

# Historical Lessons for Our Time

## Italy's Response to the Challenge of Terrorism

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### ABSTRACT

During the so-called *years of lead*, Italy had the highest rate of terrorist violence in the industrialized world. Terrorist groups, descending ideologically from the country's Marxist-Leninist and neo-fascist traditions, sought to destroy its democratic institutions. They failed. The success of the Italian government in ending this scourge merits careful study, for the lessons that might be gained in learning how we might cope with terrorism today.

**Keywords:** left-wing armed groups, terrorist groups, Italy, radical political traditions

### RESUM

Durant els anomenats "anys de plom", Itàlia va tenir la taxa més alta de la violència terrorista al món industrialitzat. Els grups terroristes, d'ascendència ideològica marxista-leninista o neofeixista, en el context de les tradicions polítiques de país, van intentar destruir les seves institucions democràtiques. Van fallar en això. L'èxit del govern italià per posar fi a aquest flagell mereix un estudi acurat, per les lliçons que podrien obtenir en l'aprenentatge de com podem fer front al terrorisme en l'actualitat.

**Paraules clau:** grups armats d'esquerra, grups terroristes, Itàlia, tradicions-polítiques radicals

### RESUMEN

Durante los llamados "años de plomo", Italia tuvo la tasa más alta de la violencia terrorista en el mundo industrializado. Los grupos terroristas, de ascendencia ideológica marxista-leninista o neofascista en el contexto de las tradiciones políticas de país, intentaron destruir sus instituciones democráticas. Fallaron en ello. El éxito del gobierno italiano para poner fin

a este flagelo merece un estudio cuidadoso, por las lecciones que podrían obtenerse en el aprendizaje de cómo podemos hacer frente al terrorismo en la actualidad.

**Palabras clave:** grupos armados de izquierda, grupos terroristas, Italia, tradiciones políticas radicales

Recent editions of the U.S. State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism make almost no mention of the communist left-wing and neo-fascist right-wing terrorism that ravaged Italy in the 1970s and 1980s. This annual book-length publication presents the government's assessment and interpretation of the terrorism threat worldwide on a country-by-country basis. The section on Europe in the 2014 report, the most recent one available, begins, "While Europe continued to face terrorist threats from a variety of sources in 2014, a primary area of concern in many countries was the emergence of the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters participating in the conflict in Syria and Iraq in the ranks of such groups as al-Nusrah Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)"<sup>1</sup>

When the State Department authors turn their attention to the situation in Italy, they focus mainly on the threat posed by radical Islamist groups. They do mention the sporadic anti-globalism terrorist activity in Italy of domestic and international anarchists against multinational corporations and banks, as well as the violence of environmentalists associated with the NO TAV movement (No to the High Speed Train) protesting construction of an accelerated railway between Turin and Lyon. Nevertheless, in their view Italy conforms to the dominant pattern of terrorism in Europe today as a problem involving mainly radical Islam and, in particular, the threat posed by returning foreign fighters from the Middle East. Indeed, Italy has been and continues to be a highly productive recruiting ground for young Muslims eager to defend the Caliphate of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

The virtual eclipse of Italy's traditional domestic sources of terrorism by radical Islam has been especially evident since the Abu Omar case of 2003 when CIA agents abducted this radical imam on the streets of Milan for rendition in Egypt, a story vividly told by Steve Hendricks in *A Kidnapping in Milan: The CIA on Trial* (2010). The Italian secret service, SISMI, also participated in the kidnapping. Although Hendricks focuses his analysis on a critique of the U.S. counter-terrorism practices that resulted in an indictment by the Italian courts of twenty-six CIA agents as well as the head of the CIA in Italy, Jeffrey W. Castelli, and the Milan station chief, Robert Seldon Lady, this episode underscored for the media the

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<sup>1</sup> *Country Reports on Terrorism 2014*, [www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/index.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/index.htm), Chapter 2 "Country Reports: Europe Overview."

salience of Muslim extremism as the country's chief terrorism threat<sup>2</sup>. From its initial reporting, the Abu Omar story has rarely been out of the Italian news, and fear of radical Islam has become the leading theme by far in media reports about terrorism in Italy.

It is as if the tragic violence of what the Italians call the “anni di piombo” (years of lead) had passed completely into the pages of history, like the Crimean War or some such event from a past that is over and done with now. The casualty statistics from these years remind us of what the Italians went through between 1969 and 1985 when Italy experienced the most severe outbreak of terrorism in the industrialized world. Robberies, kidnappings, kneecappings, assassinations, and bombings traumatized the country. Radical left-wing and right-wing groups killed some 1200 people and wounded hundreds more<sup>3</sup>. During these fifteen years, Italian newspapers were filled with stories about murdered or wounded policemen, judges, military officers, university professors, political figures, journalists, and union leaders. Periodically, spectacular terror bombings resulted in enormous loss of life. A 1984 poll identified contemporary terrorism as the single most important event in the country's history of the past fifty years, easily surpassing in perceived significance the Fascist dictatorship and the postwar establishment of the Italian Republic<sup>4</sup>.

Political extremism of the right and left has been a problem in Italy throughout its modern history. The origins of this problem are difficult to establish with precision, but the great Swiss historian of the nineteenth century, Jacob Burckhardt, cogently advanced a moral explanation for Italy's failure to become a country of healthy, stable institutions. Celebrated by him in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) as “the first-born among the sons of modern Europe” and for the marvels of its unique artistic culture, the country also had the negative distinction of pioneering the West's perilous voyage onto the high seas of modernity<sup>5</sup>.

Burckhardt defined modernity as the increasingly ardent embrace by Western peoples of individualism. The conservative Burckhardt by no means viewed the modernizing Renaissance in an entirely positive light, least of all on the crucial question of what would take the place of Christianity as the moral foundation of the West. He did not think that the men of the Renaissance had found a useful

<sup>2</sup> Hendricks (2010). In Chapter 5, “Torment,” he recounts in excruciating detail Abu Omar's nightmare existence in Egypt's rendition facilities.

<sup>3</sup> For the statistics on Italian terrorism, see: della Porta (1984)

<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Valentini, “E Garibaldi batte Mussolini,” *La Repubblica*, 8 February 1984. The poll was conducted by Monitorskopea for *La Repubblica*.

<sup>5</sup> Burckhardt (1990): p. 98

answer to this question, nor had anyone else since. Breaking with the mentality of medieval Christianity had released energies of extraordinary creativity and destructiveness. The great Italian artists carried the Renaissance to its unparalleled esthetic heights, but on the minus side, from Burckhardt's viewpoint, the appearance of men like Niccolò Machiavelli, Benvenuto Cellini, and Sigismondo Malatesta—utterly consumed with the gratification of the ego as the only rule of life worth bothering about—heralded modernity's palpable moral decline. The darkly ironic conclusion of his book, "Morality and Religion," takes the view that the Renaissance made its most profound impression on the Italians, both positively in art and negatively in morality. The legacy of the Renaissance left them with the gorgeous paintings, statues, and buildings that the rest of the world still thrills to see, but this is the culture that also produced *The Prince*, the foundation text for Burckhardt of Europe's leave taking of Christian morality. He portrays Renaissance Italians entering the modern world in a state of moral disequilibrium from which the country never recovered.

Something of this same moral approach to Italian politics, albeit with a contemporary emphasis, appears in Ignazio Silone's *Bread and Wine* (1936). A leading figure in the early years of the Italian Communist Party and then a fierce apostate to it, he made the following observation about Italians in his most famous book:

...we take seriously the principles proclaimed by our fathers or schoolmasters or priests. Those principles are proclaimed as the foundations of society, but it is easy to see that the actual functioning of that society conflicts with or ignores them. The majority, the sceptics, adapt themselves, the others become revolutionaries"<sup>6</sup>

Silone, like Burckhardt, saw the moral failure of society, in combination with the perhaps uniquely passionate and imaginative nature of the Italians, as the starting point for understanding their exceptionally turbulent history. After all, it is not every country that invents fascism or in the post-World War II era creates the most powerful communist party in Western Europe, the way the Italians did. Silone's own moral failings as a spy for the Fascist regime have become the subject recently of numerous articles and books, but his own books, above all *Bread and Wine*, remain inexhaustible sources of insight into the complex dynamics of Italian society during the fascist and post-war periods<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Silone (1986): p. 153

<sup>7</sup> For the scandalous revelations about Silone, see Dario Biocca (1998), and Biocca e Canali (2000) as well as: Biocca (2005). Among Silone's many defenders, Pugliese (2009) has written the best book in English

The more mundane consequences of a poor rapport among land, resources, and people have intersected with the larger moral questions addressed by Burckhardt and Silone to produce powerful radical cultures in Italy on the left and right. From the French Revolution to very recent times Italy has been a promised land for left-wing revolutionaries and secret societies of all kinds. Filippo Buonarroti brought to Italy the ideals of the man identified by Karl Marx as the first modern communist, Gracchus Babeuf, and fostered endless revolutionary plots. Following the Risorgimento in 1861, a constantly widening gulf in general well-being between the North and the South created what became known as the Southern Problem, which even today remains the outstanding social issue in Italy. In the nineteenth century, many of Italy's leading revolutionary figures came from the economically depressed South, including Carlo Cafiero, Antonio Labriola, and Arturo Labriola. The violent anarchist Mikhail Bakunin found his most fervid supporters first in the Italian South and then in Spain. In the first part of the twentieth century, southern Italians such as Amadeo Bordiga, Antonio Gramsci, and Ignazio Silone belonged to the first rank of the country's revolutionary left-wing leaders<sup>8</sup>.

At this point in the country's history, fascism made its momentous appearance, as a right-wing reaction to a threatened Bolshevik revolution in Italy. Ernst Nolte's observation in *Three Faces of Fascism*, that strong left-wing movements invariably produce their right-wing counterparts, finds its paradigmatic illustration in the political annals of post-World War I Italy. "[W]ithout Marxism there is no fascism," he wrote<sup>9</sup>. Fascism emerged as anti-Bolshevism. Contrary to popular belief today, fascism enjoyed an enormous prestige and popularity during the interwar period. Some of Europe's most brilliant thinkers and artists saw fascism as the only solution to the civilization-shattering problems caused by international capitalism. Martin Heidegger, Giovanni Gentile, Luigi Pirandello, and the American expatriate Ezra Pound all welcomed fascism or its Nazi variant as a deliverance from a capitalist system they all judged to be diabolical for its insane obsession with individual rights at the expense of the racial and cultural integrity of Western peoples. The Italians by and large strongly supported fascism, as Renzo De Felice has documented in his multi-volume life of the Fascist dictator. After the Ethiopian War of 1935-1936, "The personal prestige of Mussolini and, by reflex action, of fascism was in fact so high that many things, that in the preceding years would have seemed unthinkable, now were or seemed realizable"<sup>10</sup>. In the depths of capitalism's humiliating Depression-era failures, Fascist corporatism seemed to the overwhelming majority of the Italian people an intelligent

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<sup>8</sup> For the careers of Italy's leading Marxists, see: Drake (2003)

<sup>9</sup> Nolte (1963): p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> De Felice (1974): p. 794

compromise between the iron law of oligarchy in capitalism and the unavoidably tyrannous consequences of Marxist-Leninism, which by the mid-1930s reports of state-induced famine and the purge trials in the Soviet Union made commonly known.

Fascism did not fall because the Italians hated it or yearned for the freedoms offered by the American model of consumer society, but because of an obliterating military defeat in World War II. That this ideology enjoyed enormous favor at one time, even to the extent in the early 1930s of eliciting high praise and interest from the Roosevelt administration in Washington, reminds us that in the right combination of historical circumstances it could, possibly in artfully disguised essentials, return<sup>11</sup>. The neo-fascists who succeeded them on the anti-communist and anti-liberal right in post-war Italian politics have always believed that history will be with them, in the sense that the American-dominated capitalist status quo cannot survive its massive contradictions. The American model, they reason, by nature breeds contradictions, which wars and depressions make uncontrollable. The people themselves will once again call for fascism, as they did in 1922 Italy or, for its more radical form, in 1933 Germany.

A tension always has existed within neo-fascism between its moderate law-abiding and radical revolutionary elements. Tension of this kind exploded in the major neo-fascist party, the ideologically eclectic Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), in 1956 when the radicals split off from the party to form Ordine Nuovo (the New Order). The ordinovisti saw themselves as the revolutionary conscience of neo-fascism and the authentic heirs of an essential fascist legacy shorn of the mistakes and compromises made by Mussolini's regime. Led by Pino Rauti, this group of some several thousand members became the most active component in Italy's extra-parliamentary right and established connections with like-minded groups across Europe. Throughout the 1960s, Rauti edited the Ordine Nuovo journal subtitled "a review of political revolution." He quoted Mussolini on the front page of the maiden May 1958 issue: "Don't fear the storms, that which we wait will come"<sup>12</sup>. Only through revolution, however, would Europe regain the historical initiative it had lost to the monstrous tyranny of the Soviet Union and the soul-destroying consumerism of the United States.

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<sup>11</sup> For the elective affinities between Benito Mussolini and Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the early years of the New Deal until the Ethiopian War of 1935-1936, see Villari (2013). They followed each other's programs with interest and sympathy. Mussolini viewed FDR as a fellow dictator and a leader liberating himself from the dogmas of liberal economics. Diggins (1972) describes the great admiration for Mussolini in America during the 1920s until the mid-1930s. See also: Caretto (2014) on the strong similarities between Roosevelt's New Deal and the statist policies of the Mussolini dictatorship.

<sup>12</sup> Pino Rauti, "Dalle slogan al mito," *Ordine nuovo*, May 1958

When a fellow neo-fascist radical, Giorgio Almirante, gained control of the MSI in 1969, however, Rauti and many of his ordinovisti returned to the party. Violent student demonstrations and worker strikes that year created a political backlash from which the party would benefit in the 1972 elections with nearly three million votes, amounting to 8.7 percent of the total, and fifty-six Chamber seats and twenty-six Senate seats<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless, dissident ordinovisti led by Clemente Graziani continued to reject the MSI's political strategy, even with Almirante in charge. Writing in 1963 for Rauti's *Ordine Nuovo*, Graziani had expressed admiration for the guerrilla warfare tactics, with their inevitable recourse to terrorism against a militarily superior enemy, of Marxist revolutionaries in Cuba and Vietnam.<sup>14</sup> Such tactics, he still believed in 1969, needed to be adopted by the radical right. He called his group *Il Movimento Politico Ordine Nuovo*, which had its own journal, *Noi*.

Numerous other neo-fascist groups in the 1950s and 1960s competed with *Ordine Nuovo* for supremacy on the radical right, all of them professing to stand for the true anti-democratic and anti-communist cause<sup>15</sup>. Though adamantly proclaiming their devotion to the overthrow of the hated Christian Democratic order and its replacement by an authoritarian state, the revolutionary neo-fascists suffered from the most common syndrome of radical politics: a never-ending bout of rivalries, feuds, and secessions that kept them in constant intramural agitation. By the end of the 1960s, the extra-parliamentary right in Italy appeared to be a chaos of rabidly reactionary opinions incapable of a serious challenge to Christian Democratic Italy. Yet from this weirdly fractious and largely discredited quarter sprang the tragedy of Italian terrorism.

The years of lead began with a right-wing terror bombing at a bank in Milan's Piazza Fontana on 12 December 1969, leaving seventeen people dead and nearly one hundred wounded. A vast literature has come into existence on the subject of the Piazza Fontana attack, in an attempt to make sense of the voluminous documentation issuing from the judicial trials and parliamentary investigations held to determine the facts of the bombing. The case remains legally unsettled after eight trials spread over thirty-four years, but about its right-wing authorship Gerardo D'Ambrosio, who served as a judge in the first Piazza Fontana trial and thereafter followed the case closely, observed: "That the bombings of 1969, inclu-

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<sup>13</sup> Electoral Geography 2.0 Italy. Legislative Elections 1972, <https://www.electoralgeography.com/new/en/countries/i/italy/italy-legislative-election-1972.html>

<sup>14</sup> Clemente Graziani, "La Guerra rivoluzionaria," *Ordine nuovo*, May 1958

<sup>15</sup> For an analysis of the neo-fascist right, see Ferraresi (1996)



ding the one in Piazza Fontana, were the work of neo-fascists in collusion with the secret services...I believe no one can deny"<sup>16</sup>.

Odoardo Ascari, a public prosecutor who prepared a summation for one of the Piazza Fontana trials, advanced a more complex thesis than that of D'Ambrosio about the case. According to Ascari, the radical right concocted the plot, but anarchists actually executed it. Despite their drastic ideological differences, he argued, both groups of extremists sought to destroy the bourgeois status quo. Franco Freda and Giovanni Ventura, the neo-fascist Ordine Nuovo principals in the plot, successfully conspired to recruit Pietro Valpreda, an anarchist, to plant the bomb. Valpreda did so, in the belief that the bomb would explode after closing time, but the timer either malfunctioned or was not set properly. Ascari specifically faulted D'Ambrosio for not comprehending "the connection between the two groups"<sup>17</sup>. Nevertheless, even Ascari in his highly controversial and bitterly contested version of the Piazza Fontana case accepted the primacy of the radical right in originating the bombing. With this act Freda and Ventura had hoped to create chaos and public consternation sufficient to bring an authoritarian government to power.

When Judge D'Ambrosio cited neo-fascists as the perpetrators of the Piazza Fontana bombing, he had in mind the turbid world of Italy's radical right-wing culture that had survived Fascism's final fall and complete defeat in 1945. Neo-fascism obviously descended from fascism, but not as an identical copy. Italy's neo-fascists had their own ideological tradition, which only in part reflected the concerns and aims of the original fascism.

In *The True Believer*, Eric Hoffer observed that every radical movement has its "man of ideas" who supplies its "men of action" with their alternative vision of society and general philosophy<sup>18</sup>. In arriving at this insight, Hoffer had many fore-runners. For such thinkers who inspire receptive natures to revolt against the political and cultural norms of the day, Friedrich Nietzsche used the term "educator." In "Schopenhauer as Educator," an essay honoring Arthur Schopenhauer as his own foremost man of ideas, Nietzsche described him as "the one teacher and taskmaster of whom I can be proud" and with whose help "all of us can edu-

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<sup>16</sup> G. Guastella, "D'Ambrosio: quella bomba segnò la mia vita, ora sono amareggiato," *Corriere della Sera*, 13 March 2004. The other explosion to which Judge D'Ambrosio referred occurred in Rome.

<sup>17</sup> Ascari (1979): p. 289.

<sup>18</sup> Hoffer (1951). In Chapter 15, "Men of Words", p. 126, he writes "The connection between intellectual theoreticians and revolutionary movements needs no emphasis" (Perennial Library edition).



cate ourselves against our age”<sup>19</sup>. Giacomo Leopardi had the same kind of relationship in mind by identifying Giuseppe Parini, one of Italy’s foremost poets of the eighteenth century, as a *saggio*, a wise man, who combined literary excellence with the philosophical insight needed to perceive in its full and appalling actuality the decadence of the modern world. Leopardi’s classic essay, “The Memorable Sayings of Filippo Ottonieri” in his *Operette morali*, exalts the strong and vigorous independent thinkers who live solitary lives and are “disdainful of the disdain with which they are universally regarded,” rejoicing in their apartness<sup>20</sup>.

Italian neo-fascists of the post-World War II era discovered in Julius Evola their educator. A Roman aristocrat and devoted to Nietzsche, he had described himself during the Fascist dictatorship as a “super-fascist,” meaning that the regime was not fascist enough for him. “We would like,” he wrote in an April 1930 editorial for his journal *La Torre*, “a fascism more radical, more intrepid, a truly absolute fascism, made of pure force, inaccessible to any compromise”<sup>21</sup>. He neither sought nor gained acceptance by the regime. For his part the pragmatic Mussolini always found Evola to be a man of bizarre fetishes and of no use to him.

The *Revolt against the Modern World*, the Evola book from the fascist period that would be most prized by postwar neo-fascists, appeared in 1934. In it, he condemned modern individualism as the decadence of Western Civilization. The humanist movement, the Renaissance, and the Protestant Reformation had given rise to the present disorientation of the world: “The center no longer commands the individual parts, not only in political life, but in cultural life as well. A single organizing and animating force no longer exists.”<sup>22</sup> Modern theories of progress did not change man’s fundamental need for hierarchy, caste, monarchy, race, myth, religion, and ritual—historical forces that he identified as belonging to the classification of “spiritual virility.” To lose them resulted in the impossibility of generating true order any longer, a condition that he thought perfectly characterized the situation in which contemporary Europeans found themselves as they awaited their fate of being overtaken by the soul-dead Americans and the soul-denying Soviets<sup>23</sup>. He prescribed a reactionary return to the ideals of the ancient Roman Empire as the only possible salvation for Europe.

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<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche (1995), pp. 175 and 195-196.

<sup>20</sup> Leopardi (1982), p. 313.

<sup>21</sup> Evola (1930)

<sup>22</sup> Evola (1969): pp. 377-378

<sup>23</sup> He made this point in *La rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 83 and even more fully in “Americanismo e Bolscevismo, in *Nuova antologia*, no. 1371, 1929. Postwar neo-fascists viewed these writings as prophetic of the world they inhabited.

Evola's *Revolt against the Modern World* actually gained greater favor in Nazi Germany than in Fascist Italy, but it became a cult book for the radical right in Italy and throughout Europe after the war. He had foreseen the coming domination of American "civilization," a term he always used with quotation marks, over Europe. He feared that the Europeans would not survive such a relationship. His fiercely anti-American postwar books, chiefly *Men among the Ruins* (1953) and *Ride the Tiger* (1961), focused on the alienation produced by consumer society<sup>24</sup>. Not everyone who read Evola became a terrorist. The evoliani espoused a variety of political and cultural views. Nevertheless, on the fringes of his following some men took action, in the belief that the authentic existence of Italy and all Europe stood in peril. By their logic, the few good Europeans remaining had to undertake an extreme resistance against the decadent American establishment. In the years following the Piazza Fontana explosion, other right-wing terror bombings occurred, the most destructive of them, with eighty-five dead and two hundred wounded, at the Bologna train station on 2 August 1980. Judicial findings in the terror-bombing cases from the 1970s and 1980s pointed to the Evola-inspired Ordine Nuovo. Judge Mario Battaglini found that in the literature of the radical neo-fascists Evola played the starring role<sup>25</sup>. Other participants in the terror-bombing scourge could not be ruled out, such as deviant elements in the secret services and criminal organizations acting for their own ends having nothing to do with a "revolt against the modern world," but the courts have always attributed a large significance to neo-fascist ideology in these cases.

The right-wing Piazza Fontana terror bombing of 1969 created a great fear on the Italian left that the country might be succumbing once again to fascism. Italy's highly variegated and deeply rooted radical left-wing culture, like that of its radical right, had an illustrious historical pedigree, albeit without ever having come to power. The radical left in Italy was all theory. Nevertheless, communism stood to be the big winner in post-World War II Italy. Following its near-death experience under Mussolini's regime, the Communist party emerged from the war with enormous prestige from its association with Stalin, then at the height of his glory as the paramount victor over Hitler. Party membership grew at a phenomenal rate, reaching 2,100,000 by 1947<sup>26</sup>.

The Socialists, the only other political force that seriously mattered on the left at this time hardly had an existence outside the shadow of the Communist Party. A historic distinction between the two remained in effect, namely the tendency of

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<sup>24</sup> For a detailed analysis of Evola's work, see Richard Drake (1989), Ch. 7, "The Children of the Sun."

<sup>25</sup> Battaglini (1986): p. 30.

<sup>26</sup> Agosti (1996): p. 327

the reform-minded Socialists to stand in doctrinal opposition to the revolutionary program of the Stalin-backed Communists. This distinction soon began to fade and to do so rapidly after 1956 when Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin as the greatest mass-murderer in history and then caused the Warsaw Pact powers to invade Hungary, in order to quash a moderate communist movement there. Italian communism never regained its revolutionary élan after “the events of 1956”<sup>27</sup>. It, too, became increasingly moderate in political outlook and lost all meaningful connection with the Marxist revolutionary tradition.

Into the political vacuum created by the Communist Party’s inexorable shift to a basically social democratic program moved the extra-parliamentary left, acting as a counterpart, in effect, to the extra-parliamentary right<sup>28</sup>. The extra-parliamentary left regarded the official Communist and Socialist parties with the same cutting disdain that the neo-fascists of Ordine Nuovo had done with the Movimento Sociale Italiano. Men of ideas abounded on the extra-parliamentary left, but the greatest of them in the beginning was Raniero Panzieri, the legendary founder of the Turin-based *Quaderni rossi*<sup>29</sup>. Founded in 1961, this seminal publication called for the authentic left to create a revolutionary political strategy for labor’s vanguard in the offensive against capital. Panzieri wanted to accelerate the class war, to deepen class consciousness, and to strengthen working-class power against capitalist development. As he wrote in the debut issue of *Quaderni rossi*, the journal had set itself the task of reawakening “the destructive force of the working class, its capacity for revolution”<sup>30</sup>.

*Quaderni rossi* appeared irregularly from June 1961 to December 1965, the last two issues following Panzieri’s death at forty-three of a cerebral embolism. The journal had become actively engaged in Turin’s violent labor disturbances, but in that process splits began to appear between the journal’s ardent revolutionary spirits and their more moderate colleagues. Panzieri had wanted them all to live the revolution. He himself, however, had sided with the moderates as the *Quaderni rossi* broke up in factional disputes.

An even more radical journal came into existence in 1964, *Classe operaia*. Toni Negri, a University of Padova political science professor and destined to become Italy’s most controversial Marxist, participated in the secession from *Quaderni*

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<sup>27</sup> Ajello (1979): p. 415

<sup>28</sup> For an overview of the extra-parliamentary left in Italy, see Vettori (1973); Violi (1977), and Balestrini e Moroni (1997)

<sup>29</sup> For an analysis of Raniero Panzieri’s career, see: Drake (2003b)

<sup>30</sup> Panzieri, (1961)

rossi that resulted in the creation of Classe operaia<sup>31</sup>. Negri, too, must be counted among the extra-parliamentary left's leading men of ideas, for his famously dramatic university lectures and the openly revolutionary books and articles that he would write. In 1969, he helped to launch *Potere operaio*, the successor to *La Classe* and one of the most violent journals of the period leading up to the creation of the Marxist-Leninist Red Brigades terror organization. The revolutionary view of the world presented by *Potere operaio* became the mental starting point for thousands of Marxists in Italy. In its pages they would learn that conditions in Italy had to be created that would make any ruling-class job—policeman, factory executive, judge—“a risky profession”<sup>32</sup>. Indeed, *Potere operaio* published articles sympathetic to early Red Brigade actions. Many former potopisti would make their way into the ranks of the Red Brigades and other terrorist organizations as well. The defense of the Red Brigades continued in *Rosso*, the journal for Negri's *Autonomia Operaia* in the 1970s. *Rosso* also published Red Brigade propaganda statements, providing the same service for the *Nuclei Armati Proletari*, another of the major terrorist groups of the decade.

No one with greater brilliance or charisma than Negri charted a revolutionary path for the extra-parliamentary left. Lenin's example in the Bolshevik Revolution seemed to him still deserving of emulation, a point that he would make in three of the foundational books for the extra-parliamentary left: *Crisi dello stato-piano, comunismo e organizzazione rivoluzionaria* (1972), *La fabbrica della strategia: 33 lezioni su Lenin* (1976) and *Il dominio e il sabotaggio: sul metodo marxista della trasformazione sociale* (1978). He described capitalism as an unparalleled evil for mankind and contended that only Marxist-Leninist methods of revolution would rid the world of it. Communist revolutionaries, he wrote, had “to rediscover the Leninist privilege of taking up the cudgel”<sup>33</sup>. In all three of these books, he argued that properly politicized violence in the Marxist manner fostered the good of mankind. It was a faith Negri shared with the Red Brigades. Following the murder of Aldo Moro in 1978, *Autonomia Operaia* announced, “every last residual rapport has fallen,” a comment that University of Padova historian Angelo Ventura noted “at the same time confirms a rapport that had existed until then”<sup>34</sup>.

The kidnapping and murder of Moro, the most sensational crime ever committed by the Red Brigades, ended in failure for them and marks the true beginning of

<sup>31</sup> For an analysis of the role played by Toni Negri in the history of the extra-parliamentary left, see Drake (2004)

<sup>32</sup> “I proletari seguono la regola: castiga uno educarne cento, *Potere operaio*, 20 May-20 June 1972, no. 47-48. The articles in *Potere operaio* appeared anonymously.

<sup>33</sup> Negri (1972) “Marx: sul ciclo e la crisi: note, pp. 80-81

<sup>34</sup> Ventura (1980)

their eventual defeat and disappearance from the Italian scene. Long the country's leading political figure, Moro seemed to them a perfect target in their campaign to destroy the Christian Democratic establishment. Despite the traumatic shock of this tragedy, the decisive confrontation hoped for by the Red Brigades between the government and the working class did not materialize. Soon the Red Brigades were torn apart by factionalism and the defection of repentant members. The organization continued to kill and maim. Divisions within the Red Brigades over personalities and tactical issues sparked a statistical increase in violence as rival factions sought to outdo each other in revolutionary ardor<sup>35</sup> 2,513 Italian terrorist attacks occurred in 1979, a record number for a single year.

Nevertheless, the imprisoned historic nucleus of the Red Brigades, led by Renato Curcio and Alberto Franceschini, lamented the sectarianism now afflicting the Red Brigades as an unmistakable sign of the group's crisis. From their prison cells in the fall of 1980, these founding fathers of the Red Brigades called upon the organization to recompose itself in the spirit of the eternal Marxist-Leninist war on capitalism. The imprisoned Red Brigade chiefs thought that false ideas about Marxist-Leninist revolutionary theory had led to the declining fortunes of the Red Brigades. Seeking to put the group back on the right course, they produced a book-length theoretical statement, "L'ape e il comunista," focusing on the need of the Italian proletariat to break the chains of its enslavement to corporate capitalism and to confront directly the enforcement arm of this monstrous economic system, NATO. The emancipation of the working class from its economic overlords could only be achieved by "encircling, neutralizing, and annihilating...imperialism"<sup>36</sup>.

NATO, identified by Curcio and Franceschini as "the multinational army of the imperialist counter-revolution," now became a primary target for the Red Brigades<sup>37</sup>. Their campaign against NATO culminated on 17 December 1981 with the kidnapping in Verona of General James Lee Dozier, the deputy chief of staff for logistics and administration at NATO's headquarters in Southern Europe. They kept him prisoner in a Padova safe house and produced during his ordeal a 188-page ideological communication, "Risoluzione della Direzione Strategica," which called for "war to destroy the project, the men and the means of imperialist

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<sup>35</sup> For an analysis of the secessions and revolts that caused the Red Brigades to break up from within, see: Caselli e Della Porta (1984): pp. 206ff.

<sup>36</sup> Collettivo prigionieri comunisti delle Brigate Rosse, "L'ape e il comunista: elementi per la critica marxista dell'economia politica e per la costruzione del programma di transizione al comunismo," *Corrispondenza internazionale*, October-December 1980, no. 16/17, 232.

<sup>37</sup> Collettivo prigionieri comunisti delle Brigate Rosse, "L'ape e il comunista," 122.

war”<sup>38</sup>. The call would go unanswered. Acting on a tip from an informer, the police during the evening of 27 January 1982 rescued Dozier without bloodshed. The failure of the Red Brigades to fight when cornered gravely damaged their image on the revolutionary left. The Dozier rescue, a humiliating failure for the Red Brigades, dramatically accelerated a decline of the group’s morale and coherence that had been in evidence since the aftermath of the Moro slaying. Now many more repentant terrorists came forward to testify against the Red Brigades, causing irreparable damage to the remaining terrorist structures. Assassinations continued to occur sporadically for the rest of the decade, but thereafter the Red Brigades virtually disappeared from the newspapers and entered the pages of history.

A new generation of the Red Brigades appeared briefly around the turn of the century. They identified completely with the revolutionary aims and ideology of their predecessors from the 1970s and claimed to be acting in the name of “the Marxist conception of the historically necessary Communist Revolution” and “the Leninist conception of the imperialism of the State”<sup>39</sup>. Hoping to find a political following among people alienated by the globalization of the economy and Italy’s participation in Operation Iraqi Freedom, they presented themselves as the revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat. In particular, the world economic crisis brought on by globalization seemed to them an ideal opportunity for the promotion of their revolutionary agenda. The proletariat now could see the fate awaiting it ordained by their false leaders. Perhaps by murdering two economists accused by the terrorists of advancing pro-globalization economic reforms, a revolutionary explosion might be detonated, or so they evidently reasoned. On the contrary, the killings of Massimo D’Antona in 1999 and Marco Biagi in 2002 inspired widespread revulsion, not the hoped-for revolution. The new Red Brigades personnel swiftly fell into a police dragnet and are now in prison.

In trying to understand why terrorism of the left and right failed in Italy, numerous factors must be taken into account. Effective counter-terrorist police action certainly contributed to the defeat of the terrorist groups. In the aftermath of Moro’s murder, the government gave the resourceful and experienced Carabinieri general Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa virtually a free hand in devising anti-terrorist operations<sup>40</sup>. Companion measures to enhanced police power concerned the radical curtailment of normal civic freedoms. People suspected of terrorism could

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<sup>38</sup> Brigate Rosse, “Risoluzione della Direzione Strategica,” 27 December 1981 (mimeographed document in the author’s possession).

<sup>39</sup> “Documento di Rivendicazione Iniziativa Br,” [www.caserta24ore.it](http://www.caserta24ore.it), March 2002.

<sup>40</sup> For General Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa’s role in combating left-wing terrorism in Italy, see Drake (1989), Chapter 6: “The Blast Furnace of Terrorism, 1979-1980.”



be detained by order of a magistrate and interrogated by the police without the presence of a lawyer. Laws preventing unreasonable search and seizure went unenforced. Life sentences in prison, the maximum penalty in Italy, became much more common than in the period before the years of lead<sup>41</sup>.

Among the special counter-terrorism measures adopted by the Italian government, the law encouraging terrorists to repent had the greatest practical effect. By providing special sentencing guidelines for terrorists who turned state's evidence, the so-called pentito law raised constitutional issues regarding hearsay evidence and penal allowances even for terrorists convicted of multiple homicides. Under this law, some killers served sentences of only three or four years. As a tactic in the Italian war on terror, though, it worked, resulting in the arrests of dozens of terrorists.

Italian terrorists of the right failed because they never established a satisfactory political connection with the people they were trying to liberate. The neo-fascist terror bombers had no popular following. Most Italians viewed them as frighteningly maladjusted cretins whose vision of politics and society belonged to a past best forgotten. Blowing up banks and train stations produced shock and horror, but over the actions of the terror bombers, not the Christian Democratic establishment. Indeed, the status quo benefited from the actions of such adversaries, seeming reasonable and sane, if infuriatingly inefficient and corrupt, by comparison.

Unlike the numerically exiguous extra-parliamentary right, the extra-parliamentary left enjoyed substantial support. The university and worker radicals preaching the cause of Marxist-Leninist revolution numbered in the many thousands and cannot be characterized, in the manner of the radical neo-fascists, as an immiscible element in the culture of the time. On 22 December 1970 the Prefect of Milan, Libero Mazza, warned the Interior Minister that extra-parliamentary groups, which only a few years earlier had a mere scattering of followers, now had some twenty thousand militants in their ranks<sup>42</sup>. With their "fanatical and intense work of propaganda and proselytism among students and workers," he warned, the radicals constituted a serious danger to Italy's democracy.

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<sup>41</sup> For an analysis of how the government's fight against terrorism affected Italy's legal system, see Grevi (1984)

<sup>42</sup> "Il Testo Integrale del Rapporto del Prefetto di Milano Libero Mazza (22 December 1970), TESTO INTEGRALE RapportoMazza – 1-pdf Adobe Acrobat Reader DC.



The leading extra-parliamentary left publication of the time, *Lotta continua*, which in the early 1970s recognized the Red Brigades as *compagni*, had a large and varied readership. This journal led the campaign against Luigi Calabresi, a police official in Milan judged by the extra-parliamentary left to be responsible for the death of the anarchist and Piazza Fontana suspect Giuseppe Pinelli, officially a suicide. On 13 June 1971, a public letter lamenting the betrayal of justice in the Pinelli case and denouncing “torture commissioners, persecuting magistrates, and unworthy judges” appeared in the weekly magazine *L’Espresso*<sup>43</sup>. Some eight hundred of Italy’s leading scholars, film directors, journalists, politicians, writers, publishers, labor leaders, psychologists, artists, scientists, and architects would sign the letter, which also ran in the 20 and 27 June issues of the magazine. When a terrorist murdered Calabresi in 1972, *Lotta continua* proclaimed in an editorial how this killing had to be viewed as “an act in which the exploited recognize their own will to justice”<sup>44</sup>. Such views found a sympathetic following in Italy among people inhabiting the vast and varied universe of Marxist thought and action.

Italy did have a large and vocal extreme left-wing culture, but all the same the radicals remained completely shut out of the country’s political system. From the Communists to the Monarchists, every party in Parliament viewed such groups as the Red Brigades, *Autonomia Operaia*, and *Lotta continua* as deranged fanatics with nothing worthwhile to offer the Italian people. Lenin’s Bolshevik party, the paramount role model for Italy’s revolutionaries, had faced the same problem of political isolation, but Russia’s catastrophic military disasters and total defeat in the First World War had solved it for him. Nothing, except for a complete economic meltdown, compares with a lost war for enhancing the political prospects of radical causes, as the history of communist, fascist and Nazi revolutions shows. The Italian left during the years of lead never had the advantage of the kind of revolutionary context that decisively favored the ambitions of Lenin, Mussolini, and Hitler. Despite the economic downturn of the mid-1960s and some daunting social problems, particularly in the South, Italy remained one of the most prosperous countries on earth<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> “Lettera Aperta a *L’Espresso* sul Caso Pinelli,” *L’Espresso*, 13 June 1971. The letter appeared at the margin of an article by Camilla Cederna, “Colpi di scena e colpi di karate” in which she lamented how this sad case “gives us a melancholy idea of the justice and the men behind Italian laws, everything to be swept under the carpet, to conceal in new shadows Pinelli’s end, to put off infinitely the moment of truth.”

<sup>44</sup> “Ucciso Calabresi, il maggior responsabile dell’assassinio di Pinelli,” *Lotta continua*, 18 May 1972.

<sup>45</sup> For an analysis of the Italian economy during the Cold War period, see Di Matteo and Piacentini (2003) especially: “Italy’s First Phase of Postwar Development: The Role of Aggregate

The main historical lessons of Italian terrorism during the years of lead concern the advantages to be derived by the state from the political isolation of its revolutionary antagonists. The Italian government successfully fought the extremists, not by trying to understand them or politically compromising on the issues raised in the insurgencies of the radical left and right, but by a massive display of state military and police power. Neither extreme succeeded in producing a serious socio-economic alternative to the corporate capitalist status quo, which to this day, despite widespread resentment and anger over Italy's harrowing unemployment and immigration crises, possesses the inestimable benefits conferred on a polity unencumbered by plausible alternatives to its hegemony.

Terrorist organizations that vigorously remain in the field over many decades, such as al-Qaeda or the Basque ETA, as a rule have the benefit of deep support in their cultures or societies. Regarding al-Qaeda, The 9/11 Commission Report authors ruefully asked, "How did Bin Laden—with his call for the indiscriminate killing of Americans—win thousands of followers and some degree of approval from millions more?"<sup>46</sup> That radical Islam enjoys a global support base of millions of people is a state of affairs that seriously calls into question the more or less complete reliance by Washington on a military strategy for dealing with Muslims outraged by American policies in the Middle East. In his study, *The Basque Insurgents: ETA 1952-1980*, Robert P. Clark commented on the long-term support that this group enjoyed: "...one of the sources of ETA's great durability over the past two decades has no doubt been the ability of etarras to seek refuge and solace [in the Basque people]. Etarras are not alienated persons; they are, on the contrary, deeply embedded in the culture whose rights they fight to defend"<sup>47</sup>.

Italian radicals of the right had nothing at all like the kind of support documented by the 9/11 commissioners and Clark. The Italian radicals of the left had too little support of this kind to survive a concentrated government assault. Groups like al-Qaeda and ETA do not base their appeal on a social and economic program as much as they do on frustrated religious and nationalist sentiments. It is different for secular ideological movements. Their reason for being ultimately consists of the perception that they have credible alternatives to the way politics is practiced, particularly regarding wealth distribution. Political problems require political so-

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Demand" by Massimo Di Matteo and "The Italian Economy after the Bretton Woods Era (1971-2001)" by Alessandro Vercelli and Luciano Fiordoni.

<sup>46</sup> *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York-London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), p. 48.

<sup>47</sup> Clark (1986): pp. 283-284

lutions, but not all problems are political. Neither the Red Brigades nor Ordine Nuovo had a political reason for being, at least not one that mattered to Italians as a viable alternative to what they had in the Italian Republic. Calling on Italians to embrace the revolutionary paradigms of Bolshevism just as the Soviet Union was about to go out of existence or Evolian yearnings for ancient Rome as a replacement model for consumer society, though intensely satisfying emotionally for many, proved hopeless in setting any kind of political agenda. Italian terrorism during the years of lead, accordingly, could be disposed of ultimately through force alone.

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