



World dispatch

The man who knew too much

Giulio Andreotti's conviction for a journalist's murder has confirmed what many always thought about the former prime minister, says Philip Willan

Philip Willan

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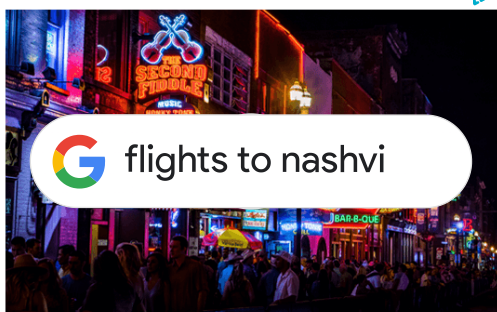


It is said that if one wants to comprehend the history of terrorism in post-war Italy it is essential to understand the murder of Mino Pecorelli. On Sunday a Perugia appeals court underscored the importance of that distant event by sentencing Giulio Andreotti to 24 years in prison for instigating the crime.

The murder of a journalistic gadfly on the orders of the man who was seven times prime minister and dominated a turbulent political scene for four decades certainly lends gravitas to the crime, which would assume a whole new significance if the Perugia judges were right.

Mr Andreotti is expected to appeal to Italy's supreme court and is not considered guilty under Italian law until that court has returned its final verdict.

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Mino Pecorelli was shot dead in his car on a Rome street in March 1979. The editor of the weekly magazine Osservatore Politico had access to a startling quantity of confidential information and many enemies.

Some observers believe the journalist was killed because of his tendency to use that information, often provided by contacts in the secret services, to blackmail politicians and businessmen in order to keep his struggling organ afloat. Others say he was a victim of his own crusading verve, which led him to publish sensitive material that other media would not handle, out of a romantic sense of the investigative journalist's mission.

Mr Pecorelli was nothing if not well informed, and the Perugia appeals court appears to have accepted the testimony of a number of mafia turncoats who claimed that the muck-raking journalist was killed by the mob in order to prevent him from publishing material that could have seriously damaged Mr Andreotti's career.

The damaging document, they suggested, could have been the text of a memorandum prepared by Aldo Moro for his Red Brigades captors. Mr Moro, the chairman of the Christian Democrat Party, had been kidnapped and killed by the left-wing terrorist organisation the year before Mr Pecorelli's death. And he had written unflatteringly of Mr Andreotti during his 55 days as a prisoner.

A part of what Mr Moro had to say about Mr Andreotti came to light in October 1978, six months after his death, when police discovered a Red Brigades hideout in Milan. A more complete version of the document was discovered by a decorator behind a wall panel in the same apartment some 10 years later.

It has been suggested that the unexpurgated document may have found its way into Mr Pecorelli's hands, precipitating his death. Mr Andreotti's lawyers say neither the short nor the long version of the document was capable of doing serious harm to the resilient Christian Democrat leader.

There is little doubt that the document was at the centre of suspicion and intrigue. Mr Andreotti and his political rival Bettino Craxi, the Socialist Party leader, confirmed as much when they each suggested that the other was responsible for its "chance discovery" in 1990. Mr Craxi suggested that a "little hand" had probably placed it behind the panel; a reference to the slim-limbed Mr Andreotti. The latter retorted that the document may well have been concealed by the "large hand" of the robust Mr Craxi.

Mr Pecorelli, writing of the 1978 version of the document, described it as a "time-bomb" which would undermine the already crumbling structures of the republic. Its late explosion in Perugia has certainly given Mr Andreotti an unpleasant surprise.

Mr Pecorelli was second to none as a guide to Italian political intrigue and his articles about the Moro affair provide some of the most fascinating, if contradictory, accounts of one of Italy's enduring mysteries. Mr Pecorelli described the kidnap operation as bearing "the hallmark of a lucid superpower", suggesting that Mr Moro's removal stemmed from his flirtation with the Communists, which posed a strategic problem for both Washington and Moscow.

In 1975 he published an article of astonishing prescience in which he purported to cite the words of an American official visiting Rome with President Gerald Ford: "I see darkness. There's a Jacqueline in the future of your peninsula."

Mr Andreotti was no stranger to the world of intrigue described by Mr Pecorelli. Realpolitik and national security were his special subjects from early in his career. A cynical readiness to compromise and to accept assistance from even the most questionable quarters would later embroil him in a trial for alleged collusion with the mafia, which ended in his acquittal three years ago.

An appeal verdict is expected within the next few months. Mr Moro, in his testimony to the Red Brigades, described him as "cold, impenetrable... without a moment of human pity".

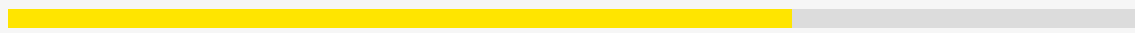
That sang froid has stood him in good stead during his long judicial ordeal and the dignity and humour with which he has borne his trials has frequently been contrasted with the stalling tactics and invective with which his successor, Silvio Berlusconi, has reacted to his own corruption trials in Milan.

Mr Andreotti's conviction has been greeted with revulsion by public opinion and politicians of every hue, since it stamps an indelible mark of infamy on an entire political era.

Paradoxically, the fate of a man who always emphasised his faith in the justice system is likely to be used by Mr Berlusconi and his allies to mount a renewed assault on the judiciary, for the rules and traditions of which the present prime minister has scant regard. The result could be a reduction in the autonomy of the magistrates and a return to the impunity of the powerful: the principle that characterised, perhaps more than any other, the Andreotti years that have just been condemned.

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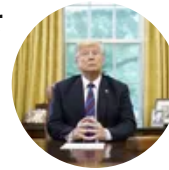
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