

BOOK REVIEW

The Politics of Sacrifice: Remembering Italy's Rogo di Primavalle

by Amy King, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, xxviii + 255 pp., £99.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780031455490

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The Politics of Sacrifice is a valuable and original contribution to the field of memory studies, which has burgeoned in recent years, in the wake of works by Anna Cento Bull, Philip Cooke, John Foot and other scholars. The study focuses on one of the bloodiest, and least studied, events of the so-called 'years of lead' in Italy: the arson set by three exponents of the extra-parliamentary left-wing group Potere Operaio, Achille Lollo, Marino Clavo and Manlio Grillo, in the small flat where the Mattei family lived, in the working-class suburban district of Primavalle, in Rome, on the night of 16 April 1973. The father was secretary of the local section of Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), the Italian post-fascist party at the time, and the arson killed two of his sons, Virgilio and Stefano, aged 22 and 10 respectively: they were burnt alive. The attack was immediately dubbed as *rogo*, a term that evokes the pyres of religious persecution and the stakes of witch hunts.

King works on a very wide repertoire of printed materials, photographs (the in-depth analysis of which is one of the book's merits), posters and unpublished oral testimonies. From these materials, the author traces the construction and evolution of the public memory of the event over a period of 50 years, focusing on the proliferation of narratives marked by the rhetoric of sacrifice and martyrdom in the sphere of the right, on the one hand, and defensive counternarratives (completely false) in the sphere of the left, on the other. She also delves into the political use of the tragedy first by the MSI and then by the populist extreme right, in terms of 'agonistic memory', in function of the construction of a community defined along political lines.

The book is divided into three parts, in each of which, first, the material events and, later, the evolution of investigations and trials are interwoven with the careful reconstruction of the public discourse and memorial practices that have taken shape around the attack.

In the first part, the most substantial, after placing the Primavalle fire in its incandescent political context, King illustrates how, in parallel with investigations and trials, two distinct and incompatible narratives took shape almost immediately. On the left, a narrative took root, spread artfully by the group responsible for the double murder – that is, Potere Operaio – according to which the massacre was the result of an internal feud within the extreme right, or even saw the complicity of the MSI itself. Potere Operaio talked a good game in presenting itself as a scapegoat by virtue of the previous, serious

episodes of provocation that had characterised the ‘strategy of tension’ from Piazza Fontana onwards. (Piazza Fontana was a massacre carried out by right-wing terrorists, but unjustly blamed on anarchists and the extreme left.) Primavalle was the first in a series of episodes in which the spread of what today we would call ‘fake news’ was presented as ‘counter-information’ and a battle for the truth, with deleterious effects on the social and political climate. On the opposite side, King reconstructs the political use of the tragedy by the MSI, in the wake of the fascist tradition that cemented its community around the cult of martyrs and the ‘blood of the defeated’ (to quote the title of a well-known Italian bestseller on the Salò fighters). Martyrdom and sacrifice were the key themes around which the memorial cult of the Mattei brothers, innocent victims of communist political hatred, was built. At the beginning of April 1973, MSI secretary Giorgio Almirante was grappling with the public indignation aroused by two serious episodes of violence clearly attributable to the extreme right: a failed attack on a train and the killing of a police officer during an unauthorised right-wing demonstration. The terrible double murder helped to divert attention from these episodes, and, following the funeral, Almirante used it to present right-wing militants and the entire MSI as stoic victims of political ‘persecution’.

The second part of the book gives an account of the evolution of memorial practices around the Primavalle fire in the so-called Second Republic, starting in 1995, the year of the ‘Fiuggi turning point’ – that is, the congress at which the MSI was transformed into Alleanza Nazionale under the leadership of secretary Gianfranco Fini, Almirante’s dauphin. Fini sought to transform a nostalgic party of post-fascists into a more modern European conservative force; in the process, the memorial cult of victims of political conflict such as the Mattei brothers lost its centrality in the party’s identity construction, and instead became the prerogative of the extra-parliamentary right who were hostile to this moderate turn. In the meantime, the albeit ambiguous and partial confessions of responsibility of the culprits – who took refuge abroad to escape imprisonment – allowed for the construction of an ‘institutional’, rather than antagonistic, memory of the Mattei brothers as victims of a season of political violence, in which Gianpaolo Mattei – the brother who survived the fire – was especially involved.

The third part, finally, examines the renewed centrality of the Mattei brothers and other victims of violent political struggle in the 1970s in the memorial practices of CasaPound Italia – an influential pole of the extra-parliamentary right in Rome – and, more generally, in those of the extreme right in a season of sovereigntist populism, as revealed by the heartfelt participation of the highest government and institutional authorities at the fiftieth anniversary of the Primavalle fire. King makes it clear right from the introduction that this research also stems from the questions raised by the strong roots and recent political successes of the post-fascist right in Italy, which saw Giorgia Meloni become prime minister in September 2022. Meloni’s party, Fratelli d’Italia (Fdi) is born from a split to the right, in opposition to Fini, and its symbol still bears the tricolour flame of the MSI. It is no coincidence that in Fdi’s rhetoric, victimhood, claims of persecution and vehement condemnation of the excesses of ‘militant antifascism’ have resurfaced, along with the memory of the ‘martyrs’ of the 1970s. Moreover, the memory of the Mattei brothers and other victims is associated with the wish for an unspecified ‘pacification’, behind which is concealed an attempt to set aside antifascism, the founding value of the republican constitution, presenting it as a divisive and conflicting factor. Besides its undoubted historiographical interest, therefore, *The Politics of Sacrifice* offers numerous stimulating suggestions for reading and analysing the present political situation in Italy.