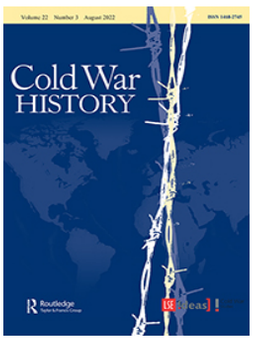

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Il 'lodo Moro': terrorismo e ragion di stato, 1969–1986 [The 'lodo Moro': terrorism and reason of state, 1969–1986]

Valentine Lomellini, (Bari-Roma: Laterza, 2021), xii + 210 pp.

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BOOK REVIEW

Valentine Lomellini, ***Il 'lodo Moro': terrorismo e ragion di stato, 1969–1986* [The 'lodo Moro': terrorism and reason of state, 1969–1986]** (Bari-Roma: Laterza, 2021), xii + 210 pp.

Cold War Italy was a land of mysteries. There are still blind spots in our knowledge of the deadly bombings that were part of the right-wing 'strategy of tension' in the 1960s and 1970s. Commentators continue to debate aspects of the kidnapping and murder of Christian Democratic grandee Aldo Moro in 1978, and the reasons for the destruction of an Italian civil airliner with 81 people aboard near the island of Ustica in June 1980.[1] Only recently have magistrates identified with some degree of certainty the *mandanti* – the behind-the-scenes sponsors – of the Bologna train station bombing that killed 85 in August 1980.

In this absorbing multi-archival study, Valentine Lomellini seeks to resolve another persistent mystery in the history of Cold War Italy: as foreign minister in the 1970s, did Moro arrange a secret *'lodo'* (a deal implying a pay-off of some kind) with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and/or other Palestinian nationalist groups, to spare Italy from attacks? As she points out, Moro was a member of the progressive wing of the Christian Democratic Party (DC) which saw Italy as a bridge between the West and the developing world and looked sympathetically on Palestinian nationalism. Lomellini places the Italian attitude towards the sharp escalation of attacks in the early 1970s – accompanied by (and connected to) internecine conflict within the Palestinian resistance – in the broader European context. She examines European states' deals to allow terrorists to depart to Gaddafi's Libya, or other Arab destinations, in return for the release of hostages. An important case in point was the Austrian government's September 1973 deal with terrorists who had taken control of a train carrying Soviet Jewish emigrants.

Lomellini begins her careful reconstruction of Italian events the same month, detailing an operation conducted by SID (Servizio informazioni difesa, Italian military intelligence) and Mossad that led to the arrest of five men (a Lebanese, an Algerian, a Syrian, an Iraqi, and a Libyan) planning to use Soviet-made missiles to shoot down an Israeli plane departing from Rome's Fiumicino airport. When the Black September organisation threatened Italy with severe consequences if the five were not released, the Italian government secretly requested Libyan intercession, extending the deadline. In October, Italian diplomats in Cairo met with an official PLO representative who offered a deal whereby Italy would be spared from attacks if it allowed the PLO to take custody of the five and try them. Although the evidence provided by Lomellini is incomplete and circumstantial, it is at this point that Moro and his colleagues appear to have made a key decision: to rely on Libya rather than the PLO. Despite its suspicions of Libyan complicity with the five (one of whom was a Libyan national) and its efforts to promote the fortunes of the moderate elements of Al Fatah within the PLO, the Italian government recognised that the PLO was unable to control extremist groups like Black September and thus could not be counted on to honour an agreement. By the end of October, two of the five (including the Libyan) were released from custody and flown on a SID plane to Tripoli whilst the remaining three were tried and then later released in February 1974.

[1]A consensus has emerged that the unfortunate plane was likely hit by a missile fired by a French or US warplane, intended for a Libyan aircraft.

The metaphorical ink on Italy's understanding with Tripoli (the exact nature of which is unknown) was hardly dry on 17 December 1973 when two teams of Arab terrorists attacked a PanAm airliner on the tarmac at Fiumicino, killing 30 people. A Lufthansa liner with hostages aboard was flown to Damascus, then Kuwait, where the hostages were released, and the hijackers taken – temporarily – into custody. The attack was the handiwork of the Libya-based Al Fatah dissident, Abd-Al-Ghafur, in collaboration with the Fatah representative in Iraq, and rising star among Palestinian extremists, Abu Nidal. According to Lomellini, it is impossible to determine the exact degree of Libyan involvement in the massacre, but the evidence was damning, and subsequent Italian policy was based on the assumption of Libyan complicity. However, Italy's subsequent policy was – effectively – to double down on the Libyan connection. The *lodo*, which she argues should be seen as a broadly supported and dynamic process, rather than a single, signed and sealed agreement, now entered its classic phase.

But why did Italy choose to cement this relationship following the December PanAm attack? Much had changed between September 1973 and February 1974, when Italy rolled out the red carpet for the visit of Libyan prime minister Abdessalam Ahmed Jallud. The quadrupling of oil prices following the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War had disrupted the Italian economy and balance of payments. Italy, like other Western countries, eschewed the United States' calls for a consumer cartel to roll back prices and scrambled to cut bilateral deals with oil producers. By the same token, Libya was eager to buy more arms and other manufactured goods from Italy and to increase Italian investment in its petrochemical industry. Iraq became another target of Italian diplomacy, and the two parties signed a 10-year technical and economic cooperation agreement in July 1974.

Lomellini's book recounts a fascinating story. Nevertheless – and probably inevitably – it leaves a number of questions unanswered. It argues, for example, that the Libyan partnership 'functioned very efficiently' in 1974 and that 'there was no longer a "security dilemma" because thanks to the "*lodi*", both national and economic security were guaranteed' (p. 90). But if Italy was spared major terrorist incidents for several years, was this necessarily a consequence of closer relations with Libya? One could presume that it was, but since there seems to have been no explicit undertaking by Libya to prevent any attacks, the period of tranquillity may have been due to other factors. Moreover, if there were an implicit Libyan pledge to not target Italy, it did not include a strict respect for Italian sovereignty. Lomellini cites a March 1976 incident in which three Libyans, armed with pistols and a hand grenade, were arrested at Fiumicino airport, interrupting their plot to kill a former Libyan foreign minister (now a regime opponent) who was in transit at the airport at the time. The highest levels of the Italian government quietly arranged for the three to receive presidential pardons, closing the case. In another instance, the Italian government declined to request the extradition of a Libyan imprisoned in France following his arrest for a political murder committed in Milan. Undoubtedly, as she argues, there was a degree of Italian toleration for Libyan attempts to eliminate regime opponents on Italian soil, but she also refers (p. 104) to cases where Libyan assassins received long prison sentences in Italy. If there were indeed an Italian-Libyan 'lodo', it seems to have been open to considerable interpretation by both sides.

More importantly, the reader would like a clearer explanation of Italy's renewed vulnerability to international terrorism in the early 1980s. In October 1982, five militants affiliated with Abu Nidal attacked a synagogue in Rome, killing a two-year-old child and wounding 30 people. In October 1985, militants affiliated with the Palestinian Liberation Front (PLF) hijacked the Italian cruise ship *Achille Lauro*, provoking a complex set of negotiations during which a US passenger was killed. Finally, in December 1985, gunmen connected to Abu Nidal opened fire on the El Al ticket counter inside Fiumicino airport, killing 16 and wounding 99.

According to Lomellini, 'The increase in violence was due, in all probability, to the emergence of Syria as a state-sponsor of the Abu Nidal group' (p. 111). But her own account suggests that Libya's role in the airport attack was likely equally important. Italian foreign minister Giulio Andreotti was keen to minimise Tripoli's involvement, but Prime Minister Bettino Craxi admitted to a US official that Libya had supplied financial and logistical backing to the Abu Nidal group. Both the CIA and Italian military intelligence (now known as SISMI) believed Libya was involved in the attack.

But why had Gadaffi –who praised the 'heroic operation' at Fiumicino, assisted militants in attacking his Italian friends? Could it have had something to do with the sharply escalating tensions between Libya and Italy's US ally? Regardless of the answer, even before the US bombing of Tripoli in April 1986, the Italian-Libyan *lodo* was in tatters. As the author shows, some Italian officials were eager to try to minimise the damage, but it is misleading to suggest that nothing had really changed since 1974 (p. 120). On 14 April 1986, Rome agreed to a European Community embargo on arms sales to Libya. Later the same month, it expelled 10 Libyan diplomats and officials, including the local representative of the Libyan Arab Foreign Investment Company (LAFICO). A LAFICO employee was arrested as part of an investigation into Libyan financing of terrorism. It had been through LAFICO that Libya had purchased a 10% stake in the Fiat automobile company in 1976. If anybody could tell how the wind had shifted by early 1986, it was the Agnelli family, owners of a controlling share of Fiat. With Italian government encouragement, they bought back the shares held by LAFICO, a transaction completed in September 1986.

To conclude, Lomellini has done impressive spade work in Italian, French, British, US, and German sources. Students of Cold War history will find the story rather peripheral to the main axes of East-West conflict. But she makes an important contribution to our understanding of Italian foreign relations, in particular the ways in which Italy attempted to cope with the external shocks of the 1970s and 1980s, and to pursue a semi-independent approach to its southern neighbour.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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