When the Left turned to violence: the emergence of armed struggle in post-war Europe: A historical case study on the Red Brigades

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A historical case study on the Red Brigades

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Introduction

Rome, Via Fani, 16th of March 1978. It was a cold morning in the Capital, when Italy was shocked by an event that seemed unimaginable: the kidnapping of Aldo Moro, the former Prime Minister and current leader of the Christian Democracy (DC) party, by the Red Brigades (Brigate Rosse, BR), unofficially emerging in early 1970 and then officially emerging and developing throughout the 1970s. Moro, one of the central figures of Italian politics since the early 1960s, was kidnapped by a group of left-wing terrorists, who saw him as a key figure in a corrupt system that had failed to address and solve the country's deep social, political, economic crises and a general state of discontent. Moro was the only political figure pushing for the DC to move in the direction of a larger involvement by the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in the Italian parliament[1] (Drake, 2006, p. 116). Moro was held prisoner, his life hanging in a small cell while the BR and the Italian state negotiated behind the scenes. Ultimately, on the 9th of May, after 55 days, the BR assassinated Moro, sending distress and a clear message through Italy and the wider world, to get to the heart of the state. This horrific act was not just an isolated incident but part of a broader wave of violence carried out by domestic leftist armed groups in the 1960s of post-war Europe.

The rise of leftist armed groups represents a crucial yet partially under-explored part of the discussion around political violence and radicalization. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, numerous leftist militant organizations emerged in response to perceived state oppression, social grievances, and domestic and transnational influences. Groups such as the Brigate Rosse (BR) in Italy, the Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF)[2] in Germany, Action Directe[3] in France, and Grupos de Resistencia Antifascista Primero de Octubre[4] (GRAPO) in Spain attempted to overthrow capitalist structures and state institutions through violence. While extensive research has been conducted on terrorism, social movements, and radicalization, few studies examine the actual emergence of these groups. This research attempts to address this gap by examining the conditions and variables that facilitated the birth of leftist armed organizations in post-war Europe, focusing on the case of the Red Brigades in Italy.

The existing literature on leftist political violence tends to focus on either the tactical aspects of militant groups or on the consequences of terrorism on state stability (Chiampan, 2020, pp.

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[1] This was called "historical compromise" as it was the only period in Italy where right (DC) and left-wing parties (PCI) cooperated (Drake, 2006, p. 116).

[2] See: Smith, J., & Moncourt, A. (2009). *The Red Army Faction, a documentary history: Volume 1: Projectiles for the people.* PM Press.

[3] See: Dartnell, M. Y. (1995). *Action Directe: Ultra-left terrorism in France, 1979-1987*. Routledge.

[4] Consult: Rodríguez López, J. (2023). *Los GRAPO contra el Estado* (1968-1985). Editorial Comares.

25-26). Meanwhile, scholars of terrorism prioritise the effects of state repression measures without fully integrating the role of social and economic discontent surrounding and influencing them (Briziarelli, 2014; Tarantelli, 2010). What is missing is an exhaustive analysis that synthesises individual motivations, movement dynamics, structural conditions, and external factors to explain the emergence of leftist armed groups.

This study attempts to bridge this gap by using three concepts. Firstly, state repression, which involves the use of physical sanctions against an individual within the territorial jurisdiction of the state (Davenport, pp. 2-4). Secondly, socioeconomic grievances, defined as collective frustrations that come from systemic inequalities (Gurr, 1970). Lastly, domestic and transnational influence, which is the diffusion of ideological frameworks, tactics, and logistical support in and across borders (Della Porta, 2018, p. 463; Tarrow, 2005). Although previous studies often examined these elements separately, this thesis tries to combine them to provide a more integrated explanation of the emergence of leftist armed movements (Della Porta, 2014, p. 95). McAdam's (1982) political opportunity theory will serve as the theoretical foundation for analyzing these considerations (Tilly, 1978).

This thesis is guided by the following research question:

What explains the emergence of domestic leftist armed groups in post-war Europe?

Literature review

This section looks over the literature surrounding domestic leftist armed groups in post-war Europe, with an emphasis on the BR and the period referred to as the Years of Lead in Italy, which was a turbulent period in Italy from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, characterized by widespread terrorism, social unrest and discontent. The review begins by looking over existing research on violent leftist organizations that emerged across Europe during that period and over research on personal factors. Finally, the review identifies gaps in the literature, particularly the lack of comparative analyses. Having defined the structure of this review, the thesis now turns to existing literature to see how these ideas have been explored.

The explanations for the emergence of leftist violent social movements have been the subject of extensive scholarly debate. Researchers identify multiple interrelated factors that contribute to these processes. Some scholars (Della Porta, 1995; Tarantelli, 2010, p. 542) emphasize individual motivations and psychological transformations and processes, others focus on competition (Tilly, 1978), while another body of literature underlines state repression and structural conditions as key drivers of violence and radicalisation (Celani, 2004, p. 60; Della Porta, 1995, 2013; Neumann, 2013).

Another strand of research focuses on the more personal factors that lead individuals to join violent movements. Bosi and Della Porta's (2012) argument is that individuals are drawn into armed movements through three primary ways: ideological, instrumental, and solidaristic. Individuals start to join fights because of a belief that they identify with. That fight is seen by them as a practical means to achieve personal or political goals, thus, it is instrumental and it is solidaristic because individuals are motivated by emotional and loyal ties (Bosi & Della Porta, 2012, p. 362). These ways highlight how internal factors also matter and have a significant impact on participation in violence. Other scholars have also examined how social movements escalate toward violence. Chiampan (2020) argues that the shift from nonviolent activism to armed struggle is often a response to state repression and internal movement dynamics as activists begin to perceive violence as the only effective means of resistance and getaway. Similarly, Della Porta (1995, 2013) highlights how movements radicalize through internal factionalization, competition, and escalation of confrontations with the state. She argues that repression often triggers a cycle in which state violence can set off retaliatory violence, pushing movements to emerge and eventually become more clandestine and violent. Lumley (1990) is one of the only ones who further touches upon this and contextualizes this radicalization process within the cultural and ideological climate of protest movements, particularly in a more communist Italy. He says that "books and symbols of

the international struggles in China, Vietnam, and Cuba were readily consumed. The Feltrinelli bookshops sold tons of Che Guevara posters" (Lumley, 1990). Hence, the scholars shape the perspective on the emergence of radicalisation, how these two are not purely reactionary but also shaped by political ideologies that justify armed struggle as part of a broader historical mission.

Moreover, the role of state repression and structural conditions in fueling political violence is also emphasised. Davenport (2007) argues that repression is often counterproductive and ineffective, as it reinforces militant groups' narratives of victimization and resistance, ultimately escalating conflict rather than suppressing it. Similar to this, Della Porta (1995, 2013) argues that strong legal reactions, such as mass arrests and surveillance, tend to radicalise and make movements emerge by alienating activists and driving them underground. Hoffman (2002) and Neumann (2013) further highlight how counterterrorism efforts can accidentally strengthen militant organizations by legitimizing their claims of state oppression. According to them, radicalisation reshapes how activists calculate their strategies, through internal dynamics and external pressures.

Even though there have been scholars touching upon the theme, the research on domestic leftist armed groups in post-war Europe is still narrowly focused and frequently divided along national lines (Della Porta, 1995; Lumley, 1990; Orsini, 2011). The conditions behind the creation of groups and escalation require more attention as social movement scholars analyse mobilization and social movements theory, but often ignore or omit the political environment and the explicit points that lead groups to engage in violent actions (Foley, 1999; Hall et. al., 2012).

While these perspectives provide valuable insights, existing research often examines these factors in isolation rather than exploring their interactions and how they all explain why this kind of movement emerges. This study attempts to provide a more integrated understanding of leftist armed emergence by concentrating on the BR and placing them within a larger European trajectory.

Theoretical framework

To best analyse the emergence of leftist armed groups in post-war Europe, this study uses a theoretical framework grounded in McAdam's (1982) political opportunity theory (POT), taken from his political process model. This theory, even though initially developed in the context of civil insurgencies in the US, highlights how opportunities for dissent, radicalisation, and the emergence of armed groups are created by structural changes, governmental reactions, and ideological influences (McAdam, 1982). Building on this theory, this framework integrates the thesis's independent variables (state repression, socioeconomic grievances, domestic and transnational revolutionary influence), which collectively explain the conditions under which leftist armed groups like the BR emerged, and which one is the most significant. By situating these concepts within Italy's unique political and social context during the Years of Lead, this framework seeks to provide a complete way to analyze how structural and societal constraints interacted with ideological motivations to facilitate the BR's emergence.

POT highlights how activists' perceptions of effective nonviolent strategies are altered by state repression, which reforms the structure of political opportunities (McAdam, 1982). Police violence during the 1969 *Hot Autumn* strikes is an example of a severe governmental response to protests in Italy that shut down institutional avenues for dissent through repression and harsh policing. This was a time of widespread mobilisation, characterised by strikes and assemblies, primarily involving workers and students, with student movements that began in 1968, a year full of protests in Italy (Bartali, 2007, p. 365). This repression radicalized leftist factions, who viewed armed struggle as the only durable and effective response to state violence and interpreted state violence as evidence of systemic illegitimacy (Maney, 2001, p. 89; Orsini, 2011). McAdam's theory (1982) explains this as a shift in the "costs of collective action"; when repression raises the risks of nonviolent protest, radical groups may adopt underground tactics, which is what the BR did. The BR framed their armed struggle as a necessary response to state-sponsored terrorism, echoing McAdam's argument (McAdam, 1982; Meyer & Minkoff, 2004, p. 1476).

POT can also be applied to Italy's economic disparities. The North-South divide, the exploitative factory conditions, and the PCI's shift toward moderation created a legitimacy crisis (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004, p. 1463; Orsini, 2011). McAdam (1982) highlights how economic instability weakens regime authority, creating expanding political opportunities for activists. The BR took this opportunity, positioning itself as the true defender of workers' and students' rights. For example, their 1972 kidnapping of industrialist Idalgo Macchiarini (director of Siemens) targeted

symbols of capitalist exploitation, directly appealing to marginalized workers in industrialized cities (Bianconi, 2003).

Lastly, while McAdam's (1982) theory focuses on domestic structures, the BR's transnational ties to groups like the RAF, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and Action Directe provided tactical models and ideological validation. This aligns with McAdam's concept of "cognitive liberation", in which activists reinterpret their local struggles as part of a global revolutionary movement, drawing inspiration from the aforementioned groups (McAdam, 1982; Tarrow, 2005).

Conceptualisation

Political violence and leftist armed groups

Political violence in this research refers to the deliberate use of force by non-state actors to achieve political goals, targeting state institutions or any symbol of authority and power (Della Porta, 1995; Tilly, 1978). It includes actions that are usually presented as resistance to perceived or actual injustice, such as armed insurgency and terrorism.

Leftist armed groups are defined by their ideological motivations to use violence to go against authoritarian or capitalist governments (Hoffman, 2002, p. 313). They are clandestine groups that use violence to advance or impose Marxist, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, or revolutionary socialist goals (Della Porta, 1995, 2013, p. 2). These groups had a singular goal: to implement targeted attacks on the country's political and economic elites that would eventually destabilise the capitalist state, with tactics deriving from Marxist-Leninist theories of revolutionary vanguardism (Lumley, 1990).

State repression

State repression is defined as "coercive actions done by state authorities to suppress dissent and maintain political control" (Davenport, 2007, pp. 1-2; Della Porta, 2013). These actions include surveillance, arrests, torture, and nonjudicial killings. In the late 1960s and early 1970s of post-war Italy, this included the *Strategy of Tension*, which was a synarchist strategy that began to rip Italy apart starting in the 1960s. The strategy involved state-linked actors, predominantly the secret services, orchestrating right-wing attacks to create public fear and justify crackdowns on the left (Celani, 2004, p. 62). Its primary purpose was to destabilise the nation. This destabilisation involved neo-Nazi groups (*Ordine Nuovo* and *Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari*), banking, and terror

networks joining forces (Celani, 2004, p. 60). By limiting legal channels for dissent, state repression then pushed movements toward emerging and radicalizing (McAdam, 1982).

Socioeconomic grievances

Socioeconomic grievances are defined as collective frustrations that come from systemic inequalities, such as unemployment, bad labor conditions, or regional disparities (Gurr, 1970; Lumley, 1990; Orsini, 2011). Rapid industrialisation in Italy enhanced worker exploitation, which created new kinds of social tensions within the new large manufacturing factories, not forgetting the widening gap between the North and the South, also due to the strong emigration[5] in the direction of the industrialised North (Orsini, 2011). Armed groups exploited these complaints as a recruiting ground, justifying violence as a reaction to being oppressed by capitalism and exploitation (Chiampan, 2020, p. 28).

Domestic and transnational revolutionary influence

This concept refers to a diffusion of ideological frameworks, tactics, and logistical support across borders, as well as domestic historical legacies and histories that legitimize armed struggle (Della Porta, 2018, p. 462; Tarrow, 2005). For the BR, domestic influence came from Italy's anti-fascist partisan resistance, while transnational ties to groups like Action Directe and RAF provided guerrilla tactics and anti-imperialist narratives. Both domestic and transnational influences were rooted in ideologies like the concept of workers' autonomy, which became a pillar of revolutionary politics in that period (Lumley, 1990).

After researching, I find that to answer the research question, three concepts formulate three hypotheses and their alternatives:

H1 (state repression): When the state uses excessive repression against leftist social movements, radical factions will emerge and adopt armed struggle.

H2 (socioeconomic grievances): If a territorial area is experiencing rapid industrialization combined with persistent economic inequality, then armed leftist groups will emerge.

H3 (domestic and transnational influence): If leftist armed groups receive ideological or logistical support from transnational revolutionary networks, then they will escalate towards emergence and violence.

[5] The number is around 150'000 people going from the South towards Milan, Turin and Genoa (ISTAT, 1975).

In conclusion, this theoretical framework uses structural and ideational factors to explain the emergence of leftist armed groups in post-war Europe through the lens of McAdam's political opportunity theory (1982). State repression closed institutional ways for dissent and discontent, socioeconomic grievances undermined regime legitimacy, and transnational revolutionary networks provided ideological and tactical resources that fueled radicalization, while domestic legacies motivated militants to act. Together, these elements help show how the BR capitalized on exploiting these political opportunities to frame their violent struggle as both necessary and, most importantly, legitimate (Chiampan, 2020, p. 24; Della Porta, 1995).

Methodology

Research Design

This study will employ a qualitative research design of historical case analysis, focusing on the case study of the BR in Italy from approximately 1969 to 1988. This research design suits this thesis, as qualitative research is appropriate for exploring how and why sociopolitical phenomena occur, especially when variables are intertwined, as in this case (George & Bennett, 2005). Furthermore, in historical research, large datasets may not be reliable or available, meaning qualitative methods are more suitable (Gerring, 2007). Historical case analysis, unlike quantitative approaches, is better at tracking concepts across time, making this method even more suitable (Halperin and Heath, 2017).

Additionally, historical case analysis helps with examining temporal dynamics and political opportunities, as McAdam's (1982) theory emphasizes that movements emerge when political conditions shift in favor of mobilization. Lastly, using this research method allows the use of both primary and secondary sources, which ensures a contextually grounded understanding of the BR's emergence and escalation.

Case Selection

The Italian case of the BR in this research serves as a theory-testing and hypothesis-testing case on McAdam's (1982) political opportunity theory. This study will test whether the political opportunity structures laid out by McAdam (like state capacity, repression, economic division, and legitimacy crises), mixed with this study's independent variables, explain the emergence and trajectory of the BR in Italy's Years of Lead. The BR case provides an ideal base for analyzing how an armed group can emerge from different factors, as it evolved from a left-wing revolutionary movement into one of Europe's most notorious terrorist organizations. The BR shares some characteristics with other leftist militant organizations, particularly in how they respond and act when it comes to state repression and revolutionary ideology. While it is similar to some leftist movements, it also differs in key ways. Compared to the RAF, the BR was more structured and hierarchical, while the RAF operated in small, decentralized cells (Della Porta, 1995). Moreover, unlike Latin American guerrilla groups, the BR operated in a functioning democracy rather than under a military dictatorship (Della Porta, 1995). Lastly, there is literature and more sources on the BR compared to the other groups (Tarantelli, 2010, p. 541).

Operationalisation and data collection

This section will explain how the independent and dependent variables are operationalised and how data will be collected for each of them within the historical context of the Italian Years of Lead.

Dependent variable

The dependent variable in this study is the emergence of leftist armed groups, understood here as clandestine groups that use violence to advance Marxist, anti-imperialist, or revolutionary socialist agendas (Della Porta, 2013, p. 2; Neumann, 2013, p. 875). This variable will be operationalised by understanding the context in which the BR established itself as an armed movement, marked by internal organisation and international action. The group's early public declarations and initial acts of violence will be examined. The study will also analyse how the BR framed its ideological commitment to revolutionary violence through its manifestos and communiqués. Communiqués were statements issued by the BR, usually found on the scenes of the crime, used to claim responsibility for violent actions, articulate ideological positions, and communicate with both supporters and the broader Italian public (Bianconi, 2003; Re, 2020, p. 281).

Independent variables

The first independent variable operationalised is state repression, serving as the pivot for the state's emergency response, which includes social, legal, and military measures and as actual or threatened use of physical sanctions against an individual or organisations (Davenport, 2007, pp. 2-3; Stortoni, 1992). To measure this variable, legal and judicial measures will be used, such as the introduction of emergency laws or anti-terrorism legislation, such as the *Legge Reale* (Law 152/1975) in May of 1975, proposed by the Italian Interior Minister Francesco Reale, hence the name *Reale*. Moreover, policing and surveillance will act as another indicator for measurement, so the expansion of special police units, arrests, and police violence during protests or operations. Lastly, episodes of state violence and coercion will be looked at, such as the use of excessive force (Gazzetta Ufficiale, 1975). The broader strategy of political control, including the *Strategy of Tension* and covert anti-leftist operations, will also be considered (Celani, 2004, p. 65). Moreover, this variable will be analysed through statements or publications from militants citing repression as a cause for violence in their interviews. Lastly, secondary sources such as historical books will be used.

The second independent variable is socioeconomic grievances. This refers to the structural economic conditions that created widespread dissatisfaction, particularly among industrial workers (Gurr, 1970). This research will analyse this variable by looking at economic indicators, such as unemployment and inflation, with a focus on labour unrest, poor working conditions, and exploitative employer practices. This economic discontent, mixed with the perceived political betrayal of the PCI's working-class interests, led future brigadists to question the credibility of traditional political channels. In this context, the BR's narrative of revolutionary struggle as the only effective response to capitalist exploitation becomes especially significant. To analyse this, historical books and BR documents referencing worker exploitation or class struggle will be used.

The last variable is domestic and transnational revolutionary influences. It contains both domestic ideological legacies and external tactical or ideological support. Domestically, many radicals in the BR drew inspiration from Italy's anti-fascist partisan movement, considering that the most notorious brigadists came from far left families (Bianconi, 2003), adopting its militant ethos and organisational models. On an international scale, the BR developed ideological and tactical affinities with other leftist groups (RAF, GRAPO, and various Latin American guerrilla groups). This influence is visible in the BR's rhetorical framing and strategic approach, as highlighted by their explicit alignment with global anti-imperialist and Marxist-Leninist struggles (Della Porta, 1995). To measure domestic influence, intellectual and ideological lineage will be looked at. To measure transnational influence, collaborations abroad, ideological inspiration, and material support will be used as indicators. The BR manifestos will be looked at again, with a focus on referencing Marxist-Leninist or anti-imperialist ideology, and communication between BR members and foreign militants will be analysed as well. Moreover, autobiographies and prison interviews will be analysed.

Analysis

Background information on the Years of Lead

The BR emerged in Italy during an unstable period known as the Years of Lead, which lasted from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. This era was marked by intense political violence, domestic terrorism, and clashes between radical left-wing and neo-fascist groups. Armed actions, including bombings, kidnappings, and assassinations, became a regular feature of Italian public life (Della Porta, 1995; Lumley, 1990).

Politically, Italy was quite divided. While the PCI, one of the largest communist parties in Western Europe, was forcefully kept out of power, mostly due to American influence[6], the DC dominated national politics (Celani, 2004, p. 63; Orsini, 2011). Especially among the younger, more radical parts of society, mistrust of official institutions increased. By the late 1960s, mass protests and labour unrest had intensified to the point of the *Hot Autumn*, when strikes and protests broke out all over industrial hubs, including Milan and Turin. Police repression, surveillance, and new emergency laws followed these protests, helping to create the impression that peaceful political participation was getting more difficult to do and that only violent means could drive change (Glynn, 2013, p. 380).

Economically speaking, the rapid post-war industrial expansion generated regional and class-based inequalities. The industrial North saw major economic growth and welfare, while the South remained heavily underdeveloped. Within factories, many workers experienced long hours, low wages, and employer-backed crackdowns on organizing efforts, all of which heightened class tensions (Bianconi, 2003; Gurr, 1970; Tarantelli, 2010, p. 545). The shift of the PCI, a party that 30% of Italian people supported, towards moderation and worker exploitation further grew more radical elements within the left, some of whom would later join armed groups (Bianconi, 2003).

Far-right violence also intensified during this period with bombings, including the infamous 1969 Piazza Fontana attack, where a bomb exploded at the National Agrarian Bank, killing 17 people (Bull & Cooke, 2013). This was later linked to people within Italy's State security services. These episodes contributed to the *Strategy of Tension* (Celani, 2004, p. 61; Della Porta, 1995).

Taken together, these conditions created a fertile ground for the rise of leftist armed groups. Many BR members had been active in university movements and extra-parliamentary leftist groups, spaces that had always been subject to police surveillance (Bianconi, 2013). As peaceful protests appeared to lose effectiveness and state violence and repression intensified, some activists began to

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[6] There was a CIA plot called *Operation Gladio* whose purpose was to collapse the Communist movement using secret agents (Sundquist, 2010, p. 60).

see armed struggle as the only viable path (Bosi & Della Porta, 2012; Della Porta, 2013). The BR, inspired by the internal anti-fascist partisan legacy and international revolutionary movements, adopted urban guerrilla tactics and began targeting representatives of state and capitalist institutions (Lumley, 1990; Tarrow, 2005). Every crime committed had a strategy to target people or companies that exploited workers, or stood for something capitalist, or against the proletariat. Their actions escalated throughout the 1970s, ending in the 1978 kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro (Bianconi, 2003; Drake, 2006, p. 215).

State repression

To measure this variable, legal and judicial measures were used, such as the introduction of emergency laws or anti-terrorism legislation.

In the Years of Lead, political violence was especially notable and came from all sides: left, right, from student movements and the police (Bianconi, 2003). Throughout this period, at least 415 people were killed and more than 4000 were injured, whether politically, in the streets, or through collateral damage. The BR killed around 90 people (Fasanella & Pellegrino, 2000). In return, the Italian State decided to use repression to stop violence against both the peaceful protests and the more violent ones.

Legal and court actions were crucial in intensifying this oppression. The *Legge Reale*, which allowed the police to use firearms, carry out stop-and-search operations without prior judicial review, and detain people preventively, is a significant example analysed. This law, officially implemented to fight terrorism and public disorder, only ended up blurring the line between police control and peaceful policing. As written by Celani (2004) and documented in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* (1975), the language of the law was vague enough to allow wide discretion. It states “provisions for the protection of public order”, so its entry was thought to help maintain order. However, in practice, it made the repressive capacity of the state bigger and more powerful without any actual limit. Bianconi (2003) writes in his book that this law was seen by many on the radical left as just a way to codify authoritarianism. Bianconi’s (2003) conclusion is based on a mix of judicial records, political discourse, and firsthand accounts from militants, such as Bruno Seghetti and Alberto Franceschini, founding members of the BR. This reinforced the belief that democratic avenues had been officially closed, and that armed resistance and violence were now the only viable paths to fight back.

Furthermore, episodes of direct state violence were also frequent during this period. Police brutality was documented during major protests, such as those in the *Hot Autumn* of 1969, where workers and students in cities like Milan, Turin, and Rome were met with tear gas, beatings, and mass arrests. In the University of Rome (*La Sapienza*), tensions rose to the point of the so-called *Battaglia di Valle Giulia* in 1968, where there were violent clashes between students and police. Della Porta (1995) recalls this by using police reports and trial testimonies, showing that such harsh policing normalized violence and created a climate of fear in universities. What seemed interesting about that part fight was that, for the first time, left and right-wing students fought together against the police (Adorni, 2020). Davenport (2007) thinks of this as a tipping point and comes back to McAdam's (1982) theory of political opportunity. When the cost of nonviolent dissent becomes too high, groups are more likely to shift toward clandestinity. In this case, students, who would have then become BR militants, shifted towards that, as any other solution would have been repressed by the state. Additionally, the *Strategy of Tension* ended up deepening the BR's belief that the state was not a neutral actor but was the perpetrator of this systemic and repressive violence (Celani, 2004, p. 62). This strategy and other oppressive measures pushed activists toward clandestinity and violence through a combination of state-sanctioned violence, framing of leftist groups, and the closure of institutional avenues (Chiampan, 2020, p. 30). Key turning points, such as the Piazza Fontana bombing in 1969, Piazza della Loggia bombing in 1974, or the Bologna railway station bombing in 1980, exemplify this dynamic. The Piazza Fontana bombing killed 17 people and was initially attributed to the anarchist Pietro Valpreda. Later investigations revealed involvement by neo-fascist groups (*Ordine Nuovo*) and state secret services (Foot, 2009). After Piazza Fontana, anarchist groups like the XXII March were infiltrated by police and far-right agents, who encouraged violent actions to discredit other leftist movements (Foot, 2009). This meant that the state wanted to frame leftist groups.

Moreover, policing and surveillance practices also intensified dramatically. Following the failures of traditional policing in containing political and radical unrest, Della Porta (2013) recounts court transcripts and police files to describe how the Italian State created specialised counterterrorism units, most notably the *Nucleo Speciale Antiterrorismo*, created in May of 1974. These units operated with increased autonomy and even more access to intelligence resources. The usual practices would include constant surveillance of suspected militants, raids on movement spaces, and the systematic infiltration of leftist organizations (Della Porta, 2013).

The effect of this policing and repression strategy had a double effect. On the one hand, it disrupted some organizations in the short term, but on the other hand, it also radicalized the BR

even more, who now viewed even nonviolent organizing as inherently criminalized. Even after these new units were created, these repressive operations together with the *Strategy of Tension* pushed for the development of the terrorist groups and their ability to resist and, subsequently, to an intensification of the terrorist activities, which further challenged the security system (Stortoni, 1992). Surveillance and raids became routine for anyone even remotely linked to the BR, further blurring the distinction between political activism and full-on criminality. The brigadists knew they were being closely followed, and they were prepared (Bianconi, 2003). Each person who joined the BR had pages and pages of rules to follow, from looking around to make sure they were not being followed, to using fake names, using cars with fake license plates, walking around with a gun at their fingertips, and above all, meticulously hiding the fact that they were part of the BR (Bianconi, 2003).

Furthermore, before the introduction of the *Legge Reale,* Law 18 of the Italian Public Security Act (1931) was used. It stated that it "requires organizers to notify the authorities at least three days in advance of any public gathering in a public space" and that "if the authorities believe that the gathering may pose a threat to public order, morality or security, they have the power to prohibit or dissolve it." However, this was used differently by the police. In the late 1960s and 1970s, this law was frequently used to violently break up demonstrations, union gatherings, or spontaneous sit-ins, especially those organized by far-left groups. The vague phrasing about "threats to public order" gave too much power to the police, a trend which continued throughout the 70s (Brocardi, n.d.).

State repression and state complicity, and aid in right-wing terror created a political climate in which violence was rationalized and normalized by the radical left. Leftist militants felt angry, betrayed, and extremely repressed, as Bianconi (2003) shows in his interviews. These measures not only targeted terrorism, but they also actively helped create it, considering the brutality of the police and the state (Della Porta, 1995). Extra-parliamentary leftist groups tried to protest against exploitative working conditions, to fight nonviolently against repression, but they were met with just more violence, hence the emergence of the BR (Chiampan, 2020, pp. 30-32; Della Porta, 1995).

In conclusion, after analysing legal frameworks, policing strategy, and coercive practice, it can be said that state repression emerges not as an incidental factor, but as a structural condition that enabled the emergence of the BR. Before the BR came into being, the Italian government still used repressive tactics more frequently in order to silence the militant workers' movement and the extra-parliamentary left. These tactics included police brutality during protests and strikes (at the FIAT

factory, for example), arbitrary detentions, monitoring of radical groups, and especially the criminalisation of independent organising, such as *Lotta Continua* and *Potere Operaio.*

Socioeconomic grievances

This section is based on analysing economic indicators, such as unemployment and inflation, considering also labour unrest and poor working conditions.

Other than constant political violence and repression, the Italian people's morale was low, and it seemed as if it was not going to get higher. Italy was already dealing with severe structural inequality before the BR's rise in the early 1970s, which had created the conditions for radical discontent (Sundquist, 2010, p. 55). Structural economic indicators such as high unemployment, regional inequality, and inflation created widespread frustration across Italy. As previously mentioned, while the country had experienced an economic boom in the post-war period, its benefits were unevenly distributed, most importantly between the industrial North and the agrarian South (Bianconi, 2003). Orsini (2011) and Sundquist (2010) both cite labor statistics from the Italian Institute of Statistics and economic studies to note that the North-South divide widened dramatically. The unemployment rate doubled from 1970 to 1980; it went from 4.7% to 10.5%, and inflation was on the threshold of 20% (De Meo, 1980; Modigliani et. al, 1986, p. 245). Political scientist Gurr (1970) recalls that relative deprivation drives political violence. He says that when material benefits fall short of economic expectations, the resulting gap generates resentment and isolation. In northern industrial cities like Milan and Turin, workers saw profits rising, but their living standards stalled. High inflation in the early 1970s also eroded real wages, further aggravating the sense that the system was failing those who produced its wealth (Orsini, 2011).

Labour unrest and exploitative working conditions were also at the centre of the discontent. Industries like FIAT put industrial workers under long hours, inadequate safety standards, and authoritarian management systems. Tarantelli (2010) and Bianconi (2003) emphasize how these circumstances contributed to a sense of shame and political irrelevance among the working class. Bianconi (2003) claims that many future BR members came from these labour conflicts. He explains that their daily experiences of economic and social oppression caused their radicalisation, as told in the interviews. Former BR militants frequently referred to the FIAT industry in interviews and autobiographies in Bianconi's (2003) book as a site of class war, not necessarily in Marxist terms but rather as a lived, daily struggle between exploited workers and a state-backed industrial elite.

Moreover, disappointment and anger with traditional political channels, particularly the PCI, played a major role in turning economic grievance into political radicalism. As the PCI shifted toward electoral compromise with the DC, many on the left felt betrayed. This shift created a legitimacy vacuum: traditional leftist institutions were no longer seen as drivers for real change (Chiampan, 2020, p. 38). Young activists increasingly saw revolutionary violence as the only remaining path to justice and a better Italy. The BR exploited this political gap and took the opportunity to frame itself as the authentic and only defender of the working class, not corrupted by parliamentary politics and only having one aim: to get to "the heart of the state", which was done through the kidnapping of Aldo Moro in 1978 (Bosi & Della Porta, 2012; Orsini, 2011).

The BR's discourse confirms this idea. Most of their communiqués and manifestos refer to capitalist exploitation, worker alienation, and class betrayal (Red Brigades, n.d; Red Brigades, 1971). They used the language of Marxist-Leninist revolution but grounded it in local and specific workplace struggles. In their early actions, for instance, the kidnapping of important factory managers, such as Idalgo Macchiarini in 1972 or Ettore Amerio in 1974 (directors of Sit-Siemens and FIAT Mirafiori), two of the biggest manufacturers in Italy, the BR explicitly targeted symbols of capitalist power (Bianconi, 2003; Della Porta, 1995). Bosi and Della Porta (2012) and their analysis confirm this ideological connection and link it to the BR recruitment. The militants did not radicalise overnight, but this anger and violence against systemic exploitation came from their firsthand experience, which the authors gathered from prison interviews. This wasn't symbolic violence; it was intended as direct retaliation for exploitative labor conditions. Their strategy was to delegitimize the state by getting to "the heart of it" and employers simultaneously, presenting armed struggle as both political and economic warfare (Tarantelli, 2010, p. 550).

Socioeconomic grievances were not casual; rather, they were important to the formation of the BR, as demonstrated by an analysis of structural indicators, labour conflict, and political frustration. Exploited labor, rising inequality, and failed political representation produced a radical critique that the BR channeled into violent action.

Domestic and transnational influence

This section looked at the BR's collaborations abroad, ideological inspiration, material support, and transnational solidarity discourse. To analyse this variable, the BR manifestos were analysed, but with a focus on referencing Marxist-Leninist or anti-imperialist ideology, and communication between BR members and foreign militants was analysed as well.

The emergence of the BR was not a single event. Domestic leftist armed groups were emerging all over Europe. It was a time of political unrest, a very fertile ground for the emergence of these groups. When it comes to the BR, the influences have been both internal and external. The tactical and ideological foundations for the BR were laid before the group's official formation in 1970.

Domestic influence: protest culture, tactical roots, and partisan legacy

Similarly to what has already been mentioned and analysed, the BR drew heavily on Italy's own radical protest culture, fostered particularly by the student and worker movements of the late 1960s and the unhappiness with the Italian State (Briziarelli, 2014; Della Porta, 2013). Many founding members had previously participated in university occupations (such as Mara Cagol[7]), factory strikes, or local militant collectives. Bianconi (2003) provides detailed biographies using interviews with early BR militants, such as Tonino Loris Paroli, Angela Vai, Bruno Seghetti and also Geraldina Colotti, all important BR militants, all becoming part of the group for different reasons, but one thing in common: to change the state that had exploited and betrayed them. He also shows how most of them transitioned from political activism in groups like *Prima Linea* or *Autonomia Operaia* into clandestine organizations. This wasn't a sudden leap into terrorism, but a gradual evolution through increasingly confrontational activism, shaped by direct encounters with harsh policing, internal ideological debates[8], discontent, and a perceived lack of progress. Activists felt as if these repressive measures, even though they attempted to isolate the radical Left, often had the opposite effect. They delegitimised the state by creating "injustice frames", which gave movements the perception of legitimized political violence (Della Porta, 1995).

The socioeconomic situation worsened this perception. Workers and students felt like they were confronting a "growing despotism against the working class" and "intensification of repression as a strategic measure" in factories, as told by Sundquist (2010, p. 54). The failure of mass movements to improve the situation in factories led workers to request intervention from outside, contributing to the practice of "gambizzazioni" (kneecapping), which involved shooting individuals in the legs (Orsini, 2011). Its purpose was framed ideologically as a form of "mediation" or "armed propaganda" aimed at threatening individuals, recruiting members, or attempting to gain sympathy from the masses (Re, 2020, p. 277).

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[7] Here she meets and later also marries Renato Curcio, founding member of the BR (Bianconi, 2003).

[8] There were multiple "metropolitan collectives" throughout Italy, where they would meet up and talk about political and ideological debates (Bianconi, 2003).

Lastly, internal ideological debates. A key part of this ideological pathway was the so-called "pedagogy of intolerance", in which the enemy was degraded to a subhuman species, making violence and homicide seem like acts of justice (Orsini, 2011). This ideological perspective, combined with feelings of resentment, hatred, and a desire for revenge, fuelled their action (Orsini, 2011).

Another significant influence was the WWII partisan legacy, during the period of *resistenza*, which not only played a symbolic role, but also a tactical one. As Lumley (1990) explains, finding his evidence in archival analysis and political memoirs, the memory of anti-fascist armed resistance remained strong in post-war Italian political culture. For many BR members, this was not just history, it was a heritage and a need to make sure the far-right would not get into power again. The armed struggle for the BR was framed as the continuation of the fight against oppression, now changed from fascism to capitalism. The partisan image, including its use in BR manifestos, offered legitimacy to their violence and helped mobilize militants who saw themselves as protectors of the partisans (Bosi & Della Porta, 2012, p. 370; Chiampan, 2020, p. 39).

Clandestine violence in Italy started with a protest tradition, already including occupations, blockades, and confrontational marches, and evolved and developed in continuity with domestic protest repertoires and strategies (Della Porta, 1995). The BR "classical" tactics, such as targeted kidnappings, sabotage, and symbolic assassinations, all came from within Italy's influence and not outside of it. The escalation to armed struggle came from within the country's influence, not outside it. The BR was heavily influenced when it came to how they saw violence as the only way to get to "the heart of the state" (Della Porta, 1995, 2013).

Transnational influence: ideological, material, and operational support

As mentioned before, the BR was not an isolated phenomenon, they were embedded in a transnational network of revolutionary organizations. The group maintained links with the RAF in Germany, the GRAPO, and Latin American guerrilla movements (Della Porta, 2013). Della Porta (2013) analysed cross-national case comparisons (1995) and conducted over 60 interviews with former members of the RAF and BR and explained that these connections entailed training, ideological alignment, and in some cases even material support (weapons, safe houses, forged documents). These ties enabled the BR to professionalize its tactics and develop international reach. The concept of "cognitive liberation" helps explain how BR militants viewed their struggle as part of a global anti-imperialist front (Tarrow, 2005, p. 58). The BR's communiqués and manifestos referenced Vietnam, Palestine, and Latin America, portraying themselves as one node in a global

fight against US-backed capitalism and neocolonialism. This ideological framing deepened their sense of purpose and justified their violence as part of a broader historical struggle (Red Brigades, Communiqué No. 3, 1978).

The BR's communiqués from 1978, issued during the Moro kidnapping, all explicitly referenced Third World liberation movements as both allies and sources of inspiration. There is a consistent reference to Marxist-Leninist frameworks, particularly those influenced by Maoist and Guevarist guerrilla theory (Red Brigades, Communiqué No. 2, 1978). The BR saw themselves as a vanguard, as a disciplined political-military apparatus capable of leading the proletariat toward revolution and attacking capitalism. This framing was not only ideological but also strategic, it helped define targets, justify secrecy, and reinforce internal cohesion. BR writings explicitly cite global revolutionaries, connecting their local actions to international anti-imperialist campaigns (Red Brigades, Communiqué No. 2, 1978). Evidence from autobiographies and prison interviews, as discussed by Bianconi (2003), confirms that these international linkages were not abstract or rhetorical. Militants often described how encounters with foreign revolutionaries shaped their worldview and operational thinking. Some BR members were trained abroad, while others kept communication channels open through intermediary networks (Bianconi, 2003). These encounters with foreign revolutionaries contributed to a sense of shared revolutionary identity, reinforcing the BR's belief that they were part of a broader historical mission (Bianconi, 2003).

The establishment of the BR resulted from both global spread, domestic persistence, and a sense of belonging. They inherited a domestic protest culture rooted in anti-fascist memory and labour militancy. They gained tactical know-how and intellectual clarity from international revolutionary networks on the outside. All of these factors combined to give the BR funds, validation and a logical worldview that saw local violence as a component of a worldwide fight and as the only way of bringing about change (Bartali, 2007, p. 364; Chiampan, 2020, p. 31).

Discussion of findings

The remaining question to be answered is which variable was the most influential regarding the emergence of the BR. After analysing the evidence, research indicates that each variable matters, but there is one that has been more significant than the others: state repression. It is the fundamental factor without which the BR would not have emerged, or if it did, certainly not with the same violence and ideals. This conclusion is based on multiple reasons.

The first reason is the perceived closure of political channels. This analysis has shown that the BR emerged during a time when traditional forms of leftist political engagement were increasingly seen as ineffective, and when there was no trust in the government (Lumley, 1990; Orsini, 2011). Despite widespread protest, structural reforms remained limited, and key institutions were perceived as either resistant to change or seen as complicit in repression. This reason aligns with McAdam's (1982) political opportunity theory's concept of a closed or semi-open political system, which tends to radicalize actors who believe peaceful change is impossible.

The second reason is the use of violence. The Italian state's use of violence, especially through police crackdowns, surveillance, and arrest, played a pivotal role in reinforcing the BR's belief that armed struggle was the only viable path (Della Porta, 1995). Della Porta's analysis, based on interviews with former BR members, showed how repression did not demobilize the movement in its early phase; instead, it deepened its militancy. This supports McAdam's (1982) idea that repression can sometimes create a "radical flank effect" (Haines, 2025), encouraging escalation rather than retreat.

The last reason is the lack of elite allies. While important, the absence of elite allies, for example, the PCI's rejection of violent tactics, was more of a reinforcing factor than a primary cause.

Orsini (2011), analysing the communiques and interviews, concluded that the political isolation it created contributed to the group's sense of siege, but did not originate their strategy, which instead came from a situation that was seen as violent in its structure, which imposed the choice of armed struggle. The state was increasingly perceived as authoritarian, repressive, and operating outside the law. This included the perception of a "terrorist state" or "double state" by the BR, which pushed the members to its emergence (Della Porta, 1995; Orsini, 2011).

Returning to the three initial hypotheses laid out, it is important to say that while repression was the trigger, socioeconomic grievances and transnational influences were the foundation. The analysis showed that the hypothesis of state repression has the most sufficient support. It is the most significant factor in explaining the BR's emergence when compared to H2 and H3. Although it is important to distinguish between the concepts and factors that influenced the sole emergence and those that influenced its development. Socioeconomic grievances (H2) and domestic and transnational influences (H3) are part of the broader context and underlying motivations that made the emergence of a group like the BR possible. State repression, however, was ultimately the key factor in transforming these grievances into violent action, influencing the timing and intensity of the BR's activities. Tarantelli's (2010) findings of union reports and employment data illustrate

rising unemployment and inflation during the 1970s, which, combined with Della Porta's (2018) interviews and Lumley's (1990) cultural-historical study of leftist media, shows that H2 and H3 were important in the emergence of BR, but did not have sufficient support. This interpretation fits well within the logic of POT, particularly in its more dynamic and actor-sensitive variants. Dynamic because violence developed in action, during conflicts with the police that fueled radicalization and the perception of the state as an enemy (Della Porta, 1995). The analysis showed that it's not just the objective political opportunities that matter, but how those opportunities and constraints are perceived, interpreted, and framed by the actors themselves; thus, it is also actor-sensitive (Della Porta, 2013; Lumley, 1990).

Conclusion

Summary

This thesis began with the research question of why violent leftist armed groups emerge in post-war Europe by focusing on the Italian case of the Red Brigades and the context of the Years of Lead from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. This research studied the situations, factors, and turning points that led political activists to become violent activists. It studied this using three independent variables: state repression, socioeconomic grievances, and domestic and transnational influence, viewed through the lens of McAdam's (1982) political opportunity theory. The findings showed that while all three elements played an important role in establishing the conditions for political violence, state repression ultimately turned out to be the most significant factor in pushing for the emergence of leftist armed groups, while socioeconomic grievances and domestic and transnational influence were necessary, but not sufficient.

State repression not only functioned as a reactive measure by the state but also as a structural and strategic transformation of the political environment. Legislative tools such as the *Legge Reale* of 1975 significantly altered the space for dissent by expanding police powers, authority, and limiting civil liberties. These shifts were further reinforced by the creation of special anti-terrorism units, heightened surveillance, and an increasingly securitized state response. This created a closing gap of political opportunity, in which traditional ways of protest were perceived as unavailable. As state violence increased, radical activists began to believe that the only way to effectively challenge it was through armed conflict. In this way, the BR's turn to violence was not simply the result of ideology or frustration, but a premeditated response to the increasingly constrained political environment, a central mechanism in the logic of POT.

The emergence of the BR cannot be entirely explained by repression alone. The ideological foundations of the group were significantly shaped by socioeconomic grievances. Inflation, stalled wages, exploitative labor conditions, and the perceived betrayal by the Italian communist party created a perfect ground for the emergence of armed movements. In order to frame their portrayal of armed struggle as a valid class response, the BR's communiqués made reference to working-class alienation and capitalist exploitation. Their ideological and tactical orientation were also shaped by domestic influences from earlier groups and ideologies, as well as global currents, such as Marxist-Leninist theory and Latin American guerrillas, which served as models for military strategy, clandestine organisation, and anti-imperialist rhetoric. In the end, the emergence of leftist armed groups in post-war Europe did not erupt in a vacuum; it was created by the state's coercive hand.

Limitations

Since this thesis only focuses on three main elements, it is important to acknowledge that other elements could have been analysed, such as the role of gender in the BR or how media and public opinion shaped its support. A second limitation is the lack of methodological triangulation. This paper has only relied on qualitative case analysis, which does not give the change for triangulation with different data types. Moreover, historical case analysis relies on the interpretation of texts, which can introduce bias. A third limitation, even though tied to the second one, is that a single case study lowers generalisability. The study mostly focused on the BR, and even though other groups have been mentioned, findings might not be generalisable to other groups. Lastly, media and public opinion have not been studied in detail, which weakens if the BR had gained or lost support throughout their emergence and existence.

Further research

Further research should attempt to expand on this topic by examining armed movements in other Western European democracies during the same period, using similar variables but with different political structures in order to build a more generalisable theory. Future work should additionally pay more attention to international state influence and Cold War geopolitics. This thesis briefly talks about CIA involvement and American influence, but it does not fully theorise external state manipulation. Future studies could study how foreign intelligence, covert operations, and funding actually shape the trajectory of leftist armed groups. By doing so, research could map the impact of international politics on domestic repression and radicalisation. Future research could investigate the interaction between state repression and digital technologies in contemporary contexts. The digital age has changed both state surveillance and groups' communication. Looking into this evolution can shed light on whether old patterns of repression still work or if they need to be updated.

In conclusion, this thesis supports the idea that armed conflict and the emergence of leftist armed groups are a political reaction dependent on the closure of legitimate political opportunities rather than just an ideological outlier. Some movements decide to turn violent when they are under the increasing control of official repression, where protest is made illegal and dissent is made dangerous.

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