

The Ustica Tragedy in 1980 Italy. War in the Mediterranean?

On June 27 1980, during the night, a civil airplane (DC9 Itavia) flying from Bologna to Palermo in Italy blew up and disappeared into the Mediterranean Sea next to Ustica island. All 81 passengers on board died. Shortly after the explosion the first hypothesis put forward was that of a structural failure of the aircraft. Then three other hypotheses came to light: a terrorist attack (there could have been a bomb on board), a missile shot by a military aircraft or a collision during the flight. The most complete inquiry conducted by Judge Rosario Priore ruled out both the structural failure and the bomb hypothesis, concluding in 1999 that the DC9 was shot down in an action which was “properly an act of undeclared war, a covered international police operation”. It did not, however, identify any guilty party. In 2007 Francesco Cossiga, who was Prime Minister in 1980, declared that the DC-9 was mistakenly shot down by a French missile, so leading to the reopening of the case with new international information requests. More recently Giuliano Amato, a PSI leader and Prime Minister in 1992, partially confirmed Cossiga’s words, speaking about a NATO covert action aimed to strike a Libyan aircraft (because of the alleged presence of Qaddafi on board) which was hiding itself under the Italian civil airplane. More than forty years after the events, however, we still do not know exactly what the reasons underlying the tragedy were and which countries were guilty and the Ustica tragedy is still one of the biggest unsolved mysteries of Italy. The aim of the present paper is not, of course, that to reach a complete conclusion as to who is directly to blame for the tragedy. As an international historian, the aim of the author is instead to turn back to the events of that time trying to put together the many pieces of the puzzle and to provide a plausible international framework for the tragedy. It is not possible, in fact, to isolate what happened in Italy on June 27 1980 from the patchwork of international tension of that time (from Afghanistan and Iran to Middle East, North Africa and Malta just to mention the main arc of crisis) as well as from the traditional dual track of Italy’s foreign policy, the Atlantic one and the Mediterranean one

Keywords: *Ustica, Italy, Libya, War, Truth*

Introduction

On June 27, 1980 during the night a civil aviation plane flying from Bologna to Palermo in Italy blew up and disappeared into the sea next to Ustica island. All 81 passengers on board died. We still do not know today what exactly happened that night and the Ustica tragedy is still one of the biggest unsolved mysteries of our country.

Last September, Giuliano Amato, former Prime Minister in 1992, in an interview to the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* explicitly described a scenario of a covert war in the Italian sky and called upon the Macron

1 Government in France to collaborate in the search for the truth on the Ustica
2 tragedy and apologize to Italy for France's role in it.¹

3 Amato's statement reopened a wide-ranging debate in Italy, dividing
4 public opinion into those who applauded his courage and those who questioned
5 his motives and the timing of his words, supposing reasons of self-interest.²

6 It was the President of the Association of the Ustica victims' families,
7 Daria Bonfietti, who apparently closed the September debate stating that, in
8 any case, Amato's declaration marked a step ahead in the direction of the
9 search for the truth, after 43 years in which "it was exactly that lack of truth
10 which was depriving Italy of its dignity".³

11 The Ustica affair may be considered from a variety of perspectives. The
12 intent of this paper is to analyse it from an historical point of view.

13 For many years I have had the privilege of being a member of a Scientific
14 Committee of historians involved in extensive research around the Ustica
15 tragedy on the basis of new declassified primary sources, in collaboration with
16 the Association of the Ustica victims' families.

17 What contribution can history make? I would like to start my reflections
18 quoting Luca Alessandrini, who is the coordinator of the above-mentioned
19 Scientific Committee:

20
21 *Can history repair things? No, it can't. It cannot give lost lives back, it cannot*
22 *give back those decades of missed reconstruction of responsibilities, it cannot*
23 *relieve the private pain of families and the public pain of citizens. History, in any*
24 *event, can place the issue in a bigger framework, in a more complete collective*
25 *past, so raising awareness. It is something like a grieving process. There is pain,*
26 *vacuum, loss - in this case of loved ones, of public truth, of State, of justice and*
27 *democracy. The loss cannot be filled, but the grieving process can help with*
28 *acceptance of the idea that it happened and can help those affected to live with it.*
29

30 I will organize the analysis into three parts. Firstly, after attempting to put
31 together the many elements useful to reconstruct the event, I will endeavour to
32 summarize the main steps taken by the Italian justice and political systems in
33 the search for the truth. Secondly, I will go deep into the international
34 framework of the Ustica tragedy, describing international relations and Italy's

¹S Fiori (2023), Interview to Giuliano Amato Ecco la verità su Ustica. Macron chiesa scusa. *La Repubblica*. 3 September: 1-3.

²L Abbate (2023), Quarant'anni di depistaggi la verità senza colpevoli. *La Repubblica*. 2 September: 3-4; C Bonini (2023), Strage di Ustica il dito e la luna *La Repubblica* September 3: 29; B Tobagi (2023), Il caso Ustica Le carte false dei Servizi ecco perché la verità è sparita dagli archivi *La Repubblica*. September 4: 6; C Vecchio (2023), Interview to Salvo Andò *La Repubblica*. September 4 2023: 7; A Ginori (2023), Interview to Alessandro Giacone *La Repubblica*. 4 September: 8; S Cappelli (2023), *La Repubblica*. Interview to Claudio Martelli 8 September: 10; A Noto (2023), Sondaggio Mistero Ustica, gli italiani concordano con Amato "La Francia dia risposte" *La Repubblica*. 10 September: 15; F Tonacci (2023), Interview to Giuseppe Dioguardi, *La Repubblica*. September 15: 14.

³D Bonfietti (2023), Ma io dico: grazie Amato. *La Repubblica*. 13 September: 14.

⁴L Alessandrini (2020), Introduction in Alessandrini L (ed.) *1980: l'anno di Ustica*. Milano: Mondadori Università: 10.

1 international policies at that time. Doing so, I will propose the main hypotheses
 2 formulated up to today in an attempt to explain the most plausible scenarios of
 3 the tragedy. In conclusion, I will say a few words about the process of public
 4 memory building in these 44 years, starting from the setting up of a memorial
 5 museum in Bologna, where the wreck of the plane is preserved.

6 From a methodological point of view, starting from considering the main
 7 theses proposed during the last 44 years by scholars as well as by journalists to
 8 explain the Ustica tragedy, the essay will summarize the most significant
 9 conclusions of the original research conducted by the author as well as by the
 10 other members of the above-mentioned scientific Committee. This research is
 11 based on both secondary and primary sources, with particular reference to
 12 newly declassified diplomatic documents in the United States, the United
 13 Kingdom, France, Malta and Italy. It is worth mentioning here the important
 14 turning point represented, from the perspective of the archival research in Italy,
 15 by the Renzi Directive, the executive order by which the then Italian President
 16 of the Council of Ministers Matteo Renzi, in 2015 requested the many Italian
 17 public Administrations to release documents relating to the Ustica tragedy and
 18 to other dramatic episodes of recent Italian history.⁵ Notwithstanding the many
 19 limits of this documentary declassification process, the Directive represents an
 20 important step in the direction of the building of a more transparent political
 21 system.

24 **The Event, the Italian Justice and the Political System**

25
 26 As I mentioned before, the night of the 27 June in 1980 a DC9 Itavia civil
 27 aviation plane disappeared from the air traffic control radars near Ustica. At
 28 Palermo airport they waited for the aircraft for the whole night. It was just the
 29 next morning that bodies and fragments of the plane were discovered in the
 30 sea. 81 passengers died, including 13 children aged from a few months to 12
 31 years. Only 38 bodies were ever recovered. Immediately, numerous inquiries
 32 started and a variety of hypotheses were formulated. Foreign advisors were
 33 consulted, air traffic control notes and radar records were looked for (some
 34 were found to be incomplete, some others concealed, some others destroyed).

35 First of all a structural failure of the aircraft was supposed. Then, other
 36 hypotheses prevailed: that of a terrorist attack (there could have been a bomb
 37 on board), that of a missile deployed by a military aircraft or that of a collision
 38 during the flight.⁶

39 Last but not least, what happened in the sky over Ustica on June 27 was
 40 linked by many people to the recovery two weeks later, on July 14, of a Libyan
 41 MIG aircraft on the Sila mountains in Calabria, in the South of Italy, not far

⁵Renzi Directive. Archivio Centrale dello Stato. Rome: <https://acs.cultura.gov.it/documentazione-declassificata/>

⁶For a historical analyses of the tragedy, see C Ranci (2020), *Ustica Una ricostruzione storica* Bologna: Laterza and D Biacchessi, D Colarieti (2002), *Punto Condor Ustica: il processo* Bologna: Pendragon.

1 from where the Itavia plane crashed into the sea.⁷ Some depositions suggested
 2 in fact that the Libyan MIG crash could have happened some days before and
 3 so could be directly linked to the DC-9 tragedy.

4 In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, Itavia was taken as the
 5 scapegoat for what happened, up to the point of forcing the company to close
 6 under economic pressure, notwithstanding the first inquiry report transmitted to
 7 the Italian parliament excluded the hypothesis of a structural failure of the
 8 aircraft.⁸

9 After that, silence falls: a “Wall of Rubber” (“Muro di gomma”) - to cite
 10 the apt expression from a Dino Risi movie of 1991 - symbolizing the
 11 impermeability of the political system. Neither the Parliament, nor the political
 12 parties, nor public opinion developed a specific interest in the Ustica tragedy,
 13 with the only exception of some Italian newspapers, first of all the *Corriere*
 14 *della Sera*. It’s worth mentioning here the important contribution of Andrea
 15 Purgatori, the recently deceased Italian journalist, who was the first to put
 16 forward the missile theory and did much to keep public interest alive.⁹

17 The first turning point was in 1986, when the Committee for the truth on
 18 the Ustica tragedy was established. The President was Francesco Bonifacio,
 19 former President of the Corte Costituzionale and it was composed by leading
 20 personalities including Adriano Ossicini (vice President of the Senate), the
 21 members of Parliament Antonio Giolitti (Socialist Party), Pietro Ingrao
 22 (Communist Party) Pietro Scoppola (Cristian Democracy Party) and Stefano
 23 Rodotà (Independent Left) and by the sociologist Franco Ferrarotti. The
 24 Committee signed an appeal to the then President of the Republic Francesco
 25 Cossiga, requesting to put an end to the silence and to cast light on the case.¹⁰

26 Thanks to Cossiga’s interest and to the action of Giuliano Amato (who
 27 was then the Secretary of the Council of Ministers in the Bettino Craxi
 28 government) the amount needed for the recovery of the wreck was allocated
 29 and in 1987 the French company Ifremer started a complex operation to bring
 30 the wreck to the surface. In the meantime, public interest grew and in 1988 the
 31 Association of the relatives of the victims was established. In the same year,
 32 the Parliamentary Inquiry Commission on terrorism began working on the
 33 Ustica tragedy.¹¹

34 Another important turning point was in 1990 when Judge Rosario Priore
 35 took the lead of the inquiry. His investigation lasted 9 years and it counted 350
 36 witnesses, 980 search warrants, 89 legal examinations and up to 300
 37 international rogatories. It was during this period that the DC9 wreck was
 38 reassembled in the hangar of Pratica di Mare to be inspected by Judge Priore
 39 and his consultants.

⁷B Tucci (1980), *Ma chi controlla il cielo del Sud?* *Corriere della Sera*. 22 July: 1.

⁸C Ranci (2020), *Ustica Una ricostruzione storica*, cit: 104 ss.

⁹In the month of August 1980 Purgatori was the only journalist who supported the missile hypothesis. A Purgatori (1980), *Il DC9 cadde dopo una collisione o addirittura fu colpito da un missile* *Corriere della Sera*. 10 August: 5.

¹⁰Appeal to Cossiga (1986), *Diteci la verità sulla tragedia dell’aereo di Ustica*. *L’Unità*. 29 June: 1

¹¹C Ranci (2020), *Ustica Una ricostruzione storica*, cit: ch 4.

1 When Judge Priore closed his investigation, his final judgement was 4969
 2 pages long. ¹²In his investigation, Priore could not identify the perpetrators of
 3 the Ustica tragedy and therefore he could not open a trial on the massacre's
 4 causes and perpetrators. However, he excluded both the structural failure and
 5 the bomb hypotheses and accused many Italian officials of perjury, abuse of
 6 authority and aiding and abetting. He also committed to trial four Italian
 7 Generals with the charge of high treason, for omitting in their communications
 8 to the government important information on military aircrafts in flight next to
 9 the DC9. ¹³

10 It's worth recalling here that in his judgement Judge Priore underlined the
 11 scenario of international war in which the Ustica affair took place.: "Beyond
 12 any doubt the DC9 accident occurred following military interception
 13 activity"¹⁴. "The lives of 81 innocent citizens were lost in an action that was
 14 nothing less than an act of war, an undeclared war, a covert international police
 15 operation against our country, whose boundaries and rights were violated."¹⁵

16 More than that, on the basis of numerous witnesses and evidence, Priore
 17 confirmed in his judgment that the Libyan MIG discovered on the Sila
 18 mountains in Calabria fell some time earlier than when it was found. Therefore
 19 he concluded that it appears likely that it fell in the same circumstances in
 20 which the Itavia DC9 precipitated¹⁶.

21 More recently, in 2011, the Court of Palermo ordered the Defence and
 22 transportation Ministries to compensate the victims families for not having
 23 ensured their safety during the flight and having withheld the truth. The
 24 Supreme Court confirmed the verdict, thus underlining that the most likely
 25 causes of the incident were either a missile strike or a collision during the
 26 flight.¹⁷

27 Despite these juridical conclusions, however, it is still not clear which
 28 countries were responsible and which flags the aircraft in the Italian sky that
 29 night flew.

30 An important turning point was Francesco Cossiga's declaration in 2008
 31 on TV and then to the judges. He stated: "When I was President of the Italian
 32 Republic in 1986, our intelligence service informed the then Undersecretary
 33 Giuliano Amato and me that it was the French, with an aircraft carrier, that
 34 launched a missile...". He then went on to say that the French had information
 35 that Qaddafi could be on board, but he was saved because the Italian
 36 intelligence service SISMI had informed him of a possible attack and he

¹²Final Judgement, Ordinanza Sentenza Priore, Procedimento Penale Nr. 527/84 AGI. (<https://www.stragi80.it/documenti/gi/>)

¹³The four Generals, Lamberto Bartolucci, Zeno Tascio, Corrado Melillo, Franco Ferri were definitively acquitted in 2007. See: n.a. (2007) Ustica una strage senza colpevoli. *Corriere della Sera*. 10 January.

¹⁴Final Judgement, Ordinanza Sentenza Priore, Procedimento Penale Nr. 527/84 AGI: 3953.

¹⁵Quoted in D Bonfietti, Preface in D Biacchessi, D Colarieti (2002), *Punto Condor Ustica: il processo* cit: 15.

¹⁶Final Judgement. Ordinanza Sentenza Priore, Procedimento Penale Nr. 527/84 AGI: 4963.

¹⁷C Ranci (2020), *Ustica Una ricostruzione storica*, cit: 12-13.

1 decided not to fly.¹⁸ As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper a more
 2 recent interview with Amato confirmed this hypothesis. On the Italian
 3 newspaper *La Repubblica*, in fact, Amato asserted that the most credible thesis
 4 was that of a simulated NATO military exercise, intended to cover an attack on
 5 Qaddafi's MIG, and that the error that saw the DC9 being struck could be
 6 attributed to the French Airforce, with American complicity.¹⁹

7 Both these statements, therefore, suggest the same thesis, that the Itavia
 8 DC9 was struck down in error by a missile launched from a French (or
 9 American?) aircraft in search of a Libyan MIG -on which Qaddafi was
 10 presumed to be travelling, which was hiding itself under the Italian DC9.

11 While this is the most accredited hypotheses, numerous other possible
 12 explanations have been put forward. We shall explore them in the next part of
 13 this paper, discussing in depth the international scenario of those days.
 14
 15

16 **The International Scenario**

17
 18 The role of the historian may be valuable in depicting the background to
 19 the tragedy and the framework in which it happened. If during the night of 27
 20 June 1980 the Itavia DC9 encountered on its route the missile which would
 21 interrupt its flight, it is a central question for historians to understand which
 22 countries could have entered Italian airspace and territorial waters. We should
 23 therefore place the Ustica tragedy within the context of Italy's foreign relations
 24 at that time. As Luca Alessandrini wrote, quoting March Bloch "History can
 25 provide contexts; can provide interpretations ... A historical phenomenon is
 26 never properly explained without reference to the historical moment in which it
 27 takes place".²⁰

28 Even just a quick glance back at the international scenario in the summer
 29 of 1980 allows us to understand how crucial that moment was.

30 The year 1980, in fact, represents a real turning point between a period of
 31 détente between the US and the USSR and one of renewed tension which led
 32 historians to speak about a "Second Cold War".

33 From the East to the West everything seemed to indicate that détente had
 34 completely disappeared: the assault on the American Embassy in Teheran in
 35 November 1979 with the taking hostage of 53 American embassy staff, and,
 36 just one month later, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979; the
 37 Soviet SS20 missiles in the East of Europe and the decision of the Atlantic
 38 Alliance to install mid-range missiles in some Western European countries,
 39 which caused great tension in Europe.²¹ As Leopoldo Nuti wrote: "the end of
 40 1979 seemed to be the point of no return of an apparently unstoppable

¹⁸Interview to Francesco Cossiga *SkyTG24* 19 February 2008.

¹⁹S Fiori (2023) Interview to Giuliano Amato: Ecco la verità su Ustica. Macron chiesa scusa. Cit.

²⁰L Alessandrini (2020), Introduction cit.: 8

²¹See O A Westad (ed.) (1997), *The Fall of Détente. Soviet- American Relations during the Carter Years* Oslo: Scandinavian University Press; O A Westad (2005), *The Global Cold War* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

1 tendency towards confrontation, and 1980 saw the coming back to a logic of a
2 head on collision between the blocs after years of dialogue”.²²

3 Particularly important in that context was the Middle East theatre, after the
4 signing of the Camp David Agreement, by which for the first time an Arab
5 Country, Egypt, recognized Israel. In a few short months Egypt became
6 isolated within the Arab World, was expelled from the Arab League and a new
7 tension arose in the region.

8 In this scenario of growing tension, in the same 1979, Saddam Hussein
9 increased his leadership in Iraq and decided to accelerate the national nuclear
10 program. France and Italy collaborated with Iraq in the nuclear field, exporting
11 a variety of materials destined for its reactors, so distancing their policy from
12 that of the United States, which in the same period condemned Iraqi nuclear
13 policy and added Iraq to the list of countries which supported terrorism. Israel
14 was, however, the country which feared most Iraqi nuclear acceleration. And it
15 was Israel which was suspected to be the mandator of some attacks against a
16 number of French industrial plants that produced parts of Iraqi reactors. This
17 culminated in the well-known Osirak episode in June 1981, when the Israeli
18 government attempted to solve the problem by bombing the Iraqi Osirak
19 reactor then under construction.²³

20 This regional scenario serves as the backdrop to a first hypothesis
21 concerning the Ustica tragedy, which traces the origins of what happened in the
22 Italian sky in June 1980 back to the framework of Israeli-Iraqi-French
23 relations. In the opinion of Claudio Gatti, a well-known Italian scholar, who in
24 1994 published a book entitled *Il quinto scenario* (the fifth scenario), the Itavia
25 DC9 was struck down in error by a missile launched from an Israeli fighter
26 plane which mistook it for a French aircraft that it was supposed was
27 transporting uranium to Saddam’s Iraq. Claudio Gatti was convinced that not
28 only did Israel have a strategic interest in attacking French-Iraqi collaboration,
29 but it also had the military competence to do that and an intelligence
30 organization able to cover the entire operation.²⁴

31 Considered by Judge Priore during his nine years investigation, Gatti’s
32 thesis was at the end rejected because of lack of sufficient evidence about an
33 Israeli’s aircrafts presence in the airspace over Ustica.

34 Italy was indeed concerned to what was happening in Middle East, due
35 firstly to its relations with Iraq, but more than that it was the Mediterranean
36 context that attracted most Italian attention. In the summer of 1980, in fact,
37 Italy played a pivotal role in avoiding an alteration of the military balance in
38 Southern Europe after the 1979 British retreat from Malta, a crucial
39 Mediterranean crossroads. On August 2 1980 Italy and Malta signed in La

²²L Nuti (2020), *Un anno difficile. La politica estera americana e le crisi del 1979-180* in L
Alessandrini (ed.) *1980: l’anno di Ustica*. Milano: Mondadori Università: 22; J A Bill (1998),
The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations New Haven: Yale
University Press.

²³S Weissman, H Krosney (1981), *The Islamic Bomb. The Nuclear Threat to Israel and the
Middle East* New York: Times Book; M Braut-Hegghammer (2011), Revisiting Osirak:
Preventive Attacks and Nuclear Proliferation Risks. *International security* 36(1): 101-132.

²⁴C Gatti, G Hammer (1994), *Il quinto scenario* Milano: Rizzoli.

1 Valletta a bilateral agreement under which Italy would assure Malta's
2 neutrality with an additional protocol that provided direct economic assistance.
3 Under this agreement Italy appeared to replace the UK in preventing Moscow
4 from acquiring air and naval bases, as well as facilities on the island and, at the
5 same time, it appeared to succeed in keeping Malta from shifting towards
6 Libya.²⁵

7 On the same date, while Italian Undersecretary of State Giuseppe
8 Zamberletti was signing the agreement in La Valletta, a bomb explosion in
9 Bologna railway station caused more than 200 victims.

10 One of the various hypotheses proposed during the years to explain the
11 Ustica tragedy is the one put forward by Zamberletti. In his opinion, the Ustica
12 and Bologna tragedies were closely connected and both were directed by
13 Qaddafi. As clearly emerges from Zamberletti's book of 1995 "*La minaccia e la*
14 *vendetta*" (the threat and the vengeance), the Ustica tragedy was the threat of
15 Qaddafi, who wanted to send Italy the message not to sign the Italian-Maltese
16 agreement. The Bologna station bomb was then the vengeance for having
17 signed it. The reasons lay in Qaddafi's hostility towards Italian Maltese policy
18 which excluded Libya from a crucial point in the Mediterranean.²⁶

19 Judge Priore took all these elements into deep consideration and also in
20 more recent times the public debate has moved back to Zamberletti's point.²⁷
21 In terms of evidence, however, the numerous examinations of the wreck
22 conducted from 1990 to 1999 excluded the possibility of a bomb on board,
23 thereby failing to confirm the main assumption of a Libyan terrorist attack.

24 The last scenario we are going to consider, the North African one, is
25 certainly no less complex and directly calls into question French and American
26 responsibilities, as mentioned above quoting Cossiga's and Amato's affirmations.

27 Qaddafi's Libya was again one of the main actors. We must consider
28 Libya's relationship with the US separately from Libya's relationship with
29 France.

30 Relations with the US were at this time full of contradictions and, from
31 1977 to 1980, the Carter administration had to carefully consider Qaddafi's
32 Libya because of the many interests involved as well as because of the new
33 sources of tension which arose. On the one side, the US imported more than
34 40% of Libyan total oil production and in Libya up to 4000 American citizens
35 worked.²⁸ But on the other side, the assault on the American Embassy in
36 Tripoli in December 1979 created deep tension. This episode – quoting
37 Leopoldo Nuti, who carefully studied US foreign policy towards Libya during

²⁵M Merlati (2020), *L'Italia e il Mediterraneo nel 1980. Il triangolo Italia-Malta-Libia* in L. Alessandrini (ed.) *1980: l'anno di Ustica*. Milano: Mondadori Università: 44-61; M. Merlati, D. Vignati (2023), *Risk and Opportunity: Italy in the Troubled Mediterranean during the 1970s*. *Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 9(3).

²⁶G Zamberletti (1995), *La minaccia e la vendetta. Ustica e Bologna: un filo tra due stragi* Milano: Franco Angeli.

²⁷F Grignetti (2016), *L'ultimo segreto nelle carte di Moro. La Libia dietro Ustica e Bologna* *La Stampa* 5 May; F Grignetti (2016) Priore: *Dietro Ustica e Bologna è plausibile che ci fosse Gheddafi* *La Stampa* 6 May 6.

²⁸L Nuti (2020), *Un anno difficile. La politica estera americana e le crisi del 1979-180*. cit: 33.

1 the Carter years- marked a “point of no return in Us-Libyan relations”, even if
2 many attempts to defuse tension were made.²⁹

3 Nevertheless, Nuti admonishes, it would be an error to exaggerate this
4 state of affairs. “From a methodological point of view, the risk is to backdate to
5 1980 the many strong tensions between Washington and Tripoli which were to
6 develop in the following years, particularly under Reagan”. In other words, “in
7 1980 Libya was a growing problem, of course, but not a primary objective of
8 US foreign policy, as it became in the following years.”³⁰

9 A unilateral and isolated American covert action to eliminate Qadafi in
10 June 1980 does not appear, therefore, entirely plausible. Different considerations,
11 however, should be made about a possible involvement of Giscard D’Estaing’s
12 France. The topic has been explored in depth by the Italian scholar Bruna
13 Bagnato, who for many years has been engaged in archival research on French
14 policy in North Africa.

15 Relations between France and Libya “at the hour of Ustica” were
16 “complex, ambiguous and tortuous, subject to the turbulence of Tripoli’s
17 aggressive strategy towards Egypt, Tunisia and above all Chad.”³¹

18 In January 1980 some Tunisians armed and trained by Libyans conducted
19 a raid in the city of Gafsa, in Tunisia, assaulting government buildings. France
20 sent there its soldiers, thus provoking a strong Libyan reaction: at the
21 beginning of February the French embassy in Tripoli and the consulate in
22 Bengasi were attacked and diplomatic relations between the two countries were
23 interrupted.³²

24 At the same time, turning to Chad, Qadafi was trying to extend his
25 influence over the country by supporting rebel forces (also against the French)
26 in a context of civil war. Above all, Qadafi was attempting to interfere in
27 Egypt’s internal affairs, thus provoking Sadat’s reaction. There is much
28 evidence of concerted Egyptian-French plans to eliminate Qadafi, dating back
29 to 1977. Giscard D’Estaing himself mentions in his memoirs a 1977 joint
30 plan.³³ Furthermore, in 1980 a new Egyptian-French collaboration would lead
31 to a military uprising in Tobruk.³⁴

32 If French involvement in the scenario of the Ustica tragedy is therefore
33 quite plausible considering French-Libyan relations at that time, how can we
34 explain the Italian involvement? Why, in other words, was it in Italian airspace
35 that the enemy aircraft were chasing each other?

36 “Italy had an American wife and a Libyan lover”. This is the well-known
37 sentence largely used in the public debate to indicate the deep ambiguity of
38 Italian-Libyan relations in those years. The relationship with Qadafi was fed by
39 political ambiguities, economic convergences and personal complicities, while

²⁹Ivi: 36.

³⁰Ivi: 43.

³¹B Bagnato (2020), *La Francia e il Mediterraneo all’ora di Ustica* (giugno 1980) in L Alessandrini (ed.) *1980: l’anno di Ustica*. Milano: Mondadori Università: 81.

³²Ivi: 85-85.

³³G D’Estaing (2004) *Le pouvoir et la vie* Paris: 178-181.

³⁴B Bagnato (2020), *La Francia e il Mediterraneo all’ora di Ustica* (giugno 1980). cit: 84.

1 at the same time Italy aimed to play a significant role in the framework of
2 NATO countries.

3 The Seventies had been a period of great prosperity in Italian-Libyan
4 relations from a commercial and economic perspective. Just think of the
5 intensity of the exchanges between the two countries (in 1977, 25% of Libyan
6 imports came from Italy) and of the cooperation agreements which provided
7 that Libya would supply Italy with oil and Italy would build refineries and
8 infrastructure in Libya.³⁵ As a consequence of that, Italy ended up maintaining
9 a political approach towards Libya which was in contrast with that of the
10 Allies.

11 After the Gafsa events, Italy did not condemn Qadafi as the other allies
12 did, carefully considering not to damage ongoing cooperation agreements. Also
13 in April 1980, despite numerous political assassinations of Libyan citizens in
14 Italy and in other European countries, Italy failed to join the Allies in taking a
15 stand against Qadafi. Through UK archival sources we now know how
16 enormous the British effort to convince the Italians to take a stand against
17 Qadafi together with other European countries was and also how the main
18 Italian concern remained that of navigating through “conflicting pressures”.
19 From the UK Foreign Office perspective, the principal reasons behind the
20 Italian “ambiguity” were its enormous economic interests at stake with Libya.³⁶

21 Above all, more important in the framework of the Ustica affair, there was
22 another hot issue in Italian-Libyan relations: the undisturbed use of Italian
23 airspace by Libyan military aircraft. We are referring to what is known as “the
24 Yugoslav corridor”: based on a secret agreement between Libya and
25 Yugoslavia, Libyan aviation could use Yugoslav airports for training and
26 repairs. On the route to Yugoslavia, Libyan military aircraft could cross Italian
27 airspace without any formal authorization taking advantage of the deficiencies
28 of the Italian radar system.³⁷

29 This “Italian inattention” was a source of great concern in the United
30 Kingdom. Writing from the Embassy in Rome to the Foreign Office about the
31 Libyan MIG crash on the Sila mountains in Calabria, the Embassy official W.
32 R. Tomkys underlined how the “activities of Libyan air force interceptor
33 aircraft over the Mediterranean [were] of continuing interest to the
34 Department” and added that the MIG incident was “embarrassing” for Italy for
35 not having intercepted it.³⁸

³⁵On Libyan foreign policy and Lybian-Italian relations during the Seventies see D Vandewalle (1995), *Qadhafi's Libya (1969-1994)* London: MacMillan; F Cresti, M Cricco (2012), *Storia della Libia contemporanea. Dal dominio ottomano alla morte di Gheddafi* Roma: Carocci; A Varvelli (2009), *L'Italia e l'ascesa di Gheddafi. La cacciata degli italiani, le armi e il petrolio* Milano: Baldini Castoldi Dalai.

³⁶Telegram from M. E. Pellew (Embassy in Rome) to J. Crosby (FCO), “Italo/Libyan Relations”, 12 June 1980, FCO 93/2345, The National Archive UK (TNA).

³⁷C Ranci *Ustica Una ricostruzione storica*, cit: 42.

³⁸Telegram from William Roger Tomkys (British Embassy, Rome) to Douglas Hardings (FCO), “MIG 23 Crash in Calabria”, 4 August 1980, FCO 93/2345, TNA.

1 In his final judgement Judge Priore explicitly refers to those “holes of the
2 Italian radar system” as the framework of what happened during the night of
3 the 27 June 1980.³⁹
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5

6 **Conclusions**

7

8 There was a war, in conclusion, in the Mediterranean on the night of 27
9 June 1980. It was a covert war which violated Italian boundaries and sovereign
10 rights, killing 81 innocent civilians. After 44 years, and notwithstanding an
11 enormous number of inquiries, we still do not know exactly who was fighting
12 in the Italian sky that night. Those who knew did not speak.

13 It is not too late, however; a lot of work has been done and many
14 hypotheses have been formulated and scrutinised. Historians on one side and
15 public opinion on the other could still participate in the search for the truth.
16 Historians can go on exploring the archives and through their research can
17 contribute to distinguish between different scenarios and make the context of
18 the tragedy increasingly clear. Public opinion can put pressure on governments,
19 demanding serious commitment in the battle for justice, first of all within the
20 framework of Italy’s current international relations.

21 As mentioned before, credit should be given to Daria Bonfietti, the
22 President of the Association of the Ustica victims’ families, for having
23 stimulated an ongoing public debate around the Ustica tragedy and for having
24 contributed to building a public memory of it over the years.

25 One of the most important steps of this process was the creation of the
26 Memory Museum in Bologna, inaugurated in 2007. The wreck of the DC9 was
27 transported there from Pratica di Mare and the recently deceased artist
28 Christian Boltanski created an installation to host it: around the reassembled
29 wreck there are 81 dark mirrors and 81 loudspeakers broadcast sighs and
30 whispers of simple, common sentences, thus underlying how random and
31 ineluctable the tragedy was. Big black boxes containing the passengers’
32 belongings (shoes, toys, glasses....) are placed next to the wreck.

33 The cinema as well has played an important role in cultivating the memory
34 of Ustica over the years, starting from the above mentioned “Muro di Gomma”
35 of 1991, up to the more recent movie "Ustica" by Renzo Martinelli. They are
36 completely different movies: the first recounts “the guilty silence of politics,
37 while the second, also thanks to the advice of Judge Rosario Priore, is an
38 attempt to propose a plausible thesis around the tragedy. Both of them,
39 however, represent important steps not only in the process of public memory
40 building, but also in the search for the truth and justice. Doing so, they are an
41 example of civil engagement.
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³⁹Final Judgement, Ordinanza Sentenza Priore, Procedimento Penale Nr. 527/84 A G.I: 4962.

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