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## Mythmaking & the Aldo Moro case

*On the assassination of Aldo Moro & Italian conspiracy theories.*

After twenty years, the search continues for definitive explanations and ultimate meaning in the Aldo Moro murder case. The key leader during the 1960s and 1970s of Italy's regnant Christian Democratic party, Moro died in 1978 at the hands of the Red Brigades, a Marxist-Leninist terrorist group. They killed Moro fifty-five days after their spectacular kidnapping of him on the streets of Rome in an operation that left five security guards dead.

The Moro case has given rise to endless conspiracy theories, and, in trying to determine their real worth, the historian faces the perennial questions about evidence, logic, and interpretation in historical argument. The traditional approach to these questions, originating in Thucydides, called for a rigorous critical analysis of history based as much as possible on documented evidence. The primary philosophical source of opposition to traditional historiography is Marx, who wanted to change the world, not merely to understand history. Politics, therefore, has always strongly colored Marxist historiography, in its direct and indirect forms, from the late nineteenth century up through Foucault's notion that truth is relative to "regimes of power." Marxism and its offshoots have been enormously influential in Italy, and they remain so even after the demise of the Communist Party and the radical reduction of formal Communist culture. The pro-conspiracy reaction of the Italian Left to the Aldo Moro murder case illustrates the great extent to which our first loves leave their mark on us.

The question haunting Italy today is, Who allowed Moro to die what the novelist Leonardo Sciascia called that "vile death"?

Conspiracy theories in the Moro case involve the Italian government, the cia, Henry Kissinger, Mossad, the kgb, and numerous other entities and individuals either singly or in diverse combinations. Conspiracy theorists hold that the progressive Moro, who zealously worked to include the Communist Party in Italy's ruling coalition, was sacrificed on the altar of Cold War politics. In short, reactionaries on both sides of the Atlantic welcomed Moro's kidnapping as a godsend and, by refusing to negotiate for his release and failing to mount an effective police search, sent him to his doom. These traitorous individuals thereby accomplished their real objective during the fifty-five-day manhunt. The question haunting Italy today is, Who allowed

Moro to die what the novelist Leonardo Sciascia called that “vile death”?

Reporting on the huge popularity of such conspiracy theories in Italy, *The New York Times* earlier this year listed me, along with Giulio Andreotti and some former Red Brigade terrorists, as “the only prominent dissenters” from the conventional wisdom in Italy about “a dark conspiracy that remains veiled” in this notorious crime.<sup>1</sup> I qualified for their list because of my book, *The Aldo Moro Murder Case* (Harvard University Press, 1995), in which I downplay the conspiracy theories.

Andreotti, a former prime minister, is currently on trial for murder, and the Red Brigade terrorists are convicted murderers. They are not the most morally unproblematic allies one could wish for in a battle where virtually the rest of the country, according to *The New York Times*, is on the other side.

*The New York Times* exaggerated the one-sidedness of this battle. The reporter neglected to mention that among the dissenters are to be found all the judges in the five sets of concluded Moro trials. In the front rank of the most knowledgeable experts about this complex case, the judges disparage the conspiracy theories that hold the Italians in thrall, arguing that no evidence of any kind exists to support such interpretations of the Moro murder. In a letter to *The New York Times*, I pointed out this discrepant fact, but learned from an editorial assistant that the newspaper did not wish to publish a response “at this time.” The press had spoken.

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It seemed odd to me that *The New York Times* would have ignored the Moro trials. During four separate trips to Rome, where I did research in the judicial archives, I developed a deep respect for the professionalism as well as the physical and moral courage of the judges in the Moro case. For many years, they had to live under around-the-clock police security, all the while mindful that the Red Brigades had murdered numerous other judges for doing their duty. The Italian judicial system as a whole has been the target of severe criticism for its slowness, corruption, and politicization, but the judges in this case persevered in their work with extraordinary diligence. They made a valiant attempt to get at the truth.

On the basis of the evidence, the judges concluded that the Red Brigades, along with the much wider Marxist-Leninist revolutionary culture from which Red Brigadism came, bore responsibility for the Moro tragedy. They reasoned that failures by the police, however numerous and astonishing, could not be redefined as crimes without a more solid basis of fact than has yet been unearthed. While acknowledging the obvious—that Moro had powerful political enemies—the judges insisted that conspiracy theorists make too many assumptions about the efficacy of that enmity in the outcome of the police search. No evidence exists that conspiracies, if they occurred at all, had a bearing on Moro’s fate.

Unlike conspiracy theorists, the judges looked to the domain of verifiable reality. The voluminous court documents tell a story about the addiction of a generation to the revolutionary ideas of Marx, Lenin, Mao, and their popularizers in Italy, to which only Dostoyevsky or Conrad could do complete justice. In the words of one repentant terrorist, addiction to heroin would have been preferable. The documents show that Moro died because of these ideas, and they show nothing else. For Italian leftists, this was the wrong verdict because it pointed to the historic Marxist-Leninist culture they had shared with the Red Brigades as the real nemesis of Moro.

Red Brigadism had flourished in Italy, the judges in one trial concluded, because it had found “protection in diverse quarters that did not conceal their scandalous ‘contiguity.’” For all those under the beguiling spell of the revolutionary mystique, the prescriptions of Marx and Lenin transformed the most bestial acts of inhumanity into thrilling deeds on behalf of the proletariat. The Moro kidnapping was just such an act. It thrilled a motley assortment of left-wingers. Sympathizers brazenly cheered and toasted the Red Brigades for living the revolution. If only a few graduate students and their professors hold such beliefs, a modern society can still manage its proper business, but, in the view of the judges, Italy was proof of the inevitably disastrous effect that a deeply rooted Marxist-Leninist culture has on a civilized polity.

The findings of the judges have provoked reactions of disbelief and outrage, but their challenge to the disbelievers and the outraged to produce something besides conjectures heavy-laden with conspiracy about the government’s manifold failures to free Moro has gone unanswered.

To be sure, the dismal performance of the Italian police in their search for Moro has given conspiracy theorists plenty of ammunition. The police forgot to follow up important leads, they lost evidence, and they did not think to keep obvious suspects under surveillance. To produce a record as consistently egregious as this, conspiracy theorists argue, would require a conscious effort. By the law of averages, the police should have gotten something right at least, but failure or—as the word appears in the conspiracy literature—“failure” crowned every one of their efforts for fifty-five straight days. By and large, the Italian people have refused to believe that so much police power could have been employed over such a long period to achieve no crime-fighting purpose whatsoever unless by conspiratorial design.

Although two authors of the Left took the lead in advancing conspiracy theories in the Moro case—Leonardo Sciascia in *L'affare Moro* (1978) and Sergio Flamigni in *La tela del ragno* (“The Spider’s Web,” 1988)—it is not only the Left that resists the explanation of the judges. For example, Tina Anselmi, the Christian Democratic chairman of a parliamentary commission investigating Propaganda 2, claimed that this secret right-wing Masonic lodge probably undermined the search for Moro. P2 lodge members in the police and the secret services would have had the motive and the opportunity to betray Moro, whose progressive politics, particularly his opening to the hated and feared Communist party, they held in abhorrence. The Cold War tensions of Italy’s political situation in 1978 led Anselmi and the majority of the commission’s members to conclude that P2 would have welcomed Moro’s death. Many Italians from very different segments of the political

spectrum continue to think of the Moro case in terms of these secret powers.

The logic of the conspiracy theory in the Moro case possesses considerable force. It is reasonable to think, in the manner of Anselmi, that Moro might have been victimized in some way by anti-Communist elements inside and outside Italy. Government officials hostile to Moro might have attempted to sabotage efforts to free him, and with all the mistakes and oversights in the police search, about which many books have been written, the temptation to see the workings of a conspiracy is understandable.

The judges, too, have logic on their side, and this suggests that in order to understand the Moro case logic alone is not enough. It is logical to assume that there might have been foul play by the authorities, but it is just as logical to ascribe the missed leads, the lost evidence, and the maddening oversights to the poor professional preparation of the Italian police for a crime of this magnitude. As a point of logic, it is highly improbable to assume, as all the conspiracy theorists do, that the police could have saved Moro had they so desired. Expressly rebutting this assumption, one of the judges observed that the failures of the police in the Moro search were not in the least surprising. For the police to have succeeded in freeing Moro would have been the monstrous deviation from the norm that conspiracy buffs are claiming for the actual search. These logical arguments, therefore, cancel each other out as explanations of the Moro tragedy. We are left, as the pre-poststructuralist judges have insisted all along, with the actual evidence as our only reliable guide.

As a historian very much aware of a dominant tendency in the academy to view objective scholarship as a myth, I faced the same questions about evidence in writing my book. I came down on the side of the judges not because of their conclusions, but because of their Thucydidean methods of carefully sifting the evidence for the most reasonable interpretation.

**T**he autobiographical literature written by former Red Brigadists illuminates the insights of the judges about the central role of Marxist-Leninism in the Moro tragedy. To be a Red Brigadist at all meant subscribing to a Marxist-Leninist world view, as Patrizio Peci made clear in *Io l'infame* ("I the Infamous One," 1983). One of the organization's most feared killers, Peci recalled his motive for joining the Red Brigades: "It is obvious that one does not make such a choice if one does not believe completely in Communism, if one does not believe in the armed struggle as the only way to bring it about, if one does not believe in victory." The cause became everything for Peci, as it did for Alberto Franceschini, a co-founder of the Red Brigades. In *Mara, Renato, e io: storia dei fondatori delle Brigate Rosse* ("Mara, Renato, and I: The History of the Founders of the Red Brigades," 1988), he described his longing for Communism in its purest and most absolute form. Red Brigadism was born of this longing.

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**T**he kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro fell completely in line with revolutionary Communist tactics as the Red Brigades understood them. The man who actually killed Moro,

Mario Moretti, noted in *Brigate Rosse: una storia italiana* ("The Red Brigades: An Italian Story," 1994) that the terrorists thought of themselves as part of the tradition of "Communist revolution." They were not given to "theoretical rigidities" any more than Lenin was in 1917 with his use of Marxist doctrines. Nevertheless, they undertook the Moro operation and all their operations with the single-minded aim of accelerating the cause of revolution, exactly as Lenin had with his tactics. The two Communist journalists interviewing Moretti for *Brigate Rosse* tried to convince him that Red Brigadism had nothing to do with Marxist-Leninism, but he had little trouble disposing of their objections.

Another Red Brigade memoirist directly addressed the significance of the Left's efforts in general to distance itself from Red Brigadism through the promotion of conspiracy theories. In *Armi e bagagli: un diario dalle Brigate Rosse* ("Arms and Baggage: A Diary from the Red Brigades," 1987), Enrico Fenzi explained that the Left wanted to forget its own acceptance of the revolutionary premises from which Red Brigadism had evolved. According to this internationally acclaimed Dante scholar and former terrorist, the Left was always the first to depict terrorism as the natural spawn of plots on the Right and highly unrepresentative hallucinations on the Left. In fact, the so-called hallucinations of the Red Brigades reflected very widely held left-wing views in Italy.

The Left's strategy of subterfuge, in combination with legitimate doubts by many thoughtful people from all sectors of political opinion—including the members of the Moro family—has clouded the central issue in the Moro murder case: the Red Brigades, fanatically inspired by their Marxist-Leninist ideology, kidnapped and killed Aldo Moro in the hope of provoking a crisis that would produce the Communist society of their fantasies. This issue has held almost no interest for the Left in its analysis of the Moro case. As Fenzi makes plain, the Left, with nothing more really than political guess-work to show for its efforts, has been obsessed with the cia and its global network of minions. In their literature, it is assumed that the cia functions as a diabolically efficient organization, leaving no trace of its infernal machinations. The agency's numerous failures and scandals, however, oblige us to question this assumption.

In categorically ruling out any cia involvement in the Moro case, Moretti declared that the Communist Left had itself to blame for the stunning success of the Red Brigades. He described the Red Brigades as the most radical expression of a vast movement in Italy. It was the intention of the organization to remain small, "a nucleus," but for years their campaign against the Christian

Democrats met with widespread approval on the Communist Left. Without the broad support that the Red Brigades received from an immense network of backers, whose demonstrations and slogans confirmed the leaders' belief in the imminence of revolution, terrorism would have faded

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quickly in Italy. The Red Brigades would have been nothing more than an Italian version of the Weather Underground. Instead they killed and maimed for years, contributing mightily to Italy's dreadful record in the 1970s of having the highest incidence of terrorism in the industrialized world. Things changed drastically with Moro's death in 1978. Thereafter, many erstwhile sympathizers and well-wishers began to reinterpret their ideas about revolution and to invent a more acceptable past for themselves. Moretti's book exposes this campaign of mythmaking for what it is.

Similarly, though without drawing all the necessary conclusions, the article in *The New York Times* exposes the Left's dirty secret in the Aldo Moro murder case: "the generation of baby boomers who . . . at least for awhile sided with the Red Brigades are now middle-aged network executives and publishers who shape public opinion." The sober but devastating indictment by the judges of Italy's Marxist-Leninist culture did not please these opinion makers. To evade a moral indictment of their entire generation of left-wing revolutionaries and sympathizers, they have ignored the unwelcome evidence and testimony in the Moro case. Instead they favor government plots, which even in the up-to-date reporting of *The New York Times* retain their entirely unproven character. Until proof to the contrary turns up, the verdict of the judges, though intensely unpopular, will continue to withstand the scrutiny of every candid mind.

1. See "Agony Lingers, Twenty Years After the Moro Killing," by Alessandra Stanley in *The New York Times* (May 9, 1998).

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