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Niccolò Petrelli

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Between Manipulation and Adaptation: The Italian Intelligence and Right-Wing Subversion and Terrorism, 1966–1974

Niccolò Petrelli

Department of Political Sciences, Roma Tre University, Roma, Italy

ABSTRACT

This article examines the performance of Italian intelligence services in confronting neofascist groups between 1966 and 1974. Traditional historiography has argued that the intelligence community formed a covert alliance with neofascists, shielding and even assisting their subversive and terrorist activities to counter the perceived communist threat. Drawing on previously unavailable archival sources, this study challenges that view. It finds that a “manipulation strategy” targeting right-wing organizations to combat communism was limited to 1967–1970 and did not extend to supporting terrorism or subversion. From 1971 to 1974, while military intelligence sought to adapt to the growing right-wing extremist challenge, its collection and analytical capabilities remained inadequate. As a consequence, the intelligence service consistently failed to generate effective warnings or penetrate the clandestine networks of the extreme right.

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“We are not policemen, we are spies. We do not arrest our targets.

We develop them and redirect them at bigger targets.

When we identify a network, we watch it, we listen to it,

we penetrate it and by degrees we control it”

John Le Carré, A Most Wanted Man

From the end of 1966, Italy was swept by a wave of protests and riots in which students and workers, mainly left-wing, played a leading role.¹ These events were interpreted by right-wing extremist groups as the harbingers of a communist revolution.² A number of neofascist organizations started therefore to conduct terrorist attacks against various types of civilian targets, as well as to devise and implement plans to overthrow the

CONTACT Niccolò Petrelli  nicpetrelli@gmail.com  Department of Political Sciences, Roma Tre University, Via Chiabrera 199, Roma 00145, Italy

¹V. Satta, *I Nemici della Repubblica. Storia degli anni di piombo* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2016), 65–132.

²G. Panvini, *Ordine nero, guerriglia rossa* (Trento: Einaudi, 2009), 22–4, 45.

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institutions of the State, as part of what amounted to a veritable campaign of subversion and terrorism which proceeded unabated for several years.

Scholarship in both Italian and English has provided a negative assessment of the response of the intelligence apparatus (the *Servizio Informazioni Difesa* – SID, Defense Intelligence Service) to this wave of political violence, stressing that the SID failed not only to generate strategic warning in relation to the emergence of new threats from the extreme right, but also to provide timely and targeted intelligence on terrorist attacks and coup plots. By contrast, according to the scholarly consensus, despite possessing adequate capabilities, the SID deliberately chose not to act, allowing various neofascist groups to act undisturbed and even cooperating with them on some occasions in the attempt to manipulate their conduct. The logic undergirding the behavior of the military intelligence was to use right-wing extremist organizations as a covert tool in the fight against communism, to destabilize the country through large-scale terrorist attacks and coup attempts so as to induce a state of emergency, or some sort of authoritarian transformation of the State institutions which could, in turn, enable them to more effectively counter the communist threat.³

Such a consensus is based on two claims. Firstly, the existence of deep collusions between the SID and neofascist organizations, and secondly the existence, within the secret service, of capabilities suitable for effectively countering the subversive and terrorist activities of the various right-wing organizations. Both assertions look rather weak. Scholarship has inferred the existence of collusions between the SID and right-wing organizations from the frequent interactions between intelligence personnel and neofascists, as well as from the multiple recruitment attempts of these latter by the SID. Such a proximity nonetheless has been summarily and hastily equated with collusion, disregarding other plausible alternative explanations for the conduct of the military intelligence service. Regarding the question of capabilities, the claim about significant levels of penetration of right-wing organizations achieved by the military intelligence service, repeatedly reiterated by scholarship, remains empirically unsubstantiated, as a rigorous and exhaustive examination of the collection and analysis capabilities of the Italian military intelligence based on the examination of all the available archival material is still missing.⁴

This paper offers a broader and more detailed interpretation of the Italian military intelligence's activity vis-à-vis right-wing subversion and terrorism between 1966 and 1974, as well as a more balanced and organic assessment of its outcome, addressing four questions still left unanswered by scholarship: what were the actual collection and analysis capabilities of the Italian military intelligence on right-wing extremism? What were the main difficulties experienced in countering neofascist terrorism and subversion?

³A. Ventrone, *La Strategia della Paura. Eversione e stragismo nell'Italia del Novecento* (Milano: Mondadori, 2019), 235–6; A. Giannuli, *La Strategia della Tensione. Servizi segreti, partiti, golpe falliti, terrore fascista, politica internazionale, un bilancio complessivo* (Milano: Ponte alle Grazie, 2018), *passim*; M. Dondi, *L'Eco del Boato. Storia della Strategia della Tensione 1965–1974* (Bari, Laterza: 2015), 393–5; M. Franzinelli, *La Sottile Linea Nera. Neofascismo e Servizi Segreti da Piazza Fontana a Piazza della Loggia* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2008), 8–9; A. Cento Bull, *Italian Neofascism: The Strategy of Tension and the Politics of Non-reconciliation* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007); P. Willan, *Puppetmasters: The Political Use of Terrorism in Italy* (Lincoln: Authors Choice Press 2002); F. Ferraresi, *Threats to Democracy. The Radical Right in Italy after the War* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), 12; G. De Lutiis, *I servizi segreti in Italia. Dal fascismo all'Intelligence del XXI Secolo* (Milano: Sperling & Kupfer, 2010), 15; and J. Avilés Farré, *La Estrategia de la Tensión. Terrorismo Neofascista y Tramas Golpista en Italia 1969–1980* (Madrid: Uned, 2021).

⁴The only exception is A. Viviani, *Storia dei Servizi Segreti Italiani, 1815–1985*, (2 vols) (Roma: Adnkronos, 1986).

How can the proximity and repeated interactions between Italian intelligence and right-wing extremists be explained? Did the military intelligence service attempt to manipulate extreme right-wing organizations to ‘destabilize to stabilize’ the country?

To answer these questions the paper integrates a vast range of archival sources from Italian intelligence now available in the *Raccolte Speciali* (RS – Special Series) at the Italian *Archivio Centrale dello Stato* (ACS – Central State Archive) in Roma thanks to the declassification programs implemented by the Prodi (2008), Renzi (2014) and Draghi (2021) governments. This study demonstrates, first, that the military intelligence indeed adopted a ‘manipulation strategy’ of neofascist organizations, but, that it was implemented only between 1967 and 1970, that its rationale always remained rather unclear, and that there is no solid evidence indicating that it envisioned the actual use of terrorism and subversion. Secondly, that for multiple reasons, the SID collection and analysis capabilities on right-wing extremism remained in the period under scrutiny rather limited, and in any case insufficient for generating tactical and (partly) also strategic warning. Third, that military intelligence repeatedly failed to penetrate the highly fragmented neofascist underground. Fourth and last, that considering the available sources, the proximity between intelligence personnel and right-wing extremists is to be explained, to a considerable extent, by the collection method favored by the SID.

The SID: Structure and Capabilities

To understand how the SID developed its strategy toward right-wing extremism between 1969 and 1974, it is essential to examine its structure and capabilities as well as the internal-security approach it inherited from its predecessor, the *Servizio Informazioni Forze Armate* – SIFAR (Armed Forces Intelligence Service), which operated from 1949 until the first half of 1966. The SID was established on 25 June 1966 through a secret directive that transformed the scandal-plagued SIFAR into a new intelligence service under the authority of the Minister of Defense. The agency employed roughly 2,500 personnel and was organized into three main departments. The first was the ‘D’ office (Defense) tasked with internal security, by far the most powerful component, with about 1,000 staff members divided into four sections responsible respectively for counter-espionage, internal security, military police, and military counterespionage.⁵ In addition to two technical support centers, ‘D’ controlled 23 peripheral counterespionage (CS) offices, each with its own sub-units, located in nearly every major urban center. The second was the ‘R’ office (Research), charged with collecting intelligence abroad for national defense and the Armed Forces. The third was the ‘S’ office (Situation), responsible for processing and analyzing information gathered by the ‘R’ and ‘D’ offices before passing it to service leaders and policymakers. Beyond these three core departments, the SID also maintained a Special Research Office (later renamed *Ufficio Ricerche Economiche e Industriali* – REI, Economic and Industrial Research Office) for overseeing economic and industrial intelligence and exports of strategic materials, an Armed Forces Office to coordinate with the intelligence branches of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, a

⁵G. Maletti, *Memoriale. Non solo Piazza Fontana* (Milano: Mursia, 2022), 211. Around 1971 ‘D’ fourth section was re-tasked with economic and industrial security; and V. Ilari, *Il generale col monocolo. Giovanni De Lorenzo (1907–1973)* (Ancona: Nuove Ricerche, 1995), 105.

Foreign Services Liaison Centre, an Electronic Data Processing Center, a Security Office, a Central Communication Unit handling SIGINT operations, and a Special Units Group (*Raggruppamento Unità Speciali* – RUS) that managed various support services and special operations activities.⁶

Like its predecessor, the SID thus remained structured primarily around two core missions: meeting the armed forces' requirements for operational planning against Warsaw Pact threats (a task that absorbed nearly all SIGINT and special-operations capabilities) and safeguarding the internal security of the state rather than projecting national interests abroad.⁷ Quantitatively, the 'D' office's resources, though modest, were reasonably well distributed, especially with regard to potential subversive and terrorist threats in urban areas. Qualitatively, however, the office suffered from significant weaknesses. Gen. Maletti, who headed the 'D' office from 1971 to 1975, noted considerable variation in the quality of personnel across its peripheral units. Many were staffed by inexperienced and poorly motivated non-commissioned officers commanded by superiors with little interest in intelligence work.⁸ Moreover, as Giannuli has emphasized, non-commissioned officers generally possessed low levels of education in those years, while officers received a narrowly military education with little or no training in psychology, economics, sociology, or political science.⁹ This situation adversely affected not only the 'D' office's collection capabilities but also its analytical performance. As Sims has observed, the analytical function in intelligence organizations is as a matter of fact diffused: low-level 'time-dominant' forms of tradecraft focused on isolating elements of novelty and correlating what is new with what is known are generally embedded in collection activities, and only higher-level 'content-driven' analyses centered on explanatory in-depth narratives are performed exclusively by dedicated analytic units.¹⁰ Although the 'S' office handled national strategic assessments, the 'D' office retained responsibility for both current intelligence and strategic analysis on internal-security matters. It carried out this task by synthesizing reports from the peripheral units, so the qualitative shortcomings of those units inevitably reduced the overall analytical effectiveness of 'D'.

The second element to consider for appreciating the SID's strategy vis-à-vis right-wing extremism is the service's professional understanding of the nature of the threat to internal security posed by communism and how best to counter it. Since the mid-1950s, operational and doctrinal concepts linked to the so-called 'theory of revolutionary war', imported from allied countries (primarily France), had begun to attract widespread attention within Italian military intelligence.¹¹ By the early 1960s SIFAR had developed

⁶Testimony of the SID Director, Special Committee on the «creation and basic law of the intelligence and security service», May 24, 1977; A. Viviani, *Storia dei Servizi Segreti Italiani*, 141–143. For a more in-depth analysis of the Italian intelligence architecture between 1949 and 1966 see: E. Vigilante, «Struttura e funzioni del Servizio informazioni forze armate (Sifar), 1949–1966», *Le Carte e la Storia*, 2 (December 2024), 87–100.

⁷See V. Ilari, *Storia Militare della Prima Repubblica* (Ancona: Nuove Ricerche, 1994); and Fulvio Martini, *Nome in Codice: Ulisse* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1999).

⁸G. Maletti, *Memoriale*, 214; a similar view was expressed by gen. Mario Mori, director general of SISDE (civilian intelligence) between 2001 and 2006, see: M. Mori and G. Fasanella, *Ad Alto Rischio. La Vita e le Operazioni dell'Uomo che ha arrestato Totò Riina* (Milano: Mondadori 2011).

⁹A. Giannuli, *Bombe a Inchiostro* (Milano: BUR, 2008), 103–4.

¹⁰J. Sims, «Decision Advantage and the Nature of Intelligence Analysis», in Loch K. Johnson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence* (New York: Oxford UP, 2010), 389–403.

¹¹J. Lorenzini, *I Colonnelli della Repubblica* (Bari, Laterza, 2025).

and begun to apply a concept of internal security focused on the struggle against communism through a broad approach based on the countermobilization of civil society and the strategic manipulation of political actors.¹² Several sources support this view. First, such an approach was set out in two widely circulated research papers, from 1962 and 1963, prepared by SIFAR's 'unorthodox warfare unit' and the Center for Advanced Military Studies (CASM), as well as in a doctrinal document on 'unconventional conflict' drafted by the military intelligence in the spring of 1964.¹³ Secondly, it was examined in depth during a conference held in May 1965 and organized by the 'Alberto Pollio Institute for Historical and Military Studies', which was funded by SIFAR; the discussions focused particularly on techniques for the counter-mobilization of civil society, ranging from counter-propaganda and counter-information to plans for integrating civilian paramilitary organizations into the armed forces for operations against communist groups.¹⁴ Last, and perhaps most important, such an approach clearly emerges in two internal military intelligence documents that detail the raising and distribution, by the military intelligence since the early 1960s, of funds to various anti-communist associations and organizations of widely differing political orientation for the conduct of propaganda, counter-information, influence, and sabotage operations.¹⁵

Thus, at its creation in 1966, on the eve of the extreme right's turn toward terrorism and subversion, the SID possessed limited collection and analysis capabilities and had begun to develop an operational approach centered on the strategic manipulation and use, for the purpose of containing communism, of every component of civil society believed capable of serving that purpose effectively.¹⁶

The SID and the Rise of Right-Wing Terrorism and Subversion: Manipulation Attempts and Operational Gaps, 1966–1969

From the second half of 1966, protests and riots against the government intensified. In November 1967, the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI – Italian Communist Party)'s constituency began pressing the party's leadership to officially support the demonstrators, something that eventually occurred in February 1968. This caused serious fears, verging on panic, among right-wing movements, particularly the extra-parliamentary component. Several groups, including *Ordine Nuovo* (ON – New Order), at the time probably the most violent extra-parliamentary right-wing organization, began preparations for what they defined as a 'qualitative leap' in the struggle against communism.¹⁷

'D' peripheral units collected intelligence that indicated some anomalies compared to what was previously known about ON, particularly in the Triveneto area, as early as the spring of 1966. In addition to the stockpiling of weapons and explosives by militants in the Verona province, local CS centers noted greater activism in the Padova area as well,

¹²V. Ilari, *Storia Militare della Prima Repubblica, 1943–1993* (Ancona: Nuove Ricerche, 1994), 490–2.

¹³A. Giannuli, *la Strategia della Tensione*, 130–140.

¹⁴The archival documentation of the meeting can be found here: <https://patrimonio.archivio.senato.it/inventario/scheda/concetto-pettinato/IT-AFS-055-002252/i-convegno-studio-istituto-alberto-pollio>.

¹⁵"Report 516,345/7/REI, REI to D: Anti-communist Propaganda," October 23, 1963, Raccolte Speciali (RS)/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/2/1/3; "Note D/t161875/1^, D to REI: Anti-communist Propaganda, November 7, 1963"; and V. Ilari, *Il generale col monocolo*, 117–8.

¹⁶N. Petrelli, *I Servizi Segreti Italiani e l'Intelligence USA. Da Gladio alla Strategia della Tensione* (Roma: Carocci, 2025), 103–7.

¹⁷V. Satta, *I Nemici della Repubblica*, 96–8; and F. Ferraresi, *Threats to Democracy*, 52–63.

along with more frequent interactions between certain local militants and members of the NATO Southern European Task Force (SETAF) based in Verona, who were believed to belong to US military intelligence services.¹⁸

It does not seem, however, that these indicators were associated with a substantive change in strategy. Such a mistake resulted from shortcomings in both collection and analysis. In fact, in 1966 the SID had only four sources in the extreme-right sector: one in the Padova area, three in the Rome area (and none in the Verona area). None of these sources was a member of ON or deeply familiar with the local networks of the movement, particularly in the Triveneto area.¹⁹

Secondly, as reports from May–August 1966 clearly show, the ‘D’ office tended to analyze ON along the lines of an ‘order of battle’ assessment of enemy military forces, focusing mainly on hierarchical structure, chain of command, number of militants, and available weapons. ON, by contrast, represented an almost classic example of a ‘hybrid terrorist organization’, one that combined a small central hierarchical structure with a broad set of diffuse and rather autonomous local networks.²⁰ It is therefore highly likely that the SID credited ON’s central leadership with far greater capacity for control and strategic direction than it actually exerted, while it possessed rather poor knowledge of the inner workings, actual capabilities, and intentions of the various local networks.

The following year, Padova’s CS center managed to upgrade its sources in the extreme right sector to eight, while another three were recruited by the *Raggruppamento Centri CS di Roma* (Rome CS Centers Group – RCCS, the counterintelligence unit coordinating Roma’s four CS centers, CS-1, CS-2, CS-3, CS-4). None of them, however, was an ON militant. Almost concurrently, and for unknown reasons, the SID deviated for the first time from the intelligence collection methodology it had employed until then in the extreme right sector, namely, the recruitment of sources, and initiated an infiltration operation through its collaborator Guido Giannettini. A neo-fascist militant and journalist specializing in strategic-military issues, Giannettini had begun collaborating with the SID’s ‘R’ office in the first half of 1967, before moving to ‘D’ in July/August of the same year.²¹ The operation began in September 1967 at the request of the ‘D’ leadership, initially as an infiltration of left-wing extremist groups.²² From approximately the beginning of 1968, however, two factors contributed to alter its nature, goals, and scope. The first was the emergence in the Triveneto area of synergies between left-wing Maoist extremists and neofascist organizations, a

¹⁸“Report CS VR to D: Seizure of weapons and ammunition, May 8, 1966,” RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/3/7; “Report 5497 CS Verona to D: Seizure of weapons and ammunition, May 12, 1966,” RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/3/3/15; “Report 6313 CS Verona to D: Seizure of weapons and ammunition, May 28, 1966,” RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/6/3/18; “Report 6736 CS PD to D: Ordine Nuovo – capabilities, August 4, 1966,” RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/2/1/19; “Note 25480/I RCCS Roma to D: Ordine Nuovo, August 30, 1966,” RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/3/2/3.

¹⁹The number is to be considered indicative; in fact, occasional sources, sub-sources and unpaid sources were not listed in official documents. Moreover, SID listed sources based on “sectors” which sometimes produced distortions, with sources operating in more than one sector recorded only once. See: “Telex 1689 CS-3 Roma to 1st Division, June 29, 1985” and “Report CS-3 Roma: Movimento Integralista Europeo Aims and Program, April 13, 1965,” RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/3/1/19.

²⁰J. Arquilla and D. Ronfeldt, *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001), 7.

²¹“Note from D to Director, July 18, 1967,” RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/27/2/12.

²²“Letter from Giannettini to head, D office, Ottobre 15, 1973,” annex to Note 166/001/23 March 13, 1985, RS/DR/PCM/DIS/Serie varie/37/3.

phenomenon later known as ‘Nazi-Maoism’.²³ The second was the further intensification, in the same area, of interactions between US military intelligence personnel and ON militants.²⁴ Between the beginning of 1968 and the first months of 1969, while the ‘D’ office succeeded in recruiting two more sources in the extreme right sector in the Padova area, Giannettini, through a source he had recruited a few months earlier, the ON militant Franco Freda, as well as through a sub-source recruited by Freda, Giovanni Ventura (also from ON), began collecting intelligence on Maoist groups in Triveneto. In exchange for the intelligence received from ON militants, the journalist provided a certain number of reports he had personally drawn up, some of which were for the SID. Among them was a document outlining the structure of the US intelligence apparatus in Italy, as well as another one dated 4 May 1969 (it is unclear whether authentic or counterfeit) which detailed a project, supported by ‘political and economic circles in Italy and also by foreign powers’, aimed at replacing the center-left government with a centrist one, if necessary through the use of force.²⁵ In a few months, Giannettini’s infiltration operation therefore began to expand and to respond to a twofold logic: on the one hand, using ON militants to infiltrate Maoist groups; on the other, collecting intelligence on ON’s network in the Triveneto region as well as on the clandestine activities of US military intelligence in the area.²⁶

Scholarship has claimed that through Giannettini the SID was covertly establishing some form of collaboration with ON, along the lines of the civil/military integration blueprints discussed during the May 1965 conference. Such an interpretation, however, is problematic for two reasons: first, the veracity of the information contained in the documents exchanged between Giannettini and ON militants regarding the coup plan cannot be ascertained; second, nothing in the available documentation indicates that the SID intended to use ON for operational rather than informational purposes. In any case, even conceding that the exchange revealed a genuine attempt to establish operational collaboration with ON against communism, there is no way to ascertain whether such a project had been developed autonomously by Giannettini or had been elaborated by the ‘D’ office or the SID’s leadership. Nevertheless, considering the emergence of ‘Nazi-Maoism’, the intensification of US covert activities in the Triveneto area, as well as the nature of the exchanges between Giannettini and ON militants, it is possible to advance a different interpretation.

The aim of Giannettini’s activities was twofold: on the one hand, exploiting the synergy that had emerged between ON and Maoist groups in the area to monitor the latter through ON. On the other hand, it served the more important purpose of controlling ON in a particularly difficult area. Alarmed by the activism of the US intelligence services in the Triveneto area, the SID attempted through Giannettini to establish control over ON’s local network, first by making its leaders aware of the structure and activity of US intelligence in the area, secondly by informing them of the existence (either real or

²³N. Rao, *La Fiamma e la Celtica* (Milano: Sperling & Kupfer, 2010).

²⁴“D Internal Note: US Undercover Personnel, August 24, 1968,” RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/2/4/4.

²⁵A. Ventrone, “La Strage di Piazza Fontana,” *Il Politico* 84, no. 2 (2019): 105–20. See also: “Letter from Giannettini to head, D office.”

²⁶“Letter from Giannettini to head, D office,” Giannettini claims that an operation aimed at assuming control of ON network in the Triveneto area took place in 1973.

fictitious) of a coup plan, and lastly by luring them into believing that through Giannettini ON could play a role in this project (most likely as an armed wing).

In the early summer of 1968, following the significant loss of votes by the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI – Italian Social Movement, Italy's main right-wing party at the time) in the political elections, the extreme right entered a phase of turmoil. Thanks to a source code-named Arrigo, the SID immediately detected the rising popularity of Junio Valerio Borghese, former commander of the *X^a Flottiglia MAS* (a World War Two fascist naval special operations unit), among minority groups in the neo-fascist area.²⁷ Between July and September the same source announced the foundation of a new extreme-right formation called *Fronte Nazionale* (FN – National Front) under the leadership of Borghese.²⁸

The history of the FN as a subversive actor is well known; hence this paper will explore only issues related to SID collection and analysis, as well as the strategy adopted by military intelligence vis-à-vis Borghese's organization.²⁹ As per reports by source *Fabiano*, in its first months of activity and at least until January 1969, the FN remained a political movement supporting radical institutional reforms aimed at redesigning Italy as an authoritarian state.³⁰ Between February and May 1969 the SID, probably through source *Issa*, a supporter of the FN, learned about the establishment, in parallel with the official political infrastructure of the movement, of clandestine units responsible for preparing 'operational tools' for subversive activities (procurement of weapons, recruitment of personnel suitable for paramilitary activities, and development of logistical infrastructures).³¹ According to an internal memorandum, on 25 May 1969 a CIA official was contacted by a member of Italian Naval intelligence who revealed to him that a group of people from the intelligence services, armed forces, government, several political parties, and industry, gathered around Borghese, was interested in knowing the US position with respect to a possible coup d'état.³² We do not know whether the CIA informed its Italian counterpart of the FN's change in strategy; the SID, however, learned about it from the head of Army intelligence, Gen. Vito Miceli. In the spring of 1969 in fact, during surveillance and counter-propaganda activity, the latter managed to gather intelligence on the FN's subversive project and decided to intensify intelligence-gathering on the issue, borrowing two sources, *Aba* and *Lazio*, from the SID and developing direct contacts with exponents of the FN as well as with Borghese himself.³³ On 16 June 1969, a report from the Milan CS center provided more details: the document reported that a

²⁷ "Note 6438 CS NA to D and RCCS Roma: MSI internal situation, June 26, 1968," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/1/6/1.

²⁸ See Note from source "Arrigo" July 3, 1968, Note from source "Arrigo" July 27, 1968, *ibid* e "Note 9585 CS NA to D and RCCS Roma: Fa Right Activity, October 5, 1968," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/1/6/4.

²⁹ See F. M. Biscione, *Dal Golpe alla P2, Ascesa e Declino dell'Eversione Militare 1970–1975* (Roma: Castelveccchi, 2022); F. Mazza, *Il Golpe Borghese quarto grado di giudizio* (Cosenza: Luigi Pellegrini, 2021); and A. Monti, *Il golpe Borghese. Un Golpe Virtuale all'Italiana* (Bologna: Lo Scarabeo, 2006).

³⁰ "Operation Fabiano Report: Fronte Nazionale, December 14, 1968," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/2/1/10; and See also: F. M. Biscione, *Dal Golpe alla P2*, 32.

³¹ Quoted in G. Cipriani, *Lo Stato Invisibile*, 371–8.

³² CIA Memorandum, "Alleged Role in Coup Plans of Valerio Junio Borghese," August 6, 1970, attachment to dispatch from Chief of Station [Rome] to Chief, European Branch, August 6, 1970, CREST, Doc. 519a6b27993294098d511202.

³³ See Testimony by Gen. Vito Miceli, "Valerio Borghese's National Front," September 26, 1974, in *Commissione Parlamentare d'Inchiesta Sulla Loggia Massonica P2, Serie II: Documentazione Raccolta dalla Commissione*, Vol. 3, Tomo iv, Parte 2 (Roma: Senato della Repubblica, 1985), 448–9; Note SID, October 8, 1970, RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/13; and Si veda anche: N. Valentini, *La Notte della Madonna*, (Roma: Le Monde Editrice, 1978), 85–6.

coup d'état was planned for the summer, before the end of September, but that problems in purchasing weapons were delaying the project.³⁴

The SID continued to monitor the FN's activities throughout the summer, gathering intelligence on the organization's logistics, finance, and recruitment, including the staging of paramilitary camps aimed at training 'commando units' for terrorist attacks.³⁵ Based on the available documentation, it appears that during the period under scrutiny the SID did not produce dedicated analytical documents on the FN. However, the basic analysis included in the collection reports forwarded by the peripheral centers to the 'D' office leadership reveals that the FN's top-down, highly centralized, military-type structure made it easier for military intelligence to understand the organization's functioning and, to a certain extent, predict its moves.³⁶ The SID was thus able to deliver a timely strategic warning regarding the FN's change of strategy and the emergence of a new right-wing subversive threat.

In the same period, however, collection efforts were less effective against ON and the smaller groups affiliated with it. From the beginning of 1969, there was an exponential increase in bombings; most involved a relatively small payload and caused minor material damage,³⁷ but others were more serious. This was notably the case with those that took place in April at the *Fiera Campionaria* and Milan's central railway station, which we now know were planned and executed by ON's Padova-Mestre network. On August 9, six bombs placed by ON at various points on the railway network exploded, injuring twelve people and causing extensive damage. An analysis conducted by the 'D' office's technical unit in the immediate aftermath of the attacks recommended targeting both the extreme left and the extreme right for intelligence collection. The RCCS Rome took a different stance, suggesting, in light of the technical expertise displayed by the attackers, that surveillance should be intensified on left-wing groups, from anarchists to Maoist factions.³⁸ The 'D' leadership initially adopted a middle-ground approach as the general requirement for collection efforts.³⁹ The following week, however, it revised its position and issued guidelines for intelligence collection that centered on left-wing groups.⁴⁰ These collection efforts failed to produce actionable intelligence, accumulating instead, for the most part, mere opinions from sources.⁴¹ Only on September 27, after reiterating once again that available intelligence substantiated the hypothesis that anarchist or Maoist groups were behind the attacks, did the 'D' leadership circulate a memo that, at least in part, amended the previous assessment. This acknowledged that, considering recent intelligence on the setting up of training camps in Emilia-Romagna by right-wing militants, it was possible that the attacks had been perpetrated by neofascist groups.⁴²

³⁴Note CS MI to D, June 16, 1969, quoted in g.i. Guido Salvini verdict, 18–3 1995, 348–9.

³⁵"D Internal Note: Extremists" summer camp, 1 August 1969," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–100-4 /1/23–23/A-23/B/3.

³⁶"D Internal Note, May 22 1970 and D Internal Note 9 August 1970" quoted in Gianni Cipriani, *Lo Stato Invisibile*, cit., 426.

³⁷C. Schaerf (ed.), *Venti anni di violenza politica in Italia* (Roma: Isodarco, 1992).

³⁸"Technical analysis of August 9 bombings", 19 August 1969," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–100-4 /1/23 - 23/A-23/B/17; and Report, RCCS Roma to D: Terrorist Attacks, 12 August 1969," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–100-4/1/23 - 23/A-23/B/57.

³⁹"Note D, August 9 1969," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/2/1/25.

⁴⁰"Note 04/26652/0/1^, D to RCCS Roma and CS: Terrorist Activity, August 19, 1969," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1969/2/52/6; and "Note for Head, D: Intelligence collection on 9 August bombings, August 21, 1969," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/2/1/28.

⁴¹Report 7052, CS FI to D: Terrorist Activity, August 29, 1969," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/2/1/24; and "Report 6354 CS BO to D and RCCS Roma: Terrorist Activity, August 30, 1969," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/2/1/33.

⁴²"Note D 04/32791/0/1^: Terrorist Activity, September 18, 1969," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1969/7/52/6; and "Note 04/33420/0/1^, D to CS BO MI GE 27 September 1969: Terrorist Activity," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1969/4/52/6.

The most plausible explanation for the hesitant and contradictory behavior of the 'D' office leadership in defining collection requirements regarding the spring-summer 1969 attacks is that it wanted to maintain maximum secrecy and compartmentalization with respect to the infiltration operation conducted by Giannettini. This appears confirmed by the fact that, between April and September, so-called nazi-Maoist groups were not targeted for intelligence collection (something which would have been natural if the intelligence collected by Giannettini had been exploited). It should also be borne in mind that, having failed during 1969 to upgrade its sources in the extreme right, the SID had serious problems in precisely defining collection requirements.

Up until the autumn of 1969, therefore, the military intelligence continued to work on terrorist and bombing activity based on the broad requirements set in April, namely concentrating mainly on the left-wing groups.⁴³

The Culminating Point of the Terrorist-Subversive Campaign and the Decline of the SID's Manipulation Strategy, 1969–1970

On 12 December 1969, around 4:30 p.m., a bomb placed by ON's Padova network exploded at the *Banca Nazionale dell'Agricoltura* in Milan, killing 13 people and injuring 88. Three days later, the RCCS Rome filed a report claiming that left-wing extremists were behind the attack.⁴⁴ On December 17, however, it forwarded a new note, based on a previous report by its subunit CS-3, which stated that a right-winger infiltrated in an anarchist group, Mario Merlino, was responsible for the bombing with the assistance of a leader of another neofascist organization, *Avanguardia Nazionale* (AN), and that the attack had been inspired and facilitated by a former member of the *Organisation armée secrète* (OAS), Yves Guérin-Sérac, now head of a clandestine subversive neofascist organization posing as a news agency called 'Aginter Presse'. The aim of the attack was to blame left-wing movements and force the government to crack down on them.⁴⁵

The report correctly identified the origin and the logic of the attack but was wrong about the actual perpetrators and facilitators. Most likely it synthesized intelligence contained in the original CS-3 report with additional, and rather outdated, information elements that the SID had collected on the links between Aginter Presse and Italian right-wing extremism, as well as with newer ones, namely, the links between AN and Merlino.⁴⁶ The SID therefore seemed to be paying dearly for its limited success in gathering intelligence on right-wing extremism, as well as for its inability to penetrate the more secretive cells. The difficulty in putting together a comprehensive operational picture based on recent and relevant pieces of intelligence probably pushed the military intelligence service to integrate what little was available with older intelligence that, although outdated, was considered (at least in part, and wrongly with the benefit of hindsight) relevant.⁴⁷

⁴³"Note 11425 for Head, D, October 18, 1969," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1969/2/52/7; and "Report 35997/I, RCCS Roma to D, CS NA, CS BO: Terrorist Activity, December 9, 1969," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/2/1/42.

⁴⁴"Report, RCCS Roma to D, 15 December 1969," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–100-4/11/2/244.

⁴⁵Note 150/484/23 SISMI to CESIS: December 12, 1969 Bombings. SID report of December 17, 1969, June 11, 1985, RS/DR/PCM/DIS/Serie varie/3/6.

⁴⁶Giorgio Boatti, *Piazza Fontana*, (Torino: Einaudi, 2009), 314–8, 329–30; and "RCCS Report, December 17, 1969," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–100-4/11/2/247.

⁴⁷"Note SISMI 19140/921/0482, 1st Division to VE, 8 April 1998."

With regard to the behavior of the 'D' office leadership, which presumably could have obtained, or already possessed, additional intelligence on the attack through Giannettini, who had infiltrated the Padova network, the most solid hypothesis is that it remained silent. It did so first to protect the infiltration operation and continue its attempt to assume control of the extreme right-wing groups in Veneto, and secondly to prevent the circulation of information about the activities of US military intelligence in the northeast and its links with extremist right-wing groups.⁴⁸ This might explain the lack of a follow-up to a memo forwarded to the 'D' leadership in mid-February 1970. The memo mentioned a possible role in the December 12 attacks of 'small right-wing groups not connected with 'USI' ('United States Intelligence', the term employed by the SID to refer to the various US intelligence organizations operating in Italy). This seems to imply that the SID was aware that US military intelligence was actively cooperating with right-wing groups in Italy's northeast.⁴⁹

At the time, the SID was also monitoring the activities of Borghese's FN. Throughout the first half of 1970, rumors of a coup d'état circulated with increasing frequency amid the country's political instability.⁵⁰ Most likely, the conspirators were looking for support and were therefore sharing their plans with potential backers to gauge their intentions.⁵¹ At the beginning of August 1970, the director of Army intelligence, Gen. Miceli, met with US Ambassador Graham Martin through the military attaché of the US embassy, James Clavio.⁵² Miceli showed him three letters received from three different military commands in the previous weeks, which outlined a coup plan. He also played for the ambassador an audio recording in which a man, whose identity the general refused to reveal, mentioned a coup d'état that was supposed to take place around August 15. Miceli explained that he had become aware of the subversive plan of the FN while collecting intelligence on this material.⁵³ In the following weeks, the US military attaché forwarded to the ambassador a series of reports based on intelligence obtained from a 'high-level Italian military source'. The reports concerned not only the subversive projects of the FN, but also the intentions and capabilities of right-wing movements, as well as the views of the leaders of the various branches of the armed forces regarding the country's political situation. Considering the different topics covered in the reports, it cannot be ruled out that the cover name employed by Clavio disguised not one but several sources. At least one of them, however, was clearly Miceli. This can be inferred from Clavio's references to the 'nervousness of the source regarding the future appointment of the head of the SID' and particularly from a sentence in the 14 September report in which he states: 'the source is now certain that he will get the position of head of the SID'.⁵⁴

Miceli reported to Clavio that, unlike the SID leadership, which considered the FN an ineffective organization, he believed it was a well-organized movement whose capability gaps could be filled, possibly even in the short term. Miceli stated that, unlike the MSI, a right-wing but non-subversive, pro-US and pro-NATO movement that enjoyed broad support within

⁴⁸F. Ferraresi, *Threats to Democracy*, 102; and Gianni Cipriani, *lo Stato invisibile*, 325.

⁴⁹"Note, CS-2 to D: Terrorist Activity," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2-100-4/11/9/25.

⁵⁰L. Cominelli, *L'Italia sotto Tutela. Stati Uniti, Europa e Crisi Italiana degli Anni Settanta* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 2014), 95-9.

⁵¹F. M. Biscione, *Dal Golpe alla P2*, 31.

⁵²C. Gatti, *Rimanga tra noi. L'America, l'Italia, la questione comunista: i segreti di 50 anni di storia* (Milano: Leonardo Editore, 1990), 85.

⁵³"Telegram from Rome Embassy to Department of State: Planning for Possible Coup Attempt, Week of August 10," Agosto 7, 1970, reprinted in: A. Monti, *Il Golpe Borghese*, 123-4.

⁵⁴For a general perspective see: Luigi Guarna, "Ipotesi di colpo di Stato, programmi clandestini e instabilità politica. Nuovi documenti sull'Amministrazione Nixon e l'Italia," *Ricerche di storia politica* 2 (August 2018), 151-70.

the officer corps, the FN had both a leadership and a consensus problem. Borghese was in fact considered by many to be a rather incapable leader, too closely associated with the fascist regime, and lacking adequate support within the armed forces, particularly the Army.⁵⁵ For this reason, the appointment of an army officer as head of the military intelligence was of the utmost importance according to Miceli: the Navy and the Air Force were in fact probably already heavily infiltrated by conspirators, and there was the risk that they would support the FN coup plot in its current state, which could have resulted in a disaster.⁵⁶ The Army, by contrast, was not compromised, had capabilities adequate for controlling the FN, and could therefore ensure its appropriate 'use' when circumstances required it. The main problem was that both the SID's current director, Admiral Henke, and the President of the Republic, Giuseppe Saragat, opposed Miceli's appointment, allegedly because he was 'too pro-US and pro-NATO'.⁵⁷

On 11 August, after meeting with Miceli, Ambassador Martin informed Henke of the coup plan. Henke, in turn, according to a telex from the US Embassy to the Secretary of State, forwarded a report to the Italian Chief of Defense Staff, Gen. Marchesi, and orally informed Defense Minister Tanassi.⁵⁸ This apparently had no major consequences: even after learning about the plot from the US embassy as well as being briefed by the 'D' office about the intensification of military training by FN militants, the head of the SID, the Defense Minister, and the President of the Republic all stuck to their previous view that the FN posed no serious threat to national security.⁵⁹

On October 18, Gen. Miceli took office as head of the SID. Archival sources nonetheless do not allow speculation on whether or how this impacted the military intelligence service's activities vis-à-vis the FN until 7 December, when Borghese's organization finally implemented its coup plan. What happened during the night of 7 December 1970 is well known, and it is not necessary to recapitulate the main events here.⁶⁰ The SID was apparently unable to provide tactical warning before Borghese's organization moved. Only around 11:00 p.m., several hours after the start of the operation, source *Issa* informed the head of the RCCS, who forwarded the information to Miceli through the chain of command. A couple of hours later, after receiving a phone call, Borghese halted the coup attempt. Based on US documentation (the only available), it can be claimed that it was Miceli who ordered the operation to be halted.⁶¹

⁵⁵Memorandum to the Ambassador from Army Attaché: Italian Right-Wing Groups, September 11, 1970, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/BORGHESE%2C%20JUNIO%20VALERIO_0031.pdf.

⁵⁶F. M. Biscione, *op. cit.*, 50.

⁵⁷Memorandum to the Ambassador from Army Attaché, Current Italian political situation September, 10, 1973; Memorandum to the Ambassador from Army Attaché: Fronte Nazionale, September 11, 1973; Memorandum to the Ambassador from Army Attaché: Current Italian political situation, September 14, 1970, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/BORGHESE%2C%20JUNIO%20VALERIO_0031.pdf; Report from Chief of Station Rome to Chief EU Division: Evaluation on Junio Valerio Borghese, September 1, 1970, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/BORGHESE%2C%20JUNIO%20VALERIO_0029.pdf.

⁵⁸"Telegram from Rome Embassy to Department of State: Possible Coup Attempt," August 11, 1970. Reproduced in: A. Monti, *Il Golpe Borghese*, 125.

⁵⁹Note, CS MI to D, September 19, 1970, 1, in Brescia 91/97, Faldoni "B/b" - atti AG Milano, Fald. B/b-1, Fasc. 7/3, 96; and G. Flamini, *Il partito del golpe. Le strategie della tensione e del terrore dal primo centrosinistra organico al sequestro Moro. Volume Secondo 1968-1970* (Ferrara: Italo Bovolenta, 1982), 231.

⁶⁰Jonathan Marshall, "U.S. Cold War Policy and the Italian Far-Right: The Nixon Administration, Republican Party Operatives, and the Borghese Coup Plot of 1970," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 25, no. 1 (2023): 138-67.

⁶¹G. Cipriani, *Lo Stato Invisibile*, 373; Back-channel Cable 1406 Ambassador Martin to Kissinger, 2 April 1971, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum (RNPLM), NSC files, Box 65, "Martin, Ambassador" Folder, quoted in Jonathan Marshall, "U.S. Cold War Policy and the Italian Far-Right," 148.

The above seriously invalidates the interpretation often advanced regarding the SID's conduct in relation to the Borghese coup attempt, namely, that in August 1970 Miceli had probed in a 'plausibly deniable' manner the US will to support a coup d'état of which he was one of the main sponsors, that in the following months he had worked to ensure the necessary support from the Army, and that, after realizing that this would not materialize, he had eventually ordered it to be halted.⁶² By contrast, analysis of the archival documentation corroborates a very different interpretation. Miceli exploited the information collected on the FN to validate his credibility as a reliable contact for the US embassy, one capable not only of providing information and assessments on right-wing forces (which he knew was of interest to the USA), but also of manipulating the various groups operating in that political area. The goal was to obtain US support for his appointment as head of the SID. Subsequently, being familiar with the FN's operational gaps and with US concerns about Borghese's organization, it is unlikely that he worked to secure the support of the armed forces for the coup plan. By contrast, a much more solid hypothesis is that Miceli manipulated the FN (perhaps even encouraging it to proceed with its plan) and then deliberately sacrificed it at the right moment. By providing the US with proof of his ability to control right-wing groups, he could lay the foundations for the SID to become the fulcrum of any future US-sponsored projects to shift the country's political center of gravity to the right.

The SID's strategy of manipulating right-wing extremist groups seemed to be gradually abandoned from the first months of 1971.⁶³ Two probable causes can be identified. Firstly, judicial investigations into the Piazza Fontana massacre and Borghese's attempted coup d'état, together with increasing media attention, brought to light the existing links between the military intelligence service and various extreme-right militants and groups. This most likely made the SID more cautious, particularly regarding Giannettini's infiltration operation. Secondly, between March and April 1971, SID director Miceli secured \$800,000 in US funding to conduct a propaganda and counter-information program (which apparently continued until February 1973) focused on strengthening the position of the MSI. As a result, the military intelligence service no longer needed to resort to extremist right-wing groups to combat communism.⁶⁴

The contours of the SID's manipulation strategy toward neofascist groups between 1967 and 1970 thus appear far more nuanced than historiography has generally suggested. As seen above, although the logic of Giannettini's operation in the Triveneto is quite clear, there is little evidence to support specific hypotheses on how the SID intended to use ON's networks in Veneto had it succeeded in gaining full control over them. Similarly, although it is certainly possible that elements within the SID supported the FN's subversive plan in order to produce some form of 'stabilizing destabilization', as mainstream historiography has claimed, the available documentation supports, by contrast, the view that the military intelligence service manipulated and then deliberately sacrificed the FN in order to strengthen its credibility with the US embassy. In doing so,

⁶²G. De Lutiis, *I Servizi Segreti in Italia*, 219–30; and N. Tonietto, "Un colpo di stato mancato? Il golpe Borghese e l'eversione nera in Italia," *Diacronie* 27, no. 3 (2016): 19.

⁶³Letter from Guido Giannettini to Gen. Gianadelio Maletti Head D/SID.

⁶⁴CIA, *The Pike Report* (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1977), 194; C. Gatti, *Rimanga tra Noi*, 125; and L. Cominelli, *L'Italia sotto tutela*, 107.

the SID aimed to secure US support and thereby conduct its own independent operations against communism.

The Transformation of the Right-wing Networks and the First Attempts at Adaptation, 1971–1973

Between the end of 1970 and the first months of 1971, the Italian extreme right entered a phase of turmoil. After the escape of its leader Stefano Delle Chiaie to Spain in July 1970, AN, structured into local networks whose activities were highly dependent on directives from the central leadership, fell into disarray.⁶⁵ For its part, ON, under increasing pressure from the police, began to experience internal breakdowns. Finally, between March and June 1971, the FN also began to disintegrate for the same reasons. Concurrently, other smaller entities began to emerge; these were often locally based and prone to opportunistic forms of cooperation.⁶⁶ In the face of these changes, the SID increased intelligence collection, focusing particularly on the Triveneto and Lombardy, through the recruitment of two additional sources, *Sauro* and *Avorio*, managed respectively by the Trento and Verona CS centers. The SID also diversified its collection efforts and started to regularly monitor not only ON and AN, but also a variety of smaller local groups.

These efforts produced some positive results: reports forwarded by the SID's peripheral units, as well as analyses conducted by the 'D' central unit, reveal a more comprehensive intelligence picture of the extreme right compared to the previous period.⁶⁷ 'D' office intelligence products displayed deep knowledge of right-wing extremism at both the national and regional levels in many respects (particularly the ideology, numbers, and capabilities of the various groups). At the same time, however, they were lacking in terms of organizational analysis, particularly regarding the interaction mechanisms between the various groups.⁶⁸ The military intelligence service therefore experienced serious problems in identifying the operational (i.e. related to subversive and terrorist activities) chains of command and control that were emerging among right-wing organizations in the various areas of the country. Moreover, although the SID's new sources in the extreme right had access to different circles and milieux, the military intelligence service continued to fail in achieving deep penetration of the neofascist clandestine apparatuses. This, in turn, made it very difficult to produce tactical warnings, except for minor attacks.⁶⁹

The consequences of these problems became evident when looking at the rise of a new extremist organization, the *Squadre d'Azione Mussolini* – SAM (Mussolini Action Teams), a small but very violent group active mainly around Milan. The SID became

⁶⁵See. F. Ferraresi, *Threats to Democracy*, 129.

⁶⁶F.M. Biscione, *Dal Golpe alla P2*, 39.

⁶⁷"Report 11347 CS Trento to D: Operation Sauro – Activity of Avanguardia Nazionale, 10 October 1970," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/5/15/2; and "D Internal Note, 20 February 1971," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–100-4/12/1/3.

⁶⁸"Report, CS Trento to D: Operation XXX – Activity of right-wing extremists, 2 March 1971, RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–100-4/12/1/6; "Report 2119, CS PD to D: Ordine Nuovo, 3 April 1971," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/7/2; "Note, CS Trento to D: Operation XXX – Activity of right-wing extremists, 19 Aprile 1971," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–100-4/12/1/25; "Report 5187, CS Trento to D, CS PA, RCCS Operation Sauro: Activity of Right-wing extremists, 28 April 1971," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/5/15/4.

⁶⁹"Report, RCCSR to D, 7 June 1971," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–100-4/12/2/31; "Report 7413, CS Trento to D, RCCS Roma: Operation Avorio – Activity of right-wing extremists, 15 July 1971," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/5/15/6.

aware of SAM's existence almost immediately after its foundation in the summer of 1969, but for more than a year and a half, despite activating all available assets, it was unable to draw a clear intelligence picture of the organization beyond identifying the two leading figures: Giancarlo Esposti and Gianni Nardi.⁷⁰ In March 1971, the head of the 'D' office, Gen. Maletti, forwarded a directive to several peripheral offices urging them to penetrate SAM by taking advantage of the opportunity provided by Esposti's upcoming military draft to recruit him.⁷¹ It is not clear whether the objective of the operation was to take control of SAM through Esposti or whether the latter was simply to be used to obtain intelligence about neofascist groups in the Milan area. In any case, the attempt was unsuccessful.⁷²

In February 1972, SAM carried out larger attacks, bombing the headquarters of the left-wing newspaper *l'Unità* as well as two monuments to the partisans of the Second World War. A few days later, Maletti ordered the intensification of collection efforts and the development of a comprehensive intelligence picture outlining SAM's organizational and operational structure, strategic objectives, leadership, and possible connections with other right-wing extra-parliamentary formations.⁷³ The following week, the Milan CS center submitted a report stating that it had failed to collect enough information to develop a clear picture of the organization. The available elements nonetheless allowed the hypothesis that SAM was not a stable entity but consisted of different micro-groups that operated independently under the same acronym. No details were included in the report regarding which entities SAM possibly brought together, nor about possible patterns of interaction between them.⁷⁴

SAM's activities gradually slowed down in 1972 following the apprehension of Esposti in February and of Nardi in September. Considering the failures of the previous months vis-à-vis neofascist terrorism, however, the 'D' office again attempted to improve collection by recruiting a high-profile source. In early 1972, in fact, the *Nucleo Operazioni Dirette* – NOD (Direct Actions Unit), a sort of special unit with informational-operational tasks created in the summer of 1971 within the 'D' office, conducted an operation to locate, approach, and coerce into cooperating the AN leader Delle Chiaie, who at the time had fled to Spain. The operation exploited intelligence from a source within AN detailing the organization's clandestine paramilitary structure and the role it had played in the FN's attempted coup d'état.⁷⁵

By contrast, no attempts were made to revise or amend the analysis function. Available analytical documents from the period show not only that the SID still relied on a 'bean-counting' military-style approach to evaluate the strength of extremist groups, but also that hypotheses about the strategic courses of action of right-wing organizations were always framed within an extremely broad framework centered on the MSI. The outlook and behavior of the MSI were considered essential for assessing the seriousness of the

⁷⁰"Report, CS Padova to D," March 4, 1972, RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2-50-6/27/4/32; "Report 24836/A, RCCS Roma to D, CS MI: Weapons and Explosives contraband, 20 August 1971," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/2/5/4.

⁷¹Note 12209, CS MI to 'D' and CCS GE, 7 October 1967," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/3/38/4.

⁷²"Note 04/51258/R1, D to CS MI e TS, 18 December 1971," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/2/5/11/8; Note, Head D to RCCS Roma, December 1971," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2-100-4/12/8/8.

⁷³Internal D Note: SAM Bombings, 11 February 1972; "Note 04/41801/R/1^, D to all CS: Activity of S.A.M., 19 February 1972," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2-100-4/12/9/39.

⁷⁴"Report, D to Director: Activity of S.A.M., 28 February 1972," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2-100-4/12/10/42.

⁷⁵*Commissione Parlamentare d'Inchiesta Sulla Loggia Massonica P2, Serie II: Documentazione Raccolta dalla Commissione*, Vol. 3, Tomo iv, Parte 1, Roma, Senato della Repubblica, 1985, 760-769.

threat posed by right-wing extremism.⁷⁶ The analyses conducted in this period by the 'D' office on internal security claimed that the MSI had adopted a strongly democratic stance and that the party was committed to exerting tight control over the most extremist fringes. This, according to the military intelligence service, effectively limited the extremist organizations' operational latitude. Lacking support infrastructures, having a limited number of militants, and possessing meagre financial resources, they could only carry out attacks of limited scope and did not have the capability to conduct large-scale terrorist attacks or develop subversive projects. For these reasons, neofascist groups did not represent, in the SID's view, a threat to the internal security of the State.⁷⁷ Assessments of this type continued to prevail at least until early March 1973.⁷⁸

Although logically and empirically solid, as well as fundamentally correct in their predictions, the SID's analyses failed to detect the evolutionary trend characterizing right-wing extremism, namely fragmentation, and to identify the type of threat that this was likely to produce: isolated terrorist attacks by small local clandestine organizations. The beginning of the trial against ON and public and political pressures to outlaw AN had in fact given further impetus to the fragmentation of the extreme right. Since the beginning of 1973, meetings and initiatives organized by neofascist activists had multiplied, with the formation of a considerable number of 'cultural circles', 'study centers', and the like. These initiatives often served to provide cover for various types of clandestine activities.⁷⁹ The military analysis approach adopted by the 'D' office made it difficult to grasp that horizontal interaction between various right-wing groups was on the rise and led to underestimating the overall offensive capabilities of neofascist organizations. Moreover, although focusing the analysis on the MSI could help to understand the underlying logic guiding the strategy of some extremist organizations, among which was ON, this approach tended to superimpose a high degree of coherence and unity on the actions of the latter at a moment when, by contrast, attacks perpetrated by neofascist groups were more the byproduct of local dynamics or even merely of opportunity.

In mid-March 1973, the leadership of the 'D' office initiated an internal evaluation of intelligence collection capabilities. The head of the office sent a note to all the peripheral branches with a bleak assessment of the department's intelligence production, judged not commensurate with its efforts. In-depth examinations of the availability of informants in each of the CS centers had indeed revealed that in several sectors (including the extreme right) coverage was mostly ensured by low-level, unreliable, or occasional sources. Since technical collection could not fulfill the office's requirements, the 'D' leadership recommended a massive recruitment effort, underlining that the objective was to have at least two qualified sources for top-priority sectors, to be able to cross-check collected intelligence, and one for each of the low-priority sectors.⁸⁰

Archival documentation on the following period reveals that, despite some progress in intelligence collection, the SID ultimately failed to adapt. Reports submitted by the 'D'

⁷⁶"Internal D Note: Riots, 9 October 1972," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2-50-6/7/1/5; "Report 10284, CS PD to D: Activity of Right-wing Extremists, 22 December 1972," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/7/11.

⁷⁷"Note, D a Director: Situation - Impact on internal security," 21 December 1972, RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2-50-6/7/1/6; "Note, D to Director: Assessment of internal security," 9 January 1973, RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2-50-6/7/1/7.

⁷⁸"Note, D to Director: Subversion and dangers to Internal Security," February 9, 1973, RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2-50-6/7/2/2; and "Note, Director to Prime Minister: Relevant Elements concerning Internal Security," March 3, 1973, RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2-50-6/7/2/15.

⁷⁹F. Ferraresi, *Threats to Democracy*, 128-9.

⁸⁰"Note 4/7650/R/1^, D to all CS: Internal Security - Intelligence Collection, 14 March 1973," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2-50-6/7/3/12.

peripheral units reveal a substantial increase in the number of sources (indeed mostly occasional, as can be deduced from the nature of the intelligence provided by them and the speed of contact) as well as greater capability for cross-checking intelligence. That they continued at the same time to focus on well-understood issues such as the political-ideological outlook or the strength of right-wing extremist organizations suggests that the military intelligence service still lacked deep penetrations into the extra-parliamentary right's clandestine infrastructures.⁸¹

These issues were addressed only in the summer of 1973, when the SID managed to acquire three additional sources in the Triveneto area and one in the Perugia province. Thanks to them, the output of the military intelligence service improved significantly in a relatively short time. Intelligence gaps still existed, particularly in relation to clandestine structures, as well as inaccuracies, especially regarding the size of extremist groups, which were often assessed with inconsistent parameters.⁸² At the same time, however, the 'D' office began to better understand the dynamics of interaction between extremist groups, as well as the related implications in terms of terrorist and subversive activity. In fact, it first noted that the disintegration of major groups represented an obstacle to planning wide-scale operations but left considerable room for fragmented and disjointed yet deadly initiatives at the local level.⁸³ Secondly, the SID pointed out that ON represented a particularly serious threat from a capability standpoint, due to the continuous and structured cooperation between the Padova, Rovigo, Verona, and Mestre networks.⁸⁴

Right-wing 'Grassroots Terrorism' and the Limits of Adaptation, 1973–1974

The period between September 1973 and the end of the following year represents the most 'productive' phase for SID in terms of intelligence activity vis-à-vis the extreme right within the period under scrutiny here. Available documentation shows, in fact, significant quantitative and qualitative improvements in the collected intelligence, as well as methodological refinements in analysis. This, in turn, resulted for a time in a more precise and structured intelligence picture, allowing SID to generate timely strategic warnings on emerging threats, particularly forms of 'grassroots terrorism'.⁸⁵ In April 1974, however, escalating violence and the return of large-scale terrorist attacks would reveal the limits of this adaptation.

In late summer 1973 the 'D' office still assessed that, overall, the threat of right-wing extremism was less serious than that posed by communism, for reasons analogous to those outlined in the previous section. It was specified, however, that the more extremist and violent

⁸¹"Note, CS NA to D: Position of the MSI Leadership," 27 April 1973," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/1/5/18; "Radiotelegram, 1st Section to RCCS, all CS, 11 May 1973, RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/1/6/6; "Radiotelegram, RCCS to D, 12 May 1973, RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/1/6/9; Note, CS TO to D: Activity of the Far Right, 24 May 1973," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/1/6/40; "Note, CS PD to D: Right-wing subversion and violence, 24 May 1973," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/1/6/42; "Note, CS Bari to D: Extremist movements subversion and violence, 26 May 1973," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/1/6/37; "Note, CS BO to D: Resumption of violence and subversion by the extreme right, 26 May 1973," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/1/6/43; "Note, CS NA to D: Subversion, 29 May 1973," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/1/6/49; Note, CS TO to D: Right-wing subversion and violence, 1 Giugno 1973," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/1/6/61; "Note, CS GE to D: Subversion, 4 June 1973," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/1/6/66; Note CS PG to D: Right-wing subversion and violence, 6 June 1973," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/1/6/68; and "Note, CS MI to D: Subversion, 28 June 1973" RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/1/7/18.

⁸²"Note, D to Director: Subversive activity by the so-called 'Gruppo Sbardella,' 30 July 1973," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/1/7/36; and "Note 4/30466/R/1^, D to RCCS Roma, all CS: Ordine Nuovo, 11 August 1973," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/7/24.

⁸³"Report 4529, CS PD to D: Right-wing long-range subversive plan, 11 June 1973," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/9/5.

⁸⁴"Note 01/1^, Head of D to Director: Right-wing activity, 11 July 1973," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/9/6.

⁸⁵See: M. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

local networks, especially those linked to ON, which was about to be outlawed, still had the capability to conduct isolated but deadly attacks,⁸⁶ a scenario that might become even more difficult should the MSI adopt a more conciliatory stance vis-à-vis extra-parliamentary organizations.⁸⁷

In the following weeks, SID's new sources provided intelligence that corroborated the essential elements of this assessment. On 17 October source *Capè* submitted a report, judged extremely reliable, which stated that during a series of recent meetings ON members had discussed moving to a new phase of revolutionary struggle. This phase contemplated the use of extreme forms of violence such as hijacking aircraft and attacking public transportation, tasks for which a 'technical unit' had started developing low-cost time bombs. The source added that ON's leadership was also working on an overall insurgency project which, up to that moment, had been shared with just a few selected members from some of the local networks.⁸⁸ Source *Turco*, by contrast, provided a less alarmist picture, stating that although motivation was high and the various cells tended to operate rather autonomously, the organization still lacked the capability to manufacture powerful explosive devices.⁸⁹ On 23 November source *Capè* reiterated his warning, claiming that a certain number of ON militants intended in the coming weeks to launch attacks against high-profile targets, both in Italy and abroad.⁹⁰

Two months later the 'D' office, integrating these reports with intelligence received from other peripheral centers, warned of impending high-profile attacks by the various local branches of ON, including murders of magistrates. The 'D' report added that ON, outlawed in November 1973, was trying to 'go underground' and would most likely rebrand itself under a new name or, alternatively, promote the creation of a clandestine federation of extreme right-wing groups under a new acronym.⁹¹ It was therefore decided to maintain maximum alert across the various peripheral structures.⁹²

Between January and February 1974, 'D' continued to collect intelligence indicating a high level of risk. On 28 January source *Tritone* reported an attempt by former members of ON to reorganize on a clandestine basis. The source specified that the reorganization, which was taking place in the Lombardy region, would be completed in about six months. He added that the objectives and 'lines of operation' of the new organization had not yet been drafted.⁹³ A few days later *Turco*, who operated in the same area, provided corroborating information. He reported that the various cells into which ON

⁸⁶Report 7655/R, CS VR to D: Ordine Nuovo – Operation Cromo, 2 September 1973," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCCP/1974/ 4/7/25; Report 7595, CS PD to D: Ordine Nuovo – Operation Cromo, 1 October 1973," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/7/27; and Angelo Ventrone, *La Strategia della Paura*, 244.

⁸⁷"Note for the Director: Right and Left-wing extremist groups, 15 September 1973," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/7/6/26.

⁸⁸Report 8288/RR, CS PG to D: Ordine Nuovo – Operation CAPE," 17 October 1973," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCCP/1974/4/7/29; and See also: "Note, Head D to Director, 26 October 1973," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/7/31.

⁸⁹Report 8379, CS PD to D: Right-wing Activity – Source "Turco," 29 October 1973," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/7/32; and Report 8698, CS PD to D: Activity of Ordine Nuovo, 12 November 1973," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/7/34.

⁹⁰"Report 9676, CS PG to D: Ordine Nuovo – Operation Capè, 28 November 1973," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/7/37.

⁹¹"D Internal Note, 17 December 1973," RS/DR/PCM/DIS/Serie varie/22/2; and "Note for the Director: Right and Left-wing Extremist Movements, 17 December 1973," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/7/8/38.

⁹²Note, CS NA to CS MI TO: Subversion in Milan, 6 January 1974," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/1/11/9; "Note CS BO to D, all CS: Subversion in Milan, 24 January 1974," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/1/11/46; and "Note RCCS Roma to D: Subversion in Milan, 25 January 1974," RS/DR/PCM/AISE /2–50-6/1/11/47.

⁹³Report 622, CS PD to CS BO, MI, VR, PG, D: Rebirth of Ordine Nuovo – Source Tritone, 28 January 1974," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/7/41.

had fragmented in the Triveneto region intended to resume, and possibly even intensify, subversive and terrorist activities.⁹⁴

In February the internal security situation in the northeast appeared to deteriorate further. The Padova CS center reported that right-wing extremists from various nearby areas were urging a resumption of terrorist attacks.⁹⁵ For its part, the Milan CS center stated that former AN militants were stockpiling small arms and explosives with the intention of carrying out attacks in Padova and Brescia.⁹⁶ On 26 February the leadership of the 'D' office responded to these reports. It underlined that, in light of the MSI's intention to return to intense 'political mobilization', the fundamental assumption underlying threat assessments in recent years might no longer be valid. This development, it noted, required an intensification of intelligence collection.⁹⁷

The SID's warnings found confirmation on 15 March, when the *Gruppo per l'Ordine Nero* (*Ordine Nero* – Black Order) claimed responsibility for two bombings: one against the headquarters of the *Corriere della Sera* and the other against the *Centro Studi Sociali Gramsci* in Milan. This was followed by another attack on 21 March against the railway network. The report sent by the Milan CS center stated that, although the organization was not previously known, available information suggested that *Ordine Nero* was in fact the now-defunct ON cell in Milan.⁹⁸ A few days later, however, RCCS Rome reported that in Rome, ON militants were merging with the *Anno Zero* group.⁹⁹ On 25 March source *Turco* reported that at the beginning of March, in Cattolica, a meeting had been held between former ON exponents to reorganize the movement clandestinely. He added that some of those present had suggested immediately beginning 'operational' activity to create chaos in the country. The document made no reference, however, to the name *Ordine Nero*.¹⁰⁰

Between April and May, *Ordine Nero* multiplied its attacks, using bombs and molotov cocktails against public offices, schools of ethnic minorities, police stations in various cities in northeast Italy, and the railway network in central Italy. The organization was evidently based mostly in the northeast, where it had incorporated former militants from the Milan section of AN and other smaller groups, including SAM and *La Fenice* (a small neofascist organization based in Milan), as well as parts of the ON networks in Triveneto. It had also apparently absorbed additional groups in Umbria and Tuscany and another in Abruzzo.¹⁰¹ Despite having anticipated the emergence of a new threat from the extreme right, the SID could not yet outline its contours. Available documentation reveals that 'D' was unable to determine whether *Ordine Nero* was truly a new organization arising from the ashes of pre-existing groups, a loose consortium of right-wing extremist networks operating autonomously under the same name, or simply a new acronym adopted to

⁹⁴"Report 707, CS PD to D: Right-wing extremism – Source Turco (on probation), 31 January 1974," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/7/42.

⁹⁵"Note CS PD to D: Subversion in Milan," February 13, 1974, RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/1/13/12.

⁹⁶"Note, CS MI to D: Subversion in Brescia by Avanguardia Nazionale," February 22, 1974, RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/1/13/28.

⁹⁷"Note, D to all CS: Activity of the MSI-DN – situation, 26 February 1974," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/1/13/36.

⁹⁸"Report 6014, CS MI to D: Milan Bombings, 15 March 1974," RS/DR/DPS/DCPP/1974/5/6/3.

⁹⁹"Report, RCCS Roma to D: Internal Security, 25 March 1974," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2–50-6/7/9.

¹⁰⁰"Report 2189, CS PD to D: Activity of Ordine Nuovo – Source 'Turco' (on probation), 25 March 1974," RS/DRMI/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/9/9.

¹⁰¹N. Rao, *Trilogia della Celtica* (Milano: Sperling & Kupfer, 2014), 222.

disguise ON.¹⁰² This uncertainty made it extremely difficult to issue tactical warnings about possible terrorist attacks.¹⁰³

Neofascist terrorist violence culminated on 28 May in Brescia, when a powerful bomb exploded in Piazza della Loggia, killing eight people and injuring 102.¹⁰⁴ The 'D' leadership immediately instructed peripheral branches to intensify intelligence collection, not only to identify the perpetrators of the attack.¹⁰⁵ In response, a few days later the Florence CS Center hypothesized that the Brescia attack had been organized either by the 'Red Brigades' or by other left-wing groups in order to weaken the MSI.¹⁰⁶ The Perugia CS Center, by contrast, offered a somewhat different and more realistic assessment based on intelligence from source *Capé* (classified at the highest level of reliability). The report stated that the attack had been planned during a meeting of former ON members held ten days before the bombing in Brescia.¹⁰⁷

Between June and July, the 'D' office failed to develop a clearer intelligence picture of the terrorist threat emanating from the extreme right. Information provided by both regular and occasional sources proved inconsistent, and peripheral branches increasingly struggled to integrate new reports with previously available intelligence in a coherent manner.¹⁰⁸ Determining the causes of this deterioration in the quality of intelligence collected by SID is not straightforward; however, two hypotheses can be advanced. The first is that the onset of more violent attacks had prompted greater compartmentalization and secrecy within the various neofascist local networks, making it increasingly difficult for sources to maintain access to relevant information. The second is that the sources themselves, neofascist militants, were either unwilling or afraid to provide information on terrorist attacks, whether out of solidarity with their comrades or for fear of retaliation. Last but not least, as stressed in a note by RCCS Rome, dysfunctions in intelligence-sharing and stove-piping may have further hampered 'D's collection capabilities.¹⁰⁹

On 4 August a bomb exploded on the *Italicus* train, killing twelve and injuring fifty. The SID, which had received no prior warning of the attack (for which *Ordine Nero* later claimed responsibility), failed to issue a tactical warning.¹¹⁰ It is possible that the difficulties discussed above played a key role in this failure. An alternative explanation is that the failure stemmed from the 'D' office's re-tasking of its collection assets between June and July 1974 to prioritize intelligence on a suspected coup plan in which neofascist groups were believed to play a leading role. This effort enabled the military intelligence service to uncover a coup d'état plan scheduled for between 10 and 15 August 1974. The plot involved elements from Borghese's FN and other neofascist groups, members of the

¹⁰²A few days before the attack *Tritone* still claimed that the new right-wing organization that had picked up the baton from ON 'might be' in his opinion identified with *Ordine Nero*. See, "Note from Source 'Tritone,' 25 May 1974," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/2/2/2.

¹⁰³"Note, D Head to Director: Bombing in Trieste, 9 May 1974," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/2/6/4.

¹⁰⁴The authors of this attack have never been found, though the consensus is that it is to be attributed to right-wing extremists, see Carlo Ghezzi (ed.), *Brescia: Piazza della Loggia* (Perugia: Futura, 2012).

¹⁰⁵"Note, D RCCS Roma, all CS: Subversion, 1 June 1974," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2-50-6/1/18/40.

¹⁰⁶Report 5457, CS FI to D: Considerations on Right-wing extremist activities, 4 June 1974," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/ 6/5.

¹⁰⁷Report 5038/RR, CS PG to D, CS MI: untitled, 11 June 1974," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/9/18.

¹⁰⁸Report 5059, CS PG to D: Activity of *Ordine Nuovo* – Operation *Capé*, 12 June 1974," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/7/44; "Report 5436, CS BO to D, CS VR: *Ordine Nero*, 17 June 1974," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/2/6/9; and "Report 4873, CS PD to D, 8 July 1974," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1969/107/1/3.

¹⁰⁹"Note, RCSS Roma to D: Subversion, 16 July 1974," RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2-50-6/1/20/33.

¹¹⁰G. Panvini. *Ordine nero, guerriglia rossa*, cit., 280. See also: Luca Innocenti, *Italicus la bomba di nessuno. Una strage impunita tra depistaggi, eversione nera e complotti di Stato* (Arezzo: Fuorionda, 2013).

armed forces, the security service of the Ministry of the Interior, as well as other political organizations of various orientations, including the 'Revolutionary Action Movement', the 'Democratic Resistance' center, and the 'New Republic' political movement.¹¹¹ On this occasion, the SID succeeded not only in issuing a precise strategic warning that identified the various components of the coup movement and the subversive plan, but also in providing a tactical warning regarding the specific period in which the coup would be attempted, thereby helping to prevent it.¹¹²

To sum up, despite the progress achieved in intelligence activity vis-à-vis right-wing extremism between the end of 1973 and the end of 1974, the SID proved unable to fully adapt. The first limitation derived from the choice to rely on a single collection methodology, the recruitment of paid sources, which left the service entirely dependent on elements whose behavior it could not control. The second limitation concerned analysis and consisted of the failure to revise the overall framework within which the threat of right-wing extremism was assessed. Even in the face of the logistical-operational 'self-sufficiency' of many small neofascist formations, the 'D' office continued until the end of 1974 to adhere to its basic assumption: that in the absence of support from the MSI, smaller right-wing organizations could not pose a serious threat to the internal security of the State.

Conclusions

The SID was established with obvious shortcomings. The average level of education in the armed forces was rather low, and no professional comprehensive in-house training was provided by military intelligence. There was thus considerable variation in the quality of personnel, determined by attitude, personal inclinations, experience, and previous training, something which inevitably precluded the possession of certain types of skills, especially in the field of analysis.

As protests and riots intensified in 1967, despite noting some anomalies in the Triveneto area, the SID did not detect ON's shift to a strategy of armed struggle; by contrast, believing that ON could be effectively manipulated, the SID launched an operation aimed at taking control of the group's local networks. Based on the available documentation, it is difficult to discern a clear rationale for this operation, save for two aspects: that the SID intended to use ON to monitor local 'maoist' groups, and that control of ON networks was considered essential for containing US military intelligence covert operations in the area. The logic undergirding the manipulation of the FN appears clearer. The SID managed to infiltrate Borghese's organization from the beginning and, thanks also to the paramilitary structure and operational methods of the Front, to effectively analyze its functioning, planning, and to anticipate its moves. It is not clear whether the lack of tactical warning regarding the beginning of the FN coup operation on the night of 8 December 1970 was the result of a mistake by military intelligence or, by contrast, whether it was part of an elaborate plan to manipulate the organization. On the basis of what is known about the interactions between General Miceli and the US

¹¹¹"Note, D Head to Director: Right-wing Subversion, 5 July 1974," RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/9/19.

¹¹²D Internal Note: Subversion, 9 July 1974', RS/DR/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/9/21; 'Report, RCCS Roma to D: Subversion, 16 July 1974', RS/DR/PCM/AISE/2-50-6/1/20/33; 'Note, D Head to Director: Subversion, 26 July 1974', RS/DR/MI/DPS/DCPP/1974/4/9/24. (INSERT 112TH FOOTNOTE HERE).

embassy, however, it seems that the SID wanted to take advantage of the FN in order to promote a project to shift Italy's political balance to the right centered on the MSI in which it could keep a central role. At the beginning of 1971 the strategy of manipulating extreme right-wing organizations was gradually abandoned, in the case of the FN since it had achieved its aim, i.e. substantial US funding, and in the case of ON most likely due to a more cautious stance by the military intelligence in light of the increasing media attention on the links between the SID and the extreme right. Due to intense pressure from police forces and judicial investigations, in the first half of 1971 the extreme right entered a phase of crisis which saw the progressive disintegration of the major organizations and the emergence of smaller entities, operating mostly locally, in a less coordinated manner, and on an opportunity basis. In the face of these changes, the 'D' office quickly managed to increase its sources and develop a broader intelligence picture, particularly regarding the size, strength, composition, and armament of the various groups; nevertheless, it continued to encounter difficulties in conducting deep penetrations of the neofascist clandestine apparatuses, and it remained therefore ultimately unable to provide tactical warnings on the more serious attacks perpetrated by neofascist organizations. Likewise, 'D' continued to suffer from significant gaps in terms of analysis, failing to identify the emerging chains of command and control that governed the interactions between the various right-wing networks in matters of terrorist activities. Furthermore, for at least two years, approximately until March 1973, the SID's analyses did not grasp the main trend characterizing the evolution of right-wing extremism, i.e. organizational fragmentation, nor the extremely fluid modes of interaction prevailing between the various groups, thus underestimating their offensive capabilities and therefore the type of security threat they posed. These problems would, in part, be resolved only in the summer of 1973 following the recruitment, for the first time, of sources with some kind of access to neofascist clandestine apparatuses, as well as with some limited analytical improvements, which promoted greater flexibility in assessments. The period between the end of 1973 and the first quarter of the following year can be considered the most successful for military intelligence, as it proved able to adapt to the threat in three ways: by concentrating intelligence efforts mainly on ON, the most dangerous neo-fascist organization; by collecting a greater amount of intelligence from a greater number of sources and examining it more rigorously; and by making the basic assumptions employed to analyze the threat from the extreme right more flexible. As a result, the service managed to generate timely strategic warnings, particularly in relation to the emergence of forms of 'grassroots terrorism'.

From around April 1974 the emergence of *Ordine Nero* and the return of large-scale terrorist attacks would stress the limits of the military intelligence adaptation process: firstly, the continued use of the sole technique of recruiting paid sources, and secondly the methodological limits that characterized the assessments of the threat posed by the extreme right. This study therefore demonstrates that the main interpretation advanced by scholarship, according to which in the period 1966–1974 military intelligence had significant capabilities that it chose not to deploy in order to take advantage of neofascist groups as covert tools in the fight against communism, should now be considered outdated. By pushing the examination of the SID's capabilities to a more granular level, and by examining the archival record more thoroughly, this article has provided a more detailed picture

of the collection and analysis capabilities, as well as of the strategy, of military intelligence, which in turn invalidates the prevailing interpretation. In fact, first, it appears clear that the SID's frequent interactions with neofascist militants were linked to military intelligence's preferred collection method, recruitment, which necessarily required a certain level of proximity. Secondly, the SID consistently failed to conduct deep penetrations of right-wing extremist organizations, namely, to recruit sources with stable access to the neofascist clandestine operational structures which, in turn, had a seriously adverse impact on its ability to prevent terrorist attacks. Finally, as mentioned above, a 'manipulation strategy' was, as a matter of fact, implemented, but careful examination of the available evidence reveals that its scope was much more limited than historiography has suggested, having been carried out only between 1967 and 1970. Similarly, its rationale always remained unclear, as the strategy simultaneously pursued varying 'bundles' of objectives, including most prominently containing the US military intelligence operational activities in the area. Finally, evidence points to the fact that it envisioned control of right-wing groups for the purpose of intelligence collection and 'containment', rather than destabilization through terrorism and subversion.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).