



The Red Brigades and the Years of Lead in Italy Pointless Violence and Inevitable Outcome

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On Sunday morning, March 16, 1978, a Fiat car passed by with a sixty-year-old man sitting in the back seat, protected by a guard sitting in the front seat, and behind it was a guard car. Suddenly, another car with a diplomatic license plate blocked the road, forcing the two cars to stop, followed by two cars from which five men and a woman jumped and opened fire on the car driver, the guard and three other security men in the other car. The attackers quickly pulled the man they wanted out of the car, pushed him into their car, and fled within three minutes.

This was not a Hollywood gangster movie scene; it was the kidnapping of Italy's Prime Minister, Aldo Moro, by the Red Brigades terrorist group, which was at its peak .

After the kidnapping, the Red Brigades demanded to exchange Moro for 13 of their imprisoned members. However, the Italian government refused to compromise with such a terrorist group. On May 9, 1978, the police found Moro's dead body dumped in a car.

Foundation and Terrorist Activity

In 1967, Renato Curcio founded a leftist student group at the University of Trento, recruiting far-left students, which became the nucleus of the Red Brigades. In 1969, Curcio married fellow extremist Margherita Cagol, and together they moved to Milan, where they polarized a bunch of followers. A year later in November 1970, they announced the foundation of the Red Brigades as openly as they could, throwing incendiary bombs on several factories and warehouses in Milan. The group engaged in kidnappings the next year, and in 1974 committed its first assassination, killing the chief inspector of the Turin anti-terrorist squad.

Since 1974, the Red Brigades have expanded in Rome, Genoa and Venice, growing exponentially and diversifying into different criminal projects, such as high-profile

political kidnappings. On April 18, 1974, the assistant prosecutor in Genoa, Mario Sossi, who was the first civil servant and the sixth in a series of kidnappings carried out by the group, was kidnapped. He was released on May 23 in exchange for a court order, banned later, to release eight prisoners affiliated with the Red Brigades.

The group also kidnapped industrialist Vallarino Gancia for ransom, which was its main source of income by kidnapping industrialists, factory owners, financiers, and politicians, along with bank robberies .

On November 16, 1977, Carlo Casalegno, deputy editor-in-chief of La Stampa, was shot and later succumbed to his injuries on November 29, 1977. On December 17, 1981, four members of the Red Brigades, disguised as plumbers, broke into an apartment in Verona inhabited by US Army Brigadier General James L. Dozier, Deputy Chief of Staff at NATO's Southern European land forces, kidnapped him and left his wife chained. They held him for 42 days until January 28, 1982, when a team from the Italian police special operations unit succeeded in rescuing Dozier from an apartment in Padua, without firing a single shot, and captured the terrorist cell that was holding him. Dozier was the first foreign American general to be kidnapped by the Red Brigades and their fellow terrorists.

Between 1974 and 1988, the Red Brigades carried out about 50 attacks, where around 50 people were killed. According to statistics by the Italian Ministry of the Interior, over 75 people are believed to have been killed by the Red Brigades. These murders were politically driven. Researcher Clarence A. Martin estimated the violence committed by the Red Brigades in their first ten years at 14,000 acts of terrorism .

Context of Emergence

Although Italy was not the only European country to suffer years of terrorism in the 1970s and 1980s, the Red Brigades were the strongest leftist terrorist group in Western Europe after World War II compared to other groups, such as the Red Army Faction (RAF) in Germany, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), and ETA in the Basque Region and Spain.

Italy's history in the early 1970s was mainly linked to political violence, and to what was then called the 'years of lead', which lasted from the 1960s to the late 1980s. It was marked by a wave of far-right and far-left political terrorism. It began with the strikes during the Italian 'Hot Autumn' of 1969, referring to a series of major strikes in factories and industrial centers in northern Italy. It coincided with the collapse of political

alliances, leaving the major parties in parliament struggling to form governments. Political instability led to a crippling economic crisis, exacerbated by a period of strong economic growth in Italy since the end of World War II, and the crisis led to violent protests. This coincided with the difficult international economic situation caused by the repercussions of the oil shock and monetary turmoil. Thus, armed groups emerged from the extreme right, and others from armed and far-left groups, the most famous of which were the Red Brigades.

Views

In his award-winning book, *Anatomy of the Red Brigades: The Religious Mind-set of Modern Terrorists*, which has been translated into several languages, Italian sociologist Alessandro Orsini analyzed all the documents produced by the Red Brigades and the studies on the organization. He asserted that the prevailing logic of the Red Brigades was essentially an eschatological one, focused on purifying the corrupt world through violence. Orsini devised a small social theory, which would allow him to reconstruct the dynamics of far-left terrorist groups and neo-Nazism that led them to murder; he called it the “subversive-revolutionary feedback theory” that asserts that the willingness to die and suffer depends on how far a terrorist integrates into the revolutionary sect. He called these terrorists the “purifiers of the world”. He stressed that all violent “purifiers” of the world of different faiths have a clear goal of building an ideal society, free from any sin or unhappiness, one in which no opposition can be allowed to disturb global harmony.

“The typical Red Brigades member is neither poor nor exploited. Can we, therefore, conclude that poverty and lack of education are in no way connected with the decision to join a terrorist organization?”, says Orsini. He believes that “the typical Red Brigades member “is fundamentally an altruist who does not aim at personal profit, and is of a relatively young age. He is not from societies’ worst-off socioeconomic groups, but is deeply shocked by the poverty and exploitation of others because of his ideology.”

Prosecution

The Italian government has countered by all means the activities of the Red Brigades, refusing to compromise with them. Eventually, it eradicated the group and all its activities. It continued to hunt down former members of the group out of Italy over the past decades, including even those who have condemned violence because they are still accused of engaging in the terrorist organization’s acts of violence .

The Italian police carried out a large-scale campaign of arrests of members of the Red Brigades and leftist sympathizers in 1980, including 12,000 arrests, while 300 fled to France, 200 to South America, and 100 to other countries. Most of the group's leaders arrested either retracted their extremist views, or cooperated with investigators in arresting other Red Brigade members, and obtained significant prison sentence reductions.

In 1981, the Red Brigades split into two factions: the majority faction of the Red Brigades Fighting Communist Party (BR-PCC) (Red Brigades-PCC, led by Barbara Balzerani), and the minority faction of the Union of Combatant Communists (BR-UCC) (Red Brigades-UCC, led by Giovanni Senzani). In 1984, the group claimed responsibility for the murder of Leamon Hunt, US chief of the Sinai Multinational Force and Observer Group, to prove its status. But leaders from the two factions, such as Curcio, Moretti, Iannelli and Bertolazzi, rejected violence the same year, deeming it pointless .

The decline and disappearance of the organization has not stopped the Italian government's efforts to repatriate former members of the organization who fled Italy. On January 14, 2004, the Italian police announced that, in cooperation with the Egyptian police, they had arrested two prominent members of the Red Brigades, Rita Algranati and Maurizio Falessi, and transferred them to Rome. Algranati is convicted in absentia of life imprisonment for inciting and assisting in the murder of Aldo Moro, as well as involvement in three other political assassinations, in addition to her participation in the attack on a Christian Democratic Party headquarters in May 1979 in which two policemen were killed. She is the wife of Italian Alessio Casimirri, who is also on trial for terrorism, involved in the Moro case and a refugee in Nicaragua.

Maurizio Falessi was sentenced to two stringent prison terms—11 years and 23 years—for joining one of the leading factions of the Red Brigades (Red Brigades Fighting Communist Party (BR-PCC)) that was active in the 1970s and 1980s .

In January 2019, Bolivia arrested Red Brigade member Cesare Batiste and extradited him to Italy forty years after he fled France to Brazil and then to Bolivia.

On April 28, 2021, the French President announced that seven former members of the Italian Red Brigades convicted in Italy for acts of terrorism in the 1970s and 1980s were arrested in France at the behest of Italy.

In June 2022, former Red Brigade members residing in France faced proceedings at a Paris court to decide whether the court would extradite to Italy many of its former members who fled to France.

The French action has renewed controversy over the fate of some 300 Red Brigade members who fled to France decades ago. They were granted asylum under President François Mitterrand after they renounced violence. However, Italian demands for their extradition did not heed the so-called French principle of Mitterrand, which grants asylum to former members of the organization provided that they have not committed deadly crimes.