second chapter, the new non-elitarian and participatory shape acquired by the Biennale after the 1973 reform of its Statute (which transformed it in a "cultural institute democratically organized", whose activity became permanent and not merely seasonal) is presented, as well as the preparation of the 1977 project, its reception from the Soviet authorities and the Italian public, and the final realized outcome of Ripa di Meana's proposal. The latter's presidency of the Biennale had been quite crucial in defining the institute's new socially engaged character, whose thematically focused editions had dealt with Chile's coup by general Pinochet and with post-Francoist Spain, respectively in 1974 and 1976 – therefore already displaying a high level of political commitment. The case of Dissent, however, was different in so far as it divided both the national and international public opinion. In the Seventies the unofficial culture of the Soviet Union was quite familiar to the West: the histories of dissident thinkers, the work of unofficial writers and artists and non-conformism as a social phenomenon in Eastern Europe and USSR were quite renown cultural facts for Western citizens during the Cold War era, more or less regularly covered by the media (especially singular cases such as that of the Dissent's leading figure Andrei Sakharov, or those of Andrei Amal'rik, Aleksandr Solzhenicyn and so on). After the 1975 Helsinki Accords had declared that the basic

[1] Archivio storico delle arti contemporanee, *La Biennale di Venezia. Annuario 1978: eventi del 1976–1977*, La Biennale di Venezia, Venice, 1978, p. 529

human rights of Soviet and Eastern European citizens should be respected, a new wave of Western exhibitions emerged: in 1977 alone there were major expositions of unofficial and alternative Soviet art in Paris, London and Washington, before Venice, plus innumerable smaller exhibitions in different countries[2]. As a matter of fact, the détente process between the USSR and USA, until then mostly based on arms control, was enriched by actions, like the Helsinki Conference, oriented to the promotion of international law and protection of human rights, which became the legal basis for many initiatives of cultural Dissent, thus shifting the ground for the political and diplomatic opposition in part also on the cultural level, effectively contributing to the promotion of the freedom and independence of thought and expression. Yet, the diplomatic balance of the Cold War remained fragile: any tiny event considered hostile (especially by the socialist countries) could engender tensions in the East-West international relations, so in the case of cultural and artistic exhibitions the aesthetic aspects used to prevail over the political concerns. The Biennale of Dissent 1977 represented one of the very few cases of cultural representation of Dissent at the official and international level in which the political considerations, for several reasons, ended to be strongly emphasised. With the afore-mentioned 1973 reform, in fact, the Biennale had assumed a new, socially and politically-engaged and cross-disciplinary format to replace the traditional objectifying and former market-oriented spirit of the institute, which had been harshly criticized in the context of the 1968 contestations.

While the establishment of the Soviet Union and those of its satellites reacted negatively to the Venetian initiative, accusing it of compromising the peaceful relations between Italy and Warsaw Pact's countries and of undermining the purposes of the Helsinki Accords (which was far too predictable and usual by such governments so sensitive and susceptible to any criticism), the Italian reception by both political parties and intellectuals was unexpectedly ambiguous and contradictory, especially on the part of the latter. As it will be explored in the third chapter, next to the international reviews and critiques to the 1977 Biennale (not always favourable, as some criticized the limits of its contents and appreciated only the supportive attempt towards the cultural opposition), the project met various forms of boycott by both Italian politics (PCI in particular, but not only), economic actors, cultural institutions and intellectuals close to the left. In fact, besides the role of Dissent in the East-West political relations, it is crucial to understand the relevance of this topic in the internal affairs of Italy during this historical period. Although information about the Soviet regime's oppression of basic human rights was spreading and in plain sight, the reactions towards these facts in the West in general, and in Italy particularly, were varied. For some left-wing politicians, especially the Communists

[2] Soomre M. K., 'Art, Politics and Exhibitions: (Re)writing the history of (Re)presentations', in *Kunstiteaduslikke*, 21(3), January 2012, p.114

(under Enrico Berlinguer's lead in 1977), at first the dissidents represented an ideological error, a kind of political opportunism and lack of professionalism, rather than an actual and serious social phenomenon. In Italy the unofficial culture of the Soviet bloc had also become a political theme for argumentation between parties in a context where the PCI, with its Eurocommunist project and strategy of 'Historic Compromise' agreed with the Christian Democrats (DC), had reached the second largest electoral standing in the country. The more marginal PSI (led since 1976 by Bettino Craxi), on the other hand, was attempting to offer a more centrist alternative to the dominant Christian Democrats, while trying to seize the portion of votes from the PCI of those citizens disturbed by the Communists' unclear but alarming relationship with Moscow.

The hypothesis here scrutinized is that the Biennale, which very little contributed, at least internally, to the fight for individual liberties championed by the dissenting movement in the socialist countries of the Eastern bloc, has nevertheless allowed for a deeper comprehension of an issue until then misapprehended at the international level. Moreover, the way the event was dealt with in the Italian political and intellectual space seems to have influenced the endogenous political balance within the Italian left, while re-defining the public image of its two main parties, PCI and PSI. The prolonged debate over Eastern Dissent stretched the discrepancy between the two. The Communists, in this case, failed to assert their ideological independence from Staraya Ploshchad: although they had already started to take distance from the CPSU on international matters since the 1968 Prague Spring, for several concurring reasons (from the will to not compromise the inter-blocs détente to the refusal of any agreement with their socialist counterpart) the PCI took a step backward when it was time to show solidarity for the dissidents, and this missed advocacy in favour of human rights would have resulted in a loss of consensus. As for the PSI, its conduct in this period was featured by radical changes derived by Craxi's rise to the lead of the party: the new secretary gave to the support for Dissent and the protection of human rights in Eastern Europe a very high priority in the Socialists' agenda – partly with an instrumental and anti-communist function, but also animated by the genuine conviction that the issue of Dissent deserved proper international attention.

The Biennale of Dissent came about in this complex and multi-layered context and its unfolding affected both the perception of Dissent itself and the Italian political dynamics: besides distressing the Communists and allowing the Socialists to acquire a role as defenders of democracy and civil liberties, it also allowed for the re-appropriation, in Italy, of the ideological and social problems posed by the 'popular democracies' in Eastern Europe, affranchised of the simplistic rationale opposing the Western and the Eastern bloc, and thus allowing for a more perspicuous recognition of the peculiar questions concerning the single countries and not the general 'socialist area'.

1. Soviet Dissent in the Seventies

1.1 Recent History of Soviet Dissent

In his introduction to *Dissent and Socialism*, the 1977 collection of essays originating from the illegal Soviet magazine *Dvadcatij Vek*, the slavist scholar Vittorio Strada explained 'dissent' as follows:

> Dissent sees the light within a society that is totally controlled by a dominant ideology (little matters whether it is actually "believed" or not) which possesses a censorship apparatus of universal capacity. […] It is then defined by those same State-organs of repression and dominance, thus becoming everything untolerated by the authority and therefore persecuted: what in other (democratic) political regimes would be a common activity of critic towards the establishment, in an authoritarian regime (devoid, like the USSR, of an "opposition theory" at the doctrinal level) turns into subversive and illegal 'dissent'.[3]

In the same introduction, the slavist scholar and expert of Soviet dissent had previously argued that the very concept of 'revolution' (radical antithesis to an established order), so dear to and recurrent within the Soviet discourse, comprises in itself the consensus/dissensus dichotomy, therefore theorizing a consensus for its objectives and yet neglecting dissent as a perturbing reality inside his social project – partially tolerated but mostly repelled. This is ultimately true when revolution, from antithetic force, triumphantly becomes the mainstream thetic force,

[3] Strada V., 'Dissenso e socialismo', in *Dissenso e socialismo. Una voce marxista del Samizdat sovietico*, Giulio Einaudi editore, Torino, 1977, p.XXI.

imposing itself as hegemonic new order.[4] The Soviet one is a revolution that, Strada goes on, "precisely on the cultural level reveals its double-faced nature: a mass-movement of liberation and participation, and thus active hope for its people, together with the creation of a cage to control that very same movement in every direction, even those congenial to the revolutionary spirit"[5]. Afterall, as Lenin himself argued in his work *What is to be done?* (*Chto delat'*?), referring to a 1852 Lasalle's letter to Marx, to be powerful and dominant, a party has necessarily to be pure and its ideals well-defined – such a purity is reached through internal struggle: the party needs to get rid of all the deviations from the official ideologic lines and of the unassimilable elements, but in the Soviet society the "deviated", "impure" elements, once depurated from the party, could not find a venue for their criticism elsewhere, as the Bolsheviks prevented pluralism in the whole State and enjoyed total cultural hegemony all over the society. This was deemed necessary to build a new man and citizen.

At the dawn of the Seventies, the USSR had gone through an ambiguous path of approach towards the expression of dissent within its community: after Khrushchev's denunciation of the Stalinist crimes against humanity and of the dictator's cult of personality at the 20th Congress of the Comintern, the new Secretary of the CPSU himself had to retreat his declarations against the bloody predecessor[6] and the so-called Thaw (Ottepel') process that followed Khrushchev's famous secret speech always maintained a moderate, top-down controlled character that never allowed a factual, substantial disclosure of criticism against the Soviet establishment and its imposition of a totalizing ideology. Even when the trustworthy, known among the party members and staunch socialist Aleksandr Tvardovskij, director of the *Novij Mir*, tried to make his magazine one of the symbols of the cultural Thaw by offering space to independent authors such as Solzhenicyn and Pomerancev, he was twice removed from his position at the lead of the magazine for his editorial choices: first in 1954, secondly in 1970[7]. Following his deposition in 1964, Khrushchev was succeeded by Brezhnev, who turned that false promise of de-Stalinization in a return to the oppressive "old ways" of opponents' political prosecution and accurate censorship (although not in the same fierce and gruesome modalities as Stalin's) even against the least politicized and non-satirical artworks – nonetheless guilty of not reflecting the State policy in regard with the function that

[4] Ibid., p.VIII.
[5] Ibid., p.XVII.
[6] Kurt M., *Dogmatismus und Emanzipation in der Sowjetunion*, Verlag Kohlbammer, Stuttgart, 1971, p.54.
[7] Clementi M, *Storia del dissenso sovietico (1953-1991)*, Odradek, Roma, 2007, p.8.

art and literature are supposed to have in the Soviet ideology: the Socialist Realist representation of the ideal post-revolutionary society[8].

In this context of reinforced intellectual immobility and harsh closeness to constructive critics, the Soviet system kept with the repression of any innovative, constructive and self-correcting force (scientists and intellectuals) that it actually needed, but whose effects it deeply dreaded in so far as they threatened the status quo and, therefore, brutally fought with methods unsimilar to the tsarist ones. In this respect, Mark Kurt vividly depicted the Communist establishment "like a living being unable to adapt to the environmental mutations, like a dinosaur that constantly mutilates itself of the organs whose new formation would allow to ease and improve its existence"[9]. He also linked this tendency of the ruling elite with their inability to further contribute to any development or positive change, which resulted in the rulers' will to ensure their own survival and permanence in the dominant position to detriment of any social progress, producing regression and underdevelopment instead.

This static state of cultural and political conditions should not suggest, however, a Soviet total imperturbability to external attempts of sociocultural influences and actual exchange of information across the two sides of the Iron Curtain. Despite the 1968 announcement of the Brezhnev Doctrine in order to strengthen the impermeability of socialist societies and the new Secretary's adversity for cultural freedom and artistic experimentation, it was precisely in this period that the dissidents began to refine and enrich their endogenous and exogenous, often ingenious, techniques of communication: supported by the collaboration of foreign journalists, the Soviet dissidents exploited the gaps in the apparatus of state control to communicate across borders. Their work informed the Western public about daily life under Communism and provided the Eastern bloc's citizens with alternatives to the party-controlled media[10]. Based in Munich but funded by the CIA, Radio Free Europe (RFE)/Radio Liberty (RL) disseminated news and commentary about events in Eastern Europe and the USSR, by broadcasting interviews with émigrés and foreign travellers, as well as intelligence contents supplied by sympathizers working within the communist governments. They also made public the essays and novels of dissident authors, bringing them to a wider audience than they could have reached through underground networks alone. These efforts brought some dissidents figures

[8] The *socialistichesky realizm*, also simplified as *socrealizm*, was the only form of art officially approved by the CPSU, that required the exclusive representation of purely Socialist "realities" and conforming worldviews. (Vaughn James C., *Soviet Socialist Realism. Origins and Theory*, MacMillan Press, London and Basingstoke, 1973).

[9] Kurt M., *Dogmatismus und Emanzipation in der Sowjetunion*, cit., p.21-22.

[10] Reddaway P., *The Dissidents: a Memoir of Working with the Resistance in Russia, 1960-1990*, The Brooking Institution, Washington, 2020, pp.103-120.

to worldwide attention. For example, in 1968 the Moscow correspondent of the Dutch newspaper Het Parool obtained a *samizdat* copy of Andrei Sakharov's *Reflections on Progress, Co-existence, and Intellectual Freedom*, a manifesto for opening the USSR to new ideas[11]. From the point of view of the voices within the Soviet dissenting movement, the solidarity and concrete support of the Western public opinion was deemed crucial for their battle toward a more democratic society, as Roy Medvedev expressed in his contribution to *Dissent and Socialism*[12]. This was especially true after the advent of Brezhnev at the party's secretariat and his turn of screw against the structures of undercover dissent which made lose ground to realities such as the *samizdat*, the network for prohibited manuscripts' hand-to-hand circulation, and that led to the numerous trials conducted against authors (among which Sinyavsky-Daniel stands out as turning-point-case for the Dissent's movement) and protestors.

In this scenario, one has to add the potentially favourable impulses coming from provisions such as President Gerald Ford's Jackson–Vanik amendment (1974) and the following Helsinki Accords (1975). The Jackson–Vanik, a revision of the Trade Act, was intended to affect the trade relations between the US and the non-market economies belonging to the Soviet bloc (and not only), to detriment of the latter. In particular, the new provision aimed at penalizing, by denying the most favoured nation status, those countries that restricted emigration – a human right in the eyes of the Western power[13]. The Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, signed in the Finnish capital on 1st August 1975, on the contrary, had been a Soviet project in principle, but it eventually ended to favor the Western priorities and core values, rejecting in fact the Brezhnev doctrine and laying emphasis on a portion of human rights dear to the liberal democracies of Western Europe and North America. The document committed the participating countries to a greater transparency in economic and military affairs, and promoted the freer movement of people and information across borders. One of the first tangible results of the Conference and its conclusive (non-binding) declaration was the formation, in May 1976, of the Public Group to Promote Observance of the Helsinki Accords in the USSR, also known as the Helsinki Watch Group, founded by Yuri Orlov and based in Moscow[14]. By and large, the Helsinki Final Act

[11] M. C. Morgan, *The Final Act. The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2018, pp.171-172.
[12] Medvedev R. and others, *Dissenso e Socialismo. Una voce marxista del Samizdat sovietico*, cit., p.4-35
[13] Jochnik, C. B. and Zinner J., 'Linking Trade Policy to Free Emigration: the Jackson-Vanik Amendement', in *Hardvard Human Rights Journal*, 4(1), pp.128-151, 1991.
[14] The idea of this project was put forth by the notorious Zionist activist Anatoly Scharansky, who proposed to one of his students, Yuri Orlov, to launch an appeal addressed to the West calling for the

established the basis to undermine the Eastern Bloc and determine its fall, rather than restore the entity's legitimacy and advance the interests of its leaders[15]. According to the Biennale's president Carlo Ripa di Meana, it also represented the juridical foundation for the 1977 Biennale of Dissent[16].

As for the public image that the USSR political establishment wished to project abroad of its own social system, the Soviets made a wide use of cultural diplomacy with both "friendly" partners and rival countries since the mid-50s: such a practice may be briefly defined as "the manipulation of cultural materials and personnel for propaganda purposes"[17] and, started under the lead of Nikita Khrushchev, it came to be extensively employed by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID), and in particular through the cultural diplomacy agency VOKS[18], to create the illusion that they had abandoned chauvinism and isolationism in favour of freedom of exchange. Under the umbrella definition of "cultural diplomacy" were comprised all kind of activities consisting in the systematic use of information, artistic, scientific and other cultural materials, symbols, personnel, and ideas, as instruments of foreign policy. It might be added that an important part of the pattern of Soviet cultural diplomacy consisted in the use, by the Kremlin, of mass-communication media to create and maintain both at home and abroad desired images, both of "Soviet culture" and "bourgeois culture" – the latter, of course, held to be in irreconcilable conflict with its communist counterpart. For example, during the 1960 international agricultural expo held in Delhi, the Soviet reports described the American pavillon as being full of "*annoying* American consumerism and *abundance* of kitchen appliances[19]". In fact Soviet cultural diplomacy "has, in addition, a negative mission […] which consists in vituperative criticism of aspects of foreign cultures deemed to be incompatible with Soviet values, as well as censorship, distortion, or denial of positive aspects of bourgeois cultures which, according to officially determined Soviet definitions of capitalism, are not supposed to exist"[20]. As a matter of fact, as Barghoorn

formation of an informal organization entrusted with the monitoring of the application of the Helsinki's provisions in the USSR. In the end, Orlov founded the group in Moscow and he was joined by 10 other elements, including the famous general Grigorenko and Yelena Bonner, wife of Andrei Sakharov. (Orlov Y., *Opasnye Mysli. Memuary iz russkoj zhizni*, Argumenty i fakty, Moscow, 1992, p.187)

[15] M. C. Morgan, *The Final Act. The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War*, cit., p.5

[16] Mecucci G. and Ripa di Meana C., *L'ordine di Mosca. Fermate la Biennale del Dissenso*, Fondazione Liberal, Roma, 2007, p.26.

[17] Barghoorn F. C., *The Soviet Cultural Offensive: the Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Soviet Foreign Policy*, Greenword Press, Santa Barbara, 1976, p.10.

[18] Vsesoiuznoe Obschestvo Kul'turnoi Sviazi s zagranitsei, i.e. All-Union Society for Cultural Relation with Foreign Countries.

[19] Dyakonov S., *Soviet cultural diplomacy in India 1955-1963*, Master's Thesis in History, Concordia University, 2015, p.31.

[20] Ibid., p.12.

maintained in his work *The Soviet Cultural Offensive: the Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Soviet Foreign Policy* (1976), "activities which for democratic societies are basically uncontrolled were, within the Soviet-style framework, an essential ingredient of foreign relations and conduct of diplomacy"[21].

In this regard, an emblematic historical event that may also represent a significant parallel with the 1977 Biennale of Dissent was the American National Exhibition held at the Moscow's Sokolniki Park in 1959. Organized with the official purpose of promoting the exchange of ideas regarding consumer technology (but including also figurative arts) between the two superpowers and thus with the hope of enabling a better mutual comprehension among their peoples, the exhibition in the Russian capital was preceded by a homologue event organized by the Soviet and staged in New York's Coliseum earlier that same year. Whereas the officials responsible for the Russian exhibition had been able to access all the American public relations and advertising facilities, even hiring a firm for their publicity campaign on Madison Avenue, when it was its turn to host the American event, the Soviet authorities tried to destroy in advance the credibility of the showcase through an unscrupulous use of the press[22]: the Committee for the Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (GKKS) elaborated a plan in order to orient the journalists' actions and to instruct them on which aspects of the exhibition to praise and which to polemize about; they made sure that a part of the press would be extremely critical towards the American contents displayed (especially underlying the unaffordability of the US lifestyle for the average citizen) and that part of the tickets would be reserved to party-line-adhering individuals, as well as loyal Komsomol members and non-party citizens. Lastly, they organized singular complaints to be included in the host book containing all the visitors' comments and others to be orally voiced by the Soviet visitors to the American guides and then transcribed by the Soviet reporters in their articles on the exhibition[23]. As we will explore later on, the CPSU had planned a similar strategy to boycott the Venetian exhibition on Dissent, described as "Contrasting measures against the anti-Soviet propaganda in Italy"[24].

In such a landscape of political and cultural contents' manipulation and concealment of truths, political opposition and dissent had mutated, changing their shape in an attempt to adapt and survive in a difficult political environment hostile to their presence: while an official

[21] Ibid.
[22] Barghoorn F. C., *The Soviet Cultural Offensive…*, cit., p.12.
[23] Zhirnov E., 'Normal'ny chelovek ne mozhet izobrazhit' zhenschinu v takom vide!', in *Kommersant' Vlast'*, vol. 31, August 2004, p.54.
[24] Valentino P., 'Mosca contro Venezia', in *Corriere della Sera*, 8th January 1994, p.25.

chronology and periodization of their evolution does not exist, in his *Storia del dissenso sovietico*, Marco Clementi proposes a vivid chronological division of the main steps composing the Dissent's evolutional process[25]. The first phase started, of course, with Khrushchev's rise to power and the end of the cult of personality, when new hopes for open dialogue and externality of critics against the government glimpsed for a short time, and the clandestine practice of *samizdat* emerged. The second step, actually taken backwards, started with Brezhnev's nomination as CPSU secretary, which was followed by a tightening of the measures against any form of resistance or mere critical demonstration. Approximately in this period (1965-1967), a significant transition came to an end with the suppression of the last (excluded some little exceptions) secret political organizations – the Marxist-Leninist *Kolokol* (the Bell) and the social-Christian party *Vschon* – which signed the ultimate passage to that form of cultural dissent whose legacy are the *informal* literary groups formed throughout the 50s and 60s[26]. Dissent as intended by Clementi, in fact, signifies a non-violent phenomenon, supported by a wide array of individuals with different ideals and traditions, which however share the same intention to be heard from an authority and see respected the right of expression, opinion and movement as stated by the same Soviet Constitution and numerous international treaties signed by Moscow. The objectives of this phenomenon were neither explicitly nor implicitly political, they did not with wish to overthrow the Communist power or introduce a multiparty system, and their efforts were mostly concentrated on petitions, appeals to the government and to international organizations, diffusion of literature and pamphlets with sociologic, literary, political – but never propagandistic – content. The same view was embraced by Roy Medvedev, who deemed the New Dissent members as "Not linked to any given political platform", as "they do not propose a doctrine of their own, but just urge upon the USSR the adherence to the laws it adopted in its same constitution and in the UN Convention on Human Rights it subscribed[27]". The third and fourth period identified by Clementi feature the alternation between growth of the dissenting movement and mass-arrests that risked to repress it definitively, while the fifth, starting in 1975 and concluding in 1982, is marked by the Helsinki Conference, the Nobel prizes awarded to Andrei Sakharov, but also by brutal repressions against the battle for civil rights – the Moscow Helsinki Group would suspend its activity in 1982, when almost all its activists had been imprisoned, forced to work camps, exiled, or had emigrated to avoid their arrest. The final phase of dissent activity would

[25] Clementi M, *Storia del dissenso sovietico (1953-1991)*, cit., p.13.
[26] Ibid., p.11.
[27] Medvedev R., *Intervista sul dissenso in URSS*, Laterza, Bari 1977, p.92; Sakharov A. et al., *La lunga strada di un'alternativa all'URSS, 1968-1972*, Jaco Book, Milan, 1972, p.23.

then naturally span from 1983 to 1991, when the reforms wanted by Gorbachev allowed for the liberation and rehabilitation of all the prisoners 'of conscience', before the ultimate fall of the USSR.

1.2 Literary Dissent and *Samizdat*

The Biennale of Dissent, in its examination of the dissenting phenomena within the Eastern bloc countries as an alternative to the official aesthetics and ideology top-down imposed by the Soviet governments, devoted relevant space to the *samizdat* reality. The exhibition included, in fact, three permanent expositions: one devoted to cinematography, a second one to *samizdat* literature and a third focused on fine arts[28]. As for the *samizdat* practice, it could not have been neglected in the Venetian venue, being a vital part of the nonconformist culture of these societies, crucial for the diffusion of information and censored material. Literature assumed an even greater value insomuch as it was recognized by the Soviet authorities as such a powerful force that they always insisted on monopolizing it for their own purposes and on punishing any use of it for unauthorized sentiments. After all, like Iosif Stalin himself maintained, inspired by Yuri Olesha, "the writers are engineers of the human soul[29]".

The strict boundaries within which literature was forcibly controlled in the USSR were further tightened up around 1968 (in correspondence with the protests against the Czechoslovakia invasion, held also in the Red Square on August 25th[30]). Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle* and *Cancer Ward* were both refused publication, whereas Tvardovskij was forced out as editor of the magazine *Novij Mir,* despite he being a renown and 'trustworthy' member of the party who had emphasized the subject of the heroic and patriotic soldier in his 1945 poem *Vasilij Terkin*. His loyalty and communist integrity did not spare him the second removal from his editorial position (after he had already been deposed in 1954) in light of the choices he made on publications[31].

In this scenario of arrests and censorship, the dissidents came to be more organized and perfected the techniques of communication which had already characterized their activities,

[28] Garimberti P., 'Questo il programma definitivo della Biennale del dissenso', in *La Stampa*, 18th September 1977, p.21.
[29] Soiuz pisateley SSSR, *Pod'em,* Voronezhskoe otdelenie, 1990, p.48.
[30] Shatz M. S., *Soviet Dissent in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980, p.126.
[31] Clementi M, *Storia del dissenso sovietico (1953-1991)*, cit., p.8.

therefore building unofficial channels of transmission for their views untolerated by the public authority. Large quantities of dissenting materials, unpublishable through regular means, were disseminated within and beyond the Soviet frontiers through the *samizdat*, i.e. the hand-to-hand circulation of manuscripts (may they be novels, poetry, essays, petitions or documents of varying sort). The word *samizdat* stand for "self-publishing house" (*sam* = self; *izdatel'stvo* = publishing house) and plays ironically on the acronym *gosizdat*, 'State publishing house' (*gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo*)[32]. In practice, a piece of work entered this mode of circulation sometimes under deliberate initiative of the same author, while on other occasions it was not originally meant to reach a wider audience, but a reader would decide to make it so: in any case, the author/reader made as many typewritten carbon copies as they could and then distributed them to trustworthy readers who, on their turn, would make additional copies and pass them over their friends and acquaintances using the most various recipients for the pieces of paper.

The date of birth of this underground tradition is not possible to identify in the Russian historical timeline[33], but a somewhat similar strategy was adopted for the diffusion of the 1790 *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* by Aleksandr Nikolayevich Radischev, a polemical study on the flaws of Catherine II's tsardom: banned by the imperial powers, it managed to circulate throughout the nineteenth century, becoming famous all over the country, and it was followed by many other literary and political works turned down by censorship[34]. As for the Soviet era, the re-emergence and affirmation of *samizdat* activities can be placed in the frame of Khrushchev's Thaw, when along with the official disclosure towards more tolerant editorial policies (allowing, for example, the publication of Marina Cvetaeva's poems[35]) the manuscripts of several former gulag's prisoners began to circulate illegally[36]. The *samizdat* phenomenon was accompanied by an analogue strategy to distribute otherwise unattainable music: the tape-recorder (*magnitofon*) was put to use by dissidents for the duplication of home-made tapes which, circulating hand-to-hand, gave rise to the so-called *magnitizdat*. This brought the singers Bulat Okudzhava, Vladimir Vysotsky and other songwriters' political and non-political forbidden ballads into the homes of Soviet citizens. Finally, following a

[32] Shatz M. S., *Soviet Dissent*…, cit., p.128.
[33] Daniel A., 'Istoria samizdata', in *Gospezonasnost' i literatura na opyte Rossii i Germanii*, Shushkina E. V. and Gromova T. V. (eds.), Rudomino, Moscow, 1994, p.96.
[34] Shatz M. S., *Soviet Dissent...*, cit., p.128 .
[35] One of the most influential Russian poets of the 20th century, Cvetaeva was persecuted for her pieces of writing which celebrated the fight of the White Army against the Bolsheviks during the Civil war (1917-1922). She and her works have been publicly rehabilitated during the Sixites.
[36] Dolinin V. and Severjuchin D., *Preodolenie Nemoty. Leningradskij samizdat v konteste nezavisimogo kul'turnogo dvizhenija. 1953-1991,* N. I. Novikova, San Pietroburgo, 2003, p.19.

migratory wave of dissidents and unwelcomed individuals from the USSR in the mid-Seventies, the publication abroad of unpublishable-at-home works spreaded in the form of *tamizdat* (*tam* meaning "there" in Russian). This latest practice was the most successful of the three mentioned, for predictable reasons: firstly, once that many activists had emigrated they could more easily operate from outside the country, whereas several of those remained in the Soviet space found themselves in prison; secondly, printing abroad was far more feasible, as well as the re-introduction of the literary pieces back in the USSR through the work of special couriers (especially the so-called *orly*, 'the eagles')[37].

One of the most significant and influent publications realized under the *samizdat* method has been the *Chronicle of the Current Events*, whose co-founder Natalya Gorbanevskaya participated to the Biennale of Dissent in 1977[38]. Established in 1968 by Gorbanevskaya along with Glya Gabay and Anatoly Jakobson, the clandestine periodical originally dedicated its pages to news about political arrests, the conditions of the prisoners within the psychiatric hospitals, the trials, the condemnations and repressions against the dissidents' families, the life inside the lagers, the protests and the hunger strikes taking place within the gulags[39]. The Chronicle therefore served as a clearinghouse about the mistreatment and infringement of civil rights throughout the Soviet Union, as one of its most remarkable aspects was the nationwide network it created. The magazine's operational method in this regard is exposed in its fifth issue:

> "…anybody who is interested in seeing that the Soviet public is informed about what goes on in the country, may easily pass on information to the editors of the Chronicle. Simply tell it to the person from whom you received the Chronicle, and he will tell the person from whom he received the Chronicle, and so on. But do not try to trace back the whole chain of communication yourself, or else you will be taken for a police informer".[40]

Thanks to this extensive chain of communication the *Chronicle*'s newsroom managed to receive correspondence and reports from all over the Soviet territory, thus being able to cover events in small towns and provincial areas as well as the major cities. With no doubt it greatly contributed to the morale of the dissenting movement's members, by reassuring them that they were not completely isolated, that their objectives were shared by others and could

[37] Clementi M., *Storia del dissenso sovietico (1953-1991)*, cit., p.206.
[38] Mecucci G. and Ripa di Meana C., *L'ordine di Mosca…*, cit., p.26.
[39] Clementi M., *Storia del dissenso sovietico (1953-1991)*, cit., p.83.
[40] Reddaway P., *Uncensored Russia: Protest and Dissent in the Soviet Union*, American Heritage, New York, 1972, p.54.

continue to be pursued even if they themselves were arrested. Furthermore, the *Chronicle* offered an important example of an autonomous civic association of a sort hitherto non-existent in the Soviet Union[41].

The Chronicle of Current Events' editorial board was initially organized within the ranks of the Moscow and Leningrad's dissenting groups and later on in other cities and republics, frequently changing its headquarters in order to escape the repeated repressions. It therefore did not possess a centralized arrangement and there regularly were changes in its direction given the recurring necessity to substitute the editorial heads in case of arrests (just as it happened with Jakobson replacing Gorbanevskaya after her imprisonment) so as not to interrupt the publishing activity[42]. It is easy to draw a link between this flexible system and the "democratic" character of *samizdat*, which functioned without censorship or any kind of central direction, as both entities tolerated the diversity of opinions to a high degree – the dissidents' beliefs and political orientations, after all, ranged from the deeply spiritual religious minorities to the non-conforming committed Communists. In other words, they were educational working models of the kind of liberties the dissidents advocated, a concrete embodiment of their fundamental principles[43]. As Bukovsky maintained, *samizdat*, just like dissent, emerged from "an extraordinary community, later on called as 'movement', where there did not exist any enrolment nor propaganda"[44], where no agenda to set the people of the USSR free was elaborated and the sole concern was to *oglasit'* (i.e. announce, reveal), and this is how it transformed from a literary-artistic phenomenon to an activity of political denunciation[45].

Many have been the attempts to synthetize the nature of *samizdat* in a single definition: Amal'rik placed its origin in the conciliation between two opposed tendencies within the Soviet society: the people's growing aspiration to social and political information on one side and the regime's increasing propensity to "cook" the official informative content imposed to the public on the other[46]. The *Chronicle* itself, on the other hand, defined *samizdat* as a "specific realizing form of freedom of speech and freedom of press in our country[47]" – both descriptions appear to be acceptable. In other words, it came to fill a cultural and informational void caused by the short-sighted policies of the Soviet regime,

[41] Shatz M. S., *Soviet Dissent…*, cit., p.132.
[42] Clementi M., *Storia del dissenso sovietico (1953-1991)*, cit., p.84.
[43] Shatz M. S., *Soviet Dissent…*, cit., p.158.
[44] Bukovsky V., *Il vento va, e poi ritorna*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1978, p.263.
[45] Ibid., p.18.
[46] Amal'rik A., *Sopravviverà l'Unione Sovietica fino al 1984?*, Coines, Rome and Amsterdam, 1970, p.29.
[47] *The Chronicle of Current Events*, n. 5, 31st December 1968.

thus becoming from a merely literary phenomenon, as it was in origin, part of a political activity with a wider radius of action.

1.3 The Soviet Dissent at The Biennale

Many were the dissidents invited by Carlo Ripa di Meana and his collaborators to participate to the 1977 Biennale in Venice from behind the Iron Curtain, fewer were those allowed to or in the position to freely choose whether to take part or not. Ripa di Meana would have delivered a list, on the very first day following the inauguration of the exhibition, with the names of those prevented from participating by the Soviet authorities at the International Conference for the Monitoring of the Helsinki Accords held in Belgrade[48], an affair we will return to later on and which represented the main hub between the two events.

Among those whose travel to Venice was impeded, Sakharov stood out as the most prominent figure of the movement opposing the authoritarian methods of the Soviet power. Awarded with the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1975 and recognized as the "the architect" of the new Dissent by Roy Medvedev[49], Andrei Sakharov was a physician, famous for his contribution to the development of the H-bomb from 1948. He made his first theoretical contribution to the fight for civil liberties in the USSR, disarmament and international détente with his 1968 essay *Considerations on progress, peaceful coexistence and intellectual freedom* (also known simply as "The Treaty") which enjoyed wide diffusion through the *samizdat* method, being translated and published in several foreign countries. From that moment on he was one of the most incisive personalities within the movement, who also founded the Committee for Human Rights in the USSR along with Valery Chalidze and Andrei Tverdochlebov in 1970[50]. He was therefore invited to the 1977 Biennale by Ripa di Meana, but his participation was prevented by the Soviet authorities, just like they had thwarted his withdrawal of the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1975. Given this impossibility to personally participate, Sakharov sent to the Biennale a secret video through the editorial

[48] Mecucci G. and Ripa di Meana C., *L'ordine di Mosca…*, cit., p.26.
[49] Mecucci G. and Ripa di Meana C., *L'ordine di Mosca…*, cit., p.142.
[50] Bergman J., *Meeting the Demands of Reason. Life and Thought of Andrei Sakharov*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2009.

consultant Sergio Rapetti, where he praised the initiative and added, about the intellectual oppression running through his own society:

> "… the ideological pression is not exerted explicitly by the State, but the system wields a general anti-intellectualism, a degradation of its traditions and education, its own militarization and bureaucratization, a low-hanging level of the overall intelligentsia, the youth's absolute ideological vacuum, its isolation from the international cultural society, the ideological and national discrimination.[51]"

Sakharov's activity supplied part of that food for debate and renovation that allowed the Dissent's transition into the third phase (1968-1972) of the afore-mentioned chronological map of development proposed by Clementi, along with the foundation of *The Chronicle of Current Events*[52]. Once Gorbachev set him free from his exile in Gorky in 1986, Sakharov took part to the growing political opposition at the end of the Eighties, being elected and co-leading the democratic Inter-Regional Deputies Group. He died in 1989, one month after the Fall of the Berlin's Wall[53].

A further character among the most influent of the Soviet Dissent, invited to the Biennale and able to participate thanks to the fact that he had already emigrated in 1976, was Andrey Amal'rik. Internally exiled in 1965 for his thesis on the Norman origin of the Rus', as it contradicted the official ones[54], once back in Moscow he published *Involuntary Journey to Siberia* where he told about his experience of displacement in Tomsk. Between 1966 and 1969 he played a fundamental role for the renovated dissenting movement and somehow bridged between his Soviet fellows and the international community in so far as he was one of the few speaking the English language[55]. In 1969 he would then complete his most famous work *Will the Soviet Union Survive until 1984?*, which obtained immediate attention abroad and where he theorized an early dissolution of the USSR due to the unfunctional system of development of the Soviet state and to a war against China that he deemed as inevitable. Amal'rik was arrested on 21st May 1970 in Akulovo according to article 190-1 of the Soviet

[51] Ibid., p.223-224.
[52] Clementi M., *Storia del dissenso sovietico (1953-1991)*, cit., p.13.
[53] Bergman J., *Meeting the Demands of Reason…*, cit.
[54] Since the XVIII century there is a contentious dispute around the origin of the Rus' State, from which stemmed modern Russia. The debate is widely varied, but mainly crystalized around the two theories. On the one side, the Normanists maintain that some Scandinavian Vikings, based in the upper Volga region, had assimilated with and then governed the Slavic people, finally founding the Rus' principality – on the other side, anti-Normanists argue that Rus' would have emerged from purely autochthonous (Slavic) political development. The latter theory is the one preferred by Soviet and nationalist points of view.
[55] Clementi M., *Storia del dissenso sovietico (1953-1991)*, cit., p.13.

constitution[56] for the two already mentioned texts and a letter sent to another prominent dissident, Eduard Kuznecov[57]. Fled his homeland in 1976 with his family, he went on with his activity of sensibilization and writing from abroad.

All the intellectuals participating to the Biennale, regardless of the nature of their activity, had had to do with the Soviet constrictive measures and the most outrageous trials conducted against some of these individuals have had the effect, by being stronger alarms of a top-down repression tendency, of mobilizing the movement's activity. The 1964 trial against Brodsky "somehow anticipated the one against Sinyavsky and Daniel and for a part of the Soviet intellectual society it represented the proof of a dangerous return to the Stalinist methods, although in a new form[58]". Iosif Brodsky, one of the most promising young poets of those years, already published on many informal magazines, was considered by many as a successor of the great poet Anna Akhmatova and belonged to the Leningrad's poetical movement during the Sixties. Brodsky would have not been prosecuted for the anti-Soviet content of his writing, as it would later happen with Sinyavsky and Daniel, but exclusively for his "parasitic" lifestyle. The issue of parasitism, heritage of the Stalinist era survived under different forms until the perestroika years[59], was regulated according to the decree of 4th May 1961 of the Supreme Soviet, amended in 1965 and 1970, which established that an adult citizen refusing the constitutional duty to work according to their capacity is committing an administrative violation – criminal if reiterated. Brodsky was thus processed starting on 18th February 1964, after he had been warned already twice (in 1961 and 1962) to find a stable job. During the trial, the judge questioned the literary profession of Brodsky:

Judge: But in general what is your specialty?

Brodsky: I'm a poet, a poet-translator.

Judge: And who said that you were a poet? Who included you among the ranks of the poets?

Brodsky: No one. (Unsolicited) And who included me among the ranks of the human race?"[60]

The prosecution in effect went on in investigating what actually proved Brodsky being a poet, and finally concluded that: "Brodsky systematically does not fulfill the duties of a

[56] Introducing the crime defined as "Spreading of deliberate fabrications, verbal or otherwise, slandering the Soviet political and social system".
[57] 'Report Prophet of Russ Doom Sentenced to 3 Years Labor', *Chicago Tribune*, 13th November 1970, p.4.
[58] Clementi M., *Storia del dissenso sovietico (1953-1991)*, cit., p.37.
[59] Ibid., p.47.
[60] Shatz M. S., *Soviet Dissent…*, cit., p.118.

Soviet citizen with regard to his personal well-being and the production of material wealth, which is apparent from his frequent changes of jobs. He had been warned in this regard by the militia in 1961 and 1962 and on those occasions he promised to find a stable job, but this did not happen as he continued to read, write and recite his decadent poems. From the report of the committee on work with young writers, it is apparent that Brodsky is not a poet. It has been judged so by the readers of the magazine *Vechernij Leningrad*[61]". He was thus sentenced to five years to be spend in internal exile while working regularly. One year later he would have been "rehabilitated" and permitted to leave for Leningrad. He emigrated to the USA in 1972, being therefore able to attend the Biennale in 1977, and received his Nobel for Literature ten years later, in 1987.

Another symbol of the anti-totalitarian Dissent, among the most notable personalities invited to the Biennale, was Andrei Sinyavsky. Notwithstanding the famous precedent of Brodsky, the trial which is commonly depicted as the one marking the actual end of Khrushchev's Thaw, the start of the hard-line of political repression under Leonid Brezhnev and a major impulse for the rebirthing Soviet Dissent is the one executed against the two satirical authors Sinyavsky and Daniel in 1966. The proceeding came to possess a meaningful value as "it had the unintentional effect of galvanizing the dissidents and giving them a new cause around which to rally[62]". This outcome was probably due to the intrinsic vagueness of the accusation brought against the two writers: they had published abroad, through the *tamizdat*, few satirical short stories but, being no law within the Soviet statute books prohibiting an author from sending manuscripts abroad for publication, Sinyavsky and Daniel were charged, under Article 70 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Republic, with the conceptually-broad offense of spreading anti-Soviet propaganda (in late 1966, evidently in response to difficulties that arose at the Sinyavsky-Daniel trial, two new articles were added to the Criminal Code, 190/1 and 190/3, to facilitate the prosecution of dissidents. The first is entitled "Circulation of Fabrications Known to Be False Which Defame the Soviet State and Social System", while the second prohibits "group actions which violate public order"[63]). Sinyavsky and Daniel were subsequently sentenced to seven and five years respectively, to be spent in labor camps.

Transcripts of these trials were taken down by sympathizers in the courtroom and circulated clandestinely: in Brodsky's case, the journalist Frida A. Vigdorova managed to

[61] Bowen C., 'The Trial of Iosif Brodsky', *The New Leader*, 31st August 1964, pp. 6-7.
[62] Shatz M. S., *Soviet Dissent…*, cit., p.119.
[63] Ibid., p.193.

refer about his trial through an almost shorthand report of some hearings[64]. Such accounts revealed not only the views of the dissidents, but especially the attitudes of the authorities as expressed in the statements of the judges and the prosecution. As it appears from these transcripts, the most frequently recurring theme was an obsessive patriotism, verging on xenophobia, which attempted to brand any critic of the Soviet government or Soviet conditions as an agent of foreign enemies. Again and again, the dissidents were accused of working for, or being fooled by, or playing into the hands of, Western governments or anti-Soviet émigré organizations. One of the principal accusations against Sinyavsky and Daniel was that their works had supposedly been used for purposes of anti-Soviet propaganda in the West[65].

The Biennale also saw the participation of some intellectuals who, back in the USSR, had suffered one of the hardest atrocities inflicted by the regime as a means of repression: the falsified and abusive use of psychotherapy and the internment within the special psychiatric facilities (commonly called *psikhushkas*) set up in the Thirties and posed under the authority of the Internal Affairs Ministry[66]. This system was described by Viktor Faynberg, arrested in 1968 along with Gorbanevskaya (one of the very few women to experience the imprisonment within the special mental hospitals) and other demonstrators for a protest against the intervention in Czechoslovakia. Faynberg depicted the treatment imposed on the political prisoners of these institutes as a process aimed at the definitive annihilation of the patients, through the development of an "unconditional reflex leading them to a total submission towards the wardens". "For this purpose they are beaten", goes on Faynberg, and "those who try to resist are moved to stricter wards. Political prisoners are deprived of the few rights that the same prisoners do, or should, enjoy in lagers and normal prisons[67]". Despite this testimonies, the kind of therapy and posology imposed on the patients is hardly known, as data on this regard are kept secret, have been lost or destroyed and the victims of these treatments are unable to remember (most likely because of these very treatments). Moreover, the paramedical staff was composed of detainees from other prisons serving the sentence while taking care of the patients, and the medical personnel consisted of Soviet officials – facts which may have contributed to the lack of information

[64] Etkind E., *Process Iosifa Brodskogo*, Overseas Publications, London, 1988, pp.60-61.
[65] Shatz M. S., *Soviet Dissent…*, cit., p.124.
[66] Clementi M., *Storia del dissenso sovietico (1953-1991)*, cit., p.155.
[67] VV. AA:, *Le testimonianze del Tribunale Sakharov sulla violazione dei diritti dell'uomo in Unione Sovietica*, La Casa di Matriona, Milan, 1976, p.146.

on this issue[68]. In 1977 Andropov enumerated, among the reasons for dissent (which included religious fanatism, nationalistic deviations and personal failures perceived by ungrateful citizens as inadequate appreciation of the State for their work) also the condition of mental instability: as a matter of fact, under his KGB presidency the figures related to special hospitals rose from few units to around twenty and the imprisonment of political opponents became more frequent[69].

The mathematician Leonid Pliusch, present at the Venice Biennale in 1977, represents one of the most renowned cases of segregation within the system of psychiatric hospitals. Active member of the Initiative Group for the Defense of Human Rights and in the general dissenting movement in Kiev, he was arrested in 1972 under article 70 of the Soviet penal code for the possession of some editions of the *Chronicle* and the *Ukrainsky Vestnik,* beside his own composition of seven "anti-Soviet" pieces of writing. After the sentence confirmed in 1973, he was interned in the Dnepropetrovsk mental hospital, in so far as he was recognized as unfit to plead, affected by schizophrenia and displaying paranoid behaviour after a psychiatric evaluation[70]. His incarceration and the inhuman treatment he was submitted to triggered several actions by the dissenting movement and calls for justice from the international community, from Amnesty International to the UN (which allowed for some improvement of his condition inside the hospital), and even from the British, French and Italian Communist Parties that manifested in favour of his liberation – but it was only in 1976, one year before his participation to the Venetian exhibition and after the umpteenth international campaign, that Pliusch was finally released and allowed to leave the country with his family.

Sadly famed for his close contact experience with the detention inside the Soviet mental hospitals, as well as his in-depth works on such a matter, was Vladimir Bukovsky – who would have taken part to the 1978 round table of the Biennale held in Turin[71], a continuation of the event organized by the city's council. He was arrested on four different occasions, approximately in a decade span: firstly in 1963 for the possession of anti-Soviet literature, when he was recognized as developing a "paranoid personality" and thus interned in the Special Psychiatric Hospital of Leningrad, and released in 1965[72]. Secondly, he was arrested

[68] Clementi M., *Storia del dissenso sovietico (1953-1991),* cit., p.155.
[69] Chenkin K., *Andropov. Ritratto di uno zar*, Rizzoli, Milan, 1983, pp.140-150.
[70] Clementi M., *Storia del dissenso sovietico (1953-1991),* cit., p.168.
[71] Messori V., 'La biografia del dissenso', in *La Stampa*, 6th May 1978, p.7.
[72] Boobyer R., 'Vladimir Bukovsky and Soviet Communism', in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 87(3), July 2009, pp.452–487.

again in 1965 for participating to the protests against the Sinyavsky and Daniel's trial (also known as the Glasnost Meeting) and forced to spend eight months in various *psikhushkas*[73]. Thirdly, he was condemned in 1967 to three years in a corrective labour camp of the Voronezh region after taking part to the protests denouncing the unjust arrest of Aleksandr Ginzburg and other activists[74]. Fourthly and lastly, after his efforts for collecting materials on the practices within the mental hospitals and the treatments the patients were subject to, he was arrested again in 1971 for being the owner of several prohibited documents, included those related to the abuse of psychiatry and to the hospitals[75]. This time he was pronounced as mentally sound and able to stand the trial: accused of spreading anti-Soviet and slanderous material abroad, especially regarding the psychiatric hospitals, he was sentenced to seven years of detention (two in ordinary prison plus five in a labour camp) and five years of internal exile – the maximum penalty[76]. During his stay in the gulag of Perm', Bukovsky had the chance to meet another detainee, Semen Gluzman, who co-authored with him the Manual on Psychiatry for Dissidents (*Posobye po psichiatrii dlya inakomyslyaschich*). The book contained instructions and practical tips on how to behave in the context of the psychiatric evaluation in order to avoid being declared mentally instable by the psychiatric committee and was dedicated to Leonid Pliusch's wife, Lena[77].

The Manual's publication in Italy shortly preceded that of Bukovsky's autobiography, *To Build a Castle: My Life as a Dissenter* (*I vozvraschaetsya veter*), presented at the 1978 round table of the Biennale held in Turin. On that occasion, the author externed his absolute contempt toward not only the Soviet authorities, but also any form of Marxism: "Anywhere he rises to power, from Cuba to Cambodia, from China to Africa, Communism transforms itself in a lager"[78].

[73] Ibid.
[74] Berson, R.K., *Young Heroes in World History*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1999, p. 44.
[75] 'The arrest of Bukovsky, 29th March 1971', *The Chronicle of Current Events*, n.19.
[76] Clementi M., *Storia del dissenso sovietico (1953-1991)*, cit., p.164. His liberation in 1977 was obtained through an agreement granting the release of Luis Corvalán, Secretary of the Cilean Communist Party, in exchange for Bukovsky's.
[77] Ibid., p.167.
[78] Messori V., 'La biografia del dissenso', cit.

1.4 The Helsinki Accords as a Weapon of Dissent

In an interview with Fabio Isopo, Carlo Ripa di Meana mentioned the 1975 Helsinki Accords among the favourable conditions to choose to hold the Biennale of Dissent in 1977[79]. In the book where he depicted the whole experience and collected his reflections on leading the Biennale, Ripa di Meana calls the Accords 'the legal foundation' of the event[80]. The international conference had indeed somehow laid the premises to the organization of such an exhibition, in so far as the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference, although not binding in its status, required the participating states to improve the circulation of information across borders and gave multiple space to civil rights.

The Helsinki Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, started in July 1973 with the participation of 33 European countries plus Canada and USA, had been a crucial step in the process of détente between the West and the socialist world. Moved to Geneva in September 1973, the negotiations continued until July 1975 and on 1st August of the same year the Final Act was signed. From the internal point of view of Eastern European citizens, it represented a new, inedited means in the hand of Dissent to have civil rights and international commitment respected by the communist powers. The document was divided in so-called "baskets", i.e. sections, and the third one was entirely dedicated to civil rights – from the expansion of travel and contacts to the improved access to information and education, while the first point of the first basket, containing the "Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations between Participating States" included the "Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief". It was established that the signatory states must respect human rights and the fundamental liberties such as freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief without distinction based on race, sex and religion. Furthermore, it was declared that the states "will promote and encourage the effective exercise of civil, political, economic, social, cultural and other rights and freedoms all of which derive from the inherent dignity of the human person and are essential for their free and full development"[81]. The respect of such principles was recognized as necessary condition for the development of peaceful and friendly relations

[79] Ripa di Meana C., interview by Isopo F., 11th October 2011.
[80] Mecucci G. and Ripa di Meana C., *L'ordine di Mosca*…, cit., p.26.
[81] Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), *Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) : Final Act of Helsinki*, 1st August 1975, p.6.

among states[82]. The Act also made a point on the need to respect the UN Statute and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, thus restating the need for the signatories to comply with the international commitments they had taken[83]. By affirming this, the document gave recognition to one of the issues most dear to and essential for the fight advanced by the dissidents in the preceding years: the obligations embodied in the international agreements that should bind the states.

Helsinki had originally been a Soviet idea first born in the Fifties, with the aim of leading the West to recognition and acceptance of the Cold War status quo. But the Western parties to the agreement had in mind a broader concept of 'détente' than the simple political-military aspect; they pictured a more outstretching idea of conciliation with the East which would include the cultural and economic aspects too. Compared to the ideal conference Brezhnev had prospected, the West came to propose an agenda which far exceeded the Soviets' key ideas and was even at odds with their goals: the liberal democracies would have not intended to take part to the Conference until it included items designed to undermine the communist restrictions on travel, emigration and the strict censorship.

The Western parties to the Conference managed to transform an initiative that was supposed to benefit the Soviet bloc into one that served their interests: after nearly three years of negotiations, the Final Act amply reflected liberal democratic ideals rather than communist ones, at least in its provisions concerning the citizens' liberties. It endorsed human rights as a core principle of international security, committed the countries to greater transparency and promoted the freer movement of people and information across borders and lay the preconditions for the rejection of the Brezhnev doctrine and for the German reunification[84]. In other words, instead of restoring the legitimacy of the Soviet bloc, Helsinki established the principles to undermine it. The result was not a balanced trade-off between the USSR's goals and those of the Western counterpart – on every significant point, the West prevailed and this represented, in officer Nikolai Leonov's words, a "a monumental act of weakness" of the Soviet Union[85].

General assessments of the Final Act tend to stress the significance of its provisions on human rights, at times even to exclusion of other contents. Although the document unequivocably champions them, it does not embrace human rights in their entirety: it is silent about the rights to education and work (except regarding migrant labour), but it explicitly

[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid., p.7.
[84] By emphasizing the rights to freedom of emigration and to the reunification of families, ibid., pp.39-40.
[85] Leonov N. S., *Likholet'e,* Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniia, Moscow, 1995, p. 163.

focused on the subset of liberties related to travel and emigration, information and freedom of the press – the liberal democratic values voiced in the context of the 1977 Biennale that would have threatened the repressive mechanisms the communist governments relied on. While the Soviet, during the negotiations, sponsored an idea of security and peace that demanded impermeability and the possibility for sovereign states to treat their citizens as they pleased (the thicker the borders, the safer the governments – they reasoned), according to the Western concept of peace, security required openness: along with the disappearance of barriers, mutual suspicion and danger of war would fall. Despite the enjoyment of sovereignty, states should have been constrained by those universal imperatives of human rights representing a standard of conduct common to the whole continent, regardless of the distinction between communist and non-communist countries[86]. At the end of the two-years Conference, the individual human rights proclaimed in the 'Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations between Participating States' pointed towards and understanding of peace in which the way states treated their own people mattered as much as the way they approached to their neighbouring territories. The universality of certain rights and values implied that no state enjoyed indisputable sovereignty[87].

Yet the Final Act left some relevant questions unresolved: the principles of non-intervention and sovereign equality had been spotlighted to impair the Brezhnev Doctrine, but the USSR and its allies could cite these same points to refuse unwelcome demands on freer movement. They had also insisted on a series of stipulations to shield their domestic systems from Western pressure. For example, the humanitarian cooperation stipulated in the third basket had to "take place in full respect for" the principles enumerated in the first basket, including the non-intervention one. The third basket also regulated international travel and family reunification, among other things, but it was specified that they had to be enacted "under mutually acceptable conditions".

As a matter of fact, many people on both sides of the Iron Curtain initially considered the agreement as an endorsement of Soviet goals detrimental to the Western ones. Some members of the Dissent were not remotely satisfied by the Helsinki Agreement, included Amal'rik and Gorbanevskaya, as the Accords did not foresee any external monitoring or control. Thus certain intellectuals such as Yuri Mal'cev, another invitee to the Venice Biennale, interpreted them as a vestige of Western disengagement in the name of security and economic interests, a capitulation to the global division in ideologically irreconcilable

[86] Morgan M. C., *The Final Act. The Helsinki Accords and…*, cit., pp.10-11.
[87] Ibid., p.12.

blocs[88]. Gorbanevskaya even defined them as "a New Munich Agreement"[89], while Bukovsky accused the West of opportunism. As graspable as these criticisms might be, such interpretations risked simplifying a multi-layered and rather complex issue: if it is true that the sixth paragraph of the first point of the Final Act stated the non-intervention principle, it was meant to stigmatize the armed intervention and the use of force in the internal affairs of a signatory country[90], but it did not exclude the possibility to exert pressure on one of the participating states in case of non-recognition and/or violation of human and civil rights. In fact, as the months passed, such critical judgements went under re-consideration: the Accords admittedly offered useful instruments to challenge state control, many Eastern European citizens could resort to them in requesting exit visas and, all across the region, activists cited the document to demand the respect of fundamental human rights. For Yuri Orlov, founder of the Helsinki Watch Group, the Accords offered the possibility to address the issues affecting the Soviet society more properly under international attention, at the same time finally overcoming the principle of non-interference by external forces on which the Soviet Union had traditionally insisted[91]. Consequently, in May 1976 Orlov founded the Group, along with other ten Soviet citizens, in order to monitor the authorities' compliance with the humanitarian provisions contained in the CESC Final Act. Few days later the TASS gave the news, defining the venture as anti-Soviet[92]. Since the very beginning of its activity, the Helsinki Group was concerned with civil rights, in particular regarding the prisoners of conscience, the *otkazniki*[93] and the conditions of political detainees within the psychiatric hospitals. This caused a prompt repressive response against the Group's representatives, which resulted in the arrest of some of its leading figures, Orlov included, in 1977. Despite this severe blow inflicted by the authorities, new members joined the association and their efforts persisted until 1982, when the last few activists remained announced the suspension of the Group's activity – it would have been re-established only in 1989[94].

Nevertheless, as the Final Act of the CSCE reflected the Western democratic demands for freer movement of people and information, and thus increased permeability of the Iron

[88] Clementi M., *Storia del dissenso sovietico (1953-1991)*, cit., p.218.
[89] AA. VV., *Libertà e socialismo: momenti storici del dissenso*, SugarCo, Milano, 1984, p.177.
[90]Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), *Conference on Security…*, cit., p.6.
[91] Orlov Y., *Opasnye Mysli. Memuary iz russkoj zhizni*, Argumenty i fakty, Moscow, 1992, p.187.
[92] The Russian news-agency founded in 1904, called *Telegrafnoye Agenstvo Sovetskogo Soyuza* (Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Unione) until 1992 and the re-named *Informatsionnoye Agenstvo Rossii* (Information Agency of Russia).
[93] Synonim of *refusenik*, the term typically indicated Jews whom the permission to emigrate in Israel was denied, but it could also refer to other groups, such as the Volga Germans and the Armenians.
[94] Clementi M., *Storia del dissenso sovietico (1953-1991)*, cit., p.227-229.

Curtain, the liberal powers could easily denounce the infringements of these principles by the Soviets and, in so doing, anchor their allegations to the Helsinki's document. The accusations of non-compliance against the USSR were advanced especially in occasion of the follow-up meetings to the Helsinki Accords: the first was held in Belgrade in 1977-1978, approximately in conjunction with the Biennale of Dissent, the second in Madrid (1980-1983) and the third in Ottawa (1985). In Belgrade, with the Americans at the lead, the Western allies seized the chance to try and enforce the Final Act, raising the cases of dozens of political prisoners and demanding that the Soviets and their allies honoured the principles of greater openness and transparency declared in the Accords. It was exactly in this context that, once the first day of the Biennale had terminated on 15th November 1977, Carlo Ripa di Meana left Venice for the Serbian capital in order to deliver a list to the plenipotentiary minister Roberto Franceschi, the Italian representative at the Conference. With the help of the Italian ambassador, Alberto Cavaglieri, on 17th November Ripa di Meana managed to hand over such a list, reporting the names of those dissidents prevented from participating at the Biennale by the denial of exit visas. The official note enumerated the following names: Andrei Sakharov, Vaclav Havel, Milovan Gilas, Bogdan Borusewicz, Agnes Heller, Ferenc Feher, Zbigniew Ziembinski, Robert Havemann, Jaroslav Sabata, Emil Morgiewicz, Lucian Pintilie, Tadeusz Konwicki, Stanislav Milota, Georg Heym, Stanislaw Baranczak, Josef Maria Bochenski, Wiktor Woroszylski – all individuals whose request for visas had been rejected by Soviet, Czech, German, Yugoslav, Polish, Romanian and Hungarian authorities[95].

However, as Ripa di Meana himself told in his account of the events, this effort to obtain justice for the afore-mentioned Eastern citizens did not result in any immediate change of policy on the part of the Communist governments and those dissidents could not bring their presence at the Biennale. In general, with the Western denouncing the infringement of individual rights on one side, and the Eastern European diplomats objecting that as interference in their domestic affairs on the other, "the meeting in Belgrade ended without substantive agreement" on any point[96]. However, the Accords represented a valuable legal support for Ripa di Meana's initiative, in face of the critics it received at home as well as abroad, in so far as it advocated in favour of an increased circulation of information and people (and thus culture) across the Iron Curtain.

[95] Mecucci G. and Ripa di Meana C., *L'ordine di Mosca…*, cit., p.50
[96] Morgan M. C., *The Final Act. The Helsinki Accords…*, cit., p.15.

2. The 1977 Biennale of Dissent and its Background

2.1 The Premises and How the Project Developed

Born in 1895 as a cultural society with the aim of promoting the artistic activity and stimulating the market of art through the establishment of an international exposition on a two-yearly basis, the Biennale of Dissent has seen since its foundation the participation by dozens of countries[97] and several reforms, the second of which occurred in 1973. This latter reformation is the one giving the exhibition the less market-oriented and rather politically-committed shape it had in 1977.

Following the cultural contestations of 1968, the Biennale was reformed to radically change its long-standing top-down structure and elitarian profile, thus rendering its organization more democratic and coherent with the public debate of those years. The proposals for the reformation of the institution were firstly advanced in 1970 and the whole legislative process, decelerated by curtailing friction within the parliament, was completed by the end of 1972 with the approval of Act n. 438 of the 26th July 1973, *Nuovo ordinamento dell'Ente autonomo 'La Biennale di Venezia'*. The draft law, however, was arrested by the Camera in what may be called a boycott, in light of two of its articles: n.1 defined the Biennale as a "cultural institute democratically organized", thus acquiring an ideological characterization. The institute became from a mere dispenser of seasonal events an entity whose activity was permanent, that abandoned its purely touristic character and widened its sphere of competence with the interest in "documentation, divulgation, research and

[97] Alloway L., *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968. From Salon to Goldfish Bowl*, New York Graphic Society, Greenwich, 1968.

experimentation" of the contemporary creativity, so as to promote a participative and non-authoritarian culture. Article 8, on the other hand, established the granted presence of the three major trade unions (CGIL, CISL, UIL) within the executive board – a decision abreast of the times but intolerable for the Christian Democratic majority of the parliament[98], which had formed the government with the Socialists (PSI), the Socialdemocrats (PSDI) and the Republicans (PRI) few days before. The concerns sustained by the MPs were therefore due to the fear of an excessively democratic and public institute which risked to raise 'problematic issues'[99], but the law was finally approved, although with radical changes and revisions. From that moment on, 'La Biennale di Venezia – International art exposition' was renamed 'Autonomous institute La Biennale di Venezia' and the hitherto ruling predominance of the visual art was left behind, in favour of a multi-sectoral and interdisciplinary new approach – among the various innovations. The Biennale ceased to be a periodical venue for artistic, cinematographic, theatrical, musical expositions and exhibitions, inaugurating the permanent promotion and support of creative activities. The Executive Board would have then been composed by 19 professionals with a cultural and artistic background belonging to the local context, the government, the trade unions and the Biennale staff[100]. In the end, in fact, article 8 stated that 14 out of 19 of these members should have been selected taking into account the lists proposed by the trade unions themselves and the cultural institutions interested in the Biennale – which aimed at ensuring the allocation of the posts among the different political and cultural forces in Italy, a shield against the political manipulation and a true representations of the various forms of expression and ideas[101]:

> "The articulated composition of this board must ensure that the activity of information, documentation, production and exhibition of the Biennale implements the confrontation and democratic participation… configuring itself as a real service of the community ... apart from the traditional canons and the merchant channels and sheltered from unacceptable discrimination.[102]"

If the calculated division of a public institution's seats among the factions was the practice

[98] Martini M. V., *La Biennale di Venezia 1968-1978. La rivoluzione incompiuta*, Doctoral Thesis in History of Architecture, Ca' Foscari University, Venice, 2010/2011, p.115.
[99] Maddalena M., *La Biennale non si farà*, in *il manifesto*, 24th July 1973. By the way, article 34 of the Act exempted the exhibited material, whatever it may be, from the law on censorship.
[100] Art. 8, Act of 26th July 1973, n. 438, *Nuovo ordinamento dell'ente autonomo 'Biennale di Venezia'*.
[101] Ibid.
[102] 1st Meeting of the Executive Board, 20th March 1974.

in politics, the final result in this case was not. Scrolling through the names and curricula of the designated people, the effort of the Italian politics for a real change compared to the past could be well noted. The Executive Board of the new Biennale included technicians and personalities of culture as understood in the broadest sense, just like the law established. Film directors such as Francesco Maselli, Ermanno Olmi and Mario Monicelli, artists such as Domenico Purificato and Ennio Calabria, art historians like Pietro Zampetti, Guido Perocco and Giuseppe Mazzariol, literates like Adriano Seroni, Neri Pozza and Mario Baratto, managers and producers of culture such as Giuseppe Rossini and Carlo Ripa di Meana constituted the Board[103]. Among the 19 members, the President was elected by majority and stood as *primus inter pares*. Along with the Board, they should have appointed the secretary general of the Institute and the directors of the sectorial committees[104]. Finally, the Board was supposed to draft a "Quadrennial plan of the of the Institute's activities" to determine the goals and methods under which realize the events, while each of the directors of the different sectors should have been supported by a group of five experts per committee, in order to ensure further plurality and professionality to the programmes of the Quadrennial Plan[105]. The passage of the law from the Senate to the Chamber before his proclamation, agitated step given the circumstances, had led to the proclamation of a *compromise* law that absorbed the more progressive instances of the 1968 protests, but in a rather confused way. Furthermore, it was immediately visible how the composition for collegial bodies, that had

[103] The Executive Board was composed of Giuseppe Rossini (DC, Christian Democrat), professor of History at the University of Rome, director of Rai – the Italian national broadcasting, that in 1973 would have found Rai 3; Francesco Maselli (PCI, Communist), secretary of ANAC - National Association of Film Authors; Adriano Seroni (PCI), literary critic and author of radio programmes for Rai, who founded the successful cultural television programme *L'approdo*; Pietro Zampetti (PRI), professor of Art History at Cà Foscari, was superintendent of the Gallerie delle Marche, then director of the Fine Arts at the municipality of Venice; Mario Baratto (PCI) professor of Italian literature in Pisa; Manlio Spandonaro (DC), confederal secretary of the CISL; Osvaldo de Nunzio (PCI), personnel representative and press agent for the Biennale cinema exhibition from 1958 and from 1971 in the internal commission of the Biennale employees; Roberto Mazzucco (PSI), playwright, radio author and film screenwriter, representative of the UIL; Ennio Calabria (PCI), artist and CGIL representative; Guido Perocco (DC), professor of Art History at Cà Foscari and director of Cà Pesaro; Mario Monicelli (PSI), film director; Domenico Purificato (DC), painter; Ermanno Olmi (DC), film director; Carlo Ripa di Meana (PSI), member of the PSI central committee, responsible director and founder of the magazine *Passato e Presente*, president of the Milan's Institute for tourism; Neri Pozza (PRI), publisher; Mario Roberto Cimnaghi, journalist and theatre critic who resigned almost immediately and was replaced by Purificato; Giuseppe Mazzariol (PSI), director of the Querini Stampalia Foundation of Venice and professor of Art History at Cà Foscari; Matteo Ajassa (DC), Head of Rai's cultural programmes; Giorgio Longo (DC), mayor of Venice.

[104] Art. 9, Act of 26th July 1973, cit.

[105] Established by art.18, this was "deemed crucial for the reformation of the Biennale, in so far as it will prevent the directors from characterizing personally their own sectors.", VII Meeting of the Executive Board, 25th June 1974.

to guarantee autonomy and democracy to the institution, had also created a plethoric structure that made the general management quite challenging.

In 1973, under proposal and with the support of Bettino Craxi[106], Carlo Ripa di Meana was presented as candidate for the presidency of the Executive Board and was elected with ten votes in favour and eight abstentions. The new President disapproved the final text of the Act, considering it as excessively influenced by the demagogic positions of the 1968 contestations, and he also deplored the stigmatization of the event's traditional vocation as a *festival* entity and market-orientation. In the 'new' Biennale, Ripa di Meana could see a path in continuity with its previous socialist character, now condemned by the blunt conceptual fracture desired by the communists[107]. However, if the Socialists won the presidency, the Christian Democrats conquered the Secretary General through the appointment of Luigi Floris Ammannati, vice president of the Experimental Centre of Cinematography, Supervisor of the Teatro La Fenice and former director of the Venice Film Festival. Since the very first meeting, it was apparent how the heterogenous plurality of the Board would have carried some weight on its work: five political parties, three trade union confederations, four associations of authors, the Biennale staff and the mayor of Florence had to peacefully collaborate, equipped with intellectual honesty and necessarily prone to democratic compromise in order to realize the programmes. Nevertheless, to underline and symbolize the renovated autonomy of the Biennale, in its very first decision as President, Carlo Ripa di Meana advanced three names for the direction of the three sectorial areas mindless of the names recommended by the party committees, and basing the selection solely on the candidates' curricula[108]. The final decision fell, respectively, on Luca Ronconi for theatre and music, Vittorio Gregotti for visual art and architecture and Giacomo Gambetti for television and cinema.

With the Quadrennial Plan 1974-77, the Biennale had placed at the heart of its activity the innovative quest for a participatory relationship between culture and society, thus overcoming its merely expositive nature of showcase and embracing an experimental role of 'social utility' – inasmuch as it committed to deal with contemporary political and social issues. What was oftentimes labelled as 'politization' of the institution, can be simply

[106] Caccamo F, 'La Biennale del 1977 e il dibattito sul Dissenso', in *Nuova storia contemporanea*, 12(4), July-August 2008, p.120.
[107] Martini M. V., *La Biennale di Venezia 1968-1978…*, cit., p.123.
[108] Declaration of the President on the nomination of the three directors, in Archivio storico delle arti contemporanee, *Biennale di Venezia. Annuario 1975 Eventi 1974, La Biennale di Venezia,* Venice, 1975, p.422.

understood as civic engagement. In those four years the Biennale became a hotspot for the nourishment of the political debate through cultural manifestations and viceversa. The autonomy it was dignified with was further emphasized and transformed by the new presidency in a sort of *extraterritoriality* which was meant to guarantee the Biennale's absolute freedom from any censoring force and ability to host whatever artistic and intellectual form. Essential element of this new institutional attitude was the constant attention to the public as active actor of the event, which resulted in extraordinary participatory trends and an utmost contemporary modality of producing culture. The great success the Biennale had in those years and the legacy it left is linked to the intuition behind it, namely the fact of giving to it a specificity of its own and a cultural utility with international resonance. The realization of this intuition implied the *in loco* and central presence of the artists surrounded by an active public engaged in the debates held under the yearly-proposed topic, and supported by the countries owning the pavilions, which were assumingly supposed to facilitate the process. Beyond every political and ideological consideration, the Biennale had managed to exit the exclusive and elitarian ghetto it had been confined into for decades, reaching out to the contemporary world and its concrete issues. The pursue of intellectually honest investigation and experimentation, unpolluted by second agendas and interests, turned the Biennale into a venue for purely cultural discussions around up-to-date matters of international relevance[109].

Next to the general mindset of autonomy and participatory involvement of the society given to the institute, the new Statute had also committed the Biennale to international interest, while the Quadrennial Plan gave it an anti-fascist ethical address. These two traits naturally influenced the choice for the theme to be treated in the next edition of 1974: the latest case of repression against a democratic system at the time was the destitution of President Allende in Chile, through a military golpe by the hand of General Pinochet, which had an impressive impact on the international opinion, including the Italian one. Such a meaningful impact was also due to the inspiring significance that Allende's socialist government had had for the youth and the forces of change since around 1968. The manifestation of the 1974 edition was organized with the purpose of informing, sensitizing and arousing democratic confrontations on the experience of Unidad Popular, Allende's party[110]. Integral part of the manifestations was the realization of murals around the lagoon by the artist Roberto Matta and the Brigade of Chilean Muralists Salvador Allende. Matta

[109] Martini M. V., *La Biennale di Venezia 1968-1978…*, cit., pp.215-219.
[110] Ibid., p.145.

reacted enthusiastically to the invitation received and was extremely satisfied by the initiative:

> "Finally they did it. It should have always been so. Culture belongs to the people and must be at their reach. It must also promote awareness. Artists are witnesses of their time, and their duty is to tell of their history, participating in the battles of fought by the people[111]."

And while the 1974 edition was being harshly criticized by part of the Italian press for its political line, Giulio Carlo Argan, the art critic and independent communist mayor of Rome, who three years later would have deplored the Biennale of Dissent, flat-out defended the initiative and its purposes, maintaining that culture should not be disenfranchised of its political meaning:

> "…politics should hopefully not simply be political professionalism but also culture, that is a politics aware of the historical reasons of its actions and ideological premises. It therefore follows that the Biennale could not be a cultural endeavour, if it wasn't political too.[112]"

Persevering in its political commitment and respecting the ideological address it had given itself, the 'new' Biennale centred the 1976 edition around Spain's transition to democracy one year after Francisco Franco's death. The democratization's process was celebrated, and the whole event was described by Ripa di Meana as "the report of a forty-years-long cultural and artistic history of Spain, since the Republic throughout the Falangist regime, up to the youngest generations[113]". Bringing the examples of 1974 on Chile and that of 1976 on Spain as precedents in continuity with its new proposal, Ripa di Meana presented his idea of dedicating the 1977 edition to the dissent in the countries of the Eastern bloc during the meeting of the Executive Board on 29th January 1977. It was the first council to discuss such a matter and, on that occasion, the proposal was approved with approximate unanimity[114]. Few days before, on 25th January 1977, Ripa di Meana had explained his notion of a 'Biennale of Dissent' in an interview to the newspaper *Il Corriere Della Sera*: the phenomenon of alternative thinking and its consequences was to be investigated in the framework of symposiums and conferences, and this different culture – an alternative to the

[111] Matta R., 'Partecipo a questa Biennale perché è diversa', in *Libertà al Cile*, 19th October 1974.
[112] Argan G. C., 'La cultura è politica', in *Libertà al Cile*, 2nd November 1974.
[113] Mecucci G. and Ripa di Meana C., *L'ordine di Mosca…*, cit., p.31.
[114] VV. AA., *1974-1978 – Cronache della nuova biennale*, Electa editrice, Milan, 1978.

official aesthetics of the Eastern Bloc countries – was to be illustrated through films, musical, dance and theatre performances, literary events and exhibitions[115]. It would have examined the phenomenon of Dissent as an independent heterodoxy to official aesthetics and ideology in the Eastern Bloc countries. Shortly after that first meeting held on Ripa di Meana's proposal, however, the Soviet *Izvestia* paper accused the President of undermining the constructive collaboration between East and West and of disregarding the Helsinki Accords. On 16th February, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Forlani informed the Board of the first outraged reactions from the Soviet and Czech media[116].

As for the context hosting all these circumstances, from the project to the reactions, Ripa di Meana explained in an interview to Fabio Isopo that 1977 presented several favourable conditions to his initiative: the Helsinki Accords had been concluded two years before, and they represented the juridical background for the manifestation; Italy's major opposition party (PCI) was dealing with the Eurocommunist strategy[117], which represented a propitious basis for open dialogue within the communist movement; and the PSI was now led by Bettino Craxi, close friend of Ripa di Meana and carefully perceptive to the Soviet empire's contradictions[118]. In the afore-mentioned interview to *Corriere della Sera*, Ripa di Meana added that "before the serious episodes of cultural, moral and political repression taking place in the heart of Europe, in Prague, and that finds analogues in Poland, the USSR and Hungary, the unrestricted voice of the Biennale is like never before recognized as invaluable and indispensable for its activity of autonomous documentation, its international influence, its numerous and robust contacts with intellectuals and artists from the whole world[119]". Perhaps naifly, the President concluded his interview observing that "in regard to this prospective of the Biennale there is no sort of embarrassment, but full and convinced

[115] 'Ripa di Meana anticipa – sul dissenso nell'Est la Biennale '77', in *Corriere della Sera*, 25th January 1977, p.11.
[116] VV. AA., *1974-1978 – Cronache…*, cit.
[117] The Eurocommunism movement, a trend shared first and foremost by the PCI, its Spanish counterpart, Santiago Carrillo's PCE, and more hesitantly by the PCF of George Marchais, emerged in the Seventies and was based on these parties' rejection of their subordination to the CPSU and its monolithic doctrine. The success the PCI enjoyed in this period is partly due to the conviction with which they stressed their independence from Moscow. (Ruscoe J., *The Italian Communist Party 1976-1981. On the Threshold of Government*, MacMillan, London and Basingstoke, 1982, pp.57-58; Guiat C., *The French and Italian Communist Parties: Comrades and Culture*, Frank Cass, London and Portland, 2003, p.12)
[118] Isopo F., 'La Biennale del Dissenso: uno scontro a Sinistra', in *Art and beyond*, viewed on 7th September 2020, <http://www.unclosed.eu/component/content/category/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=60:la-biennale-del-dissenso-uno-scontro-a-sinistra&catid=15:amnesia-artisti-memorie-cancellazioni&Itemid=124>
[119] 'Ripa di Meana anticipa – sul dissenso nell'Est la Biennale '77', cit.

support from the whole Italian left, which has strongly supported our work so far and fights to put an end to the manhunt in Prague and in order to change the situation in favour of human rights[120]" – as far as this 'full and convinced support from the whole Italian left' is concerned, Ripa di Meana's words soon proved to be wrong.

Centring the 1977 edition on the issue of dissent in Eastern Europe did not seem at odds, at first sight, with that line of political commitment undertaken by the Biennale with its last Quadrennial Plan. But the case of Dissent featured slightly different implications, compared to the instances of Chile and Spain, respectively subjected to the repressive and militarized regimes of Augusto Pinochet and Francisco Franco. The difference lay in the fact that Dissent, as we have seen, was a heterogenous phenomenon in which different stances and groups of people contesting the forms of real socialism merged, despite their distinctive points of view. Dissent could not be referred to in an univocal way, as it did not belong exclusively to a country and a unitary movement did not exist. There were several militant groups and ideological currents that, possibly under different flags and symbols, claimed more freedom. Nevertheless, it was difficult to discern them clearly as such groupings lacked their own explicit definition at the theoretical level[121].

The 1974 and 1976 editions were far from being politically neutral, but they were based on visions shared by the whole Executive Board and all the main Italian political parties, while it was not the case for the 1977 theme, as it would have been clear soon after the first meeting of the Board. It did not take long before the Dissent project was pointed to as an idea generated exclusively by President Ripa di Meana and that he allegedly imposed on his collaborators. At the same time, the issue was extremely thorny given the historical moment: the Communists had triumphed at the election thus becoming the only ally of the Christian Democrats, the country was in the middle of the so-called 'compromesso storico' (Historic Compromise)[122] between the two parties, the Socialists were settled to strengthen their position and consensus after the negative outcome resulted in the 1976 elections and, finally, the economic relations between Italy and the USSR were more than thriving. Ripa di Meana's proposal was clearly an uncomfortable initiative to the eyes of many.

[120] Ibid.

[121] Bartalini A., *La Biennale del dissenso e lo scontro nella sinistra italiana: una tappa del percorso d'autonomia del Partito Socialista Italiano*, Master's thesis in Contemporary History, Università degli studi di Milano, Milan, 2008/2009, p. 105.

[122] Coherently with the Eurocommunist policy, the Historic Compromise consisted in a strategy of broad alliance between the DC and the PCI with the hope, for the latter, of entering a coalition government at the national level. (Guiat C., *The French and Italian Communist Parties…*, cit., p.14).

2.2 Soviet and Italian Receptions to the Initiative

The Soviet concerns engendered by a Venice Biennale devoted to Dissent in the socialist countries seemed to be further increased by the fact that the manifestations immediately followed the celebrations for the 60th anniversary of the October Revolution and the introduction of Brezhnev's new Constitution, to be approved on 7th October – a circumstance that could only be explained with a conspiracy orchestrated by an international network of imperialist powers, from the CPSU's point of view. According to a secret report of the CIA, mentioned by Ripa di Meana in his personal account of the Biennale, in January 1977 a Soviet delegation threatened the Italian communists of making public their support for past Soviet activities, while a PCI delegation was offered financial support conditional on their party limiting any critics against the Soviet authorities[123]. In other words, the counterattack of the Soviet Union had commenced long before the parliamentary procedures and arrangements for the event had even started: on 5th February the pro-government Soviet paper *Izvestya* defined the proposal for the 1977 Biennale an ignominious sabotage against the USSR that risked eroding the Helsinki Accords and represented 'a questionable search for renegades in this and that socialist country[124]'.

On 24th February the counsellors of the Soviet embassy in Rome, Samokvalov and Kabanenko summoned the director of the Biennale's cinema sector, Giacomo Gambetti, to convey their government's extreme contrariety and disapproval regarding the decision to devote the 1977 Biennale to Dissent, specifying that they were enjoying "the solidarity of several figures from Italian politics and culture[125]". Ambassador Nikita Rizhov did not wait long before formally asking the Italian government, in name of all the members of the Warsaw Pact, to cancel the Biennale's programme on Eastern Dissent, threatening the retreat of all these countries from every future initiative agreed with the institute. After meeting the secretary general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ambassador Raimondo Manzini, Ripa di Meana resigned from his presidential position in light of the unprecedented Soviet interference, a matter he further explained in a letter to the Parliament on 7th March[126], where

[123] Central Intelligence Agency, *The Soviet View of the Dissent Problem Since Helsinki*, Secret RP79.101000, May 1977, Archivio CSSEO, pp.9-10, in Mecucci G. and Ripa di Meana C., *L'ordine di Mosca…*, cit., pp.209-221.
[124] Mecucci G. and Ripa di Meana C., *L'ordine di Mosca…*, cit., p.51.
[125] VV. AA., *Cronache della nuova Biennale 1974 - 1978*, cit.
[126] Ripa di Meana C., 'Lettera aperta al Parlamento di Ripa di Meana', in *La Stampa*, 7th March 1977, p.1.

he denounced such a scandalous intrusion from a foreign regime. In the context of their meeting, given the prominent national economic interests at stake, Manzini had suggested Ripa di Meana looking for diplomatic compromises with Moscow, as well as postponing the manifestations *sine die* – else, the ambassador implicitly meant, would have resulted in the cut of the Biennale's public financial funding. Ripa di Meana's resignation may be called a successful move, as it generated a wave of solidarity and a front of support for his project. Later on, that same month, the issue was discussed at the Chamber of Deputies and Forlani reassured the public of the absolute autonomy the Venetian institute enjoyed, which could be not impacted by any decision of the government, let alone an external force[127] – three days later, exhorted by his colleague and mayor of Venice Mario Rigo, Ripa di Meana withdrew his resignation. In the meantime, the PCI had initially held a supporting position, with Giorgio Napolitano asserting that the intention to dedicate the Biennale to Dissent could not undergo a U turn[128].

Act n. 324, regarding the revision of the State funding destined to the Biennale, was promulgated on 13th June and established a budget of 3 billion liras for that year[129]. Nevertheless, Ripa di Meana's initiative had not overcome the wave of obstacles before its realization: while the political pressure of the CPSU had started tightening up its grip around the Italian comrades, the communist members of the Board began to give up some of the meetings, thus slowing down the overall organization. At the same time, other collaborators frowned upon Ripa di Meana excessively authoritarian attitude as president, as he pretended to base personally pre-established decisions on open and moderate dialogue. As a result of this, Maselli (PCI) and Purificato (DC) gave their resignation[130], whereas Seroni and Calabria denounced the ongoing 'presidential regime' within the Board[131].

Once the long-waited funding seemed to have lifted up the Biennale's fortune, on 24th June the Executive Board approved the 1977 programme with the majority of votes (not unanimity), scheduling it for November and December. The extended delay taken to grant

[127] Chamber of Deputies, 16th March 1977, VII legislature, <https://www.fondazionecerm.it/wp-content/uploads/Lavori_Preparatori_833_78/CAMERA_sed0102.pdf>.
[128] Mecucci G. and Ripa di Meana C., *L'ordine di Mosca…,* cit., p.53.
[129] Art.6, Act of 13th June 1977, n.324, *Modifiche alla legge 26 luglio 1973, n. 438, concernente: Nuovo ordinamento dell'ente autonomo 'Biennale di Venezia'*.
[130] Francesco Maselli in particular justified his resignation with the fact that the approach unanimously adopted with the 1974 Quadrennial Plan had been abruptly abandoned in favour of a more despotic approach on the part of the President. (XLIV Meeting of the Executive Board, 18th June 1977, in Martini M. V., *La Biennale di Venezia…*, cit.).
[131] XLIII Meeting of the Executive Board, 21st May 1977, ASAC, in Martini M. V., *La Biennale di Venezia…*, cit.

the budget, however, provoked, on 7th July, the abdication of the three sectorial directors who had worked so hard to renovate and redefine the Biennale's identity during the prior three years: Ronconi, Gregotti and Gambetti maintained that their withdrawal was due to "the impossibility to accomplish organic programmes in such limited times as imposed by the delay for the funding approval[132]".

In the meantime, next to the first attempts to discourage the organization of the 1977 Biennale, the CPSU elaborated a line of action to take in closer proximity to the actual unfolding of the cultural manifestations: their secret plan was structured in the multi-faceted strategy entitled "Contrasting measures against anti-Soviet propaganda in Italy", as reported in the minutes of a meeting held on 27th September where the high functionaries Suslov, Kulakov, Pel'she, Ponamaryov, Solomenzev, Kashtanov, Dolghikh, Zamyatim, Cernenko, Ryabov and Rusakov were involved[133]. The document comprehended instructions for the Soviet ambassador in Italy, Rizhov, who should have met the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs to blame the regrettable exhibition in Venice, to be held between 15th November and 17th December, for threatening the friendly relations between the two countries: "The reprehensible action, conducted by the event's organizers, and placed under the accountability of the Italian authorities, is in harsh contradiction with the favourable arrangements established between our countries", assessed Attached n° 1 of the plan, where it was also stated that "the Soviet part has long pointed out, under the Ministry of Foreign Affair's eyes, the attempts to make use of the Venice Biennale for purposes that have nothing to do with the development of cultural cooperation between our peoples, and diverge from the attitude and positions held under the Helsinki Accords". A second file (Attached n° 2), once again addressed to the Soviet ambassador but regarding the PCI, contained admonishments to be imparted to the Italian Communists, were emphasis was laid on the imperialist nature of the propaganda permeating the Biennale, thus urging the PCI to react against those anti-Soviet and anti-socialist activities. Attention was also drawn towards other initiatives "targeted against the reputation of all the socialist countries": the 1977 edition of the Biennale, in fact, was preceded by analogue initiatives throughout the same year, the CPSU noted with irritation. The events they were referring to were, first of all, a discussion on Eastern European dissent patronized by the left-wing city council of Florence (whose mayor was the communist Elio Gabbugiani, also guilty of holding a press conference with

[132] 'Il Consiglio direttivo della Biennale dà il via ai programmi 1977', press communiqué on 11th July 1977, ASAC (Archivio Storico Arti Contemporanee), in Martini M. V., *La Biennale di Venezia…*, cit.
[133] Valentino P, 'Mosca contro Venezia', in *Il Corriere della Sera*, 8th January 1994, p.25.

Yelena Bonner) and, secondly, a sequence of 'reading evenings' dedicated to Sakharov in Rome. Understandably, what infuriated the Soviet central party was such an explicit support in favour of Dissent on the part of such pre-eminent and active members of the PCI. Again in the same Attached, the CPSU defined the Biennale a blatant ideologic sabotage which diverted completely from the vocation of the Biennale and Rizhov was prompted to illustrate to the Italian comrades how the project was designed to undermine the celebration of the October Revolution's 60th anniversary, the successful outcome of the Belgrade Conference and the imminent introduction of the USSR new Constitution. At the end of the official communication, the Soviet functionaries appealed to the PCI for imposing the necessary measures.

Pretty similar contents were communicated in a secret missive (Attached n° 3) targeted at the Bulgarian, Polish, Hungarian, Romanian, Czech, German and Cuban communist parties, where they were warned of the imminent initiatives centred on émigré literature, pieces of art and numerous symposia held by the members of the 'anti-socialist' Dissent – happening with the political and material support of the Italian authorities. Finally, Attached n° 4 of the Soviet secret decree regarded the contrasting measures to be taken through the Soviet mass media against 'the anti-Soviet campaign' in Italy: it provided for the diffusion of propagandistic material in our country, to be performed by the news agency *Novosti*, about the 'the development of the Soviet democracy' and 'the real face of dissent', in order to unmask and reveal the slanderous purpose of the Biennale. The plan envisaged similar countermeasures to be taken by the newspapers *Sovetskaja Kultura*, *Literaturnaya Gazeta* and *Izvestya*, while *Novoe Vremya* should have published condemnatory comments on the 'Sakharov's Evenings" held in Rome and *Za Rubezhom* had to re-issue Italian articles whose authors reproached the anti-Soviet manifestations in Rome, Florence and, of course, Venice. Arrangements were also enacted to organize interviews on the Italian television and radio with the participation of loyal exponents of the Soviet cultural elite, as well as the deployment of writers and filmmakers delegations to 'carry out an adequate activity of propaganda, while appearing on the Italian media'[134].

The Soviet censorship apparatus had been triggered, the programme projected by the Soviet central committee has also been summarized by Adriano Guerra in his work *Comunismi e comunisti* (2005) as follows: to be conducted at the governmental level, it entailed threats against the Italian executive regarding the consequences that Ripa di

[134] Central Intelligence Agency, *The Soviet View of the Dissent Problem Since Helsinki*…, cit.

Meana's initiative might have on the relationship between the two countries; a letter addressed to the PCI to commit them to intervene against the organizers, guilty of serving the imperialist propaganda; a communique destined to the fellows communist parties in Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and DDR, to invite them taking similar measures; finally, a set of propagandistic initiatives involving the mobilization of both Soviet and Italian mass media in order to arrange, *inter alia*, a week dedicated to the Soviet cinematographic production[135].

Despite the approval of Act n. 324, art. 35, which renovated the funding for the Biennale with a sum of 3 billion liras, after the resignation of Gregotti, Gambetti and Ronconi (officially due to the inadequate timing allowed by the parliamentary procedures to organize the cultural manifestations), the obstacles posed in front of Ripa di Meana's project did nothing but multiply: in August the industrialist Paolo Marinotti, allegedly in consequence to the fierce debate developed around the event, refused to offer the venue of Palazzo Grassi to the Biennale, while analogue turndowns followed, at the beginning of September, in relation to other locations traditionally placed to disposal of the Biennale (Palazzo Labia and the isle of San Giorgio, for example). Accessibility was also denied to cultural contents and resources, as in the case of the publishing house Ricordi withholding the musical scores of the composer Shostakovich[136] and some films requested to the cultural association ARCI[137]. Further complications were met by the Biennale's curators while trying to acquire the material and resources needed for the events: for the exposition of visual arts *La nuova arte sovietica*, curated by Enrico Crispolti and Gabriella Moncada, the initial intent had been to show the vast reality of Eastern European art, both 'official' and 'unofficial', but the organizers soon realised it was not feasible as hoped. By the time preparations for the expositions had begun (a quite limited period in today's institutional terms, just three months before the opening), it was clear that no cultural exchange with the USSR or Czechoslovakia was thinkable, while less clarity was given by Poland and Hungary – Crispolti made a desperate last minute trip to these countries, which resulted futile due to the interlocutors'

[135] Guerra A., *Comunismi e comunisti*, Edizioni Dedalo, Bari, 2005, p.285.
[136] Shostakovich was the first Russian composer to introduce the execution of symphonic music in cinema. Since Ricordi did not grant the rights of his scores, during the movie *La nouvelle vogue*, projected on 15th December, the music had to be heard on a tape recording the version executed by *L'Ensemble Ars Nova* of Paris in 1975. According to Ripa di Meana, this episode clearly exemplified the fierce opposition of large sectors of the Italian cultural production against his initiative, thus favouring the Soviet attempts of censorship (Mecucci G. and Ripa di Meana C., *L'ordine di Mosca…*, cit., p.39).
[137] VV. AA., *Cronache della nuova Biennale 1974-1978*, cit.

passivity[138]. In any case, the only alternative approach was to turn to Western collections. Even if there could have been any kind of interest in cooperating at the cultural level, the official position imposed by the socialist authorities was well orchestrated and strict: the festival was actively resisted by the Soviet bloc propaganda press and through diplomatic means. In the introduction to his catalogue, Crispolti described his quest for a dialogue with the Soviet art bureaucracy and his sincere belief in the positive cultural dialectics[139], but in the context of Cold War Realpolitik, these expectations were rather unrealistic and could have functioned barely at the local level.

As for the internal front of the battle fought by the Biennale, its organizers and supporters, the debate was even more intense than the clash with the Soviet Union's censoring demands. Reasonably, there were more interests at stake, both political and economics, and the liberal regime of the Italian democracy allowed for a variegated and multi-layered discussion among various actors. As for the PCI, it may seem paradoxical to speak of power in relation to a party which had been in continuous, unrelieved opposition for thirty years, but in a system such as that emerged in post-war Italy power could have many forms, and the Italian communists had since long enjoyed an influential form of *negative* power, enabling them to shape – at least to some extent – policies, popular attitudes and events. "With a widely read Party press; highly esteemed elder statesmen with reputations made during the patriotic struggles of the Resistance and articulated parliamentary leadership, all-out Communist opposition in internal affairs was never taken lightly[140]". Benefitting from being excluded for all the governments from 1947 on, unlike PSI, the Communist managed to gain consensus and avoid criticism following the end of the "Miracle", and during the bleak years of the late 1960s and early 1970s the PCI, standing alone in a period of economic uncertainty, succeeded to retain largely untouched its voting strength. This was a great plus: the PSI at the same time was finding itself ham-strung by power, its real strength in the country falling apart, entangled in unsavoury scandals – the kind of scandals typical of that period because of the very way the dominant DC was running the country. Ironically, the PCI gained in influence by its exclusion: it did not have more ability to concretely influence the events. What is worth while stressing is that the PCI reaped considerable rewards from this time of compulsory isolation: 'We have clean hands' notoriously stated an electioneering slogan of the 1970s. Considering such dynamics, it is

[138] Crispolti E. and Moncada G., *La nuova arte sovietica: una prospettiva non ufficiale*, Marsilio, Venice, 1977, pp.13–14.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ruscoe J., *The Italian Communist Party…*, cit., p.40.

difficult to assess how much of the credit for this accretion of consensus and influence genuinely rests with Party strategists. The line of action enacted by the Directorate in the Botteghe Oscure Party's headquarters, had but a limited scope: keep hold of present strength, and do nothing to alienate present sympathizers, already defined as the sources of future support. In this rather limited objective the Party succeeded. It neither alienated actual voters nor frightened off potential ones. To take an international example that provides a parallel to our Biennale's case, the 1968 Russian intervention in Czechoslovakia produced passionate reactions among the Party hierarchy, but the printed response given to the public was at the same time cautious and hostile. At the time, Berlinguer's adoption of an 'autonomous Italian road to socialism' had clearly already set the PCI upon a different path from that followed by, for example, the PCF, even though the Sardinian leader had not taken the reins of the party yet. It was him who, in 1969, expressed the PCI dissent over the normalization of the Prague Spring while visiting Moscow – which proved how, under his lead, taking distance from the Soviet dictates was possible for Botteghe Oscure, even in regard to a far more sensible situation than the 1977 Biennale.

As far as electoral strength is concerned, the 1975 and 1976 ballots had proved the broadening of PCI's popular appeal. The 1975 regional elections gave the PCI 33.4 percent of the popular vote: it was these elections that gave a renewed burst of life to the left. Following June 1975 the PCI became the ruling party in no less than five regions – Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, and Umbria (the Red Triangle regions under PCI control since the first regional elections in 1970) were joined by Piedmont and Liguria. At the national level, they gained a 34% at the political elections of the following year. By contrast, the PSI had enjoyed only about 10% of the votes at the 1976 elections for the Chamber of Deputies and its new leader Bettino Craxi, at the head of the party since July of that very year, was unwaveringly resolved to innovate the image and role of the socialists in the Italian Left's landscape. In order to attain this objective and in so far as our case is concerned, the PSI strategy consisted in taking advantage of the PCI hesitations and lack of political firmness concerning their ambiguous relationship with the CPSU. In fact, despite Berlinguer's sporadic expressions of solidarity to Eastern Dissent and passionate adhesion to the Eurocommunist project, his party replaced the initial approval to the 1977 Biennale (embodied in the party members 'yes' votes to the first proposal presented at the Executive Board) with stern opposition to the initiative, as they apparently followed the directives arrived from Staraya Ploshchad. This was probably related to the concrete risk of drift towards an anti-Soviet, and perhaps even anti-communist, function of the Biennale – which of course could threaten the fragile

equilibrium between Botteghe Oscure and the Kremlin, in case the former did not manifest the most complete discontent for the event.

One month before the inauguration of the Biennale, the PCI secretariat held a series of meetings to co-ordinate the general approach to hold in relation to the initiative: it was decided to publicly take distance from it and those comrades who may have chosen to individually participate to the events in Venice were required to represent the party's official pre-established position. In particular, an earnestly polemical stance was to be expressed towards President Ripa di Meana's initiative to visit Belgrade with the purpose of referring about the denied visas to the Conference for the Monitoring of the Helsinki Accords[141]. The most explicit form of boycott on the part of the PCI was the refusal to take part to the cultural manifestations and debates held between 15th November and 15th December, with the exception of those party members and intellectuals that were willing to individually participate. One example of this stances was the historian expert of the USSR Giuseppe Boffa who, despite his participation, afterwards expressed a rather critical attitude towards the event he had partaken, describing it as completely "inspired by Craxi's party" and "liquidating the Soviet experience as a whole[142]". There had unmistakably been a radical shift in the PCI attitude, compared to the initial demonstrations of support, gradually replaced by a condemnatory disposition and probably conditioned by the pressure exercised from Moscow. Even Adriano Seroni, communist member of the Executive Board who voted in favour of the project at first, in November defined the project as a 'cultural pastiche', whose risk was to have a purely instrumental function, and from which it was easy to slip on the ridge of anti-socialist demagogy[143].

In the press, one of the first offensives against Ripa di Meana and his project arrived from the hands of Giulio Carlo Argan, the independent communist mayor of Rome who, at the end of February, spoke of the Biennale as the symptom of a 'White Knight syndrome' suffered by the organizers, calling it a 'Solzhenicyn parade' and reducing its political meaning to an act of philanthropic solidarity in aid of the dissidents[144]. To intervene in defense of the Biennale and challenging Argan's position came an article by Vittorio Strada,

[141] Archivio Fondazione Gramsci, *Riunioni di Segreteria del PCI: 21 settembre 1977 n° 0304 0295; 11 ottobre n° 0304 0300, 16 novembre n° 0309 0167*, in Mecucci G. and Ripa di Meana C., *L'ordine di Mosca…*, cit., pp.225-226.
[142] Boffa G., *Memorie dal comunismo*, Ponte alle Grazie, Milano, 1998, pp.201-202.
[143] Berardi G., 'Un pasticcio per il dissenso', in *L'Unità,* 12th November 1977, p.2.
[144] Argan G. C., 'È una biennale o un mercato?', in *L'Espresso*, 27th February 1977.

who pointed particularly to the Soviet interference occurring in those days through diplomatic means:

> "The intervention of the Soviet ambassador in Rome (Nikita Rizhov) against the planned Biennale focused on Eastern European 'dissent' […] is having a not negligible merit: that is, unearthing certain murmured, if not silent, situations which deserve open and frank discussion. It is having a Soviet-generated ripple effect in the Italian pond[145]".

Quite clearly, with this last statement, Strada referred to the PCI inability to give up its reticence on Soviet crimes and to take distance from their ideological hegemony. But Strada's support was not unconditioned and later on, still few months before the 1977 edition of the Biennale was inaugurated, he did not miss the chance to express his doubts about the programme, especially in light of the actors involved and the kind of Dissent they represented (as already said, it is not a uniform or unitary movement):

> 'Is it rightful to label as 'dissent' those voices who clearly feature 'fascist properties'? Shouldn't the common denominator of dissent be a search for more or less democratic forms, in any case less undemocratic than those they are disagreeing with?[146]'

In other words, he deprecated the organizers' acritical approach in the selection of the artists to be invited, and feared that the event might end having a merely anti-Soviet application. If Strada's professional commitment and expertise on the issue of Soviet Dissent is undeniable (as a matter of fact he was invited to organize the third session of the event, focused on s*amizdat*[147]), it is also true that he displayed such scepticism when little if nothing was known about the Biennale's programme.

On the other side of the domestic quarrel over the Biennale's legitimacy there was, of course, Bettino Craxi and his party, who were aspiring at the destabilization of the Communist party by playing the role of the moral stronghold in defense of democracy, freedom and the right to dissent. The socialist leader has been remembered by Ripa di Meana as the sole politician participating to the Biennale's inauguration and also Renzo Foa, author of the introduction to Ripa di Meana's memoirs on the 1977 events (*L'ordine di Mosca*) esteemed Craxi as the only political figure of the global left to stand in support for Dissent

[145] Strada V., 'Chissà se l'Urss un giorno vorrà!', in *la Repubblica,* 12th March 1977.
[146] Strada V., 'Guerra e pace per il dissenso', in *la Repubblica,* 1st June 1977.
[147] Guagnelli S., 'Rane, elefanti e cavalli. Vittorio Strada e la Biennale del '77', *eSamizdat,* 2010-2011, VIII, pp.323-324.

when all the European social-democracies, especially the German one, were scrupulously following the dogmatic imperatives of the Ostpolitik:

> "Now that the second half of the XX century is simplistically remembered as a bipolar conflict between communism and anti-communism, the fact that in 1977 the Farnesina tried to sacrifice an event such as the Biennale in the name of the *Realpolitik* seems a paradox. But an attempt there was indeed, and it failed also thank to stance of Arnaldo Forlani, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, and especially for Bettino Craxi's dedication[148]".

In fact, further in the book, the Biennale's president observed that "except for the PSI and PCI on basically contraposed positions, […] none of the parties within the Parliament, nor the main extra-parliamentary movements, did anything for Dissent[149]". According to Ripa di Meana, all the major forces of the domestic and international scenario were excessively stuck to the motionless balance of the post-Yalta equilibria to do anything that could possibly harm such 'stability'. Following the dictates of Brandt's Ostpolitik and of the international détente, both Western Europe and the United States respected a *quieta non movere* principle, even to detriment of those human liberties advocated with the Helsinki Accords. He was therefore unsurprised by the boycotting tendencies and hostile reactions met by his 1977 initiative which, in his view, were perfectly in line with the 'immobilist' approach and short-sighted policy upheld by the decision-makers of the time. This position has been somehow confirmed, at least in relation to the PCI, by admittances such as that of the communist militant Emanuele Macaluso during an interview in 1991: "(with regard to the Prague Spring) We didn't support them (the demonstrators) as that would have implied a rupture with the CPSU. We had decided not to do that. Even Berlinguer, after the fracture, never broke completely with them. There was a deep reciprocal distrust, but not a total rupture[150]". A similar confession was reported by Pietro Ingrao in his work *Le cose impossibili*, where he avowed: "what I regret the most of what I did towards the Eastern regimes it's not having avoided a severe judgement when I should, but having simply done nothing to help the 'dissent' in Eastern Europe. We limited ourselves to condemn, somebody with more harshness, others with less. But we did very little to understand and intervene".[151]

[148] Foa R., *L'ordine di Mosca…*, cit., p.13.
[149] Mecucci G. and Ripa di Meana C., *L'ordine di Mosca…*, cit., p.40.
[150] Merlo, F., 'Macaluso: Compagno Pelikan, ti chiedo scusa', in *Corriere della Sera*, 11th November 1991, p.2.
[151] Ingrao P. and Tranfaglia N., *Le cose impossibili,* Editori Riuniti, Roma 1990

In his polemical recollection of that arduous year and of all the efforts he made to realize the Biennale's edition on Dissent, Ripa di Meana also remembered the few communists and non-communists intellectuals who distanced themselves from the thicker majority who, by serving obedience to the USSR or for economic interests, did not show any form of solidarity in front of the threats he received from Moscow: Alberto Moravia, Enzo Bettiza, Goffredo Parise, Leonardo Sciascia, Eugenio Montale, Carlo Bo, Roberto Calasso, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Lucio Colletti and very few others[152].

In conclusion, the 1977 Biennale on Dissent figured as a perfect transposition, on the domestic level, of an international ideological conflict, with all its nuances and implications. As far as the socialists were concerned, by evoking and amplifying Nenni's legacy in relation to the democratic issue of the communist regimes, Craxi cleverly managed to harness the question of cultural dissent in Eastern Europe and the PCI controversial relationship to such matters, thus seriously challenging their hegemony within the Italian Left. The Biennale's edition of that year and everything that had been revolving around it can be considered, given the above-reported national and international conditions, both a genuine, authentic act of support in favour of those alternative forms of culture in the socialist countries, as well as an instrument of hegemonic political strategy in the battle contended between the two main left-wing parties of the 1970s Italy.

2.3 The Biennale and its Unfolding

As we have grasped skimming the Biennale's history through the 70s, the then president of the institute, the socialist Carlo Ripa di Meana, had introduced in the years preceding 1977 a tradition of thematically and politically oriented Biennales: the 1974-1975 edition was titled "Freedom for Chile", and in 1976 the Biennale was dedicated to Post-Francoist Spain. On 25th January 1977, Ripa di Meana explained his notion of a "Biennale of Dissent" in an interview to the newspaper *Il Corriere Della Sera*: the phenomenon of alternative thinking and it consequences was to be investigated in the framework of symposiums and conferences, and this different culture – an alternative to the official aesthetics of the Eastern

[152] Ripa di Meana C., 'Con la testa voltata altrove', in *Critica Sociale*, vol.5, 2008 p.7

Bloc countries – was to be illustrated through films, musical, dance and theatre performances, literary events and exhibitions[153]. The definitive, ultimate programme – shaped by all the inconveniences and challenges faced by the organizers[154] – had been finally presented by Ripa di Meana to the Executive Board on 17th September 1977. Every aspect of the festival had been subject to criticisms: from the central theme, of course, sharply criticized by both Soviet politics and Italian politicians and intellectuals, as we have comprehended, to the budget (allegedly stretched beyond its limits, according to some murmurers) and the schedule, disgruntling that part of the audience unpleased to visit the Biennale's venues in the middle of autumn. At the 17th September presentation of the programme, Ripa di Meana replied to these critics, firstly declaring a budget of 280 million liras[155], which in his view allowed only for a modest and devoid of splendour event, coherently with the conditions characterizing the development of Dissent – a phenomenon forced to live in secrecy and with few resources; secondly, the president underlined how the delayed schedule, unusual for the institute's traditional calendar, was due indeed to the late financial concessions, the political disarray and the ideological prejudices the project had been victim of. In reviewing the line-up, Paolo Garimberti, on *La Stampa*, recognized two merits to the initiative, making it a unique event charged with a great potential for the stimulus of international debates: on the one side, it involved an overview on all components of Dissent, from its genesis (analysed through a historical conference opening the Biennale, *Freedom and Socialism*[156]) to its scientific, cultural and artistic manifestations – on the other, it adopted a comparative approach among the different countries, so as to investigate the diverse ways in which Dissent arises and grows, as well as the varying degrees of repression it suffers by the authorities[157].

The set up exhibitions were divided according to nine main sections: visual arts; music; cinema; theatre; mass media, books and *samizdat*; literature and poetry; history; religion; science. Only three of these sectors were awarded with permanent expositions, namely visual art, books (therefore, it goes without saying, *samizdat*) and cinema. Furthermore, ten

[153] 'Ripa di Meana anticipa – sul dissenso nell'Est la Biennale '77', cit.
[154] Both domestically and abroad the organizers were not granted all the materials they needed, and some of the hosts were not allowed or did not wish to participate.
[155] Most of the 3-billion-funding allocated for that year had been employed to pay the debts of the previous edition. (Reggiani S., 'Biennale, dissenso e non senso', in *La Stampa*, 26th June 1977, p.1).
[156] Where next to both Italian and foreign specialists, Michnik and Kuron (active members of the Polish *Committee for the defence of workers victims of repression*), Andrei Sakharov and Yelena Bonner, the East German philosopher Havemann and the Czech dissidents Hajek and Krigel were invited.
[157] *Questo il programma definitivo della Biennale del dissenso*, Paolo Garimberti, La Stampa, 18th September 1977.

conferences were held on the underlying themes shaping Dissent and treated by the festival, seven of which have been recorded in seven 200-pages-reports (*quaderni di documentazione*). Of the dissidents invited from Eastern Europe, the most prominent in the movement for civil rights were Amal'rik, Sinyavsky, Brodsky, Pliusch, Gorbanevskaja, Valentin Turchin[158] and, by all means, Andrei Sakharov – who, as we know, was prevented from participating along the other names included in the list delivered from Ripa di Meana to the Belgrade Conference, and who managed to proclaim his appreciation and adherence to the initiative through the video-message presented at the Biennale's first day. Eminent personalities invited mainly for their utmost artistic contribution included the film directors Milos Forman and Andrei Tarkovsky, the composer Dmitri Shostakovich and the sculptor Ernst Neizvestny.

The 1977 controverse and debated edition then took place between 15th November and 15th December and saw the participation of 350 intellectuals and specialists from 24 countries, attracting over 220.000 visitors to its expositions, film projections, concerts and conferences, while everything was documented by 500 journalists from all over the world and 11 foreign television broadcasts. Despite this remarkable turnout, confirming the functionality of the festival even in an out-of-season schedule and amounting to an overall success, it had also triggered that institutional and international crisis which would engender the boycott of those countries refusing to take part to the manifestation at the following edition: the USSR, Argentina, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary and Uruguay left their pavilions untouched in 1978[159] . The Eastern bloc countries and their allies could not be but downright frustrated by the fact that the Venice lagoon became, between November and December, safe and solid shore for all their dissidents: the very first day was inaugurated with the reproduction of Sakharov's clandestine tape in the Napoleonic Wing of the Museo Correr, to which Carlo Ripa di Meana added that: "the Biennale wanted the voices of those who, in the cultural world, have challenged the social, ideological and aesthetic status quo to be heard – a challenge against common places and calcified costumes… The Biennale wants the conditions of art and culture in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe, where

[158] Physicist and cybernetician, Turchin had been politically active since the Sixties working closely with Sakharov and Tverdokhlebov. In the Seventies, following the publication through *samizdat* of his work *The Inertia of Fear: Socialism and Totalitarianism*, he lost his work at the research laboratory. Persecuted by the KGB, he emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1977. (Turchin V., *The Phenomenon of Science*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1977).

[159]Martini M. V., *La Biennale di Venezia 1968-1978…*, cit., p.203.

the dissenting voices are rising the most, to be explored[160]". With the programme articulated along the lines of the nine sections, or 'guiding themes', the Biennale actually scrutinized every expressive form of Dissent, from history to visual art, from cinema to theatre, from literature to religion and science, with artists, literates, intellectuals, political analysts, scientists and historians exponents of the dissenting movement from various countries.

The visual art exposition, *La nuova arte sovietica: una prospettiva non ufficiale* (The new Soviet art: an unofficial perspective) was curated by Gabriella Moncada and Enrico Crispolti and had been held at the Sports Hall of the Venice Arsenal[161]: over 500 pictorial, sculptural, engraving artworks and photographs by more than 100 artists had been gathered from mostly Western European private collections (but also institutional ones or provided by émigré artists), thus eluding any responsibility for the authors and avoiding potential repercussions from the authorities to fall on them.[162] The exposition proposed and presented the work of the 'dissenting' artists through an overview on the evolution of the figurative art in Soviet Union since the Sixties. The two curators integrated the exhibition with diapositives and photographs, so as to retracing the historical context of the contemporary 'Soviet'[163] artistic research. The works (and reproductions) by around a hundred artists were exhibited in seven sections of the exhibition, which offered an historical division based on stylistic, formal and substantive artwork elements. The sections of the exhibition were: 'Expressionist and Lyric Figuration', 'Gesture, Matter and Image', 'Post-constructive and Organic Abstraction', 'Kineticism. The Dvizhenie Group', 'Surreal Figuration', 'Irony and the Everyday', and 'Conceptual Mediation, Actions and Happenings'. In addition, documentations in the form of slides were added to the exposition, as well as clippings of Western reception of Soviet unofficial art, examples of the art of the Russian avant-garde

[160] Speech of C. Ripa di Meana, *Storia/Libertà e Socialismo: momenti storici del dissenso*, in Archivio storico delle arti contemporanee, *Biennale di Venezia. Annuario 1978*, p. 530.

[161] The unusual position was due to the fact that, looking for a venue provided with a heating system, the organizers were denied availability from the locations traditionally used in the preceding years, just as many other institutions refused to lend their materials for the expositions. (Ripa di Meana C., *Il Dissenso toccò interessi economici fortissimi*, Interview by Maria Vittoria Martini, 12th February 2010).

[162] Martini M. V., *La Biennale di Venezia 1968-1978…*, cit., p.201.

[163] As Mal'cev argued, mistaking a *Russian* author with a *Soviet* one would be extremely incorrect: to define Achmatova, Pasternak and Bulgakov Soviet artists would be inappropriate just as it would be to call Thomas Mann Nazi and Eugenio Montale fascist authors. The Soviet writer would exclusively follow the canons of the *socrealizm* (imposed by the ideocracy after its proclamation during the 1934 first Congress of the Soviet writers), therefore depicting communist heroes in their work and submitting his entire creativity to the propagandistic purposes of the party. The Russian ones, at least in Mal'cev's perspective, anchored their production to other values, in order to carry on the Russian tradition, and would reject any manipulation of their production from the official authorities (Mal'cev Y., *La letteratura russa oggi e il problema del dissenso*, pp.11-12 in Scammel M. et al., *Letteratura contemporanea nell'Europa dell'Est*, Marsilio Editori, Venezia, 1977).

and photographic documentation on the conditions of practice of the artists in the USSR[164]. Their explorative attempt can be seen as part of a recent, but well consolidated, expositive trend, adopting however a different approach aimed at "critically historicizing the different phases of artistical development in the USSR[165]". In the end, Crispolti and Moncada's operation potentially appeared as a material reply to Giulio Carlo Argan's scorching critics against a programme devoted to dissent in general, and against an art exhibition with that intent in particular. Ripa di Meana had already reacted to the mayor of Rome's sceptical observations by describing them as "a tendency to hide behind snobbish aesthetic judgements of who has not understand, or is not willing to, that it is about the relationship between culture and power[166]". It can be added that the aim of the exhibition was to present as many different artistic positions as possible, while stressing their differences from the Western avant-gardes, not denying the possible influences they had received. Crispolti stated the importance of presenting artists whom – in some cases – the Western professional circles had recognised merits since the mid-1960s but the Soviet authorities still denied official recognition[167]. In other words, their expositive approach opposed both the official cultural politics of the USSR, which belittled innovative and alternative art, and the Italian artistic circles, which defined the phenomenon as provincial. The general approach of *La nuova arte sovietica* seemed quite clear and well balanced, but it did not spare the exhibition from some of the local critics, which could not get past the 'Soviet' label attached to the artworks, whereas others perceived the structure given to the vernissage as relatively cluelessness: "The question of the unofficial art's detachment from its social context, and the pure aesthetic positions of most of the exhibited artists caused misunderstanding and harsh criticism among the more politically minded Italian audience and professionals"[168]. The curator's claim and aim of keeping the representation apolitical was judged a coward choice, and the art represented as unprofessional[169]. Nevertheless Crispolti and Moncada stressed the necessity of recognising the distanced position of both the curators and artists from specific political issues, as well as acknowledging the desperate search for a dialogue with the Western tradition by the Soviet artists. Acting as a mediator, Crispolti tried to reconcile

[164] Crispolti E. and Moncada G., *La nuova arte sovietica: una prospettiva non ufficiale*, Marsilio, Venezia, 1977, pp.216-238.
[165] *La nuova arte sovietica: una prospettiva non ufficiale*, in Archivio storico delle arti contemporanee, *Biennale di Venezia. Annuario 1978*, p. 543.
[166] Del Re G., *Dissenso sul Dissenso*, Il Messaggero, 3rd March 1977, p.13.
[167] Crispolti E., and Moncada G., *La nuova arte sovietica…*, cit., p. 17.
[168] Soomre M. K., 'Art, Politics and Exhibitions:…', cit., p.118.
[169] Micacchi D., 'Novità e limiti dell'arte 'non ufficiale'', in *L'Unità*, 16th November 1977, p.3.

the Western leftist criticisms towards the 'dissenting' positions with the apolitical nature of the art presented, reminding the Western audience of the specific conditions this art had been created in. Both in his writings (i.e. the catalogue, the exhibition booklet and in some writings connected with the public discussions he had participated in) and in the exhibition structure, Crispolti and his collaborators underlined the singularity and complexity of the exhibited material.

Several émigré artists attended the opening events of the Biennale in person, among them Lev Nussberg, the founder of the Dvizhenie group, a movement that, as mentioned, was one of the central focuses at the Venice exhibition. Other emigrated artists or exile art experts, however, were not satisfied by the group's inclusion within the 'unofficial' narrative – mainly due to the fact that Dvizhenie members had also received official commissions in the USSR, thus being not unfamiliar to the collaboration with the authorities. From this point of view, the organizers had been accused of trying to arbitrarily design the 'true' nature of 'new' Soviet art along with 'interested parties', thus accomplishing a process of branding and history-writing[170]. As for the national perception of the visual art exhibition, harsh criticisms came, of course, from Sovietophile and communist parts of the audience (placed in spotlight by the Soviet press, in case of eminent individuals): the painter Marco Zuppelli, for example, expressed absolute disdain for the exposed artworks, naming them caricature of real art – by understanding as 'real art' the Socialist Realism's paradigm, with its easy accessibility for the humblest viewers and iconography that celebrated the working class– and accusing them of pursuing fashionable art tendencies such as body and pop art[171]. Regardless of the quality level or originality attributed to the exhibited pieces of part, Crispolti and Moncada's objective was certainly to give space to a pluralist cultural reality, in face of the official monolithic one, while Crispolti replied to the allegation of being excessively apolitical by giving a more appropriate perspective than the various charges against him:

> "Besides, politics is the only basis on which the dissident dimension can be considered […]: not as an exclusive condition of Eastern Europe (where it can take place, but in specific rather than all-encompassing forms) but as a permanent reality, extremely close to us and present wherever the oppression of cultural and political power is felt".[172]

[170] Soomre M. K., 'Art, Politics and Exhibitions…', cit., p.119.
[171] Clementi M., *Storia del dissenso sovietico (1952-1991)*, cit., p. 242.
[172] Frimmel S. and Bertelé M., *Criticism and Dissent. 1977 Re-enacted: La nuova arte sovietica*, in *Salon Suisse – Criticism and Dissent. 1977 Re-enacted: La nuova arte sovietica*, Venice, 23rd November 2013, p.13.

Another exposition great attention was drawn to had been the one dedicated to the publishing means used by the dissenting intellectuals for their cultural survival: *Libri, riviste, manifesti, fotografie, videotapes, samizdat* (Books, magazines, posters, photographs, videotapes and *samizdat*), curated by Gianfranco Dogliani and placed in the Napoleonic Wing of the Museo Correr. Needless to say, it focused on the *samizdat* phenomenon in all its forms and its historical development through the preceding decades. It was showed how either in the form of tissue paper or by virtue of *magnitofon*, censored or prohibited culture managed to circulate in the various countries, thanks to a network based on trust and fellowship[173]. In a collection of articles that did not make it to the Biennale, given the numerous controversies and delays the manifestation had been affected by, Michael Scammel illustrated his view of the differences characterizing *samizdat* across Eastern Europe:

> "In the USSR, dissident literature is now a prominent phenomenon, representing basically the norm, while official literature is of secondary importance. In East Germany dissent, although strong, is still a new movement, whereas in Romania and Bulgaria is even more recent. In Hungary dissent is barely visible, as it is – to say – 'unnecessary' because of the current liberal cultural environment in the country. In Poland the situation was roughly the same until last year, but now dissent has suddenly produced a rich form of *samizdat*. Finally in Czechoslovakia, perhaps the country closest to the USSR for the variety and vigour of its dissent, the whole culture is practically in opposition against the official values[174]".

In the first of these articles collected in one of the seven *quaderni di documentazione*, Yuri Mal'cev illustrated the role of the Soviet artist and/or author, equalized to a State functionary who can be considered by the society as a writer only if enrolled in the Union of the Soviet Authors, whose statute envisioned that its members must inspire their work on the Marxist-Leninist theory and serve the purpose of building a socialist country, thus following the imperatives of the *socrealizm* paradigm. As we know, those who did not follow these requirements were not recognized as actual professional authors and may be prosecuted for parasitism (as in the case of Brodsky, Amal'rik and Voznesenskaya). Mal'cev went on by denouncing the ideological and ontological mistake that confusing a *Soviet* author with a *Russian* one may represent: to define Achmatova, Pasternak and Bulgakov Soviet artists

[173] *Libri, riviste, manifesti, fotografie, videotapes, samizdat*, Archivio storico delle arti contemporanee, *Biennale di Venezia, Annuario 1978*, p. 578, in Martini M. V., *La Biennale di Venezia…*, cit., p.202.
[174] Scammel M. et al., *Letteratura contemporanea…*, cit., pp.7-8.

would be inappropriate just as it would be to call Thomas Mann and Eugenio Montale respectively a Nazi and a fascist author. The Soviet author, in fact, would carefully respect the criteria for a piece of work to be regarded as part of the Socialist Realism's school, while the Russian author, substantially adhering to the Dissent (as one category basically excluded the other) refused any control from the above as well as all the guiding lines originating from the State's ideologues[175]. The work of these non-Soviet authors was thoroughly impeded by that censorship which not only forbid to touch certain topics and leave the freedom of choice on the rest, but rather condemned and outlawed anything that did not contribute to the edification of Communism – to the point that even harmless works, lacking any polemical content against the government, where impossible to publish[176]. Mal'cev added one more observation regarding the status of literature in his home country: it had actually deceased long before the moment he was writing and quite early in Soviet history, that is, at the end of Stalin's period, since whatever was published on the Soviet press since then could barely be called literature: "the ideologic fail had determined also the collapse of the culture it was supported by"[177]. During Khruschev's Thaw the Russian literature managed to seep through the cracks allowed by the loosened censorship (for example Solzhenicyn's *A Day of Ivan Denisovich*), but that liberalism was momentaneous, and shortly after that culture had to hide again and recur to *samizdat*. Last but not least, Mal'cev felt the ethical need of pointing to the contradictory inequality inherent to the treatment reserved to the dissidents: the permission to emigrate was a privilege (enjoyed by Solzhenicyn, Sinyavsky, Amal'rik, Gorbanevskaya and so on) reserved to the most notorious exponents of this movement, while those who did not enjoy wide notoriety were forced to the permanence in the gulags and *psikhushkas*.

In conclusion, it can be sensitively said that allegations such as those advanced from Vittorio Strada, who accused the whole organization of giving voice to potentially undemocratic forces or, as it was stated elsewhere, that the event's aim was merely the propagation of anti-Soviet propaganda, seem to be unfounded. As for the political placement of the Dissent and the forces that invigorated it, Peter Spielmann, director of the Museum Bochum and curator of the 1974 exhibition Progressive tendencies in Moscow (Progressive Strömungen in Moskau), maintained that they should have been reckoned as belonging to the left part of the political spectrum – even though this judgement may seem impetuous too,

[175] Mal'cev Y., *La letteratura russa oggi e il problema del dissenso*, in Scammel M. et al., *Letteratura contemporanea…,* cit., pp. 11-12.
[176] Ibid., pp. 15-16.
[177] Ibid., p.16.

given the variety and plurality characterizing the phenomenon. He thanked Carlo Ripa di Meana with the following words:

> "I want to express you my greatest respect that you have consequently showed and honoured the art of the persecuted. As a second even more important result of the Biennale, I consider the fact that you placed the movement of the dissidents in a progressive *left* status, where it rightly belongs, whereas the permanent placement of the politically persecuted of Eastern Europe in a right locality of our political landscape seems to me very dangerous."[178]

All considered, and regardless of the ideological prejudices fostered by the various observers, the primary purpose of the 1977 Biennale of Dissent seem to effectively have been the allocation of space and dignity to those cultural, artistic, scientific, social and religious stances which could not properly express themselves in their domestic environments, although in different degrees according to the specific political conditions surrounding them. Its objective merit was, by specifically addressing and analysing the different national contexts of Dissent, to show that there was not just *one* Dissent or *one* movement, but a multiplicity of voices and points of view questioning and contesting the Soviet bloc powers' legitimacy and, in so doing, the Biennale made the Western public aware of a reality that they had until then considered amorphous and lacking a consistent popular appeal.

[178] *Criticism and Dissent. 1977 re-enacted: La nuova arte sovietica*, p.15

3. The Exhibition's Aftermath and Consequences

3.1 Praises and critics to the Biennale

As we have mentioned by recapitulating the Venice Biennale's history since the early Seventies, its Quadrennial Plan 1974-1977 can well be defined as a series of explorative initiatives devoted to experimentation and characterized by political commitment. By applying the 1973 reform, that introduced the new 'antifascist and democratic' Statute, the institute had abandoned its former elitarian identity and its purely festivalish orientation, with the aim of actively engaging the public, especially the youth and the working class – protagonists of the 1968 protests that so deeply influenced the new Venetian project. The organization was no longer dominated by market imperatives and directed at the touristic result: both the new Statute and the Quadrennial Plan were impregnated with the stances, utopias and ideologies of the 1968 contestations. Such an arrangement could not but feature demagogic tendencies which, as a matter of fact, were coherent with the ambition of involving the popular participation in the lagoon's cultural initiative – nevertheless the transformation has been deemed, by some observers, as a contradictory nonsense, just as if discarding the touristic inclination of Venice, driving vector of the city's economy, could not possibly be an option[179]. Experimentation, political engagement and arousal of the public debate: the 1977 edition of the Biennale was as good as that new cultural recipe, but it also seriously strained the diplomatic relations between Italy and the USSR, to the point of leading the Soviet to refrain from any official participation in the following edition, and

[179] Martini M. V., *La Biennale di Venezia…*, cit., pp.217-218.

influenced the internal political equilibria within the Italian left. For a merely diplomatic, and relatively minor political issue, the relationships of cultural collaboration extensively built during the preceding years with the countries owner of the exhibiting pavilions had been severely compromised: not only the Soviet Union, but also Argentina, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary and Uruguay denied their presence at the 1978 edition. It took long and elaborated negotiations to bring the USSR (as well as the other afore-mentioned empathizing with it countries) back to the 1980 edition[180].

To start by looking at the objections raised against the Biennale 'from the inside', of course some criticisms addressed to the organizers and, in particular, to the President Carlo Ripa di Meana concerned the purported instrumentalization of the Biennale and the alleged political interests lying behind its agenda. Furthermore, the President was complained the fact that he proposed and advanced it in spite of the divergent opinions within the Executive Board (which would eventually result in unsavory fractures among its members). Disregarding the objections coming from part of the Board, which ultimately had resulted in the resignations of Maselli and Purificato, the President had in fact persisted in carrying on his own – almost personal – project, leaving his role as a *primus inter pares*, guarantor of the decisional body's cohesion and democratic conduct, in favour of a more presidential attitude, through which to impose his decisions and preferences[181].

As we have formerly hinted to, a staunch negative critic also arrived from the scholar Vittorio Strada, whose naming the exhibition "a charity event" perfectly fell next to Giulio Carlo Argan accusing Ripa di Meana of being affected by a White Knight syndrome. In response to Alberto Moravia, who blamed the absence of many intellectuals at the cultural manifestation, Strada explained:

> "The absence of the Italian intellectuals have caught more than one eye's attention, it is said, someone even talked of vileness. But it would be more accurate to talk of the European intellectuals' absence. Were all of them 'cowards'? Why not to admit that many have been able to differentiate between an important thing such as 'dissent' (more for what it means, than what it actually is) and a Biennale *on* 'dissent'? Why not to assume that, once the noisy racket around the Biennale was over, it is time to deal with dissent, but with analytical accuracy and aware solidarity?"[182]

[180] Ibid., p.204.
[181] Ibid., pp.199-204.
[182] Strada V., 'Certe assenze alla Biennale', in *La Repubblica*, 8th December 1977, p.13 .

The high-level hustle and bustle went on with the Soviet dissident Joseph Brodsky replying to Strada few days later. Still noticing a lack of plurality of thoughts and positions in the material exhibited, as well as the monotone vibes in the conferences' debates and an underlying anti-Communist function to the whole event, Brodsky blamed more than anything the outstanding absence of intellectuals such as Strada (who had originally confirmed his presence)[183]. In a further reply Strada, rather arbitrarily, suggested that the Soviet despotic influence had left its mark even on the dissidents like Brodsky: "While firmly rejecting the Soviet hegemony, we should also beware that the 'dissidents', supported by local political forces, did not end up mandating their own hegemony and, unsatisfied by their failure, elevated themselves as inquisitors and prophets[184]". Strada went farther than that by writing that "Brodsky's behaviour confirms the assumption according to which the Soviet regime shapes not only the minds of its functionaries but also, unfortunately too often, of its 'dissidents'[185]". Strada's attacks against Brodsky easily appear as excessive and quite aleatory, he was evidently struggling to defend his position and it did not take long before other intellectuals (in support of Ripa di Meana's initiative) insinuated that his change of attitude seemed oddly correlated to the approval for a visa he had received from the USSR authorities, after they firstly denied it, in September 1977[186]: "Just yesterday the letter Strada gave his adhesion to the Biennale of Dissent with has been published. On 3rd October he wrote to Ripa di Meana 'you can count on my presence'. What might have led to this change of mind?[187]". Regardless of the quarrels between authoritative intellectuals and the accuses ranging from intellectual dishonesty to corruption, what is curious is the unconditioned support that Strada showed for the analogue initiative set up by *il manifesto*. A three-days conference organized by the communist newspaper between 11th and 13th November, thus immediately preceding the Biennale, *Power and opposition in post-revolutionary societies* looked at the degeneration endured by the socialist countries and at the dissenting movement consequently arising there, but from a plainly leftist perspective. The Dissent analysed was that of the *inakomyslyaschie* comrades – opposing their governments, but still believing in a communist alternative to it. Some of the invitees were present at the Biennale too (Pliusch and Pelikan, for example), while those dissidents considered to be right-oriented had been

[183] Brodsky J., 'Necessario per tutti questo dissenso', in *Corriere della sera*, 12th December 1977, p.3.
[184] Strada V., 'Dissidenti e inquisitori', in *La Repubblica*, 13th December 1977, p.12.
[185] Strada V., 'Vittorio Strada risponde a Brodskij sul dissenso', in *Corriere della sera*, 13th December 1977, p.2.
[186] S. Guagnelli, *Rane, elefanti e cavalli….*, cit., pp.320-322.
[187] Rizzi P., 'Si chiude tra le polemiche la Biennale del dissenso', in *Il Gazzettino*, 15th December 1977, p.1

excluded (e.g. Amal'rik, Sinyavsky, Bukovsky). Contrary to the Biennale of Dissent, the initiative formulated by the independent communist newspaper was recognized the merit of treating the issue of Dissent in explicitly political terms, while posing it as a confrontation between *some* forces of the Eastern Dissent and the European Left – the Biennale, by contrast, was seen as a more amorphous event, whose reach was so vast and indefinite in order to attract a wider audience[188].

Among the favourable posterior judgements to the 1977 Biennale, by contrast, we find Alberto Moravia, who individuated three virtues in the initiative: the first one is related to the event's capability to explore the formal originality and recognizability of the Dissent's physiognomy, which in literature was both "inspired by the European avantgardes and based on the typically Eastern and Russian ability to create linguistic, satirical, grotesque and symbolic atmospheres". Secondly, it had confirmed the validity of what had been called "the polemic about human rights" – the discussions generated in the context of the Biennale had shown how these issues were still deeply and vigorously felt by the citizens, in face of all those actors external to the Soviet bloc downplaying the conditions suffered by those unaligned with the socialist governments' policies (as Strada himself had pointed out, the event had an extremely broad audience, and this allowed to raise the popular awareness around the debate). Thirdly and lastly, Moravia observed, this time purely from his role of literary authority, that the Biennale "had solemnly corroborated the theory that Eastern and Soviet literature belong to the Western cultural area[189]". Moravia's positive reception of the initiative was re-confirmed in an interview from those very days, where he commented the abstention by some of his colleagues from the event:

> "I think it was due to a certain lack of information on their part, both in general and on the purposes, the modalities and the character of this Biennale. Perhaps it was necessary to make them understand that it was not about literature instrumentalized by a political trend, but just literature questioning itself both on the literary level and with the regard to its content, rather than on the political level: contents, as we know, are *not automatically* political."[190]

[188] Strada V., 'All'est niente di nuovo', in *La Repubblica*, 13th-14th November 1977, p.7
[189] Moravia A., *L'Altra letteratura nell'Europa dell'Est: atti del convegno organizzato dalla Biennale di Venezia*, A. J. Liehm, Venice, 1977, p. 467, in Guagnelli S., *Rane, elefanti, cavalli…*, cit., p.325.
[190] Accolti Gil M., 'Quattro anni di Biennale. Intervista con Alberto Moravia', in *Mondo operaio*, 12, 1977, p. 52.

Applauding was also the reaction from Turin's municipality: as already mentioned in the previous chapter by quickly touching upon the 'round table' Bukovsky took part in, following the proposal by one of the city council's members, with the agreement of both the majority and minority within the council, the Piedmont's administrative centre decided to host, in spring 1978, a 'transposition' of part of the 1977 Biennale's exposition, especially regarding the *samizdat* and visual art sections[191]. Approving reactions, however, were not unanimous also on the international level: more than one among critics and intellectuals, independently from their political positions, found some faults in the Biennale's propositions and modalities. On the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, for instance, it was remarked how:

> "Grey is the exhibition's underlying colour. Most of the artworks are granted a second glance only because we know the heroic idealism and miserable circumstances of spiritual and material restrictions in which they were produced. However, the feeling of human solidarity is unable to obscure the fact the Biennale art exhibition is a poor one, dominated as it is – but for a few exceptions – by mediocrity."[192]

In other words, here was lamented the fact that the quality of art and creative research had been supposedly sacrificed in its entirety to political purposes, albeit noble and for the sake of solidarity to a cultural minority oppressed by a tyrannical state system. It has also been argued that the materials exposed in the fields of art, music, literature, theatre and cinema were oftentimes more connected with the realities of the 'West' than the 'East', thus implying that the overall result highlighted more accurately the point of view of the expositors than those of the Eastern guests, theoretically invited to give their own account of cultural Dissent's experience in the Soviet bloc. In this sense a critical postcolonial comment may be advanced in relation to the typically Western hegemonic tendency to depict and appropriate the forms of 'Otherness', which is susceptible to deformations and easily corrupted by second ends and interests, as well-motivated and ethical as they may be. After all, "exhibitions, the larger and more visible they are, are means through which not only make culture visible, but for rooting it in history, in the fashions and forms preferred by those retaining the power to define them[193]". Visibility and the capability to ensure it is power, and in the case of the Soviet regime the control over power had been extremely strict

[191] B. Alt., 'Intervista a Ripa di Meana. Biennale del dissenso in primavera a Torino', in *La Stampa*, 10th February 1978, p.1.
[192] Diehl U., *Die verlorene Avantgarde. Die Dissidenten und die Biennale in Venedig*, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 19th November 1977.
[193] Soomre M. K., 'Art, Politics and Exhibitions…', cit., pp.120-121.

throughout its history, thus representation had inevitably become an ideological issue[194]. In the Biennale of Dissent's instance, it can be reasonably said that the Italian management might have partly played a role in shaping the cultural manifestation and the whole debate around it according to the Western standards and, in so doing, a European perspective has prevailed over it (as Moravia himself, without meaning to, essentially confirmed). Particularly in regard with the visual art expositions and naturally in contrast with these considerations, Enrico Crispolti exposed his and his collaborators' point of view as directed by "the sole aim to outline an objective, openly 'unofficial' perspective on new Soviet art in its multiple tendencies and emerging personalities". Rejecting the accuses of anti-Soviet initiative and exploitation of other works' for speculative and political purposes, Crispolti added that "if the exhibition is openly critical toward the official line of the current cultural policies of the Soviet regime, it is so within the hypothesis of a dialogue, and not in a stupidly anti-Soviet sense". According to him, one of the most effective ways to disarm anti-Soviet feeling was precisely to always adopt an attitude of free and open criticism towards the Socialist reality, especially by explicitly repudiating those elements of such a society that had nothing to do with genuine Socialism[195].

3.2 Dissent in post-Biennale USSR

As a direct result of the cultural and diplomatic conflict created by the Biennale of Dissent, the Soviet Union, along with some affiliated countries, boycotted the Venice Biennale in the following years: the most prestigious international artistic showcase was thus for a while denied not only to officially unrecognised artists, but also to the artistic 'nomenclature' of these nations, namely those intellectuals and artists whose work had not been subject to censorship. During the event's unfolding, the Soviet press, especially the cultural weekly *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, systematically slandered the Venetian initiative, publishing both domestic articles and letters from Italian correspondents that stated the propagandistic nature of the whole festival and the poor content and form of the exhibitions, trying to demote public interest and deny any cultural impact of the event. The closeness of the Soviet society,

[194] Ibid.
[195] Crispolti E., 'Lettera di Crispolti sulla pittura sovietica alla Biennale di Venezia', in *L'Unità*, 21st November 1977, p.2.

hermetically sealed under many respects and certainly unsurmountable for its average citizens, did not allow for much positive resonance of the 1977 Biennale in the public opinion of the USSR. The event was nevertheless immediately followed by similar artistic manifestations from the 'unofficial culture' and it gave some sort of acceleration to the phenomenon of Dissent's externalization. First of all, on the very first day of the Biennale and as a virtual bridge across the Iron Curtain, on 15th November 1977 two vernissages of artists unrecognized by the regime were held in Leningrad. One of them consisted in an apartment exhibition, curated by Marina Nedobrova, and supported by the photographer Valentin Samarin and the collector Georg Mikhailov at the private apartment of Vadim Nechaev, ambitiously titled "Museum of Contemporary Art", as an immediate response to the Venice Biennale[196]. As for the second vernissage, the two curators Moncada and Crispolti received a letter from the Russian migrant artist Aleksandr Leonov, based in Paris and involved in the organization of the exhibition, where he mentioned another letter sent from Leningrad, whose content he deemed helpful to the struggle for artistic freedom in the USSR and that he would consequently distribute on a wider scale. The letter he was referring to is the following:

> "An exhibition of nonconformist painters will open in Leningrad on November 15th [...]. This cultural movement is currently going through a difficult time. However, in spite of the persecution and of the emigration of talented artists and painters, the creative search is continuing. [...] The Biennale of 1977 will open on November 15th. The Venice Art festival will feature for the first time an exhaustive presentation of non-official art. This is an event to be celebrated by artists worldwide, a celebration of Art. To us, the Festival is of topical importance, and we welcome it with joy. At the same time as this event, another exhibition will open in Leningrad upon the initiative of the [Unofficial] Museum of Contemporary Painting and of the artists [...]. This exhibition is a tribute to the Venice Art Festival – the 1977 Biennale."[197]

Furthermore, still in the time-framework of the Biennale, a sit-in of local committees took place on the Red Square in support of the Armenian film director Sergey Paradzhanov, arrested in 1974 under the accuse of homosexuality[198] and whose works had been present at

[196] Soomre M. K., 'Art, Politics and Exhibitions…', cit., pp.119-120.
[197] A. Putilina and Evgenij Esaulenko to Aleksandr Leonov, Leningrad, 13th November 1977, in *Criticism and Dissent. 1977 re-enacted:…*, cit., p.9-
[198] Isopo F., 'La Biennale del Dissenso…', cit. At the Biennale of Dissent, Paradzhanov had been dedicated a day of the film section and on 25th November two of his movies were projected. The protests in his support had seen the participation, on personal initiative, of the Radical Angelo Pezzana, member

the 1977 Biennale of Dissent. However, except these minor, rather isolated episodes of cultural manifestations and political demonstrations, the project realized by Carlo Ripa di Meana and his collaborators, which costed so much effort for their organizers and raised a remarkable fuss in its domestic environment, did not elicit further consequences and little did it contribute to the de-stigmatization of Dissent in the countries under analysis at the event, i.e. the USSR and its satellites. As a matter of fact, it was not so from the points of view of those who set up the initiative and endeavoured for its successful outcome: in his work *Minulost v Pritomnosti* ('The Past in the Present') the Czech cinema historian Antonin J. Liehm, recalled the event as the place were Eastern Dissent finally acquired its deserved status and relevance. "It was not about two or three authors, some Czech, Polish or Hungarian movie, Neizvestny and Brodsky anymore, but about dozens of names and works. It was proved which role culture plays in the fight against totalitarianism, or rather, that high quality culture and art had not disappeared under Communism and that they were entitled, as it happens in other societies, to the task of political opposition. This is so as they perturbate the monolithic nature of any system, the totalitarian one in particular[199]". Although these considerations by Liehm might have corresponded to the truth at the international level while saying little of how the monolithic Soviet system remained imperturbated, the 1977 Biennale has been effectively recognized as "the most comprehensive, yet neutral, artistically selfless attempt to 'officialise' the discourse of unofficial Soviet art" of that period which "compared to the other similar exhibitions of the same year[200] […] clearly stands out for its comprehensive nature and original art historical ambition[201]".

In a historical period in which the overall international scenario came to be more sensitive to the problematic conditions and grievances of the dissenting Soviet citizens, and

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of the association Fuori! (Fronte Unitatio Omosessuale RIvoluzionario Italiano): after demonstrating in favour of the director's liberation and against the provision in the Soviet Constitution recriminating homosexuality (between male citizens only), he had been expelled from the USSR. Reggiani S., 'Paradjanov, il cinema e il dissenso nell'Est', in *La Stampa*, 26th November 1977, p.13; L. Z., 'Espulso dall'URSS, il radicale Pezzana critica i russi e la loro 'ambiguità', in *La Stampa*, 16th November 1977, p.15.

[199] Liehm Antonin J., *Minulost v pritomnosti*, Host, Brno, 2002, p.190

[200] Referred to *Unofficial Art from the Soviet Union* (ICA, London), *New Art from the Soviet Union: the Known and Unknown* (The Arts Club, Washington) and *Art et matière. Avec la participation des artistes russe contemporains* (Orangerie du Luxembourg, Paris).

[201] Soomre M. K., 'Art, Politics and Exhibition…', cit., p.120. Soomre clearly did not take into account the Nukus Museum of Art in Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan, founded by the Ukrainian artist Igor Savicky. After the censorship on non-conforming art had loosened out following Stalin's death, Savicky seized the chance to look for and take as many forbidden pieces of art as he could to the museum he established in Nukus. (Fatland E., *Sovietstan. A Journey through Turkmenistan*, Copenhagen Literary Agency, Copenhagen, 2014).

the disquieting malfunctioning of the Soviet system was generating increasing problems (ranging from rampant crime and systemic corruption to alcoholism and animosity between social classes), the most consistent part of the work for the defence of human dignity would have been carried out by those organizational movements behind initiatives such as Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty, the *Chronicle of Current Events*, the Moscow Helsinki Group (within which the Alexandr Podrabinek's Working Commission to Investigate the Use of Psychiatry for Political Purposes was set up[202]) and the cross-cutting network of *samizdat* publications. As for the change they wanted to see implemented in the system around them, the various dissidents were in considerable disagreement over the ways in which to ensure civil liberties and guarantees against the recurrence of Stalinism in their society. As already illustrated, any comprehensive attempt to draft a unitary programme of reforms for regenerating Soviet political and social life was hardly realizable, given the extreme ideological fragmentation of the groups and individuals involved in Eastern Dissent. Through the *samizdat*, which enabled them to indulge in the unfamiliar luxury of free expression, the dissidents at last had the opportunity to say precisely what was in their minds, and this was certainly a healthy practice in the intellectually oppressive environment of the Soviet civil society, but it might have also contributed to the splintering of the already thin ranks of Dissent. The "democratic" character of *samizdat*, which functioned without censorship or any kind of central direction, and the toleration of diverse opinions practiced by such enterprises, were highly educational: they were working models of the kinds of liberties the dissidents were advocating, a concrete embodiment of their fundamental principles. Nevertheless, a link may be drawn *a posteriori* between the weak commonality of interests and ideas across the movement of opposition to the Soviet power and the evenly weak civil society and structures for the protection of civil rights in Russia after the Soviet collapse. At least during the timespan we are looking at, most dissidents did not have the opportunity, or inclination, to draw up reform programs and the great majority of their writings were confined to individual cases or specific complaints. In his analysis of Soviet Dissent through a historical perspective, Shatz (1980) saw the main ideological currents of dissenting thought as falling into three broad categories: "those who advocate a return to 'pure' Marxism-Leninism, cleansed of its Stalinist accretions; those who propound some form of religious humanism and urge the restoration of Christian, often specifically Russian Orthodox, moral principles (the commitment to Russian Orthodoxy sometimes entails an

[202] Reddaway P., *The Dissidents…*, cit., p.208.

element of Russian nationalism)[203]; and those who wish the introduction of Western-style liberal and pluralistic practices, usually combined with significant elements of socialism[204]", although these three viewpoints were not embodied in any party or coherent school of thought whatsoever. The revelations concerning the Stalin era and the dictator's crimes had the attention of Soviet dissidents focused on the importance of assuring the security and autonomy of the individual, and this remained their general first priority. The disagreements were rather arising over how the social and political arrangements individual freedom requires are to be attained. The three main positions identified by Shatz – simply labelled as Marxism, Christianity, Western liberalism – represented, according to him, the most significant cultural influences that were shaping the modern Russian thought in that period and that could be seen as respectively epitomized by three prominent figures of Dissent: Roy Medvedev, Aleksandr Solzhenicyn and Andrei Sakharov.

Roy Medvedev was an utmost active spokesmen for those who regarded the Soviet Union's primary task as one of restoring the ideals and values of Marxism-Leninism that had been distorted by Stalin – Pyotr Grigorenko, a much-decorated general and convinced Communist among the earliest famous protagonists of Dissent, also declared his objective to be the revival of Leninism[205]. An educator, historian, and member of the Party until he was expelled in 1969 for his critical views, Medvedev saw the source of the Soviet system's problems in the Communist Party's deviation from the standards set by Lenin. Solzhenicyn's political project and societal ideal, on the other hand, was deeply influenced by his spirituality. The stark distinction between external, material life and inner spiritual existence underlay Solzhenicyn's controversial *Letter to Soviet Leaders*, the closest he has come to outlining a programme for the reform of Soviet life, where he urged the rulers of the Soviet Union to renounce their outworn Marxism, with its burdening international commitments, and to adopt a policy that genuinely matched the country's national interests. Solzhenicyn even declared his disposition to accept the continued monopoly over political power of the CPSU, in return for that shift to national priorities that he hoped for: away from the polluted, overindustrialized, depersonalized cities and toward balanced development, on a more human scale, with a focus on the country's north-eastern wild region. The ultimate goal of

[203] According to Shatz, 'The effort to recapture a cultural past that has been withheld is one of the elements distinguishing Soviet dissent from radical Western currents of protest, which often are rebellions against cultural tradition', p.159.
[204] Shatz M. S., *Soviet Dissent in Historical Perspective*, cit., p.158.
[205] Founder, in 1963, of the secret Action Group for the Revival of Leninism, Grigorenko was interned from 1964 to 1969 in Moscow's Serbsky Institute of Forensic Psychiatry for his political views and he is remembered as one of the most influential and earliest exponents of Dissent.

his programme was the national spiritual regeneration, to be accomplished through abstinence, simplicity, material renunciation, and a life close to nature. To attain this overriding objective, actual political democratization was deemed irrelevant: at least in this formulation, Solzhenicyn regarded political activity as a trivial, even degenerated aspect of human existence and continued political control by a self-elected state leadership was accepted as long as the society could get on with the crucial task of inner development[206]. Considered this apolitical and non-participatory inertia, the religious and moral approach proposed by Solzhenicyn seemed to display serious weaknesses to prevent a repetition of Stalinism. In profound disagreement with him and in reply to his *Letter to Soviet leaders*, Andrei Sakharov advocated "a scientific and rational approach to social and natural phenomena", one that would not oppose technology and material progress, and he also insisted that Russia needed more democracy, not further authoritarianism[207]. According to the co-founder of the Committee for Human Rights in the USSR, only by establishing efficient mechanisms for obliging the political leaders to public account for their actions, the individual could effectively find security and opportunity to shape their own life, unlike it was under Stalinism. Sakharov acknowledged the need for institutional safeguards of individual freedom and, through his activism, took a pragmatic approach towards their realization. Unlike the religiously-inspired 'reformers' such as Solzhenicyn, he believed that no spiritual renunciation or moral betterment, but specific improvements in the legal, economic, and political environment were the prerequisites for the kind of individual self-expression and self-development all the dissidents were craving for. Moreover, in a 1972 interview he stated: "I would no longer label myself a socialist. I am not a Marxist-Leninist or a Communist. I would call myself a liberal[208]" (although he always took mostly socialdemocratic positions). His pragmatic, gradualist, pluralistic view of social and political affairs, in fact, was very close, in its essence, to traditional Western liberalism, and his unshakable adherence to the rule of law, the central principle of the entire civil liberties campaign, was an outstanding development in a country where legal consciousness and due process had never been rooted. As a matter of fact and quite understandably, to many Western observers Sakharov's position appeared the most attractive and the most promising of the various currents of Soviet Dissent, to the point of becoming a benchmark for some of

[206] Shatz M. S., *Soviet Dissent in Historical Perspective*, cit., p.165.
[207] Sakharov A., *On Alexander Solzhenitsyn's 'A Letter to the Soviet Leaders*', in *Kontinent*, 10, ed. by Vladimir Maksimov, Anchor Books, New York, pp. 6-7.
[208] Quoted in Axelbank J., *A Talk with a Dissident Who Built Russia's Bomb*, in *Newsweek*, 13th November 1972, p. 55.

them. Of course, an approach such as Sakharov's to societal change has very few precedents in Russian history and of which the Soviet society had very little experience, as liberalism in the Western sense has always had frail political appeal for the Russian people. As Russian history has abundantly demonstrated, what seems sensible and plausible to most Westerners is not necessarily what will seem sensible and plausible to most Russians. Sakharov's position, nonetheless, whatever its ultimate prospects might have been, at the very least demonstrated the fertility and creativity of Soviet dissident thought, its ability to break out of the rigid framework of official ideology, just as it did from the traditional patterns of critical thought, and to generate new ideas for discussion and debate.

To the above-mentioned conceptually-vast positions for social change one may add two significant groups that represented possible allies for the dissidents in considerable numbers and that cut across the large socioeconomic divisions of the Soviet society: the national and the religious minorities (especially the latter found room for representation at the Biennale, during the conferences of religious persecution in the USSR[209]). Conscious of the troublesome grievances they were facing and of the unmeasurable imbalance affecting their battle against the Soviet authorities, the dissidents had, from time to time, sought to link their campaign for civil liberties with the demands of the minority nationalities and persecuted religious groups[210]. Despite some sporadic examples of mutual support and the continuing possibility of tactical alliances, however, the relations between the civil rights dissidents on the one hand and the national and religious groups on the other harboured at least as much potential for tension and antagonism as they did for cooperation. In the first place, while equally disgruntled by the conduct of the authorities, the various protesters did not necessarily share the same objectives. The Soviet Union's dissatisfied national minorities, including many of the Jews who refused to emigrate (*otkazniki*), were seeking not simply freedom from discrimination but greater recognition of their national identity, with the linguistic and cultural autonomy and opportunity for self-ruled development that such recognition usually implies. Similarly, the religious groups demanded not only fair treatment under the law but also freedom of worship, religious education, and right to proselytization. Just how far the urbane, cosmopolitan intellectuals of Moscow and Leningrad – especially those who remained committed to the principles of Marxism – might have gone in supporting such demands was, quite plausibly, questionable. As a result, except for some special cases,

[209] Pattaro G., *Il dissenso religioso. La collaborazione tra cristiani, credenti non cristiani e non credenti nella lotta per i diritti dell'uomo e per la libertà di espressione nell'Europa dell'est*, Marsilio Editori, Venice, 1977.
[210] Shatz M. S., *Soviet Dissent in Historical Perspective*, cit., p.174

the Soviet dissidents remained isolated in their specifically differentiated groups, vulnerable to government pressures and repressions. Since the early Seventies the authorities, by means of imprisonments, convictions to psychiatric institutions, exiles, and forced emigrations, had dispersed the members of the civil rights movement and intimidated most of its supporters[211].

As Shatz further argued, Soviet Dissent was "not just the product of a particular moment of Soviet history"[212], on the contrary, its historical origins were deeply rooted in the relationship between a modernizing but paternalistic and authoritarian state, and the educated class on which modernization depended. In other words, he linked the contemporary to him Soviet Dissent to a centuries-long political opposition against an assumed inherent tendency to authoritarianism of the Russian state. In the former Russian Empire such trend had been concretized through autocracy and serfdom but its genesis would be firstly found in the Golden Horde's influence on the territories they conquered: the Mongols had encouraged the primacy over the other Russian lords by the Grand Prince of Moscow, who ultimately defeated them. Secondly, to support this theory great importance is attributed to the so-called 'siege mentality of the Russians'[213], i.e. a constant fear of external threats, which would require a strong monarch capable of controlling massive military forces. A third fact to be held into account is the huge geographical space across which Russia is distributed, which requires a highly centralized force in order to be productive[214]: in the end, even the formation of a prepared and modernizing intelligentsia came to be State-driven, but it is "from these circumstances that comes the state's dilemma. It cannot simply take advantage of its monopoly on political power and crush the educated elite by brute force when it steps out of line without jeopardizing its own goals of

[211] The five men released from prison in April 1979 – but expelled to the United States in exchange for two convicted Soviet spies, formed virtually a living catalogue of the various protest currents annoying the Soviet authorities: Alexander Ginzburg, a long-time dissident and member of the Moscow Helsinki Watch Group; Edward Kuznetsov and Mark Dymshits, convicted in 1970 of conspiring to hijack a plane as part of a plan to reach Israel; Georgy Vins, a leader of the Baptist Initsiativniki; and Valentin Moroz, a leading spokesman of Ukrainian nationalism. (Shatz M. S., *Soviet Dissent…*, cit., p.199, note n.37)

[212] Ibid., p.180

[213] It can be described as a pressuring and constant need to ward off external invasions, given Russia's geopolitical conditions. As Shatz himself explained 'Russia has no Alps, no English Channel, no Atlantic and Pacific oceans to guarantee its security. The Mongols were only one of the many external forces surrounding it to the east, west and south, menacing its independence and autonomous cultural development. Even after the power of the Golden Horde was broken, the several Tatar successor states […] continued to raid its settlements in search of booty and slaves; to the northwest were the Swedes and the Baltic Germans […]; and on the western frontier were the Poles and Lithuanians […]' and this feeling was somehow strengthened after the advent of Communism, when the Soviet found themselves surrounded by an international front of capitalist enemies. (Shatz M. S., *Soviet Dissent…*, cit., p.6).

[214] Wolfworth W. C., 'The Russian-Soviet empire: a test of neorealism', in *Review of International Studies*, 2001, n.27, pp.213-235.

modernization and material progress[215]". The Soviet state, like the imperial state experienced before it, had to give its educated elite some sort of prestige, sense of responsibility and privilege, in order to ensure its yielding creativity and give it incentive to work. But the self-respect and self-esteem that matures in the educated elite, as a result both of its education and of its elitary status, enhance within it a growing demand for intellectual independence and self-expression, not only in matters relating merely to its work but on general public issues as well. To quote Shatz one last time, "individuals whose talents and achievements the state acknowledges to be vital for their society's development cannot help growing increasingly irritated when that same state continues to treat them like children rather than responsible citizens in all but the narrowest areas of their professional activity[216]". To recapitulate, Soviet Dissent, though it had its own specific characteristics and articulated composition, could be considered as the product of a pattern of development Russia has been following since the eighteenth century. The dynamics of Dissent resulted from an evolving relationship between an always paternalistic state forcing modernization on its subjects from above, and the educated elite on which it must rely to carry out the modernization process.

In the end, however, the dissenting movement was too weak to force any major liberalization of the Soviet system. As it had been throughout the Russian past, from Peter the Great to Khrushchev, fundamental reforms eventually came not from below, from relentless popular pressure, but from above, on the initiative of the state determined by other factors. These can be an acute external crisis, an economic emergency, a crucial succession struggle resulting in a renovation situation and, in the meantime, the dissidents are at best capable of mitigating the government's arbitrariness in specific cases, both through their own activities and with the 'intervention' of the West, by uncovering the authorities' faults to the embarrassing glare of international publicity. When Gorbachev was elected general secretary of the Communist Party, the Soviet status quo had become unbearable to many citizens, the economy was stagnant, crime and corruption were steadily rising, as well as alcoholism, adult male mortality and domestic violence. With the introduction of the glasnost policies and reforms starting in 1986, the new leader undertook a process of liberation and rehabilitation of almost all the dissidents, including Sakharov. Gorbachev called him at his place of exile, Gorky, to announce his acquittal and to summon him in Moscow, where the scientist was permitted to resume his work[217].

[215] Shatz M. S., *Soviet Dissent…*, cit., p.11.
[216] Ibid., p.181.
[217] Reddaway P., *The Dissidents…*, cit., p.224

3.3 Italy: Political Consequences for PCI and PSI

In the Seventies, under the lead of Enrico Berlinguer, the PCI clearly displayed a will to pursue a political path autonomous from the dictates of the CPSU and an aspiration to align with the broader Western European left. However, the context in which the Italian party struggled the most to take distance from the USSR, for multiple reasons, was precisely in relation to the phenomenon of Soviet and Eastern Dissent (in particular after Prague): the Italian Communists often showed resistance, as in the case of the 1977 Biennale, to express solidarity mainly towards those dissidents considered as belonging to the 'bourgeois' part of the cultural spectrum (or even reactionary, like Solzhenicyn). Furthermore, they felt, for competitive thrust, a need to hold a separate stance from that of the PSI and therefore refused to agree with the socialist rivals on such matters. The PCI was also committed to support the policy of international détente, from which follows that they avoided compromising the peaceful coexistence between the two sides of the Iron Curtain, and a certain inability to thoroughly break with the Soviets. To these factors is to be added the difficulty in finding a balance between condemning the treatment inflicted on the opposition by the CPSU and still 'saving the face of communism', by proving that developed socialism was, after all, redeemable and a Western version of it feasible – a similar equilibrium was reached criticizing, rather than the powerful Soviet communist party, a weaker partner such as the Czechoslovak one[218]. As for the PSI, the years here under consideration were marked by dramatic change generated by Craxi's rise at the lead of the party: he put the defense and support for the Dissent of the Soviet bloc at the centre of his party's policy. His actions in this regard were quite certainly governed by a certain degree of instrumentality in anti-communist sense, but he also manifested more than once a honest conviction that the issue of Dissent actually posed some theoretical questions useful for the debate around an alternative form of socialism.

Before Craxi's election, however, all the left-oriented parties of Italy did not meet the potential chances to build a dialogue with the Eastern dissidents – a conversation they were often left to carry on alone. When in July 1976, after the worst electoral defeat suffered from the PSI, Bettino Craxi rose to the head of his party, he started to dig up the issue of Dissent within the internal debate of its political circle, with the clear intent of placing it also at the

[218] Lomellini V., *L'appuntamento mancato. La sinistra italiana e il Dissenso nei regimi comunisti (1968-1989)*, Mondadori Education, Milan, 2010, p.X.

centre of the national discussion. In particular, he aimed at threatening the supremacy of the the communist adversaries, by pointing at one of the elements their attitude was most controversial towards. Until then, the PSI public attitude towards Dissent had been moderately disinterested and consecrated to the appeasement with PCI, which was justified by Francesco de Martino as a will to not perturbate the harmonius rapprochment between the two blocs and not compromise the détente process[219]. Things soon changed and, especially through their media (and the magazine *Mondoperaio* in particular), the Socialists provided several tribunes for the dissidents to express their views on the problems of their society and to urge some international intervention or solidarity. In this manner, an originally international contention was transposed on the Italian domestic level and that part of our left (the PSI), championing for increased civil liberties in the socialist countries, became the strongest advocate of these issues, probably even at the global level[220]. It is in this context that the 1977 Biennale of Dissent of Ripa di Meana took place and, while the Communists missed the opportunity to assert their ideological autonomy, the PSI performed the right moves and managed to further define its image as 'the party of the dissidents', a stronghold of freedom and democracy. The model proposed by Craxi was, in fact, a streamlined Socialism, relieved of its original working-class values, extremely disenchanted and pragmatic[221] – so as to appeal that part of the electorate who would have felt alienated by the ambiguous attitude of the PCI.

As the Czech activist Jiri Pelikan remembered after the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact: "The natural tendency (of Western diplomacy and parties) led to the simple acceptance of the faits accomplits and to the restoration of the normal relations with the Soviet bloc. We dissidents almost appeared as an obstacle to the détente everyone was wishing for[222]". Craxi, on the contrary, took distance from the acquiescent attitude of his socialist peers around Europe, Brandt and Mitterrand in the first place, who were committed to mutual understanding with the Eastern socialists even to the point of overlooking their crimes and never attaching any clause regarding the policies of internal repression in the international initiatives arranged with them. The Italian socialist leader's strategy, by contrast, consisted in careful and supporting interest towards the opposition of the Warsaw Pact's member countries, whose quest for autonomy from the

[219] Coen F. and Borioni P., *Le Cassandre di Mondoperaio, una stagione creative della cultura socialista*, Marsilio Editori, Venezia 1999, p.48.
[220] Lomellini V., *L'appuntamento mancato…*, cit., p.130-157.
[221] Isopo F., *La Biennale del Dissenso…*, cit.
[222] Pelikan J., interview by Antonio Carioti, 'Io, esule indigesto', p. 49, in *Reset*, Milan 1998.

suffocating Soviet guardianship he sustained. The Italian ambassador Antonio Baldini remembered Craxi's policy of dialogue with the socialist counterparts, and his commitment for a higher respect of human rights, especially in relation to Poland and Hungary: "Since his first mandate, Craxi looked at Poland as a 'lab-country' for the processes of change […]. He nourished the ambitious project of supporting Solidarnosc and Kor[223] through dialogue and collaboration with the government of general Jaruzelski". He had started with Kadar's Hungary, the country enjoying the highest autonomy in the Warsaw Pact, persuading the Hungarian governor to reconciliation with the memory and actions of the martyr Imre Nagy, thus rehabilitating the latter's image[224]. As for Poland, in 1985 Craxi delivered to Jaruzelski a letter where he expressed his concern regarding the fate of the activists Adam Michnick, Bogdan Lis and Wladyslaw Frasynink, whose trials had been adjourned, underlining how a positive epilogue of the legal issue for the three dissident may have resonated favourably in Italy, thus benefitting the partnership between the two countries. Similarly, the Italian politician actively urged Gorbachev to reconsider the cases of Andrei Sakharov (asking in 1985 to set him free from the internal exile in Gorki) and Natan Sharansky for acquittal[225].

The Socialists' campaign in support of Dissent allowed for the Italian cultural re-appropriation of the ideological and political problems linked to the 'popular democracies' of Eastern Europe, then divested from the simplistic rationale opposing the West/East entities, and thus allowing for the recognition of the more particular and articulated issues affecting the single countries, and not the general 'socialist area'. The prolonged debate over Dissent also stretched the discrepancy between PCI and PSI apart, with the Communists anchored to their reticence about Soviet crimes and unable to take the necessary step for the ultimate fracture with the USSR – a conduct that would later result in the failure of Eurocommunism, whose fate was also affected by the missed advocacy in support of civil rights and Dissent.

It is apparent that the PSI had been, since Craxi's nomination as secretary, the main interlocutor for Eastern Dissent not only in Italy, but perhaps in the whole West – however, while this mission and the interest towards the democratic issues of the Soviet system may have been somehow inherited from the former socialist leader Nenni, the latter had genuinely

[223] *Komitet Obrony Robotnikov*, i.e. the Workers Defense Committee, was the Polish civil society precursor of Solidarnosc. (Lomellini V., *L'appuntamento mancato…*, cit., p.131).
[224] In 1989, on Budapest's Heroes' Square, the former premier and the Hungarian insurrection were celebrated with a ceremony of solemn rehabilitation – and Craxi was among the foreign guests on that occasion.
[225] Badini A., *La politica internazionale di Bettino Craxi*, Convegno della fondazione Craxi, Milan, 30th January 2005, in Ripa di Meana C. and Mecucci G., *L'Ordine di Mosca…*, cit., pp.178-180.

wished to help the PCI break its bonds to the CPSU and get rid of the uncomfortable submission to the Soviet undemocratic methods. Craxi, on the contrary, would have not welcomed a fracture within the international communist movement and the continuation of the links between Botteghe Oscure and Staraya Ploshchad was actually congenial to his objectives. This allowed for the PSI permanence at the seat of democracy's champion within the Italian left: capitalizing on the incongruencies of the PCI and pointing to their contradictions, Craxi aimed at redefining the power relationships in Italian politics. By weakening the PCI, his goal was certainly to jeopardize the 'Historic compromise' and restore the Socialists' traditional role as mediator joint between the Communists and the Christian Democrats. The historiographic interpretations of Craxi's action around Dissent are divided in focusing either on the honest and disinterested nature of his efforts or, quite the contrary, on the instrumental use he made of this issue in domestic policy, of course with an anti-communist function. These two aspects should not necessarily be interpreted as antithetic: on the one side, the socialist leader's political identity and sensibility had actually been shaped by his experience in Eastern Europe and he considered the support for Dissent as a binding moral duty. At the same time, his strategic intuition of exploiting the communist contradictions to gain consensus and renovate the PSI's role as protagonist of Italian politics, after De Martino's hesitance and indolence towards Dissent, should not be underrated either. Compared to Nenni, Craxi matured a further innovation, i.e. the extensive use of Dissent at the cultural level in the context of political debates and in defining the party's line of action, thus advancing that image of the PSI characterized by laicity, modernity and progressivism. The main channel employed for this operation was the press, especially the magazine *Mondoperaio*, and the cultural initiatives, such as the Biennale of Dissent. Into the socialist intellectual hotbed also dissident elements from the Soviet bloc flowed, where they could find a moral shore and tribune, as well as a financial support[226]. The attention of the socialist press, in this regard, focused on two points: firstly, the contestation of the Soviet totalitarian model (labelled as neo-Stalinist); secondly, the denunciation of those limits represented by the PCI and Eurocommunism's inconsistencies (and, consequently, the implications for Dissent).

Ironically, these stances against the Italian Communists were being reinforced precisely when, thanks to Berlinguer's leadership, the attitude of the comrades against Moscow was becoming more openly critical too, especially after the 1968 intervention in Czechoslovakia,

[226] Lomellini V., *L'appuntamento mancato…*, cit., pp.132-133.

and included even some actual dialogue with the members of Dissent. An equal paradox, stauncher and substantial critics against the Soviet power and its concrete form of developed Socialism came from the European Communists (French and Italian in particular), exactly when that power's oppression was becoming less bloody and less indiscriminate, whereas no protest had been raised by those same actors during the most violent Stalinian period. Nevertheless the hesitancies showed by the PCI in the early Seventies had left an indelible mark in the Socialists' impression, which caused a long-lasting diffidence on their part. Craxi's line of action in these respects was soon endorsed also by the new President of the Republic Sandro Pertini, elected in 1978 after Leone's resignation from the position, who stressed the importance of the civil and human rights sanctioned by the Helsinki Accords and that he wished to see respected by the Soviet bloc countries in the future[227]. Thus the Italian Communists' behaviour was repeatedly diagnosed as 'schizophrenic' in its lack of clarity and determination, with the PSI strategy attempting to compromise the rival party's position both internally and externally, to the eyes of the Italian voters and in its relationship with the other communist parties. As a result, between PSI and PCI came to be established a dynamics based on the former polemicizing around Dissent in order to downsize the power and influence of the latter, whereas the latter undertook a narrative aimed at the demonization of Bettino Craxi's figure and highlighting his responsibility as wrecker of the Italian left[228]. This was the national political background of the Biennale of Dissent and, roughly in the same months in which its organization was taking the first steps, the two parties participated to a round table organized by *Mondoperaio* in order to discuss the issue of their relationship to the Dissent of Eastern Europe[229]. The whole debate essentially gravitated around the two parties' opposing points of view: the Socialists contested the PCI contradictory strategy towards the CPSU and their pretention to propose a form of socialism different from the 'real' one; while the Communists rejected any allegation of ambiguity and pointed to the official stance they took in 1968 in relation to Prague. When Ripa di Meana's project acquired concreteness and the first Soviet interferences had been overcome, the event's value as an unprecedented moment in the confrontation between the Italian Socialists and Communists emerged. At the same time, the initiative offered the most vivid, straightforward transposition of an international and ideological conflict at the domestic level.

[227] Pertini S., 'Pertini a Brezhnev: rispettate i diritti umani', in *L'Avanti*, 12nd July 1978, p.1.
[228] Colarizi S. and Gervasoni M., *La cruna dell'ago. Craxi, il partito socialista e la crisi della repubblica*, pp.76-82.
[229] 'La sinistra italiana e il 'dissenso' nei Paesi dell'Est', in *Mondoperaio*, 2, February 1977, pp.76-89, in Lomellini V., *L'appuntamento mancato…*, cit., p.164, note n.112.

The PCI directorate had met to discuss the eventuality of a Biennale on Dissent in the socialist countries already in early 1977, partly as a result of the Soviet political pression exerted since the very beginning of this whole affair. Although no overarching strategy to adopt was decided, and certainly some participants denounced the anti-Soviet and anti-communist character of the initiative, others – such as Umberto Terracini and Antonio Rubbio – felt the need to emphasize how it was unacceptable that, after sixty years from the October Revolution, civil and human rights were still disregarded in the USSR. It was nonetheless necessary to safeguard the relation with the CPSU, at least to a certain extent, and some boundaries could not be overstepped, Berlinguer and Pajetta argued[230]. After Rizhov's complaints and the following resignation of Ripa di Meana, the party's directorate convened again: the attitude of the Communist had unequivocally stiffened and the Venetian initiative was more bitterly looked upon. Tortorella sustained that the PSI was forcing a political intent into a cultural framework with the clearly malign intent of challenging them, and such a plan originated from the very heart of the socialist party, Claudio Martelli, who would have had a central role in launching the idea and whose positions had traditionally been anti-communist[231]. To understand the re-modulated approach of PCI to the issue of Dissent it is therefore fundamental to understand the multiple factors at play: the distance they had gradually taken from the Soviet hegemony; the inalienable pressure the latter still applied on them and the consequent need for the PCI not to excessively threat the unstable equilibrium they had established with the Kremlin; the political line conducted by the new leader Berlinguer in defense of the universal principles of democracy and the challenges advanced by the provocations of the PSI. However, although officially absent at the cultural manifestations, the PCI was still somehow protagonist at the 1977 Biennale: at the conference *Freedom and Socialism*, an ideological commonality between Dissent and Eurocommunism had been acknowledged and it was argued that the Western Eurocommunists were considered by the Eastern 'bureaucracies' as potential adversaries, as well as influential actors whose opinions, and criticisms, may have had the most authoritative effect on the socialist authorities[232]. In other words, the absence of a more robust and frequent dialogue between the dissenting movement and the European Communists, the

[230] Lomellini V., *L'appuntamento mancato…*, cit., p.137.
[231] Tortorella A., APCI, Direcorate, 16th February 1977, MF 288, fold. 9, pp.125-138, in Lomellini V., *L'appuntamento mancato…*, cit., p.156, note n.136.
[232] Claudin F., 'Struttura del sistema sovietico', in *Libertà e socialismo. Momenti storici del dissenso*, SugarCo, Milan, 1984, pp.288-290.

French and the Italian first of all, was regretted, and it was expected that they spoke out their disapproval and constructive criticisms towards the Soviet bloc whenever needed.

On account of all this, what had been the Biennale's influence on the endogenous political balance and relations within the Italian Left? It certainly contributed to a cooling of the relationship between PCI and PSI, and to the redefinition of the latter's image as a bulwark of democracy and stronghold for the defense of freedom, given its privileged kinship with Dissent. But Berlinguer did not intend to accept this threat to the PCI hegemony in the Italian left coming from the socialist rival, thus his party undertook a process of cultural renovation and re-analysis of both the reasons behind Eastern Dissent and the problematic aspects inherent to the socialist societies of the Soviet bloc[233], in order to further assert the independence of Botteghe Oscure from the directives of Staraya Ploshchad. Yet even after such a process of revisioning the Soviet history, the responsibilities of the Soviet authorities regarding the problems of their society, and the possibilities of an alternative, democratic way to Socialism, the official view of the PCI, expressed more or less indirectly through the party's press, persevered to see in the 'real' forces (that is, the official ones) the only potential sources of innovation and social development for the USSR, regardless of the Dissent, whose relevance they stubbornly lessened. Their expectations for reforms and changes lay within the CPSU or in the *intelligencija* loyal to the party, not in any force farther than that from the official power[234], and this doubtlessly compromised any chance for dialogue and mutual understanding with the political opposers of the socialist countries. Enrico Berlinguer himself, during the XV Congress of the Directorate in March 1979, blamed the USA for jeopardizing the détente process and accused, in particular, the administration of Jimmy Carter for the instrumental use of the human rights issue they had ostensibly made. Consequently, the equation *support for Dissent equals deterioration of Détente* came to be proposed once again[235]. Such an attitude of the PCI had been exemplified by the vicissitude of the conference 'Dissent and democracy in the East of Europe' organized by Florence's communist mayor Gabbuggiani in 1979 and hosting Amal'rik and Pliusch. It prompted negative reactions from *L'Unità* and was promptly attacked, of course, by the Soviet press too, in particular by *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. In the framework of this initiative, a document was drafted to denounce the situation in Czechoslovakia and in solidarity with country's political opposers[236]. In the end the Communists condemned the idea, accusing it

[233] Lomellini V., *L'appuntamento mancato…*, cit., pp.140-141
[234] Guerra A., *Comunismi e comunisti*, cit., pp.282-283
[235] Lomellini V., *L'appuntamento mancato…*, cit., p.151
[236] In reference to the trials held against the activist of the movement Charta 77.

of propelling the instrumentalization of Dissent to anti-Soviet ends, and the PCI members refused to subscribe the document along with PSI, DC, PSDI, PRI and PLI. The socialist newspaper *L'Avanti* seized the chance to decry once again Berlinguer's contradictory conduct and its party tendency to offer, at the same time, 'support to the victims' and 'fraternity to the jailers'[237]. Objectively, the PCI found itself isolated domestically as well as internationally, which was to be imputed to its leaders' lack of a coherent and adequate strategy: at the global level, they were frequent to express criticisms against the USSR and seemed ready to receive the Soviet remonstrances, while at home they appeared to be lacking the sufficient autonomy from Moscow to join the solidarity campaign in favour of Dissent and, having lost an important interlocutor in the DC after Aldo Moro's death, they found themselves in an uncontestably isolated position.

The PCI contradictory approach to the Dissent in the Soviet bloc is more than ever blatant in light of their reaction to the repressive campaign against Charta 77: despite the disapproval for the 1977 Biennale and the frequent reluctance to publicly support Dissent, when Petr Uhl, Jaroslav Shabata, Vaclav Benda, Dama Nemcova, Jiri Dienstbier, Otta Bednarova and the famous playwriter Vaclav Havel received harsh sentences from the Czechoslovak judges, the communist newspaper *L'Unità* deeply regretted the trial's outcome. It was maintained that no objective or historical reason justified such measures against the political opposers and those disciplinary actions proved more than ever how the Eurocommunist alternative was necessary[238] – it was the first time a link was drawn so explicitly between the European communist project and the lack of democracy in the East. Even Gian Carlo Pajetta deemed the whole issue related to the treatment of Charta 77 as damaging for the political appeal of the socialist movement.

As for a factual comparison between the PCI and the PSI based on the electoral results, the modest socialist achievement in 1979 still represented a stable endurance, whereas the PCI suffered a terse decrease of consensus, reduced by 4% compared to the 1976 ballot. Although his remained the third party of the Italian political scenario, Craxi had succeeded in outlining more distinctly the identity of PSI to the voters' eyes: the nomination of Jiri Pelikan for the first direct election of the European parliament that same year contributed to shape the Socialists' profile as main interlocutor and supporter of Eastern Dissent. Shortly after, retorting the communist assumption of a negative link between the advocation in favour of Dissent and the inter-blocs détente, President Pertini argued that the application of

[237] Zanchi C., 'Il PCI non è riuscito a superare le contraddizioni', in *L'Avanti*, 23rd January 1979, p.3
[238] 'Il processo a Praga', in *L'Unità*, 21st October 1979, p.1

the Helsinki Accords' dispositions was actually binding for the growing understanding and peaceful coexistence among peoples[239]. With this last move at the European level, Craxi managed to make use of the 'Dissent strategy' to affirm the role and identity of his party not only on the Italian playground, but on the international one too.

[239] *Intervento di Pertini su Praga per 'Charta 77'*, in *L'Avanti*, 23rd October 1979, p.7

Conclusions

Examining the so-called 'Biennale of Dissent', and integrating to it factors and information on the history of Soviet dissent, international relations and Italian politics during the Cold War, several parallel thematic threads have emerged. First of all, the notion of 'dissent' appears as designating a non-univocal phenomenon, a variegated movement composed by groups and individuals with different ideological orientations, whom was offered space for representation and self-expression at the Biennale, but which was impossible to find a unitary response or solutions for. The same dissidents had never been able to draft a common and coherent set of reforms they supposedly wished to implement in their society, as their only shared concern was to improve the individual's civil liberties and rights to impair the Soviet authorities' excessive control and oppression on their citizens. However, precisely the legitimacy of *these* freedoms could be defended by relying on the general international commitment in favour of human rights developing in those years, in particular the 1975 Helsinki Accords which, according to the same Ripa di Meana, represented the legal foundation of his Biennale, in so far as the document advocated for increased openness and circulation of information among the participatory countries (and, inevitably, between the two blocs). Several similar initiatives mediating art and culture behind the Iron Curtain, in fact, had blossomed all across Europe following Helsinki, but they were only partly politically engaged by some contextual accounts of their reception, as the fragile inter-bloc harmony could be easily harmed if critics were addressed at the Eastern governments. The case of Venice, on the contrary, was the first in which the political considerations and implications had been so emphasised and discussed, consequently triggering the Soviet reaction and challenging the peaceful relations between Italy and the USSR.

This project and its actual realization attracted much indignation and most objections addressed to the Biennale's organizers, President Ripa di Meana in particular, concerned the purported instrumentalization of the Biennale and the alleged political interests lying behind its agenda, as Ripa di Meana was member of the PSI and close friend of Bettino Craxi, who promoted the initiative since the very beginning. The allegations of having orchestrated the event for purely anti-communist and anti-Soviet purposes had also been accompanied by critics related to the question of representation in a post-colonial sense. In other words, the organizers would have performed a cultural appropriation insofar as they made an operation of 'labelling' this and that phenomenon as 'Dissent' and describing many of them through typically Western

categories. The question of representation is of course strongly related to the idea of the exhibition, but it is also an issue of power and politics, since representation allows not only to make culture visible, but also to root it in history in the terms and narrative preferred by those who manage it. This is especially true if we think about the Soviet period and the context of oppression where the Soviet culture arose, but also Western actors, given their hegemonic tendency to depict and appropriate the forms of 'Otherness' (susceptible to deformations and easily corrupted by second ends and interests) may abuse of this power. As the case of the Dvizhenie group's inclusion within the unofficial narrative despite its previous collaboration with the Soviet government proves, the organization of the event had occasionally taken arbitrary decisions in defining what was 'unofficial' Soviet culture and what was not, thus committing acts of branding and even history-writing. It can therefore be said that the (mostly) Italian administration of the Biennale might have partly arranged the cultural manifestation and the discussions around it according to not only Western standards, but also interested and personal considerations, so that the final result was dominated by both a European and biased perspective.

Apart these legitimate critics and other less justified political preconceptions suffered from the initiative, the primary purpose and main tangible outcome of the 1977 Biennale of Dissent have been the allocation of space and dignity to those cultural, artistic, scientific, social and religious stances which could not properly express themselves in their domestic environments (which happened in different degrees according to the specific political conditions surrounding them, as the Biennale showed by exploring the different national realities within the Soviet bloc). In fact, by specifically addressing and analysing the different national contexts of Dissent, the initiative's objective merit was to show that there was not just *one* Dissent or *one* movement, but a multiplicity of voices and points of view questioning and contesting the socialist powers' conduct. In so doing, the Biennale made the Italian public, and the Westerners in general (given the wide international media coverage the event enjoyed), aware of a reality that they had until then considered as lacking a relevant popular appeal, or legitimacy, and in general nebelous. From the broadest societal point of view, this has been the main cultural accomplishment of Ripa di Meana's initiative.

As for the resonance the Venetian event had in the Soviet society, any substantial reverberation was prevented by the unscratchable impermeability of its borders, impenetrable for the common citizens: eventually, changes arrived in the USSR, but as consequence of the political transformations and reforms imposed from above at the end of the Eighties, not as concessions resulting from bottom-up popular demands. Meanwhile, the dissidents were at best

capable of mitigating the government's arbitrariness in specific cases, both through their own activities and with the 'intervention' of the West, by uncovering the authorities' faults and denouncing their violations of human rights in front of the international public opinion. In Italy, by contrast, Carlo Ripa di Meana's project first and its fullfilment later caused a great amount of political and intellectual disarray, with dozens of politicians and cultural institutions blaming the project and thus denying support or adherence to it. Considering that the most intense exchange of views took place within the left, what had been the Biennale's influence on the endogenous political balance and relations between its two main parties? It certainly contributed to a cooling of the relationship between PCI and PSI, and to the redefinition of the latter's image as a bulwark of democracy and stronghold for the defense of freedom, given its privileged kinship with Dissent, while the Communists found themselves challenged in an uncomfortable position.

Especially after the 1968 Warsaw Pact's intervention in Prague, Berlinguer and his party had undertook a process of ideological revision and re-analysis of both the reasons behind Eastern Dissent and the problematic aspects inherent to the socialist societies of the Soviet bloc. This strategy had the aim of assering the party's independence from Moscow to the eyes of the voters and of proving their reliability as potential allies of the Christian Democrats. Yet even after such reconsiderations of the responsibilities of the Soviet authorities regarding the problems of their society, and the possibilities of an alternative, democratic way to Socialism, the official view of the PCI insisted on seeing the 'real', official forces as the only potential sources of dialogue and social development for the USSR. Their expectations for reforms and changes lay within the CPSU or in the *intelligencija* loyal to the party, not in any force farther than that from the official power[240], and this certainly eroded any chance for dialogue and mutual understanding with the political opposers of the socialist countries. The role of Dissent and its exponents was still lessened and deemed as a threat for the international détente. Clearly, to their attitude contributed the refusal to show solidarity towards the dissidents belonging to the 'bourgeois' spectrum or holding reactionary positions, as well as the reluctance to agree with the Socialists as a matter of competitive principle. This approach was regarded as inconsistent by the national observers, as the Italian Communists were frequent to express criticisms against the USSR on international matters and seemed even ready to receive the Soviet remonstrances, while at home they appeared to be lacking the sufficient autonomy from Moscow to join the solidarity campaign in favour of Dissent. This was to be imputed to the PCI leaders' lack of a coherent and adequate strategy and they were therefore accused of displaying,

[240] Guerra A., *Comunismi e comunisti*, cit., pp.282-283

at the same time, "support for the victims and fraternity to the jailers", which certainly harmed their image at the eyes of the Italian voters and diminished the party's electoral appeal, as the following polls proved.

Considered all these implications, the contradictory evaluations of the 1977 Biennale originating from several intellectuals of the Italian cultural landscape (from those close to the left to those member of the PCI) and their symbolic absence at the manifestation can be understood as the result of not only the pressure received from the party, but also of a general confused disposition towards the issue of Eastern Dissent and the way the debate on its roots and possible solutions was handled. Just as the Communist party struggled to marry its renovated strategy of distancing from the CPSU with the will to not irremediably compromise their project of a redeemed, reformed communism, the intellectuals strived to incorporate the international protection of human rights with the defense of a democratic communist ideal.

The second largest party of the Italian left, on the contrary, had embarked since 1976 with Craxi's leadership to redefine their image after the tough electoral defeat of that year. They thoroughly re-thought their behaviour towards Dissent, placing its safeguard at the centre of their relationship with the Soviet bloc's socialist countries and expressing their support for this cause through several political actions (such as Jiri Pelikan's nomination at the European parliament). As already acknowledged, the Socialists' articulated agenda in favour of Dissent might have been quite certainly governed by an anti-communist interest, but their leader's genuine belief in this issue appears more plausible by looking at his biography: sustained by the conviction, developed since the Fifties through his research on the structural problems of the USSR and the other 'popular democracies' of Eastern Europe and especially since 1968, that a reformed and more democratic version of communism was not accomplishable, the active support for Dissent had been the central and constant theme of Craxi's international action until the fall of the same USSR[241]. Moreover, his activity permitted not only the understanding of the ideological and political problems pervading the Eastern countries, but it also consented the perception of the complexities characterizing that region, which stretched well beyond the unelaborated formula opposing the East and the West of the continent and those two social systems[242].

In the context of the 1977 Biennale of Dissent, while the Communists, impeded by their hesitance to speak out the Soviet crimes, missed the opportunity to assert their ideological autonomy from Moscow, the PSI performed the right moves and managed to confirm more than

[241] Ripa di Meana C. and Mecucci G., L'ordine di Mosca…, cit., pp159-180
[242] Di Nolfo. E., *La poltica estera italiana negli anni Ottanta*, Piero Lacaita Editore, Bari, 2003, pp.25-29

ever its image as ‘party of the dissidents’, even at the international level. As for the general ambiguity with which the Biennale was received at the social and intellectual level, it was fomented by political pressure, engendered by the difficulty in finding a logic compromise between the condemnation against the Soviet reactionary system and the ideal of a reformable and feasible Communism, but it was also caused by that approximative, ‘orientalist’ approach that characterizes the European views on Eastern issues and that impeded the leftist public opinion to discern the wide variety of problematics and forms of oppression affecting the single communist societies from the romantic archetype of socialist community they nourished.

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Summary

This thesis aims at analysing the cultural and political consequences of the 1977 edition of the Venice Biennale, dedicated to cultural dissent in the countries of the Eastern bloc, as well as the dynamics it revealed and what this initiative can tell us, forty years later, about the Italian politics and intellectual tendencies of that period. When the President of the Biennale Carlo Ripa di Meana (member of the Italian Socialist Party, PSI, whose election was backed by the Socialist secretary Bettino Craxi) proposed the theme of Soviet and Eastern Dissent for the cultural manifestations in Venice, it triggered a series of reactions, firstly from the Central Party of the Soviet Union, and consequently from the political representatives, economic stakeholders and intellectual exponents of Italy that threatened the relations between our country and the USSR on the one side, while affecting the internal equilibria within the Italian left, especially between its two main parties, the communist PCI and socialist PSI, on the other. Following the diplomatic pressures exerted by the Soviet Union through its ambassador in Italy, the Italian government reacted by blocking the annual budget of the Biennale (a state cultural institution, at the time), thus strongly decelerating the organization of the event, as the budget would have been confirmed solely in June, when the works were rapidly resumed. Ripa di Meana, who had given his resignation in protest against the government's hesitancies in front of a foreign interference, returned in office and the cultural manifestations finally took place between November and December 1977.

Severe criticism towards the initiative originated from communist politicians in the opposition and leftist intellectuals from different cultural circles, filling the newspapers for months. The USSR maintained its reproaching position: correspondence with the intellectuals living in the Eastern bloc had been blocked, letters and invitations were returned, while the Soviet media fiercely slandered the initiative and the CPSU developed a plan to coordinate the Warsaw Pact's communist parties, as well as the Italian one, in their official reaction towards the initiative. Publishers and distributors were prevented from sharing rights, scores and films requested by the festival, while some of the traditional venues offered to the Biennale were denied on that occasion, which clearly deeply hindered the organizers' work. However, numerous émigré artists, writers, musicians and intellectuals, as well as several Western European thinkers and theoreticians, slavophiles and Sovietologists, were present at the event. Within thirty-one days there were seven different conferences, three exhibitions, and an endless list of concerts, recitals, film screenings, debates and seminars in Venice, including 350 participants from 24 different countries and attracting 220 000 visitors.

In the first chapter the history of Soviet Dissent in the two decades preceding the Biennale (i.e. following Iosif Stalin's death and the end of the cult of personality) is retraced in order to better contextualize the Venetian event and its participants. Thus the development and organization of the dissenting movement between the end of Nikita Khrushchev's 'Thaw' and the rise to power of Leonid Brezhnev, with the resulting tightening of censorship and controls, is recalled. Space has been devoted to the phenomenon of *samizdat*, the network of illegal publications and diffusion of forbidden material across the Soviet bloc (explored in the context of the Biennale with a permanent exhibition), but also to the vicissitudes behind the most prominent figures of the political opposition, invited in Venice. In particular, the experiences of Andrei Sakharov, Andrei Amal'rik, the processes against Brodsky, Sinyavsky and Daniel' and the internment in the Soviet psychiatric hospitals for political reasons of dissidents such as Vladimir Bukovsky and Leonid Pliusch are recollected. Finally, the last paragraphs are centred on the 1975 Helsinki Accords, defined by the same President Ripa di Meana as 'the legal foundation' of the Biennale and representing a potential weapon in the hands of the Eastern dissidents in order to have more respect for human rights implemented in their countries, in so far as the document advocated for increased openness and circulation of information among the participatory countries (and, inevitably, across the two blocs). The international agreement, in fact, originally advanced by the USSR and its satellites with the aim of cementing the bloc's status quo, ended to favour, at least in its third basket, those principles of openness and human rights' protection dear to the Western democracies.

In the second chapter, the new non-elitarian and participatory shape acquired by the Biennale after the 1973 reform of its Statute is presented, as well as the preparation of the 1977 project, its reception from the Soviet authorities and the Italian public, and the final realized outcome of Ripa di Meana's proposal. As it is illustrated by recalling the reforms the institute underwent since 1973, Ripa di Meana's presidency of the Biennale had been quite momentous in defining the institute's new socially engaged and politically committed character, whose thematically focused editions in 1974 and 1976 had respectively dealt with Chile's coup by general Pinochet and with post-Francoist Spain. The case of Dissent, however, was different in so far as it divided both the national and international public opinion. In the Seventies, in fact, the unofficial culture of the Soviet Union was fairly familiar to the Western public: the histories of dissident thinkers, the work of unofficial writers and artists and non-conformism as a social phenomenon in Eastern Europe and in the USSR were quite renown cultural facts for Western citizens during the Cold War era, more or less regularly covered by the media (especially singular cases such as that of the Dissent's leading figure Andrei Sakharov, or those of Andrei Amal'rik, Aleksandr Solzhenicyn and so on), however the European communist parties had often struggled to take distance from Moscow and deplore the frequent infringements of the

Soviet citizens' human rights, and many political actors committed to the process of détente between the Western and Eastern bloc refrained from those critics towards the socialist governments that could potentially harm the relations with the Soviet Union. After the 1975 Helsinki Accords had declared that the basic human rights of Soviet and Eastern European citizens should be respected, a new wave of Western exhibitions emerged: in 1977 alone there were major expositions of unofficial and alternative Soviet art in Paris, London and Washington, before Venice, plus innumerable smaller exhibitions in different countries. As a matter of fact, the détente process between the USSR and USA, until then mostly based on arms control, was enriched by actions, like the Helsinki Conference (but also the previous Jackson-Vanik amendment of 1974, which focused on the right to emigration), oriented to the promotion of international law and protection of human rights, which became the legal basis for many initiatives of cultural Dissent, thus shifting the ground for the political and diplomatic opposition in part also on the cultural level, effectively contributing to the promotion of the freedom and independence of thought and expression. Yet, the diplomatic balance of the Cold War remained fragile: any tiny event considered hostile (especially by the socialist countries) could engender tensions in the East-West international relations, so in the case of cultural and artistic exhibitions the aesthetic aspects used to prevail over the political concerns. The Biennale of Dissent 1977 represented one of the very few cases of cultural representation of Dissent in which the political considerations, for several reasons, ended to be strongly emphasised.

While the government of the Soviet Union and those of its satellites reacted adversely to the Venetian initiative, as it allegedly compromised the peaceful relations between Italy and the Warsaw Pact's countries and undermined the purposes of the Helsinki Accords, the reception of the Italian intellectual circles and by the country's political exponents was unexpectedly ambiguous and contradictory. As it is explored in the third chapter, next to the international reviews and critiques to the 1977 Biennale (not always favourable, as some criticized the limits of its contents and appreciated solely the supportive attempt towards the cultural opposition), the project met various forms of boycott by both Italian politics (PCI in particular, but not only), economic actors, cultural institutions and intellectuals close to the left. In fact, besides the role of Dissent in the East-West political relations, it is crucial to understand the relevance of this topic in the internal affairs of Italy during this historical period. Although information about the Soviet regime's oppression of basic human rights was spreading and in plain sight, the reactions towards these facts in the West in general, and in Italy particularly, were varied. For some left-wing politicians, especially the Communists (under Enrico Berlinguer's lead in 1977), at first the dissidents represented an ideological error, a kind of political opportunism, rather than a concrete and serious social phenomenon. In Italy the unofficial culture of the Soviet bloc had become a political theme for argumentation between parties, even

within the same left. In this period the PCI, with its Eurocommunist project and strategy of 'Historic Compromise' agreed with the Christian Democrats (DC), had reached the second largest electoral standing in the country, but the issue of Dissent still posed some problematic ideological questions they struggled to confront with. The more marginal PSI (led since 1976 by Bettino Craxi), on the other hand, was attempting to offer a more centrist alternative to the dominant Christian Democrats, while trying to seize the portion of votes from the PCI of those citizens disturbed by the Communists' unclear but alarming relationship with Moscow. The 1977 Biennale on Dissent thus figured as a perfect transposition, on the domestic level, of an international ideological conflict, with all its nuances and implications. As far as the socialists were concerned, by evoking and amplifying Nenni's legacy in relation to the democratic issue of the communist regimes, Craxi cleverly managed to harness the question of cultural dissent in Eastern Europe and the PCI controversial relationship to such matters, to seriously challenge their hegemony within the Italian Left. The Biennale's edition of that year and everything that had been revolving around it can be considered, given the above-reported national and international conditions, both a genuine, authentic act of support in favour of those alternative forms of culture in the socialist countries, as well as an instrument of hegemonic political strategy in the battle contended between the two main left-wing parties of the 1970s Italy.

The hypothesis that has been scrutinized is that the Biennale, which very little contributed, at least internally, to the fight for individual liberties championed by the dissenting movement in the socialist countries of the Eastern bloc, has nevertheless allowed for a deeper comprehension of an issue until then misapprehended at the international level. Moreover, the way the event was dealt with in the Italian political and intellectual space seems to have influenced the endogenous political balance within the Italian left, while re-defining the public image of its two main parties, PCI and PSI. The prolonged debate over Eastern Dissent stretched the discrepancy between the two. The Communists, in this case, failed to assert their ideological independence from Staraya Ploshchad: although they had already started to take distance from the CPSU on international matters since the 1968 Prague Spring, for several concurring reasons (from the will to not compromise the inter-blocs détente to the refusal of any agreement with their socialist counterpart) the PCI took a step backwards when it was time to show solidarity for the dissidents, and this missed advocacy in favour of human rights would have resulted in a loss of consensus. As for the PSI, its conduct in this period was featured by radical changes derived by Craxi's rise to the lead of the party: the new secretary gave to the support for Dissent and the protection of human rights in Eastern Europe a very high priority in the Socialists' agenda – partly with an instrumental and anti-communist function, but also animated by the genuine conviction that the issue of Dissent deserved proper international attention.

The Biennale of Dissent came about in this complex and multi-layered context and its examination, integrated with factors and information on the history of Soviet Dissent, international relations and Italian politics during the Cold War, has allowed for the emergence of several parallel threads. First of all, the notion of 'Dissent' appears as designating a non-univocal phenomenon, a variegated movement composed by groups and individuals with different ideological orientations, whom was offered space for representation and self-expression at the Biennale, but which was impossible to find a unitary response or solutions for. The same dissidents had never been able to draft a common and coherent set of reforms they supposedly wished to implement in their society, as their only shared concern was to enhance the individual's civil liberties and rights to impair the Soviet authorities' excessive control and oppression on their citizens. However, precisely the legitimacy of *these* freedoms could be defended by relying on the general international commitment in favour of human rights developing in those years, such as 1975 Helsinki Accords. Indeed several similar initiatives mediating art and culture behind the Iron Curtain, as already mentioned, had blossomed all across Europe following Helsinki, but they were only partly politically engaged, as the fragile inter-bloc harmony could be easily harmed if critics were addressed at the Eastern governments. The case of Venice, on the contrary, was the first in which the political considerations and implications had been so emphasised and discussed, consequently triggering the Soviet reaction and challenging the peaceful relations between Italy and the USSR.

This project and its final realization attracted much indignation and most objections addressed to the Biennale's organizers, President Ripa di Meana in particular, regarded the supposed instrumentalization of the Biennale and the alleged political interests lying behind its agenda, as Ripa di Meana was member of the PSI and close friend of Bettino Craxi, who promoted the initiative since the very beginning. The allegations of having orchestrated the event for purely anti-communist and anti-Soviet purposes had also been accompanied by critics related to the question of representation in a post-colonial sense. In other words, the organizers would have performed a cultural appropriation insofar as they made an operation of 'labelling' this and that phenomenon as 'Dissent' and describing many of them through typically Western categories and lenses. The question of representation is of course strongly related to the idea of the exhibition, but it is also an issue of power and politics, since representation allows not only to make culture visible, but also to root it in history in the terms and narrative preferred by those who manage it. This is especially true if we think about the Soviet period and the context of oppression where the Soviet culture arose, but also the Western actors, given their hegemonic tendency to depict and appropriate the forms of 'Otherness' (susceptible to deformations and easily corrupted by second ends and interests) may abuse of this power. It can therefore be reasonably said that the (mostly) Italian administration of the Biennale might have played a role in

arranging the cultural manifestation and the discussions around it according to the Western standards, so that it was dominated by their perspective.

Apart these legitimate critics and other less justified political preconceptions suffered from the initiative, the primary purpose and main tangible outcome of the 1977 Biennale of Dissent have been the allocation of space and dignity to those cultural, artistic, scientific, social and religious stances which could not properly express themselves in their domestic environments (which happened in different degrees according to the specific political conditions surrounding them, as the Biennale showed by exploring the different national realities within the Soviet bloc). In fact, by specifically addressing and analysing the different national contexts of Dissent, the initiative's objective merit was to show that there was not just *one* Dissent or *one* movement, but a multiplicity of voices and points of view questioning and contesting the socialist powers' conduct. In so doing, the Biennale made the Western public aware of a reality that they had until then considered as lacking a relevant popular appeal, or legitimacy, and in general nebulous.

As for the resonance the Venetian event had in the Soviet society, any substantial reverberation was prevented by the unscratchable impermeability of its borders, impenetrable for the common citizens: eventually, changes arrived in the USSR, but as consequence of the political transformations and reforms imposed from above at the end of the Eighties, not as concessions resulting from bottom-up popular demands. Meanwhile, the dissidents were at best capable of mitigating the government's arbitrariness in specific cases, both through their own activities and with the 'intervention' of the West, by uncovering the authorities' faults and denouncing their violations of human rights in front of the international public opinion.

In Italy, by contrast, Carlo Ripa di Meana's project first and its fullfilment later caused a great amount of political and intellectual disarray, with dozens of politicians and cultural institutions blaming the project and thus denying support or adherence to it. Considering that the most intense exchange of views took place within the left, what had been the Biennale's influence on the endogenous political balance and relations between its two main parties? It certainly contributed to a cooling of the relationship between PCI and PSI, and to the redefinition of the latter's image as a bulwark of democracy and stronghold of civil rights' defense, given its privileged kinship with Dissent, while the Communists found themselves challenged in an uncomfortable position.

Since around 1968, and especially after the Warsaw Pact intervention in Prague, Berlinguer and his party had undertook a process of ideological revision and re-analysis of both the reasons behind Eastern Dissent and the problematic aspects inherent to the socialist societies of the Soviet bloc, in order to assert their independence from Moscow to the eyes of the voters and prove their reliability as potential allies of the Christian Democrats. Yet even after such reconsiderations of the

responsibilities of the Soviet authorities regarding the problems of their society, and the possibilities of an alternative, democratic way to Socialism, the official view of the PCI insisted on seeing the 'real', official forces as the only potential sources of dialogue and social development for the USSR. Their expectations for reforms and changes lay within the CPSU or in the *intelligencija* loyal to the party, not in any force farther than that from the official power, and this certainly eroded any chance for dialogue and mutual understanding with the political opposers of the socialist countries. The role of Dissent and its exponents was still lessened and deemed as a threat for the international détente. Clearly, to their attitude contributed the refusal to show solidarity towards the dissidents belonging to the 'bourgeois' spectrum or holding reactionary positions, as well as the reluctance to agree with the Socialists. This approach was regarded as inconsistent by the national observers, as the Italian Communists were frequent to express criticisms against the USSR on international matters and seemed even ready to receive the Soviet remonstrances, while at home they appeared to be lacking the sufficient autonomy from Moscow to join the solidarity campaign in favour of Dissent. This was to be imputed to the PCI leaders' lack of a coherent and adequate strategy and they were therefore accused of displaying, at the same time, "support for the victims and fraternity to the jailers".

Considered all these implications, the contradictory evaluations of the 1977 Biennale from several intellectuals of the Italian cultural landscape (from those close to the left to those member of the PCI) and their symbolic absence at the manifestation can be understood as the result of not only the pressure received from the party, but also of a general confused disposition towards the issue of Eastern European Dissent and the way the debate on its roots and possible solutions was handled. Just as the Communist party struggled to marry its strategy of ideological autonomy from the CPSU with the will to not irremediably compromise the project of a redeemed, reformed communism, the intellectuals strived to incorporate the international protection of human rights with the defense of a democratic communist ideal.

The second largest party of the Italian left, on the contrary, had embarked since 1976 with Craxi's leadership to redefine their image after the tough electoral defeat of that year. They thoroughly re-thought their behaviour towards Dissent, placing its safeguard at the centre of their relationship with the Soviet bloc's socialist countries and expressing their support for this cause through several political actions. As already acknowledged, the Socialists' articulated agenda in favour of Dissent might have been quite certainly governed by an anti-communist interest, but their leader's genuine belief in this issue appears more plausible by looking at his biography. Sustained by the conviction, developed since the Fifties through his research on the structural problems of the USSR and the other 'popular democracies' of Eastern Europe and especially since 1968, that a reformed and more democratic version of communism was not accomplishable, the active support for Dissent had been

the central and constant theme of Craxi's international action until the fall of the same USSR. Moreover, his activity seems to have permitted not only the understanding of the ideological and political problems pervading the Eastern countries under socialist rule, but it also consented the perception of the complexities characterizing that region, which stretched well beyond the unelaborated formula opposing the East and the West of the continent and those two social systems.

In the context of the 1977 Biennale of Dissent, while the Communists, impeded by their hesitance to speak out the Soviet crimes, missed the opportunity to assert their ideological autonomy from Moscow, the PSI performed the right moves and managed to confirm more than ever its image as 'party of the dissidents', even at the international level. Its unfolding affected both the perception of Dissent itself and the Italian political dynamics: besides distressing the Communists and allowing the Socialists to acquire a role as defenders of democracy and civil liberties, it also allowed for the re-appropriation, in Italy, of the ideological and social problems posed by the 'popular democracies' in Eastern Europe, affranchised of the simplistic rationale opposing the Western and the Eastern bloc, and thus allowing for a more perspicuous recognition of the peculiar questions concerning the single countries and not the general 'socialist area'.