

The Bologna Massacre

On its 35th anniversary, **Tony Moore** describes the worst atrocity in Italy since the end of the Second World War: The Bologna terrorist attack that killed 85 people on August 2, 1980

On the first Saturday in August, traditionally the month in which workers took their holidays in Italy, the central station in Bologna was thronging with people, many of them workers with their families. Also present were many young people and tourists from all over Europe.

At 10:25hrs a suitcase containing 23kg of explosives and a timer exploded in the second-class waiting room. The roof of the waiting room and the restaurant next door came crashing down, killing many and trapping others. Three carriages of the Ancona-Chiasso train standing at the first platform were hit by falling debris.

Police and troops were quickly on the scene and threw a cordon around the affected area, but were too late to prevent members of the public swarming into the devastated station to look for friends and relatives.

In the bloody aftermath, rescue squads worked in temperatures of 30°C (86F) for many hours, pulling the dead and injured from the rubble. Many were in a critical condition with impact injuries; some had second or third-degree burns. A priest administered last rites.

There were insufficient ambulances to convey all the casualties to the city's hospitals so firefighters commandeered buses, taxis and private cars to take the less seriously injured for treatment. Doctors and other hospital staff on vacation rushed to work. Authorities sent out an urgent appeal for blood and many of the injured were taken to outlying areas when Bologna's hard-pressed hospitals could not handle the overflow.

Massive explosion

A Bologna journalist said there had been 'a tremendous explosion' followed by 'a huge yellow-red flame and immediately after a mushroom-shaped cloud.' Another eyewitness said: "There was one blast, that was all, and then absolute panic. Some people were crying, not just those who were wounded but those who saw the others wounded." University professor Malcolm Quantrill from London told the BBC that he had just reached a window in the ticket hall when there was a: "Flash of yellow light." He did not hear the explosion: "Just the crash of the masonry falling and the sound of breaking glass as the ticket window disintegrated."

Two-hundred-and-ninety-one people were injured, 73 of whom died at the scene. A further 12 people died in hospital, bringing the total death toll to 85. Many of those killed were teenagers or in their twenties, but whole families suffered too. Carlo Mauri and his wife, Anna, together with their daughter Luca, aged six, all died. Margaret Mader was killed along with her two children, Eckhardt, aged 14 and Kai, aged eight. The youngest to die was three-year-old Angela Fresu, along with her mother Maria. The two oldest fatalities were Maria Avati, aged 80, and Antonio Montanari, aged 86.

The attack was the worst atrocity to have occurred



The aftermath of the explosion at Bologna's central station on August 2, 1980, which left more than 85 people dead and hundreds more injured

SIPA Press | Rex_shutterstock

Author

Tony Moore is a Fellow and President Emeritus of the Institute of Civil Protection and Emergency Management. Now a historian, he is a regular contributor to CRJ

in Italy since the end of the Second World War.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Italy experienced widespread domestic terrorism, with groups such as the Red Brigade and the Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari (NAR) committing murder and causing explosions on a regular basis. Investigators inquiring into the events of August 2, faced considerable obstruction from some quarters, including some members of the Italian military secret services (SISMI).

Partly as a result of this, it was not until 1995 that the Court of Cassation finally confirmed sentences of life imprisonment on two members of the NAR, Valerio Fioravanti and Francesco Mambro. But the whole incident remains murky. Although they admitted their involvement in 33 murders during their reign of terror, they have steadfastly maintained their innocence of the Bologna Massacre.

Meanwhile, in Bologna, inside the station, the clock that stopped at 10.25hrs on that day, 35 years ago, remains permanently set to that time. In the main square and outside the station are memorials honouring the victims and, on August 2 this year – as has happened each year since the explosion – a commemoration ceremony will be held with many of the victims' families taking part.

CRJ