

# Umberto Eco's *Numero Zero* and Operation Gladio

By Bill Brown

The rhetorical question upon which Umberto Eco's last novel, *Numero Zero*, turns is this:

Before the Borghese plot, you realize, don't you, that there were very few bomb attacks like Piazza Fontana? Only then do the Red Brigades get going. And the bombings start in the years immediately following, one after another: 1973, a bomb at the police headquarters in Milan; 1974, a massacre in Piazza della Loggia in Brescia; that same year, a high-explosive bomb goes off on the train from Rome to Munich, with twelve dead and forty-eight injured.<sup>1</sup>

In case you don't know, the "Borghese plot," launched in December 1970, was an aborted attempt by Navy Commander Valerio Borghese and other ex-fascists to seize control of the Italian government and install a military dictatorship in its place, and the bombing at the Piazza Fontana in Milan took place in December 1969. These two events are in fact related: both were motivated by the international capitalist order's fear that, post-1968, working-class agitation was getting out of control in Italy and that capitalism might be in jeopardy there. Part of the urgency of the situation was the fact that the Italian Communist Party, far from being the source of this agitation, was in fact not able to neutralize or control it, which had long been its customary role. And it is quite true that the bombings of civilian targets (terrorism) became more frequent after 1970 and in fact lasted through the rest of the decade.

There's a good answer – a factual, historically accurate answer – to *Numero Zero*'s question, which might be rephrased as, "What changed after the Borghese plot?" But Umberto Eco isn't interested in it. He's got a "fictional" answer that pleases him more: Mussolini didn't really die in 1945, but escaped to Argentina, where he was waiting for a fascist coup in Italy to restore him to power. That coup, according to Eco, was the Borghese plot, which was called off at the last minute because of Mussolini's sudden death. "And his real death," says one of Eco's characters, "unleashes the most terrible period in this country's history, involving

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<sup>1</sup> Umberto Eco (1932-2016), *Numero Zero*, published in Italian in 2015, translated into English by Richard Dixon that same year. All quotations come from the 2016 Mariner Books paperback.

stay-behind, the CIA, NATO, Gladio, the P2, the Mafia, the secret services, the military top command, prime ministers such as Andreotti and presidents like Cossiga, and naturally a good part of the far-left terrorist organizations, duly infiltrated and manipulated.”

It should be noted that, at the time, only a handful of people believed and declared in public that allegedly “far-left terrorist organizations” such as the Red Brigades were in fact “duly infiltrated and manipulated” by the Italian secret services.<sup>2</sup> Most people on the Left chose to believe that the members of the Red Brigades were genuine revolutionaries who were merely “misguided” or “overzealous,” and it took a long time to convince them otherwise.

To return to Eco’s fictional answer: it doesn’t make any sense, not even in the pages of a novel. If Mussolini were still alive and waiting for a coup like Borghese’s to occur, why didn’t the bombings come *first*? This would be consistent with the idea, given voice by one of Eco’s characters, that such acts of terrorism “prepare the way for new forms of repression.” But no, the bombings come *after* Mussolini’s “real death,” and common sense (or logic) suggests that they should have *ended* then, not continued or even worsened, because the jig was up. Mussolini was dead and the Borghese Plot had failed. There was no reason for these particular events to “unleash” anything like what followed.

So what is the factual, historically accurate answer to *Numero Zero*’s question? As presented in the pages of Gianfranco Sanguinetti’s *Truthful Report on the Last Chances to Save Capitalism in Italy*, first published in Italian in 1975,<sup>3</sup> and echoed in Sanguinetti’s *On Terrorism and the State*, first published in Italian in 1979,<sup>4</sup> it is this: the bombing of the Piazza Fontana was an ill-considered, desperate and very risky thing to do, precisely because, as Eco’s narrator explains, “the entire operation had [in fact] been directed by the Special Affairs Office of the Ministry of the Interior” but was, in the words of one of his characters, “arranged so that all suspicion would fall on the Left and to psychologically prepare public opinion for a return to law and order.” Though some on the Left were not fooled,<sup>5</sup> the trick of State-sponsored terrorism against one’s own people worked for a little while, but working-class agitation did not end, far from it, and so what had started out as a tactic (very risky and liable to backfire at any time) was turned into a strategy: a series of increasingly desperate repetitions of the original crime. Plus

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. letters exchanged between Guy Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti in 1978: <http://www.notbored.org/debord.html>.

<sup>3</sup> English translation by Bill Brown (Colossal Books, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> English translation by Bill Brown (Colossal Books, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. The Friends of the International, “Is the Reichstag Burning?” (19 December 1969): <http://www.notbored.org/reichstag.html>.

dozens of kidnappings and murders, almost all of them blamed on the Left, which suffered mightily for them in the form of lengthy jail sentences.

Much is made about the early 1990s in *Numero Zero*, because that was when – abracadabra! – this vast international criminal enterprise (“stay-behind, the CIA, NATO, Gladio, the P2, the Mafia, the secret services, the military top command, prime ministers such as Andreotti and presidents like Cossiga, and naturally a good part of the far-left terrorist organizations, duly infiltrated and manipulated,” not to mention all the ultra-Right, fascist and neo-Nazi terrorist organizations that were involved in the violence, somehow Eco fails to mention them) suddenly disappears. “But it’s clear,” an Eco character says, “once the Soviet threat was over, that Gladio was officially consigned to the attic, and both Cossiga and Andreotti talked about it to exorcise its ghost, to present it as something normal that happened with the approval of the authorities.”

One does not “consign” something as well-developed and useful as Operation Gladio “to the attic”; you adapt it to the new conditions. Just because the Soviet Union dissolves, just because the so-called Communist parties in various European countries decide to change their names, this doesn’t mean that working-class agitation (or the threat of it) has disappeared. And in the meantime, international criminal conspiracies such as Gladio can find new enemies, both home and abroad. And so “the Communist menace” was replaced by “Islamic terrorism.”

But even if Gladio *had been* disbanded in 1990, and it is absurd to think that it was, Umberto Eco is of the opinion that it didn’t and still doesn’t matter to the Italian public. “As it turned out,” a character says, “no one [at the time] was overconcerned, the issue was almost forgotten.” This was still the case two years later, when the story was covered by the BBC. “Almost by chance,” the narrator says, he found himself “watching a program about a British documentary called *Operation Gladio*, just broadcast by the BBC.” (Did you catch that little postmodern touch there? He wasn’t watching the documentary itself; he was watching a program *about it*.) As it turns out, this documentary is real. It aired on June 10, 1992 (the chapter in which it is mentioned is titled “Thursday, June 11”) and can still be found on YouTube.<sup>6</sup> It makes for disturbing watching (“quite enough to trouble public opinion,” says Eco’s narrator): dozens of unprosecuted criminals come forward to admit they committed horrible offenses against civilians, all in the name of protecting them from “the Communist menace,” and seem not ashamed of what they’ve done, but proud.

And yet this BBC program didn’t cause a scandal when it was broadcast. At least not in Italy. “Nothing can upset us any longer in this country,” Eco’s narrator

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUvrPvV-KQo>.

proclaims. “We’ve seen the barbarian invasions, the sack of Rome, the slaughter of Senigallia, six hundred thousand killed in the Great War and the inferno of the Second, so *no one’s* going to care about a few hundred people it’s taken forty years to blow up” (emphasis added).

But people *do* care about the political crimes committed in Italy in the 1970s. Some of them write truthful books on the subject; others translate those books into other languages or write brief essays about them and post them to their websites. I dare say that more people would care about this and other serious political crimes if novelists like Umberto Eco were talented or bold enough to rise to the occasion. “This television program,” his narrator says about *Operation Gladio*, “makes all other revelations entirely pointless and ridiculous, because, as you know, *la réalite dépasse la fiction*, and so, now, no one’s able to invent anything.” Reality surpasses fiction?! That’s a pretty lame excuse for coming up with unimaginative, disinformative, even cowardly fiction, and it certainly skirts the obvious conclusion: if reality has in fact overtaken fiction, and that reality is a bad one, a new and better reality must be invented.

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