

## Falcone and Borsellino: the story of an iconic photo

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Tony Gentile is a professional press photographer. The shot he took of Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino shortly before they were murdered by the mafia in 1992 has become one of the most widespread vehicles of public memory of the two heroic magistrates. Here he is interviewed by John Dickie about how he came to take the picture, and how it became so famous.

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On 23 May 1992, Giovanni Falcone, his wife Francesca Morvillo, and three members of their escort – Vito Schifani, Rocco Dicillo and Antonio Montinaro – were murdered by a mafia bomb placed under the A29 motorway near the turn off for Capaci. On 19 July 1992, Paolo Borsellino and his entire escort – Agostino Catalano, Emanuela Loi, Vincenzo Li Muli, Walter Eddie Cosina and Claudio Traina – were murdered by a second bomb placed in a car outside Borsellino's mother's house in via Mariano D'Amelio.

The epoch-making events of 1992 have entered public memory in a host of different ways, ranging from monuments and official ceremonies, to the cinema and TV drama, and most recently a remarkable cartoon novel by Manfredi Griffone, Fabrizio Longo and Alessandro Parodi (2011). The murder of Borsellino, in particular, remains an open wound: judicial investigations into the via D'Amelio bomb are still ongoing, and as I write it seems certain that the men sent to jail for actually planting it will turn out to have been wrongly convicted. Italy will undoubtedly continue meditating uneasily on the meaning of Falcone and Borsellino's deaths for years to come.

In 1992 one photograph (Figure 1) quickly placed itself at the centre of public memory of the two heroic magistrates, and became an icon for the antimafia movement. To commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the tragic events in Palermo, and to contribute to an understanding of the public memory of those events, I interviewed the man who took that photograph, Tony Gentile.

Tony Gentile was born in Palermo in 1964. He began his career as a news photographer with a local Sicilian daily in 1989. He went on to work for many other newspapers and magazines in Italy and abroad. In 1992 he began to work with the international press agency Reuters as a freelance, and went on to become a staff photographer in 2003. He is currently based in Rome and has covered a great many national and international news stories such as the death of Pope John Paul II and the election of the new Pope, as well as international sporting events such as the Athens Olympics and the football World Cup in Germany.

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Figure 1. Tony Gentile's photo of Falcone and Borsellino was taken on 27 March 1992. It would become famous following the magistrates' deaths later the same year. © Tony Gentile/Agenzia Sintesi.

*Can you tell us how you came to take your famous photo of Falcone and Borsellino?*

On 27 March 1992, during the national election campaign, Giuseppe Ayala, who was both a judge and a Republican Party candidate, organised a conference on the mafia and politics. The conference was held in Palazzo Trinacria, in the heart of Palermo's Kalsa quarter.<sup>1</sup> Apart from Ayala himself, the speakers were Giovanni Falcone, Paolo Borsellino, Aldo Rizzo (who was deputy mayor of Palermo at the time), and the journalist Giovanni Pepi. I worked for the *Giornale di Sicilia*, which sent me to cover the event. Once I'd taken the first shots at the beginning of the meeting I took up a position to the side of the hall waiting to take more photos. Then suddenly I noticed the two magistrates exchanging quips, so I moved quickly to the centre of the table, right in front of them, and took a sequence of photos.

*What did the editors of the Giornale di Sicilia make of the photo when you showed it to them for the first time?*

When the meeting was over I went to the newspaper to develop the photographs and deliver my work to the duty editor-in-chief. When he saw it he simply said, 'Nice, but we won't use it this evening. Keep it and we'll be sure to use it later'.

*So when was the photo first published?*

I kept the negative in my archive and only pulled it out again after the Capaci bomb. In fact a few days after 23 May I was talking to a colleague when I remembered taking the photo. So I took it from my archive and sent it to the photographic agency I worked with, Sintesi, who are based in Rome. Sintesi distributed my photo to newspapers in Italy and abroad and subsequently sold it to a number of different dailies and weeklies. After the via D'Amelio bomb on 19 July many newspapers found the photo in their own archives and published it. That's when the shot was most widely distributed, and when it started to become an icon.

*So the photo was not published before Borsellino's death?*

Honestly I don't remember whether the *Giornale di Sicilia*, which had had a copy of the photo in its archive since the evening it was taken, published it before 19 July. But I am certain that it was most widely distributed on 20 July 1992, the day after the via D'Amelio bomb.

*Can you give us some concrete examples of the way the photo was used by the Italian press?*

It was used so much that it is difficult to remember when and where it was published. Maybe it wouldn't be wrong to say that all the dailies and magazines published it at least once. At the time I was a young photo-journalist and I remember how much pleasure it gave me to have my pictures in the press. I'm also sure that, at the end of 1992, a lot of magazines put together issues with the best photos of the year, and I remember especially that *Panorama* and *Epoca* used my picture as a cover photo to represent the most important events of the year. More recently *Time* magazine did an issue dedicated to heroes – including Falcone and Borsellino. They used my photo and gave some information about me as the photographer.

*When did you realize for the first time that it was not just the press that had taken to the photo, but that people were adopting it as a symbol?*

In the summer of 1992 people in Palermo were profoundly shaken by the massacres at Capaci and via D'Amelio and they rebelled against mafia violence, taking to the streets



Figure 2. Tony Gentile's photo of Falcone and Borsellino was used on a demonstration in Palermo following the massacres of 1992. The names on the placards are those of two members of Paolo Borsellino's escort who died with him. The bearded man is the father of another officer, Nino Agostino, murdered in 1989. The caption on the photo of the two magistrates reads 'So that their smile may live forever'. © Tony Gentile/Agenzia Sintesi.



Figure 3. Tony Gentile's photo was adapted for use on one of the protest 'sheets' produced by the antimafia movement on the first anniversary of the murder of Falcone. The slogan reads: 'You have not killed them. Their ideas are walking on our legs.' (I would like to thank Giovanna Fiume for permission to photograph her sheet). © John Dickie.

in huge demonstrations, human chains, torch-lit parades . . . There were always quite a few people who had made banners using my photo (Figure 2).

Then in 1993, during the demonstrations staged to commemorate the massacres, there were the first bedsheets with the photo printed on them and a phrase of Giovanni Falcone's: 'Le loro idee cammineranno sulle nostre gambe' ['Their ideas will walk on our legs'] (Figure 3).



*Did you spend the months between the two massacres in 1992 in Palermo? Were you able to see for yourself how the photo had been adopted – by the Comitato dei lenzuoli<sup>2</sup> for example?*

Yes, I was living in Palermo at the time and I knew a few people who were part of the *Comitato dei lenzuoli*. I discussed their initiative with them and I remember they asked for, and got, permission to make the sheets.

*In your view, what is it about the photo that makes it such a moving image? I'm referring both to its content and to your creative and technical input.*

In all honesty I think that there is very little creativity involved in this photo. And as far as the technical aspects are concerned, the choice of black and white was just accidental, for example. It was due to the fact that at that time newspapers were published in black and white. Evening sessions especially, which were filed near to the copy deadline, had to be done in black and white.

That evening I had the presence of mind to notice that the two magistrates were just about to adopt a position that expressed a moment of understanding between them. So I immediately moved in front of the table to shoot a sequence of photos. I think this is the only really important 'technical' thing that I did: observing people, seeing that something was about to happen, and seizing the moment. I wasn't the only photographer there that evening, but I think that my photo is the best, perhaps for the reasons I've mentioned.

From an emotional point of view, I think the photo's content is so clear that it speaks for itself, and I contributed nothing. What makes the photo moving is the understanding between the two, the bond of trust that unites them, the laugh that reveals their great friendship. They are like two great friends meeting in a bar. Borsellino's face radiates serenity. Neither seems weighed down by his role. And, above all, there is the fact that both were killed by the mafia within two months of one another.

*Translation by John Dickie*

## Notes

1. For more on the meeting (whose theme was 'Criminalità, politica e giustizia') and the context in which the photo was taken, see Lucentini's biography of Borsellino (2006, 232–33).
2. On the actions of the 'Bedsheets committee' (named after the sheets daubed with antimafia slogans that were hung from many balconies in Palermo during the summer of 1992), see Alajmo (1993).

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