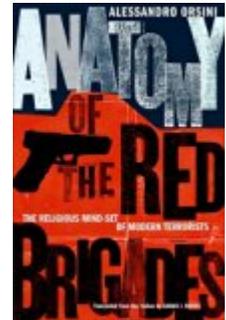




Alessandro Orsini. *Anatomy of the Red Brigades: The Religious Mind-Set of Modern Terrorists.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011. vi + 317 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-4986-4.



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Political violence shook modern Italian society during the *anni di piombo*, or Years of Lead (1969-83). Beginning in 1969, the left-wing *Brigate rosse* (Red Brigades) carried out numerous shootings, kidnappings, and assassinations of politicians, judges, professors, and civil servants. The Red Brigades' most notorious attack was the audacious kidnapping and assassination of former Italian prime minister Aldo Moro in 1978. In the same period, the *Brigate nere* (Black Brigades), composed of right-wing militants, organized their own bombings and assassinations against political and economic targets. Although the attacks tapered off in the 1980s, the trauma of this turbulent period continues to haunt Italian society. Italian politics arguably still reflects the deep divisions of the *anni di piombo*, and the historical memory of the violence has not yet been seriously examined.[1]

Alessandro Orsini's *Anatomy of the Red Brigades: The Religious Mind-Set of Modern Terrorists* proposes a new reading of the violence of the Red Brigades. The book was originally pub-

lished in Italian as *Anatomia delle Brigate rosse: Le radici ideologiche del terrorismo rivoluzionario* (2009). This English-language translation now introduces the Red Brigades and their ideology to broader audiences interested in political violence and terrorism.

The *Brigate rosse* seem to have formed in 1969 as militant members of the Partito Comunista d'Italia (Italian Communist Party, or PCI) broke with the party and founded their own underground groups dedicated to more radical political action and violence. Orsini declares that "the Italian Communist Party had a very evident 'pedagogical' responsibility in the genesis of the Red Brigades" (p. 129). This interpretation of a direct link between the PCI and the Red Brigades is controversial and will certainly be questioned by other scholars of political violence in modern Italy.

Although it is only briefly mentioned, the infamous Piazza Fontana bombing in Milan on December 12, 1969, permeates the entire book. Orsini dismisses the "strategy of tension" arguments that

see the violence of the Red Brigades as a reaction to anticommunist policies and right-wing militancy, arguing that the Red Brigades were already moving toward armed struggle. Orsini aligns himself with scholars and politicians who see communist (and sometimes socialist) political parties and groups as completely undifferentiated, part of a coherent and inherently violent ideological tradition.[2]

Orsini sets out to dissect the ideology of the Red Brigades, which he examines as a “revolutionary sect” (pp. 5-6). The *brigatisti* (Red Brigade members), he claims, were “professional revolutionaries” who aimed to purify Italian society and completely restructure its political system through a “gnostic revolution” (pp. 3-4). Although he mentions Marxist theory and its “material concept of history,” the author argues that the Red Brigades’ ideology relied on a sacralized “eschatological politics” that viewed modern society as suffering from social catastrophe and needing purificatory renewal (p. 27). For this reason, Orsini sees the mentality of the Red Brigades as characterized by an “apocalyptic vision of history” (p. 4).

Anatomy of the Red Brigades thus presents the Red Brigades’ attacks as a form of religious violence, rather than political terrorism. Orsini stresses the sectarian motivations of the brigatisti, the religious features of their organization, and the sacred dimensions of their violence. Using a religious approach to examine ideological violence could potentially be productive, but the book simply equates religion with ideology instead of incorporating methodologies from the field of religious violence studies.[3] The book thus misses opportunities to analyze religiously infused notions such as a “sacralization of politics” (p. 30), a “sacrificial gesture” (p. 32), an “obsession with purity” (p. 71), or an “armed utopia” (p. 85). The ritualistic use of “catechisms” (p. 52) and the performances of “political faith” (p. 62) suggest that religious dimensions may have indeed contributed to the Red Brigades’ militant

practices, but Orsini does not utilize René Girard’s concept of mimesis or Mark Juergensmeyer’s notion of performance violence to interpret them.[4]

The book’s analysis centers on the political pamphlets of the Red Brigades and the autobiographies of brigatisti such as Renato Curcio, Alessio Casimirri, Mario Moretti, Gianluca Codrini, Alberto Franceschini, Anna Laura Braghetti, and Adriana Faranda. The autobiography of former brigatista Petrizio Peci emerges as a particularly crucial source, revealing the dynamics of revolutionary education. The book interweaves biographical sketches of many of these brigatisti into its thematic chapters.

Rather than utilizing the methods of historians of mentalités or cultural historians to construct deep readings of these brigatisti texts, Orsini digresses into broad generalizations about all “professional revolutionaries.” The book could have developed analysis of precisely how brigatisti directly utilized the works of Karl Marx, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Antonio Gramsci, and other political theorists in their own writings, but fails to do so. Diverse writings by male and female members of the Red Brigades seem to offer opportunities for the consideration of gender issues such as masculine/feminine identities, emotional expressions, gendered “work” roles, and bodily metaphors.

Unfortunately, the book veers far off its intended course, wandering into a series of biographical summaries of the “predecessors” of the Red Brigades from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries (p. 155). In chapters 5 and 6, Orsini portrays Thomas Müntzer, John of Leiden, Oliver Cromwell, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Maximilien Robespierre, François-Noël Babeuf, Karl Marx, Alexander Herzen, Mikhail Bakunin, Nikolay Chernyshevsky, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, Hou Yuon, and Pol Pot as revolutionaries who all intended to “purify” the world using similar approaches. The author claims that all of these revolutionaries can be considered as

members of a single “politico-religious tradition” that he calls “revolutionary gnosticism” (p. 155). He characterizes Lenin as “the greatest purifier of the world known to history,” since the Russian Revolution allowed him to succeed in implementing his purificatory program and providing an example for later communists worldwide. The Red Brigades are barely even mentioned in these two long and disjointed chapters, which distract from building an understanding of the ideology of the brigatisti.

Anatomy of the Red Brigades adopts a completely ahistorical approach in dealing with these supposed precedents for brigatisti violence. The selection of revolutionary groups as precedents includes extremely disparate revolutionaries, but ignores other twentieth-century Italian revolutionary groups such as Italian brigades in the Spanish Civil War and Italian Resistance fighters during the Second World War. Orsini simplistically declares that “There is no difference between the Weltanschauung of Robespierre, Babeuf, Buonarroti [sic], Marx, Lenin, Gramsci, Che Guevara, Stalin, Mao, or Pol Pot and that of Renato Curcio, Mara Cagol, or Mario Moretti. All of them are the ‘purifiers of the world’” (p. 255). This highly questionable ahistoricism prevents an understanding of the specific aspects of the Red Brigades’ motivations, goals, organization, and tactics.

The choice of treating the Red Brigades as a “revolutionary sect” prevents the consideration of alternative forms of organized violence that the brigatisti may have employed. The Red Brigades have often been analyzed as terrorist cells, but the comparative histories of terrorism is not considered here.[5] Alternatively, Orsini could have considered the Red Brigades as military systems, and indeed he briefly notes that “rather than a political group the Red Brigades have the look of a military organization” (p. 55). This insight is not developed using studies of guerilla warfare, counterinsurgency, and combat motivation theory,

however.[6] Surprisingly missing from the book are comparative studies of political mobilization, civil conflict, and comparative revolutions in the author’s own field of political sociology.[7]

The author prefers to range casually through diverse psychologists, sociologists, and political theorists’ works, without ever really applying a coherent methodology. He mixes concepts freely from theorists and scholars as diverse as Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, William F. Ogburn, Arnold J. Toynbee, Ted R. Gurr, Norbert Elias, and Mircea Eliade. The result is methodological confusion, as the book introduces a number of terms and categories without effective definition and theorization.

Orsini almost completely ignores the right-wing Brigade nere (Black Brigades), such as the Squadre d’Azione Mussolini, even though they were active in Italy in the same period. The book does employ an appendix to compare the Black Brigades and Red Brigades’ revolutionary violence. The appendix curiously presents the Black Brigades as fellow professional revolutionaries who also strove for purification of the world using strikingly similar methods of violence, with the aim of constructing their own utopias. Orsini thus confusingly argues that the Black Brigades were nearly identical to the Red Brigades, despite their radically different ideological roots.

This exposes the central flaw of the book: if Marxist ideology produced the Red Brigades, how can a diametrically opposed ideology produce a similar armed movement? Apparently, Orsini’s answer is that the Red Brigades and Black Brigades were both professional revolutionaries steeped in “revolutionary gnosticism,” but this undermines his notion of a prolonged lineage of supposed predecessors for the Red Brigades. The analysis relies on a fundamentally problematic notion of ideology that equates political violence with religious violence.

This reader had hoped that *Anatomy of the Red Brigades* might be suitable for classroom

adoption in courses on comparative political violence, civil conflict, and terrorism. However, a chronology, a series of biographical sketches, and a brief narrative of the major events of the anni di piombo are needed to help students and readers unfamiliar with contemporary Italian history. These omissions, coupled with the book's controversial approach to political violence, unfortunately limits its usefulness for English-language students and readers.

Notes

[1]. For an initial exploration of the historical memory of the Brigate rosse through film, see Alan O'Leary, "Italian Cinema and the 'Anni di Piombo,'" *Journal of European Studies* 40, no. 3 (2010): 243-257.

[2]. On communist ideology as inherently violent, see Richard Pipes, *Communism: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2001); Stéphane Courtois and Rémi Kauffer, *Le Livre noir du communisme. Crimes, terreurs et répression* (Paris: R. Laffont, 1997); and R. J. Rummel, *Death by Government* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994). For an assessment of such approaches, see Mark Mazower, "Violence and the State in the Twentieth Century," *American Historical Review* 107 (October 2002): 1158-1178.

[3]. Anthropological and historical works by René Girard, Natalie Zemon Davis, Mark Juergensmeyer, R. Scott Appleby, Bruce Lincoln, Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, Venna Das, and other scholars of religious violence and sectarian conflict could have strengthened this attempt to explore religious aspects of the Red Brigades' violence.

[4]. Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

[5]. Randall Law, *Terrorism: A History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009); Juergensmeyer, *Terror*

in the Mind of God; Gérard Chaliand et al., *The History of Terrorism: From Antiquity to Al Qaeda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Charles Tilly, "Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists," in "Theories of Terrorism: A Symposium," *Sociological Theory* 22, no. 1 (March 2004): 5-13.

[6]. On guerrilla war and counterinsurgency, see: John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Ian F. W. Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies: Guerillas and Their Opponents since 1750* (London: Routledge, 2001); Edward E. Rice, *Wars of the Third Kind: Conflict in Underdeveloped Countries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); and Robert Asprey, *War in the Shadows* (New York: Doubleday, 1975). On combat motivation theory, see James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Anthony Kellett, *Combat Motivation: The Behavior of Soldiers in Battle* (Boston: Kluwer-Nijhoff, 1982); John Ellis, *The Sharp End: The Fighting Man in World War II* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1980); and John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Viking Press, 1976).

[7]. Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Charles Tilly, *European Revolutions, 1492-1992* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); James B. Rule, *Theories of Civil Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Relations: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1978).

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