

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The extreme right and the democratic institutions in Italy. The response of the regions to a national and trans-national phenomenon (1973–1975)

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(Received 12 December 2022; revised 12 April 2023; accepted 13 April 2023; first published online 15 May 2023)

Abstract

This essay aims to analyse the presence of neofascist organisations and far-right terrorism in Italy in the early 1970s from a new perspective. Firstly, it will focus on the activities to combat the subversive structures of the ‘black galaxy’ carried out by regional institutions through the creation of special ‘regional commissions of inquiry on the problems of neofascism’. Between 1974 and 1975, these commissions carried out an extensive inventory of the movements, associations and organisations of the Italian far right. Their aim was to show the spread of the phenomenon and its local roots. Building upon the information gathered by the regional commissions, the essay will analyse the relationships between the various far-right groups in Italy and their European counterparts. The final part of the article will focus on the influence of local specificities in defining the relations between extremist movements beyond national borders.

Keywords: neofascism; far right; terrorism; Italy in the 1970s; strategy of tension

Introduction

Between 1969 and 1975, during the most traumatic period of the so-called ‘strategy of tension’, Italy witnessed at least 4,348 episodes of violence which had a clear political origin. Eighty-five per cent of these episodes were restricted to 16 Italian provinces out of a total of 95. Together with the big metropolitan areas of the Centre North of Italy, it was the regions of the North East and the Centre where the phenomenon was most widespread. It is estimated that between 1969 and 1973 right-wing extremism was responsible for 95 per cent of the episodes of political violence, in 1974 the figure was 85 per cent and in 1975 78 per cent (Della Porta and Rossi 1986, 25; Iosa 2008, 351–369).

In the South the phenomenon was deep-rooted, but – with the exception of a few striking cases – there was less conflict there than in many areas of the North and the Centre. This might be explained by the role played by the Italian Social Movement (MSI), the legal face of the extreme right in the period of the First Republic, which in the South had, in the 1950s and 1960s, firmly established its position; a party which, perhaps, was more associated with the double-breasted suit than with the Fascist *manganello* (Ignazi 1989). From the second half of the 1960s, partly in parallel with and partly in opposition to the parliamentary route pursued by the MSI, there began to emerge various movements

which took a far more hard-line approach. What has become termed the ‘black galaxy’ was in fact made up of organisations which were very different in respect to their tactics and their ideological makeup. Some – as is well known – were strictly clandestine in nature; others, instead, adopted readily recognisable acronyms (Cento Bull 2007; Dondi 2015; Ventrone 2019). Nevertheless, taken together, it was these very organisations which fomented widespread violence, planned coups d’état, and carried out terrorist attacks of various types and of differing levels of severity. As a result they transformed Italy in those years into the main European ‘laboratory’ of black subversion (Camus, Todd and Lebourg 2017, 59). The Brescia massacre clearly represented a turning point as, faced with a population badly shaken by this event, together with increasingly indignant levels of public opinion, the regional and local institutions began to contribute, with renewed vigour and commitment, to the democratic renewal of Italy (Baravelli 2016, 15–63).

This article aims, above all, to discuss the various initiatives designed to counter neofascist violence which were promoted by the regions in the years 1974–75. Within the regional councils, special commissions of inquiry were set up to look into fascist and para-fascist activity that was taking place at a local level. The main objective of this article is, therefore, to clarify the motives, the methods and the aims that lay behind the decisions taken by the recently established regional bodies. We pay particular attention to the information provided by documents from the inquiries concerning the contacts established by the local protagonists and the wider networks of international neofascism set up in the postwar period (Mammone 2015; Albanese and Del Hierro 2016; Picco 2016; Del Hierro 2022).

The analytical approach that we take is designed to illustrate how the specificities of the local contexts influenced the nature of right-wing extremism which frequently manifested itself in different ways and with different specificities than was the case with national or transnational neofascism (Del Hierro 2021). As we will see, the issue of the link between the situation on the ground locally and the international networks of the extreme right was, to a certain extent, already present in the conclusions of the regional commissions. This is an interesting element for discussion, given that in the early 1970s the debate about the links between national and transnational extreme right organisations was not part of public discourse, nor was it present in the world of the local institutions. Nevertheless, it is by reading the documents in the light of recent historiographical developments that the specific way the regional institutes looked at the international dimension of the extreme right clearly emerges. In this sense, therefore, the concluding documents written by the commission allow us to understand the relationship between the micro and the macro. In addition, they allow us to grasp elements of the evolution of the phenomenon which frequently emerged as the result of long-term transformation, capable of producing ripples both within and beyond national confines (Kallis 2014). Hence the logical need to cast light on, above all, the investigations carried out by those regions where the presence of movements operating on a national and international level was more marked, as was the case in the regions of the Centre-North of Italy. In terms of the sources available for study it also needs to be added that we encountered many problems when trying to locate and consult the documentation relating to the work of the commissions of the regional bodies in the South.

The genesis of the regional commissions of inquiry

The first ‘investigation into neofascist activities’ was set up by the Region of Lombardy in 1971, and its chair was the Christian Democrat councillor Sandro Fontana. It was the response of the institutions to the growing spiral of black violence which had hit the region following the Piazza Fontana massacre (Dondi 2018). The bombings of

12 December 1969 were not, however, the only fuse for the cycle of violent events which took place in 1970. It was, above all, the harsh campaign for the first regional elections which embittered the political climate. The MSI, faced with the prospect of left victories in various parts of the Centre and the Centre-North, frequently employed violence as a tactic, or at the very least, stirred up tensions and clashes in order to obstruct the hustings and the demonstrations of their enemies (Panvini 2009b, 107–115). After the attacks on some local councillors, which took place in Milan on 22 April 1971, the assembly for Lombardy issued a memo which denounced the violent initiatives of groups that could be traced to the extreme right: ‘initiatives’ – so the approved text reads – ‘which it is increasingly clear are part of a co-ordinated plan’.¹

The idea of an investigation at a local level was first proposed in December 1973, when the *Uffici di presidenza* (the office that assists the president of the regional council in his duties) of all the regional councils met in Turin to establish a common programme ahead of the celebrations of the thirtieth anniversary of the Liberation (Marinelli 2019, 87–101). At the meeting, two fundamental principles emerged which would characterise the inquiries in the months to follow. In the first place, the regions insisted on the need for the initiative to have a mass dimension. The regional councils aspired, by way of the inquiry, to involve a wide range of stakeholders at the social, political and institutional level. These stakeholders included the parties of the so-called ‘constitutional arch’, the antifascist associations, and the local and provincial trade unions. The ‘mass’ character was deemed to be necessary in order to stimulate a democratic reaction which, as such, would inevitably gain strength and legitimisation from a vast and co-ordinated participation of socio-political and institutional-political participants. Equally, however, in order for the regional body to gain recognition within the national institutional panorama, it was imperative to show a capacity to mobilise sectors of civil society and public opinion. Established in 1970, the regions still needed to establish a firm profile within the public power system. Hence, they were naturally inclined to carve out a space for themselves, to acquire competences, and establish a profile which suggested they were vitally important in the eyes of the public, as well the administrative bodies above and below them. Furthermore, in the course of this initial legislature, the complexities of ‘institutional building’ were far from complete, and many prerogatives were still to be defined or initiated (Romanelli 1996; Degl’Innocenti 2004). The new bodies had been granted the power to carry out inquiries, but never before had a large-scale inquiry looked at neofascist violence. This was a new departure and a substantial opportunity (Pace 1973, 189–214).

As we have mentioned earlier, the inquiries also took shape within the context of the thirtieth anniversary of the Liberation. To a great extent, then, the inquiries were secondary to, or complementary with, the wide array of celebratory initiatives which had been designed and elaborated with the specific politico-cultural aim of reanimating and giving contemporary relevance to the values of the Resistance (Cooke 2011, 113–127). Another impulse to begin the investigation was, lastly, provided by a big meeting of the representatives of the regional councils which took place in Turin in March 1974, with the participation of political figures from Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Emilia-Romagna, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Liguria, Lombardy, Piedmont, Puglia, Sicily, Tuscany, Umbria and the Val d’Aosta. In Turin, the motion to set up a large-scale inquiry into right-wing extremist organisations was carried unanimously. The decision to gather information and materials from 1969 onwards was clearly deliberate – the Piazza Fontana bomb represented a *terminus a quo* in public opinion at the time (Dondi 2018, 51–54).

The proposal for an enquiry, which in March was still rather vague, became much better defined following the Brescia massacre of 28 May 1974, after which the call for action by the Italian institutions became ever more vocal. A key contribution was made by the Regional Council of Lombardy which met at an extraordinary meeting on 30 May,

following the Brescia bombing, and revisited the idea first suggested in 1971. The project was then relaunched at the National Meeting of the Unitary Antifascist Committees, who promised complete collaboration with 'a mass inquiry covering all Italian regions into neofascism and the black plots'.²

At a meeting in Milan on 24 June, the members of the *Uffici di presidenza* of the regional councils declared their intentions to make the project happen. Following a proposal by the Christian Democrat Gino Colombo, the regions asked for a meeting with the President of the Republic, Giovanni Leone. This meeting took place on 24 July at the Quirinal Palace and saw the President of the Piedmontese Council, Aldo Viglione, insist on the widespread concern in civil society about the escalation of neofascist violence. The regions, Viglione added, had, according to public opinion, a key role to play in preventing the further spread of this violence. Furthermore, Viglione hoped that the celebrations of the thirtieth anniversary might become 'an opportunity to ensure an active commitment from all those who had direct responsibility for defending the institutions and the key structures of the Italian State'. In response, the president of the Republic underlined the need to gather around the regional bodies the relevant social forces and local bodies with the objective of launching a 'firm, intransigent and constant struggle' against 'every expression, demonstration or act designed to unbalance the Institutions and plunge Italy into disorder'.³

Between the months of September and November 1974, commissions of inquiry were set up in Abruzzo, Calabria, Campania, Emilia-Romagna, Lazio, Liguria, Lombardy, the Marche, Piedmont, Puglia, Sardinia and Umbria. Tuscany and Friuli-Venezia Giulia followed suit in December, while the Veneto preferred to restrict its commitment to the collection of information via the press.⁴ Piedmont quickly established itself as one of the most active of the regions. On Sunday 8 November a conference was held in Novara with the indicative title of *Mass inquiry into Fascist activities*. This day of debate involved the participation of 150 town councils, the most important representatives of other regional bodies, trade union delegates and numerous antifascist associations. The key objective, as the Vice President of the Commission Dino Sanlorenzo wrote, was to 'defeat fear via participation'.⁵

The region of Calabria was similarly active at the time, a consequence of the shock of July 1970, which saw one of the most violent manifestations of extreme right agitation to date. This extremism took the form of protests in Reggio Calabria, following the decision to make Catanzaro the regional capital, a decision which had fallen into the hands of the local neofascist right, who saw it as an opportunity to acquire political capital. Clashes between demonstrators and the police ensued, with the headquarters and symbols of the parties of the left deliberately targeted (Ambrosi 2009). The long emotional wave of the 'events of Reggio' provoked a strong response from the various trade unions and democratic associations, encouraging the region to take its place at the forefront of the inquiry. In December 1974, a national conference of the *Uffici di presidenza*, entitled *The Regional Inquiries into neofascism*, was organised in Reggio Calabria. Working in collaboration with the region of Piedmont, the initiative gathered together delegates from all the Italian regional councils (Santagata 1975).

For security reasons the local prefect advised that the conference should take place in a pavilion of the citrus fair at Pentimele, to the north of city. This location was a reasonable distance from the historic centre, where MSI militants and other formations of the extra-parliamentary right had planned to organise protests (Tintori 1974). Giorgio Almirante's party, above all, had frequently attacked the regions' plan in the newspaper *Secolo d'Italia*, presenting it as a pretext to open a file on 'all those citizens, those young people, and those associations which, because of their anti-communist activities, oppose communist power' (Lentini 1975). Having lost credibility following the emergence of evidence linking

its own militants with areas of right-wing terrorism, the MSI interpreted the inquiries as a sort of witch-hunt against individuals and right-wing organisations. As a consequence, both inside the regional councils as well as in the press, the representatives of the MSI built up a rhetoric of victimisation, a counter-narrative which presented the party militants as a minority oppressed by their political adversaries (King 2020). As proof the MSI pointed to the dossiers which they had produced at a local level, along with others put together by extremist organisations that were close to them ideologically. The inquiries carried out by the right on 'red violence' were in reality almost mirror images of the damning dossiers compiled by the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and by other groups of the extra-parliamentary left. The regions could therefore rely on well-honed examples and experiences. A very useful guide was, in particular, provided by the PCI's inquiries, as they had been essentially constructed in order to raise the awareness of public democratic opinion as well as of the institutions of the State (Panvini 2009a, 228–229).

Returning to the issue of the Calabrian conference, this was attended by regional councillors, mayors, leaders of the major trade unions, and members of the antifascist associations. Messages of support arrived from the president of the PCI, Luigi Longo, from the president of the Chamber of Deputies, Sandro Pertini, from ministers and other deputies. In his opening address, the president of the Calabrian Regional Council, Scipione Valentini, underlined the key role of the regions in combatting fascist extremism. Referring to the large-scale enquiry, he continued as follows:

It is both small beer and something of real importance. It will be the former if it ends up as a mere academic study designed, let's say, to update everyone about all that's going on. It will, however, be the latter if it leads to a different way of dealing with power, a new approach to all the real problems our country is facing. If we can kick-start this project and make real progress towards a new and substantial democracy, then this inquiry will really be something big. (Valentini 1975, 48–49)

The final document approved at Reggio Calabria began by underlining once again the commitment of the regional institutions to develop policies inspired by the values of the constitution. It then went on to outline how the investigations in the individual regions would be required to work in close collaboration with the judiciary, the forces of law and order and the state authorities (Santagata 1975, 241–243). Clearly, the regions did not intend to carry out their campaign in isolation. Instead, they saw themselves as actively encouraging the state organs who had too frequently appeared excessively rigid in their approach to the antifascist struggle (Baravelli 2016, 20–63). The Reggio conference, therefore, represented the real moment of creation of the commissions of inquiry.

Nevertheless, the quantity of information produced in the first few months of the investigations was not always effectively communicated to the public and the institutions. The forthcoming thirtieth anniversary of the Liberation occasionally meant that the regions finished their work in haste. The commissions, made up of delegates from the antifascist parties, probably felt the need to get a result, even a partial one, by the date of the beginning of the celebrations, in other words the spring of 1975. On the other hand, the launch of the inquiry was a political act and, as such, it would out of necessity be influenced by contingent events. More explicitly, the political value of the inquiry was in large part related to the very idea of carrying it out with the contribution of a broad spectrum of social and institutional parties. Furthermore, the lack of an overarching national co-ordination, which had been seen as highly desirable during the discussions in Reggio Calabria, ended up compromising the diffusion and awareness of the results which had been reached, as well as meaning that the individual inquiries never really went beyond their regional dimension.

Methodology of the inquiry and definitions of neofascism

The need to equip the commissions of inquiry with as coherent a methodology as possible emerged during the Reggio Calabria conference. On that occasion the vice president of the regional council for Piedmont, Dino Sanlorenzo, illustrated the approaches and the criteria adopted by those regions – Campania, Emilia-Romagna, Lazio, Lombardy, Piedmont and Umbria – which had already established their own commissions (Sanlorenzo 1975, 64–70). The common working methods to be adopted, according to Walter Galasso, the vice president of the Veneto regional council, needed to involve a high level of inter-regional co-operation and, at the same time, a certain level of flexibility, in order to deal with specific local contexts. We can deduce that this methodological flexibility corresponded, on the one hand, to an awareness that each region had a specific political situation, and on the other, to an understanding that the neofascist phenomenon had its own characteristics depending on its location.

The proposal put forward by Sanlorenzo outlined a three-stage approach:

1. A first phase of data collection designed to define the overarching framework of the inquiry. In this respect it was considered helpful to find and sift through newspaper articles, photographs, pamphlets and propaganda material. Furthermore, it was suggested that the lists of formal complaints and of court cases against either individuals or groups of extremists, as well as chronologies of the violence, needed to be collected.
2. A second phase would involve discussions and meetings with representatives of the town councils, the provinces, the parties of the ‘constitutional arch’, trade unions, intellectuals, democratic associations and antifascist committees. The aim of involving all these was to give voice to everyone participating in the antifascist struggle at the local level. In order to speed up the proceedings, questionnaires were sent out to the local authorities together with a request that they be turned around as soon as possible. Although there were some differences, the questionnaires usually asked the local authorities to comment on the economic, social, political and cultural conditions that could have fostered neofascist activities; on episodes of intolerance or political violence; on other activities of a fascist imprint; on the presence in the area of organisations, movements, or associations of the extreme right; on the measures adopted to prevent them and to raise awareness by local bodies and democratic organisations.⁶
3. The final phase would assemble and interpret all the data that had been collected, moving towards the writing of a report from which would emerge a clear profile of the nature and the specific local characteristics of neofascist extremism, as well as a picture of the effectiveness of those measures put in place by the institutions in order to combat it. Once completed, the reports would be initially forwarded to the judiciary and the police, and then disseminated to the public via whichever channels were considered appropriate.

Together with the methodological dimension of the inquiries, Sanlorenzo also raised another compelling issue: what, he asked, should be understood by ‘what we generically term fascism these days, employing a terminology which harks back to ... models of historical experiences which nowadays show different characteristics and new national developments’. It therefore seemed important to identify and delimit the object of research and formulate definitions of fascism which were capable of updating ‘the classic formulae of the past, while at the same time understanding the historical lesson in all of its complexity, as well as illuminating a troubling and dangerous facet of the profound

transformation and crisis that Italian society ... is currently going through'.⁷ More precisely it was considered necessary to take an 'X-ray of the social forces which are leading this process, exposing the structural and superstructural modifications they produce, and identify the social classes who benefit, as well as those who suffer as a consequence and are marginalised' (Sanlorenzo 1975, 71).

From the final conference documents, and even more so from the responses to the questionnaires, a concept of neofascism which we might define as 'extensive' clearly emerges. Within the category are sometimes included not only episodes of violence, demonstrations and gatherings of a clear neofascist stamp, but also events of a rather more dubious nature, or whose connection with associations or movements of the extreme right does not seem to be immediately evident in the documents. Some examples of this type include generic acts of vandalism or episodes of an uncertain political character, or flyers, posters and graffiti of a racist or xenophobic character, not accompanied, however, with clear references to fascist ideology.

In an attempt to isolate solid documentary evidence of neofascist activities, the working group set up by the regional council of Tuscany adopted a series of criteria for categorising printed material. Journals and periodicals were chosen on the basis of their ideological content, with an evaluation of their exaltation of Fascism; denigration of the Resistance; attacks on democratic institutions, the Constitution, the parties and the trade unions; nationalism; and racist views in relation to problems of customs and culture.⁸

The commission for Friuli-Venezia Giulia adopted similar criteria to those employed in Tuscany. It traced the ideological foundations of neofascism to the overlapping of: a negation of parliamentary democracy and a harking back to Nazi and Fascist ideology; a contestation of the values and symbols of the Resistance; a violent and extreme nationalism, expressed in attacks against Slovenian organisations and the HQ of Slovenian journals; and antisemitism (*Regione cronache* 1976, 6). The explicit reference to attacks on Slovenian targets shows how the commissions of inquiry strove to define the characteristics of neofascism with nuances linked to the specificities of the respective socio-political contexts. Right-wing extremism in the border areas, in particular, seemed to be characterised by higher levels of aggression and of subversive danger, if compared to the situation in other areas of central Italy. In the 'red' regions, where the majority of the administrations were led by the PCI, and where democratic associationism was more embedded and organised, neofascist insurgencies tended to manifest themselves in fights in the squares, in acts of intimidation, or in physical clashes with opponents from the left who were frequently more numerous and better organised. This, however, does not mean that in regions such as Tuscany, Umbria, Emilia-Romagna and the Marche, there were not groups actively involved in subversion, or else leaders of local neofascism with connections to the top levels of national and international organisations (Conti 2013, 131). In the case of Friuli-Venezia Giulia in the 1960s and 1970s, however, there were not only frequent exchanges and contacts with the vast array of European neofascists, but the presence of substantive ethnic groups encouraged the radicalisation of some ideological elements, feeding a particularly aggressive form of chauvinism.⁹

Immersed in the context of the Italy of the first half of the 1970s, the commissions of inquiry were, out of necessity, obliged to consider terrorist acts and other explicit acts of violence. This approach led to their underestimating, or quite frequently missing completely, the crucial qualitative and quantitative aspects which were linked to the associational dimension of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, in a period in which the geography of the clashes between militants of the extreme right and the extra-parliamentary left expanded from the big cities to the provinces (Panvini 2009b, 215–250), the interest of the commissions tended to concentrate on the collection of information that could, in

some way, provoke the intervention of the law. Over the piece, the reconstruction of a detailed chronology of the violence, provocations and attacks on the institutions was seen as more urgent and important than assembling an image of the actual dimensions of the phenomenon, how it was organised and how it was spreading to the periphery. Ultimately, their speed and efficiency in composing a detailed picture of neofascist violence at a local level gave the nascent local bodies the possibility of claiming, having produced a tangible result, their credentials as a democratic force and, therefore, demonstrate a compelling argument for their requests for further institutional and administrative decentralisation. The document approved at the end of the Reggio Calabria conference fitted exactly within this context, in that it affirmed that ‘a mass inquiry into neofascism would only be able to achieve concrete results if it is carried out autonomously by the regional institutions’ (Marinelli 2019, 100–101).

Together with the overall emphasis placed on the need to map local neofascism, some commissions occasionally demonstrated the supranational character of the so-called ‘black galaxy’, and suggested an ambitious widening of the scope of the inquiry to embrace the links maintained by the local groups with movements and associations operating abroad. The regions, likewise, began to understand how an investigation into the ‘black plots’ needed to go beyond national borders (Sanlorenzo 1975, 64–65).

The regional view of a transnational phenomenon

On 16–17 June 1973 there took place in Brussels a *Rencontre européenne contre le néonazisme et le néofascisme* (European meeting against neonazism and neofascism), organised by the Fédération Internationale des Résistants (FIR). In his speech, Senator Arialdo Banfi, the president of the FIR, spoke of fascism as a cultural and political product that ‘was born in Italy, then spread and was, tragically, perfected in Germany, and found its place in Spain with General Franco’s Falangist movement’. Banfi went on to say that fascism was ‘an historical experience rooted in Western Europe’ and whose ‘reawakening represents a great threat to democracy and to the peaceful coexistence of the people of Europe’ (Banfi 1973, 6).

It is no coincidence that a copy of Banfi’s speech can be found in the preparatory materials for the regional inquiries. As well as providing evidence of some contacts between the commissions and the broad spectrum of Italian and European antifascism, it also shows that a general understanding was emerging of the international dimension of the neofascist phenomenon (on this development see Mammone 2015, 141–145; Albanese and Del Hierro 2016, 101–112).¹⁰ Furthermore, the principal figures of the subversive Italian right had established close connections with the French Nouvelle Droite and had established – in a departure from the recent past – a politico-cultural strategy with clear transnational dimensions (Hof 2022).

The international opening up of Italian neofascism clearly emerges from the work of the commission for Lombardy. Indeed, in terms of its economy and trade in goods, Lombardy was already the most internationalised region of Italy, and Milan, a genuine European metropolis, was a reference point for Italian and Continental neofascism (Panvini 2009b, 227–234). It was therefore highly probable that the characteristics of the regional context stimulated the commission for Lombardy to look closely at the strategic interpretations that Italian neofascism elaborated with respect to the world political situation. The working group isolated, in this respect, a number of propositions that recurred frequently in the propaganda of the hard-core right. Briefly, neofascism took three alternative positions: firstly, it expressed a fervent desire for Italy to be firmly inserted in certain European structures associated with the ‘free world’, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO); secondly, it hoped for a more active role

for Italy within the Mediterranean, even if in a 'united Europe', including the authoritarian states; and thirdly, it aspired to the application of a traditional nationalist ideology, culturally anchored to Western Europe (Majocchi 1975, 155). The first two positions were traced to a series of articles published by *Secolo d'Italia* between March and May 1972. Giorgio Almirante (1972) made a contribution to the paper, which published an article championing a 'Europe which has a certain level of autonomy, but which uses it, in the context of the worldwide balance of powers, in favour of the free world and of the entire West'. The last position, on the other hand, could be found in the leaflets of organisations such as the Organisation for the Struggle of the People (OLP), the Student Association of Young National Action (ASAN), and the 'Riscossa' cultural circle of Brescia. In this context, there are several articles of considerable interest published by leaders of the standing of Pino Rauti and Adriano Romualdi, which asserted that 'only nationalist movements can make Europe', giving 'life to an international entity that has the ideological, military and economic strength to block the pathway to other international blocs' (Romualdi 1973). The prospect of an evolution of the traditional concept of nationalism frequently went hand-in-hand with a ferocious critique of the 'Europe of the markets and of big business'. The model of European unity to which the Italian neofascists aspired was in all likelihood the one laid out in the *Charter of Verona* (Mammone 2015, 65–66).

Compared with the other border regions, Piedmont was on the receiving end of only fairly restricted levels of 'black' violence: in Turin, the first victim of an apparent neofascist attack was a militant of Continuous Struggle (Lotta Continua – LC), in April 1975 (Panvini 2009b, 220). The journalistic enquiries and the investigations of the magistrates in the two-year period 1974–75, nevertheless, brought to the attention of the public a 'dense web of shady individuals and dodgy organisations ... connected to Italian neofascism, to the European right, and to the machinations of the CIA'. Neofascism, the report of the commission of inquiry concluded, had in Piedmont deep anti-communist and anti-worker connotations, as well as clear international ambitions. According to the compilers of the document, the region was on the margins of 'black' terrorism precisely because it was a major logistical and organisational hub for European neofascism (Carcano and Papuzzi 1975, 7–10). Its geographical position, together with rapidly depopulating mountain areas – the report continued – explained the 'traffic in money, arms and documents' which had been noted since 1969, as well as the frequent visits by key figures of national and international neofascism. These included Tullio Abelli, an MSI leader from Turin, well connected to the financial world of the city, and linked to the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète (OAS), and who, in the 1950s, had been a member of *Nouvel Ordre Européen*, one of the best-known pan-European neofascist organisations (Mammone 2015, 82–83). Until 1974 Salvatore Francia had also been active in Turin. He was a major figure in *New Order* (Ordine Nuovo – ON) and, as a consequence of the solid relations he had cultivated with Spanish neofascist organisations (Albanese and Del Hierro 2016, 149), managed to find refuge in Barcelona after being issued with a large number of arrest warrants in Italy (Carcano and Papuzzi 1975, 38). In September 1969, according to the commission documents, Adolf von Thadden, the leader of the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (NPD), had been spotted in the small village of Brisino di Stresa, not far from the Swiss border, to where he had travelled in order to attend – or so it seemed – a meeting with the upper echelons of Italian neofascism.¹¹

Between 1969 and 1970 the establishment of various paramilitary camps in the Val di Souza was verified. However, the intervention of the gendarmerie limited the number of participants from France. Sometimes, it was Piedmontese militants from the *Fronte della Gioventù* who wanted to travel, not to France, but to Greece, which was one of the preferred destinations for those young neofascists who wished 'to get into training for the

decisive battle'.¹² Numerous other military camps were also discovered in another border region – Friuli-Venezia Giulia. Presenting the preliminary results of their investigation, the commission highlighted how the neofascist groups seemed to be linked to comparable national or international subversive groups carrying out activities which 'unfold in a series of acts of violence in the squares, the schools, the workplace, and which involved the use of arms' (*Regione cronache* 1976, 4). The reference point for the extreme right of Friuli was Gabriele Forziati, a member of Ordine Nuovo, who had been appointed the leader of the Trieste federation of the MSI at the start of the 1970s (Conti 2013, 68). Forziati was the go-between linking the subversive cells of the Veneto led by Franco Freda, and Giovanni Ventura, as well as commando units of different Northern European neofascist organisations. In October 1974 he represented ON in Vienna at a meeting of the leaders of the Kameradschaftsring Nationaler Jugendverbände (KNJ), the key reference point for young German and Austrian neofascists. Subsequently, according to the accounts of the region, he met with various representatives of Spanish, French, and Greek neofascism. The repeated discovery of weapons caches in different locations in the region from 1969 onwards testified – according to the commission – to the entrenchment of a 'right wing terrorist organisation operating at an international level'; an organisation composed of activists who had expertise, and had been trained in fighting 'unorthodox wars' and who had the capacity to transport across national borders a huge quantity of modern plastic explosives, small arms and cartridges (*Regione Cronache* 1976, 38–39; for the concept of an unorthodox war see Dondi 2015, 7–9).

If the border areas of northern Italy distinguished themselves in their interchange with groups of the Northern European right, the attention of the Central regions shifted to the Mediterranean, and in particular, towards Greece. 'Red regions' such as Emilia-Romagna experienced a neofascism which was much more aware of the need to project itself externally (Sorgonà 2013, 88–96). The final report of the regional commission of inquiry showed an awareness of this aspect, stating that the political activity of the 'black galaxy' was indeed 'internal, but also involved a search for connections with elements and foreign organisations present in Italy'. Furthermore, this activity passed through 'associations and circles which, dressed up as cultural and political organisations, are actually fascist in nature'.¹³ Right-wing extremism in Emilia-Romagna attempted, in many cases, to hide its true identity. This did not, however, stop its followers from making contacts abroad, especially with the regime of the colonels. To this end the federation of Hellenic Student Associations in Italy (FASEI), or the National League of Greek Students in Italy (ESESI) proved invaluable. In Modena there was evidence of the existence of one of the many branches of the ESESI in the shape of the 'Focolare Ellenico' circle which, led by Aristide Lavrvanus, maintained constant relations with the local MSI activist, Maurizio Spinelli. Groups like the 'Focolare Ellenico' carried out intensive propaganda activities. The commission related how leaflets had been distributed in Parma which lauded the likes of Benito Mussolini and Jose Primo de Rivera, and which applauded the construction of the 'new nation: Europe'. The regional inquiry also documented the links in the early 1970s between the members of the Bolognese section of Giovane Italia and trusted men of the colonels' regime. According to the documents, it was the Greek ambassador in Rome, keen to promote activities 'against the reds' in the major outposts of the province of Bologna, who was the go-between for the two groups.¹⁴

In Perugia, on the other hand, the deep-rootedness of the international extreme right depended essentially on three factors: the relative calm of the city, far from indiscreet onlookers but nevertheless close to Rome; the presence of the University for Foreigners, whose prestige attracted young people from around the globe; and the existence of a well organised and thriving MSI student association at the State University (Pannacci 2020). Although it was a rather isolated provincial city, the Umbrian capital

had taken on, from the second half of the 1960s, a novel international imperative which made it fertile soil for the seeds of foreign political associations. Above all, for the Greek right, Perugia was far from the margins. The documents of the regional commission tell us, for example, of the frequent visits to Umbria between October 1972 and February 1973 by Kostas Plevris, the right-hand man of the Greek Minister of the Interior, Joannis Jadas, and a leading figure of the ESESI. During his visits, Plevris had many meetings with MSI leaders, with neofascist student groups, and with the extra-parliamentary right. In 1975 Anastasio Tsionis, a law student enrolled for some years at the University of Perugia, was the leader of the local branch of the ESESI. And just like his predecessors Nicolas Docos, Giorgio Koloutouros and Tomaso Papadopulos, he was payrolled by the Greek consulate in Rome (Marinelli 2019, 110–112). However, according to the final report of the commission, the real turning point in relations between Umbrian neofascism and its European partners was an international conference held at the Lux cinema in Perugia. Promoted by the Europa Civiltà association, the event gathered under one roof the representatives of the bewilderingly complex galaxy of the international extreme right. Despite the fact that the Perugian branches of the MSI and the University Front of National Action (Fronte Universitario d'Azione Nazionale – FUAN) officially distanced themselves from the events, many party militants and members of the university associations populated the venue. The press – both local and national – devoted attention to the event over a number of days, fully capturing the contradictions, but even more so the similarities between the two faces of fascism: the legal and conservative neofascism of the MSI, and the extremist and subversive neofascism of the extra-parliamentary groups and of other clandestine organisations.¹⁵

Conclusion

The antifascist activism of the regions was part of a wider democratic counterattack during the key two-year period 1974 to 1975 fought by the State and the parties of the 'constitutional arch', urged on and supported by a body of public opinion exasperated by the climate of tension. There were, above all, some key factors which led to a significant change in the national and international picture which gave an impulse to the struggle against the 'black plots'. After the Brescia massacre and the bomb on the Italicus train, the forces of the government, and notably the then Minister of Defence Giulio Andreotti, promoted action required to inject new life into the secret services. In the same months, furthermore, various judicial enquiries into black subversion and its protagonists were started and completed (Dondi 2015, 326–331). However, the battle led by the Italian institutions was undoubtedly favoured by important changes in international politics, notably the collapse of the regimes of Salazar and the Greek colonels, and the resignation, in August 1974, of the American president Richard Nixon. The MSI had viewed Nixon with interest, hoping for an international legitimisation which would counteract their exclusion from national politics (Sorgonà 2019). Clearly, with the fall of the European authoritarian regimes of the extreme right, the Italian extreme right lost important protection at an international level. At the same time that the Italian right experienced clear setbacks, which inevitably coincided with a complex crisis leading to very uncomfortable outcomes, its violent dimensions reached their highest point.

It was, therefore, during this conjuncture that in the space of a few months the committees of inquiry gathered information, statistics, and testimonies. Although in many respects partial, and with some big gaps, what emerges from the documentation obtained by and elaborated by the regional commissions is a picture of the multifaceted nature of a neofascism which was highly active at a local level.¹⁶ Moving from North to South, neofascism almost never took on the same characteristics, varying not just from region to

region, but at times from one province to another. This tendency demonstrates the importance of the local political and socioeconomic context in terms of the way it shaped both the political and cultural directions, as well as the working methods, of the neofascist organisations active in the area. In sum, during the most dramatic phases of the strategy of tension the Italian extreme right came across as a composite mass, in which tactical and ideological differences, the actions of the political struggle, and the ability to make real headway in terms of its support in the social fabric, depended in part on contingent national and international demands, and in part on local factors.

In the period between 1969 and 1975, the increasing levels of aggression of black extremism was accompanied by differences in how this surfaced at a local level. This evolution came about, above all, because of a progressive realisation, both among the leadership as well as in the broader patterns of the 'black galaxy', of a lack of legal opportunities on the national level (Mammone 2015, 210–217). In terms of the relationship between local neofascism and the European far right, it is interesting to note that, according to the environment in which they operated, as well as their respective ideological proclivities, the local organisations seemed more interested in engaging with one international interlocutor rather than another.

In certain respects the range of communication strategies which were used then, as in recent times, by the formations of the extra-parliamentary right, are like a litmus paper (Whine 2012). The information gathered by the commissions confirmed, in many ways, what various contemporary observers (for example Guzzanti 1972; Pajetta 1972; Gaddi 1974) had already understood, that is, the existence of transnational networks of subversion capable of organising and moving people, skills, arms, and resources, on a European level.

Despite what they initially set out to do, the completed regional inquiries did not lead to significant exchanges of views, reflections, or debates in the institutions or in national public opinion. The final documents, at times revised and enlarged, were published and circulated around the regions. In Lombardy, the report of the commission of inquiry was enriched and enlarged by general reflections on the nature of fascism and neofascism, written by leading antifascists, such as Lelio Basso and Nicola Tranfaglia (Majocchi 1975). In Friuli-Venezia Giulia and in Tuscany, the regional inquiries were bundled together with studies of a historical or sociological nature put together with the collaboration of university teachers and the Resistance Institutes (Istituto regionale per la storia del movimento di Liberazione in Friuli-Venezia Giulia 1977; Carbonaro and Nesti 1980).¹⁷ But a veil of silence was soon cast over the inquiries. The waning of the attention and interest of the local leaders is an important factor, but probably only secondary. When the commissions finished their work, the attention of the media was already concentrated on the celebrations of the thirtieth anniversary of the Resistance in which, as already noted, the regions themselves had already invested a great deal in political and organisational terms. This does not detract from the fact that the power to carry out an investigation, exercised for the first time by the regional councils within a broad framework of antifascist activities in 1974–75, helped to better define, strengthen, and perhaps even accelerate the process of 'institution building' of the newly created bodies. The investigative work allowed the regions to expand and increase their institutional synergies. Above all, it signified a clear confirmation of their profile as political actors capable of understanding and satisfying the demands of a population increasingly dismayed and bewildered by violence and terror.

Acknowledgements. The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of the article for their help and for their comments. We would also like to thank Guido Panvini and Roberto Segatori, who read a draft version of the text.

Author contributions. Valerio Marinelli wrote the Introduction and the section entitled ‘The genesis of the regional commissions of inquiry’. Michelangelo Borri wrote the sections on ‘Methodology of the enquiry and definitions of neofascism’ and ‘The regional view of a transnational phenomenon’. The Conclusion, as well as the overall structure and conception of the article, are the result of our joint efforts.

Competing interests. The authors declare none.

Archival sources

Archivio Storico del Consiglio Regionale del Friuli-Venezia Giulia (ASCRFVG):
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 Indagine sull’attività neofascista in Piemonte (IANP).
 Archivio Storico del Consiglio Regionale della Toscana (ASCRT):
 Commissione speciale d’indagine sui problemi del neofascismo e dell’eversione contro le istituzioni (CSIPNE).
 Archivio Storico dell’Istituto per la Storia dell’Umbria Contemporanea (ASISUC):
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 Archivio Storico della Fondazione Lelio e Lisli Basso (ASFB):
 Carte Lelio Basso.
 Archivio Storico Regionale dell’Emilia-Romagna (ASRER).
 Commissione d’indagine sul neofascismo in Emilia-Romagna (CINER).

Notes

1. *Rapporto preliminare sulla violenza fascista in Lombardia. Parte I. 1° gennaio 1969-30 giugno 1971*, typescript. The document has a similar structure to the reports written in 1974–5, even though it was conceived and created outside the context of inter-regional collaboration which had begun in earnest in 1973.
2. ASFB, Carte Lelio Basso, Corrispondenza, b. 25, f. 30, *Mozione conclusiva dell’Assise dei Comitati antifascisti*, 28 June 1974. The Permanent Antifascist Committees were an amalgam of political, trade union and social forces, allied to the constitutional arch, and committed to promotion of the memory and the values of antifascism.
3. ASCRFVG, IAOFR, b. 3, *Incontro con il presidente della Repubblica*, 24 July 1974.
4. ASISUC, IRAF, b. 1, f. ‘Materiale altre regioni’, *L’inchiesta sull’attività di eversione fascista nelle regioni*, 26 November 1974.
5. ASCRP, IANP, b. 185, f. 310, *Manifestazione di Novara dell’8 settembre 1974*.
6. The response of the various local councils varied considerably according to context: in Piedmont, for example, there were very high levels of participation, with 1,007 councils out of 1,209 filling out the questionnaires sent to them by the region. In Tuscany, in contrast, only 111 councils out of the 287 involved sent a reply. This difference should not be ascribed to a lack of sensitivity to the problem, but rather to how it was perceived at a local level. It is no coincidence that the councils who gave only partial responses were those where the presence of neofascism was not particularly strong; in contrast those where the phenomenon was most clearly evident proved to be particularly assiduous when it came to filling out the forms.
7. In this article we do not propose to offer a definition of neofascism. Instead, we restrict ourselves to illustrating the meaning that was ascribed to the term in the context of the regional enquiries. Nevertheless, the subject matter of this article reflects the importance of the availability of flexible and dynamic analytical tools (Mammone 2011), capable of capturing the ways in which neofascism developed with respect to the ‘classic’ Fascism of the interwar period and, as importantly, how changes linked to variations in context, ideas and reference points defined its characteristics (Griffin 2000).
8. ASCRT, CSIPNE, b. 4, f. 33, *Relazione generale*, 4.
9. The point of reference, the Commission observed, was the ‘teachings of the new prophets of the right, particularly Julius Evola’ (see Hakl 2019 on this figure). The direct connection between neofascism and nationalism in the Alto Adriatico had precise historical roots and, it is argued, contributed to the formation of clandestine extreme right groups, mainly anticommunist in nature (Tonietto 2019, 194–202).
10. We are unable to take this issue further in the present article, but it is clearly worth noting.
11. ASCRP, IANP, b. 179, f. 302, *Questionario del comune di Novara*.
12. ASCRP, IANP, b. 178, f. 301, *Questionario della comunità montana Bassa Val di Susa*. The Greek paramilitary camps were open to ‘all comrades who have been members of Giovane Italia for 6 months or more’ and who had ‘had a doctrinal interview with the leadership’ (Rondolini 1975, 44).

13. ASRER, PG, b. 328, *Dichiarazioni rese alla stampa dalla Presidenza del Comitato Regionale per il XXX della Resistenza*, 12 June 1975.
14. ASRER, CINER, b. 1, f. 'Relazione conclusiva sulla presenza di gruppi neofascisti nel modenese', *Gruppi fascisti a Modena*; ASRER, CINER, b. 10, f. '1972', *Provincia di Bologna*, 13 January 1972.
15. ASISUC, IRAF, b. 7, *Cronistoria degli episodi di violenza fascista*, 15.
16. The figures reported in the inquiries, which need to be interpreted with a certain level of caution, are still indicative. For Piedmont 28 organisations were shown to be operational in the years 1969–75, and they were responsible for 48 attacks; 37 acts of vandalism and arson; 82 attacks in schools; 32 in workplaces and 33 on individuals. For Lombardy, in the three-year period 1969–71 the numbers are as follows: 90 serious attacks; 172 acts of aggression; 104 acts of hooliganism against persons or buildings; 181 episodes of violence against workers; 210 injured as a result of neofascist actions; 156 complaints issued against militants of the extreme right. In Friuli-Venezia Giulia there was a total of 110 episodes of violence of neofascist origin identified for the period 1970 to 1974. In Emilia-Romagna the investigation covered the years 1968–74 and identified 286 demonstrations and neofascist political meetings; 210 attacks, with 96 injured and 2 killed; 54 serious attacks; 136 acts of vandalism. Between 1970 and 1974, in Lazio 437 episodes of violence were listed, to which were added 77 actions carried out in the schools of Rome alone. For Campania, in the same years, the numbers were: 278 episodes of generic violence; 19 cases of defaced monuments; 56 assaults and acts of aggression; 56 violent scuffles and other episodes of disorder.
17. The network of Resistance institutes was established in the years following the Second World War and tasked with the job of conserving and studying the archives of the Committees of National Liberation and the partisan formations. Subsequently its remit has widened to include the study of contemporary Italian history in general. The network is headed by the Parri Institute in Milan, which was founded in 1979. Its current president is Professor Paolo Pezzino.

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Italian summary

Il presente articolo analizza la presenza di organizzazioni neofasciste e del terrorismo di estrema destra in Italia nei primi anni 1970, partendo da una prospettiva finora inedita. In modo specifico, esso si focalizza sull'attività di contrasto alle strutture eversive della galassia nera attuata dalle istituzioni regionali, attraverso la creazione di speciali 'commissioni regionali d'inchiesta sui problemi del neofascismo'. Tra il 1974 e il 1975, tali commissioni misero in atto una vasta opera di mappatura della presenza di movimenti, associazioni e organizzazioni della destra neofascista italiana a livello territoriale, mettendo in evidenza la diffusione del fenomeno e la sua radicazione periferica. Utilizzando le informazioni raccolte nel contesto delle inchieste regionali, l'articolo mira ad analizzare i rapporti esistenti tra le diverse sigle del neofascismo italiano e i più ampi movimenti europei. La dimensione regionale diventa in tal modo terreno di incontro e scambio tra militanti della destra estrema italiana e quelli delle reti nere europee, mettendo in evidenza l'influenza delle specificità locali nel definire i rapporti intessuti tra i movimenti neofascisti anche al di fuori dei confini nazionali.

Cite this article: Borri M, Marinelli V (2023). The extreme right and the democratic institutions in Italy. The response of the regions to a national and trans-national phenomenon (1973–1975). *Modern Italy* **28**, 230–245. <https://doi.org/10.1017/mit.2023.19>