

KGB and the Red Brigades: No Ties that Bind

For decades, Italian media has been convinced that Moscow and Prague, or both, were behind the Italian terrorist violence of the 1970s. • So far, declassified Cold War-era documents debunk such notions, bad news for a country that likes entertaining conspiracies and conspiracy theorists. • Most dossiers suggest that Moscow had only a primitive understanding of Italian domestic affairs in the so called “Years of Lead,” despite the strength of the Italian Communist Party. •

by Fernando Orlandi



On November 29 in Sofia, Bulgaria an official body with an endless name declassified a series of archival documents relating to international terrorism. The body, known formally as the Commission for the Dissemination of Documents and the Announcement of the Affiliation of Bulgarian Citizens in Relation to the State Security and Intelligence Services of the Bulgarian National Army, made public a vast array of papers previously unknown to scholars and historians. It was something of a tease release, since 3,000 more pages will be released in March.

What’s interesting about the papers, at least from the Italian perspective, is a KGB memo written about the activities of the Red Brigades terrorist group, a Marxist urban guerrilla organization whose shootings and kidnappings dominated European headlines in the late 1970s and 1980s.

The 10-page memo was written in 1980 and copied to the security services all Warsaw Pact nations. It represents the first official KGB document made public on the matter of Italian terrorism.

But the memo is an intellectual disappointment. It evidences oversimplification and ingeniousness, not to mention peddling array of ideological stereotypes, mostly at the expense of facts. Judged at face value, it suggests that the KGB, once implicated as being behind Italian terror movement, was out of the loop when it came to grasping the complexity of the Italian social and political scene in 1979 and 1980.

The arrest of Red Brigades leader Renato Curcio.

According to the KGB, Italian terrorism was born in the late 1960s, a time that saw a “significant strengthening of the political left, the Communist Party.” The right, with the aim of “imposing an authoritarian regime to lead the country,” and with Washington’s support, the memo says, turned to the military and the police “pull the country backward, as it was under fascism.”

For this reason, the Italian Communist Party was forced to be more vigilant and make itself ready “to return to underground warfare.” Instead, Italian Communist “failed to develop a constructive program for the further development of democratic rights” and “abandoned armed struggle.” This “ingredient of opportunism within the ranks of the Communist Party strongly influenced the ideology and political positions of those who had been ready to give their lives for the socialist future of Italy, co-opting them politically and thus pushing them toward terrorism.”

In the mid-seventies, terrorism took on a “mass character,” which in turn served the “interests of certain political forces that used terrorism to serve their interests, directing it against the Communist Party.” Secret services selectively quashed some groups while giving wide berth to others with the express intent of discrediting the Communists.

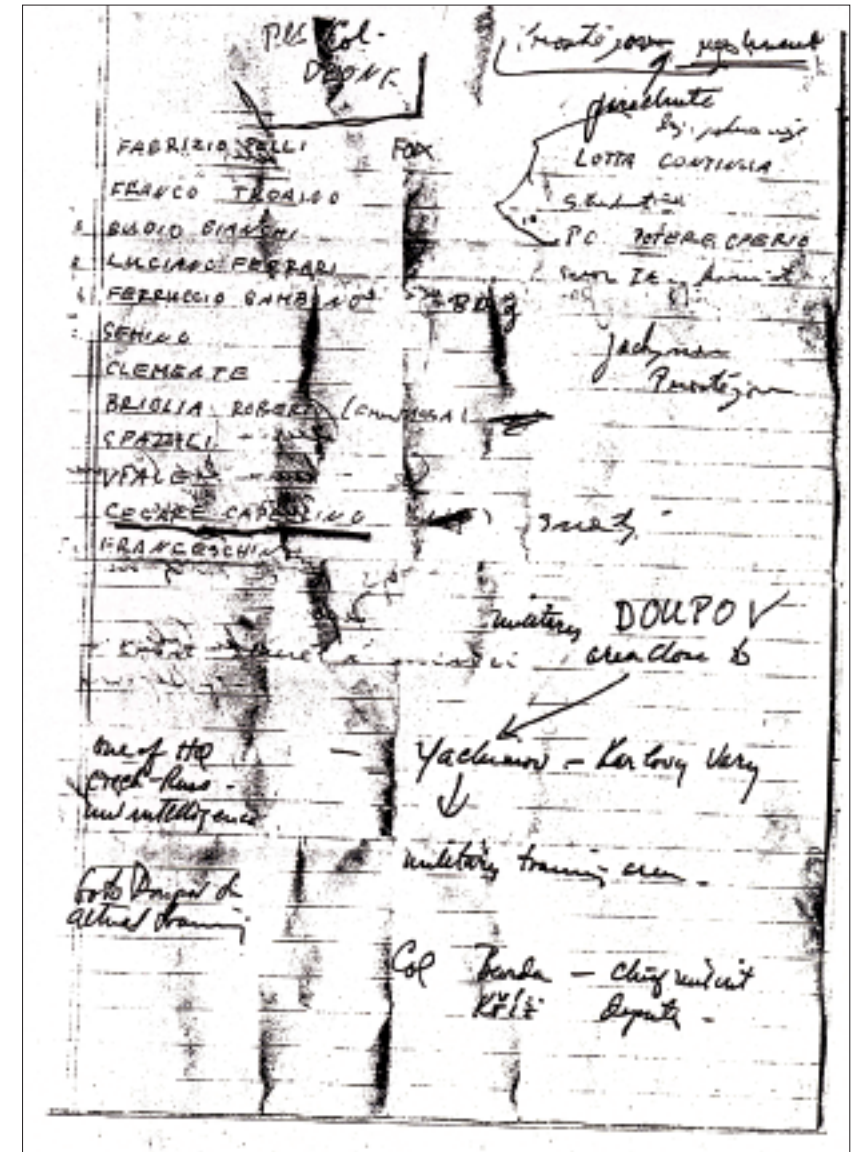
According to the KGB, the use of terrorism was linked to changes in the Italian political scene. In fact, the memo continued, “it’s worth noting a spike in terrorist activity at precisely those moments in which

KGB information culled from Bulgarian archives suggests only a primitive understanding of Italian political affairs and terrorism.

the PCI presses for entry into the government.”

From the KGB’s vantage point, at least based on this memorandum, there was nothing more to say.

Yet again documentation from the archives of former Communist states fail to support the speculative literature of the period that repeatedly tied Italian terrorism to a sophisticated and well-planned Soviet conspiracy. Such thinking would soon become the



norm. So far, no data has surfaced to suggest Soviet manipulation of Italian terrorism, even through a proxy state. That also holds true for relevant judicial documents and trial information. That the Soviets were in some way involved with domestic terrorism was certainly a reasonable hypothesis at the time. The Cold War had some extremely “hot” moments on both sides, fought out with holds barred. In some cases, the enemy of my enemy, no matter how deplorable, became a friend.

Connections between the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact and Italian terrorism seemed like a foregone conclusions. The Czechs were supposedly involved. Cover-ups and collusion was mentioned. Some writers openly stated that the Red Brigades were a KGB tool.

Italy’s history, and in particular the abduction and murder of former Prime Minister Aldo Moro in 1978, has been the subject of all kinds of conspiracies theories. Their bent depended on the source. The puppeteers included Italy’s own intelligence agencies, as well as those of Moscow and Washington. Not to a bit part for Israel. Red Brigades terrorist Mario Moretti was once labeled “a pawn of Soviet policy in Italy, increasingly under the strategic control of Prague.”

In short, the Moro affair was “Czechoslovak-Soviet” affair, with the terrorists likely trained overseas, if not foreign national. These theories fascinated the public and led to a number of successful books. But commercial success isn’t necessarily connected to any legitimate search for truth. Many of the published theories lacked sufficient credible evidence. Victor Zaslavsky’s view remains air tight. “Until specific documentation says differently, there seems to be no basis for trying to explain the Italian terrorism in terms of being directed from the outside.”

The Czech ‘menace’

That the Czechs were inextricably linked to the rise of the Red Brigades was a commonplace in many Italian government circles. Even Moro, though he lacked concrete evidence, suggested that Italian terrorism was probably backed Soviet bloc states: “In all probability through Czechoslovakia,” he told U.S. Ambassador Richard Gardner on Nov. 5, 1977, four months before his abduction by a terrorist commando team in Rome. In a document prepared by the Executive Committee for Intelligence and Security Services (Cesis), which dates to the end of 1979, intelligence officers wrote that

“elements of the Czechoslovak secret services has been in contact with the various terrorist groups.” These contacts led to recruitment, with terrorists “starting actual paramilitary training in Czechoslovakia or in another country,” after which they’d “return to Italy” and undertake lethal missions.

This focus on Czechoslovakia was so intense, particularly after the kidnapping, that Italy seriously weighed what on the surface seems inconceivable. Rome Police Commissioner Antonio Frattasi, speaking to the Italian Massacres Commission in 1998, said that Rome police considered planning a military operation directed against the Czechoslovak Embassy, located in a secluded Rome villa. Police planned to storm the villa. Only delays stopped the assault.

The alleged Czechoslovakia connection emerged again some years earlier. In September 1974, when Red Brigades chiefs Renato Curcio and Alberto Franceschini were detained, Gustavo Pignero, a member of the anti-terrorism team head by General Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa, falsely “revealed” during a press conference that “Franceschini had arrived a few days earlier from Prague.” The lie was apparently intended to protect Silvano Girotto, who was working undercover. To “cover” for him, said journalist Vincent Tessandori, the anti-terrorism team sent “sent a false report to the judiciary explaining Franceschini’s movements in recent months.” As a result, immediately after Franceschini’s the “La

The front page of the Milan daily “Corriere della Sera” on May 11, 1978, after Aldo Moro’s body was found. Interior Minister Francesco Cossiga resigned as a result.

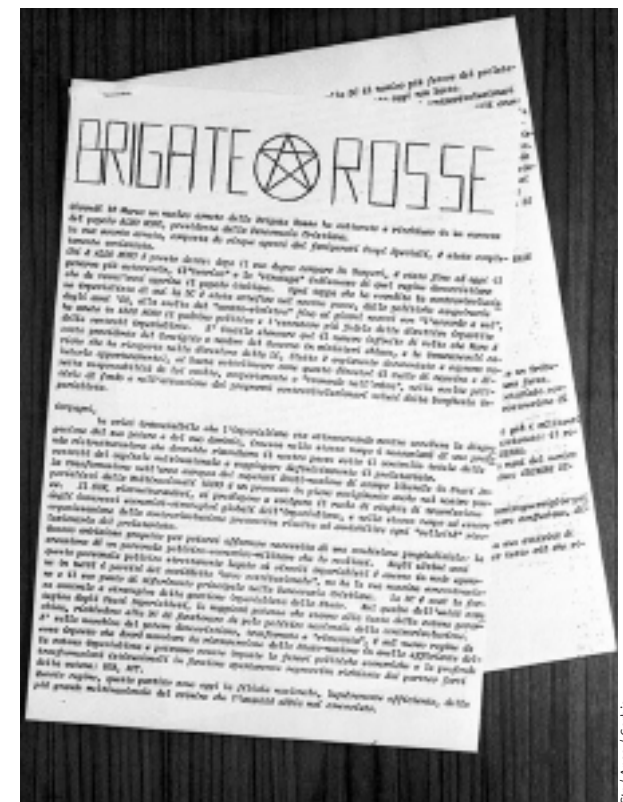


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Stampa” daily in Turin published a report saying that Franceschini “was tracked down following several trips” which he “had taken to Eastern European countries.”

At that point, rumors took on a life of their own, often filling in for missing facts. Sources began to give dubious “evidence,” including a leaked report for the Defense Information Service (CIS), the precursor to the Italian service SISMI. One was dated Sept. 30, 1974 (20 days after Pignero’s press conference). Another, from March 1975, was said to have been prepared either by Centro CS (counterterrorist) or the D-Office in Bologna and stated that Franceschini been in Czechoslovakia from June 1973 to June 1974, at a terrorist training camp of Lidice, a town located in central Bohemia, less than 30 kilometers from Prague. As early as May 1973, during an argument be-

A Red Brigades leaflet circulated while Moro, the president of the Christian Democratic Party and a former prime minister, was being held.



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tween Communist Party Senate Paolo Buffalini and then-Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti, the latter had made references to terrorists using Czechoslovakia for training.

A general’s role

A few years later the Czechoslovakia theory got a boost from Major General Jan Sejna, a Czech military insider linked to Antonin Novotny, the head of the Czech Communist Party before Prague Spring leader Alexander Dubcek. Though Cejan was portrayed as a defector, he’d fled from Czechoslovakia to the West to escape arrest for criminal offenses.

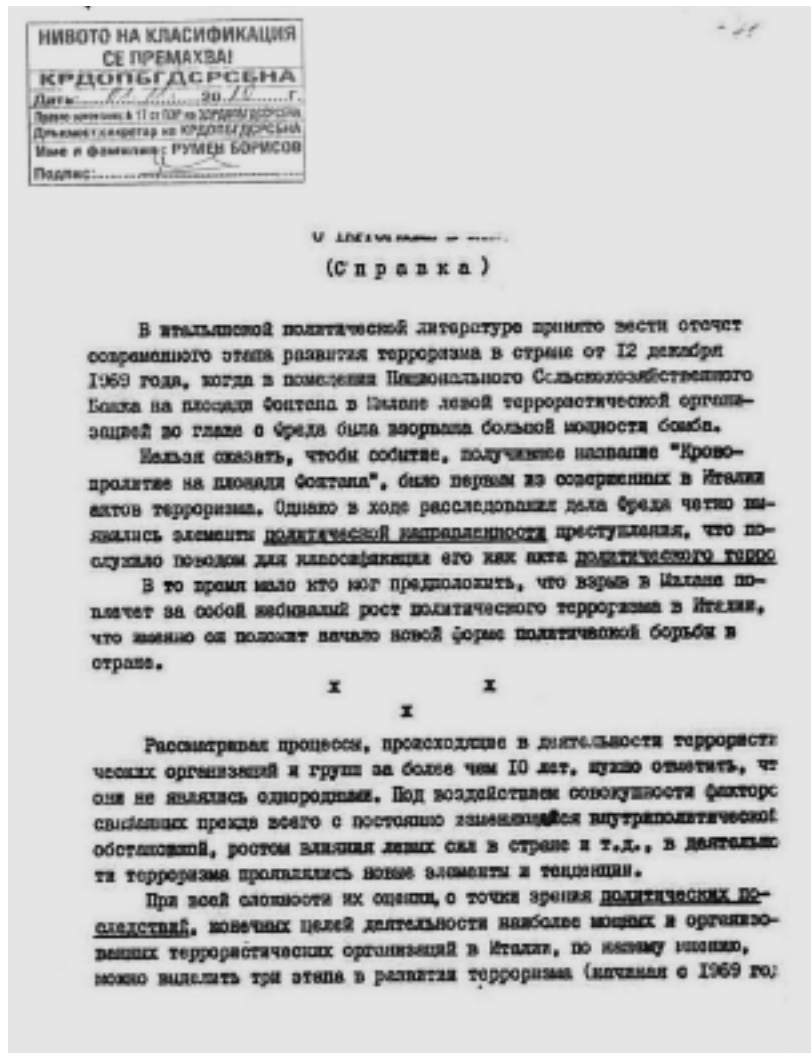
On February 25, 1968, he drove through Yugoslavia to Trieste, moving on to Rome where he applied for asylum at the U.S. Embassy. By Feb. 28 he was already in the United States. “We thought we had escaped to Moscow,” said a senior Czech officer who knew him, alluding to his anti-reformist political views.

After living in suburban Maryland outside Washington, D.C., Sejna told American conservative political analyst Michael A. Ledeen that he had information on a number of Italians who had been trained by the GRU, the Soviet military’s secret service. He mentioned the name Fabrizio Pelli. After informing then-Prime Minister of Francesco Cossiga of Sejna’s confessions, Ledeen went on to publish a series of articles published in the conservative Milan daily “Il Giornale.” According Sejna, terrorist Pelli had been trained at Douvov, Czech air force base, in 1966-67. Sejna comments were the subject of a SISMI report prepared in March 1982.

SID had long speculated about Pelli’s Czechoslovakia training. From April 1973 to May 1974 he was also believed to have worked at Radio Prague and “Rude Pravo,” the Czech Communist Party daily.

But a closer look at actual data would have overturned all the speculation. Pelli was born in Reggio Emilia on July 11, 1952. In 1966, he was 14; he turned 15 in 1967. Police and judicial probes revealed his biography in detail. He was student-worker who had a hard time holding a job and went into hiding for personal reasons. During the period when secret services suggested he was in Prague, he’d instead been in Italy mostly in northern cities, including Milan and Triveneto, particularly in Marghera. He didn’t speak a foreign language.

Sejna’s “revelations” had more to do with the circumstances in which the former Czech official found himself.



Though many Italian writers and journalists were convinced that the Soviet Union was behind Italian leftist terrorism, documentation suggests otherwise.

able to examine as-yet not-declassified documents regarding Italian terrorism.

Most of the documentation came from the interior ministry directorate. Some of the older documents included requests from Italian Embassy regarding the possibility of Italians operating in Czechoslovakia. Most were based on court instructions forwarded to the embassy via the Italian justice ministry. Other files collated general information from available sources and covered the movements of Czech intelligence, including agents in Rome.

These reports showed no ties whatever between the Red Brigades and Czech agents. Other reports specifically addressed the “anti-Czechoslovak campaign” that was perceived as having been set up by the Italian press. These dossiers were opened in the late 1970s following the Czech connection being mentioned in Italian newspapers and magazine. Not dossier suggested the slightest practical or operational link with the Red Brigades.

While some documents await declassification, so far there’s been no evidence whatever to suggest that either Czechoslovakia or Moscow had any direct role in the Italian terrorism. That hasn’t changed the tone of conspiracy theories, which persist to this day.

Bereft of any key role he might play in the United States, he refused to give up on the myth of his Communist existence. He began providing “information,” none of which anyone took particularly seriously. He said American World War II prisoners had been subjected to Soviet medical experiments. He said Moscow had taken the lead in a conspiracy to annihilate the West by submerging its citizens with narcotic drugs. His comments on the movement of Italian terrorists also belong to this fantasy genre fantasy.

In 2006, while in Prague along with several members of the Italian Center for the Study of Eastern Europe, I was

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