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EVOLUTION IN EUROPE

EVOLUTION IN EUROPE; Italy Discloses Its Web Of Cold War Guerrillas

By CLYDE HABERMAN, Special to The New York Times

ROME, Nov. 15— In Europe's new order, they are the spies who never quite came in from the cold, foot soldiers in an underground guerrilla network with one stated mission: To fight an enemy that most Europeans believe no longer exists.

Theirs is a tale of secret arms caches and exotic code names, of military stratagems and political intrigues.

At best, their tale is no more than a curious footnote to the cold war. The question is if, at worst, it could be the key to unsolved terrorism dating back two decades. Nowhere do the darker suspicions burn more intensely than in this capital whose appetite for conspiracy theories is insatiable and whose Parliament today began an investigation into where reality may lie.

The focus of the inquiry is a clandestine operation code-named Gladio, created decades ago to arm and train resistance fighters in case the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies invaded. All this week, there have been disclosures of similar organizations in virtually all Western European countries, including those that do not belong to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. An Italian Creation

As disclosed in recent days by the Italian Prime Minister, Giulio Andreotti, Gladio, named after after the short, wide, double-edged sword used by gladiators in ancient Rome, came into being during the most gelid days of the cold war.

It was originally an Italian creation, said Mr. Andreotti, who is scheduled to testify on Friday before a parliamentary commission studying bombings and massacres that claimed scores of lives in a terrorism wave that inundated Italy from 1969 to the early 1980's.

The Prime Minister said last week that Gladio later evolved into a branch of an extensive network, operated within NATO and abetted by a 1956 agreement

between the United States and Italian secret services. Over the years, he says, 622 Italians belonged to the operation -- civilians who were trained by intelligence operatives and who had fought in World War II or served in the peacetime forces. Preparing the Guerrillas

Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Greece and Luxembourg have all acknowledged that they maintained Gladio-style networks to prepare guerrilla fighters to leap into action in the event of a Warsaw Pact invasion. Many worked under the code name Stay Behind. Greece called its operation Red Sheepskin.

News reports in recent days assert that similar programs have also existed in Britain, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Austria, Turkey and Denmark, and even in neutral countries like Switzerland and Sweden. The British newspaper The Guardian today quoted a former Commander in Chief of NATO forces in northern Europe as saying that the purpose was to have a secret organization in place for guerrilla warfare if Britain were overrun by Communist troops.

"The original plan was to establish a network to arm guerrillas from the civil populace while conventional forces were occupied elsewhere," said the former commander, Sir Anthony Farrar-Hockley.

Diplomats in Rome and other European capitals say the network was inspired by anti-Nazi resistance movements in World War II, but that it was hoped these new clandestine units would be better organized. "You have to remember," a highly placed Western European official said, "that at the time everyone was praising the French resistance, the Italian resistance, and everyone had to be prepared." Secret Arms Deposits

These would-be fighters had stockpiles of weapons and explosives, officials say. Henk Vredeling, the Netherlands' Defense Minister in the 1970's, said he had known of weapons caches that were to be used for behind-the-lines sabotage. The German newspaper Die Welt reported that among secret stores of weapons in what used to be West Germany were grenade launchers, pistols and explosives.

In Rome, Mr. Andreotti disclosed that secret arms deposits were dismantled as far back as 1972 but that the secret services could not find 12 of them. Their disappearance has fueled speculation here that the weapons ended up in terrorist hands. Contributing to this conjecture are press reports that some of the underground "gladiators," as they have been dubbed, had close links to neo-Fascist groups and to intelligence organizations.

But the chief of Italian military intelligence, Adm. Fulvio Martini, insisted today

that Operation Gladio had no ties to right-wing groups and that its only purpose was to resist invasion.

"Not one of the 622 was ever involved in any conspiracies or plots," Admiral Martini said in testimony before the parliamentary commission. Varied From Country to Country

It appears that Gladio operations varied from country to country. Many worked within a NATO framework, but some -- the Netherlands, for example -- say their resistance fighters were organized purely as a national force.

In some countries, the networks were shut down years ago. Greece's Socialists say that they discovered theirs when they took power in 1981, finally abolishing it and rounding up weapons in 1985. In France, President Francois Mitterrand said this week that it was he who eliminated the French branch, but he did not say when.

Even in countries like Italy where Gladio remains in force, its members seem to have little fighting spirit left. 'Gladiators' Still Recruited

New "gladiators" are still recruited, and two members of Parliament say they visited a military base on the island of Sardinia where guerrilla training exercises were held last spring. But Admiral Martini told the investigating commission that nearly three-fourths of the 622 members were over the age of 50, or were dead.

Nevertheless, the network continues, and several officials reported that a supervisory committee of European secret services met in Brussels only a month ago.

Nourishing conspiracy theories are assertions from key European leaders that they knew nothing about the operation until recently. Joseph Luns, who was NATO secretary general from 1971 to 1984, said he had never heard of it. Belgium's Defense Minister, Guy Coeme, told a radio station today that "things were hidden from me"

Admiral Martini told the lawmakers that some Italian Prime Ministers were also kept in the dark. Indeed, as the Gladio story began to unfold, Italy's only two postwar Prime Ministers not to come from the conservative Christian Democratic Party -- Bettino Craxi, a Socialist, and Giovanni Spadolini, a Republican -- insisted that the disclosures came as news to them. Agreement With U.S. Agencies

There were other disturbing developments for Italian politicians and journalists, who as a group demonstrate a cultivated taste for intrigue and a slender faith in

coincidence.

There was Mr. Andreotti's mention of the 1956 agreement with United States agencies, whose aim for decades was to make sure that the Italian Communist Party, the largest in the West, never got a foothold in the Government. And there were long-reported links between Italian secret services and neo-Fascists.

And there is the fact that the major unsolved acts of terrorism that rocked Italy in the 1970's are all presumed to be the work of people on the far right. Left-wing terrorists like the moribund Red Brigades somehow were caught and imprisoned.

Swept up in the dispute is President Francesco Cossiga, who declared recently that it had been his "privilege" to help organize Gladio when he was in the Defense Ministry in the 1960's. Some Independent Left members of Parliament have since demanded his impeachment, but Mr. Cossiga remains unflappable.

Fact is, he said, "I admire the fact that we have kept the secret for 45 years."

Photo: Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti of Italy, who is to testify today about a secret anti-Communist organization formed during the cold war years. (Camera Press)