

Why a Political Assassination Has Not Become a National Cultural Trauma: The Years of Lead in Italy and the Memory of Sergio Ramelli

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Abstract

This study examines the contentious discourses surrounding Sergio Ramelli, a young right-wing militant killed in 1975, as a case study for understanding why a shared collective memory of Italy's Years of Lead has failed to form. Drawing on Jeffrey C. Alexander's work, the analysis focuses on the categories of memory and icon to show how ideological opposition and political violence created an image of the opponent as an enemy to be defeated. Methodologically, the essay centres on Ramelli's death and investigates how its circumstances, as portrayed in documents and cultural products such as biographies and documentaries reveal three key dynamics of ideological conflict: (1) a tragic denial of shared humanity, which impeded any unified collective memory; (2) a paradoxical mimetic identification with the working-class struggle by the attackers, who framed themselves as urban avengers; and (3) the metaphorical framing of Ramelli as a fascist figure to be physically eliminated, justifying the violence against him. Although institutional and cultural efforts have accelerated the process of symbolizing Ramelli as a civic icon, his legacy remains politically divisive. Commemorations and symbolic practices are embedded within an ideological context where neo-fascism retains significant presence, while anti-fascist memory maintains a critical and conflicted stance.

Keywords

Militant Anti-Fascism, Political Violence, Performance, Memory, Cultural Trauma

1. Introduction

Many contributions frame the Years of Lead and the Strategy of Tension in Italy, the season of political violence conventionally backdated between 1969 and 1984.

Miguel Gotor (2022) perfectly clarifies the three distinct but interconnected phenomena that mark the context of the time. The first is the neo-fascist terrorism (stragismo), a form of black subversion often with hidden State involvement, which began with the 1969 Piazza Fontana massacre. The second was the armed struggle, in the logic of the armed party, where groups like the Red Brigades (BR) and Prima Linea rose to prominence on the left. Finally, a widespread form of political violence. It is within this last dimension that the case discussed here is framed.

To understand this, it is crucial to define militant anti-fascism and to frame the figure of Sergio Ramelli.

The Ramelli case is peculiar because it involves a young student who had very recently moved closer to the right after writing an essay condemning a double homicide by the Red Brigades in 1974. His classmates had labelled him a fascist and pointed out his political affiliation to elements close to the far-left university community who practiced militant anti-fascism.

Originally, militant anti-fascism was a defensive principle, developed to protect left-wing marches and demonstrations from neo-fascist squad attacks. In this early phase, which historian Aldo Giannuli defines as defensive, even mainstream groups like the Communist Party established security services to neutralize threats. Later, after the Piazza della Loggia Massacre in Brescia in 1974, militant anti-fascism took on an offensive connotation. In this phase, the objective of the security services of far-left organizations was to defeat the political adversary, now considered an enemy to be erased.

In its offensive phase, militant anti-fascism was defined by the systematic use of violence against far-right militants and sympathizers, and even individuals with conservative views. Born from the values of the Resistance, the logic of militant anti-fascism had thus paradoxically become a practice implemented by the security apparatuses of various far-left organizations. In the case of Avanguardia Operaia (AO), this manifested in the use of squad methods and tactics.

Founded in Milan in 1968, AO was an organization primarily composed of Trotskyist militants, many of whom were students. In contrast to the broader Student Movement, it established a militarized presence on the territory, engaging in activities such as filing and shadowing militants of the far right. Capillary control and threats were followed by attacks and physical assaults, sometimes carried out with improvised weapons such as wrenches (Culicchia, 2025, 14; Casamassima, 2025). Ramelli would later become one such target. The logic underlying militant anti-fascism was preventive reprisal, which constituted legitimate method of fighting against a dehumanized enemy (Orsini, 2009; Culicchia, 2025, 87).

The ideology underpinning the principle of preventive reprisal and the slogan “Killing a fascist is not a crime” was rooted in a Manichean worldview that framed the conflict between the extreme right and the extreme left as absolute. This climate was further shaped by the ambiguous sympathy of segments of the left-wing bourgeoisie toward militant anti-fascism. It is within this context that one must

examine the sequence of events leading to the attack and murder of Ramelli.

2. The Events: The Ramelli Murder as a Tragic Performance

In 1975, Sergio Ramelli was an eighteen-year-old member of the Youth Front (*Fronte della Gioventù*), the youth wing of the Italian Social Movement (*Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI*), a party representing the post-fascist right in Italy. He had no history of involvement in political violence, subversive activity, or criminal behaviour. He wrote an essay at school condemning the killing of two working-class MSI militants by a Red Brigades (BR) commando on 17 June 1974 at the party's headquarters in Padua. In the same essay, he also criticized the silence of political and institutional actors who failed to offer condolences for the victims of the attack. Ramelli became the target of a hate campaign: he was threatened, physically assaulted, and ultimately forced to transfer schools. During this initial phase, a photograph of Ramelli - distinguished by his long hair - was circulated among members of *Avanguardia Operaia* (AO) to identify him as a fascist. The ambush, carried out by eight individuals, occurred on 13 March. Ramelli was attacked from behind with wrenches outside his home and died on 29 April after a long agony.

What do this obscure murder, the writing of an essay, a terrorist attack and a book or a documentary that recounts these events have in common? Many things, both on a historical and sociocultural level. They all reference the same episode, explicitly allude to the same protagonists or the nature of their actions, and subjectively filter reality through the lens of a particular ideology. They can be understood as performances, composed of elements such as actors, audiences, collective representations, symbolic production, power dynamics, and *mise-en-scène* (Alexander, 2004, 536). In this context, it is also possible to consider the attack on Ramelli as a tragic performance, culminating in the death of a defenceless eighteen-year-old. The actors include not only the assailants and the victim, but also his family, hostile classmates, and teachers unwilling to intervene.

The audience of this tragic performance includes the neighbours who witnessed the ambush and called for help, the relatives who mourned Ramelli at the morgue, the crowd that attended his funeral, the viewers of televised news reports, and the readers of monographs dedicated to his story. And, of course, the right-wing militants who, each year on 29 April, gather to commemorate Ramelli in a ritual marked by elements of neo-fascist folklore. The original *mise-en-scène* is the very scene of the aggression, from the stakeouts to the escalation of violence, centred around the use of the wrench, an iconic instrument that, from the attackers' perspective, symbolized proletarian justice. This object functioned as a tool of symbolic production, enabling a mimetic identification with the working class (Seligman & Weller, 2018). All the components of a tragic performance are present, allowing observers to discern its iconic dimensions. Yet, despite these elements, the murder of Ramelli has not been culturally framed as a trauma. The iconic sta-

tus of this murder (*i.e.* its ability to imprint itself on the collective imaginary) has remained limited to the memory of the far right (Bulli, 2021) and the commemoration practices attributable to this political faction. The next section intends to explore the reasons for this.

3. From Neo-Fascist to Be Eliminated to Victim of Ideology

3.1. What Makes an Episode a Cultural Trauma and Ramelli's Problematic Framing

For an event to be recognized as a cultural trauma, it must leave an indelible mark, a tear in the social fabric that either obstructs or radically transforms the collective capacity for symbolic meaning. This did not happen in the case of Sergio Ramelli. On the contrary, the symbolic framing of Ramelli as a fascist who disrupted the educational and social order began during his lifetime and - within the logic of militant anti-fascism - was ultimately affirmed through the performative dimension of his murder. To understand why Ramelli's death failed to achieve the status of cultural trauma, it is useful to revisit the four criteria outlined by Jeffrey C. Alexander: (1) the nature of the pain; (2) the identity of the victims; (3) the victims' relationship to the wider public; and (4) the attribution of responsibility.

Alexander's theorization of cultural trauma begins with emblematic cases such as the Holocaust and the September 11 attacks (Alexander, 2003). Applying the same analytical framework to the Strategy of Tension and the Years of Lead in Italy, it is possible to affirm that some episodes possess the historical depth and international resonance necessary to be interpreted as cultural traumas (Schudson, 1989; Mori & Migliorati, 2013). For instance, the Piazza Fontana bombing drew immediate international attention: The Observer notably introduced the term 'Strategy of Tension' just days after the attack. Another example is the kidnapping and assassination of Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades (Cento Bull, 2012). On the international level, this tragedy marked the abrupt end of Moro's effort to integrate the Italian Communist Party into the governing coalition, a move that would have significantly altered Italy's post-war alignment with the United States and the broader Atlantic pact. Both episodes had widespread resonance, caused a substantial redefinition of international political balances, and generated a fracture in the collective representation of Italy (Panvini, 2024). All of these consequences align with the third dimension of cultural trauma outlined by Alexander: the relationship between victims and the public.

What qualifies these events as cultural traumas are also specific aspects related to the nature of the pain they inflicted (unprecedented and largely unexpected in both cases) and that of the victims (collective and defenceless in the first case; famous and difficult to reach in the second). Equally important is the attribution of responsibility: the Piazza Fontana bombing was linked to neo-fascist actors and initially obscured by deliberate misdirection, while the Moro case involved far-left perpetrators targeting the heart of the State.

However, not all political assassinations possess the characteristics or generate the dynamics necessary to be recognized as cultural traumas. This depends on how the dimensions of the event affect the collective representation of the society in which they take place: their recognition as cultural traumas depends on how they are received, interpreted, and remembered (Alexander, 2012). The persistent political division that characterizes the Italian political landscape has produced divided and selective memories that translate into commemorative rituals where the right and the left celebrate their own fallen, downplaying the experience and political history of their adversaries. In this context, it is reasonable to consider the entire period of widespread political violence as a complex cultural trauma characterized by a series of episodes that did not necessarily and independently translate into shared cultural traumas.

In relation to Ramelli, the nature of the pain was immediately subject to discursive minimization, with efforts to downplay the civic and symbolic significance of his murder. Although the attack was widely regarded as vile by both segments of the public and prominent institutional figures, it was subsequently reframed and dismissed a few years later as a tragic mistake. At the time of the trial, held a decade after the events, leaders of the Student Movement called a conference (Telese, 2022, 315) where the dominant narrative positioned the murder within the broader climate of the Years of Lead. The conference condemned the actions of the magistrates, accusing them of wanting to retrospectively prosecute the 1968 movement and the atmosphere of contestation that, by its very nature, could not unfold without producing victims.

This line of reasoning invokes Alexander's second dimension of cultural trauma: the role of the victim. In the case of Sergio Ramelli, militant antifascist discourse reduced his identity to that of a right-wing militant, de-personalizing and de-humanizing him. This portrayal of the fascist idealised and abstracted into a symbolic figure (as one of the assailants acknowledges during the trial), mirrors the equally stylized image of the fallen comrade, commemorated for his right-wing militancy. The context of the Years of Lead was marked by a proliferation of violent episodes, each contributing to an inflation of symbolic meaning around the victims, whose memory was often circumscribed through reductive narratives (Assman, 2011) such as that of gang warfare. The reading of this period tends to present it as a succession of tragic events, which in turn weakens the specificity of memory, consolidated by the challenges encountered by the investigations. This last observation is not merely procedural, rooted in judicial or political shortcomings, but also in a broader social and cultural sense.

This brings us to Alexander's third dimension of cultural trauma: the relationship between victims and the broader public. In Ramelli's case, the climate of silence maintained by the militants of both factions enabled those responsible for the attack to, in Seligman's terms, camouflage themselves. This mimetic process took place in two ways. First, in pragmatic terms, it occurred within the nebula of militant antifascist organizations. Second, on a socio-historical level, it was facili-

tated by the integration of former militants into bourgeois professions, which offered them anonymity in the face of their agreed will not to turn themselves in. This dual mimetic mechanism has long inhibited the attribution of specific responsibilities. For a proper attribution of responsibility (the fourth dimension of the trauma identified by Alexander), the case of Ramelli required the passage of time and the formal trial to take place.

To summarize, the problematic status of the Ramelli murder as a cultural trauma can be summarized with reference to the four dimensions identified by Alexander:

(1) Nature of the pain: the case of Sergio Ramelli was discursively minimized, reframed from a symbolically significant to a tragic mistake, preventing shared meaning-making.

(2) Role of the victim: reducing Ramelli to a right-wing militant dehumanized him and limited broader empathetic identification, constraining collective trauma formation.

(3) Relation to the wider public: silence and mimetic mechanisms among militants hindered the circulation of a clear public narrative, fragmenting social memory.

(4) Attribution of responsibility: achieved only belatedly through the trial, it failed to generate full collective processing; together, these elements explain why the event did not become a shared cultural trauma.

The sentences and penalties handed down reflect the symbolic intent behind the judges' actions: to send a cultural signal aimed at restoring the collective conscience of a society struggling to move beyond the unresolved tensions of the era. The next section will explore this dimension in greater detail.

3.2. The Trial: Towards a Reframing of Ramelli as a Victim of Militant Anti-Fascism

During the 1970s, the far left was particularly popular in the Milanese neighbourhood where Sergio Ramelli resided. He attended the Molinari Technical Institute, which would later become a hub of activism for Avanguardia Operaia (AO). Within the student community, Ramelli was known as one of the few openly right-wing militants. The prevailing climate at the time facilitated the swift marginalization of his case, aided by a broader culture of silence that had already settled over other instances of political violence. In the 1980s, a more relaxed and pacified political atmosphere enabled many of those involved in militant anti-fascism to assimilate into bourgeois professional life, concealing their pasts. Ramelli's memory persisted primarily within the private sphere of his family and among right-wing activists who commemorate him every year.

The trial against AO is part of this initial situation and must be understood within this broader context.

After an initial diversion, very little will be known about Ramelli's murder for a decade. The so-called 'season of repentance' eventually had effect: some mem-

bers of Prima Linea questioned for other crimes will direct the judges towards AO. It will then be an element of this organization unrelated to the specific incident who identified those responsible, leading to their arrest in 1985. Some of the accused were also charged with a Molotov cocktail attack on a bar believed to be a meeting place for neo-fascists, as well as with the possession of an archive which listed right-wing individuals as potential targets for assault and beatings. The trial took place more than ten years after the event, following the reopening of the investigation and the recovery of the original case file. Judge Guido Salvini emphasized that the purpose of the trial was not to impose prison sentences on individuals who, in the intervening years, had reintegrated into society and were no longer deemed socially dangerous. Rather, the trial was to be intended as a symbolic gesture aimed at confronting the logic of militant anti-fascism. Ramelli's death remained without a culprit for a long time.

Rereading this passage from the order of referral to trial of those responsible clarifies what should be understood by cultural signal:

Someone will certainly try to ennoble the campaign of militant anti-fascism by claiming that it was a response to recurrent fascist massacres. [...] In reality, militant anti-fascism was a slogan waved by the leaders of the new left to gather consensus by mobilizing young people and the very young in an easy battle, because it was played on action and not on reflection (Salvini, 2025).

Writers, journalists, and historians have documented how the judges were accused of wanting to prosecute the 1968 movement and its revolutionary inspirations, including the formation of political organizations by the radical left. The intent of the judiciary was instead to prosecute a crime and, at the same time, to promote a broader reconciliation and an overcoming of the logic of opposing extremisms. From the judges' perspective, reconstructing the precise context in which Ramelli's death occurred was essential to fostering a shared memory (Assmann, 2011), one grounded in the principles of individual accountability, the link between punishment and social reintegration for the perpetrators, and the pursuit of truth for the victim. Achieving these aims required a deeper inquiry into the social and ideological mechanisms through which a peer could be transformed into a political enemy.

Among the many depositions collected during the trial, that of Marco Costa, one of the perpetrators, part of the AO commando, holds particular significance. He recounted:

He saw us. And I saw him. And that was the most terrible moment for me [...] And I felt many emotions. One of the emotions was to say let's forget it. [...] You can't because in that moment I realized that the fascists idealized as a symbol were one thing and the boy in front of me who was practically my peer was another thing.

Judge Salvini insists not only on the history of the trial, but also on the criminological and anthropological dimensions underpinning Ramelli's assault. In stark antithesis to the values that militant anti-fascism purported to uphold, it in-

tended to affirm that its operational methods often developed into squadrist—organized violence reminiscent of fascist paramilitary tactics. This paradoxical outcome was facilitated by specific neutralization techniques that also emerge from the testimony of Marco Costa, especially from the passage where he describes the idealized fascists as a symbol.

These techniques of neutralization are the denial of the victim and the dehumanization of the adversary (Merzagora, 2019). According to the first, the self-absolution typical of the figure of the urban vigilante is the result of a moral reflection that does not attribute to the affected subject the status of victim, but of strategic target (on a practical level) and political enemy (on a symbolic level). This reasoning leads to the second technique of dehumanization, according to which, since the enemy is not granted the status of human being, any possible assumption of responsibility in the face of a possible accusation of crime disappears. The crime disappears, in a certain sense, since the role of bourgeois justice is not recognized, but only that of revolutionary justice. The consistency of the cultural signal impressed by the process can be summarized as follows:

(1) the murder had no culprit; (2) the victim of a brutal attack was such, regardless of political colour; (3) it was necessary to render justice to the relatives of a murdered boy; (4) to do so it was necessary to break down the wall of silence by questioning a reality (former members of the far left galaxy); (5) in the meantime times had changed and it was difficult to reconstruct the biographical trajectories of militants and suspects; (6) once those responsible had been identified, they had to be punished; (7) the punishment had to take into account the fact that the season of widespread political violence was over; (8) in the meantime those responsible had built their lives, camouflaging themselves in civil society and entering the medical profession; (9) the punishment is accompanied by the idea of re-integration, not the destruction of the person; (10) the depositions shed light on the climate in which the attack matured; (11) with the consent of the civil party and the health system, the guilty parties are considered no longer socially dangerous; (12) it follows that they will not go to prison but will benefit from alternative penalties and (13) they will be able to continue to practice medicine because (14) the facts precede the crime committed, (15) there has been an assumption of responsibility and (16) the spirit that animates the medical profession favours an atonement for one's own sins in a logic of reconciliation with the social body. (17) The possibility of imposing lenient sentences through this legal device allows the truth to emerge because it reduces the competition between lawyers when defining the contested crime: (18) those responsible will be sentenced for voluntary homicide.

The trial, characterized by severe charges and lenient sentences, was a sign of discontinuity with the past. Now we need to understand the symbolic aspects of the logic of the conflict in which the Ramelli case developed, and through which aspects, also symbolic, this figure returns to relevance on a sociocultural level.

4. Slogans, Objects and Cultural Products in the Logic of Conflict and Reconciliation

4.1. Slogans

The analysis of violent language disseminated during the Years of Lead is crucial to understanding how political hatred was consolidated through the framing of adversaries as enemies. The social and political conflict, exacerbated by the reciprocal violence between neo-fascist groups and militant antifascists, was punctuated by markedly dark slogans where some violent events became explicit references aimed at stigmatizing the identity of ideological and political adversaries. Indeed, the slogans are two variants of the same hate speech. On the left, there were slogans such as ‘Tutti i fascisti come Ramelli, con una riga rossa tra i capelli’ and ‘Hazet 36, fascista dove sei?’. On the right, the slogans were equally explicit: ‘Beata P38, compagno culo rotto!’. These expressions are rooted in a discursive framework that rejects legality and deliberation, standing in stark contrast to the judicial reflection that would later guide the trial of Ramelli’s assailants. From a semantic point of view, these slogans correspond to discourses in the sense of the linguistic act that is at the origin of a social and political action. However, their identification as political discourse - intended as a manifestation of a precise political thought - is more problematic. They are simplified rhythmic phrases designed for mass repetition during demonstrations. The logic that these slogans imply is that of violent action, not of reflection.

4.2. Objects: Hazet 36 as a Fetish and Completion of a Mimetic Process

In the season of political violence, even objects can be understood as elements of mimetic and metaphorical reasoning and brought back to an iconic reflection. In the perverse logic of the self-representation of the political soldier, the Hazet 36 wrench used to hit Ramelli finds its mimetic representation (Seligman & Weller, 2018), in the perspective of militant anti-fascism, as an icon of proletarian justice: ‘The Hazet 36 weighs three kilos and a half. They are supposed to repair methane pipes [...] But in those years they had become the preferred weapon of the various extra-parliamentary left-wing groups’ (Culicchia, 2025, 95).

Interpreting the symbolic meaning of an object can constitute an aesthetically subversive act, insofar as it enables the transcendence of the object’s original function. In some cases, objects become fetishes, that is, they acquire a meaning and a symbolic value beyond the function for which they were conceived and designed (Fusillo, 2012): they take on a sort of non-functional corporeality (Orlando, 1993). These objects thus encode social grammars, reflecting varying degrees of cultural capital among individuals engaged in violent political interaction. For example, the object may evoke the memory of the Resistance (Mori & Migliorati, 2013) as an armed movement, signal identification with the condition of workers’ struggle, or affirm the revolutionary consciousness of the far left. From this point of view, the mimetic process with the working class by the AO militants who are renamed

in the political field (or better to say in the violent political opposition) as plumbers (idraulici), is completed through the fetishization of the Hazet 36 as a metaphor for the class struggle.

4.3. Images: The Fascist with Long Hair and the Double Value (Signal and Iconic) of Photography

Like many episodes of political violence during the Years of Lead, the case of Sergio Ramelli is saturated with iconic representations. At the time, ideological affiliation was often visually encoded through precise aesthetic and stylistic features, which allowed for the immediate identification of individuals as belonging to one or the other ideological group: eskimo coats and long hair on the left; teardrop Ray-Ban sunglasses, leather jacket and short hair on the right.

The polarization of aesthetic markers served as the external scaffolding for a political discourse aimed at reifying the other as a symbolic enemy. In the climate of escalating political violence, urban spaces became arenas of confrontation between activists who often identified one another through visual cues rather than personal acquaintance. From this point of view, Ramelli occupied a notably atypical position in Milanese neo-fascism: a young man with right-wing convictions who wore his hair long. Focusing attention on the image of the victim, after a period, makes it essential to refer to photographs as traces to investigate their memory on a personal and political level. Above all, it is necessary to understand for whom and in what sense an episode or an image can become iconic (Alexander, 2010).

In the years of militant anti-fascism, Ramelli's photograph did not have an iconic function, but a signal function: it served the far left to identify an enemy in a cultural context characterized by the opposition between ideologies. Today, however, the image of Ramelli with long hair takes on a symbolic status and a truly iconic value: deflating the symbolic value of ideological opposition (on which the recognizability between adversaries who did not necessarily know each other personally was based) and celebrating the madness of the offensive phase of militant anti-fascism. That same image can even become a commemorative stamp to remember - by the right-wing government - a victim of the political violence of the Years of Lead. Iconic photography can contribute to structuring understanding and organizing memory as a performance that can combine semiotic complexity and emotional resources (Solaroli, 2011).

Ramelli's photograph allows us to categorize the abstraction of morality through an aesthetic form (Reed & Alexander, 2009): that boy, with those characteristics, was killed and the memory of his death represents a moment that also photographs the height of political opposition and hatred.

The iconic status of a photograph is not inherent but emerges through a process of social construction, shaped by the narratives and discourses into which the image is embedded and interpreted. Today it makes sense to talk about a boy with long hair emphasizing the image not explicitly attributable to consolidated politi-

cal styles in a young man whose ideas, conveyed through a theme, resonate more as a criticism of armed ideology and Marxist political extremism that strikes – paradoxically – two individuals belonging to the people. Ramelli's photograph thus becomes a medium through which morality is abstracted and expressed in aesthetic terms (Reed & Alexander, 2009). The visual portrayal of a young man with those features, killed in a politically motivated attack, encapsulates the symbolic apex of ideological hatred and polarization.

4.4. Cultural Products and Commemorations: Permanence of Conflict and Divisive Memory

Over time, the figure of Ramelli has inspired the publication of various volumes and cultural products (Lucarelli, 2007; De Cataldo, 2022), starting with a pamphlet written by Guido Giraudo and other authors (Giraudo et al., 2024) entitled *Cuori neri*, journalist Luca Telese dedicates a long chapter to him. Telese recalls how Giraudo's book triggered a process of rediscovery of the young man's memory, which materialized in several presentations of the volume, naming eleven Italian streets and squares after Ramelli and the production of a play by Paolo Bussagli entitled *Chi ha paura dell'uomo nero?* (Telese, 2022, 263).

More recently, documentaries and two monographs dedicated to this political murder have been produced (Culicchia 2025; Casamassima 2025). In table 1 some examples of cultural products dedicated to the case are reported.

Among the cultural products, such as the documentaries offered by the State TV, a register based on information and the restitution of a fresco of the complex season of the Years of Lead prevails (Glynn et al., 2012). The cultural products whose cultural matrix is right-wing are characterized by a system aimed at remembering a fallen member of their own political party. In some cases, as in the graphic novel by Carucci, an inclination towards self-victimization on the right also emerges.

The literary works of Casamassima and Culicchia (in addition to the documented study by Telese) are important, in the direction of rereading the facts in the logic of reconciliation, as they were written by authors not attributable to the political area in which Ramelli was active and therefore not aimed at claiming a partisan memory.

Just as divisive representations emerge from the comparison of cultural products, similar patterns can be observed in the discourses that revisit and commemorate the episode and celebrate its relevance. These discourses reflect distinct interpretive logics, among which three main approaches can be identified: the logic of ideological conflict, that of reconciliation and, finally, the positions that denounce as illusory or instrumental any hypothesis of overcoming.

The logic of ideological conflict is grounded in the continued affirmation of anti-fascism as a defining and exclusionary value. This perspective is exemplified by the presence of left-wing militants outside the Molinari Institute during commemorative events, where opposition to renaming the school after Sergio Ramelli

reflects not only a rejection of neo-fascist violence, but also a broader concern that such commemorations may serve to legitimize authoritarian ideologies—now re-framed as appeals to order and security. The contemporary reactivation of Ramelli's case, often linked to recent episodes of student repression or proposals for enhanced security legislation, illustrates how his memory is interpreted by segments of the left not as a neutral historical event, but as a politically charged and potentially dangerous ideological symbol. Far-right demonstrations also contribute to this polarization, which sometimes include Roman salutes and fascist symbols, minimized or ignored by members of the institutional right. Such acts reinforce the perception, among parts of the public, that the legacy of political violence has not been critically processed, but rather selectively erased or reframed through a victimist lens.

The logic of reconciliation stands in contrast to the perpetuation of ideological conflict, aiming instead to foster a non-divisive memory that recognizes victims of political violence irrespective of their ideological affiliations. (Cento Bull, 2012). This is the case, for example, of the mayor of Milan Giuseppe Sala, who proposes to dedicate a street to the fallen of the Years of Lead, without distinction. Similarly, institutional and political figures, such as Ignazio La Russa, have publicly expressed the need to come to terms with the past, remembering Ramelli as well as other victims of the left or of the State. However, this logic of apparent pacification is questioned on at least two fronts. Firstly, it is often perceived as eliding a critical historical judgment on fascism. First, it often starts from a removal of the historical judgment on fascism: when Ignazio La Russa or Paola Frassinetti (currently serving as undersecretary of education) decline to comment on Mussolini or the use of Roman salutes, they show a fundamental ambiguity that undermines the credibility of the proposed reconciliation. Secondly, the fact that such proposals predominantly originate from the political right raises concerns about posthumous legitimization (Donà, 2022), an attempt to assert that “even our dead deserve mercy,” without acknowledging the asymmetrical symbolic and historical weight borne by the opposing political fronts.

Critical positions towards the rhetoric of reconciliation are articulated by intellectuals and political figures such as Roberto Saviano and Rosy Bindi, who openly challenge the sincerity and implications of the commemorative gestures proposed by the right. They argue that the remembrance of Sergio Ramelli, as framed by certain right-wing narratives, does not reflect a process of self-criticism but rather a strategic attempt to marginalize anti-fascism as a foundational constitutional value. According to Bindi, neo-fascist tendencies persist in the symbolic language of commemorations, making genuine shared memory unattainable without first confronting and explicitly condemning these ideological excesses. Even Giuseppe Sala, despite advocating for a dedication to all victims of the Years of Lead, acknowledges the limitations of such a gesture. He concedes that the enduring ideological fracture—now reasserted in contemporary political discourse—may render reconciliation efforts ineffective or merely symbolic. The Ramelli case con-

tinues to provoke intense debate within Italian society, serving as a focal point for unresolved tensions. The different positions that have emerged in recent years highlight how the memory of the Years of Lead remains deeply divisive, a mirror of ideological fractures that have never fully healed.

This seems to be a crucial point. The condemnation of militant anti-fascism by the right, now a governing force, presents itself as an ideal overcoming of anti-fascism tout court. Examples of this are the various situations in which government representatives choose not to speak or not to answer questions whose subject is their current position towards anti-fascism. It is a constitutional principle that, in political communication is weakened on the right as an outdated historical legacy: once the fascist experience is over, it no longer makes sense to talk about fascism, and therefore also about anti-fascism.

For this reason, reconciliation between opposing extremisms without recognizing a unanimous call to anti-fascism (and without confusing this principle with the violence perpetrated by militant anti-fascism) is an impracticable objective. On this issue, there is a lack of collective representation, therefore even the individual episodes relating to Italy's violent political past suffer from the absence of this shared matrix and remain traumatic only for the respective political factions.

5. Conclusions

In what sense Ramelli is an icon for the far right, but his murder is not a national cultural trauma?

In the context of the Years of Lead, not all episodes of political violence have been elevated to the status of cultural trauma. While some events have catalysed broader societal reflection, many remain confined as unresolved traumas within the specific political cultures that produced them (Sorgonà, 2024). This is confirmed in the commemorative practices that sustain the cult of the fallen. In the case of Sergio Ramelli, annual commemorations are marked by Roman salutes and ritual formulas such as 'Camerata Sergio Ramelli, Presente!'.

The failure of certain episodes to become cultural traumas capable of interrogating the collective conscience stems largely from the communicative closure of extremist subcultures. These subcultures have appropriated Ramelli's memory, framing him, on the right, as the quintessential victim of communist violence and embedding his legacy within a repertoire of commemorative practices that evoke the imagery of civil war. On the left, however, Ramelli's figure remains deeply divisive despite the process of reconciliation initiated by politicians, intellectuals and representatives of institutions of clear antifascist extraction.

However, there are also very recent episodes that indicate how the memory of this attack remains divisive on a political level. In 2020, Claudio Colosio, formerly a militant of Avanguardia Operaia and one of the individuals involved in the attack, was appointed to the scientific committee of the Lombardy Region during the second phase of the COVID-19 pandemic., but the media pressure of some right-wing organizations on the health councillor forced him to resign from the

position. This episode shows that the activity of surveillance on the memory relating to the events is intense, but above all reflects a broader strategy by a party that intends to continue to undermine the reputation of professionals who have served their sentence. Commemorative gestures by institutional figures further illustrate the complexity of this memory. Giorgio Pisapia, a post-communist former mayor of Milan, officially participated in the April 29th ceremony in 2018. His successor, Giuseppe Sala, has also taken part in recent commemorations, though he has publicly expressed doubt about the possibility of true reconciliation. The symbolic tension was palpable during the 2025 anniversary of Ramelli's death, when antifascist militants sang *Bella Ciao*—a hymn to resistance and freedom—as a counter-provocation against the presence of neo-fascist groups attending the ceremony.

The atmosphere is also controversial with respect to toponymy: at the proposal to name a street after Ramelli, the left-wing representatives of the Municipality of Barletta walked out of the City Council in protest. Conversely, in Ascoli Piceno (a municipality historically administered by the right and shaped by the presence of extra-parliamentary right-wing activism) a square bearing Ramelli's name is regularly defaced with writings and graffiti of clear neo-fascist inspiration. Half a century after Ramelli's death, calls for reconciliation persist across the political spectrum. Yet for such reconciliation to be meaningful, it must be rooted in a cultural framework genuinely committed to constructing a shared memory (Assmann, 2011). In this regard, the determination of magistrates in the 1980s to pursue justice through the trial of Ramelli's assailants represents an effort to bridge two traumatic registers: the personal tragedy of the victim and the broader historical violence of ideological extremism. In this sense, it can be said that Ramelli's murder, while remaining a politically divisive episode, also constitutes a paradigm for interpreting the years of political violence and opposing extremism.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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