

CounterPunch

July 31, 2020

# The Bologna Massacre, the ‘Strategy of Tension’ and Operation Gladio

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Ruins of the Bologna station west wing after the bombing. Beppe Briguglio, Patrizia Pulga, Medardo Pedrini, Marco Vaccari – [www.stragi.it/](http://www.stragi.it/) – [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)

On the sweltering morning of August 2, 1980, a powerful explosion blew apart the central train station in Bologna, Italy, killing 85 people and wounding 200 more. To this day, it is uncertain exactly who is behind the deadliest terrorist attack in modern Italian history. It is clear that right-wing extremists including neo-fascists, Italian secret service agents and rogue outlaw Freemasons carried out the attack. What is less clear is whether, or to what extent, the bombing was part of a clandestine, Europe-wide right-wing state terror operation.

## **Years of Lead**

The period from the late 1960s through the 1980s was one of social and political turmoil in Italy known as the *anni di piombo*, or years of lead. Terrorism from both the far right and far left was commonplace during these deadly decades, in which some 12,000 attacks claimed hundreds of lives. Until Bologna, the most infamous of these was the kidnapping and murder of former prime minister Aldo Moro by the communist Red Brigades in 1978.

Bologna, capital of the prosperous Emilia-Romagna region in northeastern Italy, was — and remains — a hotbed of political activity. Home to the world's oldest university, the city is known by locals as *Bologna la dotta*, or Bologna the Learned. It is also called *Bologna la rossa*, or Bologna the Red, as the city has long been a stronghold of the Communist Party. Home to some of the world's finest food and wine and brimming with cultural treasures, the city has been described as the perfect combination of hedonism and communism.

Still, there was bloodshed in Bologna during those Years of Lead. After police shot and killed Francesco Lorusso, a 24-year-old far-left militant, on March 11, 1977, the city erupted in street clashes that lasted for days. The Italian government sent armored combat vehicles into the university quarter and other hot spots to quash what Francesco Cossiga, the interior minister, called “guerrilla warfare.”

On June 27, 1980, Itavia Flight 870, a DC-9 passenger jet en route from Bologna to Palermo in Sicily, crashed into the Tyrrhenian Sea near the island of Ustica, killing all 81 passengers and crew on board. Like the Bologna station bombing, the cause and the culprit behind the disaster remain shrouded in much mystery. At the time, Prime Minister Francesco Cossiga said the plane was [accidentally shot down](#) by French fighter jets engaged in a dogfight with Libyan warplanes over the Mediterranean Sea. However, a 1994 report concluded that a terrorist bomb had brought down the plane. This solved nothing, for in 2013 Italy's top criminal court [affirmed](#) the stray missile theory. Regardless of who is responsible for the Ustica massacre, the tragedy weighed heavily on Bologna's public consciousness during the summer of 1980, the nadir of the Years of Lead.

## **Ticking Time Bomb**

It was sun, sand and sea, not death and destruction, that were on the minds of many of the thousands of travelers who packed into Bologna's main train station, the Stazione di Bologna Centrale, on that hot morning of August 2, 1980. Summer holidays were just beginning and many of the travelers that day were students on their way to the Adriatic seashore. As the temperature soared, the air-conditioned second-class waiting room quickly filled to capacity. No one noticed the suitcase someone slipped into the crowded room, right up against a load-bearing wall to maximize death and destruction. No one knew that packed inside were 23 kilograms (50 pounds) of military-grade explosives timed to go off at 10:25 am.

Tonino Braccia was a 19-year-old policeman waiting for a train to Rome, where he was to attend his cousin's wedding. "It was a really beautiful day, [he recalled](#). "Scorching hot." Braccia said he was "feeling really good" that morning, as his commander had granted him three days' special leave to travel to the capital. "I was smoking a cigarette and I went into the waiting room but there wasn't anywhere to sit, it was completely full," he told the BBC. "So I leaned against the door and looked outside."

## **Bloodbath**

Malcolm Quantrill, a 44-year-old university professor from London, had just reached the ticket window in the booking hall when he suddenly saw a flash of yellow light. "I did not hear any explosion, just the crash of masonry falling and the sound of breaking glass as the ticket window disintegrated," he [said](#).

Braccia doesn't remember the explosion either. "I have tried and tried to remember the moment of the explosion but I really can't remember anything, even the noise," he said. "Probably because I was too near it — just two meters away." The next thing he remembers is waking up under a train as water from a firefighters' hose dripped down on his face. Most of his clothes had been blown off.

"I heard people screaming and shouting," recalled Braccia. "There were people running. An acrid smell. My mouth tasted bitter and horrible. There was smelly dust everywhere. Everything was yellow. Blood was pouring out of my mouth, my eyes, my ears, my nose." He would lose one of his eyes, as well as the use of one of his arms. He is also partially deaf. The young policeman would spend

two weeks in an induced coma and undergo 24 operations over the coming years.

Giuseppe Rosa, a bus driver parked outside the station, will never forget the blast. Rosa said he [“heard an enormous bang”](#) and then “part of the roof lifted into the air and fell down on itself.” A massive, gaping hole had been blown in the center of the station, the twisted steel girders a testament to the sheer power of the bomb. Rubble was strewn about. From the chaos Quattrone, the British professor, emerged, shocked and disoriented. “There was blood all over me. Everyone was running, shouting and screaming.”

Amid the smoldering debris, weeping rescue workers collected blasted bodies and bits of bodies. Bologna residents joined travelers in offering first aid to injured victims and in digging dead and wounded people from the rubble. Buses, taxis and private cars rushed victims to hospital.

The bombing of Bologna Centrale — the *strage di Bologna* to Italians — remains the most devastating terrorist attack in Italian history. In the history of modern terror attacks up to that time, only the 1946 [bombing of the King David Hotel](#) in Jerusalem by Zionist militants led by future Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin killed more people. The final death toll in Bologna was 85, with 200 others injured. The youngest to die that day was a 3-year-old girl. The oldest victim was 86 years old.

## Strategy of Tension

At first, Italian government and police officials attributed the blast to an accidental explosion, perhaps of an old boiler. Authorities soon received calls from people on both the far right and far left claiming responsibility for the attack. However, it was soon apparent that this was no communist plot. Rather, it was the result of not-so-secret collusion between state officials, fascist terrorists and agents provocateurs, the notorious *strategia della tensione*, or [Strategy of Tension](#). This unholy alliance of shadowy right-wing forces including corrupt politicians, secret service officers, fascist militants, clergymen and rogue Freemasons would stop at nothing to keep communists from power.

The Strategy of Tension, under which violence and chaos were encouraged rather than suppressed, was ultimately meant to terrorize Italians into voting

for the oligarchic Christian Democrats instead of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). The policy was backed by the United States, which had a decades-long history of meddling in Italian politics. The Central Intelligence Agency funneled [tens of millions of dollars](#) to anti-communist parties to influence the outcome of numerous Italian elections beginning in the late 1940s. The CIA also engaged in forgery and other disinformation in a bid to discredit the popular PCI.

The Bologna massacre happened just three hours before a court in the city started the trial of a group of right-wing terrorists, including the notorious fascist Mario Tuti, for the [August 4, 1974 bombing](#) of the Italicus Express train from Rome to Brenner, an attack that killed 12 innocent people. Investigators quickly zeroed in on militant fascists, attributing the Bologna bombing to the Armed Revolutionary Nuclei (NAR), a neo-fascist terrorist group led by 21-year-old Francesca Mambro and her future husband Valerio Fioravanti, who was 22 at the time. The Bologna prosecutor issued 28 arrest warrants for members of NAR and Terza Posizione, another far-right group.

## **Terror on Trial**

Trials began in March 1987. Prosecutors asserted the terrorists were hoping to spark a revolt that would end with Italy returning to fascist dictatorship, under which it had been ruled as recently as 35 years earlier. Among the defendants were fascist financier Licio Gelli, who once served as a liaison between Rome and Nazi Germany and who was grand master of the banned P2 Masonic Lodge, Pietro Musumeci, a former army general and deputy director of military secret service who was a leading member of P2 and two former professional footballers. It was a veritable Who's Who of the Italian far right.

In July 1988, four people — Mambro, Fioravanti, Massimiliano Fachini and Sergio Picciafuoco — were [convicted of murder](#) and sentenced to life in prison. Two others were acquitted. However, the four murder convictions were overturned on appeal in 1992. A new trial began the following year; all of the defendants were again sentenced to life behind bars, except for Fachini, who was acquitted. Lesser sentences for crimes including forming an armed gang, subversive association, obstruction and defamation were also handed down to many of the defendants.

Mambro, who was paroled in 2013, maintains her innocence to this day, although she and Fioravanti have accepted moral responsibility for NAR terror attacks. Speaking about the Bologna bombing in a [1997 interview](#), she said she “remembers the day perfectly.”

“I heard about it on the news and I thought, ‘what kind of people could do a thing like that?’” Mambro said. “So wanton. So indiscriminate. I wanted to cry.”

## Operation Gladio?

In 1984, convicted fascist Vincenzo Vinciguerra testified to Italian investigators that he had been recruited for a 1972 car bombing in Peteano as part of Operation Gladio — Latin for “sword” — which was launched by the Italian secret service in the 1950s as a stay-behind guerrilla resistance operation in the event of a Soviet invasion or communist takeover of NATO countries. “There exists in Italy a secret force parallel to the armed forces, composed of civilians and military men, in an anti-Soviet capacity, to organize a resistance on Italian soil against a Russian army,” Vinciguerra testified. “Lacking a Soviet military invasion, which might not happen, [they] took up the task, on NATO’s behalf, of preventing a slip to the left in the political balance of the country. This they did, with the assistance of the official secret services and the political and military forces.”

Vinciguerra’s testimony is corroborated by other prominent Italian officials. Gen. Vito Miceli, former head of military intelligence, [testified](#) that “the incriminated organization... was formed under a secret agreement with the United States and within the framework of NATO.” Former defense minister Paulo Taviani told a magistrate that during his time in office, “the Italian secret services were bossed and financed by CIA agents,” while Giandelio Maletti, a former secret service general, [said](#) **“the CIA gave its tacit approval to a series of bombings in Italy in the 1970s to sow instability and keep communists from taking power.”** Former secret service chief Gen. Gerardo Serravalle [said](#) that as Gladio evolved into a terrorist operation, “representatives of the CIA were always present” at meetings, although the Americans did not have voting rights. Serravalle also said that Gladio agents trained a British military base. A parliamentary terrorism committee [also revealed](#) that the US funded a training base for “stay behind” operators in Germany.

Although the CIA denied involvement in Gladio, one of the agency's former directors, William Colby, [detailed in his memoir](#) how the CIA was involved in stay-behind operations in Scandinavian countries. [Declassified CIA documents](#) also prove that the US helped set up German stay-behind networks, which involved former Nazis including two SS colonels, Hans Rues and Walter Kopp, who the agency described as an "unreconstructed Nazi."

Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti [publicly acknowledged](#) the existence of Gladio in 1990. The Christian Democrat said that 127 weapons caches had been dismantled and claimed that Gladio was not involved in any of the bombings during the Years of Lead. Andreotti also said that in 1964 Italy's military had joined the Allied Clandestine Committee, which was created seven years earlier by the US, France, Belgium and Greece, and was in charge of directing Gladio operations. That same year the European Parliament condemned NATO and the US for their role in Gladio terrorism and for "jeopardizing the democratic structures" of European nations.

## **Agonizing Uncertainty**

While it cannot be said with any great certainty that the Bologna bombing was a Gladio operation, the attacks certainly bears the hallmarks of Operation Gladio. Explosives experts determined that the blast was caused by "retrieved military explosives" of the same sort used in the 1972 Peteano car bombing. On the 20th anniversary of the bombing, Andreotti [gave an interview](#) in which he said that there were forces in what would today be called the "deep state" who would stop at nothing to defeat communism. "In the Italian secret services, and in parallel apparatus, there was a conviction that they were involved in a Holy War, that they had been given a sacred mission," the former prime minister said. "And that anything that passed as anti-communist was legitimate and praiseworthy."

Forty years later, the terror trail of August 2, 1980 refuses to go cold. In January 2020, Gilberto Cavallini, a 67-year-old former NAR member, was convicted of providing logistical support for the bombing and [sentenced to life in prison](#). Many of those accused or convicted in connection with the massacre maintain their innocence, and Bologna and the world are no closer to knowing for sure who is behind the attack.

For some victims, the uncertainty is agonizing. “I can’t accept that they took my life away from me,” said Braccia, the former policeman. “I had such a zest for life and they destroyed it. We don’t know the truth, and that is the difficulty. We want the truth. Who really did this?”

There is a clock on the wall outside the main entrance to Bologna Centrale. It is permanently stopped at 10:25. Like the unrepaired blast crater and memorial wall in the station hall, it is an eternal reminder of the horrors of that infernal August morning 40 years ago, and of questions that may never be fully answered.

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