

NATO's secret armies linked to terrorism?

Italy's Gladio

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At a time when experts are debating whether NATO is suited to deal with the global “war on terror”, new research suggests that the alliance’s own secret history has links to terrorism.

ISN Editor’s Note:

This report written by Daniele Ganser is based on excerpts from his newly released book, “NATO’s Secret Armies. Operation Gladio and Terrorism in Western Europe”, released this week by Frank Cass in London.

The book describes NATO’s clandestine operations during the Cold War. The research was prompted by a story that made world headlines in 1990 but quickly disappeared, ensuring that even today, NATO’s secret armies remain just that – secret.

Until now, a full investigation of NATO’s secret armies had not been carried out – a task that Ganser has taken on single-handedly and quite successfully.

In Italy, on 3 August 1990, then-prime minister Giulio Andreotti confirmed the existence of a secret army code-named “Gladio” – the Latin word for “sword” – within the state. His testimony before the Senate subcommittee investigating terrorism in Italy sent shockwaves through the Italian parliament and the public, as speculation arose that the secret army had possibly manipulated Italian politics through acts of terrorism.

Andreotti revealed that the secret Gladio army had been hidden within the Defense Ministry as a subsection of the military secret service, SISMI. General Vito Miceli, a former director of the Italian military secret service, could hardly believe that Andreotti had lifted the secret, and protested:

“I have gone to prison because I did not want to reveal the existence of this super secret organization. And now Andreotti comes along and tells it to parliament!” According to a document compiled by the Italian military secret service in 1959, the secret armies had a two-fold strategic purpose: firstly, to operate as a so-called “stay-behind” group in the case of a Soviet invasion and to carry out a guerrilla war in occupied territories; secondly, to carry out domestic operations in case of “emergency situations”.

The military secret services’ perceptions of what constituted an “emergency” was well defined in Cold War Italy and focused on the increasing strength of the Italian Communist and the Socialist parties, both of which were tasked with weakening NATO “from within”.

Felice Casson, an Italian judge who during his investigations into right-wing terrorism had first discovered the secret Gladio army and had forced Andreotti to take a stand, found that the secret army had linked up with right-wing terrorists in order to confront “emergency situations”. The terrorists, supplied by the secret army, carried out bomb attacks in public places, blamed them on the Italian left, and were thereafter protected from prosecution by the military secret service. “You had to attack civilians, the people, women, children, innocent people, unknown people far removed from any political game,” right-wing terrorist Vincezo Vinciguerra explained the so-called “strategy of tension” to Casson.

“The reason was quite simple. They were supposed to force these people, the Italian public, to turn to the state to ask for greater security. This is the political logic that lies behind all the massacres and the bombings which remain unpunished, because the state cannot convict itself or declare itself responsible for what happened.”

No comment from NATO or the CIA

How strongly NATO and US intelligence backed and supported the use of terror in Italy in order to discredit the political left during the Cold War remains subject of ongoing research. General Gerardo Serravalle, who had commanded the Italian Gladio secret army from 1971 to 1974, confirmed that the secret army “could pass from a defensive, post-invasion logic, to one of attack, of civil war”.

The Italian Senate chose to be more explicit and concluded in its investigation in 2000: “Those massacres, those bombs, those military actions had been organized or promoted or supported by men inside Italian state institutions and, as has been discovered more recently, by men linked to the structures of United States intelligence.” Ever since the discovery of the secret NATO armies in 1990, research into stay-behind armies has progressed only very slowly, due to very limited access to primary documents and the refusal of both NATO and the CIA to comment. On 5 November 1990, a NATO spokesman told an inquisitive press: “NATO has never contemplated guerrilla war or clandestine operations”.

The next day, NATO officials admitted that the previous day’s denial had been false, adding that the alliance would not comment on matters of military secrecy. On 7 November, NATO’s highest military official in Europe, Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) US General John Galvin, together with NATO’s highest civilian official, Secretary-General Manfred Wörner, briefed NATO ambassadors behind closed doors. “Since this is a secret organization, I wouldn’t expect too many questions to be answered,” reasoned a senior NATO diplomat, who wished to remain unnamed. “If there were any links to terrorist organizations, that sort of information would be buried very deep indeed.” Former CIA director William Colby confirmed in his memoirs that setting up the secret armies in Western Europe had been “a major program” for the CIA. The project started after World War II in total secrecy, and access to information was limited “to the smallest possible coterie of the most reliable people, in Washington, in NATO” and in the countries concerned. Yet when in Italy in 1990 former CIA director Admiral Stansfield Turner was questioned on television on Gladio, he strictly refused to answer any questions on the sensitive issue, and as the interviewer insisted with respect for the terror victims, Stansfield angrily ripped off his microphone and shouted: “I said, no questions about Gladio!”, whereafter the interview was over.

Protest from the EU

If there had been a Soviet invasion, the secret anti-communist soldiers would have operated behind enemy lines, strengthening and setting up local resistance movements in enemy-held territory, evacuating shot down pilots, and sabotaging the supply lines and production centers of occupation forces. Upon discovery of the secret armies, the European Parliament responded with harsh criticism, suspecting it to have been involved in manipulation and terror operations. "This Europe will have no future," Italian representative Falqui opened the debate, "if it is not founded on truth, on the full transparency of its institutions in regard to the dark plots against democracy that have turned upside down the history, even in recent times, of many European states." Falqui insisted that "there will be no future, ladies and gentlemen, if we do not remove the idea of having lived in a kind of double state - one open and democratic, the other clandestine and reactionary. That is why we want to know what and how many "Gladio" networks there have been in recent years in the Member States of the European Community." The majority of EU parliamentarians followed Falqui, and in a special resolution on 22 November 1990 made it clear that the EU "protests vigorously at the assumption by certain US military personnel at SHAPE and in NATO of the right to encourage the establishment in Europe of a clandestine intelligence and operation network", calling for a "a full investigation into the nature, structure, aims, and all other aspects of these clandestine organizations or any splinter groups, their use for illegal interference in the internal political affairs of the countries concerned, and the problem of terrorism in Europe".

Secret armies across Western Europe

Only the parliaments in Italy, Switzerland, and Belgium had formed a special commission to investigate the national secret army, and after months or even years of research, presented a public report. Building on this data and secondary sources from numerous European countries, "NATO's Secret Armies" confirms for the first time that the secret networks spread across Western Europe, with great details on networks in Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, Holland, Luxemburg, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Italy, Greece, and Turkey, as well as the strategic planning of Britain and the US. The stay-behind armies were coordinated on an international level by the so-called Allied Clandestine Committee (ACC) and the Clandestine Planning Committee (CPC), linked to NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE). And they used cover names such as "Absalon" in Denmark, "P26" in Switzerland, "ROC" in Norway or "SDRA8" in Belgium. Interestingly, large differences existed from country to country. In some nations the secret armies became a source of terror, while in others they remained a prudent precaution.

In Turkey, the "Counter-Guerrilla" was involved in domestic terror and torture operations against the Kurds, while in Greece, the "LOK" took part in the 1967 military coup d'état to prevent a Socialist government. In Spain, the secret army was used to prop up the fascist dictatorship of Franco, and in Germany, right-wing terrorists used the explosives of the secret army in the 1980 terror attack in Munich. In other countries, including Denmark, Norway, and Luxemburg, the secret soldiers prepared for the eventual occupation of their home country and never engaged in domestic terror or manipulation. In the context of the ongoing so-called war on terror, the Gladio data promotes the sobering insight that governments in the West have sacrificed the life of innocent citizens and covered up acts of terrorism in order to manipulate the population.

Allegations that NATO, the Pentagon, MI6, the CIA, and European intelligence services were

linked to terror, coups d'état, and torture in Europe are obviously of an extremely sensitive nature, and future research is needed in the field. In the absence of an official investigation by NATO or the EU, ongoing international research into terrorism is about to tackle this difficult task, the first step of which I hope to have promisingly taken with "NATO's Secret Armies".

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