



*The Red Brigades has won signal victories, suffered important losses, and built and fought courageously for over fourteen years. During seasons of mass offensives against Italian capitalism as well as seasons of counter-blows and retreats.*

**THE**

**BRIGATE  
ROSSA**

**POLITICS OF  
PROTRACTED WAR  
IN THE IMPERIALIST  
METROPOLIS**

by  
J. Sakai

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This revolutionary struggle in Italy, which has gone through such a rapid and complex development, is enduring a period of great hardship. Not only in terms of the inevitable errors and losses, but in the temporary ebb of mass struggle. The corporations are breaking up their great factory complexes, and laying off tens of thousands as they shift production to new systems of smaller, widely scattered factories that are highly robotized or automated. The proletariat has been hit, very hard, and is being forcibly taken apart and reshaped. This is just the most evident “pacification,” a step in the imperialist stage our Italian comrades refer to as “restructuring.”

In this brief introduction to the Italian revolutionary struggle we have been forced to give only the most general outline. Entire areas of importance, such as the distinctive analysis the Italian revolutionary left has reached on the present stage of world imperialism were not dealt with because we felt it not possible to adequately discuss them in our restricted space.

We do not believe that the program of the Red Brigades is a prescription to be swallowed whole by movements within the u.s. Empire. Just as they struggled to critically examine and learn from the experiences of other communists’ movements—but never to imitate anyone—so we too, should use in a communist way the knowledge our Italian comrades have paid so dearly for. Despite storms of repression, the guerrilla struggle in Italy will endure and advance to final victory!

**“OUR DEMAND FOR COMMUNISM IS INDESTRUCTIBLE!”**

“a noose around the neck of the proletarian revolution.” They point out that it is: “a course which must be criticized because it revives in the ranks of the urban proletariat one of the original vices of the capitalist mode of production: the separation between thought and action.” This is why, according to this view, the BR has developed some cadre whose military-technical abilities appear impressive, but whose political stability and class stand are weak (which leads to military disasters).

This is the original debate from 1969–72, between the “Red Army” position of the GAP and the “armed party” position of the BR, now reproduced at a higher level. The BR position now restated in that document does not retreat an inch from armed struggle, but still insists that it must be cast in protracted war based in the masses. Therefore, in their view, in this period of heavy repression and imperialist counter-offensive the first task is to sink deeper underground roots within the proletariat, increasing agitation, and giving industrial workers clear political leadership for mass struggles.

This view holds an unchanged analysis of the long-term nature of the imperialist crisis, in which: “Class tensions coagulate with the prospects of civil war and the authoritarian transformation of the State reaches and goes beyond the point of no return.”

Thus, they point out that: “Without a program that explains the social goals of the war it is not possible to mobilize all the proletarian components whose objective interests are at stake and without this mobilization the development of the war is impossible. Militarism cannot defend against this vicious cycle.” By concentrating everything in their own immediate military actions and nothing on steadily organizing larger forces for the protracted future, *“the organization becomes everything and the proletariat its cheering section, its reservoir of cadres.”*

# ***THE BRIGATE ROSSE***

## ***POLITICS OF PROTRACTED WAR IN THE IMPERIALIST METROPOLIS***

by  
**J. Sakai**

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of the many actions of the “Summer offensive.” The *New York Times* reported:

*“The kidnappings demonstrated the terrorists’ continued ability to infiltrate Italian institutions. In Naples, the Cirillo Affair led officials to conclude that the terrorists had moles in the region’s administration, of which Mr. Cirillo was a member. In the Milan and Mestre kidnappings, the terrorists’ declarations showed that they had infiltrated a major labour union, as a union official conceded in one of the first admissions of its kind.”*

As this is being written the radio news tells us that the Brigades have assassinated two prison wardens in two successive days. How do we reconcile this military capacity, this strength of hidden support, with the instability that has touched even leading cadres? It is well-known that the Brigades have been undergoing a protracted inner struggle over political perspective. The dominant tendency has been to try and match the imperialists blow-for-blow, to step up the level of guerrilla actions as repression intensifies. This is certainly understandable; it needs little explanation.

The opposing point of view has been held by many leading BR cadre, particularly those in prison. In their 1980 document *a discussion on subjectivism and militarism*, Renato Curcio, Alberto Franceschini, and other cadre sharply criticize “military subjectivism” which has led to a one-sided concentration on tactical technique at the expense of strategic revolutionary politics. Thus, in their view, guerrilla P.O.W.s “turn” because the organization now produces fighters who are not and in some cases are unfit to be politically armed. Straining to overcome the repression on a purely military plane, the organization in the field has increasingly been concentrating everything on tactical military operations. Tactics over strategy.

This “militarist subjectivism,” in the Curcio-Franceschini view, is

deadly information about underground members, safe houses, and organization. Many were arrested as a result, and the BR publicly said that Peci's defection "wounded us near the heart."

In January 1982, the carabinieri freed u.s. General James Dozier, who had been a BR captive in Padua for over a month. Antonio Savasta, the group leader of the action, not only failed to execute Dozier when the police broke into the apartment, but soon "turned" police informer. This demoralizing event was a great surprise, even after the Peci defection. It was untypical of the steadfastness of the BR. Questions have been raised about whether the BR are collapsing, demoralized under the pressure of heavy repression.

On a military plane the BR have, throughout this heavier and heavier repression, continued to operate. In January 1981 the Brigades captured Judge Giovanni D'Urso, the head of Italy's maximum security prisons. At the same time imprisoned cadre led an uprising at the Trani maximum security prison, briefly holding 18 guards. D'Urso was released in return for the government closing Asinara, (where Curcio and other BR cadre had been), the security prison that was the most remote and with the worst conditions. Carabinieri General Enrico Calvaligi, chief of security for the political prisons, was assassinated by the BR on New Years Day.

That summer the BR interrogated, tried and executed Roberto Peci, who had been used by police to get his brother to "turn." In the South, in the city of Naples, a leading reactionary politician, Ciro Cirillo, was captured and held 90 days before the imperialists paid a large ransom. In Milan an auto executive was held until his company (Alfa Romeo) agreed to recall laid-off workers. In Mestre an executive responsible for repressing workers at a chemical plant was captured and executed. These were just a few

## **BASIC FACTS ABOUT THE BR**

The Red Brigades are not an armed collective, but the main Marxist-Leninist organization in Italy. They swim in the sea of proletarian unrest and share with other revolutionaries a base of support that is in the many thousands. Their leading position is valid not only on the scales of organization and influence, but also in the central reality that their strategic leadership has been proven in practice. They view their struggle as comprising the first stage of a protracted war, in which the central focus is the building of an armed communist party.

The BR has won signal victories, suffered important losses, and built and fought courageously for over fourteen years. During seasons of mass offensives against Italian capitalism as well as seasons of counter-blows and retreats. All around them during these years virtually all other revolutionary groupings have fallen to state repression, fragmented hopelessly from inner political confusions, or given up and drifted person-by-person back out of struggle or to reformism. The BR almost alone has endured and carried the struggle forward. This is a reality that its revisionist critics on this side of the Atlantic cannot face.

The misimpression is often given that the Red Brigades are a bourgeois student grouping similar to the u.s. Weather Underground. While the BR was born in the 1960s university and youth ferment in northern Italy, they bear no similarity to the Weather Underground. Not in class composition, not in strength and not in political line. The Brigades have an organic relationship to the Italian proletariat. Even from the beginning many of their members were from the working classes. More to the point, the BR is an integral stage in the long tradition of proletarian struggle in Italy.

An example is Alberto Franceschini (now imprisoned), who is one of the leading BR cadre and who represents the third generation of his family to pick up the gun. Franceschini's grandmother was an organizer of a militant peasant league in 1922. His grandfather was arrested and spent many years of his life in fascist prisons, before finally breaking out and joining the armed underground as a fighter (at age 59). Carlos Franceschini, Alberto's father, was sent by the Nazis to Auschwitz concentration camp for being a communist. He too escaped, made his way back to their home region, and became an intelligence cadre in the Partisan Action Squads. After World War II he went to work for the Communist Party of Italy (PCI). Now retired, he says: "I have lived as a proletarian and I want to die as a proletarian. I have done my work, I have given what I could give. Above all, I have given my son." This is the Red tradition that the Brigades represent.

Of the seven BR cadre known to the police as of September 1976 who came from the Southern city of Reggio Emilia (Franceschini's home town), four are from proletarian families, two from the petty bourgeoisie, and one from the peasantry. While three of them became university students, the other four were a plumber, a winery worker, a factory worker, and a salesman for a rubber cement distributor. One, Tonio Parou, was the most respected union shop steward in his plant. So even though the BR was born of the young revolutionary intelligentsia, they came from all classes and many were workers.

All serious evaluations of the Brigades deal with the BR's wide network of support as well. While the BR does not reveal details of its organizational strength (and we ourselves have, of course, no way to directly measure these matters), it might be useful to review the commonly used public estimations on this. In the wake of the BR's Aldo Moro kidnapping (he was the Italian President-to-be and the single most powerful bourgeois politician) in 1978

total membership.

Revisionism in Italy has made its nature clear, and this marks a historic turning point. The PCI will increasingly lose its ability to "absorb" and muffle new layers of militancy that arise. We could learn from this advanced example that revisionism is not just "confused," not just "not revolutionary enough"; it represents the interests of the petty bourgeoisie within the proletarian movement. The Italian situation makes this traditional analysis come to life.

## **INTERNAL STRUGGLE**

The present situation is one of extreme difficulty for our Italian comrades. The imperialist counter-blows have been harsh, the repression of the public left created a partial stillness over the surface of Italian politics. While the repressive machinery has struck many blows, it is necessary to point out that its characteristic clumsiness is still true.

As a classic example, after Moro was kidnapped, the carabinieri (the national paramilitary police) released the photographs of 20 "terrorists" said to be responsible—it turned out that one was a police agent, two were in prison, one was someone who had left Italy three years before, and two were photos of the same man with and without a mustache. This is still typical of police abilities.

It is, however, an unescapable reality that the past three years have seen serious reverses suffered by the BR. Many have come from internal weaknesses, from cadre "turning." In 1980, Patrizio Peci, one of the leading BR cadre, "turned" and furnished police with

neighbors—such as keeping irregular hours—that might indicate underground revolutionaries. AO leader Piperno was arrested in Paris because a vacationing PCI member spotted him in a cafe and called in French police. Factory rallies and strikes by the revolutionary left no longer take place, in part because the PCI has physically crushed such attempts with goon squads of hundreds of PCI security men swinging crow bars and pipes. The police and bosses assist quite happily, of course. Why would the imperialists need a fascist coup, with this type of neo-fascism (which calls itself “Communist”) to give them a mass base?

The new kind of relationships can be seen in the way that the imperialists, acting through the State, have harmoniously put together into harness both the fascists and the revisionists. Thus Pietro Calogero, the Padua prosecutor who led the mass arrests of the Autonomia theoreticians, is a PCI member. On the other hand, Achille Gallucci, who was in charge of the Moro investigation before he got promoted to be chief prosecutor for Rome was a known associate of the armed fascist leadership. Gallucci as chief prosecutor banned the Autonomia publications and stepped up the repression. So today revisionists and fascists work side-by-side in the Italian repressive apparatus, uniting under the hegemony of imperialism to exterminate the new revolutionary upsurge from below.

While the PCI’s recruitment to the State security apparatus sharply increased the repression (and the losses), the Berlinguer clique has not been able to make its party base collaborate as well as they had hoped. The revisionist leadership did make many new friendships; they were, however, all among anti-communists. Party membership has fallen. Even beyond this, many members have just gone inactive. The PCI youth organization, the Young Communist Federation, lost 60,000 members in the four years after Berlinguer’s “historic compromise.” That was half of their

the *New York Times* reported:

*“The hard core of the Red Brigades consists of 400 to 500 full-time members who are on the payroll of the organization. Their salary is 250,000 lire (about \$400) a month, the minimum wage of an Italian worker...*

*“Above ground, a second group of up to 1,000 Brigatisti live a seemingly normal existence as respected members of Italian society. Specialists in the government, press and diplomatic community who have attempted to piece together a picture of how the terrorists operate generally believe that the above-ground members of the Red Brigades are men and women in their 30s and early 40s whose ties to the organization date back to the student revolution of the late 1960s and early ’70s, and who have since made their mark in life and have reached positions of responsibility in government ministries, the police, the large nationalized and private industries and the political parties...*

*“Among the new recruits, specialists say, have been a good many workers in the large industries in the Milan and Turin area—Italy’s most prosperous and most advanced region. This is thought to be highly important—and ominous.”*

Public estimates of the revolutionary left’s active base were uniformly large by the late ’70s. Professor Sabino Acquaviva of Padua (one of the militant student centers), a researcher on political violence, put the size of the illegal left underground at 4,000–8,000 cadre and the size of the active support base at 200,000–300,000. In a major *New York Times Magazine* story in 1981, the conservative u.s. journalist Claire Sterling (who has obvious ties to the c.i.a.) writes of Italy’s “so-called Second Society of hundreds of thousands of law-abiding citizens offering the terrorists acceptance and protection.”

The question is not whether these estimates are numerically accurate. This is not primary for us. Rather they show how all

observers have been impressed with the dimension of the BR's organizational base. Even if, in the current season, repression has disrupted and partially imposed a stillness, this doesn't change the important fact that masses of people voluntarily made a choice for communism.

It is an open secret that the BR has an underground among the older "Stalinist" trade-unionists of the revisionist PCI ("Communist Party of Italy"). These tough veterans of the docks and steel mills, particularly in industrial Turin and Genoa, oppose the revisionist sell-out of their party's revolutionary tradition. Many bitterly condemn the 1945 disarming of their partisan guerrilla units by the PCI leadership as the derailing of revolution. In Genoa a 49-year-old worker at Italsider steel works was caught secretly passing out BR leaflets by a revisionist PCI union officer, who not only informed to the police but testified against his co-worker in court. This collaborator, Guido Rossa, was later executed by the BR.

## **POLITICAL BACKGROUND**

In order to understand the development of communist armed struggle in the 1969–1971 period, it is necessary to grasp the importance of fascism in Italian politics. The massive university outbreaks of 1968 and the militant strikes of young factory workers in the "hot autumn" of 1969 revealed how deepening social crisis had forced millions into conflict with capitalism. The imperialist response was an unleashing of fascist violence in coordination with the State. Just as in 1922, when the bourgeois government asked Benito Mussolini and his Black Shirt fascist legions to take over state power in order to put down the proletarian left, the rotting fascist corpse was reanimated to do

*"In the view of many Italians, including anti-communists, it has become more true than ever that the country cannot be governed without the Communists (the PCI —ed.). And the Communists have made the most of this feeling. In speeches and newspaper articles their leaders have been arguing that only a mobilization of all the political and social forces of the country can stave off the terrorist threat..."*

These could be the words of a Hitler or a Mussolini. The PCI spoke of "mobilizing" the whole Italian nation into one mailed fist to smash the revolutionaries. Those neo-fascists (or should we say, "National Socialists"?) tell the workers that the No. 1 priority is assisting the security police to arrest guerrillas. The Nazi movement in Germany gave the bourgeoisie a mass apparatus, a network located within every school, factory, office and street to act as the fanatical eyes, ears and fists of the State.

The imperialist use of mass revisionism in a neo-fascist way does not achieve everything that a Nazi-type party would do. It does not promote ideological fascism, etc., but the great advantage to the imperialists is that this nascent neo-fascism mobilizes the masses and places them at the service of the State apparatus, permits one-party rule, suppresses the sectors of rebellion, disciplines the proletariat—and the flexibility and co-optive framework of bourgeois democracy are still retained to a large degree. Further, all these crimes are done in the name of "democracy" by a party that calls itself "Communist." How better?

The massive network of PCI unions, student organizations, neighbourhood sections, etc. has been turned into both an informer's network for the police and an anti-left thug army. After BR actions the PCI union officers are supposed to check if any workers in their departments missed work those days, and thus could be suspects. In some cities PCI members have been given lists of suspicious signs to watch out for in their

the votes of right, center and Left in the parliament. Thus there is the panoply of bourgeois democracy—elections, changes of cabinet, continual bickering and debate—but only one possible government and only one program.

The PCI has even jumped over the parliamentary right, and has joined the outright fascists in vying for the mantle of being the “law and order” party. In parliament the party has threatened to bring down any conservative government that negotiates with the BR. The PCI has zealously called for and voted for each new repressive law asked for by the security agencies. These include giving the police greater powers to tap telephones, to arrest suspected revolutionaries *before* any investigation, to imprison those designated as “terrorists” up to 12 years without trial (and many are so held), and on and on. It goes without saying that the PCI warmly approves of Government banning of left publications and demonstrations. The leadership of the PCI does not merely support, but rather demands, a police state reign of terror against the proletariat.

Berlinguer and his clique atop the PCI saw the deepening social crisis as moment of problems, but also of supreme opportunity. The rise of genuine revolutionary forces, particularly in the working class, threatened to undermine the base of the PCI’s power. Already in the universities the PCI had lost ground it would never regain. So the revisionists no less than the police officials desperately wanted to kill off this vital young left.

And on the other hand, the inability of the old bourgeois machinery to stop the revolutionary forces created an opening for Berlinguer and his fellow revisionist bureaucrats to join the capitalist front office. The week after the March 1978 kidnapping of Aldo Moro, the *New York Times* reported:

the dirty tasks bourgeois democracy could not handle.

The Italian fascist movement began its “strategy of tension,” a campaign of violence to both directly attack the left and to create a wave of mass alarm and chaos to justify a military coup. In this first campaign the fascists tried to work secretly, publicly blaming the left for these random, violent attacks. In April 1969 bombings began, clumsily at first, with many misfires. The fascist trademark was (and still is) bombs aimed at crowded public areas—train stations, exhibition halls, etc. On August 8, 1969 the fascists bombed eight trains, but without any fatalities. On October 4, 1969 the fascists tried to bomb an elementary school in Trieste.

On December 12, 1969 the “strategy of tension” reached its deadly heights. The fascist Ordine Nuovo (New Order) bombed the Piazza Fontana in Milan, killing 16 and wounding 90. In July 1970 Ordine Nuovo bombed the Rome-Messina train, killing 6 and wounding 100. All during this period the fascists called for “civil war” against the left and the installation of a “strong” government. Their direct attacks against the movement grew. Aided by police, fascist squadristi attacked known leftists in the streets in Milan. Newsvendors who sold communist newspapers were beaten up. In May 1974 eight activists were killed in Brescia when an anti-fascist march was hand-grenaded by Ordine Nuovo.

The state, acting in lockstep coordination with the fascist counterattack, itself moved against the revolutionary left with gathering weight. On the day of the nationwide general strike of November 19, 1969, police jeeps charged movement crowds leaving a theater in Milan. Driving up on the sidewalks, the police tried to cause a dangerous panic in the crowd of departing youths. In the melee two jeeps collided with each other, killing one of the police. Immediately the police and bourgeois press shouted that this cop was “murdered” by communists. His funeral became a

fascist rally, and Italian President Saragat (one of the historic old leaders of Italian Social-Democracy) called upon the public to “isolate and inoculate” the movement.

In December 1969 the Milan police announced that leftists had done the random bombing at Piazza Fontana and arrested two anarchists, Valpreda and Pinelli. (It is now officially admitted to have been done by Ordine Nuovo). Valpreda was held for three years before the charges were finally dropped, while Pinelli was thrown to his death out of the office window of the chief of the “Red Squad” at Milan police headquarters. Officially his “suicide” was “proof” of his alleged guilt.

In this time the generalized repression of the left gathered significant weight. The editors of two leading anti-revisionist newspapers were arrested. Italy’s most celebrated New Leftist, Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, was indicted for publishing an Italian edition of *Tricontinental* magazine. The old Mussolini-era laws making it a crime “to incite class hatred” were revived. Between October 1969 and January 1970—the height of the fascist “strategy of tension”—some thirteen thousand legal indictments were issued against members of the movement. At this time the student struggles were receding from their 1968 crest.

The use of force to finally strike down dissent extended to the proletarian masses, as did the generalized use of militant force by the exploited to push back with their demands. The signal event was the crushing of a farm labor demonstration near Avola on December 2, 1968. The police ended the protest by gunfire, continuing firing at those hiding in the fields for 25 minutes. Two were killed and many wounded, including children. The public scandal was enormous, but neither the State nor the parliamentary political parties were moved. The strategy of the bourgeoisie, gradually unfolding step by step, was to kill the

reached so high a stage of unity as in Italy. (Benito Mussolini, the Italian fascist dictator from 1922–1945, originally came out of the leadership of the revisionist Italian Socialist Party. He was, in fact, the editor of their national newspaper.) In the 1970s Italy edged up to the brink of a fascist coup. The rising tide of mass unrest and struggle, the feeble anachronism of the Italian state machinery, and the paralysis of Italian parliamentary politics (for years deadlocked between the conservative Christian Democrats and the revisionist PCI) all seemed to press toward the brink of ending bourgeois democracy. This did not happen in the expected way.

The Red Brigades and other revolutionary organizations that predicted fascism have been criticized as alarmist, criticized as those who arm to fight imaginary dangers while ignoring the undramatic, humble work of mass organizing. We can safely say that the BR’s analysis (and that of the GAP and other groups) was not completely accurate but was close to its target.

The Italian phenomenon is a type of nascent neo-fascism, with the revisionist PCI carrying out some of the functions usually done by a Nazi party under full-blown fascism of the old style. In 1978, after years of maneuvering, the PCI and the Christian Democrats entered into the “historic compromise.” Ending 30 years of Left parliamentary opposition, the PCI promised to support the reactionary government if they were consulted about major policy decisions.

This “grand embrace” was far more than just a phase of parliamentary maneuvering. The PCI’s final step into the right answers an emergency that only fascism has usually been able to handle. Capitalism’s governmental paralysis has been at least temporarily eased, since with the PCI’s support when necessary the political representatives of the bourgeoisie enjoy

3. The third road taken by young activists of the New Left was to double back toward the PCI. Sixties leaders such as Alberto Asor Rosa and Mario Tronti eventually decided that no revolutionary progress was possible without reforming the giant PCI and getting it moving again.

This is hard to appreciate without knowing that the PCI is one of the three main institutions of Italian society; more than just the “historic party of the Italian proletariat,” the PCI, (“Communist Party of Italy”) is in u.s. terms like the White Left, Democratic Party, YMCA and AFL-CIO rolled into one organization. The PCI usually gets roughly 30% of the national vote, and through its elected officials it runs half of the municipal governments in Italy. The PCI trade union arm, the General Confederation of Labor, is by far the dominant union grouping, and has 4 million members (in Italy union membership is voluntary, and in each major factory workers belong to different unions of the competing major political parties).

Since the Sixties the PCI, once merely a pro-Moscow, election-oriented, revisionist bureaucracy, has “ripened” even further. Under the direction of its Secretary-General, Enrico Berlinguer, the PCI has become the foremost world example of so-called “euro-communism.” The PCI has denounced “Stalinism” and Moscow, pledged itself to working only through bourgeois government, and tried to appear with a freshly painted coat of “humanism” and “democracy” over it. That is to say, the PCI has taken the logical step for revisionism and abandoned the historical baggage of its long-ago Leninist past. Where once the PCI fought fascism with rifles in hand, now it is collaborating with fascism.

Marxism-Leninism has long scientifically understood the relationship of revisionism to fascism; nowhere has the tie

rebellion in society by repressive force—if necessary to the most naked and fascistic degree.

Then, too, a section of the bourgeoisie and its security apparatus believed that only a fascist state, reached via a military coup, would be “strong” enough to rise above Italy’s permanent parliamentary paralysis and restore order to the society. In 1964 General DeLorenzo, head of SID (Italian military counter-espionage police), was exposed while trying to organize a fascist seizure of the government. Forced into retirement, Gen. DeLorenzo won a seat in Parliament as a leader of the neo-fascist La Destra Nazionale party. (At that point some 7% of the Parliament seats were held by the fascist parties.) His successor as SID chief, General Miceli, was himself later implicated in the abortive 1970 armed coup attempt by fascist leader Prince Valerio Borghese (an aristocratic fascist hero of World War 2). The SID, in the collapse of the feeble takeover attempt, used its secret military resources to spirit the key fascist conspirators out of the country.

The Italian press openly speculated on whether a military “strong man” would seize power. So heavy were the possibilities of a fascist coup that three times in 1969–1974 the revisionist PCI put its tens of thousands of cadre on alert poised to go underground instantly if the fascist takeover went through.

In 1968 and 1969 the young revolutionaries who would become the core of the BR were primarily engaged in theoretical struggle and mass organizing within workplace study collectives. Far from being romantically obsessed with military action, they were sharply critical of “focoism” and other tendencies that they saw as separating in a subjective fashion the timing of communist development from the general timing of the proletarian class struggle.

The factory and office collectives were implanting themselves in the workplace and achieving the useful—but not spectacular—results we might expect. At the giant Pirelli tire plant in Milan the revolutionary left had successfully joined with other workers in launching a broad campaign around speed-up and safety issues. At the IBM plant in Vimercate they forced the company—and a collusive union—to rehire a rank-and-file leader who had been dismissed. At Siemens young revolutionaries led an office-clerical workers strike, the first strike at the company for 20 years, which included 90 percent of the office employees. Yet, the progress of the revolutionary left, while more than adequate in terms of any given individual workplace, was outstripped by events and inadequate in terms of the class struggle as a whole.

To be limited to the issue of unsafe factory conditions while the bourgeoisie was moving its major forces into position to militarily shoot society into pacification was objectively inadequate. To be still at the political level of reforming the local union while the rise of national fascism corroded the present situation was objectively inadequate. As the IBM study group wrote in 1970: “The political vacuum in which the struggle in the factory treads marks (...) an inability to give a proper political weight and an adequate outgrowth. The bombs that exploded in Milan have objectively closed the struggle over collective bargaining contracts.” The IBM study group concluded that the young revolutionary left, still not consolidated into a new, genuinely communist party, still with only slender roots within the proletariat, had the objective choice of either moving to a higher level of development “or they are doomed to be inexorably swept off the political stage...”

It was the duty, however difficult, of the revolutionary vanguard to correctly respond to objective conditions and thus be able to lead the proletariat beyond its present subjective limitations. The higher level was armed struggle, to deny the imperialists an

militants getting themselves fired. Even worse, the brazen stance of promoting the use of force without adopting an underground cadre structure or other preparations for severe repression ended in tragedy. Autonomia was, whatever it said, counting heavily on using bourgeois civil liberties. This is, of course, a complete contradiction—revolutionary “autonomy” that is tied to the scant protection of bourgeois laws. The BR noted:

*“The resistance movement and the area of Autonomia is built and articulated around guerrilla warfare, and not vice versa. To enlarge this area signifies, therefore, in the first place to develop the organization of guerrilla warfare... The ‘autonomous assemblies’ do not know how to get out of the false opposition of ‘legality’ and ‘illegality.’ They fail to pose the question of organization based on real political needs, and thus they end it by delimiting the latter within the type of legal organization they have given themselves. They cut their feet to make them fit the shoe...”*

Autonomia has been crushed by State repression. Its journals have been banned, its demonstrations no longer permitted. Many of its leading members and many activists have been arrested as “terrorists,” with the State charging that AO theoretical leaders were the secret generals of the Red Brigades (!). Padua University professors Tony Negri, Oreste Scalzone and other prominent Autonomia intellectuals were singled out for repression. The reaction has in some cases been a furious backpedaling, with criticisms of the BR for prematurely antagonizing the imperialists and supposedly touching off a repression too heavy to handle. AO leader Franco Piperno, before his arrest in Paris, proposed from hiding that an “amnesty” be agreed on, with revolutionary fighters giving up and returning to “legal” life while the imperialists freed prisoners and ended repression. To this hopelessly idiotic proposal the BR replied: “We are only at the start of the war and you already beg for a truce.”

sending in soup kitchens that instantly functioned.

The Autonomia “movement on social needs” promoted mass struggle to directly take what people needed to live. Their “self-reduction” campaign had workers simply reduce their payments on utility bills, rent, transit fares, etc. to a level that each person felt was fair. In the factories militants were urged to unilaterally improve working condition by individual absenteeism and sabotage of production. Particularly during the intensity of the 1977 university revolts, with violent student takeovers of campuses, AO’s approach seemed to some to herald a new road to revolution.

The Brigades, while supporting the growth in militant struggles by students and young workers, had severe criticisms of Autonomia’s spontaneistic approach. It was clear even back in the 1960s that much of the young left believed that strategy consisted only of joining whatever popular struggles the masses swelled in order to push the most confrontational tactics. The cadre that were founding the BR specifically pointed out their disagreement with the elementary line that made no strategic moves, but instead only proposed:

*“...to pursue the eruptions of struggle wherever they manifest themselves (universities, Battipaglia, Fiat, Pirelli, technicians, bank employees) with a single aim: to produce a ‘radicalization’ of the struggle through the exaltation of the forms in which it manifests itself; the contents of the struggles are left to take a back seat.”*

It had become apparent that the political line of Autonomia contained much value, much inventiveness, but also unresolved contradictions. The stress on a program of spontaneous, individualistic struggle was, however popular at times, unable to work in a strategic manner. For example, the “weapon” of heavy absenteeism in the factories just led to the Autonomia

unopposed reign of terror and repression. The Red Brigades had begun secretly building an armed communist underground in 1969. Cadre already active in organizing the BR wrote: “The comrades must understand that political struggle cannot be waged unless the military dimension of the clash is also assumed... The bosses have militarized power, let us militarize the clash.”

## **THE MEASURES TAKEN**

The vanguard set forth its political analysis: *“The hypothesis therefore is that of a long ‘protracted war,’ in the course of which the working class strengthens itself in the measure in which it organizes itself...for this is the crux of the matter. It is not so much a matter of a speedy victory and of vanquishing all (the facile slogans of fledgling manipulators) but of growing in a struggle of long duration... Revolutionary process and not revolutionary moment...”*

*“In europe...the hypothesis of the generalized insurrection is today absolutely illusory. But this does not signify the renunciation of one’s task as a revolutionary... The bourgeoisie has already chosen illegality. The long revolutionary search in the metropolis is the only adequate response. It must begin today and here.”*

All this is very far from the manipulated image of the Brigades as those intoxicated with machine guns, whose politics supposedly begin and end with violent tactical gestures. The Italian situation is especially instructive to us, because it shows the working out in practice of the competing political lines. For within the movement of young revolutionaries at that critical nexus were not only sharply differing lines, but ones that on the surface appeared to differ only more subtly. In specific there were instructive differences among those who favored armed revolutionary action that proved to be all-important.

Across the Italian struggle of the 1970s no less than 22 armed, clandestine, revolutionary organizations took form (in actuality thousands of military actions were done under some 100 names, although most of these appear to have been ad hoc retaliations by informal groupings of activists). Demonstrations of the young left were conducted under an escalating atmosphere of confrontation. Indeed, under the pressure of fascist violence and state repression, armed security squads became the rule at left rallies and meetings (even by those groupings opposed to armed struggle). Often public movement demonstrations ended with shoot-outs between masked pistol-carrying activists and the police. The social crisis and the spreading use of force extended to all classes. Factory takeovers, takeovers of buses by workers to demand free fares, mass fighting in the streets to protest rent increases, were part of this phenomenon. The actual birth of organized guerrilla struggle, therefore, was not a subjective decision of a few but an inevitable aspect of the overall deepening of imperialist crisis in Italy.

1. Among the first armed organizations was that of the Partisan Action Group (GAP), whose early contribution was considerable. The GAP's most significant figure was Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, the heir to one of Italy's major publishing fortunes. Feltrinelli was greatly moved by the freshness and heroic directness of the Cuban Revolution and his own meeting with Fidel Castro; out of the presses of his publishing house came an amazing Niagara Falls of revolutionary writings from around the world. This was an invaluable service to the young revolutionary movement. Convinced of the impending reality of a fascist coup, Feltrinelli and his comrades began an underground effort in the Spring of 1969. Attacks on corporate offices, expropriations, bombing of u.s. consular offices, even innovative mass propaganda through the broadcasts of a mobile "Radio GAP," gave evidence of the determination of the new fighters.

small ultramilitant groups of workers who beat up foremen, wreck machine tools and start fires." Autonomia tried to raise a magnetic pole of rebellious attraction in the proletariat that rejected the bourgeois institutionalization of union structures and reform politics.

There is no doubt of this movement's historic contributions, its liberating awakening from the slumber of revisionism. It is also true that this current—which was in the main a revolutionary one—was not able to fully overcome a habituation with spontaneity and individualistic militancy. It tended to think as though the strategic foundations of revolution could come from more militant tactics within mass movements.

Autonomia, in particular the leading organization Autonomia Operaia (Workers Autonomy)—or AO—generally scorned the building of a vanguard party as too elitist and outmoded. Instead, they saw a new type of revolution arising from the spontaneous advances of the masses, who would violently fight themselves free from the cage of institutionalized and ritualized reforms.

AO criticized the BR as not only elitist, but as a tendency whose move towards tight, conspiratorial organization had caused them to lose close, flexible involvement with the mass struggles. Autonomia unfavorably compared the small, carefully prepared actions of the BR to the large-scale, spontaneous illegality of mass movements. Autonomia was in no way passive, but a current in which the highest value was put on individuals becoming autonomous from bourgeois constraints, on militancy in all areas of social confrontation. Everything from forcibly taking groceries past the cash register without paying to ripping out bus fare boxes in the fight for free fares. On the other side of this militancy, when natural disasters devastated rural areas Autonomia would demonstrate the institutionalized fraud of official relief by

ability alone, but of both strategy and tactics.

The NAP, for all their heroism, entered the arena of combat relatively late, at the end of 1973. By “late,” we mean at a time when armed struggle had already commenced, the State already “on guard,” and many cadres already committed elsewhere. Their hurried building focused on tactically assembling fighters, with the depth of infrastructure that characterizes the BR visibly lacking. Many NAP cadre had to function on both levels simultaneously, being the public militant organizers and also the secret armed combatants. In Florence, for example, one NAP cadre was at the same time the public leader of the militantly pro-armed struggle Jackson Collective and also the leader of the NAP armed expropriation cell. His death in a failed expropriation resulted in both the local aboveground and the underground being disorganized. The lack of security was obvious. Courage and zeal are indispensable, but they are not enough alone. In both the GAP and the NAP there was a relationship between their class perspectives and their inability, despite much that was so commendable, to find the right strategic grasp on picking up the gun.

2. Developing shoulder-to-shoulder with the current of armed struggle was the Autonomy movement (“Autonomia”), which represented the mass struggles of the young revolutionary left. While the “Autonomous Area” had outward aspects of the 1960s “counter-culture,” it was highly political. Autonomia was explicitly anti-reformist, standing for self-liberation from the hegemony of bourgeois institutions, politics, values—a fighting “counter-culture,” in which coffeeshops and Marxist journals blended with independent factory committees and neighborhood struggles over tenants’ rights. Even the *New York Times* had to notice how, by 1978, Autonomia factory committees had put the bourgeois unions on the defensive: “...outflanked and savagely fought by

While to outward eyes the military actions of the Red Brigades may have seemed cut from the same pattern as those of the GAP, the political perspectives were different in significant ways. In the u.s. Empire armed struggle too often is taken as simply shooting away, doing expropriations, etc., over and over until the masses join you—the “real” questions seem to be ones of small-group security and military tactics, while politics seems little more than inspirational slogans. The Italian experience shows how armed struggle, more than any other form of struggle, is completely dependent upon the scientific correctness of political line.

The GAP aimed themselves directly at the formation of an army, which they believed was the main instrument of the class struggle. In contrast, the Red Brigades aimed at building *not* an army, but “the armed party of the proletariat.” It is the vanguard party that is critical to the BR. For without it there is no strategic leadership. Since the GAP left the question of the Party to others (seeking only to be the military fist of the struggle), it proved unable to confront revisionism or to stabilize political unity within its own ranks. Their initiative and self-sacrifice to start an army could not overcome their reluctance to break cleanly with the past. Indeed, the GAP not only still looked to the USSR, but still hoped that the revisionist PCI (which was the historic party of Italian workers) could be reformed and purified.

It is not unusual, therefore, that the GAP as an organization had full vitality for only three years. The same was true of the later Armed Proletarian Nuclei (NAP), which formed in Naples in 1973–4. The NAP’s history is related to that of the prison struggle, and more than any other grouping its perspective was based on the “lumpen.” As one NAP fighter said in court:

*“We address ourselves to that reservoir of the unemployed, convicts, subproletarians... An historic alliance between these persons and the*

*proletariat is necessary. That is why the NAP are within the masses...*”

### **ANNAMARIA MANTINI CLAIMS HER BROTHER’S BODY**

*“On October 31, 1974, Annamaria went to the Florence morgue to identify her brother’s body. She was calm, composed. ‘Yes, it’s Luca all right,’ she said simply. In the death chamber she bent over and placed some pages of a book between her brother’s hands. The book was Blood in My Eye by George Jackson... She was heard murmuring: ‘You were consistent to the very end, Luca. Forward to victory, we will avenge you!’ ‘We must be ready to consider death as a common thing,’ was written in one of the two pages that Annamaria had placed between Luca’s hands.”*

*Annamaria Mantini was a NAP partisan, as her brother had been. He died in an expropriation. Annamaria was killed on July 8, 1975, by Sgt. Tuzzolino of the Rome “anti-terrorist” squad. He “accidentally” shot her with his service automatic at point-blank range through the head as he was arresting her. Up to that day the NAP had not killed. Seven months later a NAP unit shot down Sgt. Tuzzolino, leaving him permanently paralyzed.*

Again, the NAP contributed (at a heavy price) to the early development of the armed movement. They helped politicize the spontaneous struggle in the prisons, and their actions added to the new current. In May 1975, for example, the NAP’s October 29th Nucleus kidnapped Rome Judge Giuseppe DiGennaro, holding him until the authorities agreed to the transfer of three NAP cadre to other prisons, and to a nationwide radio broadcast of a communique on the prison struggle.

The NAP was defeated, its cells broken up and arrested beneath

the counter-attack of the State. Such defeat was neither final, accidental, nor inevitable. Like the Partisan Action Group, the NAP failed to fully reach a scientific, proletarian class outlook. They did not, for example, grasp the essence of protracted war. Protracted war doesn’t just mean “long”; it also means “soon,” “timely,” “build for the years to come”—in other words, a war in which the Revolution dominates and utilizes the dimension of time.

To repeat, the BR insisted on “revolutionary *process* and not revolutionary *moment*.” So that while the Brigades had begun organizing by the Fall of 1969, it was not until September 1971 that the first BR actions signed by communiqués appeared. Those actions related to factory struggles, and were limited to destroying the cars of executives. There appear to have been only a few of those symbolic propaganda actions. In 1972 and 1973 there were three kidnappings of executives.

It was not until April 1974—some four and one half years after the discussions forming the BR began—that the first important military action took place. That was the kidnapping of Sossi, the chief prosecutor of Genoa. He was released in return for the promised release of two BR cadre—a release later blocked by Prosecutor Francesco Coco in a “betrayal.” It was Coco who, after warnings, was the first person assassinated (along with his two bodyguards) by the BR in June 1976. So almost seven years elapsed between the political discussions forming the Brigades and their first firefight.

The Brigades spent years primarily in strategic preparation; building a militant base within the proletariat, training cadre and organizing a *political* structure to sustain combatants, to educate the class, and to counter the blows of the State. Their noted efficiency (along with their “nine lives”) are not products of sheer technique, but of correct political line. Not of tactical