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Pinelli, Valpreda & state terror

Review of *The Valpreda Papers: The prison diaries of Pietro Valpreda*

Albert Meltzer

1976

On 12 December 1969 a bomb exploded at a bank in Milan: many people were killed. The press and police blamed it on anarchists, whereas it was actually part of a policy by the Italian state, involving infiltration of the anarchists and the use of fascist terrorists to justify an authoritarian takeover.

During the 'investigation' Pinelli was murdered by the police: despite the revelation of the plot Valpreda had to wait many years to be cleared at trial. More details can be found in Stuart Christie's *Stefano delle Chiaie* (available from AK Press)

The Valpreda Papers: The prison diaries of Pietro Valpreda, Gollancz, 1975

The publication of *The Valpreda Papers* is a major event notwithstanding the ill-informed introduction by Gaia Servadio, a journalist who has obviously not even read the book — imagining, for instance, that the Anarchist Movement in Italy *was destroyed by the Fascists and then it was revived in 1968... in Carrara!*

Valpreda was suddenly and without reason involved in 1969 in a major trial that shook Italy. The neo-Fascist movement (with its po-

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lice ramifications) had tried to pull off a threefold coup — to smash the Anarchist movement, to spread terror in the heart of the working class, and to show the need for a law-and-order party. The reasons for attacking the Anarchist movement were because it was not involved in party politics as was the Communist Party and had therefore no “friends in high places”; the press had for years built up a “notoriety” tag; a blow at the libertarian movement would be damaging to the “Left” generally without involving State politics; and finally, it was thought the Anarchist movement would be isolated as Valpreda himself indeed was.

To some extent this may have boomeranged against the Fascists — but because of it the Italian State has kept Valpreda a prisoner for six years and totally ruined his life, rather than admit his innocence and the whole frame-up. The plot failed. But the State is stuck with its trial.

The book does not give the full story of the Milan bomb placed by the Fascists. Valpreda knew nothing about it then. He only knew he was picked up one day and blamed. The reason for his selection was not even mistaken identity, some element of which existed in the Dreyfus and Sacco and Vanzetti cases, later reinforced by prejudice. He was picked out deliberately because he was a member of a situationist-type group that could be [more] easily infiltrated by hostile elements than a working-class anarchist group — especially on a localised basis as they are in Italy. He was a dancer and it was thought he would have no working class solidarity to back him up. He was picked out and built up as the victim by the Fascists who committed the bomb attack in Milan against people visiting a co-operative bank. A few of the perpetrators — long after, and after great pressure — are now on trial. But their victim Valpreda has been — after touch and go as to acquittal on the score of justice — kept back to be tried along with them — rather than the State admit it lent itself to a gross injustice and a massacre.

By giving Valpreda’s own thought day after day, month after month, as his long calvary dragged on, the diaries in a way give a

deeper insight to the case than some of the straight documentaries have done, even though it does not relate the story. (Nothing excelled the two Swedish T.V. films on Pinelli and Valpreda which were shown in Britain in 1974).

Valpreda has been the subject of great calumny even by so-called libertarians who did their best to wash their hands of him once they heard of his problems — the suggestion that he was not really an anarchist at all (which the police seized on when it was discovered that the Anarchists could not be blamed at all for the Milan bomb, and an ideal solution for them would have been “fascist plot” — “anarchist catspaw”, or even madman ‘who thought he was an anarchist, disowned by anarchists’). Nobody could doubt his anarchism who reads the book — and it is hardly his fault — indeed it is his great misfortune — that the press have built him up as an “anarchist leader” simply because they happen to know his name. Some in the movement even now, want to dissociate themselves from Valpreda because he disagrees with them on one or two points — he not unnaturally welcomes politicians taking an interest in his case, for instance. How ossified organisations love to disclaim!

Valpreda does not answer his deprecators, and reserves his attacks for the class enemy. There is an essential dignity in his whole bearing that adds immeasurably to the sustained tragedy of his story. Faced with the vicious liars and male whores of the Italian press, whose barbs, innuendoes and downright lies while he has been defenceless in prison recall the barbarities of the pillory, he has retained that dignity.

His observations from inside prison are acute and perceptive and throw a searing light on Italy today. It has been Valpreda’s unsought-for-fate that he has become in life a symbol of the struggle, linked with Pinelli in death. PINELLI ASSASSINATED — VALPREDA INNOCENT — CALABRESI MURDERER! Has been shouted, painted and sung throughout the country. Calabresi has met rough justice (or perhaps he was disposed of by those who feared it). But Valpreda goes on living. In life he records the prison

scene in Italy — where the imprisoned rot on for years, and guilt or innocence is an irrelevance. He speaks simply but movingly of the class struggle and the great debate on socialism and liberty as it comes through to him in his cell.

In the face of personal tragedy, despair, the demoralisation that prison is intended to produce, Valpreda has gone on fighting. He has utilised his status as *anarchist prisoner* not to demand privileges for himself as a “political offender” but to hammer home the message of freedom not only to other prisoners but to the world. His position was not of his choice. He was tied to the stake and had to face the torture — His choice was only whether to submit to the torture miserably or to assert not just his innocence but his faith. In choosing the latter he will be remembered, if social justice prevails, when the names of his hypocritical accusers — in Vanzetti’s words — only recall that accursed past when man was wolf to man.