

REVIEW ESSAYS

Italian Terrorism

Drake, Richard. *The Revolutionary Mystique and Terrorism in Contemporary Italy*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989.

Meade, Robert C. Jr. *Red Brigades: The Story of Italian Terrorism*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990.

Moss, David. *The Politics of Left-Wing Violence in Italy, 1969-85*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.

In light of recent developments in Europe and elsewhere, many of the events described and then analyzed in these books seem incredible. With the collapse of communist rule in Eastern Europe and the pursuit of *glasnost* in the Soviet Union, it seems hard to imagine that only a few years earlier Marxism-Leninism was a sufficiently powerful ideology for many young Italians to commit thousands of violent acts, including murders, in order to achieve its triumph in their own country. Fantastic as it now seems, the goal was to achieve for Italy an economic and political order comparable to those prevailing until very recently in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, etc.

Viewed in historical perspective, the more than decade long episode of revolutionary terrorism Italy experienced over the 1970s and early 1980s seems likely to be recalled as the last serious effort in Europe to make a revolution in the name of Marxism-Leninism. If, for no other reason, the violent events are worth paying attention to because they have likely brought down the curtain on actors, exceptionally loquacious ones, seeking to bring about leftist revolution in an industrialized democracy.

Also in Italy, and at approximately the same time as the revolutionary bands were committing terrorist acts in the name of the metropolitan proletariat, other groups used violence to win political power on behalf of very different principles. During these "years of lead" Italy experienced a serious wave of terrorist violence carried out by neo-Fascist organizations. In the name of anti-communism and in the hope of putting an end to the corruption and decadence of the democratic regime, the neo-Fascists wound up killing more of their fellow citizens than did their counterparts on the revolutionary left.

All three of the books under review are very well done, but with the exception of a few chapters in Richard Drake's volume, they devote little attention to violent neo-Fascism and its causes. The books are focused overwhelmingly on the revolutionary Left.

It is true however that the three books differ in both scope and perspective. *The Revolutionary Mystique and Terrorism in Contemporary Italy* is

widest in scope. Its author, an historian, provides an account of the emergence, evolution and decline of both left and right-wing terrorist groups. He makes a particularly valuable contribution to our understanding of the subject in three ways. First, Drake offers English-speaking readers some feeling for the way in which the terrorists themselves saw their situation. This effect is achieved through the author's review of the available biographical and autobiographical writing about the major characters in the terrorist drama. With time on their hands and confronted by long prison sentences, some of the terrorists have chosen to reflect on what they did and why they did it. Drake reports these reflections and offers some interpretation of their meaning. Second, the author provides us with an intellectual history of the New Left and neo-Fascist political ideas (and ideologues) from which the leaders of the various terrorist groups, Left and Right, derived much of their inspiration. And third, Drake goes to considerable lengths to make sure his readers are made aware of Italy's economic and political circumstances before and during the terrorist episode.

Of equal interest, *The Politics of Left-Wing Violence in Italy, 1969-85* is a book written from a clear social science perspective. David Moss, its author, furnishes his readers with a statistically informed account concerning where and when the violence occurred and what types of individuals were responsible for its planning and commission. The author's classification of the terrorists into intellectuals, apparatchiks and locals helps us to understand the outlook and structure of the major left-wing terrorist organizations. Moss also reminds us that in terms of politics, more important than the violence itself is the meaning to be assigned to it. Using the concept of "translation," he emphasizes the extent to which the terrorist episode was a conflict between various actors to define the meaning of the violence and hence the appropriate public response to it. Government agencies, political parties (Left, Center and Right), trade union organizations, the judiciary as well as the violence producing groups engaged in a war of words and symbols designed to win legitimacy for their self-serving interpretations of what the violence was all about.

Red Brigades: the Story of Italian Terrorism provides an excellent and detailed account of the most deadly and long-lasting of the revolutionary terrorist groups. Robert Meade, Jr., an attorney, traces the Red Brigades' (BR) origins back to the University of Trento and the turbulent era of mass student and worker protest of the late 1960s. The author paints vivid pictures of the political scene, both in the corridors of power and on the streets, from which the BR emerged. There is an especially thoughtful description of the Moro case, the dramatic kidnapping and assassination of the former prime minister in the spring of 1978. This is followed by an account of how the authorities then went about dismantling the BR. Here particular attention is paid to the role played by the late *carabiniere* general Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa as well as to the impact of the intensely debated legislation on repentance and disassociation, laws which led to so many defections from the BR and the other terrorist organizations. But, as the author is careful to remind us, elements of the BR remain active in Italy to this day, more than 20 years after the group's formation.

Finally, English language readers are fortunate to have available three such valuable works on revolutionary terrorism in Italy as have been reviewed above. They were a pleasure to read.

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Conflict in Northern Ireland

Arthur, Paul, and Keith Jeffery. *Northern Ireland Since 1968*. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988.

Bell, J. Bowyer. *The Gun in Politics: An Analysis of Irish Conflict, 1916-1986*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1987.

Bishop, Patrick, and Eamonn Mallie. *The Provisional IRA*. London: Transworld, 1987.

Holland, Jack. *The American Connection: U.S. Guns, Money and Influence in Northern Ireland*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1987.

McVeigh, Joseph. *A Wounded Church: Religion, Politics and Justice in Ireland*. Cork, Ireland: Mercier, 1989.

Nelson, Sarah. *Ulster's Uncertain Defenders: Loyalists and the Northern Ireland Conflict*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1984.

The six books to be discussed in this review essay are all well worth reading. Specifically, not only do they examine the ongoing problem of Northern Ireland, but they also offer insights into the more general problem of violent political conflict. In this essay I will discuss four issues dealt with by these works that are relevant both to the Northern Ireland crisis and to the broader problem of violent political conflict in the modern world.

First, some of the books provide a good discussion of religion and its impact on political conflict. It is interesting to recall that in the 1960s, when the Northern Ireland crisis was beginning, the consensus among political scientists was that religion was, as people used to say back then, "irrelevant." Put differently, the "conventional wisdom" of political scientists at the time was that religion was becoming less and less important in political affairs; that increasingly, religion was a matter of concern only to individual believers, not to the political system as a whole.

This belief in the lack of relevance of religion to politics meant that most political scientists were poorly prepared initially to understand many of the political upheavals of the past several decades, from the emergence of