

“The Left and the Rise of Terrorism in Italy: Gli Anni di Piombo”
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Italy in the early 1960s seemed to make progress toward becoming a less “anomalous” country, but soon after the wave of terrorism best identified with the Red Brigades took place.

While there are many aspects that help explain this phenomenon, one might ask the question: why did terrorism explode in the late 1960s and 1970s?

After all, Italy had just gone through an extraordinary economic boom so the country was better off economically than it had been in the past. One of the major explanations may be found in the political evolution of the country.

- Important transformations had been going on in the political parties of that era.
- With regard to the Christian Democrats, centrism (the alliance of the DC, Socialdemocratici, Repubblicani, and Liberali) seemed to have run its course. The new secretary, Amintore Fanfani, was ready to move left. The 1958 elections brought an increase of about 2 percent to the DC, but the votes came primarily from monarchists and neo-Fascists, which disappointed the leftist Fanfani who wanted to open up the government to more “democratic” elements (the Socialists).
- Fights in the DC led to Fanfani’s resignation in 1959.
- In the meantime, similar changes had been happening in the PSI, where Nenni had been trying for a long time to break off from the Communists, with whom he was allied in the “Unity of Action Pact.” Nenni hoped to break the gridlock in Italian politics by joining the DC in governing Italy. Nenni hoped in this way to move the country to the left, to bring more reforms to the country, to bring at least some significant working class support to the government, and to become independent of the Communist Party.
- However, this was a complex operation for two reasons: the PSI had been subordinate to the Communists since the 1948 elections in various ways; it depended on the PCI for financing, and some Socialist supported the Communists and secretly held a “doppia tessera.” The other reason was the conservatives in the Italian government (led by Malagodi and his Liberali) argued that the Socialists did not really want to be independent of the Communists and were really a “Trojan Horse” for the Communists. They

were supported by the Americans (Eisenhower Administration), with whom Malagodi had a lot of influence.

- The result of this double split was gridlock. The Italians found it impossible to form stable governments without Socialist support. In fact, in June 1960 Fernando Tambroni tried to transform a caretaker government into an activist one by accepting the support of the MSI (there were rumors that he was planning a coup d'état). This event led to riots when an MSI scheduled their Congress for Genoa, a noted anti-Fascist city).

The Center-Left

- In 1960 the international situation changed, as did the Catholic Church (John XXIII, who changed the Church's policy from one of opposition to the Center-Left to one of support).
- In the United States, John F. Kennedy was elected President. Kennedy was more liberal than Eisenhower and, furthermore, appointed Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. as his advisor.
- Schlesinger had close ties to Italy: connections particularly to Salvemini; favored Nenni and the left.
- Since Italy was not a major concern for Kennedy because of the other crises that occurred, he gave control of the Italian situation to Schlesinger. Schlesinger tried to make changes in American policy toward Italy, particularly in removing the "American veto" against the Socialists' joining the cabinet.
- However, Schlesinger had a lot of trouble doing that because he found opposition in the American bureaucracy; this split into State Department factions for and against; and CIA factions for and against.
- The fight dragged on for a long time and was finally resolved only when news came of the Kennedy assassination.
- The Communists were opposed to the Center-Left, not because they believed that it would be bad for the country, but because the Socialists had outmaneuvered them and because they could not control the situation.
- As a result, they raised obstacles at every turn against the Center-Left, making it very difficult to pass reforms. In fact, its difficulties encouraged the right to plan a coup d'état against it (the Sifar Affair, 1964). Nenni had to reduce his reform program.

Terrorism

- Even though the Center-Left has some important reforms to its credit (e.g., the Legge Brodolini, divorce, nationalization of electricity), the constant opposition of the Communists (and DC of the right) blocked the modernization of the country at a time when the Italian culture seemed ready to go ahead with this.

- I tend to put the heavier burden for this failure on the Communists rather than on the DC or the right in general. These last movements opposed reforms on principle; the Communists did so out of political motivation, i.e., that they were not the leaders nor would they have had the political credit for successful reforms—at least not unless they would have wholeheartedly supported them. It was a shortsighted policy because, had they changed then, rather than later in a halfhearted way, the history of the country would have been different.
- There might have been a reformist bloc formed that could have defeated those forces that opposed reform. This produced a decline in Socialist votes and an increase in Communist votes because the PCI had appeared to be correct: the Center-Left, which they had predicted would fail, indeed seemed to have failed.
- Communist opposition not only blocked reform, but it also favored a culture of anti-reformism among its followers, looking at the Socialists as traitors (plus the policy of the “doppio binario.”)
- The combination of these policies exacerbated conditions in the country, making it difficult to pass reforms (also because the opposition was able to take advantage of the split), while at the same time encouraging a revolutionary atmosphere because it was not possible to get things done.
- By the time 1967 and 1968 came around, the students were exasperated and we all know about the explosion that came about in those years.
- It had not been possible to reform the university or Italian society; wages were still low compared to other countries, so 1968 was followed by the “Autunno Caldo” of 1969.
- When these events occurred, as Socialist votes declined and Communist votes increased, the Communists were finally ready to get on the bandwagon and to support the government, but this time they would be in a position to lead the movement on the left.
- In other words, they were following the Socialists.
- This was when talks took place between the Communists and the DC led by Aldo Moro. In fact, the negotiations were similar to those that took place during the 1960s, this time with the Communists instead of the Socialists.
- However, the strategy backfired, because the Communists had not backed off their revolutionary and hegemonic rhetoric, which had raised expectations among the youth.
- It is not surprising that when the youth saw the Communists negotiating with the DC to go into the government, backing off in practice from their teachings that had never been recanted, that there would be a reaction.
- Those “children” of Communist ideology that wanted revolution felt that they had been betrayed by the Communists and it does not take much to

understand why they turned to violence and the kind of ideology that the Party had always favored, at least in words.

- They were not convinced by the policy of “il doppio binario” and thought that the PCI had sold out to the bourgeoisie.
- From here they turned to the terrorism of the “anni di piombo” that were the 1970s.
- Alessandro Orsini has rightly emphasized in his book that the Red Brigades were motivated by a “religious mindset,” but the point is that it took a “perfect storm” of conditions to come together in order to encourage the outbreak of a terrorist wave. The “religious mindset” of the terrorists predisposed them to violence, but the point is that the conditions in the country created a supporting atmosphere for their actions that made “gli anni di piombo” possible.
- This occurred in the late 1960s and 1970s due to the opposition of the PCI, which could have cooperated to make the Center-Left a success but did the opposite. Later, when it tried to cooperate it was too late.