

## 1960. L'Italia sull'orlo della guerra civile

by Mimmo Franzinelli and Alessandro Giaccone, Milan, Mondadori, 2020, vi + 312 pp., €22.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-88-04-72245-8

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The Tambroni government, which ruled Italy between March and July 1960 (effectively less than four months), was a paradoxical and tragic political fiasco. Conceived as a transitional government, it was meant to overcome an intractable political stalemate and smooth the internal rifts of the Christian Democracy (DC), which was unable to find a majority in parliament but was still reluctant to ally with the Left. However, relying on the external support of the Italian Social Movement (MSI), the government immediately hit rough waters and escalated social conflict. Instead of pacifying Italy, Fernando Tambroni – a champion of law and order – set it ablaze.

As is well known, the inclusion of the neofascists within the majority only 15 years after the fall of Mussolini incensed anti-fascists. Tensions climaxed in June, when the MSI obtained authorisation to celebrate its national congress in Genoa, a city with a robust anti-fascist tradition. Former partisans, socialists, communists, and young rebels poured into the streets to obstruct the congress and condemn the alleged resurgence of authoritarianism. Strikes and demonstrations gave way to urban guerrilla episodes against police and the MSI. While the government hardened repression and denounced the protests as a communist plot to destabilise the country, violence exploded in Reggio Emilia, where five protesters were fired upon and killed by police during clashes on 7 July. At the same time, anti-government demonstrations swept throughout Sicily: the police pulled the trigger again, murdering six people. Amid shock and chaos, many said that Italy was teetering ‘on the brink of civil war’ (pp. 182–3). Grown increasingly isolated within his own party, Tambroni was forced to resign. Ironically, his successor Amintore Fanfani obtained the largest parliamentary consensus since 1948, leveraging the fear of the opposed extremisms.

Despite being ‘the most serious and threatening episode for the institutions in that period’, as Aldo Moro put it (p. 251), the crisis of 1960 has received little scholarly attention, while leaving divisive public memories. Therefore, Franzinelli and Giaccone’s book is much welcomed – all the more so because it seeks a detached understanding of these events ‘using the tools of history’ (p. 6). *1960. L'Italia sull'orlo della guerra civile* is indeed grounded in meticulous archival research, ranging from the records of state institutions to those of political parties both at central and local levels. With the aim of shedding light on those controversial months, the authors follow the individual trajectory of Tambroni, whose personal values and political agency are deemed essential to grasp the meaning of the 1960 crisis. It must be noted that, prior to this book, Tambroni’s career had been scrutinised only in a rather absolving essay by Luciano Radi, a colleague and friend of the prime minister. So, in the first part of the book, Franzinelli and Giaccone retrace Tambroni’s life up to 1960; in the second part, they focus on the disastrous four-month government. A fine-grained political history, the research also delves into the debates of Christian Democrats and surveys the related discussions of neofascists, socialists, and communists.

What do we learn about the summer of 1960 from such a reconstruction? First, Tambroni stands out as the embodiment of the major derogatory features usually attributed to the Italian First Republic and its politicians. Moved by ‘unbridled ambition’, as the authors write (p. 232), Tambroni lacked a political compass, his pole star being self-promotion. He was indeed a tireless transformist, able to present himself as a Catholic of leftist persuasion while secretly negotiating with the MSI for support. As one would expect, he was also prone to clientelism and accustomed to the fratricidal tactics that thrived among Christian Democrats. Interestingly, the authors bring intriguing evidence of Tambroni’s use of espionage, dossiers, and the media to spread false accusations against rivals. His stubborn anti-communism was the other major constant in his life, coupled with a disdain for social movements and grass-roots democracy: Gustave Le Bon meeting Joseph McCarthy, so to speak. A politician of this sort, the book suggests, was likely to fan the flames of social discontent. However, the magnitude of the 1960 crisis cannot be explained without considering, as the authors aptly do, the intrigues, feuds, and grovelling that characterised the major Italian party – a party that still bowed to the Vatican’s vetoes. Finally, Franzinelli and Giacone emphasise how the policing of protest was still harsh and rudimentary while simultaneously communists and socialists mobilised assertively and revived contestation in the streets.

Well-sourced and accurate, the book succeeds in delivering a rich and elucidatory portrait of both Tambroni and the DC in that pivotal period. Occasionally, however, the book wallows in details rather than mastering them, offering countless quotes from correspondence and hairsplitting over the positions of a certain current or politician. The description of the backstage plotting sometimes overshadows the main event, and the reader loses sight of the broader picture. Most importantly, the biographical and political framework tends to neglect the social dimension of the crisis and fails to examine the non-institutional protagonists of this short-lived wave of protest. For instance, the authors engage only marginally with the debate on those ‘youths with striped t-shirts’ (as journalists defined them, referring to their favourite garment) who unexpectedly threw themselves into the anti-government protest, often dodging the leadership of leftist parties and unions. What were their ideals and grievances? What was their specific role in the riots? Did they constitute a new social movement or, vice versa, were they individuals moved by instinctive anti-fascism? Was July 1960 the harbinger of the ‘long 1960s’? These and other questions, also raised by previous research such as Philip Cooke’s study, remain to be properly addressed.

Finally, the book – starting from its title – perpetuates the assumption that Italy was actually ‘on the brink of civil war’ (p. 3). Such a claim was quite common in 1960, as pundits and politicians took advantage of this emotionally-charged concept to support or condemn the government. As the authors convincingly demonstrate, the political crisis was exceptionally severe. However, Italy was not about to fall prey to opposing armed factions. Central government and democratic institutions were under stress but remained in full command and functioning. In other words, the analytical category of civil war should be applied more cautiously and arguably avoided in this case. Paradoxically, the same thirst for power, shrewd realism, and opportunism that the authors ascribe to the DC were also safeguards against extreme forms of political conflict and institutional breakdown. After all, the unpopular and erratic Tambroni was immediately ousted, and the Christian Democrats set out on a ‘centre-left’ path, ensuring continuity once again.