



HAL
open science

‘Power is in the Streets’: Protest and Militancy in France, Italy and West Germany, 1968–1979

Luca Provenzano

► **To cite this version:**

Luca Provenzano. ‘Power is in the Streets’: Protest and Militancy in France, Italy and West Germany, 1968–1979. *Contemporary European History*, 2023, pp.1-18. 10.1017/S096077732300022X . hal-04682384

HAL Id: hal-04682384

<https://hal.science/hal-04682384>

Submitted on 30 Aug 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

THE CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN HISTORY PRIZE

‘Power is in the Streets’: Protest and Militancy in France, Italy and West Germany, 1968–1979

Luca Provenzano 

Centre d'histoire de Sciences Po, Paris, France
luca.provenzano@sciencespo.fr

This article explores cultures of militancy in public space among currents of the revolutionary left in France, Italy and West Germany during the ‘red decade’. It shows how radicals embraced convergent strategic perspectives, discourses on violence and insubordinate practices for confronting the police. However, patterns of militancy subsequently diverged along national lines in the face of different experiences of neo-fascist violence, domestic social conflict, and legacies of armed resistance and civil war. In particular, the relatively frequent use of lethal force by Italian police in defence of public order motivated a current of the Italian revolutionary left to endorse the use of firearms during protests. Across national experiences, domestic protest policing conditioned the use of force by protestors and the transformation – or not – of protestors into terrorists.

Introduction

On 1 March 1968, the occupation of the University of Rome set the stage for the first large-scale physical confrontations in the history of the Italian student movement. As a cohort of 4,000 radicalised students tried to reclaim the university campus after its occupation by the police the previous day, a premeditated offensive against the police led to a generalised confrontation known as the Battle of Valle Giulia. The events were significant for activists from the Italian New Left (*nuova sinistra*), many of whom interpreted the protest as signs of revolutionary potential.¹ More militant forms of protest subsequently emerged in West Germany, as members of the *Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund* (Socialist German Students Association, SDS) attempted to blockade the Springer media conglomeration following the attempted murder of anti-authoritarian student leader Rudi Dutschke in mid-April. These events energised debates over the potential of resistance (*Widerstand*) and counter-violence (*Gegengewalt*).² The incidents in West Germany were analysed by Parisian activists only days before combative protests in the Latin Quarter contributed to a nationwide general strike and a political crisis that appeared to bring France to the precipice of revolution during the events of May and June 1968.³

¹ On Valle Giulia, see Guido Crainz, *Il paese mancato: Dal miracolo economico agli anni ottanta* (Rome: Donzelli editore, 2005), 260–71. For self-defence, see Crainz, *Il paese mancato*, 266–7. According to former *Potere operaio* activists it was actually the students who started the confrontation; Aldo Grandi, *La generazione degli anni perduti: storie di Potere Operaio* (Turin: Einaudi, 2003), 45–6.

² Timothy Scott Brown, *West Germany and the Global 1960s: The Antiauthoritarian Revolt, 1962–1978* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³ Staal, ‘Créer Deux, Trois, Berlin!’, *Avant Garde Jeunesse*, 12 (1968), 4–6. For France in 1968, see recently Ludivine Bantigny, *1968: de grands soirs en petits matins* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2018). On the transnational and global dimension, see Salar Mohandesi, ‘Bringing Vietnam Home: The Vietnam War, Internationalism, and May ’68’, *French Historical Studies*, 41, 2 (2018), 219–51.

Thereafter, encounters between protestors and police would assume a prominent role in Western European revolutionaries' understandings of the potential of violence.⁴ Drawing on the experience of '68 and a broader tradition of hostility to state authority, a transnational cohort of revolutionaries came to perceive combative protest as a potent form of struggle. Groups engaged in this form of militancy included a network of some of the more influential organisations of the self-identifying revolutionary left after '68: *Gauche prolétarienne* (Proletarian Left, GP) and the *Ligue communiste* (Communist League, LCR) in France; *Potere operaio* (Worker Power, PotOp) and *Lotta continua* (Continuous Struggle, LC) in Italy; and the West German 'Sponti' ('Spontaneist') movement and the group known as *Revolutionärer Kampf* (Revolutionary Struggle, RK) in Frankfurt am Main.⁵ Formed out of the magma of 1968–9, these organisations aspired to fuse revolutionary violence and mass politics. Their common, transnational turn to low-intensity physical combat in public space is striking because their intellectual horizons spanned the full spectrum of 1970s heterodox Marxisms, including such influences as Guevarism, Italian workerism (*operaismo*), Maoism and Trotskyism. For an influential stratum of the European revolutionary left, physical confrontation was the order of the day. The crisis of the revolutionary left from 1973 to 1976 led to the implosion of these groups or their reorientation, but the culture of militancy in public space endured, as evidenced by the violence that accompanied the Movement of 1977 in Italy.⁶ Why did activists risk injury, arrest and criminalisation to participate in combative protests? How were combative behaviours socialised and practised? And why did activists embrace cultures of militancy to differing extents in different national contexts?

The focus of this article is the collective use of force in the context of demonstrations, strikes, occupations and encounters involving protestors and police. Historians have conventionally differentiated this form of political violence from terrorism. I do the same. Throughout this article, I use the term 'militancy in public space' or the shorthand 'militancy' to refer to it. I argue that although revolutionary left organisations issuing from the student revolt of 1968 articulated similar cultures of militancy, both the scale and the form of militant behaviours subsequently diverged. There were four reasons for this. First, militancy was more common where domestic armed resistance and civil war had played formative roles in the defeat of fascism and the foundation of the democratic state, namely Italy and France. Second, encounters between workers and police in France and Italy in the late 1960s tended to encourage the recourse to force by elements of the revolutionary left; militancy remained limited in West Germany in part due to the relatively peaceful dynamics of domestic social conflict. Third, combative protest was more common where

⁴ On the broader significance of the French May in Italy, see Anna Bravo, *A colpi di cuore: storie del Sessantotto* (Roma: GLF editori Laterza, 2008), 234; Crainz, *Il paese mancato*, 295–8; Guido Panvini, *Ordine nero, guerriglia rossa: la violenza politica nell'Italia degli anni Sessanta e Settanta (1966–1975)* (Turin: Einaudi, 2009), 35.

⁵ For general overviews of these organisations see, for France: Philippe Artières and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, eds., *une histoire collective, 1962–1981*, 3rd edn (Paris: La Découverte, 2008); Daniel Bensaïd, *Une lente impatience* (Paris: Stock, 2004); Alain Geismar, *Mon Mai 1968* (Paris: Perrin, 2018); Jean-Paul Salles, *La Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (1968–1981)* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2005); Henri Weber, *Rebelle jeunesse* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2018). For Italy, see Luigi Bobbio, *Storia di Lotta continua*, 2nd edn (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1988); Aldo Grandi, *La generazione degli anni perduti*; Giovanni de Luna, *Le ragioni di un decennio, 1969–1979. Militanza, violenza, sconfitta, memoria* (Rome: Feltrinelli, 2009); Marco Scavino, *Potere Operaio. La storia. La teoria*. (Milan: DeriveApprodi, 2018); Angelo Ventrone, *'Vogliamo tutto': Perché due generazioni hanno creduto nella rivoluzione, 1960–1988*, 7th edn (Rome: Editori Laterza, 2020), 150–267. Recent literature discussing the Frankfurt Sponti milieu includes Sebastian Kasper, *Spontis: Eine Geschichte antiautoritärer Linker im roten Jahrzehnt* (Münster: edition assemblage, 2018); Sebastian Kasper, 'Das Ende der Utopien: Wandel der Spontis in den langen 1970er-Jahren', PhD dissertation (Universität Freiburg, 2017); Gerd Koenen, *Das rote Jahrzehnt: unsere kleine deutsche Kulturrevolution, 1967–1977* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2001), 317–57; Sven Reichardt, *Authentizität und Gemeinschaft: linksalternatives Leben in den siebziger und frühen achtziger Jahren* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014). I use the actors' category 'revolutionary left' to underline the self-conception of the groups in question. Since not all of these groups were hostile to participation in the formal political arena, the term 'extraparliamentary left' is not satisfactory. 'Extreme left' and 'radical left' have pejorative connotations and were mostly used by their political adversaries.

⁶ For the movement of 1977, see Luca Falcicola, *Il movimento del 1977 in Italia* (Rome: Carocci editore, 2015); Alessio Gagliardi, *Il '77 tra storia e memoria* (Rome: manifestolibri, 2017); Monica Galfré and Simone Neri Serneri, eds., *Il movimento del '77: Radici, snodi, luoghi* (Rome: Viella, 2018); Marco Grispigni, *1977* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 2006).

neofascist efforts to appropriate public space encouraged activists to embrace militant anti-fascism. Finally, activists adopted divergent forms of insubordinate behaviour according to the routine levels of force employed by the state in confrontations. In Italy, more frequent police recourse to lethal force in defence of public order conditioned activists to improvise on common discourses of self-defence and counter-violence to motivate the use of firearms in encounters between protestors and police. Thus, similar revolutionary commitments had divergent practical implications in the 1970s depending on national context.

This article offers a comparative and transnational perspective on militancy in France, Italy and West Germany. Although 1968 in Western Europe has been the subject of significant transnational historical inquiry, studies of political violence in the 1970s have rarely embraced a transnational and comparative perspective that goes beyond the study of terrorism in Italy and West Germany.⁷ The strategic visions, discourses and practices of revolutionary left groups in the context of militancy have typically been analysed in exclusively national terms based on unstated but problematic assumptions that attitudes towards violence or conflictual dynamics were unique to one national context.⁸ Including France in this broader transnational and comparative analysis is a valuable corrective because both discourses on violence and factors that allegedly contributed to political violence elsewhere existed there, too, including the legacy of the Resistance, the experience of police violence, neo-fascist activism, strong connections to national liberation movements in the Third World and a sense of revolutionary possibility linked to the events of 1968. It is worth recalling, moreover, that despite the cliché that ‘no-one died in May ’68’ there were more deaths in the context of social and political conflict in the year 1968 in France than in either Italy or West Germany. In the sixties, the French left suffered more victims of state repression than the West German left; it operated in a more authoritarian political context embedded in the recent violent origins of the Fifth Republic; and it had more profound links to Marxist insurgencies in Latin America, Algeria and Vietnam.⁹ Meanwhile, the events of May ’68 led the French revolutionary left to embrace the possibility of imminent revolution. Yet although the same revolutionary left developed a robust culture of militancy, this did not lead to the formation of a significant armed group. Including France in a broader analysis is a useful means of undermining teleological biases and underlining the plurality of forms of political violence in Western Europe in the 1970s.

This article provides a corrective to scholarship on political violence in the 1970s focused on the emergence of terrorism. In particular, it complicates our understanding of the factors that turned protestors into terrorists by outlining the contingent relationships between militancy in protests, strikes and occupations and the forms of action systematised by organisations dedicated to armed struggle (*la lutte armée, la lotta armata, der bewaffnete Kampf*). The prism of terrorism studies has tended to obscure the multiplicity of forms of political violence in 1970s Europe, reinforcing the assumption that the sole significant form of political violence in those decades was armed.¹⁰ In this vein, an

⁷ See Christoph Cornelißen, Brunello Mantelli and Petra Terhoeven, eds., *Il decennio rosso: contestazione sociale e conflitto politico in Germania e in Italia negli anni Sessanta e Settanta* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012); Petra Terhoeven, *Deutscher Herbst in Europa: der Linksterrorismus der siebziger Jahre als transnationales Phänomen* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2014). A notable exception to the focus on Italy and West Germany is Isabelle Sommier, *La violence politique et son deuil: L’après 68 en France et en Italie* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1998).

⁸ See the insightful critique in Marco Grispigni, *Quella sera a Milano era caldo. La stagione dei movimenti e la violenza politica*. (Manifestolibri, 2016); Marco Grispigni, ‘La strage è di stato. Gli anni Settanta, la violenza politica e il caso italiano’, in Simone Neri Serneri, ed., *Verso la lotta armata. La politica della violenza nella sinistra radicale degli anni Settanta* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2012), 93–116.

⁹ For state violence at the tail end of the Algerian War of Independence, see Jim House and Neil MacMaster, *Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror, and Memory* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006); Alain Dewerpe, *Charonne, 8 février 1962: anthropologie historique d’un massacre d’État* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006). For the Gaullist ‘coup’, see Grey Anderson, *La guerre civile en France, 1958–1962. Du coup d’État gaulliste à la fin de l’OAS* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2018). For the Third World, see Christoph Kalter, *The Discovery of the Third World: Decolonization and the Rise of the New Left in France, c. 1950–1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). Cf. Quinn Slobodian, *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in 1960s West Germany* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ For historiographical reviews of the vast scholarship on terrorism, see Karrin Hanshew, ‘Beyond Friend or Foe? Terrorism, Counterterrorism and a (Transnational) “Gesellschaftsgeschichte” of the 1970s’, *Geschichte und*

enduring scholarly focus has been the relationship between '68 and later armed groups that emerged in West Germany and Italy.¹¹ Historians of West Germany have debated the relationship between the New Left and *der bewaffnete Kampf*;¹² recent contributions to scholarship on political violence in Italy tend to position the revolutionary left that emerged in the late sixties and early seventies as the generative milieu of 'red terrorism'.¹³ Scholarship on the French revolutionary left (*gauchisme*) of the 1970s still tends in the opposite direction, relativising the embrace of political violence by revolutionary left groups after '68, likely because subsequent armed movements were insignificant. As Robert Gildea noted around the fortieth anniversary of 1968, 'French historians, political scientists and most former militants maintain the orthodoxy that French radicals or revolutionaries did not "do" violence . . .'.¹⁴ Bringing militancy into transnational and comparative focus shows that a common form of political violence did directly emerge out of the protests of 1968 but that its relationship to armed struggle was both variable across national experiences and an issue of intense debate within the revolutionary left.

Beyond International Context: Domestic Conditions and Militancy

Scholarly accounts of the emergence of political violence in Western Europe in the 1960s tend to emphasise the constitutive role of representations of the heroic Vietcong or Cuban *foco*, with the Tet Offensive, the experience of Cuban revolutionaries, and the February 1968 International Conference against the Vietnam War in West Berlin providing the context for the radicalisation of the New Left.¹⁵ In this vein, Timothy Scott Brown reminds us that the valorisation of revolutionary violence was an intrinsic part of European revolutionaries' support for Third World revolutions and national liberation struggles.¹⁶ However, domestic conditions were even more decisive influences. In general, structural conditions and forms of political and social conflict favouring militancy were more prevalent in Italy and France than in West Germany, helping to account for the relative marginality of 'mass militancy' (*Massenmilitanz*) as advocated by Frankfurt am Main Spontis like Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who themselves sought inspiration from May '68 and the *autunno caldo*.¹⁷

Gesellschaft, 42, 2 (2016), 377–403; Giovanni Mario Ceci, *Il terrorismo italiano: storia di un dibattito* (Rome: Carocci editore, 2013). A societal history of terrorism in West Germany is Karrin Hanshew, *Terror and Democracy in West Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For the multiplicity of forms of violence in the 1970s, see Andrea Lanza, 'Quando è finita la rivoluzione. Il divenire storico nei movimenti italiani degli anni Settanta', *Meridiana*, 76 (2013), 220–1.

¹¹ In this vein, Martin Conway and Robert Gerwarth, 'Revolution and Counter-Revolution', in Donald Bloxam and Robert Gerwarth, eds., *Political Violence in Twentieth Century Europe* in (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹² The debates generated by the work of Wolfgang Kraushaar and the publications of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research (HIS) are symptomatic in this regard.

¹³ Gabriele Donato, '*La lotta è armata*'. *Sinistra rivoluzionaria e violenza politica in Italia, 1969–1972* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2014); Panvini, *Ordine nero, guerriglia rossa*. Notably, both authors conclude their analyses of the emergence of 'red terrorism' well before the dramatic escalation of left-wing political violence in 1977–1978. Less than 10 per cent of the around 130 victims of armed organisations on the left died between 1969 and 1975 while over 100 (>80 per cent) were killed between 1977 and 1982. See Renato Curio, ed., *La mappa perduta* (Rome: Sensibili alle foglie, 1994), 493. Contributions to the volume *Verso la lotta armata* tend to recognise a higher degree of contingency in the emergence of terrorism at the end of the decade; see Simone Neri Serneri, ed., 'Contesti e strategie della violenza e della militarizzazione nella sinistra radicale', in Serneri, ed., *Verso la lotta armata*; Marco Scavino, 'La piazza e la forza. I percorsi verso la lotta armata dal Sessantotto alla metà degli anni Settanta', in Serneri, ed., *Verso la lotta armata*, 117–203. For a broader overview of the debate on the relationship between '68 and terrorism in Italian scholarship, see Ceci, *Il terrorismo*.

¹⁴ Robert Gildea, 'Forty Years on: French Writing on 1968 in 2008', *French History*, 23, 1 (Mar. 2009), 119. I thank Ben Mercer for directing me to this quote.

¹⁵ Bantigny, 1968, 123–50; Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, 1968. *Eine Zeitreise* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2008); Mohandesi, 'Bringing Vietnam Home'.

¹⁶ Brown, *West Germany*, 337.

¹⁷ For the transnational itinerary of Cohn-Bendit, see Wolfgang Kraushaar, 'Zwischen Frankfurt und Paris: Daniel Cohn-Bendit', in *Fischer in Frankfurt: Karriere eines Außenseiters* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2001), 80–119.

Neo-fascist violence encouraged militancy.¹⁸ In Italy, where neo-fascism and the radical right were relatively robust, anti-fascist protest had already taken a confrontational turn during the crisis imposed by the Tambroni coalition government in June 1960.¹⁹ As Guido Panvini has shown, from 1966 to 1975, Italian revolutionary left activists tended to legitimise violence and embrace militancy. Some of this cohort radicalised into organised surveillance and physical aggression against neo-fascists and, eventually, political homicide in the context of neo-fascist efforts to appropriate the streets and terrorism by the radical right.²⁰ A similar dynamic would later have an important role during the Movement of 1977, as the movement retaliated against resurgent neo-fascist violence.²¹ In France, where neo-fascism was more marginal following the defeat of the OAS (*Organisation armée secrète*) during the Algerian War of Independence, revolutionary left activists nevertheless honed a culture of physical confrontation in battles against neo-fascist adversaries.²² Incidents between anti-fascists and neo-fascists were essential preludes to the May 1968 events.²³ Subsequently, several of the most violent Parisian demonstrations of the early 1970s were efforts to halt reunions by neo-fascists.²⁴ In West Germany, the attempted assassination of Rudi Dutschke by radical right sympathiser Jozef Bachmann was the catalyst for militancy during the nationwide Easter demonstrations of 11–14 April 1968.²⁵ However, physical confrontations involving the revolutionary left and radical right were less common in West Germany despite protests and counterprotests triggered by the electoral campaigns of the extreme-right *Nazionaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (German National-Democratic Party, NPD).²⁶

The trajectory of social conflict in the late 1960s and 1970s contributed to further national disparities in the culture of militancy. On the one hand, renewed working-class insubordination led to battles between workers and police in France and Italy in the 1960s. These encounters fostered revolutionaries' perceptions of an enormous potential for 'mass violence' and of the police as illegitimate agents of capital. In France, renewed working-class insubordination was key to the imaginary and political strategy of the revolutionary left issuing from 1968.²⁷ In this vein, violent conflict at the height of strikes in Caen in January–February 1968 led to the conclusion by members of the *Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire* (Revolutionary Communist Youth, JCR) that the use of force could be a meaningful dimension of demonstrations.²⁸ 1968 gave aspiring revolutionaries a stronger dose of optimism. For the French Maoist current that merged into the GP, the confrontations between workers and police at the Peugeot factory at Sochaux at the end of the wildcat strikes demonstrated how working-class subjectivity expressed itself through violence.²⁹ Industrial insubordination in Italy in 1968–9 likewise encouraged domestic militancy.³⁰ For the Italian workerist intellectuals who formed PotOp, the Battle of Corso

¹⁸ For a transnational approach to neo-fascism, see Andrea Mammone, *Transnational Neofascism in France and Italy* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁹ Guido Crainz, *Storia della Repubblica. L'Italia dalla Liberazione ad oggi* (Rome: Donzelli editore, 2016), 99–106.

²⁰ Panvini, *Ordine nero, guerriglia rossa*. For the 'strategy of tension', see also Crainz, *Il paese mancato*, 369–410.

²¹ Corasaniti, *Volsci*, 94–5.

²² Nicolas Lebourg, 'L'affrontement des étudiants extrémistes, dans les années 1960', *Etudes*, 5 (Apr. 2018), 45–8; Florence Johsua, "'Nous vengerons nos pères' . . . De l'usage de la colère dans les organisations politiques d'extrême gauche dans les années 1968', *Politix*, 104, 4 (2013), 203–33. DOI: 10.3917/pox.104.0203.

²³ Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, 'Le champ des possibles', 45–7 in Artières and Zancarini-Fournel, eds., 68; Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, 'Die Phantasie an die Macht'. *Mai 68 in Frankreich*, 3rd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2016), 178–80.

²⁴ For the 21 June 1973 Parisian anti-fascist demonstration that led to the dissolution of the Ligue, see Bensaïd, *Une lente impatience*, 167–9.

²⁵ Brown, *West Germany*, 333–6.

²⁶ See Panvini, *Ordine nero, guerriglia rossa*, 33–5. For the Frankfurt 'antifa' demonstration of 17 June 1978, see *Pflasterstrand* 33 (1–14 July 1978).

²⁷ For France and working-class insubordination in the 1960s and 1970s, see Xavier Vigna, *L'insubordination ouvrière dans les années 68: essai d'histoire politique des usines* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2007).

²⁸ Clovisse Versa, 'Quand une idée pénètre les masses elle devient force matérielle', *Avant-garde jeunesse*, Apr. 1968, 12.

²⁹ Michèle Manceaux, *Les maos en France. Avant-propos de Jean-Paul Sartre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

³⁰ See Crainz, *Il paese mancato*, 321–62; Nicola Pizzolato, "'I Terroni in Città': Revising Southern Migrants' Militancy in Turin's "Hot Autumn", *Contemporary European History*, 21, 4 (Nov. 2012), 619–34. For broader representations of the

Traiano between workers, their student allies, and Italian police at the climax of strikes at the gigantic Fiat factory in Turin on 3 July 1969 became an exemplary episode of ‘working-class violence’ immortalised in the 1971 novel *Vogliamo tutto* (*We want everything*) by Nanni Balestrini.³¹ The same current of Italian revolutionary activists interpreted events like the revolt of Reggio Calabria of 1970 as a sign of the potential for mass violence and illegality among the ‘proletarians’ of central and southern Italy.³² By contrast, in Germany, working-class insubordination remained more fragile and police used force on strikers less often. Significantly, factory-oriented currents of the West German revolutionary left tended to refer to working-class insubordination in France and Italy as models for revolutionary rupture.³³ However, confrontations between youths and police during events like the Schwabing riots of July 1962 in Munich contributed to the emergent identification of ‘marginalised groups’ (*Randgruppen*) as a revolutionary force.³⁴

Another contributing factor to militancy was the legacy of anti-fascist resistance during the Second World War. One implication of the Resistance for the revolutionary left was that illegal, violent action could be successful. Karrin Hanshew has noted how a discourse of resistance (*Widerstand*) that emerged in the 1960s functioned as a source of symbolic legitimation for the later armed movement in the West German context, and its relationship to militancy was if anything more direct.³⁵ However, the wartime Resistance was of greater military and political significance in fascist Italy and Vichy France than it had been in Nazi Germany.³⁶ In post-war Italy, that historical legacy was incorporated in both Catholic and communist variants.³⁷ The same was true of France: both Gaullists and communists turned their historical roles in the Resistance into sources of symbolic and political capital. To be sure, the usefulness of anti-fascist culture was by no means self-evident to all revolutionary leftists after 1968. If both the GP and *Lotta continua* sought to claim the symbolic legitimacy of the partisan past in 1970, Italian workerists were typically circumspect about the revolutionary potential of anti-fascism.³⁸ Nevertheless, prominent activists in both countries envisioned revolution as the outcome of civil war, the scenario that both French and Italian communist parties had disavowed in 1943–5.³⁹ Indeed, in both Italy and France the notion that the Resistance had been betrayed by the local Communist Party was central to the memory politics of the revolutionary left.

working class, see Andrea Sangiovanni, *Tute blu. La parabola operaia nell'Italia repubblicana* (Rome: Donzelli editore, 2006), 123–226. Already the 7–10 July 1962 Piazza Statuto events in Turin evinced divergent reactions from a cohort of workerists involved in the journal *Quaderni Rossi* and the socialist and communist press. See Sangiovanni, *Tute blu*, 50–3.

³¹ Nanni Balestrini, *Vogliamo tutto. Romanzo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1971). As Andrea Sangiovanni notes, the climactic final chapter of the novel, entitled ‘The Insurrection’, depicts the Corso Traiano events. Sangiovanni, *Tute blu*, 168. For a critical analysis of Balestrini’s novel as a source, see Pizzolato, ‘I Terrori in Città’.

³² Grandi, *La generazione degli anni perduti*, 141–3; De Luna, *Le ragioni*, 107–9. For Reggio Calabria, Crainz, *Il paese mancato*, 470–9.

³³ ‘Klassenkämpfe in Italien’, *Wir wollen Alles!*, 19 (Aug. 1974), 1–2.

³⁴ For essentialist notions of working-class youth and violence among the New Left in West Germany, see Brown, *West Germany*, 268.

³⁵ Hanshew, *Terror and Democracy in West Germany*, 68–109.

³⁶ Olivier Wieviorka, *The Resistance in Western Europe 1940–1945* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019); Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile: saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991). For the political significance of the ‘moment of Liberation’, see Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Moment of Liberation in Western Europe: Power Struggles and Rebellions, 1943–1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

³⁷ For Catholics and political violence, see Guido Panvini, *Cattolici e violenza politica: l'altro album di famiglia del terrorismo italiano* (Venice: Marsilio, 2014).

³⁸ For the GP and the ‘New Resistance’, see Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007). For workerist scepticism towards anti-fascism, see Panvini, *Ordine nero, guerriglia rossa*, 135; Guido Panvini, ‘Parole come pietre. Verso la militarizzazione della lotta politica nell’estrema sinistra’, in Giuseppe Battelli and Anna Maria Vinci, eds., *Parole e violenza politica. Gli anni Settanta nel Novecento Italiano* (Rome: Carocci editore, 2013) 99–101.

³⁹ For uses of ‘civil war’ as an interpretative prism in debates about the sixties and seventies in Italy, see Grispigni, 1977, 99–111; Panvini, *Ordine nero, guerriglia rossa*, 3–5. For contemporary radical uses in the case of France, see Alain Geismar, Serge July and Evelyne Morane, *Vers la guerre civile* (Paris: Editions et publications premières, 1969). For Italy, see Panvini, *Ordine nero, guerriglia rossa*, 201–5.

Lastly, militancy emerged in the context of the routine use of force by police to control protest. In fact, incidents of significant ‘counter-violence’ in the streets predated direct American intervention in the Vietnam War, the climax of the armed movement in Latin America, and the apex of global Maoism. Already, some protestors fought back during incidents like the ‘state massacre’ (*massacre d'état*) at the Charonne metro station in Paris on 8 February 1962; the events in Genoa in July 1960 and the Piazza Statuto battle in Milan from 7–10 July 1962; and various ‘youth riots’ in West Germany and central Europe like those in Munich in 1962.⁴⁰ Both the protest movements and subsequent scholarship document the often unmotivated and arbitrary use of force by police in the context of the student movement of the late sixties, well prior to the active embrace of militancy as an active project of the revolutionary left.⁴¹

Theorising Militancy: Common Strategic Visions and Discourses, 1968–79

Based on these divergent conditions, it might be assumed that revolutionary left organisations in different national contexts would have articulated highly distinct ideological visions and discourses on the use of force in demonstrations. This was not the case. Despite operating on distinct national terrains, organisations that embraced militancy all attempted to occupy a strategic position between the *de facto* pacifism of local ‘reformist’ parties and what were perceived as voluntarist attempts to initiate armed struggle by self-proclaimed revolutionary elites. To be sure, there were variations on this theme, but revolutionary left organisations that promoted militancy tended to imagine revolution as the product of civil war or popular insurrection – the question was how to set the process in motion. The same groups tended to counterpoise ‘mass violence’ and ‘vanguard violence’. Thus, although there were continuities in the ideologies and forms of action of the Italian revolutionary left and early armed groups, both PotOp and LC criticised the strategy articulated by the Tupamaros of Uruguay and adapted to local conditions by activists like Giangiacomo Feltrinelli.⁴² By contrast, *Potere operaio* articles exalting ‘the urban guerrilla’ (*la guerriglia urbana*) in 1971 were actually dedicated to violent confrontations in the streets.⁴³ In Frankfurt, the RK journal *Wir wollen Alles* (*We Want Everything*, 1973–6) advocated revolutionary violence but vocally criticised the *Rote Armee Fraktion* (Red Army Faction, RAF) for its alleged vanguardism well before the German autumn of 1977.⁴⁴ In the same vein, consider RK member Joschka Fischer’s appeal to armed activists in June 1976 to ‘throw away the pistol, and pick up the paving-stone and resistance that means another life’. This was not a renunciation of violence; it was a call to practise militancy as the revolutionary alternative to armed sectarianism.⁴⁵ In Italy, a larger number of activists eventually merged into clandestine, armed groups. Yet Roman activists from the *Comitati autonomi operai* (Autonomist Worker Committees, CAO) articulated similar critiques as late as 1977–9, even if *autonomi* were far from opposed to armed struggle.⁴⁶ In short, the revolutionary left organisations discussed here were representatives of a tradition of Marxist thought that had

⁴⁰ For France, see Dewerpe, *Charonne*, 142–62; for Italy, Crainz, *Storia*, 99–101; for West Germany, Brown, *West Germany*, 58–60.

⁴¹ For France, see Bantigny, 1968, 153–79; for Italy, Crainz, *Il paese mancato*, 217–93; for West Germany, Brown, *West Germany*, 335.

⁴² On the complicated relationship between PotOp and Feltrinelli, see Grandi, *La generazione degli anni perduti*, 216–29, 252–64.

⁴³ ‘Si alla violenza operaia: Momenti di guerriglia urbana in Italia negli anni ’60’, *Potere operaio*, 43 (25 Oct. 1971), 34–8; ‘Si alla violenza operaia: momenti di guerriglia urbana in Italia negli anni ’60 (II)’, *Potere operaio*, 44 (Nov. 1971), 31–3; ‘Si alla violenza operaia (III). La battaglia di Belfast’, *Potere operaio*, Dec. 1971, 31–3.

⁴⁴ See the contributions by both RK and local LC activists in *Rote Hilfe, Neues vom Sozial-Staat. Dokumentation zum Teach-in der Roten Hilfe zur unmittelbaren Unterdrückung durch Polizei und Justiz* (Frankfurt am Main: Rote Hilfe, 1972) and *Revolutionärer Kampf, ‘Der bewaffnete Kampf wird nicht ein Kampf von Avantgarden sein’, Wir wollen Alles*, 21 (Oct. 1974), 1–2. For the Spontis and *Militanz*, see Kasper, ‘Das Ende der Utopien’, 186–98.

⁴⁵ Attributed to Joschka Fischer, ‘Rede aus Frankfurt’, *Radikal*, no. 2 (1 July 1976), 9. Cf. Hanshew, *Terror*, 190–1.

⁴⁶ Salvatore Corasaniti, *Volsci. I Comitati autonomi operai romani negli anni Settanta (1971–1980)* (Milan: Mondadori, 2021), 200–23; Grispigni, 1977, 69–70.

already been articulated in the 1860s by the International Workingmen's Association (IWMA): 'the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves'. Taking that perspective on revolutionary violence inclined these organisations to prioritise uses of force that posed low barriers to entry.

Some revolutionary left groups and activists did tend to also embrace theories and practices of organised, 'vanguard' violence over the course of the early 1970s, though the operations of their semi-clandestine wings were modest.⁴⁷ And some revolutionaries turned from militancy to armed struggle. For example, Valerio Morucci founded the Roman protest security service of PotOp and subsequently became the leader of *Lavoro illegale* (Illegal Work, LI), a short-lived military wing of the organisation. After the dissolution of PotOp in the spring of 1973, however, Morucci became a prominent member of the Roman column of the *Brigate rosse* (Red Brigades, BR) and participated in the kidnapping and murder of Prime Minister Aldo Moro in 1978.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the protest security services (*servizi d'ordine*) of the Italian revolutionary left were not necessarily the nuclei of later armed groups. Meanwhile, Guido Panvini's argument that revolutionary left practices of counterinformation and acts of organised violence against neo-fascists in contested universities, schools and neighbourhoods were systematised by the armed formations into 'red terrorism' implies that ritual encounters between protestors and police in the *piazza* may have been rather marginal to the emergence of armed struggle, even in Italy.⁴⁹ Likewise, the fact that so few French revolutionary leftists involved in violent protest or even semi-clandestine operations ever embraced terrorism is enough to undermine the notion that there was self-generating momentum necessarily leading from one form of political violence to another.⁵⁰ The frequent teleological bent of terrorism studies – and the correlated notion that the revolutionary left and armed groups existed on a single spectrum of radicalising yet essentially homogeneous practices of political violence – systematically understates differences between forms of political violence as well as the disagreements about what type of revolutionary strategy was legitimate, strategic or desirable. Those who made the 'qualitative leap' from militancy to armed struggle were decidedly in the minority.

The commonalities between revolutionary left groups that embraced militancy went beyond broader strategic visions to include common discourses on violence.⁵¹ First, violence could function as legitimate, effective self-defence. Second, it could represent moral and obligatory 'counter-violence' against the explicit violence of the state and the intrinsic violence of capitalism. Third, activists understood violence as a means of encouraging insubordination by the working class or its allies. Finally, activists identified violence as a means of revolutionising oneself and forming a collective revolutionary party or class: violence as practice. Later, Italian autonomists and their transnational peers also emphasised the affective or emotional dimension of violence, describing the use of force as an expression of revolutionary subjectivity or needs and experience of intense, revolutionary emotions. In general, analysis of revolutionary discourse reveals a broad overlap in how activists in prominent revolutionary groups understood violence across national boundaries, undermining the explanatory power of ideology in accounting for the different levels of force used by activists. This calls into question recent interpretations that have argued for the crucial role of the revolutionary left in theorising

⁴⁷ This was the case of both *Lotta continua* and *Potere operaio*; see Grandi, *La generazione degli anni perduti*; Donato, 'La lotta è armata'. The *Gauche prolétarienne* and *Ligue communiste* also tended in this direction until the spring and summer of 1973. *Lotta continua* activists were condemned for the 17 May 1972 killing of Milan police commissioner Luigi Calabrese in 1990 on the testimony of a former militant turned police informant, though the role of leader Adriano Sofri remains highly contested. Two *Potere operaio* activists were responsible for the Primavalle fire leading to the deaths of two young sons of a neo-fascist politician in the spring of 1973 (Panvini, *Ordine nero, guerriglia rossa*, 208–10, 266–8).

⁴⁸ Grandi, *La generazione degli anni perduti*, 216–38; Valerio Morucci, *Ritratto di un terrorista da giovane*, 1st edn (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1999); Valerio Morucci, *La peggio gioventù: una vita nella lotta armata* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2004).

⁴⁹ Panvini, *Ordine nero, guerriglia rossa*, 265.

⁵⁰ Marco Scavino has thoughtfully criticised studies of political violence in Italy in the 1970s for assuming that 'violence' is a sort of 'inclining plane' possessing its own dynamic and direction. Scavino, 'La piazza e la forza', 130.

⁵¹ For a more detailed analysis of militancy among French leftists, see Luca Provenzano, "'The Great Lesson of May '68 is that Violence Pays': Militant Protest, Violence, and the Police in the 1970s', *French Historical Studies*, 46, 3 (Aug. 2023).

and legitimising the use of force and ‘therefore’ preparing the conditions for the explosion of ‘red’ terrorism in Italy.⁵² Revolutionary left groups *did* theorise and legitimise the use of force in France, Italy and West Germany – yet the operational implications and persuasive efficacy of that discourse diverged, largely along national lines, in the course of the 1970s.

The notion that the use of force could be a legitimate, effective means of ‘self-defence’ became popularised above all during the demonstrations of 1968. Though militants also framed self-defence as a step towards revolution, the discourse of self-defence also expressed a fundamental refusal of victimisation by the police. Thus, an article in the JCR publication *Avant-garde jeunesse*, published in March 1968, argued that recent confrontations in Caen showed that protestors could turn the relationship between police into an ‘opposition of two wills’.⁵³ In a similar vein, the famous Italian protest song *Valle Giulia* enthused over the ‘new fact / we didn’t run away anymore’.⁵⁴ Likewise, the Italian newspaper *La Sinistra* presented student insubordination during the Battle of Valle Giulia as ‘violent self-defence’.⁵⁵ Belying the cliché that the movement rejected violence against persons, West German student leaders actually endorsed ‘self-defence’ against the police during the anti-Springer demonstrations of April 1968.⁵⁶ This dovetailed with the way the French JCR represented the insubordinate behaviours of protestors during May ’68 as ‘self-defence’ against police aggression.⁵⁷ *Il Potere operaio* made similar claims at the apex of the ‘Hot Autumn’ of 1969.⁵⁸ After 1968, both the LCR and PotOp argued that militant self-defence in the streets at picket lines and in working-class neighbourhoods was an obligatory element of the revolutionary process.⁵⁹ And RK and the Frankfurt Housing Council (*Häuserrat*) frequently depicted the use of force as legitimate defence of the movement during the housing struggles of 1973–4 in the Frankfurt Westend.⁶⁰ As a Frankfurt Sponti slogan went, ‘If you don’t defend yourself, you’re living the wrong way!’ (*Wer sich nicht wehrt, lebt verkehrt!*)

A second discourse identified militancy and ‘counter-violence’, following Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (*Critique de la raison dialectique*) and Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* (*Les Damnés de la terre*).⁶¹ According to this discourse, the use of force by revolutionaries and workers was a legitimate riposte to the violence both of the state and of capitalism. Revolutionaries also improvised on ‘counter-violence’ to denounce the moral and material asymmetry between state violence and that of the working class or the revolutionary left. Sartre himself described student protest behaviours as ‘counter-violence’ in famous articles written during May ’68, and this formulation became ubiquitous in Maoist publications like *La Cause du peuple*.⁶² In Italy, the newspaper *La Classe* extolled working-class counter-violence during dramatic encounters between workers and police at Corso Traiano in Turin on 3 July 1969.⁶³ In the West German case, Karrin Hanshew has also called attention to ‘counter-violence’ (*Gegengewalt*) in the context of the New Left of the late

⁵² Cf. Donato, ‘*La lotta è armata*’, 13 and various contributions to Battelli and Vinci, eds., *Parole e violenza politica*.

⁵³ Clovisse Versa, ‘Quand une idée pénètre les masses elle devient force matérielle’, *Avant-garde jeunesse*, Apr. 1968, 12.

⁵⁴ Paolo Pietrangeli, *Valle Giulia* in *Mi caro padrone domani ti sparo* (I Dischi del Sole, 1970). According to former *Potere operaio* activists, the line was the subject of considerable derision among the group because the students had been the ones to assail the police. Stefano Lepri as interviewed in Grandi, *La generazione degli anni perduti*, 139–4.

⁵⁵ ‘Autodifesa violenta’, *La Sinistra* 10 (16 Mar. 1968).

⁵⁶ ‘Gewalt’, 19 Apr. 1968, APO-Archiv, Standort Berlin, 1382–1385; ‘Ergebnisse der Diskussionen im Audimax der TU zur Frage der Gewalt und zu unseren weiteren Aktionen’, mimeographed fragment of a larger report in APO-Archiv, 1382–1385, 5. Cf. Brown, *West Germany*, 336.

⁵⁷ *Avant-garde jeunesse* 13 (18 May 1968); *Avant-garde jeunesse* 14 (27 May 1968).

⁵⁸ *Il Potere operaio* 19 (7 July 1969), 16.

⁵⁹ LCR, *Autodéfense ouvrière* (Jan. 1973); ‘L’autodifesa operaia oggi’ in *Potere operaio* 46 (Feb. 1972), 29–30.

⁶⁰ Revolutionärer Kampf, ‘Widerstand ist möglich - Wohnungskampf in Frankfurt’, *Wir wollen Alles!*, 3 (Apr. 1973), 2; Revolutionärer Kampf, ‘Die Räumung’, *Wir wollen Alles!*, 3 (Apr. 1973), 7–8.

⁶¹ For original formulations, see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique, précédé de Question de méthode* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960); Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002).

⁶² Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Les Bastilles de Raymond Aron’, in *Situations VIII. Autour de 68* (Paris: NRF-Gallimard, 1971), 175–92.

⁶³ *La Classe* 10 (5–12 July 1969), 1. See also ‘Contro la violenza, la violenza’, *La Sinistra* 10 (18 Mar. 1968) 8–9.

1960s.⁶⁴ Similarly, during the 1973–4 housing struggles in the Frankfurt Westend, the militant wing of the Spontis frequently appealed to ‘counter-violence’ by improvising on French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s 1947 *Humanism and Terror* (*Humanisme et terreur*). As members of RK wrote in March 1974, ‘Violence, or even more precisely, violent resistance, was and is for the housing council and all those who showed solidarity with its struggle and it aims, never an end in itself . . . we never invented violence, but always only found it in front of us . . . the violence of the police baton forced violent resistance (*Widerstand*)’.⁶⁵

A third discourse presented militancy as a powerful means of encouraging mass insubordination. This was a superficially plausible interpretation of the French May ’68 events because a nationwide general strike had sequentially followed encounters in the Latin Quarter. Though never uncontroversial, subsequent understandings of militancy as a form of ‘exemplary action’ were common among revolutionary leftists in all three contexts.⁶⁶ Discourses about the explosive political potential of protest violence were articulated in Italy in the form of the ‘theory of the detonator’, not least in analyses of the French May.⁶⁷ Along these lines, LC accepted the validity of organised violence on principle in December 1971 but argued for its subordination to mass action.⁶⁸ By contrast, PotOp was more sanguine about the need for organised violence, as reflected in its self-representation as ‘the party of insurrection’.⁶⁹ The discourse of violence as a means of encouraging insubordination was less popular in West Germany among currents like RK. Nevertheless, RK members also evoked ‘exemplary action’ in the context of confrontational demonstrations during the struggle for housing in Frankfurt, claiming that militancy rather than passivity had brought public sympathy and incited a mass movement.⁷⁰

Finally, revolutionary leftists articulated the discourse of militancy as practice, a means of revolutionising the revolutionaries, overcoming ideology, and forming and building a revolutionary party or class. This discourse identified violence as a key experience in the emergence of the revolutionary self and had sources in phenomenological accounts of revolutionary violence by Jean-Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon. As is well known, anti-authoritarian Rudi Dutschke articulated an early version in an account of the West Berlin demonstration cycle from 1965–7, itself broadly based on the account of decolonial violence in *Les damnés de la terre*.⁷¹ The notion of revolutionising oneself through the use of force also tended to be articulated by currents of radicalism influenced by cultural avant-gardes.⁷² This motif was also expressed in the well-known slogan ‘under the paving stones, the beach’ (*sous les pavés, la plage*), which framed prying up cobblestones for confronting the police as a means of recreation. Another variant focused on the intense collective emotions experienced during confrontations, including fear, joy and hatred. For example, the working-class protagonist of *Vogliamo tutto* recounted the collective joy of workers and their student allies as they launched projectiles at the police during the confrontation in Turin on 3 July 1969:

Groups reorganised themselves, attacked at one point, dispersed, and returned to attack at another point. But now what moved them more than rage was joy. The joy of finally being strong. Of discovering your needs, your struggle, were everyone’s needs, everyone’s struggle. . . . Every rock that was hurled at the police was hurled with joy, not rage. Because in a word, we were all strong.⁷³

⁶⁴ Hanshew, *Terror and Democracy in West Germany*, 83–8.

⁶⁵ Einige Genossen aus Frankfurt, ‘Unsere Gewalt gegen ihre!’ *Wir wollen Alles!*, 13 (Mar. 1974), 4–7, emphasis added. Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanisme et terreur: essai sur le problème communiste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), 42–3.

⁶⁶ For France, see Provenzano, ‘May ’68’.

⁶⁷ Panvini, *Ordine nero, guerriglia rossa*, 37.

⁶⁸ ‘Violenza e programma politico’, *Lotta Continua* (1 Dec. 1971).

⁶⁹ See Ventrone, ‘*Vogliamo tutto*’, 176–82; 186–91.

⁷⁰ Revolutionärer Kampf, ‘Die Räumung’, 8.

⁷¹ See his contributions to Uwe Bergmann et al., *Rebellion der Studenten oder Die neue Opposition* (Reinbek b. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1968).

⁷² Pierre Peuchmaurd, *Plus vivants que jamais* (Paris: R. Laffont, 1968).

⁷³ Balestrini, *Vogliamo tutto*, 149.

In this passage, violent insubordination in the *piazza* emerges as an experience of intense emotions and collective empowerment – a motif that would have a significant future within the Italian ‘area of autonomy’ in the 1970s, a set of inter-networked collectives and editorial experiences that proliferated alongside the crisis of revolutionary left groups like PotOp, LC and *Il Manifesto*. Although some autonomist workers collectives had formed in Rome as early as 1971, much of the political, cultural and intellectual capital of the *autonomi* derived from Italian workerist theory and the prior experience of the earlier groups.⁷⁴ Pre-existing networks that had connected Italian revolutionary left organisations to French and West German peers would also contribute to the emergence of a broader transnational autonomist current.

In general, European autonomists of the mid- to late-1970s understood militancy through the same discourses as their revolutionary left predecessors, as becomes apparent in a review of publications like *Rosso* (1973–9), *Rivolta di classe* (1974–7), *I Volsci* (1978–81) and *Camarades: revue militante dans l'autonomie* (1976–7).⁷⁵ During the Movement of 1977 in Italy, the protest slogan ‘You have paid dearly, but you have not paid everything’ articulated the discourse of counterviolence, promising a revolutionary riposte.⁷⁶ Months later, after confrontations at the nuclear reactor in Malville, French autonomists announced that, due to the rigidity of the institutions of repression, victorious struggles were unimaginable without violence.⁷⁷ References to ‘counter-violence’ were also prominent within the later West German *Autonomen*.⁷⁸ But, as we have seen, autonomists also focused on the significance of violence in terms of emotions. They frequently described or legitimised the use of force in terms of overcoming fear, experiences of intense emotion and the expression of subversive desires or needs.⁷⁹ This somewhat novel accent derived from the popularity of ‘starting from oneself’, the critique of militancy in the earlier revolutionary left groups and the rehabilitation of emotions and the body, all influenced by the feminist movement of the 1970s.⁸⁰ It can also be interpreted as a symptom of activists’ redefinition of ‘revolution’ more broadly. Where revolution had once been a transcendent political objective to be realised through future-oriented action, it had come to mean the liberatory experience of self-fulfilment in the here and now; as Bolognese *autonomi* declared in 1977, ‘revolution

⁷⁴ See Sergio Bianchi and Lanfranco Caminiti, eds., *Gli autonomi. Le storie, le lotte, le teorie*, vol. 1 (DeriveApprodi, 2007) and the remainder of the 11-volume series *Gli autonomi*. For the origins of the Roman *autonomi*, see Corasaniti, *Volsci*, 11–89.

⁷⁵ See ‘Dalle giornate d’inverno a quelle di primavera’, *Rosso*, 15 (Apr. 1977), 2; ‘Roma: Giorni che valgono anni’, *Rosso. Giornale dentro il movimento* (Mar. 1977), 4–5. For *Rosso* and violence, see Scavino, ‘La piazza e la forza’, 178–82. For discourses on violence in the movement of 1977, see Falciola, *Il movimento del 1977 in Italia*, 202–11. For French *autonomes*, ‘Pour ouvrir la discussion sur l’état’, *Camarades. Revue militante dans l'autonomie* (Summer 1976), 3–7; ‘La question de la violence, l’État, le mouvement révolutionnaire et l’union de la gauche’, *Camarades. Revue militante dans l'autonomie*, 3 (Dec. 1976), 32–5; ‘Autonomie, violence, nouvelles réalités des luttes’, *Camarades. Revue militante dans l'autonomie*, 4–5 (June 1977), 30–1.

⁷⁶ See the front-page illustration accompanying *Rosso* 17–18 (Mar. 1977).

⁷⁷ Anonymous, ‘Sur la violence, encore et toujours’, *Camarades. Revue militante dans l'autonomie*, 6 (Nov. 1977), 9.

⁷⁸ Freia Anders, ‘Wohnraum, Freiraum, Widerstand. Die Formierung der Autonomen in den Konflikten um Hausbesetzungen Anfang der achtziger Jahre’, in Sven Reichardt and Detlef Siegfried, eds., *Das Alternative Milieu. Antibürgerlicher Lebensstil und linke Politik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und Europa 1968–1983* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2010), 473–98.

⁷⁹ Luca Falciola notes that violence was understood as ‘expressive’ by sectors of the movement of ’77. Falciola, *Il movimento del 1977 in Italia*, 258. On the turn towards ‘desire’ and its connection to the legitimisation of violence, see also Simone Neri Serneri, ‘Il ’77 e il lungo ’68 italiano’, in Galfré and Serneri, eds., *Il movimento del ’77*, 49–50. Sven Reichardt notes that militant *Instandbesetzer* of 1980–81 in West Berlin likewise understood violent action and street battles as an expression of mass ‘needs’. Reichardt, *Authentizität*, 561–2. For the ‘theory of needs’ in the context of Italian radicalism, see Corasaniti, *Volsci*, 21–2; Falciola, *Il movimento del 1977 in Italia*, 94–5.

⁸⁰ See Falciola, *Il movimento del 1977 in Italia*, 64–9; Paola Stelliferi, ‘Il 1977 nel femminismo italiano’, in Galfré and Serneri, eds., *Il movimento del ’77*, 79–95; Joachim C. Häberlen, *The Emotional Politics of the Alternative Left: West Germany, 1968–1984* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Joachim C. Häberlen, Jake P. Smith and Russel A. Spinney, ‘Struggling for Feelings: The Politics of Emotions in the Radical New Left in West Germany, c. 1968–84’, *Contemporary European History*, 23, 4 (Nov. 2014), 615–37; Reichardt, *Authentizität und Gemeinschaft*, 140–55.

has fallen from the sky'.⁸¹ Reflecting the emotions and violence theme in 1975, *Rosso* proudly declared its emotional identification with an image of young lovers kissing on a barricade during May '68.⁸² Reporting on encounters during the Movement of 1977, editors revived the concept of violence as a means of 'breaking through' to reality and claimed that the rupture of the police line with Molotov cocktails on 12 March 1977 in Rome had been 'a reckoning (*contarsi*), a discovery of our own force . . .'. At the same time, they claimed that the apparently purposeless burning of hundreds of cars by young people during the same demonstrations was 'an expression of destructive potential' and 'subversive desire'.⁸³ Infamous passages in Antonio Negri's 1978 *Il dominio e il sabotaggio* (*Domination and Sabotage*) offer a variation on the same theme:

Nothing reveals the extent of the enormous historical positivity of working-class self-valorisation more than sabotage . . . A felicitous result is unavoidable: every act of destruction and of sabotage rebounds onto me like a sign of class belonging. Nor does the eventual risk offend me: to the contrary, *I am filled with febrile emotions, as if awaiting a lover*.⁸⁴

Here, a political discourse on 'sabotage' as an integral element of working-class practice merges into enthusiasm for destruction as a quasi-erotic experience. In a less erotic register, after extremely harsh rioting in Frankfurt am Main on 25 November 1978 during solidarity protests for Iran, an enthusiastic Sponti would write to *Pflasterstrand* expressing the good vibes: 'I have not seen the backs of the police for some time. Simply classic'.⁸⁵ The discourse of violence as an emotional practice was common among activists across national contexts.

Practices of Militancy and Public Order Policing: The State as a Radicalising Force?

As we have seen, parts of the revolutionary left in all three countries committed themselves to militancy while articulating a convergent strategic vision and common discourses on revolutionary violence. But practices of militancy diverged along national lines. This was not because of strong strategic or ideological differences between groups in different national contexts, but because revolutionaries' commitments to defending themselves or retaliating against their adversaries had different practical implications depending on the routine uses of force by their opponents.

Revolutionary left activists in France, Italy, and West Germany embraced highly convergent practices of militancy in '68.⁸⁶ Subsequently, the emergence of semi-organised groups of young men recruited for their physical prowess and bravery was a common transnational trend.⁸⁷ These formations, known in France and Italy as the *services d'ordre* or *servizi d'ordine* (security services, SO), borrowed principles of asymmetrical urban combat from international Marxist insurgencies but adapted those principles to protest tactics. In France and Italy, both revolutionary leftists and their adversaries often used the phrase 'urban guerrilla combat' as an informal name for these practices. Thus, in the spring of 1971, the GP proudly declared that revolutionaries had improvised on Mao Tse-Tung

⁸¹ Andrea Lanza, 'Quando è finita la rivoluzione', 205–27.

⁸² 'Le giornate d'aprile', *Rosso* 15 (Mar.–Apr. 1975), 4. For chronicles see Panvini, *Ordine nero, guerriglia rossa*, 288–92; Scavino, 'La piazza e la forza', 196–9.

⁸³ 'Roma: Giorni che valgono anni' *Rosso* 17/18 (Mar. 1977), 4.

⁸⁴ Antonio Negri, *Il dominio e il sabotaggio: sul metodo marxista della trasformazione sociale*, 1st edn (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1978), 42–3, emphasis added.

⁸⁵ *Pflasterstrand* 44 (16 Dec. 1978–12 Jan. 1979), 36.

⁸⁶ For an extended comparison of political violence in France and Italy, see Marco Grisogni, *Quella sera a Milano*.

⁸⁷ Scholars have called attention to prominent women advocates and heroines of armed struggle, as part of inquiry into the intersections between gender and political violence. See Katharina Karcher, *Sisters in Arms: Militant Feminisms in the Federal Republic of Germany since 1968* (New York, NY: Berghahn, 2017); Patricia Melzer, *Death in the Shape of a Young Girl: Women's Political Violence in the Red Army Faction* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2015). Militancy was largely gendered male, at least in the Italian context, and feminists criticised the LC *servizio d'ordine* during controversies in the spring and summer of 1976.

thought to generate a new form of *guérilla urbaine* suitable to French conditions.⁸⁸ In the same year, PotOp lionised the student movement contribution to a new form of *guerriglia urbana* in a series of articles dedicated to violent protests.⁸⁹ Though similar formations were rarer in West Germany, in Frankfurt am Main, Joschka Fischer and elements of the Sponti movement notoriously formed a *Putzgruppe* or ‘riot group’ that articulated a set of hit and run tactics (*Kleingruppentaktiken*) during confrontations in the context of the Westend housing struggles of 1973–4.⁹⁰ Within these perspectives, revolutionaries prioritised building small, cohesive groups of militants whose mobility and ability to improvise in the urban environment allowed them to out-manoeuvre large police formations.⁹¹ Larger demonstrations were also considered ‘bases’ or starting points for militant actions against the police or other targets.⁹²

Practices of militancy expanded to include pre-protest reconnaissance; monitoring of police radio during demonstrations and forms of rapid transmission via pirate radio; the stockpiling of projectiles, pickaxe handles and crowbars; and various forms of training and physical conditioning in all three countries. In 1971, *Potere operaio* enthused over ‘action by mobile groups of comrades who attack the forces of police from multiple points, the use of the barricade, of the street blockade, of urban congestion as an instrument of defence and struggle, the organisation of zones that prepare Molotov cocktails . . . the broad use of means of communication like the police radio or small transmitters, the reconstruction of *servizi d'ordine* with both offensive and regulatory functions . . .’.⁹³ The consequence was a form of violent protest that merged behaviours typical of working-class insubordination – stone-throwing, improvised barricades and self-defence groups at picket lines and occupied factories – with forms of organisation borrowed from insurgency in the Third World. Moreover, although militants tended to limit the use of force and the resulting injuries among police were generally confined to bruises, fractures and superficial lacerations, such encounters often engendered professional and physical insecurity among the police, inspiring calls for new protective equipment, tactics and weapons.⁹⁴ Although decisions to use force were based on evaluations of the balance of forces between revolutionaries and the police and analyses of the political situation, insubordinate behaviours were socialised. Members of the GP practised launching volleys of Molotov cocktails in locations like the Bois de Vincennes outside Paris in the summer of 1970, while activists in PotOp learned to construct Molotov cocktails and practise ‘hit and run’ actions during the same period.⁹⁵ A similar training process took place among members of the *Putzgruppe* in 1973–4.⁹⁶

Another transnational dimension of militancy was the diffusion of typical defensive equipment in demonstrations that both protected the body from harm and anonymised activists in the face of police surveillance. Already in May ’68, French activists published tracts exhorting protestors to equip themselves for protest and providing advice on potential countermeasures against truncheons, water cannon, and tear gas.⁹⁷ By the early 1970s, radical formations had embraced defences that included motorcycle helmets and facial scarves, leather jackets or padded parkas, and gloves for handling incendiaries.⁹⁸ Practices of passive defence against surveillance and coercion became

⁸⁸ Gauche prolétarienne, ‘Illégalité et guerre’, *Cahiers prolétariens*, 1 (Jan. 1971), 29–47. Violent demonstrations were defined as an essential part of this practice.

⁸⁹ ‘Si alla violenza operaia: Momenti di guerriglia urbana in Italia negli anni ’60 (I)’, *Potere operaio*, 43 (25 Oct. 1971), 34–8;

‘Si alla violenza operaia: momenti di guerriglia urbana in Italia negli anni ’60 (2)’, *Potere operaio*, 44 (Nov. 1971), 31–3.

⁹⁰ Kasper, *Spontis*, 87–8; Koenen, *Das rote Jahrzehnt*, 345–7.

⁹¹ In this vein, see ‘Contro l’ordine nella metropoli’, *Potere operaio del lunedì*, 24 (24 Dec. 1972), 4.

⁹² ‘Widerstand ist nötig’, *Wir wollen Alles!* 12 (Jan. 1974), 8.

⁹³ ‘Si alla violenza operaia (1)’, 35.

⁹⁴ For physical and professional insecurity and equipping the police, see Mathieu, ‘L’autre côté de la barricade’, 169–70; Luca Falciola, *Il movimento del 1977 in Italia*, 196–202; Enzo Fimiani, ‘Dall’altre parte della piazza’.

⁹⁵ Provenzano, ‘May ’68’, Grandi, *La generazione degli anni perduti*, 164–6.

⁹⁶ Koenen, *Das rote Jahrzehnt*, 345–6.

⁹⁷ See Mouvement du 22 mars, *Ce n’est qu’un début, continuons le combat* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1968), 48–9.

⁹⁸ For the SO in France, see the sequence on 21 June 1973 in the Romain Goupil film *Mourir à trente ans* (1982).

diffuse enough in the late 1970s to provoke efforts to criminalise the use of helmets, masks or scarves in protests.

Militants also embraced weapons ranging from crowbars and slings to multiple generations of the Molotov cocktail. Although the latter may have functioned as a symbol of the nexus between militancy in Europe and insurgency in the Third World, its use also corresponded to efforts to disorganise and deter police in the context of the introduction of new police equipment like visors and plexiglass shields that mitigated the risk of injury from improvised projectiles like stones.⁹⁹ In practice, protestors rarely used Molotov cocktails against police in 1968;¹⁰⁰ however, revolutionary left groups did eventually embrace the use of Molotov cocktails in significant quantities in protests in the 1970s. Activists of the GP used hundreds of Molotov cocktails at the 10 March 1971 demonstration against the reunion of the neo-fascist group *Ordre nouveau* (New Order) at the Palais des sports; *La Cause du peuple* subsequently printed a front-page photograph of a burning police officer gyrating on the pavement.¹⁰¹ Likewise, PotOp activists were key protagonists in encounters like the 5 February 1971 Roman demonstrations in which protestors launched volleys of Molotovs at police; a handful of activists were apprehended, alongside an arsenal of Molotovs, prior to 12 December 1971 protests in Milan.¹⁰² By 1971, the use of Molotovs as a means of intimidation and deterrent had become common among revolutionary activists in Italy and France.¹⁰³ Though more cautious, Frankfurt am Main activists launched volleys of Molotov cocktails in anti-Francoist demonstrations outside the Spanish consulate on 19 September 1975. During another prohibited demonstration after the death of RAF leader Ulrike Meinhof on 10 May 1976, 'Mollies' inflicted grievous burn injuries on police officer Jürgen Weber when his squad car went up in flames.¹⁰⁴ In general, however, the value of the Molotov cocktail lay in its dissuasive potential: serious injuries among police ranks were rare but, by their own admission, police were extremely reticent to pursue demonstrators using these incendiaries. Just as militants tended to use the Molotov cocktail more often over the decade, activists also revisited its composition. Original models had to be handled carefully and were prone to ignition problems, but later generations of Molotov were more reliable and exploded on impact due to a novel chemical composition.¹⁰⁵

Despite considerable transnational similarities in the armament and tactics used by revolutionaries during violent protests in 1968, activists nevertheless embraced different patterns of militancy over the course of the ensuing decade. As Marco Scavino notes, insubordinate protest behaviours could occur in multiple forms and intensities, ranging from the 'spontaneous' use of force by informal groups on the margins of demonstrations to the ritualised, habitual and deliberate exercise of force by formations like the SO.¹⁰⁶ Although groups on the revolutionary left in all three national contexts tended to embrace organised protest violence in the early 1970s, the use of more injurious protest weapons like crowbars, slings and the Molotov cocktail tended to be more common in Italy and France than in West Germany.¹⁰⁷ Further differentiation occurred in the second half of the decade as some Italian revolutionaries embraced armed demonstration trains, 'the tactic of the P38'. In a 'qualitative leap' (*salto di qualità*) that began in the context of the Roman housing struggle of 1974 and became

⁹⁹ Cf. Panvini, *Ordine nero, guerriglia rossa*, 115–16.

¹⁰⁰ For visual illustrations of Molotovs see *Avant-garde jeunesse*, 9 (Jan.–Feb. 1968), 15; *La Sinistra*, 3, 10 (16 Mar. 1968). For the infamous West German student movement film on Molotov cocktails, see Brown, *West Germany*, 193. In France, some Molotov cocktails were thrown during the Caen events of Jan. 1968 and the second 'night of the barricades' in May '68.

¹⁰¹ *La Cause du peuple*, Mar. 18, 1971, 7.

¹⁰² For the Dec. 1971 demonstration in Milan, see Grandi, *La generazione degli anni perduti*, 236–49; Panvini, *Ordine nero, guerriglia rossa*, 199–206.

¹⁰³ For the Molotov as a deterrent and 'self-defence' measure, see Grandi, *La generazione degli anni perduti*, 164.

¹⁰⁴ Koenen, *Das rote Jahrzehnt*, 330–1; 350–2.

¹⁰⁵ For Italy, see Grandi, *La generazione degli anni perduti*, 186–7. For France, see Provenzano, 'May '68'.

¹⁰⁶ Scavino, 'La piazza e la forza', 128–30.

¹⁰⁷ In this vein, the use of Molotovs during the 10 May 1976 protests in Frankfurt became controversial within the movement; Koenen, *Das rote Jahrzehnt*, 331–3. See the debate 'Mollies für ein anderes Leben: ja oder nein', *Fuzzy* special issue (May 1976), 11.

routine during the movement of 1977, Italian autonomist groups brought firearms to encounters and fired on buildings and police from demonstration ranks, collapsing conventional distinctions between mass violence and armed struggle.¹⁰⁸ In one of the most striking manifestations of this insurrectional current, some 100,000 activists demonstrated on 12 March 1977 in Rome in a protest marked by unparalleled levels of destruction, including the paralysis of a police officer who later succumbed to his injuries.¹⁰⁹ What accounts for the uniquely violent nature of protest in Italy in the second part of the 1970s?

In fact, across national experiences the forms and intensities of violence that the revolutionary left deployed in protests tended to reflect the routine exercise of force by police. For instance, the relative limitation of the use of force by West German activists in protests and the political distance between Sponti advocates of *Massenmilitanz* and armed groups like the RAF were conditioned by the relative demilitarisation and restraint of the national police in defence of public order. West German police almost exclusively used the baton, tear gas and the water cannon to control confrontational protestors throughout the 1970s. The fact that West German police were significantly more restrained than their French and Italian peers in public order policing throughout the period may be counterintuitive since West Germany was the site of the killing of student Benno Ohnesorg by a police officer in June 1967, an event whose consequences for the West German armed movement are well known.¹¹⁰ Yet even West German Sponti activists travelling from Frankfurt to a Parisian protest in the spring of 1976 noted that protestors were more combative in France as a result of the 'militarisation' of the French police, bemoaning their own relative inexperience and lack of militancy.¹¹¹

Meanwhile, the propensity of French *gauchistes* for the collective use of force, and their more routine use of weapons like crowbars and Molotov cocktails during protests, should be interpreted as adaptations to the more routine use of force by police, stronger tear gas and explosive grenades.¹¹² In general, the reputation of the French police as restrained in 1968 and afterwards has been skewed by contrasting their behaviours to those of police forces that routinely used firearms in protests or engaged in massacre.¹¹³ During May '68 in France, police were directly responsible for four deaths. Two of these victims were fatally shot; two suffered fatal injuries due to the use of explosive grenades by the security forces. A Maoist student, Gilles Tautin, drowned in the Seine under controversial circumstances.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, French police rarely used firearms in defence of public order and 'only' two protestors were killed by police in the context of protest from July 1968 to December 1977.¹¹⁵ This mitigated the threat of a spiral of violence: one of the few victims of domestic terrorism in France during the 'red decade' was Jean-Antoine Tramoni, the private security guard who fatally shot Maoist

¹⁰⁸ For the 'qualitative leap', see Marco Grispigni, "Il salto di qualità". La violenza di strada e i suoi attori', in Galfré and Serneri, eds., *Il movimento del '77*, 267–70.

¹⁰⁹ Domenico Guzzo, 'Roma. La chimera insurrezionale e la fine dell'illegalità di massa', in Galfré and Serneri, *Il movimento del '77*, 206. For the fatal injury of an officer of the Roman *celere*, see Enzo Fimiani, 'Dall'altre parte della piazza. Il I reparto Celere a Roma nel 1977', in Galfré and Serneri, eds., *Il movimento del '77*, 296.

¹¹⁰ This relative restraint has often gone unnoticed by West German historians. Cf. Klaus Weinbauer, *Schutzpolizei in der Bundesrepublik: zwischen Bürgerkrieg und Innerer Sicherheit: die turbulenten sechziger Jahre* (Munich: Paderborn, 2003). For the exception to relative police restraint—police brutality and the killing of Benno Ohnesorg during 2 June 1967 demonstrations in West Berlin, see Brown, *West Germany*, 74–5.

¹¹¹ 'Paris. 23 Apr. 1976', *Fuzzy. Extranummer zu Frankfreich*, 25 Apr. 1976, 2–3.

¹¹² For the police arsenal after 1968, see Provenzano, 'Beyond the *Matraque*', 619–20.

¹¹³ For this highly-successful operation, see *ibid.*, 623–4.

¹¹⁴ Philippe Mathérion (killed by an explosive 'OF' grenade); Gilles Tautin (drowned in the Seine); Pierre Beylot (fatally shot); Henri Blanchet (killed by an explosive 'OF' grenade); and a young person fatally shot by police in the department of Calvados. The death of police Commissioner Philippe Lacroix was attributed to protestors under controversial circumstances, leading to the acquittal of the two youths initially deemed responsible. For a chronicle and analysis of the major episodes of violent protest in '68, see Bantigny, *1968*, 153–79.

¹¹⁵ Ecologist Vital Michalon was killed on 30 July 1977 by an explosive grenade launched by the police during the protest against the Superphénix nuclear site at Creys-Malville. On 4 Mar. 1976 at Montredon, the CRS did return fire in an episode that cost the lives of both a commander of the CRS and 50-year-old winemaker Émile Pouytes.

activist Pierre Overney during physical confrontations outside the Renault-Billancourt factory on 25 February 1972.

The frequent use of force, an eventual turn to the ‘tactic of the P38’ by Italian activists in encounters in the *piazza* and the stronger genetic connections between *servizi d’ordine* and armed groups were informed by fatal patterns of Italian public order policing. In 1968–73, Italian police were responsible for twelve deaths in the context of protest while suffering a single victim, police officer Antonio Annarumma.¹¹⁶ Throughout the ‘red decade’ Italian security forces accumulated an unrivalled ‘body count’ in public order policing in a pattern of vehicular homicides, the lethal use of tear gas launchers to directly target protestors and recourse to firearms. Although some scholars have interpreted the violence of the Italian police as an effect of disorganisation and indiscipline, the lethal use of arms to repress militancy in the *piazza* was legalised in the form of the 7 May 1975 Public Order Law introduced by Justice Minister Oronzo Reale, and police benefited from substantial impunity for killing protestors.¹¹⁷ Eleven members of the revolutionary left, *l’area dell’autonomia*, or the Italian Communist Party were killed by police in the context of protests from January 1968 to December 1977.¹¹⁸ The uniquely lethal nature of Italian public order policing is the most persuasive explanation for the appearance of armed protest solely in the Italian context.

Specific incidents illustrate the fatal implications of police recourse to firearms in defence of public order as well as how a current of Italian activists tended to legitimise an armed and equally lethal riposte. On 8 September 1974, protestors decided to retaliate in kind following the death by police bullets of 19-year-old autonomist Fabrizio Ceruso, wounding eight police officers during encounters in the Roman quarter of San Basilio.¹¹⁹ Later, one of the events that precipitated the ‘qualitative leap’ during the Movement of ’77 was the death of LC militant Pier Francesco Lorusso at the hands of an armed member of the *carabinieri* in Bologna on 11 March 1977. A gruesome graffito at the site of the fatal shooting of police officer Settimio Passamonti during demonstrations one month later, proclaiming ‘comrade Lorusso has been avenged’, left no doubt that the perpetrators considered their actions a form of retaliation. Similarly, two days after the killing of Roman protestor Giorgiana Masi on 12 May 1977, protestors in Milan fired on the security forces during demonstrations around Via d’Amicis, fatally injuring vice-brigadier Antonio Custra.¹²⁰ Although a micro-historical approach to specific cases could shed further light on how militants legitimised these actions, the process is evident enough: fatal, armed police interventions motivated similar reprisals by activists. The implication is that Italian revolutionary leftists were not uniquely predisposed to violent protest but were improvising on common discourses in the face of more elevated levels of state violence.

Table 1 documents the use of force by protestors, the force levels typically deployed by police in protests, the overall number of victims of public order policing, and the number of members of revolutionary left organisations or historical left parties who fell victim to police interventions in demonstrations from December 1968 to December 1977.¹²¹ In fact, the Italian revolutionary left was unique in experiencing a

¹¹⁶ See Sernerì, ‘Contesti e strategie della violenza’, 40–3. For the death of Annarumma and moral panic that followed, see Crainz, *Il paese mancato*, 356–60. For the movement of 1977 and the police, see Falcicola, ‘Gli apparati di polizia di fronte al movimento del 1977: organizzazione e dinamiche interne’, *Ricerche di Storia Politica*, 16, 2 (2013), 161–82. Fimiani, ‘Dall’altre parte della piazza’.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Falcicola, ‘Gli apparati di polizia’. For the Reale law, Corasaniti, *Volsci*, 80; Panvini, *Ordine nero, guerriglia rossa*, 289.

¹¹⁸ De Luna counts thirty-two radical left activists who died in episodes of political violence during the period 1968–80. Significantly, over 1/3 of the victims fell prey to police violence during demonstrations. See De Luna, *Le ragioni*, 19–20. A useful chronology is Gabriele Donato, *La violenza, la rivolta. Cronologia della lotta armata in Italia 1966–1988* (Trieste: Istituto regionale per la storia della Resistenza e dell’Età contemporanea, 2018). The practice of vehicle-mounted police charges by Italian police – with potential lethal implications – was unique to Italy.

¹¹⁹ Corasaniti, *Volsci*, 69–70; Crainz, *Il paese mancato*, 487–8, Scavino, ‘La piazza e la forza’, 195–6.

¹²⁰ Falcicola, *Il movimento del 1977 in Italia*, 197–8; 201–2.

¹²¹ For the French count I have relied on Artières and Zancarini-Fournel, eds., *Les années ’68* and the records of the interior ministry at the Archives nationales in Pierrefitte. The Italian count is largely based on De Luna, *Le ragioni*, 15–29, alongside other secondary literature referred to throughout this article. In France, Maoist activist Christian Riss was gravely injured by police bullets in 1971 but recovered. In Italy, the victims were Cesare Pardini (1969), Salvio Saltarelli

Table 1. Fatalities and force during violent protests in France, Italy and West Germany, December 1968–December 1977

	France	Italy	West Germany
Victims of public order policing	2 (4 in May 1968*)	20	0
Revolutionary left or historical left activists who died due to police intervention in protests	0	11	0
Weapons routinely used by police during violent protests	Explosive grenades Tear gas The baton/rifle butt	Firearms (1968–77) Tear gas Vehicle-mounted police charges The baton/rifle butt	Tear gas/Chemical Mace Water cannon, The baton
Weapons routinely used by the revolutionary left during violent protests	Molotov cocktails, Slings, Crowbars/ pickaxe handles Stones	Firearms (1974–7) Molotov cocktails, Slings, Crowbars/pickaxe handles/wrenches Stones	Molotov cocktails (1975–6) Slings Crowbars/ pickaxe handles Stones

pattern of fatal police violence during protests. Meanwhile, the routine use of force in public order policing varied between national contexts. Indeed, if national police in all three cases often employed varieties of tear gas and truncheons on demonstrators, the similarities ended there. There were also correlations between the most powerful weapons typically used by police in defence of public order and those employed by revolutionary leftists in encounters in public space. In France, the Molotov cocktail emerged as an equivalent to the explosive grenade used by the police; in Italy, the ‘tactic of the P38’ was informed by the use of firearms by police. In West Germany, activists typically used less ostentatious and injurious arms; so did police. Revolutionary left militants in all three contexts understood the use of force during protests as a legitimate form of self-defence and retaliation, but the specific forms of police violence in defence of public order – and thus, the forms taken by self-defence or retaliation – diverged along national lines.

Conclusion

Although a current of revolutionary left organisations issuing from 1968 in France, Italy and West Germany embraced similar perspectives on the use of force in encounters between protestors and police, this form of militancy diverged as revolutionaries encountered different domestic contexts. In general, neo-fascist violence, contemporary working-class militancy, legacies of resistance and civil war, and the interaction between the movement and the police encouraged militancy more in Italy and France than in West Germany. In addition, revolutionaries tended to adapt the forms of militancy to different practices of public order policing. In Germany, where police were relatively restrained in the defence of public order, self-identifying revolutionaries were more reluctant to use force in protests and *Massenmilitanz* advocated by the Spontis remained distant from armed struggle as promoted by groups like the RAF. In France, more muscular forms of public order policing encouraged a more forceful response from activists, yet the *forces de l'ordre* generally avoided using firearms and so did revolutionaries; here too, militancy and armed struggle tended to remain separated. In Italy, in the context of neo-fascist activism and the relatively frequent recourse to firearms by police in defence of public order, militancy was both robust and radical. A cohort of Italian revolutionaries eventually improvised on common transnational discourses of self-defence and counter-violence to inaugurate armed militancy in the *piazza*, and the Movement of 1977 became a ‘radical milieu’ for terrorist formations at the end of the decade.¹²² Thus, similar revolutionary commitments had divergent implications depending on national context.

(1970), Franco Serantini (1972), Roberto Franceschini (1973), Fabrizio Ceruso (1974), Pietro Bruno, Gianino Zibecchi, Rodolfo Boschi, Gennero Costantino (1975), Mario Salvi (1976) and Francesco Lorusso (1977). The circumstances surrounding the death of Giordiana Masi remain controversial.

¹²² Falciola, *Il movimento del 1977 in Italia*, 211–14. See also Guido Panvini, ‘Le Brigate rosse e i movimenti del 1977’, *Mondo contemporaneo*, 1 (2014), 131–46.

This analysis suggests that the use of force in Western Europe cannot be reduced to the unique international context of Third World Marxism, the Vietnam War and revolutionary activism in Latin America. A global sixties and global seventies literature has emphasised how the international context inspired French, Italian and West German revolutionaries. Yet, if anti-imperialist solidarity protests did provide crucial opportunities for militancy, these accounts risk exoticising political violence in Europe by neglecting its internal sources. By contrast, I argue that militancy was a product of the last major cycle of factory-based insubordination in contemporary European history between May–June 1968 in France and the *autunno caldo* of 1969 in Italy. It was also an outcome of the revolutionary left's effort to articulate class politics on new terrain: as working-class radicalism on the factory floor declined, encounters between activists and the police tended to arise in the context of struggles over housing and public services that were integral to attempts to form new revolutionary protagonists in the 1970s.¹²³ Third, militancy emerged in the context of a transnational struggle between domestic neo-fascism and anti-fascism amidst the legacies of Resistance and civil war, even if that struggle also encouraged acts of organised aggression that went well beyond rituals of protest and counter-protest. Finally, the use of force by the revolutionary left in protest contexts was strongly informed by the standard operating practices of the police. Situating militancy in demonstrations, strikes and occupations against this backdrop suggests that one form of left-wing political violence in Western Europe during the 'red decade' was less a product of the global imaginaries and connections of the New Left and its revolutionary successors and more obviously a consequence of the dynamics of domestic conflict and policing.

Another implication of this analysis is that the specific forms taken by militancy in the 1970s were not determined by revolutionary ideology alone. Although it did play a role, an overemphasis on ideology obscures the intrinsic connections between the use of force by revolutionaries and the practices of their adversaries. Those adversaries were not limited to the radical right, even if a focus on the conflict between neo-fascism and militant anti-fascism can help to restore the interactive dimension involved in the use of force. Rather, the trajectory of protest illustrates how the repressive practices of the state, duly legitimised by parliamentary majorities, could ignite political violence.¹²⁴ Ultimately, the use of force by the state conditioned both the forms taken by revolutionary left militancy and the relationship between militancy and terrorism.

Acknowledgements. The author would like to thank Ben Mercer, Gerd-Rainer Horn and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on this article. This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement no. 101028399.



Funded by
the European Union

¹²³ See Guzzo, 'Roma. La chimera insurrezionale e la fine dell'illegalità di massa', 201–18. For appropriation struggles and the 'take back the city' (*prendiamoci la città*) campaign in Italy, see Ventrone, 'Vogliamo tutto', 217–25. For resonances in West Germany, see Alexander Sedlmaier and Freia Anders, "'Squatting Means to Destroy the Capitalist Plan in the Urban Quarters': Spontis, Autonomists and the Struggles over Public Commodities (1970–1983)', in Martin Baumeister, Bruno Bonomo and Dieter Schott, eds., *Cities Contested: Urban Politics, Heritage, and Social Movements in Italy and West German in the 1970s* (Frankfurt; New York: Campus Verlag, 2017), 277–300.

¹²⁴ Cf. Grisipigni, 'La strage è di stato'; Lebourg, 'L'affrontement des étudiants extrémistes'; Guido Panvini, *Ordine nero, guerriglia rossa*.

Cite this article: Provenzano L (2023). 'Power is in the Streets': Protest and Militancy in France, Italy and West Germany, 1968–1979. *Contemporary European History* 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077732300022X>