



SCHAR SCHOOL OF POLICY AND GOVERNMENT

Center for
Security Policy Studies
at George Mason University



TERROR VANQUISHED

The Italian Approach to Defeating Terrorism

SIMON CLARK



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Foreword

IT IS MY PLEASURE to introduce *Terrorism Vanquished: the Italian Approach to Defeating Terror*, by Simon Clark. In this compelling analysis, Mr. Clark draws on extensive historical research he conducted while resident in Italy, and explains why this distinctive story resonates today. While each country's experience with domestic or foreign terrorism has its own characteristics, Mr. Clark provides important insights that should be useful to American policymakers.

It is nearly two decades since the September 11 attacks on the US, and the terrorism threat has not remained static. *Terrorism Vanquished* draws us to consider how we might respond to a different source of terrorism from the al-Qaeda perpetrators of 9-11. What if the severe polarization of American politics were to lead to a real threat from political extremism at home? This historic study is a fascinating case on its own, but is quite pertinent to today's political debates and security challenges. And it has the welcome benefit of offering some positive messages, that smart strategies can indeed defeat terrorism.

This wonderful study is the first in a new series of publications from the Schar School of Policy and Government's Center for Security Policy Studies. We will be providing monographs and reports several times a year that offer original analysis on a range of topics in international security. We begin with terrorism; future titles will address issues of conventional defense strategies, regional security challenges, and emerging transnational threats and responses. For more on the work of CSPS, please see csps.mason.edu.

Ellen Laipson

Director, Center for Security Policy Studies

Schar School of Policy and Government, George Mason University

September 2018

Preface

AS I FINISHED my undergraduate studies and briefly considered an academic career, one topic stood out for the thesis I was beginning to write in my head: how when so many had despaired, a single man had led the fight against a brutal and effective terrorist group and utterly defeated it. I had grown up in Italy during the rise of the Red Brigades and vividly remembered being sent home from middle school on the day Aldo Moro was kidnapped. The fear and chaos of the time, with fully armed military units deployed in the streets, regular street fights with tear gas and worse that I would stumble into as I went into Florence with my friends, and the overall sense that the country was spiraling out of control, were hard to ignore. My parents had sent me off to boarding school in England where I joined other expatriates whose families considered Italy an increasingly risky place for their children and I watched with admiration as the Carabinieri general, Carlo Alberto dalla Chiesa, took control of the state's fight against the Red Brigades and their allies and slowly began restoring a measure of confidence in the population and peace in the streets. I was fascinated by this cultured and shrewd policeman, far from the caricature of the stupid Carabinieri officer of Italian popular culture — the butt of jokes applied in other countries to despised ethnic minorities — and intrigued by the approach he was taking.

When the counter-terrorist campaign was over, in 1982 the Italian government sent dalla Chiesa to Sicily to take on the growing Mafia threat, but this time failed to give him the support and backing that he asked for so insistently. As had happened so often before, and would again a decade later with the magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, the Mafia decided to attack first and murdered dalla Chiesa and his wife in the streets of Palermo. So here I had the perfect subject: a successful counter-terrorist campaign led by a brave, principled and brilliant leader who was also a martyr for his country. All I lacked was the bank balance. I left academia for the world of work and put this thought aside.

Years later, Professor Lawrence Freedman, whose work I had admired and who had been kind enough to encourage me to consider a return to academic life, convinced me to try my hand at a doctoral thesis. The library of King's College London is a wonderful place to work, and the chance to revive my old idea was a joy. My supervisor, Professor Peter Neumann, himself an expert on radicalization and terrorism, could not have been more generous, but the discipline of the defensive writing in the doctoral style defeated me. I suspect that is a young man's game. I had little interest in the process or the prize, and just wanted to tell what I thought was a good story and one that I hoped might be useful to counter-terrorism practitioners tackling new threats. Real life and US politics also got in the way and soon I found myself in Washington, DC, talking to Ellen Laipson, who combined practical experience as the Vice Chair of the National Intelligence Council with a high academic position as the Director of the International Security Program at the Schar School of Government and Public Policy at George Mason University. The conversation was liberating: she encouraged me to put the boxes of notes I had accumulated over the years down in writing and to tie dalla Chiesa's experience to the challenges facing security services today. I gladly took her lead and you have the results in your hand. I can only hope the story is interesting and perhaps even useful.

This is the first in a series of books that the Schar School's Center for Security and Policy Studies will be publishing on a range of security related topics. The series aims to stimulate policy relevant discussions and new thinking in the world of security policy.

I owe many thanks to Neslihan Kaptano at the Schar School who took me in hand and helped me with the research and editorial process and am grateful to Mr. Charles Allen, Ambassador Richard Kauzarlich, Professor Ahmet Yayla, Dr. Juliette Shedd and Professor Robert Deitz for their suggestions and comments. Ambassador Anthony Gardner was kind enough to read the manuscript and give advice and encouragement as well as fill in some details of his father's remarkable tour in Italy during this difficult period. As always, all errors and judgments are my responsibility alone.

I now am beginning to understand why all writers thank their families for their patience; I know that I tried that of mine. I owe particular thanks to our daughter Sophie for her careful reading and extensive editing of my early draft and to our son Michael for the example of public service he gives every day with his Naval service. My wife Diana — a real writer — put up with having an amateur one in the house for far too long, for which I will always be grateful.



Terrorism becomes a battle of wills, as to who is psychologically stronger, terrorists or society.” —SIR DAVID OMAND¹

Introduction

THE RED BRIGADES were the most effective and feared Italian terrorist² group in the period from 1969 to 1982 — the “Years of Lead”³ — when domestic terrorism engulfed the country. They maimed, kidnapped and killed politicians, judges, security officials and journalists and were able to hold the former Prime Minister hostage for 55 days before executing him in the middle of Rome. At their peak, the Red Brigades made a government collapse, intimidated judges and juries, terrified the media into publishing their propaganda, and gave the impression of being a fearsome military force that could act with impunity throughout the country. The US Ambassador at the time spoke for many when he observed, “*During the height of the crisis, many experienced observers seriously feared that Italy was about to collapse.*”⁴ But, not only did Italy not collapse; under the inspired leadership of the Carabinieri⁵ General Carlo Alberto dalla Chiesa the Italian state defeated the terrorists without sacrificing the civil liberties of its citizens. This book examines dalla Chiesa’s approach to defeating the terrorist threat and draws lessons that may be useful to police and security services in future campaigns.

The scale of political violence during the years of lead is striking: the Italian Interior Ministry catalogued 14,591 terrorist attacks in the period from 1969

1 David Omand, *Securing the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 87-88

2 Using Wilkinson’s definition of terrorism as premeditated violence designed to create a climate of extreme fear, directed at a wider range of targets than the immediate victims, involving attacks on random or symbolic targets including civilians, violating society’s norms regulating disputes and used primarily, though not exclusively, to influence the political behavior of governments, communities or a specific social group. Paul Wilkinson: *Terrorism and Democracy* (London: Routledge Third Edition, 2011), 4

3 *Die bleierne Zeit* (the Years of Lead) was the title of a German film of 1981 on their terrorist years, which was adopted by Italian commentators as a description of the period from 1969-1982

4 Robert Meade, *Red Brigades: The Story of Italian Terrorism* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 13

5 The Italian military police, discussed in more detail in Chapter 2

to 1982, reaching a peak of 2,513 in 1979, resulting in 419 deaths. One of the shrewdest observers of Italian political violence, Richard Drake, observed at the time that: “since 1969, Italy has suffered a devastating terrorist assault on her political, social and educational institutions”⁶ and that: “nothing like the Red Brigades’ reign of terror — involving the intimidation, maiming and murder of politicians, policemen, journalists, university professors and judges — occurred on the same scale any place else.”⁷

The Red Brigades had cells in Turin, Milan, Genoa, Rome and Naples and, at their height, were able to carry off militarily sophisticated attacks against well-protected targets. They recruited over ten thousand supporters who protected the seven to eight hundred underground fighters making them appear invulnerable.⁸ But in the end the Italian state, so often ridiculed for its inefficiency, corruption and incompetence, waged an effective counter-terrorist campaign that totally destroyed the organization while protecting the country’s democratic values. The Red Brigades spawned a number of copy-cat and allied groups, of which the most important were Prima Linea (Front Line), that emerged from the militia of the extreme left wing party Lotta Continua (Continuous Struggle), and the Nuclei Armati Proletari (Armed Proletarian Nucleus), that represented radicalized former criminals. The interplay and competition between the groups, and later between breakaway factions of the Red Brigades themselves, contributed to exacerbating the violence as the groups jockeyed for pre-eminence by building a reputation for brutality.

Faced with a terrifyingly effective campaign of kneecappings, kidnappings, arson and assassination, the Italian political and security authorities initially struggled to find the right response. After downplaying the threat in the early years, the government turned to large scale military and police deployments that made for good security theater but were ineffective in the absence of usable intelligence. Many politicians on the right and also some on the center and the left, clamored for more repressive laws to roll back recently won civil liberties. Only when General Dalla Chiesa took over the counter-terrorist campaign did these understandable but counterproductive impulses recede, as the politicians and public alike responded to his vigorous and effective approach and his confidence that the forces of democracy could win this fight. Dalla Chiesa’s unusual military and policing career fighting guerrilla groups, the Nazi occupation and the Mafia had given him a unique set of experiences and insights that informed the strategy he pursued to destroy the Red Brigades.

6 Richard Drake, *The Revolutionary Mystique and Terrorism in Contemporary Italy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 10

7 Richard Drake, *Apostles and Agitators, Italy’s Marxist Revolutionary Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1

8 Vladimiro Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2016), 504

The story of Dalla Chiesa's victory is not only of historical interest; it shows how an effective strategy can defeat a professional, deeply rooted and ideologically committed terrorist group. The destruction of the Red Brigades counters today's popular narrative that terrorism can only be contained but never fully defeated.⁹ As one of the foremost researchers of the period observed, the terrorists and the groups they formed have been and continue to be much studied but the efforts of the state to stop them have been largely ignored.¹⁰ It is time to redress this imbalance and to celebrate such a striking success.

We are fortunate to know a good deal about Dalla Chiesa's strategy from his own writings and interviews during the campaign. Though he refined his tactics as circumstances evolved, his basic approach did not change, despite intense political pressure to take moral short cuts. He understood that the center of gravity of the campaign was psychological. Victory would come from destroying the credibility of the terrorists among their supporters and the general public. To do so, he built a motivated and well led team and used five tactics that he had developed over a lifetime of fighting organized insurgent and criminal groups: 1) infiltrating the target, 2) analyzing its methods and structures, 3) controlling the prisons, 4) convincing members of the group to repent, distance themselves from the movement and collaborate with the authorities, and 5) fomenting splits in the organization to hasten its collapse. Chapter 1 explores the strategy that Dalla Chiesa adopted which evolved into a distinctive, and successful, Italian approach to combating violent extremism.

Similar violent challenges to the democracies of Argentina and Uruguay in the 1970s had resulted in their fall and the rise of viciously authoritarian regimes; Italy's democracy had collapsed in the 1920s under the pressure of the violent tactics of the Fascist movement, so the survival of Italy's democracy was by no means a foregone conclusion. Many Italian commentators at the time were too caught up in their internal political battles to recognize the scale of this success, it took an American observer to summarize accurately the challenge the state had faced and the result of the campaign it had waged and the result it had obtained through so much sacrifice:

*"The Red Brigades had risen to a position of power that enabled them to threaten the state as no revolutionary organization had done since the Fascist takeover in 1922. Now the Red Brigades had come tumbling down in ruinous defeat; they existed as leaderless fragments... The Red Brigades no longer existed as an organization."*¹¹

9 Richard Haass, *Where to Go From Here*, Foreign Affairs, July/August 2017, 6

10 Vladimiro Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 11

11 Richard Drake, *The Revolutionary Mystique and Terrorism in Contemporary Italy*, 148

The Red Brigades emerged out of a toxic political environment, which is the topic of Chapter 2. We start with the complex state of Italian post-war politics, the political blockage that resulted from the anomalous role of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), always the main opposition but not an acceptable governing party to many in the Italian state and to its NATO allies, before moving to the student and worker revolts that sparked a decade of violence.

Chapter 3 reviews the large but dysfunctional security institutions during their slow transition from the habits and structures inherited from the fascist dictatorship. The chapter focuses on the Carabinieri, Italy's gendarmerie, where Dalla Chiesa had built his career and with whose values he identified deeply. Dalla Chiesa's career, from an early experience in counter-guerrilla campaigns to fighting the Nazis as a partisan and taking on the Mafia in Sicily, had given him a unique preparation for the counter-terrorist campaign he was about to lead. Dalla Chiesa's personal popularity and identification with anti-fascism provoked jealousies and suspicions in the more reactionary elements of the security services, including among some of his superiors, which led to resistance to him and his methods. The in-fighting and toxic relationships between police and Carabinieri as well as within the Carabinieri between modernizers and reactionary officers was bad enough, but the links between the intelligence services and neo-fascist terrorist groups and coup plotters, and the purges that followed when these links were revealed, made for a particularly difficult environment in which to run an effective counter-terrorist organization.

The terrorist campaign of the Red Brigades, and the state's response to their challenge took place in three distinct phases: from the emergence of the Red Brigades in 1970 to the capture or death of their founders in 1975-1976; the rebirth of the new Red Brigades under more effective and ruthless leadership until the kidnapping and murder of the former Prime Minister and President of the Christian Democratic Party, Aldo Moro — their greatest triumph — in 1978; and their defeat between 1978 to 1982 when General Dalla Chiesa was finally given the authority to run an effective counter-terrorist campaign against them. Chapter 4 charts the story of the birth and growth of the Red Brigades; Chapter 5 covers the Moro kidnapping and its aftermath and Chapter 6 chronicles the escalation in violence after the Moro murder, the emergence of disillusioned Red Brigades activists prepared to confess — the famous *pentiti* or repentant ones — and the path to the group's ultimate defeat. Though a few sporadic attacks under the Red Brigades banner continued until the early 1990s, by 1982 the threat was effectively neutralized and even the leadership of the organization admitted that the war was over.

Too many Italian and foreign observers, including a few particularly unhelpful American self proclaimed experts, could not or did not want to believe that the Red Brigades were a truly domestic phenomenon and wasted much energy looking for foreign links to explain what was happening, a sadly typical example of displacement activities in counter-terrorist campaigns that we cover in Chapter 7. Supporters of the Communist Party claimed to see the hidden hand of the Italian secret services or their American CIA sponsors while hard line anti-communists saw that of Moscow. An Italian taste for conspiracy theories has resulted in a small forest of books which try to identify the secret origins of the Red Brigades: some blaming the freemasons; others the French or British intelligence services and many aiming their fire at an obscure language school in Paris staffed by Italian leftists who had abandoned the cause. In reality, the evidence is clear that this was a home-grown phenomenon with deep roots in the domestic far left, but these theories confused many investigators and continues to pollute the debate about the rise and fall of Italian terrorism.

After Moro's murder, the Italian government finally gave *dalla Chiesa* the authority to destroy the terrorists with a coordinated national approach. Chapter 8 covers his approach to defeating the Red Brigades and their allies. This is an exemplary case of a counter-terrorist campaign in which the strategy was clearly articulated and followed through to total victory. *Dalla Chiesa* was acutely sensitive to the political aspect of the struggle and wanted to be sure that he carried public opinion with him while maintaining elite support, both in the government and among the opposition parties, so he went out of his way to explain, in public interviews as well as in confidential memoranda, what he intended to do and then held himself accountable for delivering results. The General was particularly sensitive to the concerns of the Communist Party, whose support would be essential to maintaining legitimacy, and wanted to get them to start working with the police and security services to tackle the threat, rather than running their own intelligence operations. This was an under-appreciated part of his overall approach as neither side wanted to highlight the level of co-operation. Years later, the shadow interior minister for the Communist Party would reveal that he had held secret meetings with *dalla Chiesa* throughout the emergency that had been essential in building a new level of trust between the party and the security forces.

The nimble, technologically sophisticated inter-agency group that *dalla Chiesa* built put into practice his strategy for psychological warfare and achieved impressive results by applying his tactics of infiltration, careful analysis, control of prisons, separating terrorists from the movement and fomenting splits to discredit the enemy. His emphasis on a small hand picked groups of police, intelligence and *Carabinieri* officers working closely together with the latest

technology and managing the tempo of operations to stay ahead of the adversary was groundbreaking at the time and still has valuable lessons for counter-terrorist campaigns today.

The terrorist emergency of the 1970s and early 1980s was primarily a political struggle. We look at the origins and evolution of the idea among large sections of the Italian far left that violent revolution was not only an acceptable but a realistic and necessary development in a liberal democracy and that an urban guerrilla movement could create fundamental social change. The interplay between left- and right-wing terrorism was an important factor in mutual radicalization as was the competition between terrorist groups for recruits and support. Dalla Chiesa was acutely aware of the ideological aspect of the struggle and his tactics were carefully calibrated to undermine the confidence of the terrorists in the justice of their cause. We examine how his tactics as well as larger international political developments influenced the morale of hardened terrorists and how offering redemption changed their calculus. The example of Sergio D'Elia, a leader of Prima Linea who was convicted of participating in a murder and, after repenting, went on to become a leading member of Parliament and a prominent peace campaigner, is a particularly vivid example of this political path.

Finally, chapter 9 concludes with some lessons we can draw from dalla Chiesa's victory that may be relevant to counter-terrorist campaigns today. Democracies with blocked political systems in which sizable minorities feel shut out of the political process, in which narratives of violent political change are accepted, with zero-sum political competition and a dynamic of mutual radicalization, are susceptible to violent challenge. Italy provides both a cautionary tale of how domestic terrorist groups can emerge to threaten the state as well as an object lesson in how this kind of threat can be defeated without sacrificing the democratic values that the state aims to protect. These lessons, sadly, may be useful again in other countries.

Much has been written in Italian about this harrowing period of Italy's contemporary history. The coverage of the Years of Lead began with some excellent journalism, most notably Giorgio Bocca's *Noi Terroristi* (We, the terrorists) and *Gli Anni del Terrorismo* (The years of terrorism) and Indro Montanelli (himself a victim of a Red Brigades kneecapping) and Mario Cervi's volume in their essential history of Italy: *L'Italia negli Anni di Piombo* (Italy in the Years of Lead) that summarize the events and the atmosphere of the period. Sergio Zavoli's more recent *La Notte della Repubblica* (The Night of the Republic) is also a helpful account of the politics and culture of the period.

Once the campaign was over, and the Red Brigades leaders were imprisoned, they maintained their reputation for writing at great length about their motivations. During the campaign, this habit had infuriated their leader, Mario Moretti, who

complained that he was trying to run a serious revolutionary group and that he didn't have time to read the turgid essays on Marxist-Leninist theory that his colleagues insisted on producing. In a series of memoirs and long interviews, most notably Curcio's, Gallinari's, Franceschini's and Moretti's own accounts of the campaign, they re-fight old internal battles and try to explain the choices they made. Franceschini has argued for years, in ever more elaborate conspiracies, that Moretti (who took over leadership of the organization after the founders were arrested or killed) was an agent provocateur. Moretti replies, convincingly, that it would be an odd agent provocateur who would willingly spend a further two decades in jail, as he did, rather than admit he had been wrong about his ideology. Giovanni Fasanella and Antonella Grippo wrote movingly about the stories of the victims of Italian terrorism, who are so often sadly ignored in the accounts of the period.

The motivations of the terrorists is a topic of endless fascination in Italy mainly because they were such recognizable figures and clearly by and large not monsters but rather well meaning political activists who had made awful decisions. Alessandro Orsini's astute, if polemical *Anatomia delle Brigate Rosse* (Anatomy of the Red Brigades) ties their ideology back to traditional Marxist thought with some well chosen quotations from Gramsci and, less convincingly, to a broader Manichean tradition in Italian political culture. Luigi Manconi, a former member of the non-violent extreme left wing group *Lotta Continua* shows his familiarity with the language and thought of the movement in his *Terroristi Italiani* (Italian Terrorists) and links their motives to a blocked political system and the myth of the betrayed Resistance.

Sadly, the more analytical coverage quickly degenerated into conspiracy theory with Giorgio Galli, the historian of the Italian Communist Party, giving a particularly slanted example in his *Piombo Rosso* (Red Lead) that uses all sorts of claims of secret service interference to absolve the Communists of any blame for the movement. Even Donatella Dalla Porta, whose statistical research remains the best resource on the period, is tempted down these unproductive paths and is too open to the largely debunked theories of state manipulation of the opposed terrorist groups, the so-called strategy of tension, and overly generous in her interpretation of the early days of left wing revolt as a well meaning, if violent, expression of a desire for social change. It is simply not true for example, as she argues, that the use of neo-fascist violence was part of the institutional policy for dealing with collective action.¹² The Interior Minister, Paolo Emilio Taviani, explained that the situation had been more complicated and messy. There had been elements in the secret services in sympathy with the extreme right and a weak administration had

12 Donatella Della Porta, *Left Wing Terrorism in Italy*, in Crenshaw, *Terrorism in Context* (College Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2001), 113

let them grow. When his administration cracked down on them some splintered off and became a true threat, but this was never part of a deep government plot, but rather a bureaucratic nightmare.¹³ The writings of Alberto Franceschini, one of the founders of the Red Brigades, have veered into ever more elaborate conspiracy theories over the years as have those of the Communist member of parliament and a member of the Parliamentary commission on the Moro case, Sergio Flamigni, who sees the CIA's hand everywhere.

Perhaps the most internationally damaging of the conspiratorial approach to the history of the Red Brigades came from the influential American journalist Claire Sterling whose book, *The Terror Network*, convinced many in the Reagan administration to see the hidden hand of the KGB behind the domestic terrorist groups and to ignore their local roots and pathologies, dismissing the accurate and useful analysis from the CIA and the State Department. The emphasis on international state sponsorship of what was at its roots a domestic problem misled too many American policy makers in the Reagan years.

Only recently has the focus begun to shift to those who fought the Red Brigades. Pierangelo Sapegna and Moro Ventura's *Generale, un caso aperto* (The General: an open case) is a helpful overview of dalla Chiesa's career with a short section on the anti-terrorist campaign though its primary focus is his work against the Mafia. Gianremo Armeni did scholars a great service in his oral history: *La strategia vincente del Generale dalla Chiesa* (dalla Chiesa's victorious strategy) though his analysis of the General's strategy is more implied in the interviews than fully developed. Nando dalla Chiesa's compilation of his father's writings: *In nome del popolo Italiano*, (In the Name of the Italian People) is a moving act of filial piety as well as an invaluable source. The most valuable, credible, and insightful analysis in Italian of the campaign comes in Vladimiro Satta's many accounts of his research during the *Commissioni Stragi* (Parliamentary Enquiry on Political Mass Murders) where he demolishes one conspiracy theory after another in the search for verifiable truths. Satta's *I nemici della Repubblica* (The Enemies of the Republic) is an essential summary of what is known of the left-wing and right-wing terrorist movements during the period as are his meticulously researched books debunking the conspiracy theories, *Odissea nel caso Moro* (Odyssey in the Moro case) and *Il caso Moro e i suoi falsi misteri* (The Moro case and its false mysteries). Robert Meade's *The Red Brigades* gives a solid account of the campaign and of dalla Chiesa's role in the fight against terrorism. Meade is realistic about the constraints facing the Italian police up to the end of the Moro kidnapping and of the importance of the public disgust that doomed the Red Brigades after they murdered a Communist union official, Guido Rossa, who had reported one of their activists. He also has a wonderful quote from Franceschini on the dangers of

¹³ Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 238

the ideology he and his fellow terrorists had espoused: “*we have only been addicts of a particular type, addicts of ideology. A fatal drug, worse than heroin. A few cubic centimeters of it and you’re done for life.*”¹⁴ Alison Jamieson’s *The Heart Attacked* also gives a helpful, clear and detailed account of the years of lead even if some of the details are now dated and could benefit from an update, particularly in the description of the Moro kidnapping in Via Fani which lacks the information that came to light in later investigations. Still, as a chronological account of the rise and fall of the Red Brigades, the book stands out for its clarity and detail.

Most of the analytical writing has concentrated on putting the Red Brigades in the context of the broader problem of left-wing terrorism during the period. What has been missing so far, particularly in English, is a systematic analysis of the strategy that defeated the Red Brigades and an exploration of what contemporary counter-terrorist experts can learn from this experience. This book translates many of the Italian sources for the first time, avoids the conspiracy theorizing that has infected so much of the literature, and concentrates on extracting the practical lessons from Dalla Chiesa’s success that can contribute to today’s debate on effective counter-terrorist practice.

14 Meade, *The Red Brigades*, 235



At the heart of the revolutionary project is a contradiction that, with good police work, will sooner or later prove fatal.”

—ROBERT MEADE, *RED BRIGADES*

1

The Italian Approach to Counter-Terrorism

AT THE HEIGHT of the Jihadist threat in Europe in the 2000s, many analysts were puzzled by why Italy seemed immune. Theories ranging from the Mafia's control over arms shipments, to Al Qaeda's use of Italy as a transit point¹⁵ were considered until a consensus emerged in the counter-terrorist community¹⁶ that the Italian security authorities were particularly alert and competent, with the right tools, techniques and ruthless determination to deal with the threat,¹⁷ although some analysts warned that this period of Italian exceptionalism may be coming to an end.¹⁸ Given that these were attributes not always ascribed to Italian institutions, the next question is how did Italy develop such an effective approach to combating terrorism. Answering this question requires looking back at one of the darkest periods in Italian political life, the years of lead of the 1970s and early 1980s. Understanding how Italy defeated the domestic terrorist challenge of that period helps to explain the current Italian approach to counter-terrorism and may have useful lessons for other countries facing similar challenges.

The greatest internal threat to the Italian state in the post-war period came from the Communist urban terrorist group, the Red Brigades, and its allies. For over a decade, they attacked politicians, policemen, soldiers, journalists, academics, judges and citizens, using murder, arson, kidnapping, beatings and kneecappings to achieve their political aims.

15 "Islam, Islamism, and Jihadism in Italy;" Lorenzo Vidino, "The Evolution of Jihadism in Italy: Rise in Homegrown Radicals," *CTC Sentinel* 6:11 (2013); Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy. Birth, Development and Radicalization Dynamics*.

16 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/23/why-has-italy-been-spared-mass-terror-attacks-in-recent-years>

17 <https://www.economist.com/europe/2017/09/30/why-italy-has-not-yet-suffered-islamist-terrorism>

18 Michele Groppi <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-terror-threat-to-italy-how-italian-exceptionalism-is-rapidly-diminishing/>

Their eventual defeat by the forces of the state, brilliantly led by the General of the Carabinieri (Italy's gendarmerie) Carlo Alberto dalla Chiesa, provides a template for a successful counter-terrorist campaign and remains the touchstone for Italy's approach to a different terrorist challenge today. Dalla Chiesa developed a sophisticated approach to defeating the Red Brigades based on detailed intelligence led operations built on infiltration and electronic monitoring of suspects and careful mapping of their networks and ideologies; tight control of prisons to prevent terrorist recruitment and promote de-radicalization; aggressive military operations run by the Special Intervention Groups he established in the Carabinieri and which remain the core counter-terrorist units today¹⁹ and a unique set of laws that provided incentives for terrorists to leave their organizations, not only providing vital information to the authorities but dismantling the networks of trust that held the terrorist groups together.

The response of the Italian state to today's Jihadist threat draws on this history, adding a new tool — deportation — to deal with suspects who have not yet committed acts of violence but are suspected of potentially doing so in the future. As Lorenzo Vidino and Francesco Marone point out:

Given Italy's long history of confronting domestic terrorism (such as the Red Brigades in the 1970s and early 1980s) and sophisticated criminal organizations (in particular, the Sicilian Mafia, the 'Ndrangheta and the Camorra)^[15], Italian authorities developed skills and legal tools that are useful in confronting jihadist terrorism. Additionally, over the last few years, Italian lawmakers have passed various laws aimed at strengthening the country's already extensive counterterrorism legislation, and adapting it to the current threat.

In general, Italy gives priority to the criminal justice system in its approach to counter-terrorism, as Italian authorities have ample powers to conduct lengthy surveillance operations and pre-emptive raids.²⁰

The dual nature of the Carabinieri as both a national police force and a military body, trained and equipped for light infantry conflict, gives it a particular strength in counter-terrorism campaigns that combine painstaking intelligence gathering with kinetic action in which often well armed terrorists need to be decisively overmatched. The military discipline and organization, and the commitment to upholding democratic values, were useful elements in a difficult and often bloody conflict. But this is also a case where personal leadership mattered. Dalla Chiesa's remarkable career in the Carabinieri gave him a set of insights into a winning

19 <http://www.carabinieri.it/docs/default-source/default-document-library/dispositivo-antiterrorismo-dell'arma-dei-carabinieri.pdf>

20 <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/jihadist-threat-italy-primer-18541>

strategy against a deeply rooted terrorist movement. To understand his victory, and his legacy, we need to first understand the man.

GENERAL DALLA CHIESA

The dalla Chiesa family was of traditional Piedmontese stock, though his father had bucked tradition by marrying an Emilian, to whom dalla Chiesa attributed his creativity, the Piedmontese being known for earnestness and formality rather than for their sense of fun.²¹ In all other respects, though, his father, General Romano dalla Chiesa, had embodied the Piedmontese Carabinieri tradition. When his sons Romolo — who would also become a Carabinieri general — and Carlo Alberto, both in their lieutenant uniforms, greeted him on his return to Milan from the Nazi concentration camp he had been sent to for refusing to join Mussolini's rump regime, Romolo embraced him while Carlo Alberto saluted. The family legend is that the next day Romano punished Romolo for undignified behavior.²² Even in their choice of Christian names, the dalla Chiesa family demonstrated their national pride: the father as the Roman of ancient legend, with one son named after Romulus, the founder of Rome and the other after the Piedmontese king who had introduced the Constitution and begun the unification of Italy.

Dalla Chiesa spoke often about the singular role of the Carabinieri as a unifying force in Italian society. In his speech to commemorate the 166th anniversary of the founding of the Carabinieri, he spoke of their continuing struggle to protect the unity of Italy against Nazi aggression, organized crime and terrorist attacks alike and he focused intently on the force's position as a truly national institution, deliberately not tied to local allegiances and loyalties but rather dedicated to protecting all citizens and particularly the weak and the vulnerable in every corner of the country.²³ The journalist Giorgio Bocca described dalla Chiesa as a Carabiniere from the tip of his toes to the top of his head.²⁴

In a departure from family tradition though, dalla Chiesa had not started his career in the Carabinieri but rather had joined the infantry at the start of the Second World War. He had been dispatched to Montenegro to tackle the insurgency that was challenging the Italian occupation after Mussolini's disastrous decision to invade the Balkans. He learned counter-insurgency skills and won two battle awards, before transferring to the Carabinieri in October 1942, who sent him to command the district of San Benedetto del Tronto on

21 Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa, *In nome del popolo Italiano, autobiografia a cura di Nando dalla Chiesa* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1997), 12

22 Sapegno and Ventura, *Generale: Carlo Alberto dalla Chiesa, un caso aperto* (Arezzo: Limina, 1997), 14

23 Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa, *In nome del popolo Italiano*, 246-252

24 Giorgio Bocca, quoted in Sapegno and Ventura, *Generale*, 13

the Adriatic coast. When the Fascist regime fell on July 25th, 1943, he quickly decided to help the resistance. He smuggled allied prisoners of war through German lines until the Nazi security services found out about his activities and sent the SS to arrest him. He escaped by tying his bed sheets to the back window of his barracks and climbing down them as three carloads of SS troops surrounded the building. Dalla Chiesa then joined a local resistance group in the nearby mountains, teaching them military skills and continuing to smuggle Allied prisoners of war out of German lines until he too crossed the lines and joined the free Italian government.

He was assigned to the protection team for the new provisional government and entered Rome with the Allies. After the war, he returned to his studies, graduating with a joint degree in law and political science from Bari University, where he studied under Aldo Moro, then a young law professor, before heading to Sicily to fight the Mafia, as his father had done before him.²⁵

Dalla Chiesa's two tours in Sicily (1949-1952, 1966-1973) taught him how to interrogate suspects gently and persuasively and to get witnesses to turn against the Mafia, even if winning convictions in the local courts was often hard, thanks to the political protection that the Mafia enjoyed and the fear it engendered. He distinguished himself by going after powerful and politically connected Mafia dons including the vote brokers who guaranteed the large Christian Democratic victories on which local politicians traded. His career advanced slowly in the period between his Sicilian tours. General De Lorenzo, commanding General of the Carabinieri who, as the journalists Montanelli and Cervi observed, carried out his duties with "South American swagger,"²⁶ was busy writing plans for a Carabinieri led coup, which were never triggered but caused much paranoia when revealed in the 1970s. De Lorenzo distrusted this subordinate who showed such commitment to the democratic values of the resistance,²⁷ and sidelined him, forcing him to move his family four times in one year of service to ever more marginal posts. After a few unhappy years in backwater commands, Dalla Chiesa requested a transfer back to Sicily where the Mafia had evolved from sheep rustling and union busting to the drug trade and large-scale construction frauds. He began to map the genealogy of Mafia families, set up long lasting observation of couriers, and investigate those areas that were crime free, as those were where the bosses lived and worked. He introduced network analysis and infiltration techniques to round up entire gangs,²⁸ though convictions remained elusive.

25 Sapegno and Ventura, *Generale*, 17-20

26 One of Italy's leading journalists and himself a victim of a Red Brigades kneecapping

27 Dalla Chiesa *In nome del popolo Italiano*, 89

28 Sapegno and Ventura, *Generale*, 23-30

On October 1st, 1973, dalla Chiesa was finally promoted to Brigadier General and given command of the first Carabinieri brigade in Turin. On December 10th, the Red Brigades had kidnapped Ettore Amerio, head of Personnel for FIAT, the nation's largest manufacturing company, and held him for eight days before releasing him.²⁹ Dalla Chiesa followed the case carefully and argued that the Red Brigades were becoming a real threat, disagreeing with the district magistrate Luciano Violante, who didn't take them seriously.³⁰

Ignoring the magistrate's views, dalla Chiesa began to build an anti-terrorist squad, teaching his Carabinieri to dress, talk and think like the terrorists, to infiltrate their networks and continually track their movements. One of his closest subordinates, General Bozzo remembers that the work was hard but that the Carabinieri *"obeyed him easily, the truth is that they doted on him: if dalla Chiesa asked for a sacrifice, they were ready to give their souls because they knew that he would always be the first to take a risk, to be an example."*³¹

His techniques paid off with the capture of Curcio and the death of Cagol, along with many of the founders of the Red Brigades and by the October 1974, his unit had arrested 34 Red Brigades militants and had warrants out for another 43.³² Dalla Chiesa's high profile exacerbated the jealousy and resentment against him among the Carabinieri leadership, who had always viewed him with suspicion and, in July 1975, his group was disbanded and the team dispersed among the traditional regional structures.³³ The government approved this decision as the threat appeared to be over, a judgment which the Interior Minister later confessed he regretted.³⁴

When, soon after, a Red Brigades unit was caught on the Swiss border with machine guns stolen from Swiss Army depots, dalla Chiesa sent an emissary to the government in Rome to warn of the threat but was not taken seriously.³⁵ Later that year, dalla Chiesa proposed the creation of a national anti-terrorism group but was once again turned down.³⁶

In May 1977, facing a crisis in the jails, the government asked dalla Chiesa to take on an additional new assignment to fix the problem. Prison revolts and escapes had become an increasingly menacing threat to the state, growing from 211 in 1974 to 376 in 1976.³⁷ Even more worrying was the use that terrorist

29 Sapegno and Ventura: *Generale*, 42

30 Sapegno and Ventura, *Generale*, 42

31 Sapegno and Ventura, *Generale*, 42

32 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 443

33 Sapegno and Ventura, *Generale*, 56

34 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 144

35 Gianremo Armeni, *La Strategia Vincente del Generale Dalla Chiesa* (Roma: Edizioni Associate, 2004), 31

36 Armeni, *La Strategia Vincente*, 72

37 Giancarlo De Vito, *Camoschi e Girachiavi* (Milano: Laterza, 2009), 90

groups, starting with the NAP but soon moving to the Red Brigades and others, were making of prisons to recruit new members by convincing common criminals that they were being oppressed by the capitalist system. Dalla Chiesa concentrated all the political prisoners in nine high security prisons, specially constructed to make escape impossible. He would move them regularly from prison to prison, often in the middle of the night, to disrupt any attempt to organize revolts inside the jails or escapes planned from outside. By isolating the political prisoners from the common criminals he stopped the recruitment process and he set out to demoralize the prisoners and create feuds among them.³⁸

In October 1977, the government agreed to move ahead with another proposal dalla Chiesa had made, this time to create a rapid reaction force of Carabinieri modeled on the German GSG-9 rapid intervention force which had shown its mettle in the Mogadishu operation, where they had rescued the passengers of a hijacked plane. The *Gruppo D'Intervenzione Speciale* (Special Intervention Group), were specially trained to take on challenging hostage situations and other emergencies. This proposal, like so many of dalla Chiesa's initiatives, was vehemently opposed by his superiors in the Carabinieri, with his direct superior, General Giavanbattista Palumbo, writing in the margins of the memo proposing the new group that "*it's not worth a damn*".³⁹ The new group soon showed its worth putting down a series of bloody prison revolts.

He had enjoyed his initial campaign against the Red Brigades, telling a journalist who had asked him whether terrorism for him was a nightmare, a worry or what, that it was none of that, but rather a game of chess.⁴⁰ When the Carabinieri leadership dissolved his counter-terrorist group he became frustrated and depressed as the situation worsened. The low point came when the Red Brigades kidnapped the former prime minister Aldo Moro, General Secretary of the Christian Democratic party who had been dalla Chiesa's law professor many years before, and held him for 55 days while the authorities were made to look ridiculous and ineffective in a search that mixed tragedy and farce. In the Parliamentary inquest on the police response, his closest collaborator, General Bozzo, remembers going with dalla Chiesa and ten of his men to Rome during the crisis, finding total chaos there, and ending up going to the movies as there was nothing to do.⁴¹

When, after Moro's murder, he finally won the powers he needed to tackle the challenge, he had a clear view of what had to be done. In his memorandum to the Interior Minister⁴² he set out his strategy to traumatize the terrorist

38 Prospero Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli* (Milano: Bompiani, 2006), 175

39 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 441

40 Giorgio Bocca, quoted in Sapegno and Ventura, *Generale*, page 57

41 Armeni, *La Strategia Vincente*, 76

42 Dalla Chiesa *In nome del popolo Italiano*, 223-227

organizations and destroy their credibility with supporters and the public by forcing contradictions between their members to create splits in the movements. He identified the university halls as a central battleground, particularly among those professors like Toni Negri at the University of Padua, Enrico Fenzi, a Dante and Petrarch scholar in Genoa and Gianfranco Faina, a historian, also at the University of Genoa, who would only give full marks to students who could show evidence of having carried out terrorist attacks.⁴³

His tactics were built around a focus on careful and thorough tailing of suspects, mapping the order of battle of each group, and on concentrating on a psychological approach to the campaign to disorient and demoralize the enemy. He aimed to destroy entire cells rather than just arresting a few suspects.⁴⁴ His success made him a hero to the public, and his insistence on preserving the rule of law won him the support of the Communist Party, but the internal jealousies in his own force did not cease, and the Interior Minister had to fend off constant complaints from the commanding general of the Carabinieri about his subordinate's high public profile.⁴⁵

Some of his superiors may have hated him but his subordinates and his colleagues were in awe of Dalla Chiesa's leadership, work ethic and values. A close colleague, General Sechi, later reflected⁴⁶ that many had believed the victory of Communism was inevitable and that Dalla Chiesa had restored their confidence in democracy. He always pushed hard for results and led by example. When he heard that the Red Brigades were planning a breakout from the prison in Cuneo, Dalla Chiesa went himself in the middle of the night to inspect the prison's defenses by torchlight. He never had a bodyguard, which he considered a sign of weakness but relied on constant movement and surprise for his security. He pushed his views hard though he always respected hierarchy, bowing to a magistrate who insisted on an immediate arrest when he had wanted to continue tailing a group of suspects,⁴⁷ but he generally won magistrates over by the force of his own example.⁴⁸ General Sechi, one of his closest colleagues, explained that Dalla Chiesa had become a symbol of the unity of the state and of the rejection of those who tolerated terrorism.⁴⁹

On June 18th, 1979, Dalla Chiesa wrote to the Interior Minister declaring that the emergency was coming to an end and requesting a transfer back to normal

43 Dalla Chiesa *In nome del popolo Italiano*, 232

44 Biagi interview in *Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa*, 265

45 Armeni, *La Strategia Vincente*, 138

46 Armeni, *La Strategia Vincente*, 136

47 Armeni, *La Strategia Vincente*, 140

48 Armeni, *La Strategia Vincente*, 145

49 Armeni, *La Strategia Vincente*, 40

duties and a Divisional command.⁵⁰ The Interior Minister asked him to stay on as anti-terrorism coordinator until the end of the year, and in January 1980 dalla Chiesa finally got his wish and took command of the Pastrengo Division in Milan, with 27,000 men, 130 Patton tanks, helicopters, armored personnel carriers and anti riot vehicles. He remained in informal charge of the anti-terrorist work but was back in the ranks. He had finally achieved the same rank as his father and crowned a successful career in the service.⁵¹

By 1982, terrorism was no longer a threat to the integrity of the country, but the growing Mafia menace in Sicily was, so the government turned once more to dalla Chiesa, this time as a civilian. In May 1982, Prime Minister Andreotti appointed dalla Chiesa as Prefect of Palermo, the representative of the Republic in the province, with the specific task of tackling the Mafia there. He retired from the Carabinieri and returned to Sicily where he concentrated on understanding the new drug financed Mafia networks and rallying local opinion against them, with a particular emphasis on mobilizing young Sicilians to oppose Mafia oppression.

The Mafia reacted with a campaign of intimidation and murder, which they dubbed "Operation dalla Chiesa." His son, Nando dalla Chiesa, who would later become a member of parliament for the anti-mafia La Rete party, tells of his father's concern that the Andreotti wing of the Christian Democrats was tied up with the Mafia so would never give him the tools he needed.⁵² Sure enough, the promises the government had made to him were not fulfilled and dalla Chiesa found himself isolated and alone with his new young wife in Palermo. He complained that he lacked the power to arrest the Mafia and political bosses, who he named in his last interview, in the August 1982 issue of *L'Europeo*.⁵³ The Red Brigades had tried to kill him four times, and dalla Chiesa knew that the Mafia would too. He believed that stealth and surprise were more effective than armored cars and large escorts and had always refused protection. This had served him well as long as he could trust those around him, but in Palermo that was not the case. On September 3rd, 1982, a Mafia commando ambushed dalla Chiesa's car killing him and his wife. A few days later, a handwritten sign appeared at the scene that read: "*here dies the hope of honest Sicilians.*"⁵⁴

50 Sapegno and Ventura, *Generale*, 100

51 Sapegno and Ventura, *Generale*, 20

52 Nando dalla Chiesa, *Delitto Imperfetto* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 2003), 129

53 Nando dalla Chiesa, *Delitto Imperfetto* 136

54 Sapegno and Ventura, *Generale*, 2

Lessons and Legacy

After his shocking murder, dalla Chiesa became a symbol for Italians who fought against the abuses of the Mafia and of corrupted state institutions and was remembered as the man who had saved the country from terrorism. Squares, schools and Carabinieri barracks were named after him and his face became synonymous with a commitment to honest government; a cause fervently championed by his son who entered Parliament soon afterwards, bluntly attacking the Prime Minister, Giulio Andreotti, and much of his Christian Democratic Party for having sent his father to his death.

His legacy in counter-terrorism practice is less clear. The laws on repentance that he had promoted stayed on the books and his intelligence led approach became standard practice in the Carabinieri and police force. Publishers were fascinated with the accounts of the Red Brigades' actions, the memoirs of their leaders and endless conspiratorial theories of who had been behind the movement, and academics focused on the dynamics of radicalization. This left little space for serious investigation of dalla Chiesa's strategy for counter-terrorism and his successors showed little interest in discussing these beyond a few interviews. A small exception came in 2016 when one of his former officers discussed how dalla Chiesa would have dealt with Jihadi groups recommending more aggressive infiltration, intelligence work and, most importantly, a public campaign to discredit Jihadist ideology.⁵⁵ This book tries, for the first time, to draw out lessons from dalla Chiesa's experience that may be useful to counter-terrorism practitioners today.

55 <https://www.lettera43.it/articoli/politica/2016/03/24/tavaroli-contro-lisis-imparate-da-dalla-chiesa/164992/>



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Italy has never achieved social integration. This problem has been so severe during the past century that a conspicuous minority of intellectually vocal and politically active Italians in every generation has desired revolution.⁵⁶

2

Post War Italian Politics: Stasis And Chaos

THE RISE OF THE RED BRIGADES can only be understood in the notoriously complex context of post war Italian politics. The country had 43 governments in the 40 years from 1946 to 1986. Ten major parties were represented in Parliament along with various minor groupings, particularly on the left where splits and fierce ideological debates led to frequent realignments. The trauma of the Fascist dictatorship and the Second World War had led the founders of the Italian Republic to create a system with many checks on governmental power and a weak executive. A strict proportional representation system allowed tiny political groupings to gain parliamentary seats, and the major parties were themselves split into various internal factions, whose leaders negotiated constantly for appointments for their supporters in the sprawling government organizations and state owned companies that controlled much of the economy. Crucially, the Italian Communist Party was the country's second largest political force but was excluded from joining the government as a Soviet aligned party was unacceptable to the United States and the country's NATO allies, as the American interference in the 1948 election to tip the balance against them had shown so clearly.

The Christian Democrats (DC) were the largest party, representing a broad coalition of Catholic forces from the center left to the right, supported by the church, committed to NATO membership and, most of all, to maintaining control of the government and the patronage opportunities that this offered. Politically, the party ranged from the social justice left inspired by the Second Vatican Council to a law and order right with a base of small business and anti-communist voters. The party was strongest in the deeply Catholic regions of

the Veneto, Lazio and in the south,⁵⁷ where its support depended on patronage network with an often equivocal relationship with local organized crime groups. The party itself was split into competing factions jostling for power and influence in the permanent, ever shifting, governmental coalitions and exploiting the opportunities for patronage and corruption that these created, with a shared commitment to holding power and using it to benefit the party's supporters.

The Communist Party drew credibility from its leading role in the partisan resistance against the Nazi occupation and its reputation for honesty and good government, attracting increasing support from middle class voters who sought an alternative to the political corruption of the Christian Democrats. The Communists dominated local politics in the prosperous and traditionally left wing regions of Tuscany and Emilia Romagna and represented the bulk of industrial workers in the north. Rhetorically the party presented itself as a Marxist-Leninist organization committed to proletarian revolution though in practice it accepted parliamentary democracy. Some Communist resistance fighters kept their weapons after the Second World War but the party had largely abandoned its paramilitary organization in the 1950s and concentrated on winning elections.

The Socialists and various splinter groups stood for the traditional left wing, non-Communist tradition and had struggled to maintain their relevance until they entered into coalition with the Christian Democrats and benefited from the patronage powers that this offered.

Smaller parties on the center and right represented traditional business interests and conservative political traditions and the Italian Social Movement (MSI) provided a home for the roughly 10% of Italians who remained loyal to fascism.

Until 1960, the Christian Democrats had been strong enough to rule in coalition with center-right partners, but the rise of the left during the 1950s made coalition building increasingly challenging until, in 1960, the party tried to form a government with the support of the neo-fascist MSI. This caused widespread protests, beginning in Genoa when the MSI rally's keynote speaker was the former fascist prefect who had been responsible for deporting union leaders to Nazi concentration camps.⁵⁸ Protests spread across the country and reached their peak in the Communist city of Reggio Emilia, where police opened fire on a demonstration, killing five protesters.⁵⁹ The government fell and the Christian Democrats accepted that they had to let the Socialists and their allies into government to achieve the overriding objective of keeping the Communists out of power.

57 Percy Allum <http://www.rivistameridiana.it/files/Allum,-La-Dc-al-Nord-e-al-Sud.pdf>

58 L'Unita' reporting on Genoa demonstrations: <https://perma.cc/8R9C-BCFF>

59 Partisan Association commemoration of massacre: <https://perma.cc/9XQV-W3XG>

This new political structure turned out to be reasonably robust despite the frequent changes of government, but had a fatal flaw. Since the Communist Party was allied to the Soviet Union, it could never be allowed to form a government but, without it, there was no alternative to a Christian Democrat led government and thus no way for voters to throw out an administration, no matter how poorly it performed. The phenomenon of a “blocked democracy” attracted increasingly negative comment and caused rising frustration. Unsurprisingly, Italian politics became increasingly corrupt and unresponsive to the needs of a rapidly industrializing country under growing social strain.

Apart from the demonstrations of 1960, the post-war years had not seen major political violence. The country was focused on the economic boom that saw Italy develop rapidly from a poor agricultural economy to a developed industrial one. This led to wide scale migration of over 8 million largely uneducated peasants from the underdeveloped South to the industrialized North,⁶⁰ which had little capacity to integrate them into a booming but poorly organized industrial sector. The social consequences of this shift were to become tragically clear in the factory riots that were to characterize industrial relations in the 1970s and formed the backdrop for the rise of the Red Brigades and their ability to recruit alienated workers.

Violent rhetoric remained an accepted political tool among various segments of Italian politics: the Communists talked about the inevitable revolution, even if they did little to bring it about; the remaining Fascist groups believed in the cleansing power of violent struggle, and a millenarian Catholic tradition could also lead to the glorification of direct action, accentuated by the fashion for liberation theology which tried to fuse Marxist theories of class struggle with Catholic teaching on social justice. The liberal spirit of political compromise remained a minority view in Italian political discourse.

Leonard Weinberg’s comparative study of political violence noted the danger of this kind of blocked political system, where fundamental notions of legitimacy were not settled: “*At least at the domestic level, democracies that display high levels of terrorist violence are more likely where party politics consists not only of multiple parties, but where these parties are far apart ideologically or where they contest elections along some other dimension of conflict. Italy, Greece, Peru, Lebanon, and Turkey come to mind as places where these elements came together during the 1960s and 1970s.*”⁶¹

Italian political violence began as an outgrowth of the student movement. The Italian student revolts of 1967 to 1969 were part of a broader movement in the West, from the American protests against the Vietnam, to the French uprising

60 Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 154

61 Leonard Weinberg, *Democracy and Terrorism: Friend or Foe? (Political Violence)* (pp. 8-9). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.

against De Gaulle, the civil rights marches in Northern Ireland and the movement against repressive laws in Germany. The Italian protests began as a challenge to the unresponsive, hierarchical university system that had failed to expand or modernize in response to the increasing demands put on it by the country's rapid industrialization. In a series of well meaning reforms, entry to university courses had been opened to all high school students but without expanding the teaching facilities, modernizing the curriculum or helping students complete their studies in a reasonable period. This created a frustrated, unemployable and seemingly permanent student class with no real prospects and led to a radicalized student movement. Though parts of the movement remained peaceful and focused on social change, a significant fringe adopted violent tactics and revolutionary, often Maoist inspired, ideologies.

On March 1st, 1968 over a hundred students and police officers were injured at a demonstration held by the Architecture faculty in the University of Rome.⁶² The protesters had arrived prepared with Molotov cocktails, rocks and iron bars and took on the police in a battle that lasted for hours. Though the left wing poet Pier Paolo Pasolini had criticized the students in his biting poem *Valle Giulia*⁶³ as the bossy, blackmailing, confident and shameless children of the bourgeoisie and reminding them that:

*At Valle Giulia, yesterday, there was a fragment
of class struggle: you, my friends, (although
in the right) were the rich,
and the policemen (although in the wrong)
were the poor...*

Despite Pasolini's warnings, mainstream opinion on the left supported the students. The official Communist Party paper, *L'Unita*, led with the headline "*The Communists are with the students in their struggle.*"⁶⁴ In April, Luigi Longo, the party's General Secretary, wrote in *Rinascita*, the party's premier ideological magazine, praising the student movement for adding to the progressive movement and excusing the violence by observing that well behaved masses couldn't bring about change. The support paid off with a million extra votes for the Communists in the following year's election. Not all party leaders agreed with the support for student rioters but the objections were mainly focused on the student movement's criticism of Soviet "social imperialism" and their refusal to accept Soviet primacy in the Communist movement. The French Communist Party, always more hard

62 Indro Montanelli and Mario Cervi, *L'Italia degli anni di piombo*, (Milano: Rizzoli, 1991), 51

63 <https://perma.cc/72NE-YKBN>

64 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 94

line in its Stalinism than its Italian counterpart, had refused to have anything to do with the French student revolt precisely on these grounds.⁶⁵

The violence continued throughout the year and into 1969, with arson, beatings and even brief kidnappings, culminating in the death of a policeman in Milan in November 1969. The atmosphere of student revolt crystallized into a more organized movement towards revolutionary violence in some universities, most notably in Italy's first sociology faculty, housed at the University of Trent, which had been set up in 1962 to train Catholic students for government jobs and had become a center for revolutionary student movements. One of the student leaders there, Renato Curcio, a 28-year-old undergraduate, began organizing revolts in the late sixties against the professors and the very concept of a university, modeling his activities on the Chinese Red Guards. He argued that: *"the university is a class instrument. At an ideological level it produces and disseminates the ideology of the dominant class."*⁶⁶

While at university, Curcio met Margherita Cagol, a brilliant student who shared his Catholic upbringing and his revolutionary views. They married (in a formal church service) and continued organizing student revolts until they fell out with the other organizers over their belief in the need for revolutionary violence. They moved to Milan where Cagol won a scholarship to continue her studies, which supported them both as they began planning for the revolution.⁶⁷ After joining the tiny Chinese and Albanian funded and Maoist inspired Communist Party of Italy (PCd'I) — from which Curcio was promptly expelled for "political adventurism and organized factionalism"⁶⁸ — Curcio and Cagol founded their own group, the Metropolitan Political Collective, the precursor to the Red Brigades.

The student revolts coincided with an upsurge in worker unrest, which soon escaped the control of the official unions. Partly this was just bad luck as thirty two major contracts came up for renegotiation in the last quarter of 1969, but the unrest mainly reflected the stresses of Italy's accelerated industrialization, which had drawn workers from the underdeveloped south to the industrial centers of Turin, Milan and Genoa under ugly working and living conditions.⁶⁹ Militant and often violent factory based union groups began to emerge and to challenge the three traditional unions, each allied to one of the main political parties and structured to manage social conflict rather than exacerbate it. The traditional unions found the new militancy hard to manage and were often supplanted by autonomous new unions who were prepared to use violence to push their claims.

65 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 95-96

66 Marco Nese and Ettore Serio, *Il Generale Dalla Chiesa* (Roma: Kronos, 1982), 50

67 Vittorio Orsini: *Anatomia delle Brigate Rosse* (2009-2010); Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino Editore, 2009), 40

68 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 24

69 Montanelli and Cervi, *L'Italia degli anni di piombo*, 58

FIAT, Turin's largest employer, tried to deal with the violence of these new union organizers by firing 122 troublemakers and reporting them to the police but the industry minister, Carlo Donnat-Cattin, forced the company to reinstate them.⁷⁰ After this, worker militancy spread quickly in the factories of the north. Strike days climbed from 74 million in 1968 to 300 million in 1969⁷¹ and worker militancy soon spilled over into widespread violence. On July 3rd, 1969 the FIAT plant in Turin erupted with four thousand workers battling police for hours, burning cars, throwing stones at police and torching the neighborhood, with support from student organizers who helped direct the attacks.⁷²

As the workers' revolts exploded, Mario Moretti, a junior manager and mechanical engineer in the SIT-Siemens telecoms plant in Milan, became radicalized.⁷³ He wrote later that the factory had manufactured telephones and Red Brigades members in equal numbers. Moretti and his colleagues began leading arson attacks against management and organizing systematic beatings of the supervisors in the plant. Activists at the Pirelli tire factory and Magneti Marelli sparkplug plant imitated these tactics and began to attack plant managers. As the historic leaders of the Red Brigades declared in their 1976 trial: "*The Red Brigades were born in the Pirelli factory of Milan. This is not an accident, because it was the working class at Pirelli that represented in that phase the highest levels of political conscience and autonomy which had matured in the struggles of 1968-69.*"⁷⁴ The factory violence could quickly get out of hand. Enrico Galmozzi, one of the founders of the terrorist group Prima Linea, allied to the Red Brigades, remembered that he and his fellow terrorist Arialdo Lintrami had to save the floor managers from the workers at the Breda factory who would have lynched them.⁷⁵ He was amused by the irony of hardened terrorists saving the lives of the representatives of the bourgeois oppressors.

The student revolt and the worker protests merged, lethally, on November 9th, 1969 when a student march and union demonstration met by accident in front of Milan's Lyric Theatre as the show was letting out. The police intervened to keep protesters and theatergoers apart and the demonstration turned violent. An iron bar, thrown by one of the protesters, hit and killed a policeman in his jeep, the first death from the growing violence. The following month, on December 12, 1969 a bomb went off in a bank in Milan's Piazza Fontana, killing 16 people and wounding 58 more. The police rounded up anarchists, who they understandably suspected of planting the device, given the traditional anarchist reputation for

70 Montanelli and Cervi, *ibid* page 61

71 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 102

72 Oreste Scalzone: *Biennio Rosso* (Milano: SugarCo, 1988), 140-142

73 Giorgio Galli, *Il Partito Armato* (Milano: Kaos Edizioni, 1986), 22

74 A Aglietta, *Diario di una giurata popolare al processo delle Brigate rosse* (Milano: Libri, 1979), 137-154

75 Aldo Cazzullo, *I ragazzi che volevano fare la rivoluzione* (Milano: Mondadori, 2006) introduction

bomb throwing. One of their leaders, Giuseppe Pinelli, died under interrogation, allegedly falling out of the fourth floor window of the police station⁷⁶, and it later emerged that the real bombers were a neo-fascist group, acting in collaboration with agents of the Italian secret service agents who had wanted to discredit the left by staging an atrocity.⁷⁷ A seemingly endless series of trials and appeals, lasting over twenty years, did not in the end result in convictions. The bombing and the death of Pinelli set off a spiral of attacks from groups on both sides of the political divide.

The wealthy banker, publisher and political activist Giangiacomo Feltrinelli played a curious and central role in the early days of leftist violence. He had inherited the family bank and publishing empire and added to it by a series of brilliant business decisions, most notably buying the rights to Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*, which had been rejected by all other publishers in Italy and by publishing Boris Pasternak's masterpiece *Doctor Zhivago* after smuggling the manuscript out of Moscow. He had left the Communist Party in 1958, which he thought it had gone soft after abandoning its Stalinist principles in Khrushchev's thaw, but stayed close to its more hard line leaders and to the Soviet authorities. He also cultivated links with the Czechoslovak leadership and secret service and kept a house in Prague.⁷⁸ In 1967, he travelled to South America to meet Fidel Castro in Cuba and Che Guevara's followers in Bolivia. The Bolivian authorities caught him and expelled him from the country after the Italian government intervened to save him from a bloodier fate. He returned convinced that armed struggle would soon be necessary in Italy to prevent a right wing coup along the lines of the Greek Colonels' revolt and began funding a range of fledgling terrorist groups, including the 22nd October group in Genoa and his own Partisan Action Group (GAP), self consciously modeled after the wartime partisan groups. As the early financial sponsor of Italian left-wing terrorism, he played an outsized role in the early growth of the movement despite his own peculiarities and almost comically poor field craft. On March 15th, 1972, he accidentally blew himself up while trying to use explosives to take down electricity pylons (on his own property) as part of a plot to start a revolution.⁷⁹ This marked the end of the GAP, many of whose members went on to join the fledgling Red Brigades, but the inspiration and seed funding he had provided to other groups would soon bear fruit.

Alberto Franceschini came from traditional Communist stock in Reggio Emilia. His father had been sent to Auschwitz in 1944 to build ovens as a conscripted laborer. When he realized what was going on, he fled and was hidden

76 Inspiring Dario Fo's most famous play, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, which won him the Nobel Prize for Literature

77 Sergio Zavoli, *La notte della Repubblica* (Milano: Oscar, 1995), 55

78 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 139

79 Montanelli and Cervi, *L'Italia degli anni di piombo*, 98

by German social democrats until the war was over. His grandfather had fought in the resistance and remained a convinced Stalinist even after the twentieth party Congress in which Khrushchev had exposed the horrors of the Stalin regime, although his father had followed the party line and denounced Stalin's excesses.⁸⁰ Franceschini was brought up as a good communist, listening only to Radio Moscow and Radio Prague, joining the Young Pioneers and enjoying vacations in the Soviet Union. He was lucky to avoid the tradition among communist families of naming their children after Soviet leaders — leading to a surfeit of Italian Vladimirovs. Growing up, like many of his contemporaries in the younger generation in the Communist heartland of Reggio Emilia, he had become disillusioned with what he saw as the Communist Party's accommodation to bourgeois democracy. The myth of the inevitable revolution was still alive in his district, so much so that on the reverse of the inevitable portrait of Gramsci that hung in the Party office, there was one of Stalin, to be displayed when the leadership wasn't looking.⁸¹ But the reality of a Communist Party that had reached an accommodation with bourgeois democracy stung the young activists who formed a dissident group and began to plan a violent uprising. They started by learning how to use the 50 Sten machine guns that the British Special Operations Executive had parachuted in to help the resistance during the war and still worked perfectly, until the party officials found out and sent the Carabinieri to confiscate the weapons. The group then rented an apartment in town as a base for a Marxist collective and began to talk to the other revolutionary groups that were emerging across the country.

The toughest member of the group, Franceschini recounts, was his childhood friend Prospero Gallinari, a peasant's son from a partisan, Communist family. Franceschini said, admiringly, of him that he was prepared to do anything. If it had been necessary to execute his mother, he would have done so, perhaps crying and apologizing, but he definitely would have killed her.⁸² Gallinari tells the story in his memoirs of growing up with proud tales of uncles fighting the fascists and the Nazis during the war and then storing the weapons the allies had given them in the woods for the revolution to come. Gallinari's joined the communist youth, was talent spotted by the Party and sent to a training school for future cadres, run on Soviet lines, to train future party officials. As he describes it, communism was still an ideal but the shining star of the Soviet Union had dimmed. He fell out with the party elders when, aged 16, he broke into the local headquarters to put the red flag at half-mast for the death of Che Guevara.⁸³ The Party leaders

80 Giovanni Fasanella e Alberto Franceschini, *Che cosa sono le BR*, (Bari: Progedit, 2004), 18

81 Fasanella e Franceschini, *Che cosa sono le BR*, 28

82 Fasanella e Franceschini, *Che cosa sono le BR*, 37

83 Prospero Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 46

reprimanded him, telling him that the party would decide who to mourn and that, in any case, Che was an adventurer and practically a Trotskyist.

These three strands: radicalized students, disaffected workers and disillusioned communist youth, would come together to form the Red Brigades.

Meanwhile, other groups were forming on the left, with minor ideological but important tactical differences from the Red Brigades and the interplay between these groups formed an important part of the dynamic of radicalization. In Tuscany, *Potere Operaio* (Workers' Power) had emerged in 1966 based on the writings of the socialist intellectual Renato Panzieri, who had been an early champion of the "workerist" approach that rejected parliamentary democracy and argued for armed struggle based on organizing factory workers. Panzieri was arguing against the move in his own party to accept a coalition with the Christian Democrats as well as against the Communist Party's argument that they needed to defend the bourgeois democratic system as a necessary precondition for a proletarian revolution which could only occur, as Marx had argued, once the bourgeois evolution was complete. Toni Negri, another intellectual who had left the Socialist Party in the 1960s, joined Panzieri to make the case for violent wildcat strikes and sabotage as the first phase of a revolutionary struggle. Adriano Sofri, who had been expelled from the Communist Party for left-wing deviationism in 1966, joined the group and began evangelizing in factories. Sofri would later be convicted for murdering the police chief Luigi Calabresi, who the left held responsible for the death of the anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli who had allegedly fallen from a police window while being interrogated for the Piazza Fontana bombing.⁸⁴ Francesco Tolin, a leader of the group, began publishing a magazine (also called *Potere Operaio*) in 1969 that made the case for revolutionary uprisings in factories. He was charged with incitement and arrested on November 25th for encouraging the kidnappings, violence and vandalism that had occurred in Turin, Milan, Bergamo and other cities under the banner of the organization. The Communist Party and trade union movement defended him and attacked the arrest as an attack against freedom of the press. He was convicted and served two and a half months in jail before being released for a family emergency.⁸⁵

This "workerist" approach to the armed struggle was to form an important, though never dominant, part of the approach of the Red Brigades and many of their allies. Curcio and his allies took a different, "militarist", view, emphasizing the importance of a small, disciplined and underground vanguard organization over the concept of the workers' revolt. Feltrinelli's *Gruppi Armati Proletari* (GAP) also took this militarist position and after his death, the GAP members who joined the Red Brigades brought this tradition with them. The tension

84 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 24-28

85 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 121-124

between these two operational concepts was to recur throughout the history of the Red Brigades, most notably with the defection of the Milan based workerist “Walter Alasia” brigade after the murder of Aldo Moro.

Though this is a book about left-wing violence, it is worth touching on right wing, neo-fascist terrorism as well, particularly since, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it appeared to be a more serious threat to the state. The street fights between Marxist and Fascist groups were important steps in radicalizing many future terrorists on both sides. For many left-wing activists, the idea of a fascist coup in Italy was brought to life by the examples of the Greek Colonels coup in 1967 and Pinochet’s takeover in Chile in 1973. The arrival in Italy of Chilean refugees made the fall of the Allende regime particularly poignant and vivid. These examples pushed some activists to consider armed resistance and to abandon electoral politics as a dead-end, since democracy had so clearly failed in Greece and Chile.

Although fascism had been largely discredited after the fall of Mussolini, a hard-core neo-fascist tendency remained and grew as a reaction to the growth of the left. The ideological inspiration for the rebirth of a violent, extra-parliamentary right came from Julius Evola whose 1961 book *Riding the Tiger* criticized the increasingly materialist and non-spiritual Western civilization, making the case for returning to an authoritarian, traditionalist society by bringing the military and police into a coalition to fight the corrupting influence of liberal democracy.⁸⁶ Two groups: *Ordine Nuovo* (New Order) and the even more extreme *Avanguardia Nazionale* (National Vanguard) emerged in the mid 1960s to bring Evola’s ideas to life through physical violence. They were inspired by the activities of the French *Organisation de l’armée secrète* (OAS) which was conducting a terrorist campaign against the Algerian nationalists and against President Charles de Gaulle, who had conceded independence to Algeria thus, in their view, betraying the interests of the white colonists there.⁸⁷

The interest in the OAS’s tactics was shared by the leadership of the Servizio Informazione Difesa (SID), the Italian secret service, then part of the military and controlled by a right wing faction of the Army. In an eerie echo of the opening scene of Costa Gavras’ film, *Z*, about the Greek coup, a seminar on counter guerrilla techniques at the military Alberto Pollio institute in May 1965 brought together the SID planners with the leaders of Ordine Nuovo and Avanguardia Nazionale to discuss how to use violence to convince the public to support an authoritarian reaction.

General De Lorenzo, the head of the Carabinieri throughout the 1960s, prepared a plan for an authoritarian takeover in 1964, Piano Solo, in which

86 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 31

87 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 31-47

20,000 Carabinieri would take over the TV and radio stations, arrest all political leaders of left wing parties and impose martial law.⁸⁸ In 1970, Count Junio Valerio Borghese, a fascist war hero, led a detachment of forestry troops in an attempted coup in Rome,⁸⁹ which ended in confusion when Borghese changed his mind and recalled his troops after they had already seized a few government buildings. This tendency among parts of the military and security services to at least consider authoritarian takeovers of a fragile democracy tied into the Gladio stay behind groups that had been organized by the Italian secret service in the 1950s to oppose a Soviet invasion through sabotage and had distributed weapons caches throughout the country. These weapons were later suspected of having been used in right-wing terrorist attacks⁹⁰ and the revelation of the existence of these groups caused a scandal in the 1980s. Just because some leftist groups were paranoid is no reason to ignore the very real threats that Italian democracy faced from authoritarian forces.

88 <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1990/12/29/ventimila-carabinieri-per-un-golpe.html>

89 https://www.ilmattino.it/rubriche/accadde_oggi/8_dicembre_1970_tentato_colpo_stato_junio_valerio_borghese-1399035.html

90 Montanelli and Cervi, *L'Italia degli anni di piombo*, 39



That the law was immutably written and equal for all was something the informer had never believed, nor could he ever have done so.

—LEONARDO SCIASCIA: THE DAY OF THE OWL

3

The Italian Security Apparatus

THE UNIFICATION OF ITALY was part of the wave of nationalist projects that defined European politics in the second half of the nineteenth century and that so often ended up disappointing the liberal intellectuals who had championed them. Like the unification of Germany, the Italian project had emerged in the liberal revolts of 1848. The Italian idealists had been crushed by the Austro-Hungarians and kept down by the subsequent repression. The kingdom of Piedmont, like that of Prussia, had escaped the worst of the revolts and maintained its position as a militarily powerful, if politically marginal, state. Under the canny leadership of its prime minister, Count Cavour, Piedmont maneuvered skillfully to extend its control over the other Italian states through small wars and diplomatic exploits, finally unifying the country under its rule by 1870 after defeating the Papal forces and conquering Rome. The new state was unpopular from the start, particularly in the south, as unification had destroyed the protections of the local industry from lethal northern competition and it had to be maintained by force. In his *Concise History of Italy*, Christopher Duggan explained that the narrow base of the new ruling class:

“gave rise to feelings of acute vulnerability, and was one reason why governments felt driven to use repression so often in defense of the status quo. Military barracks and police stations loomed large in the social geography of Italy’s towns and cities; and in rural communities, the headquarters of the carabinieri was frequently the most conspicuous building. The army was regularly deployed to break up strikes and demonstrations; and when the unrest was severe (as in Sicily in 1862, 1866 and 1894) military tribunals were instituted to mete out summary justice. The police had extensive powers:

a man could be sent to a penal island for five years merely on suspicion of being a criminal."⁹¹

During the fascist dictatorship repression increased while, at the same time, the Carabinieri in particular began to develop a campaign to win public support by presenting themselves as the protector of the poor against exploitative local elites, particularly in Sicily where they took the lead on the anti-Mafia campaign. After the Second World War, the Carabinieri's fight against the Mafia became the stuff of legend as honest northerners descended on Sicily to impose a rule of law that the island would not accept. In his most famous novel, *Il Giorno della Civetta* (The day of the owl), Leonardo Sciascia's main character, Captain Bellotto, a Carabiniere (like dalla Chiesa from Parma) arrives in a Sicilian village to investigate a murder in the main town square, that everyone witnessed and no one seems to remember. The account of the clash between Sicilian silence and Bellodi's belief in upholding an impartial law drives the tragedy. The novel tells the story of a man and of an institution, the Carabinieri, deeply embedded in the life of local communities throughout the country but never fully accepted or trusted, of a dysfunctional security infrastructure that was never of the people but imposed on them, and of a few brave men trying to bring justice and order to a country that struggled to believe in either. Dalla Chiesa identified deeply with Bellodi's character and often boasted that it was based on him. The tension between a weak, mistrusted security apparatus and the will of a few of its leaders — for whom dalla Chiesa was both a leader and an example — to deliver impartial justice was the backstory to the Italian state's initially inept and finally effective reaction to the challenge that the Red Brigades had made to its legitimacy.

The initial reaction of the Italian state to the emerging terrorist threat was hampered by the chaotic political situation and the complex structure of its security apparatus. The political system was undergoing a high degree of stress as it tried to cope with a deep economic recession, the rise of the Italian Communist Party and the growth of widespread street violence between left and right wing extremists. The security forces were poorly structured to cope with the challenge of terrorism. District magistrates were in charge of criminal investigations, with no coordination mechanism across districts. Policing was split between a civilian police force (Pubblica Sicurezza, after 1981 renamed Polizia di Stato), reporting to the Interior Ministry, and a gendarmerie, the Carabinieri, reporting to the Defense Ministry, as well as various other bodies including local forces reporting to town councils, a forest guard and the Finance Police reporting to the Finance ministry. There were no formal coordination mechanisms between the various forces and a history of rivalry between them made cooperation difficult. Though,

91 Christopher Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 137

at 200,000 staff,⁹² overall police numbers were higher than in other European countries, training and equipment were poor. Italy's intelligence agency, the Defense Information Service (SID) was a military department with notoriously right-wing sympathies whose leader was arrested in 1974 on suspicion of plotting a coup — a charge on which he was later acquitted — before going on to stand a member of parliament for the neo-fascist MSI party.⁹³ The SID had little experience in anti-terrorist work and tended to see domestic terrorism through the lens of the cold war. Its credibility was dented when it emerged that some of its operatives were helping neo-fascist groups organize their own terrorist attacks⁹⁴ to aggravate internal tensions and create the conditions for an authoritarian takeover. The government dissolved the SID in 1977 and replaced it with two agencies, a civilian one tasked with domestic security, the carefully named *Servizio per le informazioni e la sicurezza democratica* (Service for Information and Protection of Democracy — SISDE) and a military service tasked with international issues, the *Servizio per le informazioni e la sicurezza militare* (Service for Information and Military Security — SISMI).⁹⁵ Recruitment for SISDE in particular was vetted to exclude operatives with links to neo-fascist groups but, as the reorganization got underway, the intelligence services found themselves in chaos and failed to keep track of the growth of the terrorist threat.⁹⁶

The Fascist era system of political dossiers on potentially subversive citizens was finally abolished in 1968 but was not replaced by a more democratically accountable approach to monitoring potential terrorists and none of the various police forces had trained for hostage rescue or rapid intervention contingencies.⁹⁷ The transition from the repressive fascist policing traditions to more democratic ones had left a gap at a particularly dangerous moment.

Some security officials understood the scale of the challenge but couldn't convince their political leaders, or the public, that the issue was serious. Milan's Prefect — its senior public order official — Libero Mazza wrote a confidential report on December 22nd, 1970 to the Interior Minister on the danger posed by extremist groups. After detailing the year of violence in his city, he showed that the extremist groups had grown from a few hundred members to over twenty thousand and explained how they organized themselves to conduct ever more violent attacks in the knowledge that they would not be prosecuted. He recommended that the government pass a law to ban demonstrations that were likely to turn violent before the chaos and anarchy led to a popular demand for

92 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 50

93 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 437

94 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 235

95 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 456

96 Montanelli e Cervi, *L'Italia degli anni di piombo*, 212

97 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 52

an authoritarian reaction. When the report inevitably leaked, a few commentators applauded his analysis, most notably Carlo Casalegno, deputy editor of *La Stampa* newspaper (later murdered by the Red Brigades) but public opinion, particularly on the left, was vehement in its denunciation what they interpreted as an anti-democratic recommendation.⁹⁸ The government backtracked and buried the report, not wanting to cause a break with the Socialist Party, which had attacked it with even more vehemence than the Communists in the typical competition between the two parties at the time for left-wing support. Milan's police chief, Allitto Bonanno, whose democratic credentials as a former partisan leader should have insulated him from criticism for trying to squash democratic values, tried again in 1972 to alert his superiors to the threat, highlighting the emerging threat of the Red Brigades in his report to the Interior Ministry, with the same disappointing results.

THE CARABINIERI

The Carabinieri predate the Italian state. They were set up in the Savoy's Piedmontese kingdom of Sardinia in 1814 to form a protective unit for the restored monarchy after Napoleon's overthrow and to stand behind army units in battle, ready to shoot any soldier who retreated.⁹⁹ Once Italy was united under the Savoys in the 1860s, the Carabinieri were sent to provide policing presence throughout the new country and be a symbol of the newly unified Italian monarchy. To ensure that the force would remain above parochial interests, the soldiers were sent to serve well away from their home districts, a policy that has been maintained to this day. Every small town in Italy has its Carabinieri station and barracks as a visible symbol of Italian unity. The Carabinieri have an equivocal role in Italian culture, being both the butt of jokes about their stupidity, taking the place of ethnic jokes in other countries as a reflection of the largely southern composition of their lower ranks, while at the same time serving a rare symbol of national unity in a country that has always struggled with the concept and where regional loyalties remain powerful.

The Carabinieri continued to fulfill their policing and military duties throughout the early years of the Italian monarchy, taking a leading role in the Italian colonial adventures at the end of the 19th century and beginning their long struggle with the Mafia in Sicily. Under the Fascist dictatorship, the Carabinieri remained loyal to the state and the monarchy. When the king and his advisers decided to depose Mussolini on April 25th, 1943 it was Carabinieri officers that they sent to arrest the dictator, in the knowledge that their loyalty to the crown

98 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 286-288

99 Carabinieri official website <https://perma.cc/8P6R-Y8PL>

would override any allegiance to the regime, and it was Carabinieri officers that guarded Mussolini's prison until the SS freed him in a daring glider raid later that year. After Italy changed sides on September 8th, 1943, the Nazi forces dissolved the Carabinieri in the portion of the country they still controlled and sent those they could capture to German concentration camps. Many Carabinieri fought bravely in the resistance and were killed in action. The Carabinieri gained their own martyrs during the war, most notably the twelve Carabinieri officers killed in the Fosse Ardeatine, the Nazi massacre in Rome in which 323 Italian hostages were killed in reprisal for the death of 33 German soldiers.

Once the Second World War was over and the country had voted to become a republic, the Carabinieri remained the primary policing body in the country, though the civilian National Police rose in importance, particularly in large cities, in the 1950s and 1960s. Still, the Carabinieri remained the most trusted and visible symbol of the state.



There is only one way in which the murderous death agonies of the old society and the bloody birth throes of the new society can be shortened, simplified and concentrated, and that way is revolutionary terror. —KARL MARX¹⁰⁰

4

Birth of the Red Brigades: Years of Lead

LIKE THEIR COUNTERPARTS in Germany, France, Belgium and Spain, the Red Brigades emerged from the radical fringe of the student movements of the 1960s. They were inspired by Maoist thinking, by Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* and by South American ideas about urban guerrilla movements¹⁰¹ and claimed to represent the authentic revolutionary Marxist tradition that the traditional Communist and Socialist parties had abandoned. In practice, as Paul Wilkinson pointed out at the time, these groups were "a bizarre contradiction: Lilliputian membership and negligible popular support coupled with the most pretentious language of people's revolutionary war and struggles against world capitalist imperialism."¹⁰²

The Red Brigades followed the pattern but stood out by virtue of their size, with membership in the thousands, of whom 643 were eventually convicted of terrorism offences (including 60 life sentences for murder) and tens of thousands of supporters.¹⁰³ The depth of their support among left-wing academics and in major factories also distinguished them from the smaller groups in Italy and across the rest of Europe. As Philip Heymann observed when commenting on the US reaction to 9/11: "So far the US has been blessed — compared to... Italy in the time of the Red Brigades — with a society that does not have deep divisions that the terrorists can exploit or heavily alienated sub-sectors where the terrorists can be safe."¹⁰⁴

100 Karl Marx: *The Victory of the Counter-revolution in Vienna 1848* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/11/06.htm>

101 Carlos Marighella, *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla*, (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1970)

102 Paul Wilkinson, *Terrorism versus Democracy, the liberal state response*, third edition (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 25

103 Donatella della Porta in *Terrorism volume 2* Rosemary O'Kane, ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 490

104 Philip Heymann, *Terrorism, Freedom and Security* (2003), 69

In the early days of the terrorist wave, the Red Brigades were only one of the many different groups in Italy (reaching a total of 657 at the peak of the crisis)¹⁰⁵ that were using violence for political aims, so it was only with hindsight that their founding story became important. In November 1969, Renato Curcio and Margherita Cagol summoned a group of seventy activists to Chiavari, on the Ligurian coast.¹⁰⁶ They met at Casa Marcheroni and the Stella Maris hotel in rooms they borrowed from the local bishop, telling him that they were hosting a discussion on the future of Catholic youth movements. This was the first time that the student groups, led by Curcio, Cagol and Giorgio Semeria, the workers groups, led by Moretti, Corrado Alunni and Alfredo Bonavita and the disillusioned communist youth, led by Gallinari, Alberto Franceschini and Roberto Ognibene had met.¹⁰⁷ Franceschini was the link between the communist youth of Reggio Emilia and the Milanese faction and the only one with any military training, as the old partisans of his town had taken him to the hills to learn how to handle the machine guns they had kept after the Second World War.¹⁰⁸

Curcio and Cagol had founded a fringe extra-parliamentary group in Milan called the Collettivo Politico Metropolitano (Metropolitan Political Collective). They proposed that the group should move underground and pursue a violent revolution but were outvoted. In good Bolshevik tradition, they decided to split and borrowed the bishop's symbol of the five pointed star as their new — and soon to be infamous — logo.¹⁰⁹ The hardcore group met again in August 1970 at Pecorile near Reggio Emilia. This meeting attracted a hundred activists from all three strands and there the majority agreed to go underground and begin planning for the armed struggle.

The leaders were based in a series of communes around Milan where they began to plan the campaign. Curcio, Cagol and Franceschini had come up with the name Red Brigades (Brigate Rosse) as a conscious echo of the Communist partisan Garibaldi Brigade during the Second World War, and had recruited around one hundred supporters to help them as they went underground.¹¹⁰ Curcio adopted the battle name Armando, after his uncle who had been killed in the war fighting with a partisan unit against the Wehrmacht. The Red Brigades name first appeared in April 1971 on leaflets distributed in the working class neighborhood of Lorenteggio in the suburbs of Milan that explained the new group's objectives as follows:

105 Donatella della Porta, in *Terrorism volume 2* Rosemary O'Kane, ed., 490

106 Zavoli, *La notte della Repubblica*, 75

107 Zavoli, *La notte della Repubblica*, 76

108 Fasanella and Franceschini: *Che cosa sono le BR*, 40

109 Armeni, *ibid* page 25, though Alberto Franceschini claims he designed the five star symbol tracing the outline of a 100 lira coin (Fasanella and Franceschini, *Che cosa sono le BR*, 79)

110 Fasanella and Franceschini *Che cosa sono le BR*, 78-79

WHAT ARE THE RED BRIGADES?

*The Red Brigades are the first units of armed propaganda whose fundamental aim is to communicate the organization and strategy of class struggle through their existence and actions. The Red Brigades have therefore always the same objectives of the people's movements and their fundamental aim is to win the support and sympathy of the proletarian masses.*¹¹¹

On September 17th, the group was ready to act. They carried out the first arson attack, burning down the Sit-Siemens HR manager's garage.¹¹² They followed up with a more sophisticated arson attack on the test track at Pirelli, carried out by Franceschini and three factory workers, who set off improvised explosive devices with a slow burning fuse that blew up six trucks and caused significant damage.¹¹³ During this period, the Red Brigades prided themselves on being more strategic and less violent than the many other emerging terrorist groups.¹¹⁴ The terrorist groups carried out robberies and brief kidnappings to fund their growth and acquired weapons from the black market and Partisan arms caches left over from the Second World War.

In September 1971, Curcio wrote his first theoretical resolution setting out the case for violence: *The Social Struggle and organization in the metropolis*.¹¹⁵ He explained that a revolutionary organization needed to achieve parity with state power on every level including freeing political prisoners, carrying out death sentences, executing policemen and expropriating property from the capitalists. It also had to create an alternative center of power in factories and working class districts. His strategy for achieving this was to use the city as the central battleground and to channel worker protests to revolutionary aims. Curcio and Cagol moved to Turin to escape the police pressure in Milan and began organizing in the major factories there with considerable success. The workers in the FIAT Mirafiori factory were in the middle of their contract negotiations and used the Red Brigades' attacks to press home their demands. After a series of violent strikes, sit-ins and arson attacks on managers' cars, the company conceded the main demands of equal pay for all workers at each grade, a higher holiday entitlement and a 150-hour paid study leave entitlement.¹¹⁶ Curcio reports that the workers asked him and his colleagues to do more, which led them to look at the propaganda potential of kidnapping factory managers.¹¹⁷

111 Marco Clementi: *Storia delle Brigate Rosse* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2007), 18

112 Galli, *Il partito armato*, 17

113 Fasanella and Franceschini, *Che cosa sono le BR*, 84-85

114 Fasanella and Franceschini, *Che cosa sono le BR*, 85

115 Alison Jamieson, *The Heart Attacked* (London: Marion Boyars, 1989), 77

116 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 324

117 Renato Curcio, *A viso aperto* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1995), 77-84

There was fair degree of imitation in the early tactics the group adopted as well as in its political language, which drew inspiration from a mixture of South American urban guerrilla movements, Maoism and nostalgia for a purer form of Leninism. Carlos Marighella's *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla* was a particularly powerful text as it was practical and an easy read. Leonard Weinberg accounts for many of the tactical choices by noting the “*copy-cat or emulative behavior by different groups (e.g. following the Chinese example, the Uruguayan Tupamaros staged kidnappings of wealthy or prominent individuals and subjected them to “people’s trials,” in which the victims were compelled to wear dunces’ caps, before letting them go), and note that this practice was then adopted by such European groups as the Italian Red Brigades.*”¹¹⁸ Their tactics echoed the post war *Volante Rossa* armed wing of the PCI in Milan that had killed fascists, kidnapped factory managers and attacked enemies of the party from 1945 to 1949, when the leaders had to flee to the Soviet Union to avoid arrest by the Italian authorities.¹¹⁹

Left wing terrorists were not the only, or indeed in the early days of the years of lead, the most deadly sources of violence. The bomb in Piazza Fontana had shocked the nation, and the incompetence of the police’s investigation into the fascist groups behind it had caused many to wonder whether there was a deeper plot behind the attack, a theory that developed into the “strategy of tension,” the idea that shadowy forces were fomenting a crisis between the extreme left and extreme right for an unclear, but nefarious, objective. The violence from the right radicalized some on the left. In the first of the Red Brigades’ self-interviews (a leaflet in the format of an interview), Curcio declared that the bourgeoisie had already started the war and that the Red Brigades were only reacting to the attack. Adriano Sofri, a founder of *Lotta Continua*, disputed the excuse that the left was innocent because the right had adopted violent tactics, commenting that: “*The shock of the massacre was very strong for us, it knocked us back, but we were all political militants with a long standing desire to make the revolution... I ask myself, without the massacre of Piazza Fontana, would I have thrown my first rock or not? I think yes. In fact, perhaps we had already thrown it.*”¹²⁰

While Curcio was writing the resolutions, the older members were taking more practical steps to start the revolution. Gallinari recruited a group of pretty young women to seduce local policemen. The women would lure the policemen to back alleys where their accomplices would attack them, steal their side arms and leave them handcuffed to railings in their underpants. Recruitment was easy as the younger factory workers proved receptive to the message and many union leaders turned a blind eye to activities that helped them win concessions

118 Weinberg, *The end of Terrorism?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 52

119 Pino Casamassima, *Il libro nero delle Brigate Rosse* (Milano: CeBook, 2012), 3

120 Luigi Manconi, *Terroristi Italiani* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2008), 33

from management.¹²¹ Franceschini writes about the great sense of power that their early robberies gave him. He could make seventy or eighty people do what he wanted and felt his intimidation routine was so effective that he dreamt of carrying out a bank robbery without a weapon, just relying on his technique to get the cashier to hand over the money.¹²² He was disappointed that the organization never gave him permission to try.

In early 1972, Mario Moretti rejoined the Red Brigades after briefly working with an alternative group led by Corrado Simioni (suspected by Franceschini of being a CIA backed agent provocateur, but in practice just an activist prudent enough to leave before becoming entangled in too many criminal activities).¹²³ Simioni had been an early member of the Curcio and Cagol's CPM and an advocate of moving underground and beginning the armed struggle waged by a small group of trained activists. Once the campaign had got underway in earnest, he reconsidered his activism and decamped to Paris to begin a comfortable life as a foreign language teacher at the Hyperion language school, which he founded with some fellow former Italian activists.

Moretti began planning a series of kidnappings to raise the profile of the Red Brigades. He kidnapped Idalgo Macchiarini, a Sit-Siemens manager on March 3, 1972, photographing him under the Red Brigades banner with a pistol pointed at his head before releasing him. On February 12th, 1973, the Red Brigades kidnapped Bruno Labate, a fascist CISNAL trade union officer at FIAT, shaved his head and left him chained to the factory gates in his underpants and with a placard around his neck denouncing him as a management lackey. The press didn't pay much attention to these early efforts, focusing instead on the trial of the Piazza Fontana bombers.¹²⁴ Meanwhile, the violence was becoming more deadly: on March 15th, Feltrinelli's home made bomb had exploded prematurely, killing him; on May 17th, the police officer who had interrogated the anarchist Pinelli, who had died falling from a window at police headquarters during his interrogation, was shot and killed.¹²⁵ The police began to crack down and captured Marco Pisetta, a recent Red Brigades recruit, who they handed over to the SID secret service agents. He confessed and gave them details of the Red Brigades operational techniques and structure.¹²⁶

Pisetta's information led to the arrest of 116 members of the Red Brigades and its sister organization Prima Linea and the discovery of two logistical bases, one of which had a soundproof cell in which the Red Brigades had planned to hold their

121 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 87

122 Franceschini, Mara, *Renato e Io* (Milano: Mondadori, 1998), 50-51

123 Fasanella and Franceschini, *Che cosa sono le BR*, 74

124 Zavoli, *La notte della Repubblica*, 82

125 Zavoli, *La notte della Repubblica*, 84

126 Zavoli, *La notte della Repubblica*, 86

next kidnapping victim. In response to these blows, in May 1972 the leadership decided the time had come to go fully underground. In their organizational document, published in 1973, the Red Brigades explained that this offered a decisive tactical advantage. The document explained that the organization would be split into “regulars” and “irregular” members. The regulars would cut off all ties to their earlier life, go underground as full time fighters and would be paid a salary pegged to that of a skilled factory metal worker. Irregulars remained active in society, participating in attacks only when needed and were, the document insisted, to be held in the same esteem and rank as the regulars. Each major factory would have its own brigade, mapped into regional brigades. Three front groups would be responsible for logistics, counter-revolution (counter-espionage) and factory organization.¹²⁷ An executive committee, initially made up of Curcio, Cagol, Moretti and Franceschini, was established to provide overall leadership.

The reaction of the security forces was lackluster until an aggressive investigating magistrate in Genoa, Mario Sossi, began digging more deeply into the various organizations and bringing them to justice, earning him the nickname “Doctor Handcuffs.”¹²⁸

On June 28th, the Red Brigades hit the Alfa Romeo factory, kidnapping Michele Mincuzzi and again leaving him handcuffed to the factory gates with a sign which read: “*fascist manager, tried by the Red Brigades.*” On December 10th, they went one better, kidnapping Ettore Amerio, head of personnel for FIAT, and holding him for eight days and only releasing him after FIAT agreed to reinstate six hundred workers who had been fired after the 1973 recession caused by the oil shock that had hit the Italian economy particularly hard.

The results of these attacks were highly satisfactory. In his memoirs, Mario Moretti reports that even the Catholic workers in his factory were supportive, commenting that “well, you are right, now we can breathe more freely.”¹²⁹ For a Marxist revolutionary organization, support from the organized working class was the ultimate measure of success. Despite the police raids of various hideouts and the first arrests, the Red Brigades were able to establish branches at the FIAT, Lancia, Pininfarina and Singer factories in Turin and spread to the petrochemical plants in Marghera near Venice and at the university in Padua.¹³⁰ Recruitment accelerated, due in part to the organization’s openness to accepting women in leadership roles.¹³¹ Curcio and Moretti saw an opportunity to expand to Genoa, where the leaders of October 22nd, Feltrinelli’s former group, had been arrested

127 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 322-324

128 Zavoli, *La notte della Repubblica*, 82

129 Mario Moretti, *Brigate Rosse: Una Storia Italiana* (Milano: Mondadori, 2007), 29

130 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 58

131 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 59

and convicted by Judge Sossi for murdering a security guard during a robbery.¹³² The Red Brigades recruited a group of workers at the Ansaldo welding factory and students at the local university, who founded the Genoa column and began planning for a spectacular launch in that industrial city.¹³³

On April 18th, 1974, eighteen Red Brigades members, led by Margerita Cagol, kidnapped Judge Sossi — getting great press coverage, as Moretti bragged — and issued a statement condemning him as “*a crucial pawn on the counter revolutionary chessboard, fanatical persecutor of the working class.*”¹³⁴ Sossi cracked under pressure and revealed details of police corruption and of the involvement of the Interior Minister in illicit arms deals, which the Red Brigades published in their regular communiqués, deeply embarrassing the government.

The Genoa Court of Appeal agreed to the kidnappers’ demand to free eight prisoners from the October 22nd group and send them to Cuba in return for Sossi’s release.¹³⁵ The Italian Communist Party pressured Cuba not to accept the swap¹³⁶ and Judge Francesco Coco, Sossi’s direct superior in the judiciary, reversed the court’s decision arresting the prisoners as they were about to leave the courtroom. Franceschini nonetheless concluded that the Red Brigades had succeeded and expressed relief that he hadn’t had to kill Sossi after holding him for 35 days.¹³⁷ Mario Moretti disagreed arguing that the hostage should have been killed. Valerio Morucci, another of the kidnappers, later told the Parliamentary commission of enquiry that the group came around to Moretti’s argument after the kidnapping had concluded, and agreed never to release a hostage again unless their demands were met.¹³⁸ Four years later, the Moro kidnapping would put this decision to the test.

After his release, Sossi reported that his captors were “*extremely well organized and there must be many thousands of them,*”¹³⁹ boosting the reputation of the Red Brigades among the extreme left. Communist and Socialist Party newspapers refused to accept that that the Red Brigades were anything other than a group of right wing provocateurs. Television coverage was constant and the major newspapers printed eight Red Brigades communiqués in full. The kidnapping had divided the authorities and increased the organization’s prestige, but politically it turned out to be a failure. One of the kidnappers, Roberto Ognibene, explained that the political objective was to force the Communist Party into an alliance

132 Zavoli, *La notte della Repubblica*, 81

133 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 66

134 Galli, *I partito armato*, 87

135 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 337

136 Jamieson, *The Heart Attacked*, 83

137 Zavoli, *La notte della Repubblica*, 174 joint interview with Sossi and Franceschini

138 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 338–339

139 *Corriere della Sera* May 28, 1974

with the Red Brigades, on the model of the Unidad Popular in Chile under Allende — in which the Red Brigades would play the part of the MIR — but the Communist Party leadership had surprised them by supporting the bourgeois government and the police.¹⁴⁰

The organization's first murders were unplanned and shocked many of their supporters. The Red Brigades had recruited a column in the Veneto region based around the local *Autonomia Operaia* (Workers' Autonomy) a broad based and violent ultra leftist movement that had been founded by Toni Negri, a professor at the university of Padua. On June 17th, five of the new Red Brigades members attacked the Padua office of the MSI. They had planned to steal some documents and vandalize the office but were surprised to find two MSI party members, who they tied up and held at gunpoint. The MSI members tried to grab one of the pistols and a struggle broke out in which the two MSI members were wounded.¹⁴¹ The Red Brigades team then executed their prisoners and left.¹⁴² This caused shock in leftist circles that had seen the Red Brigades, despite their violent rhetoric and actions, as a chivalrous organization; the "Controinformazione" newspaper — one of the newspapers of the extreme left¹⁴³ — speculated about the growth of a militarist faction before being corrected by the Red Brigades leadership and running an editorial praising the murders. Curcio explained in his memoirs that this mess made the organization look like a bunch of common killers and that they had been tempted to disown the whole thing but, after a discussion in the executive committee, they had decided to take responsibility for the attack and blame the MSI members for their own deaths.¹⁴⁴

Franceschini and other apologists for the Red Brigades argued later that this turn to murderous violence was a betrayal of the early promise of the organization. Vladimiro Satta, the archivist for the parliamentary enquiry on terrorism and one of the most acute observers of Italian terrorism disagrees, noting that: "*The Red Brigades had started to kill because they came from a multi decade ideological tradition of revolutionary violence, as anyone who had any historical knowledge would have understood.*"¹⁴⁵ As Margerita Cagol had explained, in a letter to her family, the use of violence to bring about the revolution was inherent in the Red Brigades project from the start. As she wrote: "*But you will ask, are these the means to use? Believe me, there are no others.*"¹⁴⁶

140 Galli, *Il partito armato*, 95

141 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 73

142 Galli, *Il partito armato*, 96

143 whose editor was charged with collaboration with the Red Brigades in October 1974 when the Carabinieri discovered a stack of letters between the two organizations (Galli, *Il partito armato*, 98)

144 Curcio, *A viso aperto*, 94-95

145 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 469

146 Meade, *The Red Brigades*, 39

General dalla Chiesa had been active in his role as head of the Carabinieri brigade in Turin, the center of the Red Brigades movement and had decided to use unorthodox tactics to attack the organization. He had been able to infiltrate the group by placing an agent, Silvano Girotto, who claimed to have been a South American revolutionary friar and offered to provide military training to the new recruits.¹⁴⁷ Dalla Chiesa's anti-terrorism squad raided a hideout and arrested Curcio and Franceschini. Cagol and Moretti took over, though the organization retained the norms of collective leadership, as it was to do throughout its existence. Gallinari had also been arrested for dangerous driving so much of the original founding group was now out of commission.¹⁴⁸

A debate broke out between the workerist wing, which wanted to concentrate on violent factory organizing and the militarist wing, which wanted to attack the state directly. This division was to become a constant theme in the internal life of the Red Brigades and one which dalla Chiesa would exploit later on, but for now was hidden from the public. Moretti was able to broker a compromise by suggesting that the group concentrate on freeing its prisoners from jail, beginning with Renato Curcio who was being held in a low security facility.

On February 18th, 1975, Cagol led a successful raid on the prison of Casale Monferrato, where the recently imprisoned Curcio was busy reading a textbook on the fabrication of explosives that he had found in the prison library.¹⁴⁹ Curcio's lawyer had carefully cased the prison during the visits to his clients and had drawn a detailed map that he handed to Cagol to help her plan the raid, which went off without a hitch.¹⁵⁰ The situation on the streets was deteriorating, with frequent clashes between increasingly heavily armed groups of the extreme left and neo-fascist gangs, leading to a series of deaths: four in February, two in March and another four after widespread riots in April. Other groups, particularly the Nuclei Armati Proletari (NAP), a Naples based band of ex-criminals with a Marxist bent, were emerging and challenging the Red Brigades by using more indiscriminate violence.¹⁵¹

The government reacted by passing a set of laws in May 1975, the *Legge Reale*, which gave police the power to hold suspects for up to 96 hours. Of more practical use was an initiative that dalla Chiesa took to build a rapid reaction force of specially trained Carabinieri who could handle shootouts and hostage rescues.

147 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 75

148 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 117

149 Meade, *The Red Brigades*, 64

150 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 82

151 Galli, *Il partito armato*, 110-111

Meanwhile, the Red Brigades was under internal strain, with doubts about the leadership's move to a more militaristic approach that downplayed factory organizing in favor of spectacular attacks, that led some early members to leave. The need to fund the growing group of underground "regulars" pushed the group into criminal activities without directly political objectives. Cagol decided to fix this by kidnapping the wine magnate Vallarino Gancia for a large ransom, but dalla Chiesa's group discovered her hideout and killed her in a shootout on June 4th after she had killed one officer and wounded another.¹⁵² Curcio was recaptured on January 18th, 1976 after a shootout in which both he and a Carabinieri officer were wounded and on December 15th, 1976, Walter Alasia, the young leader of the Milan group, was killed in a shootout that also cost the lives of two officers. The remaining Red Brigades leaders renamed the Milan column in his memory.

152 Galli *Il partito armato*, 116

“

Our Organization has learned to fight and has built the political and military structures that class war requires. Organizing the armed struggle for communism, building the fighting communist party and preparing ourselves militarily to be soldiers of the revolution is the path we have chosen.¹⁵³

ROSSSE



5

Attacking the Heart of the State

A FEARSOME REBIRTH 1976-78

AFTER CURCIO'S SECOND CAPTURE, Cagol's death and the imprisonment of most of the group's founders, it seemed that the threat from the Red Brigades was over and the leadership of the Carabinieri dissolved dalla Chiesa's national anti-terrorist unit. Power in the Red Brigades had shifted from the jailed founders, steeped in Marxist theory and linked — despite their disagreements with its current political line — to the traditions of the Communist Party, to the logistics section, run by Mario Moretti, a practical and effective revolutionary who worried less about the group's theoretical debates and more about organizing successful attacks on the state.¹⁵⁴ The extreme left groups who had bet on parliamentary politics had been wiped out in the elections of June 1975 and had started to look again at violence as the only way forward, providing a new recruiting ground.¹⁵⁵

The turn to greater violence was not, as some sympathizers argued, a break from the early traditions of the Red Brigades and their allied groups but rather a logical progression from their ideological starting point. Dalla Chiesa's eldest son Nando, a prominent Italian sociologist, summarized the ideological traits of the Italian extreme left in the 1970s as: 1) the primacy of ideology or knowledge with the dogmatism and cult of leadership that entailed, 2) the idea the revolution was around the corner, 3) contempt for parliamentary democracy, seen as a trick to mislead the working class, 4) a simplistic and Manichean vision of society, 5) a lack of interest in the dignity and the value of the lives of class enemies and 6) a

153 Red Brigades, Moro kidnapping communiqué number 2 Dossier Brigate Rosse page 301

154 *Bocca Noi Terroristi*, page 132

155 Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy*, 281

mystical belief in the purifying value of violence.¹⁵⁶ This was an ideological path that led inevitably to ever greater and less discriminate violence.

Moretti decided to raise the stakes. He took the view that the emphasis on factory organizing was a dead end, as he never believed that the workers could be the engines of transformation without an armed vanguard.¹⁵⁷ He brought a harder edged and better organized approach to the campaign and planned the first deliberate murder — killing Francesco Coco, the judge who had blocked the prisoner exchange in the Sossi kidnapping, and the two policemen in his security detail.¹⁵⁸ The historic leaders of the organization, from their cages in the Turin trial, hailed the murder declaring that: “yesterday, June 8th, 1976, an armed unit of the Red Brigades executed state pig Francesco Coco and the two mercenaries paid to protect him... This action opens up a new phase in the class war which aims to dismantle the apparatus of the State, attacking the men who are identified with it and who direct its counter-revolutionary drive.”¹⁵⁹ Hundreds of new members joined and the NAP merged their organization into the Red Brigades, giving them a foothold in southern Italy and a link to the local criminal organizations.¹⁶⁰

In September 1976 that Moretti recruited the lovers Valerio Morucci and Adriana Faranda from the Roman world of the extreme left to set up a column there and start preparing for a spectacular attack.¹⁶¹ The successful kidnapping of the shipping magnate Pietro Costa yielded a ransom of 1.5 billion lire (\$1.8 million), which covered the running costs and paid for an apartment in Rome in which Moro would be held the following year.¹⁶² The street violence escalated in 1977, with mass riots in Bologna, Rome and Milan and regular demonstrations led by masked and armed activists who didn’t hesitate to shoot at the police. The death toll increased for the security forces and the demonstrators alike: the Carabinieri killed a student in Bologna on March 11th, the following day a Carabinieri was gunned down in Turin and on March 22nd a policeman was killed in Rome. On April 22nd, a policeman was killed in Rome and three wounded when marchers opened fire on the police escort, on May 12th, the police opened fire on a peaceful march killing a student. On May 14th a violent group of demonstrators shot and killed a policeman.¹⁶³ By the beginning of 1978, the situation was out of control. Time Magazine’s cover story on January 23rd, headlined “*The Chaos in Italy*” explained that “*Italy’s current political crisis has been*

156 Nando dalla Chiesa: *Del sessantotto e del terrorismo: cultura e politica tra continuità e rottura* (Il Mulino, n1/1981)

157 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 49

158 Galli, *Il partito armato*, 130

159 Alison Jamieson, *The Heart Attacked*, 108

160 Galli, *Il partito armato*, 137-138

161 Jamieson, *The Heart Attacked*, 106

162 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 117

163 Galli, *Il partito armato*, 152-153

exacerbated by a spreading plague of riots, lootings, assassinations, kidnappings and bombings that has thoroughly unnerved Italians and turned the streets of many of their historic cities into battlefields." This created an ideal recruiting environment for the Red Brigades, who continued staging low level attacks while concentrating on training and preparing the organization for a spectacular breakout.

Renato Curcio and his fellow historic leaders of the Red Brigades had gone on trial in Turin charged with insurrection and other crimes, an event they used to extract maximum propaganda value and demonstrate their ability to intimidate, adopting the tactics of the star French radical lawyer Jacques Vergès.¹⁶⁴ The trial started on May 17th 1976 but came to an immediate halt when the defendants refused to recognize the court's authority and ordered their defense attorneys to quit, repeating in court the threat to have them killed if they persisted. The court then tried to appoint new defense attorneys who pleaded a range of medical excuses, including depression induced by terrorist threats, to avoid taking this dangerous role. The head of the Turin bar, Fulvio Croce finally stepped forward and offered to lead the defense. The Red Brigades reacted by murdering him on April 28th, 1977. At this point, the six hundred potential lay jurors refused to take up the six seats required by law and the court was stuck. The government had to extend the time period for pre-trial detention to avoid having to release the prisoners while the courts tried to find a solution. By March 1978, a jury had finally agreed to be seated in a heavily armed underground bunker housed in a military barracks with thousands of police and Carabinieri deployed to protect the trial. The Red Brigades continued to attack, killing a Carabiniere and a policeman but the trial finally concluded in June 1978 with thirty guilty verdicts and sixteen acquittals.¹⁶⁵

A series of violent street protests demonstrated broad support for the Red Brigades in the wider world of the extreme left. In particular, the *Autonomia* movement in the Veneto, inspired by Toni Negri's teaching at the University of Padua, provided recruits, financial and operational support and boosted the morale of the Red Brigades regulars.¹⁶⁶ During a demonstration of *Autonomia Operaia* in Padua, where Toni Negri taught, the marchers began to chant the Red Brigades slogan. Gallinari heard about this in jail and was stunned; if a demonstration in a small city of the Veneto could come out in support of his movement, then he thought that the Red Brigades must really represent the nation's progressive forces. Negri's relationship with the Red Brigades remains a contentious topic in Italian legal and political debates. Negri, a professor of political philosophy, had made his name with his research on Spinoza and had been an early theoretician

164 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 132

165 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 483-485

166 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 150

of urban guerrilla movements in the 1960s. He had founded two movements: *Potere Operaio* (Workers Power) and, after it was banned, *Autonomia Operaia* (Autonomous Power), to channel the energies of the extreme left in his region and across the country, and had preached the virtues of revolution while retaining his academic posts. He fled to France after being accused of assisting the Moro kidnapping, a charge that the prosecutors later dropped, and of encouraging two murders, a charge that stuck. His case became a *cause celebre* among French intellectuals including Jean Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes who accused the Italian state of persecuting him as an intellectual. He returned to Italy in 1997 to serve out a reduced sentence after a plea bargain, and went back to writing academic tomes on contemporary Marxism. Whatever his direct links with the Red Brigades leadership were, what was clear was that his teaching and inspiration, and that of other like-minded academics, had supplied a new generation of willing terrorist recruits.

While the Red Brigades were preparing and rearming, other terrorist groups began to form to contribute to the armed struggle with tactical differences but similar objectives. The most effective and brutal of these was Prima Linea (Front Line), a group of no more than a few dozen activists but thousands of supporters (923 of whom were eventually put on trial)¹⁶⁷ that emerged from the security services of the legal extreme left political party *Lotta Continua* (Continuous Struggle). In April 1977, the leaders of Prima Linea met in Scandicci, near Florence, to plan their contribution to what they described as a civil war.¹⁶⁸ Led by Marco Donnat Cattin, son of a prominent Christian Democratic politician, whose friends protected his son from the security services and later helped him escape into exile, the group disdained the underground life of the Red Brigades and insisted that its members continue living a normal working life while conducting attacks on the evenings and weekends. They began with bank robberies, moving to assassinations in 1979 with the murder of the district attorney Emilio Alessandrini in Milan. Alessandrini, a progressive and vigorous investigator, had been looking into fascist terrorist groups and investigating the Vatican bank scandal. Prima Linea explained that they had killed him precisely because he was restoring credibility to the magistrature with his impartial work and his efficiency. The attacks accelerated: in September Prima Linea killed the head of planning at FIAT, in December, they attacked the company's Villetta business school also in Turin, lined up the professors and their students and shot five of each in the leg. The following year, they killed Judge Guido Galli and Paolo Paoletti, CEO of a manufacturing business which had been responsible for a pollution scandal, as well as William Vaccher, who they suspected of being

167 Sergio Segio, *Miccia Corta* (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2005), 22

168 Zavoli, *La notte della Repubblica*, 365

an informant. In May, they shot Sergio Lenci, an architect who worked for the prison service, who survived with a bullet in his brain. By 1980, they had carried out 101 attacks, resulting in 18 deaths.

Sergio Segio, who took over the leadership of Prima Linea after Donnat Cattin's flight to France, explained in his memoirs¹⁶⁹ that the group aimed to show that an armed struggle could be conducted without having to go underground and cut off links to the working class. The debate among the extreme left about appropriate tactics had given birth to new terrorist groups, competing for recruits and resources by demonstrations of exemplary violence. Prima Linea saw themselves as the armed representatives of the radical movement of 1977 in opposition to the purely military approach of the Red Brigades but this did not make them any less violent, just less cautious. Prima Linea's lack of discipline made them an easier target for the police and Carabinieri, who began rolling them up in a series of operations starting in 1978, many involving shootouts. In an echo of the effects of the Red Brigades's fratricidal attacks on their own, the murder of William Vaccher had disgusted many of Prima Linea's sympathizers opening the space for those arrested to begin helping the authorities. Patrizio Peci had identified Roberto Sandalo, a Prima Linea leader, who the Carabinieri picked up in early 1980 and who immediately confessed. Over the next year, dalla Chiesa's team dismantled the organization largely ending the killing. Two years later Segio, now in jail, convinced the imprisoned Prima Linea leadership to declare the war was over. He is now a writer and social worker, helping drug addicts return to normal life.

Meanwhile, the Red Brigades concentrated on building its operational infrastructure, deepening its links in the major factories of the north, while planning a spectacular attack. In one of their bulletins in 1977, titled "*The Development of Armed Struggle Towards Civil War*," the Red Brigades leadership explained that: "*In our view, the growth of spontaneous rebellion is insufficient to transform armed struggle into civil war. Our idea is that all the groups carrying out armed struggle and all the youthful rebellion created by the closure of political opportunities by the government of national solidarity need to be unified in a Fighting Communist Party which can organize the struggle and lead it until victory is achieved.*"¹⁷⁰ This declaration was the clearest statement of intent to raise the stakes by attacking the heart of the state and thus unify the disparate revolutionary movements under the leadership of the Red Brigades. It also, as dalla Chiesa was to realize, pointed to the central weakness of the revolutionary left: its tendency toward ideological fragmentation and infighting. If this could be exploited, the unity that the Red

169 Segio, *Miccia Corta*

170 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 156

Brigades sought to achieve could be destroyed and each group could then be eliminated in detail.

THE MORO KIDNAPPING

The Moro kidnapping was one of the most dramatic episodes of post-war Italian history and, in the logic of the Red Brigades, a natural next step after the Sossi operation. Franceschini had moved to Rome in 1974, soon after Sossi's release, to plan the kidnapping of the leading Christian Democratic politician and future prime minister, Giulio Andreotti.¹⁷¹ He began his research by reading the Christian Democratic paper, *Il Popolo*, so regularly that the news seller assumed he was a party official as no one else would want to read such a boring publication. He had a northerner's suspicion of Romans, complaining that the local leftists talked too much and were crooks, a view that was confirmed when a local activist convinced him to swap his Beretta pistol for a revolver that he later found didn't work. Franceschini then started tailing Andreotti, attending the church where he prayed every day and beginning to scout a location for a prison in which to hold him. Franceschini's plans ended on September 8th, 1974 when the Carabinieri arrested him following a tipoff from Giroto. The next big kidnapping would have to wait.

Three years later, Moretti had finally managed to build a credible operation in Rome, recruiting out of the local extreme leftist movements a few reliable operators, under the leadership of battle-tested leaders sent down from the north including Moretti himself, Gallinari, Franco Bonisoli and Carla Brioschi. The Roman recruits began to prove themselves with the kneecapping of the director of the main television channel's nightly news program, Emilio Rossi, on June 3rd 1977, and the dean of Rome University's School of Economics, the accountancy professor Remo Cacciafesta on June 21st.¹⁷² On November 2nd they kneecapped the Christian Democratic politician Publio Fiori and on February 14th 1978 they killed the magistrate Riccardo Palma, who managed the prison building program. Despite these attacks, the police and Carabinieri struggled to believe that the Red Brigades were anything other than a purely northern phenomenon and discounted their claims of responsibility for these attacks. On February 28th, the weekly magazine *Panorama* published a story entitled "*Why they don't catch them*" explaining the tensions between police and Carabinieri and between both and the magistrates, and the lack of actionable intelligence that had given the Red Brigades free reign.

171 Franceschini Mara, *Renato e io* 103-106

172 Satta, *I nemici della Repubblica*, 506

Moretti had dispatched teams to shadow Giulio Andreotti, who had recently become Prime Minister, Amintore Fanfani, the president of the Senate, and Aldo Moro, the president of the Christian Democratic party. The plotters concluded that Andreotti's protection was now too strong and Fanfani's movements too unpredictable and so decided to concentrate their planning on Moro.¹⁷³ Savasta and a group of university students began tailing Moro at the political science faculty where he taught when he wasn't in meetings with his own party leaders, its allies and the Communists to form the new government on the basis of the historic compromise that he had championed so forcefully.¹⁷⁴

Aldo Moro was a central figure in Italian politics, serving continuously from 1948 in a series of government positions including as prime minister (twice for a total of more than six years), foreign secretary, justice minister and education minister. Though a staunch anti-communist in his early political career, he had come around to the view that the Communists needed to be brought into government and slowly persuaded his party to support this position. In early 1978, it appeared that Aldo Moro, the President of the Christian Democratic party had pulled off a political miracle. Despite a clear statement by the US Ambassador against a pact with the Communist Party,¹⁷⁵ Moro had negotiated a platform that would allow the Christian Democrats to form a government with Communist support but without including them in the coalition and so break the parliamentary deadlock.

On the morning of March 16th, 1978, Moro set off from his house in Rome to Parliament to vote in the new government that his painstaking negotiations had finally brought about. He travelled as usual in a car with his driver and his two bodyguards, followed by a police escort with three policemen for additional security. As they entered Via Fani at 9 am, a car with diplomatic plates blocked the road and five men dressed in the uniform of the national Alitalia airline stepped out and opened fire, getting off 91 shots of which 45 struck home.¹⁷⁶ Four policemen were killed instantly and one managed to fire two shots before being struck down, Moro was unharmed and bundled into a waiting car.¹⁷⁷ The weapons the police escort carried at their feet were so old and in such poor repair that the Red Brigades team ended up throwing them away after collecting them at the scene with the hope of increasing the size of their arsenal. Passersby noticed a motorbike following the car and whole books of speculation have been written about the identity of the riders, which has

173 Jamieson, *The Heart Attacked*, 108

174 Jamieson, *The Heart Attacked*, 111

175 Richard Gardner: *Mission Italy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield 2005), 151

176 Sergio Flamigni: *La Tela del Ragno* (Roma: Kaos edizioni, 2003), 42

177 with the document bag he was carrying, which was to become the topic of many conspiracy theories after his death

never been ascertained.¹⁷⁸ The endless recycling of conspiracy theories around the kidnapping, despite the clear forensic evidence and eye witness accounts of the perpetrators, can be explained by the journalist Giorgio Bocca's observation that: "Italian pessimism towards the nation is such that any action of excellence is automatically attributed to strangers."¹⁷⁹

The kidnapers held Moro in a walled off section of an apartment in the center of Rome for 55 days. They followed the approach of previous kidnappings, putting their prisoner on trial and publishing the interrogations in regular bulletins, though the captors were disappointed by the absence of any shocking revelations. Moro wrote to his family, his colleagues in government and to the Pope asking for a prisoner exchange but the government, with the strong support of the Communist Party, refused to negotiate. Moro's family and some of the Socialist Party leaders took a different position and argued for a prisoner swap, causing painful and heated debates in political circles.

His captors took down his detailed accounts of Italian political life, which they did not release, presumably because they did not fit with the theories they were espousing, but were discovered in a hideout a few months after his death, with a longer account emerging in 1980 when a new owner decided to knock down a wall in the apartment where the document had been stored.¹⁸⁰ The police efforts to find the hideout were fruitless and on May 9th, after taking a vote in the Executive Committee, the Red Brigades decided to kill their prisoner. Moretti led Moro to a Renault 4 car in the basement car park of the apartment block where he had been held and asked him to sit in the trunk so they could drive him home. Moretti then shot Moro with a Czech made Skorpion submachine gun and parked the car in a road half way between the Christian Democratic and Communist Party headquarters before calling the authorities to tell them where they could find Moro's body.¹⁸¹

The police reaction to the kidnapping was showy but the results were dismal. Between them, the police, Carabinieri and the army deployed 12,760 men, stopped 114,531 people for inquiries and carried out 674 searches.¹⁸² The lack of good intelligence was clear from the start: on the day of the kidnapping the police distributed a series of photographs of suspects that were shown on the evening news and printed in all the newspapers. It didn't take long for observers to note that two of the suspects were already in jail and two other pictures were duplicates.¹⁸³ In an illustration of the lack of coordination between regional

178 Vladimiro Satta, *Il Caso Moro e i suoi falsi misteri* (Roma: Rubettino, 2006) page 25

179 Richard Drake in *Terrorism in Europe* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 111

180 Gardner, *Mission Italy*, 181

181 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 170

182 Satta, *Il Caso Moro*, 530

183 Vladimiro Satta, *Odissea nel caso Moro* (Roma: EDUP, 2005), 143

bodies, Carabinieri General Niccolò Bozzo, one of dalla Chiesa's closest aides in Turin, reported to his superiors that his sources told him the Red Brigades were looking for experienced bricklayers in Rome to build a prison cell, which had surprised him as he didn't know that the Red Brigades had an operation in Rome. His superior, General De Sena, had dismissed the warning saying that there was no threat from the left and that they just needed to deal with the NAP and fascist terrorist groups in Rome.¹⁸⁴

The police did find the printing press the Red Brigades used for their communiqués but didn't stake it out and lost the opportunity to catch the kidnapers on their next visit when they saw the police outside and fled. The police identified the hideout that Moretti was using in Via Gradoli but didn't search it after the neighbors told them that the tenants were respectable people and only discovered it later after the Red Brigades had carelessly left the bathroom tap on and flooded the floor below.

Inevitably, such a high profile case attracted fraudsters hoping to profit from the confusion and desire to save Moro's life. The Red Brigades made it clear, particularly to Moro's family, that they were not out for a ransom, but this did not deter the Vatican where Pope Paul VI was determined to do whatever he could to save the life of his old friend. Italy had been battered by a spate of kidnappings in the 1970s and had passed laws blocking ransom payments but the government made it tacitly clear that the law would be ignored in this case if Moro could be saved. The Pope asked Monsignor Curioni, chaplain of the San Vittore prison in Milan, to ask around and see what could be done. A mysterious Mr. X soon contacted the Monsignor and demanded a ten billion lire (\$12 million) ransom, about ten times the going rate for kidnappings at the time. Meanwhile a fake Red Brigades communiqué announced that Moro's body could be found in the Duchessa Lake caused a brief flurry of police activity until the lake was dredged without results. The forger who had written the false communiqué turned out to be an accomplice of Mr. X and the Vatican never paid the ransom.¹⁸⁵ A senior socialist politician and academic, Romano Prodi — who was to become prime minister twenty years later — heard about a possible Red Brigades base in Gradoli. To protect his source he claimed to have learned the name in a spiritual séance, which did little to strengthen his credibility. The police went ahead with a detailed search of the village of Gradoli near Rome with no success. It did not occur to the investigating magistrate to search Gradoli Street in Rome where the Red Brigades did indeed have a main operating base, discovered later on thanks

184 Satta, *Odissea*, 158

185 Satta, *Odissea*, 567-570

to the water leak.¹⁸⁶ These activities just added to the impression of confusion and incompetence.

The missed opportunities and the blunders of the next fifty-five days of Moro's captivity shook the confidence of the public and of Italy's allies. When Moro's dead body was found in a car carefully parked half way between the headquarters of the Christian Democrat and the Communist Party, in the middle of Rome which was supposedly under a state of siege, the Italian state's humiliation was complete.

Adriana Faranda and her partner Valerio Morucci, the founders of the Rome column, had pleaded to free Moro but accepted the majority's decision to kill him. Gallinari and Moretti pointed to the jump in recruitment after the murder to argue that they had taken the right decision,¹⁸⁷ and, in a narrow sense, the operation had been successful both in showing the capabilities of the Red Brigades and the incompetence of the security services who kept stumbling over leads and then failing to exploit them.¹⁸⁸ A broader view though would have indicated its strategic failure as the public made its rejection of the Red Brigades's brutality unequivocally clear.

This surprise that the Red Brigades and their sympathizers showed to this response demonstrated how far removed they were from the mood of the Italian public. In his history of modern Italy, *Force of Destiny*, Christopher Duggan explains that:

*“Contrary to the hopes of the terrorists (whose highly abstract readings of Italian society, influenced by fashionable Marxist sociology, had blinded them to the reality of the conservative aspirations of most ordinary Italians), the country was not plunged into incipient civil war. Instead, as one of the kidnappers, the young feminist Anna Laura Braghetti, recalled despondently, a wave of indignation of solidarity swept the country, ‘with piazzas full of red flags and students and workers calling us fascists.’”*¹⁸⁹

To Moretti's disappointment, the Communist Party did not join the revolution he was trying to start with the kidnapping but rather vigorously supported the state and insisted on not allowing any dialogue with the terrorists to rescue Moro. Years later, he explained that *“we were using their arguments from the 1950s and 1960s against Moro and they were on the side of the government — amazing. We*

186 Satta, *Odissea*, 560

187 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 181

188 Meade, *The Red Brigades*, 176

189 Christopher Duggan, *Force of Destiny* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), 571

didn't believe that in the end the party would support the state once we had proven that revolutionary forces could challenge the Christian Democrats."¹⁹⁰

The Communists' support of the rule of law didn't help them politically; as the US Ambassador had suspected, public disgust over the murders hurt the party "*which many Italians rightly saw as having planted the ideology that bore this bitter fruit.*"¹⁹¹ Crucially, the government finally decided to hit back hard, under the unified leadership of the one person who had shown he could beat the terrorists: General dalla Chiesa.

190 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 174

191 Gardner, *Mission Italy*, 169

“

I told you that a terrorist big shot, the same one my men caught on the anniversary of your death, had started to talk. He has confessed on a huge scale and put me in a position to win this great struggle.¹⁹²



6

Escalation, Repentance, Defeat

ON SEPTEMBER 1ST, the government appointed dalla Chiesa to a new role as the nation's anti-terrorist coordinator with a direct reporting line to the Interior Minister and broad executive powers. He recruited 230 Carabinieri and policemen to work with him and began mapping the structure of the organization he had set out to destroy.¹⁹³ Members of parliament for the extreme left and Communist Party expressed fears that this appointment would make him an "Italian Pinochet" but he was able to reassure them of his commitment to democratic values.¹⁹⁴

The Interior Minister during the Moro kidnapping, Francesco Cossiga, had resigned when his body was found and his successor, Virgilio Rognoni, decided the time had come to act. He considered two candidates to take on the task of defeating the terrorists and quickly settled on dalla Chiesa because of his deep understanding of the problem and his popularity with the public that desperately needed reassurance. He pushed through an emergency decree to create a new position for him that would bypass the cumbersome bureaucracy of the magistrates and the Carabinieri command.

Rognoni explained that the Red Brigades had gone quiet in 1976 when violent street demonstrations seemed to be the major problem. It was clear after the Moro kidnapping though, that the earlier lack of focus on the threat had been a mistake and that citizens needed to be given a sense of security. The hollowing out of the security services had lost the institutional memory and only dalla Chiesa could bring that back. Rognoni asked dalla Chiesa to form a group reporting to him directly to tackle on the challenge. The country needed a strong, well known

192 from dalla Chiesa's diary, in which he would write letters to his dead wife. March 23rd, 1980. dalla Chiesa, *ibid* page 240

193 Sapegno and Ventura, *Generale*, 57

194 Nese and Serio *Il Generale dalla Chiesa*, 82

personality who could reassure the public, and dalla Chiesa had the clearest idea of the overall structure of the terrorist groups and as well as a consistent and thorough analysis of the problem. The secret services, as Rognoni tells the story, were useless: the SISDE internal service was only two years old and totally disorganized and the SISMI military secret service believed everything was a Soviet plot.¹⁹⁵

Dalla Chiesa's team got to work and quickly had a stroke of luck. The Red Brigades member Lauro Azzolini had forgotten a bag on a bus in Florence. When an elderly lady found it and handed it in to the police, they were surprised to find a receipt from a dentist's office in Milan, a purchase certificate for a motorbike, a bunch of keys and a pistol whose serial number had been rubbed off.¹⁹⁶ The Carabinieri visited the dentist bringing with them photographs of known suspects and the staff quickly recognized Azzolini. They then traced the motorbike and one of the workers at the shop mentioned that he had seen Azzolini in a nearby street, via Monte Nevoso, a few times. The Carabinieri then took the keys and tried them out late at night on every house in the neighborhood until one door opened. They then set up an observation post nearby and waited until the suspects arrived. When the Carabinieri broke into the apartment, they captured nine senior Red Brigades members and found some of the notes of Aldo Moro's interrogation. These notes became a minor scandal later on as the Red Brigades prisoners insisted that there was a fuller set, and a stash of money that the Carabinieri must have stolen or hidden for political gain. Dalla Chiesa denied all knowledge of another document, as did the officers who had carried out the raid and searched the property. In 1990, a new owner of the apartment demolished a partition and found the document carefully hidden behind the brickwork, clearing up at least this mystery.

Gallinari explained that the Monte Nevoso break-in had been devastating because of an organizational decision the leadership had made earlier that everyone in the hierarchy had to participate in front line operations, no matter how risky they were. The leadership understood the danger of decapitation but felt it was essential for morale that the lower level members saw the leadership participating in military actions.¹⁹⁷

The Red Brigades continued to attack, murdering nine policemen and magistrates and wounding eight from June to December. They were now in competition with splinter groups, carrying out their own attacks and each pushing the other to escalate.¹⁹⁸ The Red Brigades then made a crucial mistake: they murdered a trade union leader. Guido Rossa, a Communist trade unionist at the

195 interview with Virginio Rognoni reprinted in Armeni *La strategia vincente*, 83-90

196 Satta, *Odissea* 622

197 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 202

198 Galli, *Il partito armato*, 221

Italsider steel plant in Genova who had reported a Red Brigades worker to the police for handing out leaflets and proselytizing. Riccardo Dura, the head of the Genova column, shot and killed him on January 19th, 1979, despite having been ordered just to kneecap him.¹⁹⁹ He justified his disobedience later by explaining that traitors must be killed. The Red Brigades issued a statement acknowledging the mistake but the damage was done. Gallinari called the murder a disaster. Until then, local Communist Party offices had refused to report activists to the police; after the murder everything changed.²⁰⁰

An unprecedented demonstration of the anger this had cause came at Rossa's funeral where two hundred and fifty thousand workers attended chanting slogans against the Red Brigades. Professor Fenzi, a university lecturer in Genoa and one of ideological leaders of the Red Brigades, reported that the murder had cut off recruitment among workers in the city and was the beginning of the end for the group there.²⁰¹ He explains the murder as typical of a kind of madness that had entered the organization, quoting one of its members, an admirer of Pol Pot who said: "*if we win, I don't want honors or titles. I just want the task of killing all our enemies; it will be hard work, as many millions will need to be killed. That's all I want to do.*"²⁰²

Dalla Chiesa's team kept working as the attacks continued. Gallinari was wounded in a firefight and captured on September 24th while planning a robbery;²⁰³ FIAT fired 61 workers with Red Brigades links in October, many of whom were tried the following year and Toni Negri, the university professor who had led the extremist groups in Padua and had been one of dalla Chiesa's highest profile targets, recanted in jail, earning the contempt of Gallinari and others but severely disrupting recruitment in the university.²⁰⁴ The Red Brigades continued to strike, murdering the chief technology officer of the Montedison plant and the vice president of the High Council of the Magistrates. In February 1980, dalla Chiesa's team scored a breakthrough, arresting the head of the Turin column and one of the group's most effective hitmen, Patrizio Peci.

A new law, that dalla Chiesa had requested, offered reduced sentences to those who confessed and renounced the organization and this was the time to use it. Dalla Chiesa's careful interrogation convinced Peci to confess and renounce the group, and on March 28th, the Carabinieri raided a Genovese hideout killing all four Red Brigades members inside. The pressure was starting to tell. The original leadership in prison began to challenge the leaders on the outside,

199 Galli, *Il partito armato*, 227

200 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 207

201 Zavoli, *La notte della Repubblica*, 220

202 Zavoli, *La notte della Repubblica*, 221

203 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 222

204 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 232

formally requesting the resignation of the executive council,²⁰⁵ while Franceschini complained about their inability to storm the high security prisons in which they were held, The Milan (Walter Alasia) column split off, committing two unapproved murders.²⁰⁶

As the organization began to fragment, the level of violence increased. Gallinari, now in jail, observed that the Red Brigades had reached the highest quantitative point of violence at the same time that they had become the weakest politically, as the real purpose of the attacks turned to winning internal credibility among the various factions rather than pursuing a well thought through political program.²⁰⁷

The Naples group kidnapped the Christian Democratic city councilman Ciro Cirillo, who was notoriously tied to the local organized crime *Camorra* organization, killing his two bodyguards. Unlike in the Moro case, the state allowed the Red Brigades to negotiate through *Camorra* prisoners who controlled the organization from the local jails and Cirillo was freed on payment of a significant ransom from secret service funds. The dissident Walter Alasia column in Milan kidnapped Renzo Sandrucci, head of production at Alfa Romeo to demand improvements in the conditions for the workforce, while the Genoa column kidnapped Giuseppe Taliercio, director of the Petrochemical company and the Rome column kidnapped the deputy head of police in Primavalle, a local suburb, each group trying to prove that their own approach was the right one. Meanwhile, the kneecappings, arson attacks and brief kidnappings continued.

Moretti reacted to the internal pressure by killing the Carabinieri General Enrico Galvaligi, who ran prison security and kidnapping Judge Giovanni D'Urso, a senior official in the prison service. Moretti had concluded that the group had over reached in the Moro kidnapping, as there was no point in violence that didn't lead to negotiations and political victories, so decided to concentrate on demands that the government might concede.²⁰⁸ The kidnapping was the closest the Red Brigades would ever get to Professor Freedman's advice to terrorist planners: "*When terrorism is used effectively as a strategy it serves as a coercive means of obtaining political effects by using threats of violence against civil society.*"²⁰⁹ The government agreed to the demand to close the toughest prison on the island of Asinara and, after D'Urso's 14 year old daughter had read the Red Brigades communiqué on television, including the section calling her father "*that pig who deserves to be condemned,*" the Red Brigades released him.²¹⁰ Moretti later described the operation as his masterpiece, "*a perfect work of craftsmanship, never*

205 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 234

206 Zavoli, *La notte della Repubblica*, 451

207 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 253

208 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 200-201

209 Lawrence Freedman, ed., *Superterrorism: Policy Responses* (Oxford: Wiley, 2002), 47

210 Jamieson, *The Heart Attacked*, 187

to be repeated,"²¹¹ as a targeted attack had achieved its political purpose and given the group the chance to rebuild its reputation. The pressure that dalla Chiesa maintained gave Moretti and his remaining group no space to rebuild and this last attempt to restore the Red Brigades' image also failed.

On March 4th, 1981, a Carabinieri infiltrator, Renato Longo,²¹² identified Moretti's hideout and he was finally arrested. The organization, which he had barely held together, began to crumble. One group in Turin began pursuing violent trade union activities, the Naples group became a pure criminal gang, robbing banks and murdering security guards. Giovanni Senzani, a sociology professor and criminologist — who had been an adviser to the Italian prison service while planning attacks on it — created an ultra-violent splinter group — that even the hard line Gallinari described as extremist²¹³ — focused on killing those who had confessed and their families, including Peci's brother, whose killing he filmed, and his girlfriend, who was attacked in jail but survived.²¹⁴ On October 21st, 1982, Savasta's group, now renamed the *Guerrilla Party*, carried out a bank robbery in Naples and executed two guards for the sole purpose of getting press coverage for their banner denouncing Natalia Ligas, one of their colleagues who had joined the ever growing ranks of repentant Red Brigades members who were cooperating, the *pentiti*. At this point, even the most aggressive Red Brigades leaders were becoming disgusted with the pointless bloodletting. Gallinari, one of the Red Brigades' most effective killers, wrote of his horror on learning that his comrades were now killing innocent people just to be able to get their message on television.²¹⁵

THE DOZIER KIDNAPPING AND THE END

In its assessment of the state of the Red Brigades in 1982, the CIA noted the group's impressive ability to rebuild its ranks, observing that the organization still had between 100 and 150 underground fighters and about 500 part-time members despite over 2,000 arrests in 1980.²¹⁶ The challenge the organization faced was of internal splits and dissention from the decisions of the leadership.

Antonio Savasta, the last of the Moro kidnapers still at large, decided to relaunch the group with a spectacular attack, which might appeal to the growing anti-nuclear movement in the country and provide a new source of recruits as the

211 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 226

212 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 231

213 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 253

214 Zavoli, *La notte della Repubblica*, 457

215 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 282

216 CIA Archives: <https://perma.cc/7HKU-EJ4M>

recruitment effect from the Moro kidnapping had faded.²¹⁷ They decided, for the first time, to attack an American officer to show that they were ready to take on foreign imperialism but were stumped by their lack of knowledge of American military ranks and had to buy a box of toy soldiers to figure out whom they should target.²¹⁸ On December 17th, 1981, Savasta's unit kidnapped General James Lee Dozier, the US Army deputy Chief of Staff, NATO Southern Land Forces, in Verona.²¹⁹ This time, the Red Brigades were unable to interrogate their prisoner, as none of them spoke English and he spoke no Italian.²²⁰

By now, dalla Chiesa had been promoted to command the Carabinieri division Pastrengo and was no longer in charge of the anti-terrorist campaign. The Dozier kidnapping finally gave the police force the opportunity to show that they too could deal with the terrorist threat as part of their traditional rivalry with the Carabinieri. The police had built its own rapid response team to compete with dalla Chiesa's GIS, and its anti terrorist DIGOS units were fully operational.

The Interior Minister gave the police the lead on the case to reduce the rivalry with the Carabinieri while fighting off American pressure to take over the case. Unlike dalla Chiesa's Carabinieri, the police had no scruples about using rougher interrogation techniques in their effort to show quick results. The police's anti-terrorism Digos unit took the lead and picked up some low level Red Brigades members who they waterboarded until they revealed the location of the hideout where Dozier was being held. The police rapid reaction force then took over and raided the hideout successfully on January 28th, freeing the prisoner and capturing all the kidnapers. The subsequent arrests put an end to the Red Brigades as an organized threat and, even though a few random murders continued as late as 1987, the movement was effectively finished. It is a source of continuing regret to the Italian authorities that in this isolated case the police departed from dalla Chiesa's strict insistence of respecting the rule of law in pursuing terrorists, but it is fair to admit that the police's achievements hastened the end of the Red Brigades.²²¹ The CIA's assessment of the aftermath of the Dozier affair stated that: "*The conclusion of the Dozier kidnapping will be viewed by the Red Brigades as a humiliating defeat inflicted by the Brigades' principal enemy, the Italian government.*"²²² The assessment went on to speculate that the defeat would exacerbate the tensions between the different wings of the movement and push the remaining members at large to rethink their approach. On January 26, 1983, Renato Curcio admitted that the war was over: "The armed struggle has been short-circuited, it did not

217 Savasta's deposition, in *Galli Il partito armato*, 332

218 Jamieson, *The Heart Attacked*, 191

219 Galli, *Il partito armato*, 317-333

220 Galli *Il partito armato*, 317-333

221 Satta, *Odissea* 654

222 CIA Archive: <https://perma.cc/52H5-KVN6>

succeed in making the great leap forward, it fell to the ground. Its protagonists can only mourn, liberating themselves from the ghost.”²²³

Gallinari summarized the outcome as well as the political spin when he explained that the Communist Party needed to blame the Red Brigades for the failure of the historic compromise so pushed the notion of secret plots while the Christian Democrats used the Red Brigades to discredit the idea of Communism and thus the Communists. In reality, Gallinari understood, the movement had been defeated by effective repression and by its internal struggles, which left it unable to propose any viable political platform and thus made it politically irrelevant.²²⁴ Rossana Rossanda, the publisher of the newspaper *Il Manifesto*, the voice of the non-violent ultra-left, refused to go along with the Communist Party’s obfuscation, recognizing that: “*the Red Brigades are a story of the left: all the ingredients that we were taught in the courses we remembered so fondly on Stalin and Zhdanov were there. The world, we had learned then, is divided in two: on one side stands imperialism, on the other socialism.*”²²⁵ Moretti justified the armed struggle by arguing that the Red Brigades lasted twelve years and that could only have happened if they were fulfilling a real need but acknowledged that they failed to maintain their link to the working class and overreached.²²⁶

223 Drake, *Apostles and Agitators*, 147

224 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 337, 337

225 Rossana Rossanda introduction to Mario Moretti *Brigate Rosse*

226 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 200-201



Speaking with a veteran foreign correspondent last week I learned an Italian term I hadn't known: *dietrologia*. The idea is that many Italians believe that the surface or official explanation for something can rarely be the real one. There's always something behind, or *dietro*, that surface. It's a great word.²²⁷

7

State Sponsorship: a Comforting Illusion

THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST the Red Brigades needs to be set in the context of the Cold War and Italy's position as a front line state in that conflict. The fundamental political problem of a NATO country whose second largest party did not accept its western orientation was one that had hung over the country's politics ever since the 1948 election in which the Catholic Church and the United States government had intervened decisively to ensure a Christian Democratic victory.²²⁸ The gap between the radical rhetoric and the practical accommodation of the Communist Party became ever greater as the hope of a popular revolution faded and the link to Moscow became increasingly strained. This distance between the party's revolutionary rhetoric and its cautious political actions created a sense of dissonance among some of its more ideologically committed members. It was the belief in an unfinished revolution that led Armando Attolini, an old partisan, to give Franceschini the Luger pistol he had taken from a dead German soldier and tell him to use it well.²²⁹ This was the weapon that became famous in the photographs of Red Brigades prisoners in years to come. Franceschini explains that the party hierarchy knew who the Red Brigades members were since most of them were still current or former party members, but would never have told the police.²³⁰

This revolutionary nostalgia coexisted uncomfortably with a Communist Party that was trying to present itself as respectable. In their memorandum to President Carter, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Undersecretary Michael Blumenthal

227 Johnson Column, the Economist March 15, 2011

228 Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy*, 254

229 Giovanni Fasanella and Gianfranco Pannone documentary *Il Sol dell'Avvenire*

230 Franceschini Mara, *Renato ed Io*, 80

described the party as *“Italy’s best organized and most dynamic political force. It has gained support by attracting increasing numbers of middle class voters to it solid but relatively constant labor base. These middle class voters responded to the Communists not as a party of ideology or revolution but as a party of social reform and effective government.”* The challenge for the US was that any softening of the decades long policy of shunning the Italian Communists might have repercussions in France and Spain, which also had strong Communist parties given that *“in neither country would the Socialist or other parties of the democratic left or center wish the inference to be drawn that we no longer regard the West European Communist parties as a serious problem.”*²³¹

The Soviet Union also struggled with its position toward the Italian Communists, who they funded and supported with KGB communications equipment, while criticizing them for a *“cowardly rejection of Leninism.”*²³² Enrico Berlinguer, the Communist Party leader, began speaking openly about a pluralistic Euro communism that would respect democracy, a position the Bulgarian leader, Todor Zhivkov, condemned in December 1976 as *“ideological subversion.”*²³³ Awkwardly, the Czechoslovak StB secret service had also been funding the Red Brigades on a small scale and both the Soviets and the Italian Communists were terrified that this would be exposed. The Soviet Ambassador in Rome told his Czechoslovak counterpart that *“You get a pennyworth of benefit [from the Red Brigades], but did a hundred times more damage.”*²³⁴

The Red Brigades were never shy about looking for international support, turning to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) for weapons and training,²³⁵ but struggled to build deeper relations with foreign groups. The Palestinian groups had a privileged position in Italy thanks to the deal that Aldo Moro had struck in 1973 with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), a Marxist offshoot of the PLO under the leadership of the Christian Palestinian activist George Habbash. The Italian police would look the other way when they used Italy as a transit ground for weapons in return for promising not to carry out attacks there.²³⁶ The PFLP also offered protection to Red Brigades members on the run but steered clear of too much involvement in Italian domestic politics.

Their discussions with the Basque separatist group ETA showed that the Red Brigades had little in common with the nationalist organization, but the German Rotee Armee Faktion (RAF), or Baader-Meinhof gang seemed a better bet,

231 Declassified, undated memorandum in Gardner, *Mission Italy*, Appendix

232 Christopher Andrew, ed., *Mitrokhin Archive*, volume 1 (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 386-388

233 Andrew Mitrokhin, 388

234 Andrew Mitrokhin, 389

235 Andrew Mitrokhin, 389

236 Satta, *Odissea*, 459

as the two groups were ideologically aligned. The leadership of the two groups agreed to meet to discuss joint operations. In an unfortunate misunderstanding, as narrated by Mario Moretti in his cell years later, the Italians left when they didn't see any men at the agreed rendezvous, discovering later that the three German women had waited for them in vain, a mistake that Moretti described with some embarrassment as a typical example of Italian chauvinism.²³⁷

Unhelpfully, the specter of foreign intervention continued to confuse matters among Italians and their allies. The Soviets tried to distract attention from the movement's Marxist roots by suggesting the Moro kidnapping was a NATO plot,²³⁸ a claim the Italian mass market left wing magazine *Panorama* picked up with the headline "Moro like Kennedy," implying that both had been killed by the CIA. The American political crackpot Lyndon La Ruche went further, accusing the US Ambassador to Italy, the academic Richard Gardner, of being behind the Moro kidnapping.²³⁹ In fact, Gardner had been tracking the terrorist problem ever since his arrival as Jimmy Carter's representative and had written a long letter to the National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski in 1977, the year before Moro's kidnapping, on the problem. Working with the embassy's political section and the CIA office, he had explained that:

There is one point to which needs to be made with some emphasis in order to set an accurate stage for any analysis of the "foreign connections" of Italian terrorism. That point is simply the inescapable conclusion that we are seeing in Italy today is very largely a homegrown phenomenon, springing from root causes which can easily be identified in the socio-economic ambience of contemporary Italy. Without going into great detail, these causes include the high level of unemployment among intellectual youth, inflation, poor schools and educational facilities, and, above all, a feeling of helplessness and a widespread frustration at the lack of any convincing sign that the government is seriously dedicated to coping effectively with the causes which give rise to violent outbursts, particularly among young people.

It is also important to bear in mind that the Italian proclivity for blaming "foreign devils" for its afflictions is not new; Embassy officers who have discussed the political terrorist phenomenon with Italian security and intelligence authorities detect a strong bias towards attributing terrorist to external causes, with vague references to the Red Army Faction or Baader-Meinhof group in Germany, and the Japanese Red Army. The fact remains, however, that I know of only one specific documented case where there was solidly-sourced information on Czech assistance to the Red Brigades. Since

237 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 191

238 *Novosti* September 8, 1978 quoted in Gardner, *Mission Italy*, 177

239 Gardner, *Mission Italy*, 179

*that one fragmentary report, no one in this Mission has been able to acquire hard evidence of external involvement with Italian terrorism.*²⁴⁰

The Ambassador continued his prescient reporting by discussing the likelihood that any connections between Italian and foreign terrorists would probably not rise above the level of informal contacts and that the real problem lay in the weakness of the Italian intelligence and security service which he described as being “*in a state of total confusion.*” Responding to what he expected would be the pressure in the US to become more involved in the Italian counter-terrorist efforts, he counseled strongly against it, advising that the US should “*avoid becoming entangled in phenomena which are primarily of national concern to the host country*” while reminding the National Security Advisor that under the Hughes-Ryan amendment of 1975, passed in response to US meddling in Chile to subvert the Allende government, the CIA was only authorized to deal with international terrorism and could not intervene in domestic police activities.

Brzezinski agreed with the Ambassador’s assessment replying in early 1978 that “*In spite of much discussion of its international links, Italian left terrorism is essentially a domestic phenomenon. The work of small clandestine groups of pseudo-intellectual left desperadoes, it is supported in varying degrees by the thousands of members of the open organizations of the extreme left, particularly Continuing Struggle [Lotta Continua] and Workers Vanguard [Autonomia Operaia].*” He also minimized the role of the Czech secret service, concluding that: “*The admittedly limited evidence rather suggests that their contact with the terrorists is an intelligence operation designed to produce information and perhaps demand a limited degree of guidance in return for limited support. We do not credit the thesis popular in Italy — that terrorism is seeded from abroad — nor the corollary that it would cease if malicious foreigners would stop meddling.*”²⁴¹

Unfortunately, not all of the American government shared this clear eyed and practical assessment of the nature of the problem. After holding back any assistance, in an excessively strict reading of the Hughes-Ryan amendment, the US State Department over-corrected during the Moro kidnapping, dispatching Dr. Steve Pieczenik, a psychiatrist and purported expert on kidnapping, to Rome to help the Italians with the rescue operations, where he thoroughly failed to do any good but caused decades of confusion with his eccentric theories. Pieczenik claimed that he had staged the Duchessa Lake fraud as part of a complex plot to force the Red Brigades to kill Moro even though by then the Italians had thrown him out of the country as a nuisance.²⁴² He has been interviewed by various parliamentary enquiries which have never been able to validate his claims and

240 Gardner, *Mission Italy*, 171-172

241 Gardner, *Mission Italy*, 173

242 Satta, *Odissea*, 558

now runs a website that claims that Saddam Hussein is alive in Russia and that 9/11 was an inside job.²⁴³

In her book *The Terror Network*, which was translated into 22 languages and used in FBI counterterrorism training, the American journalist Claire Sterling had claimed that the Red Brigades were run by the KGB, setting off an absurd meeting between the head of Italian Military Intelligence, General Sansovito, and then Secretary of State Alexander Haig, who refused to believe the CIA's assertions that the Red Brigades were a purely domestic phenomenon.²⁴⁴

An altogether different conspiracy theory involved the freemasons and in particular the secret P2 lodge whose exposure caused a political scandal in the 1980s. Secret lodges are illegal under the Italian constitution but, despite this prohibition, Licio Gelli, a Tuscan businessman and right wing political activist, had organized the lodge and recruited over 900 members from the worlds of business, politics and the military. The lodge acted as both an old boy's club and a home for right wing political discussion. Under pressure from his superiors, even General dalla Chiesa had sent in a membership application, a move that he immediately regretted and retracted. The reality of a corrupt, self-serving group of masons has been transformed into a global plot by the imagination of some Italian writers, led by the Communist Party member of parliament and member of the parliamentary commission on terrorism Sergio Flamigni, who alleged that the P2 members in the government had deliberately impeded the search for Aldo Moro as part of a plot to create a right-wing backlash. A parliamentary enquiry led by Tina Anselmi, a respected Christian Democratic politician and former resistance fighter, investigated the P2 in detail and found no links between the organization and the Moro kidnapping.²⁴⁵

More painfully for dalla Chiesa's family and those who fought the terrorist scourge, the great Italian novelist Leonardo Sciascia joined the chorus of those who suspected a hidden hand. Sciascia, a member of parliament, was a member of the parliamentary committee charged with investigating the Moro kidnapping but refused to sign on to the majority report, publishing his own dissent which he then included in a dense, allusive book that raises all the old conspiracy ideas without ever making an explicit case for anything other than what the majority had concluded, namely that the kidnapping was carried out by the Red Brigades without interference from Italian or foreign hidden hands. Nando dalla Chiesa, the general's son, challenged Sciascia's account and his later writings in which he had accused the general of dictatorial ambitions and made a series of easily

243 stevepieczenik.com

244 Duane Clarridge: *A Spy for all Seasons: my life in the CIA* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), page 186

245 Satta, *Il caso Moro e i suoi falsi misteri*, 129

disproved allegations about dalla Chiesa's methods, including that he had wanted to bring back the death penalty.²⁴⁶

The Italian love of conspiracy theories led to ever more inventive searches for the hidden hand. Bettino Craxi, leader of the Socialist Party and the first non-DC Prime Minister, believed the Hyperion language school in France (where his former Socialist colleague Corrado Simioni taught after leaving the fledgling Red Brigades) was the hiding place of the "great old man" who was really running the group on behalf of an unidentified foreign power.²⁴⁷ In 1990, the Venetian court looked into these charges and could find no facts to substantiate them. Even more creatively, Mario José Cereghino and Alberto Fasanella (co-author of a different conspiracy theory with Alberto Franceschini) revived the Mussolini government's conspiracy theory that the British were behind everything bad that happened in Italy and that, specifically, that British intelligence had supported Italian terrorist groups to get their hands on Italian oil production.²⁴⁸ The evidence to back this claim comes from the declassified Foreign Office cables in which the British Ambassador to Rome expresses concern about the Italian political situation in the mid 1970s.

Silvano De Prosopo and Rosario Priore took a different line, blaming the French, and specifically Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault's influence on Francois Mitterand who, they allege, had become convinced by Foucault's view that to punish criminals was oppressive and that the Italian terrorists in particular should be left in peace as long as they did not commit crimes on French soil.²⁴⁹ De Prosopo and Priore went on to allege that the French language school, Hyperion, founded as we have seen by former Red Brigades activists, was the "strategic center of international terrorism," run by the French secret service to cover their support for terrorist operations in defense of French interests, a claim that lacked any evidence to support it.²⁵⁰

Satta demolishes the various conspiracy theories in his minutely documented *Odissea nel caso Moro* (Odyssey in the Moro case). He points out that the Hyperion theory starts with Franceschini's vague suggestion that the school was a front for an intelligence service ("whether Western or Eastern is an insignificant detail").²⁵¹ None of the other former terrorists who had found refuge in France backed up this theory for which no hard evidence was ever produced. The theory was part of Franceschini's ongoing feud with Moretti, who he accused of betraying

246 Nando dalla Chiesa, *Delitto imperfetto* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 2003), 271-275

247 Sapegno and Ventura, *Generale*, 74

248 Mario José Cereghino and Giovanni Fasanella, *Il Golpe Inglese* (Chiarelettere, 2011), 263

249 Silvano De Prospero e Rosario Priore, *Chi manovrava le Brigate Rosse?* (Milano: Adriano Salani, 2011), 176

250 De Prospero and Priore, *Chi manovrava*, 161

251 Satta, *I falsi misteri*, 199

the idealistic dreams of the founders of the movement with his formalistic and bureaucratic management of the Red Brigades.

The parliamentary commission (*Commissione Stragi*), which ran from 1989 to 2001, looked closely at all the allegations of foreign interference concluding that the US Ambassador and CIA station chief had been correct²⁵² when they had assessed, in a cable to Zbigniew Brzezinski in December 1977, that “*what we are seeing in Italy today is very largely a homegrown phenomenon, springing from root causes which can easily be identified in the socio-economic ambience of contemporary Italy.*”²⁵³

As Satta points out, one compelling piece of evidence for the home grown nature of the Italian terrorist problem can be found in the number of different groups that sprung up during the period and the thousands of members who joined them.²⁵⁴ Decades of enquiries and hundreds of books on all manner of conspiracy theories have never shown anything but minor foreign involvement in what was always an Italian tragedy. Conversely, the minutely documented trials of all but one of the Red Brigades leaders as well as the parliamentary enquiries form a robust evidentiary base.

Even the story of Alberto Casimirri, the only kidnapper of Moro to escape justice, backs up the official account. Casimirri grew up in the Vatican where his father served as the papal spokesman for Popes Pius XII, John XXIII and Paul VI, after a wartime military and romantic adventure in Kefalonia later immortalized in the novel and film Captain Corelli’s Mandolin.²⁵⁵ Casimirri had joined the Red Brigades in 1973 from *Potere Operaio* and took part in a series of operations including at least two murders, until he decided to leave the group and flee the country. In 1983, he settled in Nicaragua where he runs two Italian restaurants. The Italian judiciary’s many attempts to extradite him have failed as the Nicaraguan government had granted him citizenship. In an interview with the Catholic magazine *Famiglia Cristiana* (Christian Family) in 1988, Casimirri unburdened himself and justified his decisions while noting that the struggle was now over.²⁵⁶ He explained his history in the organization and his role in the Moro kidnapping, denying absolutely any involvement from Italian or foreign secret services of any kind. He became disillusioned after Peci’s confession, concluding that the group had reached a political dead end and that it was time to leave while he still could. He ended the interview by explaining the origins of the *Gran Vecchio* (Great old man), the phrase that had haunted the conspiracy theorists looking for a hidden hand behind the Red Brigades. He

252 Satta, *I falsi misteri*, 85

253 Gardner, *Mission Italy*, 171

254 Satta, *I falsi misteri*, 487

255 Aldo Grandi, *L’ultimo brigatista*, (Milano: Rizzoli, 2007)149-150

256 Grandi, *L’ultimo brigatista*, 160-169

explained that the youngsters in the Red Brigades always referred to Moretti as the great old man, as he was so much older than they were and was respected, though he was never a dictator. The phrase stuck and was overheard by others who didn't understand its origins and turned it into a theory of a deep conspiracy.

The links between the Red Brigades and international left wing terrorist groups were weak because there were few opportunities for meaningful collaboration. The links to foreign intelligence services were weaker still as working with such an unmanageable group was not worth the risk. Their real international links were not those of the fevered imaginations of the conspiracy theorists, but rather those of the world of ideas. The Red Brigades prided themselves on their doctrinal orthodoxy: they quoted Marx, Lenin, Engels and Gramsci in their communiqués, they saw the world conflict between a parasitic bourgeoisie that had to be eliminated and a proletariat that had to be led with iron discipline in the Marxist-Leninist tradition. The man who inspired them had worked in the British Library a century before.



Terrorism is a particular form of psychological warfare, a battle of wills played out in people's minds.

—GENERAL CARLO ALBERTO DALLA CHIESA²⁵⁷

8

A Strategy for Psychological Warfare

LAWRENCE FREEDMAN memorably refers to “*strategy as a story told in the future tense*”²⁵⁸ and we are fortunate to be able to examine dalla Chiesa’s choices in that context from his writings and interviews during the struggle against the Red Brigades, uncontaminated by hindsight.

The central document is dalla Chiesa’s memorandum to the Interior Minister setting out how he proposed to conduct his campaign. On October 14th, 1979, dalla Chiesa sent Rognoni a four-page memorandum outlining the results since his appointment and his plan to defeat the enemy.²⁵⁹

He began by setting out three short-term objectives: 1) discover the group’s operational and logistical bases, 2) identify high profile members and any foreign support and 3) prevent recruitment in prisons, particularly of common criminals who could turn to terrorism. Beyond the immediate work though, dalla Chiesa argued the real objective was to identify and neutralize the minds behind the Red Brigades, who were to be found in university campuses and factory floors. He intended to break the enemy by finding its flaws and exploiting them until the organization collapsed.

Dalla Chiesa was pleased by the early results including one hundred and thirty arrests, the discovery of nine operational and logistics bases, and the research on campus recruitment that had led to the arrest of twenty university professors. He added though, that the battle could not be won just by arrests and statistics; it was primarily a psychological campaign that could only succeed by traumatizing

257 Peter Neumann and MLR Smith, *The Strategy of Terrorism: How It Works and Why It Fails* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), page 9

258 Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy, a History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013) page xiv

259 reprinted in Dalla Chiesa, *In nome del popolo Italiano*, 223-227

the terrorist organizations and destroying their credibility with the public and with their sympathizers.

The real measure of success, he argued, was that the state, which had appeared shaken by the aggressiveness and impenetrability of the terrorist groups, was now showing confidence in the law and its institutions; that the security forces no longer looked in trouble but were able to penetrate the terrorist groups and exploit their successes and that all the terrorist groups were taking serious hits that were ruining morale among their members and supporters. Dalla Chiesa concluded that his campaign was exposing the contradictions between the strands of the terrorist movement.

Dalla Chiesa complained about the lack of progress in Parliament on bills he had recommended, the fight between local police units and his group to take credit for successful raids, the tardiness of the judiciary in pursuing anti-terrorism cases and the jealousies and lack of support from other parts of the administration, but on the whole expressed confidence that the campaign was on the right path and would succeed.

Dalla Chiesa built a tight-knit group of operatives who reported directly to him, lived and dressed like the terrorists, read their literature and infiltrated their meeting places. He collated all intelligence daily and tracked the money flows from the bank robberies and kidnappings that had funded the organization. He never arrested single members but preferred to follow them until he could take down an entire network. He insisted on absolute adherence to legal and moral standards, even sending a bunch of flowers to Susanna Ronconi, one of the group's leaders, when he heard that a policeman had hit her in jail.²⁶⁰ He did not shy away from investigating powerful and politically connected terrorists, including Marco Donnat-Cattin, the son of the Industry Minister, a founder of Prima Linea. Most importantly, he understood that he needed to discredit the movement and convince its members to abandon it. By identifying intellectual credibility as the center of gravity of the campaign, he was able to wage a sophisticated attack against the movement and its supporters that led to its total destruction.

The emphasis on the movement's ideological underpinnings led dalla Chiesa to focus on the intellectual milieu in which the Red Brigades had grown. He distinguished between subversion and political struggles to satisfy the legitimate aspirations of the masses to assert their rights and improve their economic and social position, insisting that all social bodies should support the latter and fight the former. He criticized the academics that had educated a generation of students to hate civil society and the false equivalence that others made between the state and the terrorists. He challenged the media to stop acting as stenographers for the terrorists and to concentrate their reporting on the

260 Dalla Chiesa, *In nome del popolo Italiano*, 19

damage their attacks inflicted. He totally rejected the explanations of the terrorist phenomenon that tried to justify it by linking it to poverty or social injustice, nothing that “*it has long been clear that terrorism cannot be considered the results of socioeconomic ills that afflict society in democracies*” but rather “*is one of the many tools that certain political groups of the extreme left use to subvert the existing institutions with violence.*”²⁶¹ He followed up this argument with a focused campaign against the “Bad Teachers” who had preached violence in the classroom, most notably with the charges against Toni Negri, who only managed to escape jail time by running for Parliament under the banner of the libertarian Radical Party before fleeing to France.

Dalla Chiesa’s personal example, clear strategy, commitment to the protection of legal norms and effective leadership reversed what had seemed a hopeless situation and restored the rule of law to a country that was close to breakdown. This success was not inevitable. Peter Jenke, the head of research at Control Risks, commented at the time that “*If measured by the number of incidents (2,150 in 1979 although fewer in the early 1980s), or numbers of people involved, or even technical sophistication and brutality, Italy ranks in Europe as having the most debilitating of all terrorist problems — it is national in extent and generalized in its impact.*”²⁶² Moretti, the group’s leader in its most ferocious period, emphasized the group’s deep social roots, noting that: “*we lasted twelve years. How could we have managed if we weren’t fulfilling a real need.*”²⁶³ The political pressure to suspend legal protections was strong, with even the centrist Republican Party advocating a return of the death penalty for terrorists. The country could have taken an authoritarian path as had happened in some South American countries under similar circumstances or could have sought an accommodation with the new political force. That it did neither, but rather was able to defeat the threat was in large part due to a correct strategy, brilliantly carried out.

First, dalla Chiesa had to build a team that could fight the Red Brigades. Dalla Chiesa recruited young men and women, ideally single, who were physically fit, had a good knowledge of the law, were patient, determined and able to reflect, and didn’t look like Carabinieri. He held firmly to a “no Rambo rule.”²⁶⁴ His officers were banned from visiting Carabinieri stations, barracks or family homes and, if married, had to cut off all family ties during their service with his unit, as he had done himself much to his wife’s distress. When she died of a sudden heart attack, he reproached himself for the strain this life had put on her.²⁶⁵ In his interview with *Epoca* magazine in 1982, dalla Chiesa explained that his men lived

261 Satta, *I falsi misteri*, 625

262 Peter Jenke, *Guerrilla and Terrorist Organizations*, Rand Study 1983, 43

263 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 32

264 Armeni, *La strategia vincente*, 122

265 Armeni, *La strategia vincente*, 107

undercover, using aliases to rent apartments, false license plates on their cars and practicing total compartmentalization between units, just like their enemies.²⁶⁶ A sign of his success was that applications to join the Carabinieri spiked as those to join the police fell.²⁶⁷

Dalla Chiesa was an enthusiastic early adopter of technology that could help his work. The Italian computer industrialist Carlo de Benedetti had given him the computers that his team used to keep track of their targets.²⁶⁸ His team used electronic monitoring devices and high performance cameras to gain a better understanding of the enemy. He introduced fax machines and cellular phones to his units to speed up transmission and banned the use of radios and landline phones that were vulnerable to interception. His team developed observation vans that could be used for long-range covert monitoring and could follow suspects inconspicuously. In the end though, it was the quality of his team and the efficiency with which he employed them that gave them their edge. He was scrupulous about never allowing them to testify in court and thus risk being identified and used cutouts to sign all documents and provide statements to the prosecution. Dalla Chiesa also fought to protect his men from some of the more left-wing magistrates who tried to block their work, most notably in Bologna where a magistrate charged the undercover operative running Dalla Chiesa's unit there with various charges in an attempt to expose and discredit the Carabinieri operation.²⁶⁹

INFILTRATION

Dalla Chiesa had learned the value of infiltrators in his work against the Mafia and he took personal responsibility for finding men who could penetrate the Red Brigades. His first great success was with a former Italian priest turned Bolivian revolutionary: Silvano Girotto, better known as "*frate mitra*" (brother machine gun).²⁷⁰

The Italian police had pursued Girotto in the 1960s for a series of robberies. He had been arrested by the French police while crossing the border illegally and had escaped a jail sentence by joining the Foreign Legion. After three months in Algeria, he had deserted and returned to Italy where he had joined the Franciscan order and was ordained as a priest before heading to South America.²⁷¹

While on missionary work in Bolivia, Girotto had witnessed government massacres and had joined Che Guevara's revolutionary group, picking up a fair

266 Sapegno and Ventura, *Generale*, 58

267 Satta, *I falsi misteri*, 633

268 Satta, *Odissea*, 441

269 Satta, *Odissea*, 629

270 Armeni, *La strategia vincente*, 59-68

271 Sapegno and Ventura, *Generale*, 49

degree of expertise in guerrilla operations. He moved to Chile and sought refuge in the Italian embassy after the Pinochet coup. On his return to Italy in 1974, one of dalla Chiesa's men approached him and asked him to help their hunt for the Red Brigades after convincing him that there was no place for guerrilla activities in a democracy. Giroto's experiences with Guevara gave him a level of revolutionary credibility that meant he was ideally placed to infiltrate the group and discover its secrets. He contacted some early supporters who put him in touch with a lawyer for the group. The lawyer questioned him on Marxist doctrine and on his motivations and then arranged for him to meet Curcio and Moretti. Giroto reported that Moretti was angry that they were not being more aggressive, complaining that *"our pistols shoot at the sky,"* to which Curcio added no, we shoot at our feet because we don't know how to use them. They asked Giroto to become their military instructor, bypassing the normal vetting processes.²⁷²

Giroto reported back on the order of battle of the group and set up Curcio's arrest. Dalla Chiesa regretted having to move too quickly and not rounding up the entire group but at that time there no legal protection for informers who committed crimes and he was concerned that Giroto would have to join a robbery or be compromised.²⁷³ Even so, the results had been devastating for the Red Brigades. As Giroto explained in his autobiography, infiltration *"is the only truly infallible method against which no clandestine organization has an effective defense... It's true that compartmentalization exists but after a while you can pick up all sorts of information. No compartmentalization can resist someone who wants to know all the details, all the facts."*²⁷⁴

Giroto was only one of many informers who dalla Chiesa was able to place in the Red Brigades. He sent Carabinieri to study under Toni Negri and other university lecturers who preached the armed struggle, and one even went to Paris to work as a sous-chef in the restaurant where the Prima Linea leader Marco Donnat-Cattin worked.²⁷⁵ His successes had the added value of increasing the group's paranoia and mutual suspicions, a tendency he exploited by planting suspected informers in prison cells with the most hardened terrorists, a practice which Moretti complained created dissention and ideological conflict and made recruitment impossible.²⁷⁶ Moretti himself was later captured thanks to an informant. The ability dalla Chiesa demonstrated to penetrate the organization, learn its secrets and exploit them played a central part in the psychological dominance he was able to achieve over his opponents.

272 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 75

273 Armeni, *La strategia vincente*, 70

274 Silvano Giroto, *Mi chiamavano frate Mitra* (Roma: Edizioni Paoline, 2002), pages 365-366

275 Armeni, *La strategia vincente*, 113

276 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 236

The classic problem that police face with infiltrators is that the criminal organization will expect new recruits to commit a crime early on to prove themselves. Dalla Chiesa's answer to the Moro Commission on whether he allowed his informers to commit attacks on people explained how he handled this problem: "*I would not allow that... they are allowed to distribute leaflets, burn a car, which I will overlook*"²⁷⁷ but no more. In any case, it was relatively straightforward for dalla Chiesa's Carabinieri to penetrate the Red Brigades because they were so fluent in their revolutionary language that they came across as credible recruits. Prison infiltration was even easier as there was less ability to ask new recruits to commit crimes. In a change from their previous hands off policy, after 1978, the Communist Party also ran its own infiltration operations with its own operatives posing as new converts and reporting back to the Party and to dalla Chiesa's units.²⁷⁸

MAPPING THE IDEOLOGY AND ORDER OF BATTLE

Even before the Red Brigades were formally established, the Carabinieri had penetrated their ranks. We know the details of the Chiavari meeting because the Carabinieri had an informer in the group who reported on the ideological debates on whether to initiate the insurgency.²⁷⁹ The problem, from the start, wasn't identifying the leadership of the Red Brigades but rather getting the institutions and mass media to recognize the seriousness of the threat and invest in tackling it seriously.²⁸⁰ When dalla Chiesa arrived in Turin, he quickly grasped the scale of the problem, remarking, "*they are built on a solid ideological base and won't be easy to destroy.*"²⁸¹ From the start, dalla Chiesa recognized that: "*Terrorist groups evolve out of broader political movements and it is by looking at these movements — their ideas, narratives and internal dynamics, as well as their changing attitudes towards political participation — that one can learn most about the future of terrorism.*"²⁸²

Dalla Chiesa's insistence on understanding the Red Brigades was unusual in Italian policing: he wanted to know everything about the enemy including their order of battle, behavior and their methodology. His was an intelligence led approach in which each source was studied and ranked by credibility, every Red Brigades document was carefully studied and all robberies were examined for clues that they might be related to terrorist funding.²⁸³ He ordered his

277 Commissione Moro, volume 4, pages 327-328

278 Gianni Cipriani, *Lo Stato invisibile, Storia dello spionaggio in Italia dal dopoguerra a oggi* (Milano: Sperling & Kupfer, 2002)

279 Armeni, *La Strategia Vincente*, 25

280 Armeni, *La Strategia Vincente*, 26

281 Nese and Serio, *Il Generale dalla Chiesa*, 49

282 Peter Neumann, *Old and New Terrorism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 162

283 Armeni, *La Strategia Vincente*, 99-100

men to break from the traditional policing approach in which single members of the organization would be arrested when they were spotted.²⁸⁴ Instead he would have them followed until the entire network had been identified using electronic and physical monitoring and absolute discretion and only then roll up the entire group.²⁸⁵

All information was to be collated and transmitted daily without fail²⁸⁶ and data from all regional offices was assessed and tracked centrally. The magistrate Vittorio Pomarici gave the example of the raid on the Montenevoso hideout in Rome where Moro had been held. The address had been found in an investigation in Florence, which, under the old system, would never have been shared with Roman investigators. Only a national intelligence structure could connect the dots.²⁸⁷

One of the most useful monitoring tools was a decree that required landlords to report house rentals to the police. A police detective in Turin, Commissario Esposito, had worked out that the Red Brigades always rented rooms in the ground or first floor so that it would be easier to escape if the police moved in, so they concentrated on reviewing all rentals and purchases of these apartments and flagging those made to newly arrived residents.²⁸⁸ Even though this was not always followed in practice, it unnerved the Red Brigades²⁸⁹ and, when it was obeyed, it led to some of the most important breakthroughs, most notably finding Curcio's safe house.²⁹⁰ Moretti considered this measure significantly more dangerous than the police roadblocks, which were easy to get around.²⁹¹

Dalla Chiesa was particularly interested in understanding and disrupting the support network that enabled the Red Brigades to function. The winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, Dario Fo, and his wife Franca Rame, one of Italy's leading theatrical couples, had set up a network of sympathetic lawyers known as *Soccorso Rosso* (Red Rescue) to help left-wing activists in trouble with the law. Some of them provided normal legal services but others went further, attacking the legitimacy of the state and helping to smuggle messages from jail. One of the most famous lawyers in the group, Edoardo Di Giovanni openly declared his allegiance to the Red Brigades. Dalla Chiesa investigated the lawyers who had crossed the line, one of whom escaped to France, which, under the Mitterand

284 Armeni, *La Strategia Vincente*, 93

285 Armeni, *La Strategia Vincente*, 101

286 Armeni, *La Strategia Vincente*, 103

287 Armeni, *La Strategia Vincente*, 93

288 Satta, *Odissea*, 442

289 Meade, *The Red Brigades*, 181

290 Sapegno and Ventura, *Generale*, 55

291 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 166

doctrine, refused to extradite known terrorists to Italy throughout this period. Another committed suicide when exposed.²⁹²

Years later, in his television interview with Enzo Biagi, Dalla Chiesa spoke of his respect for the Red Brigades leaders as worthy opponents and of his contempt for those like Toni Negri who had taught them, staying safe in his university chair, making grant applications while others fought.²⁹³ Negri was later acquitted of the charge of directing the Red Brigades but it was his advocacy of violence in his books and lectures that had caused the real damage. Dalla Chiesa's team analyzed the social background of the leftist activists, demonstrating the link between the professors who taught their students Marxist theory and guerrilla warfare techniques and the violence that followed.²⁹⁴

Rossana Rossanda, publisher of the non-violent left wing newspaper, *Il Manifesto*, and a keen observer of the Italian political situation, described the terrorist leaders as the unwanted children in a family album of the left.²⁹⁵ A good account of the indigenous nature of the terrorist phenomenon comes from Raffaele Fiore, one of the Moro kidnapers and the murderer of Fulvio Croce and Carlo Casalegno, deputy editor of *La Stampa* newspaper, who described the ideological path that had led him to join the cause.²⁹⁶

Fiore came from a southern peasant family and had moved north to find factory work at sixteen. He had joined a Catholic relief group that collected funds for Latin America and had stated reading up on the causes of poverty there. In the Breda factory in Milan where he had found a job he met Arialdo Lintrami, an early Red Brigades member, who explained Marxist theory to him and recruited him to distribute their leaflets.²⁹⁷ He soon moved on to arson attacks on managers' cars and was encouraged by the factory workers who approved of these actions, before moving on to his first brief kidnapping. The organization then ordered him to move to Turin to manage the Amerio kidnapping, after which he took responsibility for carrying out assassinations. He joined the leadership in 1978 after killing two policemen outside Turin's main prison and was one of the gunmen in the Moro kidnapping. He was arrested in March 1979 when a policeman and was sentenced to life in prison. He now lives quietly in Piacenza, where he works as a social worker and, unlike many of his former companions, never repented or distanced himself from the cause.

292 Satta, *Odissea*, 452

293 Dalla Chiesa, *In nome del popolo Italiano*, 255

294 Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa, 264

295 della Porta and Torrow in *Terrorism*, volume 2, *ibid* page 43

296 Aldo Grandi, *L'Ultimo Brigatista*

297 Grandi, *L'Ultimo Brigatista*, 37

Fiore explains that there was no secret to what they were trying to achieve and no mysterious foreign plot behind them. He believed that they could create a counter-power to the state through armed struggle and that the task of the revolutionary left was to lead the revolution, completely transforming the country's economic model and geopolitical orientation.²⁹⁸ The Red Brigades saw themselves as part of a movement with the RAF, ETA, the IRA, the South American revolutionaries and Palestinian organizations. They hoped to detach at least a part of the Communist Party base from the reformist tendency of its leadership.²⁹⁹

As Jenke pointed out at the time *"Intellectually the roots of contemporary Italian violence lie inside Italy... nowhere else is debate on the ultra left as fervent or as original or as brilliant. No orthodoxy or unity prevails, rather a fractious, shifting sea of arrogantly pitted hostilities."*³⁰⁰ It was this atmosphere of Marxist tradition, mixed with Catholic millenarianism that Giorgio Bocca memorably christened as "Cattocomunismo" consisting of *"the need for total and definite answers, the rejection of doubt, the replacement of duty arrived at by reason with faith, the need for a Church, authority, dogma, justified by social solidarity and the expectation of earthly paradise."*³⁰¹

Alessandro Orsini, in *Anatomia delle Brigate Rosse*, the most thorough analysis of the movement's ideological underpinnings, posits a gnostic theory of terrorism in which the elect are chosen to purify a corrupt world through fire. He quotes Anna Laura Braghetti, one of the early leaders, who explained that *"I imagined a world in which every wrong was righted, every inequality corrected, every injustice cured... This justified the means we would use."*³⁰² Mario Farrandi, another member, said: *"In those years we never asked ourselves what we had to build, we just knew that we had to destroy what was."*³⁰³ In their manifesto written in 1982, Curcio and Franceschini stated that capitalism suffocates and kills all individuality and that people are phantoms who don't see their own imprisonment and can only be liberated by an apocalyptic war led by the Red Brigades who alone see the truth.³⁰⁴ Fenzi believed that *"I and the Red Brigades knew all, understood all. Our actions were just the extension of our ability to understand the direction of history."*³⁰⁵ The result of this emphasis on purity and destruction were summarized once the

298 Grandi, *L'Ultimo Brigatista*, 65

299 Grandi, *L'Ultimo Brigatista*, 66

300 Jenke, *Guerrilla and Terrorist Organizations*, 44

301 Montanelli and Cervi, *L'Italia degli anni di piombo* 136

302 Alessandro Orsini, *Anatomia delle Brigate Rosse*, 13

303 Orsini, *Anatomia delle Brigate Rosse*, 15

304 Orsini, *Anatomia delle Brigate Rosse*, 29

305 Orsini, *Anatomia delle Brigate Rosse*, 88

campaign was over by Franceschini, who observed that: *“if we had come to power, we would have made Pol Pot turn pale.”*³⁰⁶

This was the ideology that Dalla Chiesa believed his team needed to understand. They would review every document that the Red Brigades and their allies would send out, attend the lectures of the university professors who taught the theory and practice of armed struggle and identify supporters and activists.³⁰⁷ In an appendix to his report to Rognoni, Dalla Chiesa gave an account of his monitoring of Gianfranco Faina and Enrico Fenzi’s lectures at the University of Genova. He quoted Faina’s approving research on the Baader-Meinhof gang, titled: *“A ray of light in the darkness of the German Federal Republic,”* a set text in his class.³⁰⁸ He gave details on Toni Negri’s lessons at the University of Padova, where he had turned the entire political science faculty into a revolutionary training ground, and also mentioned the University of Calabria whose professors taught the theory of armed struggle, which their students put into practice with robberies on the post office bank and bombs at the local steel factory. This is why Dalla Chiesa insisted on going after the professors who recruited and inspired the terrorists and not just the gangs themselves.

CONTROLLING PRISONS

Both sides recognized the importance of prisons in the campaign. In the early days, as shown by Curcio’s escape, prisons were poorly managed, and both the Red Brigades and the NAP used them as recruiting grounds, bringing valuable criminal expertise into the groups. On May 6th, 1975 the NAP kidnapped Giuseppe di Gennaro, a senior prison official in the Justice Ministry and held him for five days. At the same time, two NAP members in jail along with a common criminal took a number of prison guards hostage. Both situations were resolved when the authorities agreed to play a tape of the group’s demands on the radio and to move the prisoners to a new jail. By April 1976, the NAP and the Red Brigades were working together to attack the prison system. On April 22nd, they conducted a joint raid on the office of the prison inspection office in Milan, taking documents and leaving behind a leaflet that complained about the attempt to *“reduce the resistance of our imprisoned comrades who are upholding their role as revolutionaries in jail, by oppressing them with isolation, beatings and continuous unannounced transfers.”*³⁰⁹

306 Orsini, *Anatomia delle Brigate Rosse*, 377

307 Sapegno and Ventura, *Generale*, 44

308 Dalla Chiesa, *In nome del popolo Italiano*, 232

309 Lorenzo Ruggiero, *Dossier Brigate Rosse* page 38

Beyond planning escape attempts and proselytizing, prisons became the main venue for theoretical debates and writing, as the comrades on the outside were preoccupied with planning the attacks. Lawyers for the Red Brigades would smuggle the documents out and make sure they were distributed widely.³¹⁰ As the number of prisoners increased, the organization's focus on prison conditions sharpened, prompting the first attacks on prison officers and administrators. Gallinari organized a prison riot on Christmas Eve 1976 and used the cover to escape with two colleagues, taking with them the guards' machine guns and rejoined his comrades.³¹¹ He took over the campaign against prison officers, killing Riccardo Palma, the head of the high security prison construction program, on February 18th, 1978, after the designated killer had hesitated.³¹² This was one of a series of assassinations aimed at intimidating the managers of the newly effective political prison system.

Terrorist violence continued to grow though the Red Brigades seemed to fade in 1976 after a series of arrests and shootouts that had left much of the original leadership dead or in jail. Courts found it hard to get convictions for those imprisoned as both the prisoners and their accomplices on the outside were able to intimidate jurors. In 1977, after a series of prison riots and escapes, dalla Chiesa was assigned responsibility for getting the system under control, which he did by moving the terrorists to nine newly built high security prisons. The Red Brigades and allied groups fought this by attacking prison officials, most notably Riccardo Palma, who ran the building program and was killed on February 14th 1978.³¹³

Dalla Chiesa took on the task of getting a grip on the prison system and quickly built or refitted nine high security prisons, which Gallinari described as "*the apex of the bourgeois counterattack and symbol of the crisis of the bourgeoisie.*"³¹⁴ The island prison of Asinara in particular became synonymous with the increased control that the state was beginning to exert on the Red Brigades. All attempts to storm it failed, demoralizing the prisoners and making them resent those still at large.³¹⁵ Even after the Asinara was closed as a result of the Dell'Urso kidnapping, the criticism continued. The prisoners in Palmi published a 120-page document in 1979 setting out their criticism of the leadership and proposing a new program, though Moretti complained he was a bit too busy to read it while trying to run a serious insurgency and lamented their incorrigible verbosity.³¹⁶ At the end of the

310 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 133

311 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 146

312 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 175

313 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 175

314 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 175

315 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 208

316 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 211

year, the prisoners requested that Moretti resigned as leader, a request he accepted but then reversed when no one would take his place.³¹⁷

In her paper on leaving underground organizations, Della Porta concentrates on the importance of reducing the psychological cost of leaving by providing safe, homogenous areas in prisons and a mechanism for renouncing one's own past activities without necessarily betraying former colleagues. Dalla Chiesa's treatment of Peci and the other members of the organization who had repented or distanced themselves from the Red Brigades and his offer of multiple paths out of militancy achieved exactly this result. She quotes an unnamed former Red Brigades leader who said that: "*It's as if the organization followed an independent path of laws that are not its own and became at that moment the law of defeat.*"³¹⁸

These splits, disputes, and arguments did not just happen by accident. Dalla Chiesa carefully monitored all documents coming in and out of the prisons, bugged every cell and kept a close eye on all conversations between the prisoners and their lawyers.³¹⁹ Franceschini suspected as much, noting that in the prison of Piani where he was held with the other prisoners who were considered most dangerous, the atmosphere was that of a campus in which free discussion between political prisoners was not only allowed but encouraged, while prisoners who disrupted the debates were quickly sent elsewhere.³²⁰ While Franceschini initially enjoyed the discussions and lack of violence in the prison, he became increasingly irritated by Toni Negri's lectures on the stupidity of the Red Brigades. After Negri had insisted that the Red Brigades had reached a dead end, Franceschini exploded in a rage, which was overheard by all the other prisoners and resulted in his transfer to Nuoro and a permanent break between Negri's group and the Red Brigades leadership.

Dalla Chiesa had made sure that recruitment in jail was impossible, as was any chance of escape. The Carabinieri managed the prison accommodation to ensure that prisoners who hated each other would have to share cells, sharpening arguments and causing disorientation and ideological conflict.³²¹ This slowly brought the leadership around to the view that, even if their motives had been legitimate, the attempt to create a revolution in Italy had failed. By 1981, even Moretti had concluded that: "*our armed struggle had exhausted any possible purpose,*"³²² though finding a way out would only happen with the rise of the *pentiti*, a group he would never join.

317 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 214

318 Della Porta, *Leaving underground organizations: A sociological analysis of the Italian case* <http://cadmus.eui.eu//handle/1814/11576>

319 Sapegna and Ventura, *Generale*, 46

320 Franceschini Mara, *Renato e io*, 94-97

321 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 236

322 Moretti, *Brigate Rosse*, 240

ENCOURAGING REPENTANCE

General Sechi explained that dalla Chiesa's focus in interrogations was to break the ideological certainty of the prisoner, as he did with Patrizio Peci who gave wholly reliable evidence to the authorities.³²³ General Richero remarked how different dalla Chiesa's interrogations were to the normal police focus on facts, dates and times. Dalla Chiesa would talk calmly about the suspect's life, demonstrating a total knowledge of his life story, to create a bond and open up the conversation. His objective was not just to try to turn the prisoner but to build a bond of trust. In Peci's case, it all started with his mother, who was very ill and who he hadn't seen since he had gone underground to run the Red Brigades column. Dalla Chiesa sent General Bozzo to talk to him, reassure him that he would be looked after, and express his sympathy about Peci's mother's health, and that made the hard man of the Red Brigades collapse and open up. Then dalla Chiesa followed up by visiting Peci regularly and hearing his confession that led to the arrest of 85 Red Brigades members and the collapse of his column.³²⁴ Dalla Chiesa wrote in his diary that the breakthrough allowed him to withstand the increasing political pressure he was under to use unorthodox methods to crack the Red Brigades.³²⁵ His refusal to consider the use of torture or coercion was total and uncompromising. When the murderer of the journalist Walter Tobagi, Marco Barbone, was caught, dalla Chiesa called his father to convince his son to talk and spare himself a long sentence.

The crucial legislation (law number 15/1980) that made this possible was the law on the collaborators with justice, passed in February 1980 at dalla Chiesa's insistence. The law created a new vocabulary of *"pentiti"* (those who repented), *"dissociati"* (those who distanced themselves from their former allegiance without collaborating, and *"collaboratori di giustizia"* (those who helped prevent future crimes and identify their former colleagues. The law provided for large reductions in sentences, up to total freedom, for those members of terrorist organizations who publicly repented of their activities and helped the police, and smaller reductions for those who just publicly repented, or distanced themselves from the organization. The law also increased penalties by half for any crime committed pursuant to a terrorist activity and this combination of reward and punishment turned out to be brilliantly effective. The small, libertarian Radical Party campaigned against the law and organized a national referendum against it. They lost spectacularly with 85% of the voters supporting the measure.³²⁶

323 Armeni, *La strategia vincente*, 108

324 Sapegno and Ventura, *Generale*, 66

325 dalla Chiesa, *In nome del popolo Italiano*, 240

326 Satta, *Odissea*, 640

Gallinari lamented that the law “*provides the bourgeoisie the legitimacy to downgrade as terrorism the social, political and human challenge that a whole generation had launched against the arrogance of power,*”³²⁷ a complaint which was a back handed compliment to its effectiveness. Judge Pomarici agreed with Moretti that it was the political failure of the Red Brigades that made many of their members reconsider their position and disown their earlier allegiance. He notes that the Red Brigades “*pentiti*” never lied in their testimony.³²⁸ Further laws in 1982 and 1987 increased the benefits for those remaining terrorists who turned themselves in and distanced themselves from the movement, increasing the attractiveness of this way out for those who saw no future in the armed struggle. Even Antonio Savasta, who had led one of the nastiest spinoff groups from the Red Brigades, ended up taking advantage of the legislation and confessing in full, hastening the fall of the remaining units.³²⁹

In 1987, long after the worst of the terrorist threat had abated, the Italian parliament passed a final law offering further benefits to any remaining terrorists who would join the ranks of the “*disociati*” by renouncing their terrorist past, admit their own crimes and repudiate violence. They did not have to help the police with their enquiries to benefit from the reductions in sentences that were offered. This final grant convinced many of the remaining hard-core activists including Alberto Franceschini, Sergio Segio, Giorgio Semeria and Nadia Mantovani to quit and ask for clemency.³³⁰ Only Curcio and Moretti refused to take up the offer, though both admitted that the war was over.

This innovation gained some notice abroad though sadly has not been copied as widely as it might be. The Canadian counter-terrorism expert Ronald Crelinsten focused on the rehabilitative function of the criminal justice system, “*helping the convicted terrorist rethink the error of his or her ways and reintegrate into society. In Italy, for example, repentance laws which required convicted terrorists to renounce the use of violence in exchange for more lenient treatment helped to convince many terrorists to take the path away from terrorist violence and towards more socially acceptable means of protest and dissent.*”³³¹

SPLITTING THE MOVEMENT

The leadership of the Red Brigades was acutely conscious of the danger of splits, both inside the movement itself and between the movement and its external supporters. Dalla Chiesa understood this aspect of the Terrorist’s Dilemma

327 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 278

328 Armeni, *La strategia vincente*, 125

329 Satta, *Odissea*, 675

330 Satta, *Odissea*, 644

331 Ronald Crelinsten, *Counterterrorism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 57

and exploited it ruthlessly.³³² As Robert Meade explained, their organizational challenges: “reflected the BR’s efforts to resolve one of the great dilemmas of that mission, one of the great problems faced by all such groups: how to maintain the compartmentalization and secrecy needed to evade the police while remaining in touch with the masses. Reconciling efficiency and basic ideological principle would prove very vexing. The entire experience of the BR suggests that revolutionaries in advanced, democratic societies cannot help but be overmastered by this problem, that at the heart of the revolutionary project is a contradiction that, with good police work, will sooner or later prove fatal.”³³³

Jacob Shapiro’s brilliant book on the managerial challenges of running a terrorist organization, *The Terrorist’s Dilemma*, highlights the problem of managing the security-efficiency and the security-control tradeoffs. The Red Brigades struggled with both: the Neapolitans who were more interested in the money they could raise from bank robberies than the political effects of their actions are a typical example of the first; the breakaway Walter Alasia column who rejected Moretti’s militarism for a factory based approach, of the second.

The first important split occurred as a result of the Moro murder, when Valerio Morucci and Adriana Faranda decided to leave the group and set up their own rival organization. They took some Red Brigades weapons with them, which led to charges of theft and indiscipline by the leadership, but won support from their friends in the Roman extreme left movements who protected them from the police and from their own former colleagues. Eventually, their protector’s father tipped off the security services who promptly arrested them before they could set up their new group.

The ideological split between the “workerist” and “militarist” faction would widen under pressure, leading to a series of splits up to the total breakup of the Red Brigades into Gallinari’s *Partito Comunista Combattente* (Fighting Communist Party) and Savasta’s *Partito Guerriglia* (Guerrilla Party). As Gallinari ruefully admitted, it was becoming clear that the increasingly violent terrorist attacks had more to do with the internal politics of the battling groups than with any clear strategy and were thus politically counterproductive.³³⁴ Another break opened up in 1980 on the proper attitude to the Soviet Union, with Savasta arguing that the Red Brigades should try to build a relationship with the KGB and Senzani accusing him of wanting an alliance with “social imperialists” who were just as bad as the capitalists.³³⁵ The split between the imprisoned historical leadership and the activists on the outside also widened, becoming increasingly

332 Jacob Shapiro: *The Terrorist’s Dilemma* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013)

333 Meade, *The Red Brigades*, 62

334 Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 254

335 Satta, *Odissea*, 666

bitter as the leaders lamented the activists' inability to attack the well-protected jails. Finally, the geographical structure of the Red Brigades column, which had been such an asset initially, became a liability as the competition between them intensified, sharpened by lack of common links, particularly after the arrest of Moretti, who had held the regional units together.

Dalla Chiesa's emphasis on operating always within the law and with the support of the Communist Party and the trade union movement was a shrewd tactic as well as a reflection of his commitment to the rule of law. This made it ever more difficult for the Red Brigades to connect to what they saw as their natural base. Their errors, most notably the Rossa murder, ultimately made this impossible. Encouraging repentance and disassociation helped weaken the bonds between the various units and created mutual suspicion and fear. Gallinari complained about the state's effective policy of splitting groups up in prison to promote doubts and division.³³⁶ Dalla Chiesa's careful analysis of the ideological and organizational underpinnings enabled his men to exploit these divisions and destroy the groups in detail. Perhaps most importantly, the fragmentation wrecked the image of the Red Brigades as a supremely well-organized and disciplined secret army.

Dalla Chiesa and his successors were prepared to accept the temporary increase in violence that the competition between the splinter groups produced in the confidence that this was a sign of their disintegration. There is an interesting contrast between the Italian treatment of the Red Brigades and the British treatment of the IRA in the lead up to the Good Friday agreements, where the focus was on preventing splits among the Provisional IRA to make sure that the agreement would stick. The Italians did not aim for a negotiated solution as they had been able to detach the Red Brigades fully from their social base and so were able to achieve a complete destruction of the movement by encouraging its fragmentation.

WINNING AND KEEPING POLITICAL SUPPORT

The Communists and some Socialists were suspicious of centralized police power and all too conscious of the authoritarian reaction to terrorism in so many South American countries that were culturally close to Italy. Dalla Chiesa was acutely aware of the need for political and practical support particularly from the Communist Party apparatus, which had much more information on the terrorists than they had previously been prepared to share. Franceschini explained that the Communist Party had always kept an eye on the Red Brigades but in the early days would not cooperate with the police, for fear of exposing the communist

³³⁶ Gallinari, *Un contadino nella metropoli*, 301

background of the Red Brigades leadership, preferring instead to accuse them of being provocateurs and hoping that they would disappear of their own accord.³³⁷ Dalla Chiesa understood that this policy would no longer work and made a point of befriending Ugo Pecchioli, the party's shadow Interior Minister. The General explained his strategy to the Communist representative in detail in a series of secret meetings that Pecchioli only revealed in 1995.³³⁸ The idea of the Party cooperating with the security services would have horrified party members who held to Leninist doctrine and Stalinist sympathies, so had to be concealed until the campaign was over. Dalla Chiesa's history in the Resistance — in contrast to the right-wing sympathies of some other police and security officers — won him an audience with the left and his openness to dialogue dissolved their concerns. At the same time, dalla Chiesa fought pressure to introduce draconian special powers from the right and even from the Socialist President of the Republic, Sandro Pertini, a great resistance figure who had become alarmed by the emergency and had momentarily over-reacted.³³⁹

The emphasis on legality is notable and often overlooked. One of the observers who understood its central importance was Paul Wilkinson. In his book, *Terrorism and the Liberal State*, he set out the task of those charged with combating terrorism: “*The primary objective of counter-terrorist strategy must be the protection and maintenance of liberal democracy and the rule of law. It cannot be sufficiently stressed that this aim overrides in importance even the aim of eliminating terrorism and political violence as such.*”³⁴⁰ Wilkinson quotes the campaign against the Red Brigades as a textbook case of successful counter-terrorist strategy.³⁴¹ He notes the importance of the laws that increased the police's search powers, but gives most of the credit to the effective coordination under dalla Chiesa's leadership. While noting that “*the defeat of the Red Brigades was hastened by their own internal crisis of morale and solidarity*” — arguably itself a consequence of dalla Chiesa's strategy — he goes on to concede that “*it was the greatly strengthened central direction of the counter-terrorism effort and its enhanced proactive intelligence capability which enabled the Italian police and judicial authorities to deliver the coup de grâce against the Red Brigades. In the early 1980s the judicial authorities were given the scope to offer real incentives to convicted terrorists to turn state's evidence. The so called pentiti (repentant) law gave courts the discretion to reduce sentences very substantially where convicted terrorists provided tangible information leading to the arrest and conviction of fellow-terrorists.*” He concludes, “*This measure was introduced at just the right moment, when the terrorist movement's morale was sagging*

337 Franceschini Mara, Renato e io, 80

338 Ugo Pecchioli, *Tra misteri e verità* (Milano: Baldini & Castoldi, 1995), 144-145

339 Interview with Virgilio Rognoni in Armeni *La strategia vincente*, 127

340 Paul Wilkinson, *Terrorism and the Liberal State* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 125

341 Wilkinson, *Terrorism and Democracy*, 80

badly. It was brilliantly successful in providing the police with detailed information which helped them to crack open the Red Brigade cells and columns.” Wilkinson agrees with dalla Chiesa that creating pathways out of terrorism is a crucial element of a successful anti-terrorist strategy. He notes that there was no practical way of capturing all the terrorists, particularly those who had fled abroad (one senior leader ended up running a restaurant in Nicaragua).³⁴² Providing an “*educative solution*” in which terrorists are persuaded, and persuade others, that their former choice was counterproductive and wrong is essential to final victory. The number of former terrorists who found careers in social work, often working hard to help drug addicts and dropouts is also striking. It may be that offering former terrorists a way of showing to others — and themselves — that their motives were pure was part of the process that enabled terrorists to abandon their former life.

Another expert who emphasizes the importance of an educative solution is Richard English, though he argues that terrorism “*represents a subspecies of warfare*,”³⁴³ a view that dalla Chiesa rejected, walking out of an interview in disgust when a journalist referred to the “soldiers of the Red Brigades.”³⁴⁴ He is on more solid ground when he points to the combination of ideological motivations with “*the most profound disaffection from what is, coupled with an almost millenarian expectation of what will be*” as the driver of terrorist groups, so “*the politics of legitimacy is repeatedly central*.”³⁴⁵ He goes on to explain that some terrorist campaigns (ETA, the IRA) could develop momentum while others (the Red Brigades) did not precisely because in Italy’s case this disaffection was not widely shared in the community.³⁴⁶ Preventing such disaffection from becoming widespread is why “*the best response here to the terrorist problem is probably this: respect orthodox legal frameworks and adhere to the democratically established rule of law*.”³⁴⁷ [Emphasis in the original]. This was precisely the point dalla Chiesa argued so vehemently against politicians who wanted to suspend the rule of law and give him broad extra-legal powers to fight the terrorists.³⁴⁸

English also emphasizes the importance of good information from human and technical means, explaining that “*Intelligence is the most vital element in successful counter-terrorism. . . . The effective infiltration and penetration of enemy groups, together with the sharp-eyed deployment of electronic and other surveillance, will allow for the gathering of decisive knowledge*.”³⁴⁹ His formula for a successful campaign is

342 Grandi, *L'ultimo brigatista*, 149

343 Richard English, *Terrorism: How to Respond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 24

344 dalla Chiesa, *In nome del popolo italiano*, page 255

345 English *Terrorism: How to Respond*, 49

346 English *Terrorism: How to Respond*, 50

347 English *Terrorism: How to Respond*, 33

348 Armeni, *La strategia vincente*, 83

349 English *Terrorism: How to Respond*, 131

to: “respect orthodox legal frameworks and adhere to the democratically established rule of law,”³⁵⁰ “co-ordinate security related, financial and technological preventative measures,”³⁵¹ and thus “maintain credibility in counter-terrorist public argument.”³⁵²

Dalla Chiesa built a strong relationship with the competent and politically moderate Christian Democratic Interior Minister Rognoni and successive governments made the sensible decision to keep the minister in his role from June 1978 to August 1983 maintaining valuable continuity to the political leadership of the campaign. In 1977, the ministry had established a central coordinating body to fight terrorism, with the unwieldy title of the Central Office for General Investigations and Special Operations and the acronym UCIGOS. The central office set up district offices, DIGOS under the leadership of the national police, which took increasing responsibility for the anti-terrorist campaign as they built capability and knowledge through the late 70s and early 80s. The minister protected dalla Chiesa from interference from his superiors in the Carabinieri who had objected so vehemently to his appointment, which the minister had sprung on them in August, perhaps not coincidentally when they would be on vacation.³⁵³ The left wing of the Socialist Party attacked dalla Chiesa in Parliament as part of their campaign against their own party’s leadership, which had supported the appointment, and the Interior Minister had to fight this political attack as well as clearing resistance from the police and other security bodies.³⁵⁴ It helped that dalla Chiesa kept the costs of his operation under tight control, never spending more than 20 million lire a month.³⁵⁵

350 *English Terrorism: How to Respond*, 133

351 *English Terrorism: How to Respond*, 136

352 *English Terrorism: How to Respond*, 136

353 Satta, *Odissea*, 615

354 Armeni, *La strategia vincente*, 45-46

355 Satta, *Odissea*, 617



“

If yesterday, a citizen at the bar or at the cinema could fear that he was sitting next to a member of the Red Brigades...today, it's the Red Brigades member sitting at the bar or in the cinema or at the theater who has to ask himself, is the person next to me a Carabiniere?³⁵⁶

9

Conclusion: Defeating A Terrorist Threat

COUNTER-TERRORIST campaigns tend to be long, bloody and messy affairs, well worth avoiding if at all possible. Unfortunately, recognizing the signs of an emerging threat is hard, as few security officials have the imagination to see how a marginal extremist movement can end up posing a serious danger to society. A case in point is the threat from American white nationalist groups, which is curiously absent from mainstream political debate. In an eerie echo of the years before 9/11, security services have struggled to connect what look like random acts of violence in the service of crackpot beliefs into an overall picture of a real danger to American democracy.

A few scholars and researchers have been raising the alarm: the Anti-Defamation League's 2017 report catalogued 274 murders by right-wing extremists in the last decade, making up 71% of all US domestic extremist killings, compared to 26% by Islamist extremists.³⁵⁷ Peter Singer wrote an article in February 2018 about the threat, quoting New America's research showing that attacks by right-wing extremists outnumber those by left-wing groups by 17 to 1.³⁵⁸ The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has documented the rise of alt-right inspired attacks that have resulted in 43 deaths and 67 injuries so far.³⁵⁹ Disturbingly, nine of these thirteen attacks occurred in 2017, which the SPLC sees as a harbinger of worse violence to come.

356 dalla Chiesa TV interview with Renzo Biagi, in dalla Chiesa, *In nome del popolo Italiano*, 265

357 <https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/murder-and-extremism-in-the-united-states-in-2017#the-incidents>

358 <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2018/02/national-security-pros-its-time-talk-about-right-wing-extremism/146319/>

359 <https://www.splcenter.org/20180205/alt-right-killing-people>

To someone like me who grew up in Italy during the 1970s, when terrorist violence engulfed the country, this seems dreadfully familiar. As the left- and right-wing terrorist groups grew in the early part of the decade, politicians routinely underestimated the threat they posed and dismissed efforts to tackle them robustly. It took hundreds of deaths and the kidnapping and murder of a former Prime Minister to shake the country out of its lethargy. The good news from the Italian experience is that, once the state fully committed to eradicating domestic terrorism, it succeeded; the warning is that letting the problem fester only raises the cost of a counter-terrorist campaign.

There are, of course, significant differences between Italy in the 1970s and the US today, though not all of them should be comforting. After all, Italian terrorists struggled to purchase guns, not a problem that faces an American extremist today. Also, in Italy, shootings from left wing extremists were matched by bombings and beatings from right wing ones. So far, most of the US violence has come from the right, with Antifa and other left-wing groups causing the occasional street brawl in Portland, Berkeley and Atlanta but not, yet, much more despite some of their more blood curdling claims. Even so, the perception of two opposed violent groups can quickly lead to radicalization and tit-for-tat escalation.

The parallels, though, are striking. Hope not Hate,³⁶⁰ an anti-extremist group, has documented the reach of the Alt-Right extremist ideology that glorifies violence and peddles millenarian fantasies which appeal to a segment of alienated young men, much as Marxist and Fascist fantasies did to tens of thousands of Italians. An Administration that appeases extremist groups (“good people on both sides”), neglecting the threat they pose, resembles the feckless Italian governments and the Communist opposition of the early 1970s, which avoided facing the reality of the Red Brigades until it was almost too late.

The Italian experience raises another warning. The hard left was divided between those who wanted to participate in the electoral process and those who saw terrorist violence as the only path. By 1977 the question was settled, when voters were sick of the violence in the streets and wiped out the extreme leftist parties. The result, however, was an inflow of recruits, newly disillusioned with electoral politics, to the terrorist groups and a spike in violence. A similar repudiation of alt-right political figures by American voters and a decisive shift away from white nationalism as a politically viable strategy could motivate at least some right-wing activists to form or join violent groups.

The United States has suffered from the horrors of home grown and global terrorism, most bloodily with the Oklahoma bombing and on 9/11, but has been spared the endemic violence of the kind that plagued Italy during the years of lead. In 2003, Philip Heymann compared the US favorably to Italy, expressing

360 Hopenothate.com

relief that American society did not suffer from the kind of deep divisions that had created the conditions for the rise of the Red Brigades. Fifteen years later, Heymann's confidence no longer looks so well founded. The political divisions in the United States have widened and become stubbornly entrenched. The combination of conspiratorial thinking, Manichean ideologies and a powerful sense of grievance, combined with the easy access to powerful weapons and a cult of political violence, should worry all those who are sworn to keep the peace.

This is why dalla Chiesa's victory over the Red Brigades offers lessons that may be useful to American security officials in the future. It is worth remembering that his was a definitive victory, one that scrupulously respected the rule of law and reintegrated former terrorists back into society. Germany had a similar, though less intense, challenge fighting the Baader-Meinhof gang during this period and dealt with it in a much more brutal fashion, never achieving reconciliation. The British experience with the IRA and the Spanish with ETA showed how long such a campaign can drag on when the authorities are unable to fully detach the terrorists from the population they claim to represent. France, with a much smaller terrorist threat, bent its commitment to human rights, resorting to special closed courts for terrorist trials. By contrast, Italy retained full legal rights for accused terrorists throughout the emergency despite their murderous attacks on judges, lawyers and juries. This makes Italy's case worth careful study.

Under the pressure of a violent terrorist attack on the institutions of government, particularly with political pressure to act quickly and ruthlessly, these lessons are easy to forget. The temptation to put the military in charge was one that the British government fell into when the Northern Ireland troubles flared, with disastrous consequences; the inability to offer a politically acceptable way out for disillusioned terrorists has stymied the otherwise highly effective Israeli campaigns against Palestinian groups. Conversely, threats can be underestimated by a nation's political leadership, even when security officials have sensed the danger, if detailed information is lacking: the CIA's inability to infiltrate Al Qaeda in the 1990s and a mistaken belief that only state sponsored terrorists were a real danger blinded American political leaders to the scale of the threat that organization posed.

The terrorism scholars Bruce Hoffman and Jennifer Morrison-Taw³⁶¹ encouraged security officials to study past counter-terrorist campaigns as the best way to prepare for future ones, much as war colleges encourage officers to study famous battles. Their qualitative case studies of counterterrorist efforts demonstrated that there are four crucial elements to all successful campaigns: 1) effective overall command and coordination, 2) building public trust and support

361 Bruce Hoffman and Jennifer Morrison-Taw: *A Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism*, in: *European Democracies Against Terrorism*, Fernando Reinares, ed. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 9-10

and ensuring that anti-terrorist legislation is sensitive to public sentiments, 3) coordination within and between intelligence services and 4) collaboration between governments in the case of international terrorist groups. Dalla Chiesa campaign against the Red Brigades elegantly demonstrated all four.

The first task is to admit that there is a problem. Non-governmental groups like Hope not Hate³⁶² have documented white nationalist ideology, infiltrating activists into these groups at great personal risk and mapping their networks. Daryl Johnson, an analyst at the Department for Homeland Security with fifteen years experience researching right wing groups, warned of the threat in 2009, touching off a firestorm of attacks from Republican politicians and the American Legion that led the department to withdraw his paper and shut down his research.³⁶³ This mirrored the early Italian experience where the political leadership refused to listen to warnings from judges, policemen and Carabinieri, including dalla Chiesa himself, out of fear that they would be accused of political bias. In 2017, after the Charlottesville riot, Johnson warned that the threat he had reported on was getting worse, as far right groups continued to radicalize and act with impunity.³⁶⁴ He argued that President Trump's tacit support had emboldened extremist groups, a case bolstered by Trump's pardon of the arsonists Dwight and Steven Hammond in July 2018.³⁶⁵

Once a government commits to defeating a terrorist movement, it needs to learn about the enemy's leadership, ideology, techniques and order of battle. The prominent terrorism scholar Richard English emphasizes the value of good intelligence in counter-terrorism work:

“Sustained human assets — agents and informers who acquire superior intelligence about one’s enemy — are vital if one is to possess the necessary understanding of the terrorist opponent. The effective infiltration and penetration of enemy groups, together with the sharp-eye deployment of electronic and other surveillance, will allow for the gathering of decisive knowledge. Precisely who and where are the terrorists? What is stimulating (and what might undermine) their reservoirs of recruits and sympathizers? What are they currently planning, and when? What are their strengths and weaknesses, their divisions and potential fissures? What is their position in

362 <https://alternativeright.hopenothate.com/>

363 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/08/21/i-warned-of-right-wing-violence-in-2009-it-caused-an-uproar-i-was-right/?utm_term=.76d41866a13c

364 Wired, 8 July 2012 <https://perma.cc/26BC-62QG>

365 <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/10/politics/hammonds-trump-pardon/index.html>

*terms of finances and weapons? What are the conditions under which they might consider political compromise?*³⁶⁶

Taking a political science and sociological approach, Rodgers and Kullman examined the lessons of dalla Chiesa's campaign for US law enforcement, emphasizing the importance of a "full court press" of political, legal and law enforcement measures and highlighting the value of the repentance law to break the networks.³⁶⁷ They pointed out the paradox that offering lenient sentences in return for collaboration is routine in normal criminal cases but an overlooked tactic in counter terrorism and concluded that:

*"The 'war' on terrorism will likely be won or lost, not by virtue of high-powered weaponry or massive manpower or by huge allotments of public revenue. Success or failure will come as a result of the organization, purpose, skill and intelligence of those involved in counterterrorism. As a first order of business, the agencies of the federal government, in a coordinated manner, need to establish as a priority the collection, analysis, and networking of vital information regarding the nature, resources, objectives and tactics of domestic terrorists and potential terrorist groups. Secondly, some agency, or perhaps, interagency task force with substantial legal authority and financial and logistical resources should be designated as the operational coordinating group on domestic terror, as the National Security Council is for international-based incidents."*³⁶⁸

English goes on to emphasize the importance of seeking to change the calculus of the terrorists so that peaceful political action can be shown to be more effective than violence, avoiding over-militarizing the response and focusing on intelligence, led by police and security services, not the military. He concludes by making the practical as well as the moral case for strict adherence to legality in the fight against terrorists:

*"it is not merely a question of effectiveness — that the battle against terrorism is more likely to be won by calm professionalism within the existing framework of respecting civil liberties — but also a more central question of what it is that one is defending in the conflict against terrorist violence in any case."*³⁶⁹

366 English, *Terrorism*, 131-132

367 Rodgers and Kullman, *Facing Terror* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), 121

368 Rodgers and Kullman, *Facing Terror*, 123-124

369 *English Terrorism*, 134-135

The academic Louise Richardson, who herself grew up among IRA members in Northern Ireland, recognized the bonds of intense camaraderie, shared ideological links and the desire to destroy the world of their parents that held the Red Brigades together.³⁷⁰ She distinguished between terrorist groups that are isolated from the community they claim to represent and those that are deeply embedded, as well as between those who have non-negotiable, millenarian aims and those who have negotiable goals.³⁷¹ Richardson argued that governments would have to compromise with organizations that are close to their community with negotiable goals, like the IRA. Isolated groups with non-negotiable goals, like the Red Brigades could, in her view, be totally eradicated.

Richardson's argument underestimates the depth of support for the Red Brigades among significant sectors of the Italian left and the union movement, particularly in the Northern industrial cities. As their leader, Mario Moretti, pointed out, the Red Brigades could only have lasted as long as it did because they were fulfilling a social function for their supporters. What Richardson's framework missed, and dalla Chiesa understood, was that the distance between a terrorist group and the community is itself a dynamic variable. This can be shifted by shrewd police work, as well as by the group's own mistakes. Dalla Chiesa pursued the academics that championed violence, undercutting the intellectual basis for terrorism. The errors that the Red Brigades committed as they radicalized, culminating in the murder of the union official Guido Rossa, disgusted the community they claimed to represent and ultimately sealed their fate. Similarly, American security officials should study the links between right wing violent extremists and the larger population that may tacitly endorse them, looking for points of tension that can break those links and encourage the non-violent right to reject and repudiate those who choose violence. Federal officials need to avoid shows of force that reinforce the narratives of victimization that extremists use to make their case, focusing instead on quiet law enforcement built on accurate intelligence assessments.

Educating the broader public about terrorist threats is also an important technique for building social resilience. It would be helpful if the DHS took the lead in explaining the ideologies and propensity for violence on the extreme right in the US. Careful distinctions are more important than false equivalences in this kind of reporting. In the Italian example, the far-right fringe groups were capable of great, indiscriminate violence, but could not recruit from a deep pool of politically motivated supporters, whereas the extreme left began its violent attacks with greater discrimination, that faded over time, but had a wide pool of recruits and imitators. Explaining the intent and capabilities of different groups is

370 Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want* (London: John Murray, 2006), 67

371 Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want* (London: John Murray, 2006), 67

not only analytically sound but it also can help the public understand the nature of the threat rather than just succumb to an overall dread of an undifferentiated terrorist menace.

Apart from the tactical innovations that played such an important part in Dalla Chiesa's victory, there is one overall strategic lesson that is worth emphasizing: that his was a political battle to be won or lost on the battleground of public opinion. Any tactic that helped convince the public, and crucially wavering populations susceptible to the Red Brigades' message, was worth adopting; any tactic that alienated them — no matter how effective it might be in the short term — was counter-productive. Dalla Chiesa's rejection of harsh interrogation techniques was part of this as was his shrewd use of information operations and his exploitation of informers and repentance laws to discredit his opponents.

The most original, and valuable contribution that the Italian state, at Dalla Chiesa's urging, made to the art of counter-terrorism was the invention of the legal concepts of repentance and disassociation. These provided disillusioned terrorists with a way out and destroyed the networks of trust that underpinned the Red Brigades. In a powerfully argued and psychologically insightful paper, Max Abrahams explained *"that terrorists are rational people who use terrorism primarily to develop strong affective ties with fellow terrorists."*³⁷² He pointed out that *"Since the advent of modern terrorism in the late 1960s, the sole counterterrorism strategy that was a clear-cut success attacked the social bonds of the terrorist organization, not its utility as a political instrument. By commuting prison sentences in the early 1980s in exchange for actionable intelligence against their fellow Brigatisti, the Italian government infiltrated the Red Brigades, bred mistrust and resentment among the members, and quickly rolled up the organization."*

In *Ending Terrorism in Italy*, Anna Cento Bull and Philip Cooke looked carefully at the circumstances that led to this result, emphasizing the examples of good practice that other countries should imitate.³⁷³ They highlighted the importance of incentives to convince convicted terrorists to change their ways and ones still on the loose to turn themselves in. Their work examined how a humane and tolerant prison system for those who had shown signs of repentance helped them make the journey and reintegrate into society. There are interesting parallels here with the Saudi approach to counter-jihadism in which respected Islamic scholars work with captured terrorists to show them a path that takes them away from violence. This tactic worked with the Al Qaeda bomber Ali Abd al-Rahman al-Faqasi al-Ghamdi in June 2003. Al-Ghamdi's father told reporters that his son had surrendered after the authorities had promised that his

372 Max Abrahams, *What Terrorists Really Want*, International Security, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Spring 2008), pp. 78-105

373 Anna Cento Bull and Philip Cooke, *Ending Terrorism in Italy* (London: Routledge, 2013)

punishment would be reduced in half if he surrendered and cooperated.³⁷⁴ The US should explore setting up a similar approach for de-radicalizing violent white nationalists and other right wing extremists.

Dalla Chiesa's stature, deep understanding of the problem and ability to project a calm, efficient image to his political masters and the public at large was a vitally important element in his campaign. The public and the government were prepared to trust him and he used that trust to calm demands for extreme measures that would have just made the problem worse. His ability to build and lead an agile interagency team that researched the ideology, methods, tactics and structure of the terrorists he was fighting, his insistence on explaining his overall strategy clearly to the public while keeping his tactics hidden, his shrewd use of informants and ability to convince terrorists to abandon their cause, and his evident commitment to the rule of law all maintained this high level of trust in a country that was used to thinking the worst of its public officials. We should hope that the United States never needs to turn to such a leader in response to a serious domestic terrorist threat but, if it does, there are few better examples to follow than that given by General Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa of Italy's Carabinieri, the savior of the Italian Republic.

374 Jacob Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma*, 258

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