**Between Manipulation and Failed Adaptation:**

**The Italian Intelligence and the Rise of Right-Wing Terrorism, 1969-1982**

*Niccolò Petrelli*

*Roma Tre University*

In 1968-69 Italy was swept by a wave of protests and riots by workers and students which were seen by right-wing politicians and extra-parliamentary organizations as the harbingers of a revolution. From that moment on the country experienced an appalling series of acts of subversion and terrorism by a multitude of right-wing groups that would last more than 10 years, including a sustained bombing campaign, several planned and attempted coups d’état, and almost continuous street killings. In the face of such an unprecedented wave of terror the Italian intelligence services performed very poorly; first they failed to provide strategic warning with regard to the shift of right-wing organizations from riots and aggressions to outright terrorism; secondly, they mostly failed also in the provision of tactical warning, proving unable to deliver timely and targeted information on the plots of right-wing extremists.

Scholarly studies have generally explained such an intelligence failure by emphasizing the connivance between right-wing organizations and many high-ranking intelligence officials and the *de facto* adoption by the Italian intelligence service of what we might call a “manipulation strategy” geared towards taking advantage of right-wing terrorism to strengthen consensus around state institutions, in this way stabilizing the country (Bull, 2007, Willan, 2002, Ferraresi, 1996). This paper, by contrast, aims at providing a broader explanation for the Italian intelligence failure in countering right-wing terrorism by focusing on two hitherto overlooked variables, the “institutional culture” of the Italian intelligence, and its collection and analysis capabilities, and by integrating a vast range of archival sources declassified between 2014 and 2021 by the Italian security services.

In the period under scrutiny, the institutional culture of the Defense Intelligence Service (*SID – Servizio Informazioni Difesa*), heavily biased towards political (and military) intelligence, significantly affected both collection and analysis. In fact, the *SID* managed to penetrate the majority of right-wing extremist organizations, and combining HUMINT and SIGINT disposed of non-negligible collection capabilities; these nonetheless proved inadequate for providing tactical warning of impending bombings, plots and attacks as the intelligence service penetrations tended to focus on gathering political rather than operational intelligence. Similarly, in terms of analysis, the *SID* showed an inclination to privilege understanding the overall political vision of right-wing organizations to the detriment of their social background, organizational features, and working mechanisms. Cumulatively, these had a deeply adverse impact on the intelligence service performance between 1969 and 1982.