

A tangled web of fascists, fugitives and secret ops

The trial and investigation into the 1980 Bologna bombing has unearthed unholy alliances and revealed that those involved in the terrorist atrocity were not the first fascists to arrive in London to escape justice. **Alfio Bernabei** reports

It wasn't exactly a complaint, but the tone of Umberto Palma's remark a few months ago in the Bologna courtroom – where a hearing was taking place over the renewed investigations into the 1980 fascist attack at the railway station that killed 85 people – indicated more than just disappointment. 'We wrote to the British authorities a year ago, but we still haven't received a reply,' he said.

Palma is the public prosecutor who, alongside a number of lawyers, has been acting on behalf of the families of the victims who continue to seek the truth behind the attack that also killed two Britons. Catherine Mitchell and John Kolpinski were a young couple who were passing through the station when the explosion occurred.

Palma did not specify what he meant by 'British authorities', except that he used the term *rogatoria*, which translates as a request from one court of law to another court of law. He was understood to refer to an inquest held in London, which had attempted to shed light into the killing of Italian Sergio Vaccari in a flat near Holland Park. He was tortured to death in 1982, but those responsible were never found. The case was quickly forgotten.

Forty years on, any further information about unspecified items of value that Vaccari kept in a safe is still considered relevant. Vaccari was mingling with Italian fascists in London and is thought to have been part of the team that killed banker Roberto Calvi in 1982. A crucial document that has emerged has been taken as proof that money originating from Calvi's bank,

which also dealt with Vatican finances, was used to pay the terrorists who planted the bomb in Bologna.

Vaccari is a piece of a larger puzzle. He was part of the still mysterious arrangement that, in the years of the so-called 'strategy of tension', the period of violent unrest between 1968 and 1982 during which Italy suffered numerous terrorist attacks by both the left and the right, allowed a considerable number of Italian fascists, mafia gangsters and fugitives from justice to cross the Channel and find a safe haven in the UK.

Some of these fugitives were found variously entangled in activities linked to the then secret network Operation Gladio, or Stay Behind, and so needed to flee Italy. According to some reports, this clandestine Gladio organisation was originally created by Britain way back in January 1949 to resist a threat from communist Russia.

A former terrorist-turned-credible-historian, Vincenzo Vinciguerra, who testified during the recent hearings in Bologna, put it starkly. Pointing to the case of a member of the fascist Avanguardia Nazionale, Mario Ricci, who worked in London under the cover of a travel company, he said: 'The United Kingdom was the place where

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the SID (*Servizio Informazioni Difesa*, the Italian secret service of the Ministry of Defence set up in 1965) sent the fugitives from justice (*latitanti*) who needed to be protected.'

If, until recently, the narrative of Italian fascists seeking refuge in London has focused solely on the arrival of those fleeing Italy soon after the Bologna outrage, these recent court hearings have helped to understand that it had all started much earlier.

Fugitives

Let us leave aside speculations that Hubert Howard, of the British Psychological Warfare Branch (PWB) during the Second World War who had settled in Italy, may have had something to do with a Rome-London link of Gladio. Let us also leave aside the issue that Italian president Giuseppe Saragat (1964–1971) and the British secret service, as suggested by historian Miguel Gotor, had 'endorsed the strategy of tension' from the beginning (December 1969). What still remains is the fact that one of the key protagonists of that strategy, Fabio De Felice, sought refuge in London soon after the attempted coup d'état led by Prince Valerio Borghese during the night of 7–8 December 1970.

It is also a fact that Italian members of the Gladio/Stay Behind organisation have admitted taking part in military training in the UK.

De Felice, a history professor and fascist intellectual who edited the magazine *Politics and Strategy*, has been described as a kind of liaison officer behind the 'strategy of

tension', acting between right-wing organisations, the Italian secret service and Licio Gelli's P2 Masonic Lodge that ordered and financed terrorist attacks with a view to bring about a violent overthrow of democratic institutions and trigger a state of emergency to justify a military coup following the example of Greece in 1967.

According to testimonies heard during this last trial in Bologna, it was through some assistance received by 'Signora Francini', who, as well as being in contact with CIA agents in Italy, had a network of friends in London, that De Felice fled to the UK to avoid having to answer questions over the attempted coup.

The presence of De Felice in London acquires disturbing significance if one gives weight to a document found in the National Archives at Kew, according to which Britain and its NATO allies had considered organising a military coup in Italy to prevent communists from entering the government coalition, a plan favoured by the Christian Democratic leader, Aldo Moro, who was killed in 1978.

It was also during the 1970s that a number of Italian antiquarians, criminals on the run and shady figures with links to the far right converged on London. During the recent hearings in Bologna one of their British contacts – Bill Hopkins – was repeatedly named. Known as a member of the 'angry young men' and author of a controversial novel, Hopkins had an antique shop and, among those named in the recent hearings in Bologna who gravitated in his direction, were Agostino Vallorani, Mauro Mezzina, Vaccari and Valerio Viccei.

Andrea Speranzoni, one of the lawyers acting on behalf of the families of the victims of the Bologna bombing, was adamant in claiming that Hopkins had had printing facilities hidden in his antique shop from where pamphlets and literature of the so-called Third Position originated. This strongly suggested that the leader of this neo-fascist group, Roberto Fiore, who in 1985 was convicted in absentia of 'subversive association' and sentenced to nine years in jail, was among the visitors.

Efforts to locate another venue of potentially greater significance, the



Roberto Calvi

Killed in 1982 in London, documents show that the bank he worked for was involved in paying the terrorists who bombed Bologna station in 1980

London branch of the Hyperion 'school of languages', were frustrated when in the late 1970s two agents sent by public prosecutor Pietro Calogero to investigate this mysterious educational institution with suspected links to the 'strategy of tension' received no help from Scotland Yard. On the contrary, on returning to their hotel, the two agents found that their rooms had been searched.

Complicity

One of the most startling revelations during the hearings came in the form of a document stating that, in April 1981, Fiore had shared a flat in London with Gilberto Cavallini, a member of the Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari, who worked hand in hand with those subsequently found guilty of planting the explosive at Bologna: Valerio Fioravanti, Francesca Mambro and Luigi Ciavardini. Cavallini has been sentenced to life imprisonment in a court of first instance for his complicity in the attack, with a second instance trial expected in 2023.

Interestingly, the document in question, described as a phonogram exchanged between British and Italian Interpol, had been circulating for some time, but in a truncated form. 'We are now in possession of the original document in English,' said Speranzoni.

'It shows that, whoever translated it, omitted precisely the line stating that Fiore and Cavallini were sharing a flat in Tabor Road under false names.'

How could Cavallini have found his way to London eight months after the Bologna bombing? It could only be interpreted as a mission to consult and re-group militants in view of further activities.

While the main aim of the hearings in Bologna was to find out who had masterminded and paid for the attack at the station and to determine whether Paolo Bellini was the 'fifth man' involved in planting the bomb, the introduction of a mass of fully digitalised documentation from previous trials, historical research and additional testimonies have delivered a distillation of events that presents a clear picture of an orchestrated violent intervention that bloodied a country that was seeking its way out of the traumatic experience of fascism.

The Gladio/Stay Behind secret army, originally created to counter a communist threat from Soviet Russia, switched into an instrument to mutilate internal political developments. An even more secretive apparatus was set up, starting a war against communism as 'the enemy within'. In Italy, it was managed by the P2 Masonic Lodge, which recruited army chiefs, intelligence officers and media figures. It needed foot soldiers to carry out terrorist attacks. Far from acting spontaneously, these terrorists were obeying orders, while experts in psyops [psychological operations] were called in to set up false trails to sidetrack investigators. And, when militants faced the prospect of arrest, they somehow knew whom to turn to for help.

If one considers that, for one reason or another, the states and countries named during the hearings include Spain, France, Algeria, South Africa, Portugal, Angola, Lebanon, Israel, Libya, Palestine, Russia, the former Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Greece, Switzerland, Brazil, Argentina, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Chile and the USA, it is clear that no serious historian who wants to write about events during the second part of the previous century can afford to ignore some of the information gathered during this trial.