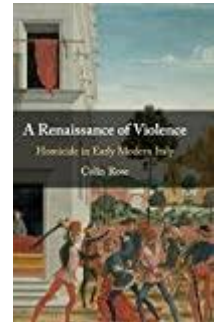




**Colin Rose.** *A Renaissance of Violence: Homicide in Early Modern Italy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 264 pp. \$30.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-108-72692-4.



**Reviewed by** Brian Sandberg (Institut d'Études Avancées de Paris and Northern Illinois University)

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**Commissioned by** Peter Sposato (Indiana University Kokomo)

One of the most brazen murders in Bologna's history occurred on September 8, 1652, when Giacinto Pungelli, a *sotto-auditore* (assistant judge) in the Tribunale del Torrione (Tribunal of the Tower), was gunned down as he left the church of the Celestine Convent following mass. The judges and notaries of the Tribunale del Torrione conducted an extensive investigation of this assassination of one of their own, interrogating ninety-seven witnesses and uncovering a conspiracy and a long-simmering vendetta. The trial records reveal that "Pungelli's death was a flagrant attack on court authority, but it occurred in the context of partisan rivalry and anti-papal feeling" (p. 185).

*A Renaissance of Violence* constructs an institutional history of the Tribunale del Torrione, a criminal court established by the Papal States to prosecute homicides and other serious crimes in the city and province of Bologna. The papal government in Bologna instituted judicial reforms to centralize criminal justice and empower the Torrione court. The book relies on Weberian theories

of state development—and particularly on the concept of a monopoly on legitimate violence—to interpret the court's attempts to centralize criminal justice. The court employed an inquisitorial judicial procedure to conduct investigations, which were normally instigated by judges and notaries after receiving denunciations. The Tribunale del Torrione could issue death sentences, galley service punishments, and banishments, yet the judges normally stressed conflict resolution through peace accords and pardons.

Colin Rose exploits the criminal trial records of the Tribunale del Torrione, conserved in the Archivio di Stato di Bologna. The book utilizes a quantitative approach to criminal justice, examining data from 701 criminal investigations and/or trials conducted by the Tribunale del Torrione during the seventeenth century. Rose samples the murders for each decennial year during the seventeenth century, allowing an analysis of fluctuations in homicidal violence. He assesses the monthly rhythms of violence, as Carnival revelries, tournaments, festivities, and agricultural

labor patterns produced periodic spikes in murders. These monthly rhythms changed over the course of the century as war, epidemic disease, and famine strained Bolognese society. The trial records allow Rose to track the murder weapons employed and reconstruct the social relationships between homicide victims and perpetrators. The statistics demonstrate contrasts between the homicide rates in urban and rural areas. The book also documents the number of executions carried out by the Tribunale del Torrione by decade, demonstrating the court's relatively limited use of capital punishment.

Despite the book's focus on the Tribunale del Torrione and its records, the many homicide cases testify to the court's failure to prevent violence in Bolognese society. Rose constructs a typology of homicide to categorize murders in early modern Bologna and assess patterns of violence. Studying homicide rates reveals multiple ways in which the Tribunale del Torrione failed to restrain violence in Bolognese society. For example, "when it sought to curb the violence of regional elites, the criminal court of Bologna became party to the revival of vendetta violence between urban nobles seeking the reestablishment of feudal privileges in their rural lands" (p. 3).

Rose's approach to interpreting homicide in Bologna builds on histories of crime and violence in early modern Europe by Pieter Spierenburg and other scholars, who have argued for a progressive development of social controls to restrain violence.[1] The book devotes considerable attention to reexamining Spierenburg's findings and refuting Norbert Elias's influential, but outdated, theory of a "civilizing process" (pp. 18-20).[2] Rose rightfully dismisses Steven Pinker's "rosy view of an inexorable decline in violence across time" (p. 3n6). The book responds to more nuanced studies of crime, murder, execution in early modern Italy by Trevor Dean, Gregory Hanlon, Thomas Cohen, Elizabeth Cohen, and Nicholas Terpstra.[3]

The book offers fascinating glimpses of gendered dimensions of homicide, emphasizing that the vast majority of murders resulted from male-on-male violence. Many men also killed women, as domestic violence and sexual assault contributed to murders of wives, lovers, and prostitutes. The author comments that "Bologna's society modelled an Abrahamic patriarchy" that condoned wife-beating (p. 145). Some women fought back and a few of them even killed their husbands or male relatives. The book does not elaborate a conception of patriarchy, but it does question the trope of the "poisoning wife" (p. 149). Rose notes that during investigations of women who had allegedly killed their husbands, "their trials show court notaries pursuing stereotyped lines of questioning that were often contradicted by the atypical actions of the accused" (p. 155). Developing close analysis of such interrogations might produce more compelling evidence of gendered violence.

The outbreak of bubonic plague in 1630-31 in northern Italy seems to have had an enormous impact on Bolognese society. The papal legate of Bologna took efforts to combat the plague, instituting travel restrictions, trade embargoes, and quarantines. Nonetheless, the plague killed thousands of Bologna's inhabitants, causing significant social disruption and increased violence—which was reflected in higher homicide rates. Rose finds that the court experienced a serious crisis of legitimacy during this period, stressing "the inability of central authorities such as the *Torrione* to assert their legitimacy both during and after the plague" (p. 180).

Urban violence exploded in the aftermath of the plague, as demonstrated by rising homicide rates. Young men fought and brawled in the streets and piazzas of Bologna, especially during festivals. Artisans and students participated in crowd violence, which could turn deadly. Clients and servants in nobles' entourages confronted each other over precedence disputes, insults, and

challenges. Nighttime fights broke out in and around the city's *osterie*, taverns, and brothels.

Rural violence also worsened throughout the province of Bologna in the mid-seventeenth century. Disputes over land ownership, field boundaries, grain supplies, pasturing, sharecropping, and farm labor fueled murders in the Bolognese countryside. Petty vendors and smugglers quarreled over goods and debts. Deadly fights broke out over card games, *bocci* games, gambling, and tavern arguments. Bandits and deserters waylaid travelers, robbing them and often killing them. Bolognese nobles defended their seigniorial privileges and asserted their power over peasants and artisans in rural communities. Nobles organized armed companies to confront their rivals or ambush them in small towns and villages.

Nobles and their clienteles were responsible for much of the murderous violence in early modern Bologna. Powerful noble families such as the Aquilini, Ariosto, Barbazza, Balducci, Bevilacqua, Colonna, de' Grassi, Grimani, Grotti, Landini, Malvezzi, Paleotti, Pepoli, Ruina, Sandovali, and Zambeccari appear in the trial records. Unfortunately, we never get a clear sense of these nobles' clienteles and the ways in which their political agendas drove armed violence. Rose frequently refers to noble "factions" and "factionalism," suggesting that "much of the troubled history of the seventeenth century in Bologna had its roots in the violent factionalism that characterized the medieval commune and oligarchy" (p. 9). The book does not really develop an analysis of noble political dynamics and their relationship to violence, however.

Rose characterizes the Pungelli assassination (discussed above) as part of a conflict that "should be considered a low-level civil war fought in Bologna from approximately 1630 to the 1660s" (p. 185). This case invites comparisons with the murder of Pierre Baillet, *président* (presiding judge) in the parlement de Dijon, the subject of James Farr's microhistory, *A Tale of Two Murders*.

[4] According to Rose, "the best way to describe the quantity and quality of violence in the city and province of Bologna in the judicial records of 1652 and 1660 is as a civil war in which the factions were not always clear, loyalties shifted within and among elite families, and the legatine government was left largely unable to control order within Bologna" (p. 220). The causes, course, and dynamics of this civil conflict are unclear, however. The book alternates between locating the origins of the civil violence in the 1630s or the 1650s, but sometimes implies that the conflict had much deeper roots, dating from the 1506 papal conquest of Bologna.

The book contributes exciting new findings on violence and peacemaking by focusing on the papal government's attempts to limit civil violence and prevent revenge killings in Bologna. The papal legates attempted to control violence through firearms regulations, restrictions on carrying daggers and concealed blades, and bans on assemblies of armed groups. The *sbirri* (constables) who carried out arrests of alleged murderers figure significantly in many of the murder cases. Meanwhile, the Tribunale del Torrione often forged peace pacts to resolve criminal investigations. Rose emphasizes that "of the 701 homicide trials collected in this sample, at least 212 were settled with a notarized peace accord granted by the victim's kin to his killer, which brought the process to a conclusion and commuted the killer's sentence of banishment, galley service or death to pardon, and a return home to his community" (p. 55). Rose draws on other studies of "cultures of peacemaking" to assess the peace pacts in Bologna (p. 24).

Rose's analysis of trial records demonstrates that the peacemaking efforts of the Torrione judges often produced unsatisfactory results. Many murderers fled as exiles and refused to enter into peace accords. Some Bolognese nobles and urban elites seem to have been willing to harbor bandits, undermining peace pacts. Exiled nobles and their followers could return to carry out vendettas, as

when an armed group that included several exiled nobles ambushed Paris Maria de' Grassi in a shocking midnight attack outside the church of San Martino in 1652. Rose argues that "killings that broke official peace accords provide acute evidence that revenge killings in 1632 demonstrated a breakdown of centralized judicial order" (p. 175). The "targeted killing" of Don Antonio Maria Marcolini, a priest in Castel Bolognese, in 1640, stemmed from the breakdown of a previous peace pact between the Balducci and Marolini families and their allies. Rose characterizes this assassination as "an episode of noble revenge-as-politics," arguing that it was part of a "civil war" in the province of Bologna in the mid-seventeenth century (p. 212). Rose suggests that "the continued antagonism among republican, oligarchic, and papal factions within the city's elite destroyed the city's thin atmosphere of social trust" (p. 228). Unfortunately, we never get a sense of the dynamics of this civil conflict or of the noble "factions" who were engaged in the fighting.

The book could have developed a broader approach to violence studies and the history of civil conflict. Rose draws on studies of social violence, dueling, and vendetta by Robert Davis, Stuart Carroll, and Edward Muir but could have usefully explored the interrelationships between dueling, feuding, vendetta, assassination, noble revolt, and civil war.[5] The book employs the concept of honor but never develops a rigorous analysis of the honor cultures in Bologna. Instead, the book alludes to anthropological models of pan-Mediterranean honor and shame that have been heavily criticized. The trial records reveal an astonishing number of ambushes, shootouts, and skirmishes involving firearms—which were employed by both nobles and commoners. Planned attacks often occurred outside of churches, coordinated around the timing of masses and provoking scandal in the community. These ambushes suggest an organization of armed violence markedly different from the dueling and vendetta practices often associated with early modern noble culture. The

dynamics of gunfights and the culture of firearms that fueled them could have been examined as episodes of political violence and civil conflict rather than simply as resulting from a breakdown of "societal trust" (p. 157).

In the end, the motives for all this violence remain unclear. Rose argues that "in cultures of violence such as the warrior nobility of early modern Italy, violence did not necessarily need to achieve any pragmatic goals, and the language of anger, honor and dissatisfaction that early modern violence communicated was as valuable an end as any practical achievement" (p. 226). Rose claims that his methodology relies on "qualitative analysis of a nominal body count of homicides in Bologna across the seventeenth century" (p. 227). Yet the book seems to rely primarily on quantitative analysis of homicide rates, murder sites, murder weapons, and execution rates. The book could have developed much more textual analysis of the rich trial records. Close analysis of the language of the judges and witnesses from the trial records, contextualized with correspondence and other archival sources, might yield a fuller understanding of the dynamics of the violence and civil conflict that produced the dead bodies littering Bologna's piazzas, streets, and highways.

#### Notes

[1]. Pieter Spierenberg, *Violence and Punishment: Civilizing the Body through Time* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), and *A History of Murder: Personal Violence in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008).

[2]. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), originally published as *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, 2 vols. (Basel: Haus zum Falken, 1939); Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), originally published as *Die höfische Gesellschaft* (Darmstadt: Hermann Luchterhand Verlag, 1969).

[3]. Trevor Dean, *Crime and Justice in Late Medieval Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 2007); Gregory Hanlon, *Human Nature in Rural Tuscany: An Early Modern History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Thomas V. Cohen, *Love and Death in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Elizabeth Cohen, "Honor and Gender in the Streets of Early Modern Rome," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 22, no. 4 (April 1992): 597-625; Nicholas Terpstra, ed., *The Art of Executing Well: Rituals of Execution in Early Modern Italy* (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2008).

[4]. James R. Farr, *A Tale of Two Murders: Passion and Power in Seventeenth-Century France* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

[5]. Stuart Carroll, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Robert C. Davis, *The War of the Fists: Popular Culture and Public Violence in Late Renaissance Venice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Edward Muir, *Mad Blood Stirring: Vendetta and Factions in Friuli during the Renaissance* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

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