

Prima Linea

AT A GLANCE

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SUMMARY

Formed: 1976

Disbanded: June 1983

First Attack: April 29, 1974: Two PL gunmen killed a provincial lawyer for right-wing party Italian Social Movement (MSI) in Milan. (1 killed)¹

Last Attack: November 13, 1981: Two PL members killed a public security patrolman who asked for their identification as they disembarked from a train in Milan's central station. (1 killed)²

OVERVIEW

Prima Linea was Italy's second-largest left-wing terrorist group after the Red Brigades, with nearly a thousand members. The PL sought to overthrow the capitalist state in Italy and replace it with a dictatorship of the proletariat. The organization targeted mostly politicians, law enforcement, factory managers, and business leaders. PL was loosely organized, with a national leadership coordinating several local cells. These cells determined local tactics largely independently and staged attacks under a variety of names. It had members throughout Italy but was most active in the industrial cities of the north. The group split into factions and ultimately dissolved after the arrest of several of its members.

NARRATIVE

Prima Linea was Italy's second-largest left-wing terrorist group after the Red Brigades.³ It was loosely organized, with a national leadership coordinating several local cells. These cells

determined local tactics largely independently and staged attacks under a variety of names in addition to Prima Linea.⁴

The PL sought to overthrow the capitalist state in Italy and replace it with a dictatorship of the proletariat.⁵ The organization targeted mostly politicians, law enforcement, factory managers, and business leaders.⁶ It was most active in the industrial cities of Northern Italy.

The PL shared with the Red Brigades the goal of establishing a proletarian dictatorship in Italy, but the two groups were rivals and seldom cooperated. Many PL founders were dissident former members of the BR who had left over two key philosophical disagreements. First, the PL's founders rejected the rigid hierarchy of the Red Brigades. As a result, PL allowed its local cells to operate with substantial autonomy from the National Command.⁷ Second, PL leaders felt that the BR placed too much emphasis on militancy to the exclusion of other political action.⁸ PL militants, unlike those of the BR, did not go completely underground.⁹ They often maintained their identities and jobs and participated in overt political activity as well as covert attacks, though their attacks were no less violent than those of the BR.

The PL was active between 1976 and 1982, mostly in the industrial cities of northern Italy.¹⁰ The organization began to decline and splinter with a wave of arrests and desertions beginning in 1980. Many detained PL members cooperated with law enforcement, leading to still more arrests. Some members split from the main organization and formed new groups to focus on freeing these "political prisoners."¹¹ Others joined the BR.

The PL formally dissolved at a conference in June 1983, where members declared the armed struggle inadequate to force social transformation.¹²

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

The PL's founders shared backgrounds with the militant wings of Italy's main extra-parliamentary leftist groups: Worker Power (PO) and Struggle Continues (LC). When these groups dissolved in the mid-1970s, many of their former members either joined the Red Brigades or smaller local terrorist organizations. Dissident members of the Red Brigades and the leaders of local groups went on to found the PL.

In 1976, the PL's founders created a national command to coordinate the local groups, which remained largely autonomous and operated under a variety of different names in addition to Prima Linea.

Italian security forces arrested virtually all of the PL's leadership as part of a crackdown on terrorism beginning in the late 1970s.¹³ Some PL leaders provided authorities with information on the group's activities in exchange for shorter sentences, leading to more arrests. The PL's remaining leaders in response formed new groups to focus on attacking prisons to free imprisoned PL members before abandoning armed struggle themselves.

Marco Donat-Cattin (1976 to 1979): Donat-Cattin was a founding member of the PL and the son of Christian Democrat vice-secretary Carlo Donat-Cattin. He was arrested in 1980 but was later released for giving authorities information that led to the arrest of other PL members. He died in a car accident in 1988.¹⁴

Susanna Ronconi (1976 to 1980): Ronconi was another founding member of the PL and a former member of Worker Power and the Red Brigades.¹⁵

Sergio Segio (1976 to 1983): Segio was arrested in 1983. He was a former member of the extra-parliamentary left-wing group Struggle Continues. Additionally, he was a co-founder of Prima Linea and its successor group Nucleus of Communists, formed in 1980.¹⁶

Barbara Azzaroni (1978 to February 28, 1979): Azzaroni had been a militant with the left-wing groups Worker Power, Autonomy, and Communist Combatant Formations (FCC) prior to joining the PL. She was killed along with another PL member in a shootout with police in Turin on February 28, 1979.¹⁷

B. NAME CHANGES

The PL staged attacks under dozens of names in addition to Prima Linea.¹⁸ It is often difficult to know precisely whether a group was operating on behalf of the PL or independently. Among the names used by the PL were Armed Struggle for Communism, Communist Fighters Brigades, Armed Proletarian Circles, Communist Fighters Departments, Communist Fighters Committees, Proletarian Departments for the Communist Liberation Army, and Class Warfare for Armed Proletarian Power.¹⁹

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- 1976: 20 militants and 1,500-2,000 "potential supporters (Terrorism and Security: the Italian Experience)²⁰
- 1979: 2,500, including "satellite groups" (Terrorism and Security: the Italian Experience)²¹
- 1983: 100 (Terrorism and Security: the Italian Experience)²²

D. RESOURCES

The PL mostly financed its own operations. The organization acquired money through bank robberies. It bought some weapons from the Middle East but more often acquired weapons by robbing army and air force installations.²³

E. GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

Prima Linea was active in 19 provinces throughout Italy. Its most active local squads were based in the industrial cities of northern Italy, especially Turin, Milan, and Florence.²⁴ The group staged its first attack in Milan,²⁵ and its founding congress outside Florence brought together militants from Turin, Milan, Florence, and Naples.²⁶

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY AND GOALS

The PL sought to overthrow the capitalist state in Italy, though it lacked a well-developed vision of what should replace it. In contrast to the BR, the PL did not seek to take state power itself, but to facilitate a spontaneous uprising of the proletariat.²⁷ Like the BR, the PL felt the Italian Communist Party (PCI) had betrayed the workers' cause, especially after the PCI struck a "historic compromise" with the center-right Christian Democrats (DC) in 1976.

The PL also feared that Italy might become a military dictatorship like Greece, Spain, Portugal, or Turkey, and aimed to prevent that outcome.²⁸

Like other Italian leftist groups, the PL drew inspiration from Latin American revolutionaries, particularly the urban warfare model of Uruguay's Tupamaros.

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

PL members participated in and gained recruits from student and worker demonstrations.²⁹

Members also distributed propaganda through fliers, left-wing periodicals, and in person.³⁰ Many PL members did not give up their jobs or identities to join the PL, and they used their positions in the community to recruit new members.³¹

C. TARGETS AND TACTICS

The PL coordinated left-wing militant groups that had previously operated separately. The groups remained largely autonomous under the PL "National Command" and continued to carry out attacks under several names. This was a tactic to confuse law enforcement and create the appearance of a constantly growing terrorist threat to the state.³²

The PL's most important symbolic targets were the center-right Christian Democrat political party, the car manufacturer Fiat, right-wing trade unions, and law enforcement. The PL's leaders perceived these organizations to represent capitalism and the repression of the working class.³³

PL members attacked associated people and property. They sometimes assassinated their victims and sometimes immobilized them by shooting them in the legs or arms.³⁴ They frequently disarmed police officers by force.³⁵ PL members would also use bombs or incendiary bombs to cause damage to factories or offices or carry out raids to steal documents for intelligence-gathering.

In contrast to the Red Brigades, no kidnappings have been attributed to the PL.³⁶

PL successors Communists Organized for Proletarian Liberation (COLP) and Nucleus of Communists attacked prisons with the aim of freeing imprisoned leftists.³⁷

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

April 29, 1976: Two PL gunmen killed Enrico Pedinovi, a provincial lawyer for right-wing party Italian Social Movement (MSI), in Milan. The PL's first claimed attack took place in Turin on November 30, 1976, with a raid on the offices of the Fiat Managers' group. (No casualties).³⁸

October 11, 1978: Four assailants -- three men and one woman -- shot and killed criminology professor Alfredo Paoletta in Naples. It was the first political homicide for which the PL claimed responsibility. (1 killed).³⁹

January 29, 1979: A PL squad shot and killed assistant state attorney Emilio Alessandrini in Milan. (1 killed).⁴⁰

December 11, 1979: Between six and ten Prima Linea members raided the Valletta Institute of Business Administration in Turin, shooting five teachers and five students in the legs. (0 killed, 10 wounded).⁴¹

January 21, 1982: Seven members of PL successor group COLP killed two military policemen and wounded another in a shootout in Siena. One COLP member died in the firefight. (3 killed).⁴²

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

PL members often retained their jobs and identities, rather than "going underground," in order to maintain contact with the working class.⁴³ Extraparliamentary organizations such as Continuous Struggle (LC), Worker Power (PO), and Worker Autonomy (AUTOP) were key recruitment pools for the PL.⁴⁴

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

The PL grew out of contacts between former militants of extra-parliamentary leftist groups, especially Struggle Continues (LC) and Worker Power (PO). Both groups dissolved in the early

1970s. Some of their former members formed new groups and continued to stage attacks under a variety of names.⁴⁵ Some founded the periodical *Without Cease*, which provided the intellectual foundation for the PL. The PL would later attempt to combine overt political activity with covert terrorist attacks, as *Without Cease* advocated.⁴⁶

Leaders of the local militant groups, many of them also involved in *Without Cease*, established *Prima Linea* in 1976 and 1977 to coordinate strategy through a "National Command," but local PL cells still used different names and remained largely independent at the tactical level.

The PL's origins in legal Italian leftist groups and left-wing periodicals were similar to the origins of many other Italian leftist terrorist groups.⁴⁷ The PL shared communist and anti-fascist goals with these groups, and they sometimes staged joint actions or cooperated at the technical and logistical level. For example, the PL bought arms from Communist Revolutionary Committees (Cocori) and shared resources and eventually merged with Communist Combatant Formations (FCC).⁴⁸

The PL and the BR also shared broad goals, but differed in strategy. The two groups were rivals until the late 1970s.⁴⁹ Many of the PL's founders were former members of the Red Brigades who left over disagreements about the role of militancy and hierarchy. The PL publicly condemned the BR's most famous action, the 1978 kidnapping of former Prime Minister Aldo Moro.⁵⁰ However there is evidence that the two groups began to collaborate as the PL declined and began calling for a unified "proletarian force." The BR may have been involved in the PL's 1979 attack on a Turin school of business administration; the PL's claim of responsibility featured the BR's symbol of the five-pointed star.⁵¹ In 1982, groups that had split from the BR and the PL staged a prison raid together.⁵² The BR also absorbed some PL assets in the wake of arrests that largely dismantled the organization.⁵³

At 1980 and 1981 conferences, PL members founded the related groups *Nucleus of Communists* and *Communists Organized for Proletarian Liberation* (COLP), which both focused on prisons and were not entirely independent of each other.⁵⁴

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

Members of the PL trained with European terrorist groups and received arms shipments from Libya and Palestine.

In France, members of the PL and successor organization *Communists Organized for Proletarian Liberation* (COLP) trained and conducted robberies with the French terrorist group *Direct Action* (AD).⁵⁵ Members of the PL also enjoyed safe haven in France.⁵⁶ In Spain, some PL members trained with the Basque separatist group *Basque Homeland Freedom* (ETA).⁵⁷

Italian leftist groups including the PL bought weapons, including rifles and missile launchers, from the *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine* (PFLP). Libya acted as an intermediary in these purchases and separately sold arms to multiple Italian leftist groups, including the PL.⁵⁸

MAPS

- Italy

¹ Pisano, Vittoriofranco S. *Terrorism and Security : the Italian Experience* : Report of the Subcommittee On Security and Terrorism of the Committee On the Judiciary, United States Senate. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1984. p. 76. The PL's first claimed attack took place in Turin on November 30, 1976, with a raid on the offices of the Fiat Managers' group (none killed). (Segio 2006, p. 344)

² Pisano, Vittoriofranco S. *Terrorism and Security : the Italian Experience* : Report of the Subcommittee On Security and Terrorism of the Committee On the Judiciary, United States Senate. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1984. p. 77 and Associazione Italiana Vittime del Terrorismo, "Schede/1981/VISCARDI," Available: <http://www.vittimeterrorismo.it/memorie/schede/viscardi.htm>

³ Cesare Bermanni, "Il nemico interno - Guerra civile e lotta di classe in Italia 1943-1976," Odradek edizione, 1997. Cited in Segio 2006, 381. The same source attributes 394 attacks to the BR over the same period.

⁴ Pisano, Vittoriofranco S. *Terrorism and Security : the Italian Experience* : Report of the Subcommittee On Security and Terrorism of the Committee On the Judiciary, United States Senate. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1984. p. 11.

⁵ Pisano, Vittoriofranco S. *Terrorism and Security : the Italian Experience* : Report of the Subcommittee On Security and Terrorism of the Committee On the Judiciary, United States Senate. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1984. p. 3.

⁶ Pisano, Vittoriofranco S. *Terrorism and Security : the Italian Experience* : Report of the Subcommittee On Security and Terrorism of the Committee On the Judiciary, United States Senate. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1984. pp. 76-77.

⁷ Pisano, Vittoriofranco S. *Terrorism and Security : the Italian Experience* : Report of the Subcommittee On Security and Terrorism of the Committee On the Judiciary, United States Senate. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1984. p. 11.

⁸ Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. p. 87.

⁹ Gnosis Rivista Italiana di Intelligence, "Movimentismo e militarismo: Prima Linea anima armata del '68," 4/2005.

¹⁰ Della Porta, Donatella. *Il Terrorismo Di Sinistra*. Bologna: Il mulino, 1990. pp. 92-93.

¹¹ Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. pp. 358-359.

¹² Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. p. 363.

¹³ Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. p. 91.

¹⁴ Gnosis Rivista Italiana di Intelligence, "Movimentismo e militarismo: Prima Linea anima armata del '68," 4/2005, footnote 1, and Segio 2006, 356; Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. p. 337.

¹⁵ Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. pp. 85-86.

¹⁶ Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. pp. 182.

¹⁷ Barbato, Tullio. *Il Terrorismo In Italia Negli Anni Settanta : Cronaca E Documentazione*. Milano: Bibliografica, 1980. p. 245; Barbato, Tullio. *Il Terrorismo In Italia Negli Anni Settanta: Cronaca E Documentazione*. Milano: Bibliografica, 1980. p. 164.

¹⁸ Della Porta, Donatella. *Il Terrorismo Di Sinistra*. Bologna: Il mulino, 1990. p. 92.

¹⁹ Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. p. 87.

²⁰ Pisano, Vittoriofranco S. *Terrorism and Security : the Italian Experience* : Report of the Subcommittee On Security and Terrorism of the Committee On the Judiciary, United States Senate. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1984. p. 20.

²¹ Pisano, Vittoriofranco S. *Terrorism and Security : the Italian Experience* : Report of the Subcommittee On Security and Terrorism of the Committee On the Judiciary, United States Senate. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1984. p. 20.

²² Pisano, Vittoriofranco S. *Terrorism and Security : the Italian Experience* : Report of the Subcommittee On Security and Terrorism of the Committee On the Judiciary, United States Senate. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1984. p. 20.

²³ Pisano, Vittoriofranco S. *Terrorism and Security : the Italian Experience* : Report of the Subcommittee On Security and Terrorism of the Committee On the Judiciary, United States Senate. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1984. p. 14, and Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. pp. 341-363.

²⁴ Della Porta, Donatella. *Il Terrorismo Di Sinistra*. Bologna: Il mulino, 1990. p. 93.

²⁵ Pisano, Vittoriofranco S. *Terrorism and Security : the Italian Experience* : Report of the Subcommittee On Security and Terrorism of the Committee On the Judiciary, United States Senate. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1984. p. 14, and Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. p. 76.

²⁶ Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. p. 85.

²⁷ Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. p. 87, and Meade, Robert C. *The Red Brigades : the Story of Italian Terrorism*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1990, p. 95.

²⁸ Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. p. 34.

²⁹ Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. pp. 99-104.

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- ³⁰ Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. p. 125.
- ³¹ Meade, Robert C. *The Red Brigades : the Story of Italian Terrorism*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1990. p. 95.
- ³² Gnosis, *Rivista Italiana di Intelligence*, "Movimentismo e militarismo: Prima Linea anima armata del '68," 4/2005.
- ³³ Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. pp. 86, 341-363.
- ³⁴ Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. p. 379.
- ³⁵ Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. p. 341-363.
- ³⁶ Pisano, Vittorfranco S. *Terrorism and Security : the Italian Experience : Report of the Subcommittee On Security and Terrorism of the Committee On the Judiciary, United States Senate*. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1984. p. 14; Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. p. 25.
- ³⁷ Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. p. 182.
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- ³⁹ Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. p. 90 and Associazione Italiana Vittime del Terrorismo, "Schede/1978/Paoletta," available: <http://www.vittimeterrorismo.it/memorie/schede/paoletta.htm>
- ⁴⁰ Gnosis, *Rivista Italiana di Intelligence*, "Movimentismo e militarismo: Prima Linea anima armata del '68," 4/2005.
- ⁴¹ Barbato, Tullio. *Il Terrorismo In Italia Negli Anni Settanta : Cronaca E Documentazione*. Milano: Bibliografica, 1980. p. 186.
- ⁴² Pisano, Vittorfranco S. *Terrorism and Security : the Italian Experience : Report of the Subcommittee On Security and Terrorism of the Committee On the Judiciary, United States Senate*. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1984. p. 14; Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006.
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- ⁴⁶ Della Porta, Donatella. *Il Terrorismo Di Sinistra*. Bologna: Il mulino, 1990. pp. 118.
- ⁴⁷ Della Porta, Donatella. *Il Terrorismo Di Sinistra*. Bologna: Il mulino, 1990. p. 92.
- ⁴⁸ Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. pp. 124, 129.
- ⁴⁹ Barbato, Tullio. *Il Terrorismo In Italia Negli Anni Settanta : Cronaca E Documentazione*. Milano: Bibliografica, 1980. p. 29.
- ⁵⁰ Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. p. 125.
- ⁵¹ Barbato, Tullio. *Il Terrorismo In Italia Negli Anni Settanta : Cronaca E Documentazione*. Milano: Bibliografica, 1980. p. 260.
- ⁵² Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. pp. 194-195.
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- ⁵⁵ Pisano, Vittorfranco S. *Terrorism In Italy : an Update Report, 1983-1985 : Report of the Subcommittee On Security and Terrorism for the Use of the Committee On the Judiciary, United States Senate*. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1985. p. 26.
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- ⁵⁷ Pisano, Vittorfranco S. *Terrorism and Security : the Italian Experience : Report of the Subcommittee On Security and Terrorism of the Committee On the Judiciary, United States Senate*. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1984. p. 14, and Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. p. 29.
- ⁵⁸ Pisano, Vittorfranco S. *Terrorism and Security : the Italian Experience : Report of the Subcommittee On Security and Terrorism of the Committee On the Judiciary, United States Senate*. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1984. p. 14, and Segio, Sergio. *Una Vita In Prima Linea*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 2006. pp. 30-31, citing "Update Report," *Clandestine Tactics and Technology*, International Association of Chiefs of Police, Gaithersburg, MD, vol. VIII, Issue No. 4, 1982, pp. 3-4.