

Did CIA

Two men, claiming to be former CIA agents, charged on Italian TV last week that the U.S. intelligence agency had actively promoted right-wing terrorism in Italy during the 1970s.

They also alleged the CIA had been involved in the still-unsolved 1986 assassination of Swedish prime minister Olof Palme.

The CIA dismissed these charges as "nonsense."

Lurid or fantastic they may be, but rumors have been circulating for a decade that the U.S. was somehow involved in the murky world of Italian terrorism.

During the 1970s, Italy was being torn apart by gangs of murderous terrorists of both the right and the left. The Socialist party was dominating the wobbly centre-left government while the powerful Communist party was making steady advances. Outside powers embarked on a long campaign to either overthrow Italy's chronically unstable democracy or bend it to their will.

The Soviet KGB, acting through its proxy spy services in East Europe and two radical Palestinian groups, gave arms and aid to the leading Marxist terrorist groups, the Red Brigades and Prima Linea.

In 1978, the Red Brigades kidnapped and murdered Italian prime minister, Aldo Moro, plunging the nation into near chaos. Later, in a little noted but highly intriguing development, an Italian non-partisan parliamentary investigation of terrorism reported that the Red Brigades had been offered arms and support by Israel in 1974. The Brigades, leery of Israel, turned down its proffered assistance.

According to the government investigators, Israel's objective in supporting the Red Brigades was to promote instability in Italy and to punish it for supporting the Arabs. The report also suggested that Israel's long-term

back Italian terrorists?



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goal was to provoke the collapse of Italy, a close U.S. ally, in order to make Israel America's leading ally in the Mediterranean.

While this was going on, Italy's two rival intelligence services were fighting their own civil war.

The SID was strongly pro-Arab and had even helped prevent Libya's Col. Moammar Khadafy from being overthrown by a coup. It also protected PLO men in Italy against Israeli hit teams.

The other spy agency, SISMI, was very pro-Israeli and heavily influenced by the CIA. Senior officers at SISMI tried to mount a coup d'etat in the late 1970s, with some military backing, against the government but were blocked by SID and other army generals.

Allied to SISMI was a uniquely bizarre group, the nefarious Propaganda Due Masonic Lodge, and its shadowy leader, Licio Gelli. This rightist secret society kept extensive blackmail files on all important Italians. P2 also worked closely with fascist terrorists who committed a series of outrages, including the bombing of Bologna's train station.

Adding to this minestrone of intrigue, Grand Master Gelli and his blackmailing Masons were also in cahoots with the Vatican's banker, Roberto Calvi, who, among other things, secretly funnelled papal funds to right-wing

groups in Italy, Latin America and to Solidarity in Poland. The CIA apparently worked closely with Calvi and his Banco Ambrosiano in some operations.

Banco Ambrosiano collapsed under mysterious circumstances and Calvi was found hanged under London's Blackfriars Bridge. Shades of Fu Manchu.

The Americans, meanwhile, continued their longstanding covert financial support of Italy's Christian Democrats while trying to prevent a Soviet-backed communist takeover — which was, ironically, being promoted by their friends in Israel.

There is evidence to suggest the CIA was involved in some sort of funny business with Gelli, SISMI and its neo-fascist generals. But we don't know how far this involvement went or if the charges made by the two purported ex-CIA men are in any way true.

The CIA has sometimes backed terrorist groups in the past, most notably in Lebanon where a failed CIA attempt to assassinate a leading Muslim cleric with a car bomb cost 83 lives. The agency may have done so in Italy as an antidote to the even greater threat of left-wing terrorism.

There's little doubt the 1981 attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II was the direct result of the Vatican's secret financial support, channelled through Calvi and Gelli, to anti-communist forces in Poland. The KGB would be more successful with Pakistan's late leader, Zia ul-Haq, another stalwart anti-communist, who was assassinated in 1988.

But there's no evidence the CIA had a hand in the murder of Sweden's Olof Palme. In fact, it has been whispered for years in the spy trade that Palme, who was ostensibly very anti-American, may have become a secret CIA "asset" in 1948 during his student days at Ohio's Kenyon College.