

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Years of Lead. Memory, history, journalism, victims

Terrorismo italiano (con un testo di Edoardo Albinati)

by Giovanni Bianconi, Guidonia Montecelio, Treccani Libri, 2022, 114 pp., €10.00 (paperback), ISBN 9788812009947

L'Italia del terrorismo: partiti, istituzioni e società

edited by Riccardo Brizzi, Giovanni Mario Ceci, Michele Marchi, Guido Panvini and Ermanno Taviani, Rome, Carocci, 2021, 340 pp., €36.00 (paperback), ISBN 9788829001200

Brigate rosse. Storia del partito armato dalle origini all'omicidio Biagi (1970–2002)

by Pino Casamassima, Milan, Baldini & Castoldi, 2022, 1,000 pp., €20.00 (paperback), ISBN 9788893884761

Colpirne uno. Ritratto di famiglia con Brigate Rosse

by Mario Di Vito, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2022, 192 pp., €19.00 (paperback), ISBN 9788858148822

Il figlio terrorista. Il caso Donat-Cattin e la tragedia di una generazione

by Monica Galfré, Turin, Einaudi, 2022, xx + 276 pp., €18.50 (paperback), ISBN 9788806253790

Era mio padre. Italian Terrorism of the Anni di Piombo in the Postmemorials of Victims' Relatives

edited by Sciltian Gastaldi and David Ward, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2018, x + 274 pp., €62.17 (paperback), ISBN 9781788743266

Il 'lodo Moro'. Terrorismo e ragion di Stato 1969–1986

by Valentine Lomellini, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2022, 224 pp., €22.00 (paperback), ISBN 9788858146705

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'Soprattutto un attore di quella drammatica fase della vita italiana è stato tuttavia privilegiato in modo schiacciante come oggetto di studio: il "soggetto terrorista", ovvero i terroristi e le organizzazioni terroristiche.'

(‘One kind of actor in that dramatic period of Italian life has been privileged above all others, in an overwhelming way by researchers and others: the terrorists themselves and their organisations.’
(Brizzi 2021, 11).)

Interest in the so-called ‘years of lead’ in Italy continues unabated, both within the publishing industries and in other media (as the recent transmission of Marco Bellocchio’s huge TV series on the Moro case – *Esterno notte*, 2022 – shows). There have been a number of different approaches to writing about those years since the 1970s. First, there were the journalists. Given the importance in terms of media coverage, and the public interest in political violence and the trials that followed, a number of local and national journalists became specialists in ‘following’ red and/or black terrorism. All of these journalists ending up writing books, often a series of volumes, relating to various aspects of political violence. These specialist journalists included Vincenzo Tessandori (based in Turin) and Pino Casamassima. The massive tome by Casamassima contains all the advantages and disadvantages of a journalistic approach to this subject. On the one hand, the writing is crisp, the stories are told with gusto and with many fascinating anecdotal details, and the scene is usually set beautifully. But on the other hand, there is a tendency to indulge in conspiracy theories, and to ignore or play down historical context, and of course the numerous academic works on this subject published since the 1970s are largely ignored.

A second approach is to see political violence as a subject of academic research. This has led to a variety of work from a number of angles. In Brizzi et al (an extensive edited collection) there are wide-ranging but also focused studies of the relationship between various political parties and political violence, as well as chapters on public opinion in relation to key moments in the ‘years of lead’. I found the chapters on the Radical Party, and the Republican Party, particularly interesting and original. Some of the statistics cited in this book are extraordinary. For example, there were 174 kidnappings in and around Turin alone in 1974, and between January 1969 and February 1998 a total of 672 kidnappings in Italy. This was a ‘business model’ used by terrorists, and by organised crime (often at the same time) to raise money, but also, in the case of the ‘armed struggle’, to set up supposedly alternative forms of justice and ‘hold the state’ (and big business) to account.

Thirdly, scholars and others have begun to take a micro-historical or ‘intimate’ approach to those years, looking at the violence through the lens of individual and family tragedy, and turning the focus onto the victims. The key works in this direction were

those of Benedetta Tobagi and Mario Calabresi, both children of fathers murdered by left-wing terrorists in Milan. Monica Galfré's study takes as its focus the extraordinary tale of Marco Donat-Cattin, militant and later part of the 'armed struggle' with Prima Linea. Donat-Cattin's father was the leading Christian Democrat, Carlo. Galfré tells this extraordinary story as a family tragedy, but also as a political tale, with high-level machinations, secrets, mysteries and controversies. Did father protect son? At the time, this was the suspicion that fell on Carlo Donat-Cattin, and he resigned. There are also other mysteries linked to this story. Marco's transition from street violence to high-level assassination still seems a little difficult to explain, especially the participation in the assassination of magistrate Emilio Alessandrini in Milan. There are also elements of Shakespearean *family tragedy* in the well-known circumstances of Marco's death (run over by a car after he stopped to help somebody on the motorway). His decision to turn state's evidence to become a hated '*pentito*' is also part of the story of political violence in the 1970s and 1980s – where former comrades became bitter enemies, often overnight.

A micro-historical, intimate approach is also taken by Mario Di Vito in *Colpirne uno*, which mixes elements of 'faction' or 'creative writing' with historical fact. The story here is that of a provincial magistrate, Mario Mandrelli, investigating the horrific kidnapping and assassination of the brother of the most famous *pentito* of all – Patrizio Peci. Roberto Peci was seized by the BR in the seaside town of San Benedetto del Tronto in June 1981, in revenge for the 'betrayal' of his brother. A story was invented by the Red Brigades in order to justify this act – that Roberto himself was also a *pentito*. But this was not true. Roberto Peci was held for 55 days in Rome (the same as Moro in 1978) tortured and then killed, and parts of his interrogation were filmed. It was a mafia-type killing. Di Vito captures the lonely battles for justice of the family and the magistrates, living in fear of their lives for years, and the lack of public interest in the case beyond a sense of initial outrage. It is a lyrical and sad book, but also uplifting in the ways it highlights those who defended the institutions and the rule of law in years and times when it was difficult to do so, and with limited resources. There is also a private side to this story, involving hidden diaries and documents. Mandrelli was Di Vito's grandfather. His book also has a strong sense of place, of the sea, of the outside world in which these horrific events took place.

Casamassima's account covers the entire history of the red brigades, through various breakaway and splinter organisations, right up to the most recent murder by a group which saw itself in this tradition – that of the academic Marco Biagi in Bologna in 2002.

By beginning with the last, fragmentary 'BR' killings, and moving backwards, Casamassima takes an unorthodox approach to his subject. It could be argued that these final groupings were eccentric fragments almost entirely unconnected with the milieu which spawned the BR and other groups in the 1970s and 1980s. Nonetheless, Casamassima dedicates an enormous amount of space to these splinters. It could also be argued that they developed in a very particular sphere within the trade union movement, and that their 'soft' targets – advisors to the government on labour law – were very different to those developed by the highly ideological and political groups which operated in the 'years of lead'. Casamassima is a fine writer and tells with verve and clarity what is often a very familiar story to experts in this material. His enormous book is accompanied by numerous documents, including many BR *comunicati*. In addition, the decision to separate the BR from other organisations (such as Prima Linea) is understandable in narrative terms, but makes little sense historically or politically. Militants moved between the groups quite frequently, and they often collaborated in activities of various kinds. They were also in competition with each other for kudos and political visibility. While the

BR has dominated most accounts of those years, the numbers killed by other groups were almost as great.

A further set of questions regards the role of the state, the secret services, and international geopolitics during the years of lead. This can be overplayed by some, presenting Italy as a willing pawn in power games of the US, the USSR and other forces. Nonetheless, this is not to ignore the influence of international forces within Cold War Italy, in particular in Rome. Valentine Lomellini's subject of analysis is the so-called 'Lodo Moro'. This is a supposed (and secret) 'agreement' made between elements in the Italian government and elements in the Middle East to keep Italy out of the conflict and prevent further terrorist attacks in Rome. The city had seen a number of terrorist attacks by Palestinians in the 1970s, in particular at Fiumicino airport. Lomellini's study unveils the background to these attacks, the negotiations that followed, and the role of Rome as a central arena for proxy conflict. Palestinian organisations also set up links with groups in Italy – providing arms and training for the Red Brigades. I will return in detail to this volume later.

One of the key shifts in recent years in 'years of lead' studies has been from a focus on the perpetrators to one on the victims. For a long time, journalists, publishing houses and academics were transfixed by the *brigatisti* themselves. They were invited onto TV, interviewed extensively, biographies were written about them and by them, they all published their own (problematic) accounts of the past, with major publishing houses. This has now changed. Most *brigatisti* now have a very low profile, and there is controversy when they speak in public. The victims have taken centre stage. This shift has also affected academic, journalistic and other kinds of research.

But it is also true that this is not necessarily reflected in many of these works under review. Casamassima's huge volume is largely focused on the perpetrators, not the victims. Some of his account also reflects an ambiguity across large parts of the left itself in the 1970s – towards political violence in general, and its causes – something which has lingered on in some forms. It took a long time for large parts of the left to disassociate themselves fully from the BR and, for example, *Prima Linea*. And even when they did, fuzzy areas remained – which often took the form of reassuring conspiracy theories (the terrorists were not really terrorists because they were spies/manipulated/allowed to do what they wanted).

The slim volume *Terrorismo Italiano* (produced by the Italian National Encyclopedia publishing house, Treccani) seems to be an attempt to reproduce the very successful OUP short introductions series. The format is interesting, including a stimulating essay by the novelist and educator Edoardo Albinati and an overview of certain aspects of the years of lead, with a focus on the terrorists themselves, and the *longue durée* of those years, in judicial and human terms. Beginning with what was almost the final chapter in the 1970s and 1980s, the extradition and confession of Cesare Battisti, who was responsible for a number of murders and had largely avoided prison through escape and by living abroad, but finally returned (through extradition) in 2019, Bianconi traces certain themes that emerged in those years. For example, the various targets of the protagonists of the 'armed struggle', and how these changed – from fascists and factory bosses to judges, journalists and politicians. He also analyses the language used by the terrorists. This is a useful and clear general introduction to the subject, although necessarily it leaves a lot out, there is no bibliography, and it also assumes a high level of knowledge.

Albinati's essay opens up a number of questions. He looks into violence itself, and why it was so attractive at the time, writing of '*la violenza come mezzo da adoperare spregiudicatamente o come vero e proprio oggetto di culto, come fonte di legittimità o come schermo necessario a proteggere la democrazia minacciata ... per i suoi sostenitori la violenza chiarifica, mette ordine, fa emergere netto il profilo delle relazioni tra cose e persone*' ('violence as something to use without too much thought, or as a kind of cult, as a source of legitimacy or as a way of

protecting democracy under threat ... for those who support it, violence clarifies, and brings order – it allows forms of relationships between people and things to emerge in a stark way’) (2022, 21). He also reflects on the sympathisers, who were so important in allowing the perpetrators to act for such a long time, and survive. President Cossiga once said that this ‘area’ amounted to a million people! And Albinati also reflects on ‘*la schiera dei pentiti, delle spie, dei doppiogiochisti, degli infiltrati, dei rinnegati, degli agenti provocatori e dei convertiti: formano una storia a parte, ricca di svolte e di contraddizioni, e se vogliamo la più misteriosa*’ (‘a collection of supergrasses, spies, ambiguous wheeler-dealers, infiltrators, traitors, agents provocateurs and the converted. These categories are a kind of history in themselves, full of shifts and contradictions. In some ways this is the most mysterious category of all’ (2022, 29). Perhaps, he muses, it is the ‘traitors’ who really help us to understand what happened in those years?

There was also the reality of the armed struggle, which was far from romantic (and is most vividly described in Patrizio Peci’s *Io l’infame*, 1983). Alongside the grand political pronouncements of the *brigatisti* – using terms such as the ‘heart of the state’, the ‘conquest of power on behalf of the proletariat’ – sat the mundanity of daily life in hiding and during a kidnap, where doing nothing for most of the time was obligatory, and life was necessarily ‘monastic’. Even the ‘actions’ contained many elements of dullness and normality. The ‘*sequestrati*’ needed flip-flops, they needed somewhere to go the toilet, they needed feeding. Inevitably, some sort of human connection with victims was made, even with a supposed ‘fanatical persecutor of the working class’ (as the BR put it) such as the magistrate Mario Sossi (who was released alive). Inside the ‘hiding places’, the enemy became a human being, at least for some – and thus harder to kill. It seemed easier to murder those seen as spies, for whom a special hatred was reserved, and special (often horrific) treatment handed out.

Conspiracy theories, and the idea that the BR and other groups were ‘so-called’ or not really what they said they were, were (and are) widespread. This was fuelled by the procession of *doppiogiochisti* (ambiguous double dealers), fake anarchists and other figures who populated the story of Piazza Fontana, and the endless, often state-inspired, *despi-staggi* (smokescreens) of those years. The analysis of that shocking event (which turned out to be largely true) was applied to every other act of violence attributed to ‘the left’ which followed – without any real attention to the facts themselves. This happened even when murders were explicitly claimed by terrorist groups, as with the Padua killings of two neofascists in 1974.

While the murders, injuries and threats were, of course, real, there was also the sense of spectacle, in the pronouncements and activities of the *brigatisti* and other groups. In 1978, the ‘historic leadership’ of the BR in prison had no control (or say) over the actions outside the prison walls. But despite this, they continued to *act* as if they had in some way ordered the killings, or the kidnapping of Moro, and were in charge. They were forced to *play a part*, although in reality, their role was propagandistic more than active, once they had been arrested (although they hoped for, and worked towards, escape at all times).

In the end, the idea that these random groups of people, self-identifying as the representatives of ‘the proletariat’ and the ‘revolution’, and assigning themselves powers of justice and life and death, could be taken seriously in terms of pronouncements on any subject at all (such as capitalism, or the political system), and could themselves actually believe what they were writing and doing, was incredible. This did not prevent journalists and the general public doing just that – taking these groups at their word and thinking and writing about their strategy and theories at great and inordinate length. But there was nothing there. The emperor had no clothes. It was a black hole of self-absorbed, narcissistic nothingness. In interrogations after they had abandoned the ‘armed struggle’, former terrorists struggled to explain their past selves, and their acts. Their heart wasn’t in it

any more. Nothing made much sense once the struggle was over. For many, it was like waking from a dream, or rather a nightmare.

Era mio padre is a collection of essays and articles loosely connected to a wave of 'victim' literature (with relation to terrorism) which appeared in the 2000s, in particular in the wake of Mario Calabresi's book *Spingendo la notte più in là* (2007), and the work of Benedetta Tobagi (*Come mi batte forte il tuo cuore*, 2009). Both their fathers were murdered by left-wing terrorists during the 1970s and 1980s, when they were tiny children. Both wrote highly successful books which were a combination of history, memory and political argument.

There are many interesting aspects to this volume, although the whole is somewhat fragmentary and at the same time occasionally repetitive. There is a lot of focus on a couple of short-lived anti-victim polemics (by De Luna and Raimo) which now seem strangely antiquated. Moreover, the theoretical attention to memory studies draws rather heavily on two oft-cited works by Halbwachs and Hirsch. The book also tends to draw a binary distinction between History and Memory (which are rarely defined, but often stated) which seems somewhat overcome by a wealth of recent work, for example on divided memory, and the lack of attention to work and theory relating to oral history (where this distinction has been blurred for years) is telling. The comparative focus is also underplayed. We are often told about Italian exceptionalism, but what about Spain and ETA or Ireland and the 'Troubles' (some rather odd statistics are cited here, and in Casamassima, which massively play down the dead in the Northern Ireland 'Troubles')?¹ In addition, the works of victim-children are often criticised for allowing slippage between History and Memory and emotional approaches, again largely ignoring the (by now) vast wealth of literature on the history of emotions and the increasing interest in cross-over work between fiction, history and memory (and memoir). Interesting points are made in some chapters about the hierarchy of victims. Why are some prominent public figures, and others aren't? Why do some books have a huge impact, and other don't? But these are not fully drawn out. In addition, the book never attempts to explain *why* the focus was on the perpetrators for so long. It is clear that the family nexus is often the way in which terrorism is narrated – as in the recent TV 'fiction' about General Dalla Chiesa (2023) which constantly counterposes the general's 'family life' with his investigative and political activities.

One of the most original parts of the collection is the section on attempts at reconciliation and pardon between victims and perpetrators. The authors conclude that overall these attempts have largely failed, with some notable exceptions. Perpetrators generally failed to fully repent, seemingly taking refuge in a series of excuses and justifications for their past actions, leaving the victims in a difficult situation. Generally, a situation full of long-lasting trauma and silence seems to have prevailed, which has not really been affected by official attempts at commemoration or well-publicised 'greetings', such as that between the wives of Luigi Calabresi and Giuseppe Pinelli – Gemma and Licia – in Rome in 2009. The extraordinary reflections of Sergio Lenci, an architect who survived being shot in the head by members of the Prime Linea group in his own bathroom in 1980, are analysed at length (2010). But Lenci's attempts to understand what happened to him, and why, largely fell on deaf ears. Moreover, the added trauma of the *pentiti* laws, which assigned tiny sentences to many who had blood on their hands, is largely overlooked. It is widely accepted that these *pentiti* laws led to the end of terrorism as a national force, but the impact on the victims and their families was immense. They received no justice.

Lomellini's dense and tightly-argued volume deals with something which probably doesn't exist, at least in a concrete form. The so-called 'Lodo Moro' is a supposed agreement between the Italian state, or parts of it, and some elements in the Palestinian resistance movement 'signed' sometime in the 1970s. This 'agreement' has become part of

political folklore, and longstanding debate. Lomellini doubts that there is an actual written document waiting to be discovered, but concludes that, in the face of Palestinian terrorist attacks in Rome and elsewhere in Italy, particularly the horrific December 1973 attack at Fiumicino airport in Rome, parts of Italy's secret services and/or parts of the government met with specific Palestinians, and agreed a kind of truce.

What exactly was agreed, and why, is the matter of some dispute – was it in return for pro-Arab foreign diplomacy and geopolitics, or did it also lead to allowing the traffic of arms, and for the use of Italy as a kind of base for terrorist attacks and planning elsewhere? Lomellini concludes that there were discussions and some sort of flexible pact, which struggled to hold in the face of Palestinian factionalism and internal political issues and changes. Other mysteries are linked to alleged references to the 'Lodo' in Aldo Moro's famous letters from his Red Brigade 'people's prison' in 1978, where it appears that he was using the Lodo, or talks with the Palestinians, to justify or argue for some sort of pact with the Red Brigades to free himself.

There is much fascinating material here, and in many ways the series of 'foreign' terrorist attacks on Italian soil in postwar Italy are a forgotten part of the history of violence in that period. Rome had always been a crossroads of interests, arms, political groups and intrigue. Palestinians were assassinated by Mossad, for example, on a number of occasions in the Italian capital. Fiumicino airport was the target for two bloody attacks by Palestinian groups, which have not entered Italian collective memory. Moreover, some (including former president Cossiga, who often made reference to a so-called 'Lodo Moro') have looked to pin the most deadly of the bomb attacks of the 'years of lead', the 1980 Bologna bomb, on Arab terrorists. Although written in a very academic style (there are almost as many pages of notes as there are of text) some of the incidents described here are startling – as in the arrest of two leaders of *Autonomia Operaia* in 1979 near Ortona with two land-air missiles hidden in their car. It seems they were transporting them on behalf of a Palestinian group, and that their arrest violated the 'Lodo' in some way.

The book makes little concession to the general reader, assuming widespread and detailed knowledge of different kinds of secret services, DC politicians, Palestinian formations and much more besides. Moreover, it would have been useful if the author had simply described some of the events she cites in clear detail – the reader has to dig around, or look on the internet, to find out what *actually happened*, which can be rather frustrating. Hopefully there will be an English translation so this fascinating and mysterious story can find a wider readership.

In general, the work on the years of lead continues to produce a wide variety of material and approaches, which range from the intimate to high-level diplomatic history. Interest remains high in those years, as those who took part enter old age, or pass away (Silvano Girotto, '*Frate Mitra*', was one of the most recent protagonists of those years to die). Yet, there is still much to be told, and many of the archives remain closed, or difficult to access. The incredible BR trial in Turin in 1976–8, for example, has attracted little academic interest. Moro's murder remains central, but many other assassinations and kneecappings have not been studied. The coming years will remain rich in terms of the years of lead in Italy and their repercussions in human, political and cultural terms.

Note

1. For example, the book claims that Italy saw the 'highest' human cost of terrorism in Europe (2018, 238). But ETA killed over 800 people in Spain, and over 3,500 died in the Northern Ireland 'Troubles'.

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