



Nunzio Pernicone, Fraser M. Ottanelli. *Assassins against the Old Order: Italian Anarchist Violence in Fin de Siecle Europe.* Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2018. 232 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-08353-2.

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Nineteenth-Century Anarchist Violence

When Nunzio Pernicone, the foremost American historian of Italian anarchism, passed away in 2013, he left behind an almost-finished manuscript on the history of Italian anarchist violence in the era of “propaganda of the deed.” Pernicone asked his friend and colleague, Fraser Ottanelli, to see the project through to completion, which entailed editing down an eighteen-chapter manuscript of over 700 pages down to a manageable seven chapters and 182 pages (plus notes). Ottanelli is to be commended for the care with which he undertook this daunting task, the result of which is the best study of anarchist political violence in English—and perhaps any other language, as well.

Between 1890 and 1900, Italian-born anarchists killed President Sadi Carnot of France (1894), Prime Minister Antonio Cánovas del Castillo of Spain (1897), Empress Elizabeth of Austria (1898), and King Umberto of Italy (1900). Two also made earlier failed attempts on the life of King Umberto (1897), as well against Prime Minister Francesco Crispi of Italy (1894). These six incidents, and the individuals who carried them out, are the main focus of this book, but they are each carefully placed within their proper historical and transnational contexts. The result is a compelling call to reinterpret both the individual acts and their historical roots.

The authors forcefully reject the notion that anarchist violence was a direct outgrowth of anarchist ideology, particularly in the Italian case. Instead, they place

Italian anarchist assassinations squarely within the Italian revolutionary tradition of Mazzini, Garibaldi, and the Risorgimento—a tradition that already advocated armed insurrection, bombings, and tyrannicide long before anarchism arrived on the scene. “That political violence was an integral feature of the Italian Risorgimento,” they remind the reader, “is an incontestable fact” (p. 8). If anything, they argue, anarchist thinkers like Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin “actually served to moderate and even restrain the violence committed by Italian anarchists” (p. 17). Moreover, propaganda by itself was never enough to precipitate actions; as Pernicone and Ottanelli point out, the Italian anarchist press was rife with calls for revolutionary violence throughout the 1880s, a decade in which Italy was devoid of almost any such acts. What changed in the 1890s, they argue, was the fierce repression of radicalism under Francesco Crispi, which in turn sparked retaliatory acts. In other words, context was more important than ideology.

Assassins against the Old Order also analyzes the different forms and motivations of anarchist political violence, which are too often lumped together under the categories of “propaganda of the deed” or “terrorism.” In the process, it charts the clearest and most nuanced account of “propaganda of the deed” yet written. “Propaganda of the deed” (a term that itself originates of the writings of Risorgimento revolutionary Carlo Pisacane) was first used by Italian anarchists to refer to “small-

scale guerilla warfare” (p. 23) in the form of armed insurrections intended to spark general uprisings. And although “insurrectionary deed had failed to generate a flicker of response from the class it was intended to influence” (i.e., the Italian peasantry, p. 24), its proponents, including Errico Malatesta, continued to promote organized insurrectionary activity well into the twentieth century. It was only in the 1880s that “propaganda of the deed” came to denote individual acts of revolutionary violence, and in Italy this new interpretation was embraced by the “anti-organizationists” (*anti-organizzatori*), who had “delusional notions about its effectiveness” (p. 35). Yet anarchist violence was not yet synonymous with assassinations; instead, the most common form of it took in Italy in the 1890s was bombings “directed at buildings as symbols” rather than at people (p. 54). In fact, it is questionable whether these acts should be classified as “propaganda of the deed” at all; as the authors note, “Devoid of the illusion that the killing of scores of innocents would weaken and destabilize capitalist society, the Italian anarchists in the 1890s utilized explosives principally as a means of retaliation, as extreme measures of protest and resistance against authoritarian and repressive government” (p. 56).

Nor were most of the assassinations that Italian anarchists carried out intended to ignite a revolution. Most were instead, like the bombings, acts of “retributive anarchist justice” (p. 115) targeting state officials directly complicit in violence against workers and radicals. As the authors repeatedly note, this anarchist violence, while certainly extralegal, bears little resemblance to “terrorism” as it is commonly understood. (They could also have noted that they do not even conform to most definitions of “propaganda of the deed.”) Instead, “by virtue of targeting only high personages considered guilty of crimes, the assassinations and failed attempts

were acts of tyrannicide, a form of political violence that enjoyed a long and honored tradition in Italy” (p. 181). The only outlier to this pattern is Luigi Lucheni, the assassin of Empress Elizabeth, who was a peripheral figure in anarchist circles and demonstrated little understanding of its basic tenets beyond a hatred of elites, and “had become fixated with assassinating a high personage so that his deed would be featured in the newspapers and bestow permanent notoriety upon him” (p. 118).

The book does not allot equal space to each of its assailants. It deals with Lucheni, Pietro Acciarito, and Michele Angiolillo all within a single chapter, whereas Gaetano Bresci, who returned to Italy from Paterson, New Jersey, in 1900 to kill King Umberto, is the subject of two full chapters covering both Bresci’s life and the international aftermath of his act. Here the authors’ meticulous research really shines, as they refute a number of false and unfounded claims that continue to surround Umberto’s assassin and attempt to link him (without evidence) to a wider conspiracy. Rather, the authors argue, the only likely conspiracy appears to involve Bresci’s suspicious “suicide” in Santo Sefano prison, which may have been ordered by Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti in response to a rumored plan to break Bresci out of jail.

Ultimately, this is a book that seeks to understand political violence and those who carried it out. This is a welcome departure in an area where so much is simply labeled “terrorism” and so little analysis has been done of the actual influences, motives, and contexts of the perpetrators. Although it is unfortunate that the book never connects the violence of the 1890s to that of Italian anarchists in the United States in the 1910s or in Italy under Mussolini (who was the target of several world-be anarchist assassins), *Assassins against the Old Order* will nevertheless rightfully stand as the definitive study of nineteenth-century anarchist violence.

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